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Imagining Identity: Ethnographic Investigations into the Work of Creating Images of Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Comic Books

by

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ABSTRACT

Imaging Identity:
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Notions of race, ethnicity, and gender are so frequently essentialized precisely because they are such complex, messy, contingent, contradictory, and fragmentary concepts. As a result, representations of race, gender, and ethnicity tend to mistake the wholeness of the representations for the wholeness of the racial, ethnic, or gendered subject. Just as race, gender, and ethnicity are lived and experienced by comic book creators, so too are they imagined and constructed within the constraints of industry practices. This dissertation examines the representation of race, gender, and ethnicity in comic books through the eyes of comic book producers; a relatively small segment of the U.S. entertainment industry consisting of men, women, and corporate entities that make their living imagining identities and telling tales of adventure and heroism. This dissertation is an intentional and, I will argue, necessary break from more traditional models of media and cultural studies that emphasize consumption, textual analysis, audience reception, and reading practices.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
(The Story So Far)

The Legion of Superheroes, published by DC Comics, Inc., was my first favorite comic book. An inter-galactic, interspecies, and interracial band of superpowered teens from the 30th century, the Legion’s membership has expanded and contracted over the years with a low of three and a high somewhere in the thirties as well as storylines and subplots that extended for months and even years. To help counter the inevitable confusion, the first page of each adventure featured a series of circular panels containing head shots and the names of each Legionnaire that was to a play a part in the forthcoming adventure along with a brief paragraph describing “the story so far.” Not only did each segment of the “the story so far” provide a look back but also gave the reader a glimpse into the future. The Legion of Superheroes wasn’t the first to do this, but it did serve as my first encounter with these particular storytelling conventions. And since, as I will explain in the next chapter, this dissertation is first and foremost a story, I will begin each section with an introductory chapter titled The Story So Far. And also, in consideration of my belief that wherever one is very much a product of where one has been I will use this first Story So Far to identify some of the institutions and individuals that have played a part in this little adventure of mine.
This dissertation bears the marks of several institutions, each of which has provided some measure of intellectual, logistical, and/or financial support. In order of appearance they are: Oberlin College, Columbia University, Rice University, the Transart Foundation, Project Row Houses, the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the Friends Research Institute, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (RO1-DA 10736).

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Vivian Lee; my parents, Crawford and Toni Carpenter; and my parents in-law, Howard and Theresa Lee.
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SECTION ONE: PRELIMINARY ELEMENTS

Chapter 1

Identity and Cultural Production at the X-Roads of the Imagination

If identity is both real and really made up, then what are the processes, methods, and means through which identity is imagined? Notions of race, gender, and ethnicity are so frequently essentialized precisely because they are such complex, messy, contingent, contradictory, and fragmentary concepts. This dissertation examines the representation of race, gender, and ethnicity in comic books through the eyes of comic book producers; a relatively small segment of the U.S. entertainment industry consisting of men, women, and corporate entities that make their living imagining identities and telling tales of adventure and heroism. Within the comic book industry, race is imagined and negotiated by individuals who bring their personal experiences, source material, and conceptions of self to the creation of privately owned referential images and narratives.

This project started as an investigation into the work of African-American cartoonists and the representation of Black identity in comic books. While it may seem appropriate to narrow my investigations to a particular race, gender, or ethnicity, to do so would belie the fact that comic books are the products of
creative teams that may or may not match the race, gender, or ethnicity of the characters they create. Whether it is an African-American artist using Asian models to create a White heroine, a gay Hispanic male writing an interracial relationship between Wonder Woman and an African-American United Nations development worker, or a multiethnic team of artists, writers, and editors creating a Black superhero – the representation of Black identity and African-American participation remains a unifying thread in this project. While this dissertation is an ethnography that addresses issues related to media, identity, and representation, it does so primarily through the documentation and analysis of the production processes responsible for the creation of comic books and the personal experiences, creative practices, and source material of comic book creators. As such, this dissertation is an intentional and, I will argue, necessary break from more traditional media and cultural studies models that emphasize consumption, textual analysis, audience reception, and reading practices.

Media and cultural studies that emphasize consumption, textual analysis, audience reception, and reading practices tend to regard media images and narratives as part and parcel of a vast representational landscape subject to virtuoso readings, sweeping judgments, and broad characterizations usually connected to the "ism" of the moment. These models of media and cultural studies tend to mistake the wholeness of the representations for the wholeness of
the racial, ethnic, or gendered subject. Many of these models fail to address the
processes through which these images and narratives come into being, the
reasons why some images and narratives endure while others fade over time, as
well as the relationship between the identity of media representations, their
owners, and their creators. Much of this flows from the failure to account for the
fact that many media images and narratives are meant to have multiple, and
often contradictory, readings; hence the term ‘crossover success.’ This is further
compounded by a lack of attention to the structure of creative teams whose
members may or may not share a subject position with the representations they
create and the role of editors, owners, and institutional gatekeepers.

Finally, while this ethnography focuses on cultural producers and
production, it does not subscribe to scholarly assumptions that posit discrete
spheres or divisions between production and consumption. In fact, the deeper I
delved into my field research, the more I had to come to grip with the fact that
comic book producers are also consumers, and as such their consumption
patterns are very much at issue when addressing representation. The whole
notion of audience and consumption becomes increasingly problematic when one
considers the many ways\(^1\) that the production process and its participants

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\(^1\) This comes in the form of marketing executives and publicists who actively shape the image and
target the audiences of comic books, editors who function as both gatekeepers and surrogates for
the audience, and even internet chat groups as well as the comic book letter page.
imagine comic book audiences and consumption. As a result, I am using as my models works that emphasize the acquisition, deployment, and (re) cycling of ideas, images, and narratives.

So blinded by the flashy images, so distracted by over-the-top narratives, many cultural critics forget that comic books are the creative output of people in this world whose job it is to imagine identity. Once imagined, these people take identity and give it a commodity form. They use these commodity forms – these characters – to tell stories. For the most part, they work in groups, often for large corporations. They use their experiences, observations, and collections of objects and images. They distill secondhand stories, borrow from the public domain, tap into the public consciousness, and recall oft-forgotten fables. They tell their tales in words and pictures, comic books that recount the adventures of men in tights, mutants in leather, and women in ... well, not much at all. These storytellers, these crafters of identity, shape and are shaped by the public imagination ... the same public imagination that serves the repository of our most noble aspirations and base desires – our most sacred sentiments and profane utterances. They work with fragments; they work from the trace remains of those who have created before them. They work in a state of fragmentation. They are part of a decentralized production process, a process that brings together words and pictures in service of a thoroughly surreal art form, an art form whose creators sit
at the crossroads of the imagination, commerce, myth, and law. Comic books are the product of collage, the reworking of symbols, the appropriation of narratives, and the juxtaposition of desires in order to create a world that bears some connection to its readers, a world of representations of race, gender, and ethnicity crafted from icons, caricature, and stereotypes.

I will use this movement away from consumption, textual analysis, audience reception, and reading practices in favor of an emphasis on production processes, creative practices, and personal experiences to address broader concerns about the relationship between identity, images, commerce, and the imagination. As such, this dissertation hinges on my opening question, from which all my other questions flow: If identity is both real and really made up, then what are the processes, methods, and means through which identity is imagined?

So how do personal experiences and industry practices affect the representation of race, gender, and ethnicity in comic books? So what are the processes and negotiations that contribute to the vast representational landscape so often referred to in media and cultural studies texts? So what is it like to sit at the crossroads of the imagination, commerce, myth, and law? What is it like to create a collage of reworked symbols and appropriated narratives? How do
comic book creators work within industry constraints to create an imaginary world peopled with easily identifiable characters with racial, ethnic, and gender characteristics? What is the relationship between experience and representation, especially when the experience in question is that of cultural difference? If identity is a lived experience – a shifting milieu of negotiations, appropriations, resistance, complicity, strategic essentialisms, discourses, and performances – then what? To what extent do the processes by which identity is constructed and fixed in the form of images and narratives – in this case comic book adventures and characters – mirror identity as a lived experience? How does a media producer reconcile the everyday lived qualities, particularities, contradictions, incongruities, the mutability and temporally contingent nature of cultural difference with representation, a process that leans heavily on symbols, archetypes, icons, and stereotypes – devices that smooth over differences, eliminate contingency, and create a sense of timelessness? How does the media producer reconcile his or her own subject position, his or her own differences and particularities, with the work of creating representations that he or she may or may not share some commonalities with? What is authorship and what is creativity when the work of art is the product of the input of a decentralized many whose primary commonality is their participation in a geographically dispersed production process? How do production processes harness the contradictory
desires and creative activity of cultural producers who may or may not share any
commonalties?
Chapter 2

On Following the Metaphor

In his book, Ethnography Through Thick & Thin, George Marcus (1998, p. 14) argues that "a multi-sited research imaginary, tracing and describing the connections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate is ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own context of significance." Throughout our interactions he has been prone to telling me to "follow the metaphor." And to this admonition, I have done my best to honestly depict the words and pictures that represent race, gender, and ethnicity as well as the men and women who participate in the creation of the words and the images to which I refer.

The difficult task was figuring out how following something as ephemeral as a metaphor, how to write about the creation, appropriation, use, and deployment of a metaphor in such a way as to maintain the metaphor's multiple meanings without losing the metaphor's essential qualities or severing the metaphor's connection to everyday interaction. That was until I started going to an every Tuesday happy hour at Birra Poretti's in Houston with a group of artists, most of whom were African-American. From 6:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. we would bitch and talk about life, work, art, and the people who wrote about art. I'll never
forget David McGee’s opening at Houston’s Contemporary Art Museum. The show featured David’s reinterpretation of master works of painting by such artists as Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso. David gave a short talk at the opening. During the question-and-answer session, an audience member asked David why he had incorporated images of a monkey in many of the paintings in such a way as to suggest that there were racial implications. David, who is African-American, replied that the monkeys had nothing to do with race. He described watching a documentary on monkeys in which he saw a parallel between the animals’ buffoonish behavior and masculinity. He wanted to capture that in the context of his re-interpretation of master paintings, many of which are of women. The following week, Shyla Dewan, a writer who attended the opening, published a review (Dewan 1998) of the exhibit in which she authoritatively stated that the monkeys represented David McGee – a Black man!

The following Tuesday night at Birra Poretti’s began with our usual hazing of one another, “What do you bring to the table?,” was a common question directed at both familiar and unfamiliar faces. Dewan’s article was a topic of conversation at Biere Pereti’s but not the topic of conversation. Dewan’s article, as a topic of conversation, was mixed in with so many other topics that it seemed to be a minor point ... not because it wasn’t important but because it was part of greater context that joined a lot of seemingly unrelated things. Conversation
topics included getting ready for the next show; preparing for the next interview; paying the rent; welfare reform; gentrification; defining “ghetto-fabulous”; trips to Europe, Africa, and Alabama, as well as David’s question to me, “Stanford, given your interest in comics why aren’t you into pop art? What’s up with your interest in surrealism?” And whenever any of our commentary got too esoteric, David would interject, “Quit ki-ki and ka-kawing and break it down like your listeners are six years old!”

Birra Poretti’s crystallized something for me. I couldn’t go through Rice Anthropology without, to some degree, buying into the Writing Cultures Project, seeing an intimate connection between form, content, and context. There is something unsatisfying to me about what happens when the most interesting elements of a conversation are culled and (re) presented as data that are analyzed and, from which, authoritative conclusions are drawn. Something happens when people sit around a table. Yes, they bring together all their commonalities but so to do they bring together all of their differences. The table – and the conversations that spring from it – have the potential to be the contingency upon which tomorrow rests. This contingency manifests in the form of stolen moments, half baked ideas, and pieces of someone else’s dreams that become a part of the archive from which we forge our understandings and create our identities.
If the Writing Cultures Project has taught me anything, it is that an ethnography is every bit as much a story about the fieldwork and fieldworker as it is an analysis of the subject or the field. And for this reason, I am regarding this dissertation not so much as a theoretical treatise or an in-depth analysis as I am trying to put forth the story of its making. If I can bring anything unique to current debates in anthropology, art, media, and ethnic studies, I hope that it will be an honest depiction of what happened when I decided to just follow the metaphors. As such, I am far less concerned with a deep analysis of every word or image as I am of charting my course and describing the connections, inconsistencies, and contexts that I encountered as I approached each crossroad, stopped for each conversation, and took my place at each table.
Chapter 3

From the X-Roads of the Imagination, Following the Metaphor, and Beyond

So what do I bring to the proverbial ethnographic table? What is it that I can contribute to current debates in anthropology, art, media, and ethnic studies? What follows are a series of vignettes – ethnographic accounts of the Sisyphean task of giving form to the imagination. They are part and parcel of the fragmented lives of comic book creators. They come in the form of stolen moments, reconstructed conversations, second-hand stories about comic book characters, and vague recollections of a decentralized comic book production process that, once woven together, looks at the work of creating identity in comic books. These vignettes will look at identity and representation at the crossroads of the imagination, commerce, myth, and law; a point at which ideas come together; a site in which accidents happen on a regular basis; a place in which things fall apart ... as quickly as they come into being.

I will begin Section Two with the following question: Is there something in general, a system or process, that governs the messy, contingent, and contradictory realm of representation and identity construction? I will build on previous arguments that look at the relationship between identity and narration
to argue that identity describes both an individual's relationship to history and history's relationship to the individual. I will argue that media are an important means through which history is transmitted and identity is imagined. To this end, I will introduce and discuss the notion of an archive, collections of cultural artifacts and excess that are (re) configured to create new cultural forms. I will also introduce Claude Levi-Strauss' use of the term bricolage, Jonathan Boyarin's notion of the means of imagination, and Mark Anthony Neal's use of the term Post-Soul Generation. I will describe the comic book production process, paying particular attention to its decentralized nature, individual job functions, multiple authorship, and use of legal categories, such as trademark and copyright, to create commodities from gendered, ethnic, and racially identifiable likenesses. I will review previous work on race, gender, and ethnicity in comic books and related media, most of which base their arguments on readings of completed media texts. I will argue that media forms are the products of an imagination tempered and constrained by negotiations, creative processes, and industry practices that prefigure the representation of difference.

In keeping with my criticisms in Section One of media and cultural studies scholarship that base the wholeness of their arguments on the perceived wholeness of media texts, Section Three will depart from textual analysis in favor of ethnographic encounters with comic book producers. Section One and Section
Two argue that comic book producers work from both personal experience and public and private collections of source material (archives) in order to create property units (comic book characters) that have racial, gender, and ethnic identities. Section Three will describe and show some of the interactions among comic book creators that are the basis for my arguments. Whereas Section One and Section Two put forth comic book creation as a rational process of ordering archives and negotiating outcomes, Section Three will address the contingent, chaotic, and often unpredictable interactions and occurrences that come into play. These ethnographic accounts will look at the intersection between individual comic book creators, comic book characters, and the places, spaces, and politics of comic book production from a variety of perspectives. These accounts will describe a professional existence at the crossroads of the imagination, commerce, myth, and law; an endless negotiation; a continual state of fragmentation; a juggling act in which the balls that stand for identity and representation can only warrant attention for a moment at a time.

As much as it can be, Section Four will serve as my conclusion. Except for the last chapter, the chapters in this section will revisit previous chapters from Section One, Section Two, and Section Three. Chapter 14 will use my last extended field research trip to New York in order to review the changes that my interviewees have undergone over the preceding two years. It will recall a visit to
the home of Walter and Louise Simonson’s home several years before that influenced that first piqued my interest in looking at comic book production. And finally, I will draw some conclusions about industry practices. Chapter 15 will pick up where my earlier interview with Brian Azzarello left off. I will use this interview that touched on his use of specific source material and, specifically, on the use of the “n-word” in some of the comic books that he writes. As part of this interview we both talked about our first encounters with the “n-word” and I will use this interview to draw some conclusions about how different people relate to archives and source material. Chapter 16 will pick up on my recollections of Tuesday happy hour at Biere Pereti’s as well as my leanings toward ethnographic surrealism. I will use this to draw additional conclusions about archives. In Chapter 17, I will review Section Three in light of my argument that archives function through strategies and acts of (dis) appearance. The chapter titled Chapter 18 will conclude the dissertation with the third and final, part of my interview with Brian Azzarello. I will use this to argue that media production, whether through the diversification of its labor and products or through the use of recognizable imagery and narratives, makes the promise of an authenticity that cannot ever be delivered. I will argue that authenticity is an illusion, the end product of a production process, a process of rationalization ... a process of authentication.
Throughout this dissertation I will make references to the comic books that my interviewees worked on. I will include graphic images from many of the comic books to which I refer but I will limit my comments on the images to the text boxes that accompany the images. I am taking this approach in effort to highlight the (dis) juncture between the comic book page and the places, spaces, and social lives of comic book producers. I believe that this is a necessary inclusion for those readers who are not familiar with comic books. However, I am limiting my discussion on the words and images on the page in order to prevent this dissertation from getting bogged down in the thematic and textual analyses that I critique.
SECTION TWO: HISTORIES, ORIGINS, AND BACKGROUND

(The Story So Far)

Thus far I have set out to create an ethnography of comic book production and comic book producers that addresses the relationship between comic book producers and their creations. I have argued against media and cultural studies that emphasize thematic and textual analyses. I have criticized these works on the grounds that they essentialize identity. I have argued that while participation and representation can be looked at separately, doing so belies the inherent complexity of situations in which people work in creative teams that can have little or no connection to racial, ethnic, or gendered images and narratives that they create.

I have described the work of the comic book creator as an existence at the crossroads of the imagination, commerce, myth, and law. I will use this section to tease out exactly what I mean by this characterization. In Chapter 4, I will describe early ethnographic encounters that highlight the complex relationship between representation and participation in the comic book industry. In Chapter 5, I will use Claude Levi-Strauss' notion of *bricolage* and James Clifford's notion of *finding meaning where it may* to argue that identity construction as an
everyday practice has much in common with identity construction in media in that it involves the continual (re) configuration of archives of cultural products and excess. In Chapter 6, I will use the ideas of Ackbar Abbas, Arjun Appadurai, and Greg Urban to further examine the ways in which archives are created and circulated. In Chapter 7, I will return to the field, in this case dinner at the 2001 Wizard Comic Book Convention. This will be my first attempt to address the lack of an accepted history of Black participation and representation in comic books. Once I have established a brief history of Black participation and representation, I will use Chapter 8 to familiarize readers with industry practices and conventions. This section will be structured around Daniel Pink's observations about the (re) emergence of freelance labor. And finally, Chapter 9 will discuss the impact of the rise and fall of Milestone Media, Inc., a comic book company with the express goal of creating a multicultural superhero universe. At issue is the fact that this relatively brief period in the early 1990s has come to overshadow previous and successive attempts to achieve the similar goals by other creators of a variety of racial and ethnic identifications.

But first, I must address an ongoing tension that runs throughout this dissertation, that being the relationship between contingency and essentialization. In Chapter 3, I said that I would, at the beginning of this section address the following question: Is there something in general, a system or
process, that governs the messy, contingent, and contradictory realm of representation and identity construction?

The short answer is yes. Unfortunately, this isn’t the place for short answers. I opened this section with an articulation of identity as socially constructed – a mutable, messy, contingent, and contradictory state of affairs – which will inevitably put me on the humanities side of the debate over whether anthropology is part of the sciences or humanities. The notion of social construction is an old one. It promises an open-ended world in which much more is possible than impossible – all we have to do is change people’s minds, a task that is so ephemeral as to be stifling. Essentialism, with its irrepressible urge to find the essence of things – the Truth – creates orders and classifications that make our often labyrinthine world eminently more navigable but lacking as far as possibilities. I am not interested in figuring out the essential Truth or truths of identity or culture, but I am interested in making it a bit more navigable by focusing on a commonality – a common practice that hinges on possibilities – that being the construction of identity. I keep thinking of the apocryphal stories of anthropologists who get up at meetings and try to make general statements about how people “are” or what culture or identity “is,” only to be confronted by someone in the crowd who says, “not my people.” While these stories are good for a laugh, they highlight a basic problem: We are so caught up in trying to figure
out what identity or culture is, we lose sight of the fact that ultimately they are byproducts of what people do.

"We people" eat, sleep, shit, pass the time, and die. We imagine. We imagine identity. And we (re) imagine identity throughout our lives in a process that continually marshals history, archives, experience, and desire. The extent to which identity and culture appear to be immutable is a reflection of the extent to which the processes of imagining identity draw upon or contend with similar histories, archives, and experiences. And while the work of the imagination, at its most general level, stays the same, the conditions – such as technology, pace, and the forms in which the imagination is expressed or circulated – do change. The work of the imagination is dynamic and, as such, commands special attention. But first a bit of history and some ethnographic accounts that highlight what I refer to as the dilemma of cultural production in a Post-Soul world.
Chapter 4

Brother-Man Road Trip & Dead Nigger Storage

The Dilemma of Cultural Production in a Post-Soul World

In his book, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, Mark Anthony Neal (2002) borrows George Nelson’s notion of the *Post-Soul Generation* to describe the Black segment of *Generation X* as the first Blacks to come of age amidst a mass media that has incorporated images of Black popular culture. Manthia Diawara expresses a similar sentiment in his book, *In Search of Africa* (1998), in which he argues that the creative sensibilities of this generation are a marked contrast with its predecessors in that it regards race as both an identity to have and a commodity to sell. Neal and Diawara are correct in pointing out the qualitative impact of the mass mediation of Black cultural producers. But what about White, Hispanic, and Asian cultural producers who also came of age in the shadow of a mass mediated Black culture? And what happens when these White, Hispanic, and Asian cultural producers work side by side with their Black counterparts? How do these White, Hispanic, and Asian cultural producers approach images of, as well as narratives about, Black peoples and cultures? These questions pose quite a dilemma for the study of representation; especially where group authorship is concerned. I call this the dilemma of cultural production in a *post-soul* world.
February 26, 1999. I hurriedly brushed the rain off my trench coat as I entered the elevator and hit the button to go up to the sixth floor. While this wasn’t my first visit to DC Comics, I still wasn’t quite sure what to expect. As much as I tried to keep focused on what I was going to say when I reached L.A. Williams’ office, my mind kept going back to how I got to where I was.

I moved from Houston to Baltimore in December 1998 for a pre-doctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. I chose Baltimore for its proximity; forty-five minutes to an hour from Washington D.C., one hour and forty-five minutes from Philadelphia, and three hours and a half hours from New York City. When I applied for the fellowship, my research was defined primarily in terms of African-American characters and creators. And while African-American participation and representation still remain at the core of my research, my focus quickly changed to emphasize identity construction in a more general sense.

I spent most of my first month at the Smithsonian on the phone. I had some contacts within the comic book industry that went back to my days as an undergraduate at Oberlin College. I met Walter and Louise Simonson through Walter’s brother, Bruce, one of my professors at Oberlin. At the time Walter was
illustrating the covers for *Jack Kirby's Fourth World*, a comic book published by DC Comics featuring the exploits of the New Gods. Paul Kupperberg was the editor and L.A. Williams was the assistant editor of *Jack Kirby's Fourth World*. While an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, L.A. wrote his senior thesis (Williams 1993) on Black comic book characters. L.A., who is African-American, gave me the phone number for an up-and-coming African-American comic book artist named Jamal Igle. At the time Jamal was working with African-American comic book writer Alex Simmons on two projects, *Blackjack* and *Race Against Time*, both of which were created and self-published by Alex. Jamal gave me Alex's phone number. While I was on the phone with Alex, he mentioned that he was going to Amherst, MA. for an exhibition of African-American cartoonists at the Words and Pictures Museum. I asked Alex for more information on the event, and he got me in touch with the upcoming exhibition's curator Rob Stull, an African-American comic book inker. At the time, Rob was working as the inker, along with African-American artist ChrisCross, on *Slingers*, a Spider-Man spin-off published by Marvel Comics. While I was on the phone with Rob, he mentioned that he was traveling up to Amherst with a group of African-American comic book creators to give a comic book creation workshop. I asked if I could ride up with them. "I don't see why not, but you'll have to talk to L.A. Williams over at DC Comics. He's the one who's handling the van rental. Do you want his number?"
“No, thanks,” I responded, “I already have it.” I called L.A. immediately after I finished with Rob. As I was saying my good-byes to L.A., I pulled out my Palm Pilot, tapped my way over to February 26, 1999, and entered, in capital letters, BROTHER-MAN ROAD-TRIP.

The elevator door opened on the sixth floor. As I walked out I looked across at a mural of DC Comics characters. I turned to my left and walked over to the white metal door. I picked up the phone on the wall next to the white metal door and I dialed L.A.’s extension as I peered through the door’s 8” x 10” window.

“L.A. Williams,” responded the voice on the other end.

“Hey, it’s me, Stanford.”

“Hey me-Stanford, I’ll be right there in a second.”

Within moments, L.A. greeted me at the door and escorted me in, saying “things are little crazy right now. Paul’s office has moved so his old one’s empty. You can hang out here with the others until everyone else arrives.”
“Others?”

“Yes, there are some people there that you might want to meet.”

We walked over to the office across from L.A.’s. The speech balloon on the door said Paul Kupperberg. There were four people inside, two African-American men and two African-American women. “Stanford Carpenter, I would like you to meet Dwayne Turner, his wife Robin, Eric Battle, and his wife Stephanie.”

“Eric Battle, aren’t you doing the art for Aquaman?”

“Yes,” replied Eric.

L.A. interjected, “Dwayne does Spawn.” I knew Eric and Dwayne by name but, until then, I had no idea that they were African-American. Spawn and Aquaman were both drawn by African-American artists – the irony was not lost on me. Spawn, a popular character published by California based Image Comics, is a character who was visibly African-American until the day that he died, went to hell, and was sent back to Earth with superpowers and a face burned and disfigured beyond racial recognition. And Aquaman, the blonde-haired, blue-
eyed, fair-skinned King of the Seven Seas! "Stanford's doing a research project on Blacks in comics," continued L.A.

"So, are you doing it on Black cartoonists or Black characters?" asked Dwayne.

"Well, I'm just starting, but I'm trying to look at both..."

"Hold on a second," interrupted L.A. as he looked across the hall at his office mate, a light-skinned African-American. "Harvey, I want you to meet someone." Harvey came over and introduced himself. I asked Dwayne, Robin, Eric, Stephanie, and Harvey if they were also coming up to Amherst with us. None of them were; it turned out that their visit was a coincidence. Dwayne and Robin had traveled from Pennsylvania to visit Eric and Stephanie and catch a Broadway play. Harvey had other plans. As we were talking, Rob Stull arrived. This was our first face-to-face meeting. Along with Rob were three African-American males: Mark Morales, at the time the inker for Marvel Comics' X-Force; Louis Small, Jr., at the time the penciller for Harris Comics' Vampirella; and Grey, a penciller and inker who had just finished redesigning the costume for DC Comics' recently revamped Mr. Terrific. At the time, Grey and Louis shared a
studio along with Steven Harris, an African-American penciller who, at the time, was working on a fill-in issue of *Robin*.

Within the next hour, L.A., Rob, Mark, Grey, Louis, and I were in the rental van and on our way to Amherst. On the way to Amherst, I pulled out my Palm Pilot and asked everyone to name all the comic book artists and writers that they knew were African-American. I had recorded the names of everyone present. After the tenth entry, two of the passengers remarked that they didn’t know that such-and-such person was Black. And it was the same for the remainder of the names. We were out of names to add to the list somewhere around twenty! Our attempt at listing all of the African-Americans in comic books eventually gave way to industry war stories. This prompted recollections by some of the passengers of working on creative teams where the other members didn’t actually know their race until they met face to face for the first time at a comic book convention. And since it isn’t unusual for members of a creative team to live in different states and/or countries – with their primary modes of communication being phone, fax, or e-mail – it could be months or years before this discovery occurs.

It is August 18, 2001, at the Wizard Con, a comic book convention held each year in the Chicago suburb of Rosemont, IL. The hotel bar sits just across
the street from the Rosemont Convention Center. Brian Azzarello and I sit at the bar. Brian is a White comic book writer, known for his edgy adult-oriented stories. He grew up in an integrated section of Cleveland. It’s been a long day and it’s only half over. We alternate between looking at each other and our diminishing pints of beer. A whiff of smoke curls off the end of Brian’s cigarette. Our conversation is all over the place, touching on such topics as the use of the “n-word,” prison life, White supremacy, and Brian’s latest project Cage – a comic book mini-series featuring Power Man, a.k.a. Luke Cage: Hero for Hire.

Now its Brian’s turn to take on Cage, one of Marvel’s first Black superheroes. The fact that Brian is a White writer working on Black character is nothing new. So too were Len Wien and Archie Goodwyn, both of whom wrote Power Man, and Don McGregor, the writer on the Black Panther in Jungle Action (see figure 1). When McGregor and Wein and Goodwyn were writing Jungle Action and Power-Man, respectively, they were breaking new ground. Brian comes to Power-Man, now referred to as Cage, having grown up reading the adventures of superheroes of a variety of hues:

When Paul Gallacy and Doug Moench were on Master of Kung Fu, it was one of my favorites. It was Bruce Lee in a James Bond movie. It was like so cool. Just the villains ... it had that James Bond
sensibility. I loved it. I also liked Luke Cage when I was a kid. I didn’t buy _Power-Man_ regularly but I had a lot of friends who bought _Spider-Man_ and _X-men_ and _Thor_ and all that other shit. They hated Luke Cage (see figure 1). “He’s just bulletproof and he’s strong,” [they said]. They thought he was stupid. I was like “Well, you don’t like him so I guess I should. [And the] Black Panther (see figure 1), when it was written by Don McGregor, when he did that whole Wakanda thing. He had the nutsiest villains. He had Killmonger trying to take over the nation, and he had these insane henchmen. Black Panther was a book that I just went ape shit over. Then it just sort of petered out.

For Brian, this is a trip down memory lane, an engagement with an established character. At the same time, he is well aware of the pitfalls. He was recently called to task on the Internet for using the “n-word” in issues of _Hellblazer_ and _100 Bullets_, both of which are labeled mature-readers comic books.
Figure 1. Left: splash page from *Black Panther* #41 (April 2002) showing the Black Panther in his original costume from his initial appearance in the pages of the Fantastic Four. After his initial appearance, the Black Panther had several other guest appearances in the Fantastic Four. He also graced the pages of the *Avengers* as one the earliest members of the team alongside such characters as Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and the Hulk. The Black Panther also appeared in solo adventures in the compilation comic book *Jungle Action* as well as an ongoing comic book and several miniseries. Currently, the Black Panther appears in an ongoing comic book that bears his name.

Right: Cover from *Luke Cage: Power Man* #17 (February 1974). Power Man originally appeared in comic book, under his own name, which was later replaced by an ongoing comic book titled *Power Man and Iron Fist*. *Power Man and Iron Fist* featured his exploits alongside Iron Fist (a blonde haired, blue eyed, white male master of many Asian martial arts). In the 1990s, Power Man appeared in his own comic book, titled Cage. Cage is currently being published under the same name as a four issue miniseries.
I met Brian through Axel Alonso. At the time, Axel was Brian’s editor for 100 Bullets, published by Vertigo, DC Comics’ mature-readers comic book imprint. Axel, an Hispanic male in his mid-thirties grew up in Oakland, CA on steady diet of West Coast rap music. During our first meeting, Axel also recalled reading Master of Kung Fu and Luke Cage: Hero For Hire. In fact, both Axel and Brian commented that Marvel had all the cool characters. My first meeting with Axel took place at his office, just after I had returned from the Brother-Man Road-Trip. Between my first and second meeting with Axel I read everything that I could get my hands on that he had edited. This was when I read the first installment of the Hellblazer storyline titled “Hard Time,” written by Brian Azzarello and drawn by Richard Corbin, a story that opens with the rape of a White prison inmate by a Black prison inmate (see figures 2 and 3). I was rankled.
Figure 2. Above: page one of the opening sequence to the four issue “Hard Time” story arc from *Hellblazer* #146 (March 2000).
Figure 3. Above: page two of the opening sequence to the four issue “Hard Time” story arc from Hellblazer #146 (March 2000).
At the beginning of our second meeting, I asked Axel what he thought about the decision to open with the rape. "Did you see *Pulp Fiction*?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"It's kind of like the whole 'dead nigger storage' thing."

I knew the reference. I doubt I'll ever forget that evening at the movies when I saw *Pulp Fiction* for the first time. Jules Winfield (played by Samuel L. Jackson) and Vincent Vega (played by John Travolta) had just accidentally killed a young African-American on their way to deliver a brief case to Marcellus. After the accidental shooting, Jules calls Jimmy (played by Quentin Tarantino), the only person he knows "in 818 [the area code]" and says, "me and my homeboy [Vincent] are in some serious fucking shit and have to get off the road pronto!"

Upon Jules and Vincent's arrival, Jimmy was irate. He knew that if his wife saw the corpse she would "kick his ass."

When you came pulling in here did you notice a sign in the front of my house that said dead nigger storage? Did you notice a sign in
the front of my house that said dead nigger storage? Do you know why you didn't see it? 'Cause it ain't there. 'Cause storing dead niggers ain't my fucking business!

This scene from *Pulp Fiction* was a hotly debated topic for its use of the "n-word." While some argued that this usage was gratuitous, others agreed with Tarantino who argued that his use of the "n-word" was appropriate because it was an authentic reflection of the word's usage. Tarantino backed up his argument by saying that he may be White, but that he feels more comfortable with Blacks. In his book *Harlem World*, John Jackson (2001) argues that Tarantino's arguments concerning this film moment highlight a change in popular conceptions of race. Referring to it as the post-Tarantino era of representation, Jackson argues that Blackness is less about skin color than it is an act, a performance, a deployment of symbols and behaviors.

At first I didn't get what Axel meant by his reference to *Pulp Fiction*, but he made it clear. From his perspective as a comic book editor, Axel echoed Jackson's sentiments. Although Axel thought Tarantino crossed the line, that his use of the "n-word" was "gratuitous," he couldn't deny that it was how people spoke on the basketball court, at the clubs, and in popular music. Axel acknowledged that the use of the "n-word" was dicey but, at the same time, this
was an adult comic book with adult themes and a for mature-readers label. Brian was trying to create a world, a context, and Axel had to have faith that the audience would not get so fixated on a particular word that they would not read the story.

Sometime in the spring of 2002, Harvey and I met up at Hanley’s Universe, a comic book shop located just across the street from the Empire State Building in New York City (NYC). It was a Wednesday, the day the new comic books come out. Axel, Harvey, George Carmona (a Puerto Rican male who worked in DC Comics’ editorial administration), Will Dennis (a White male editor at Vertigo), and Jim Higgins (a White male independent comic book publisher) are off talking in a corner. All of them are in their late twenties or early thirties. They’re going back and forth about an e-mail survey that had been circulated asking people to name their all-time top-ten Hip-Hop artists. Two days later I would interview Cliff Chiang (see figures 20 and 21), an Asian-American artist, about his work on a story that would introduce a Black female character to the Batman comic books.

Upon our meeting, Dwayne Turner had posed an important question when he asked whether I was researching Black characters or Black creators. At the time of the Brother-Man Road-Trip, Rob, Mark, Grey, Louis, Alex, Jamal, Eric,
and Dwayne, all of whom were African-American, were responsible for writing or illustrating Spawn, Aquaman, Impulse, Hornet, Prodigy, Ricochet, Dusk, Cable, Domino, Siryn, Sunspot, Meltdown, Warpath, Dani Moonstar, Caliban, Shatterstar, Blackjack, Night Thrasher, Iron Fist, Nova, Namorita, Speedball, Turbo, Bolt, Aegis, Vampirella, and Pantha.\(^2\) Of the above twenty-seven characters, twenty were male, nine were female, twelve were White, five were Black, two were Hispanic, one was Asian, two were Native-American, and eight were of some other mixed or imaginary racial identity. Blackjack and Pantha are the only non-White male characters to have their name in the title of the comic book in which they appears. Vampirella, a White female, is the only non-male character to have her name as the title of the comic book in which she appears. Except for the lead character in *Blackjack* each of these characters were, not only corporately owned, but they were also the end products of creative teams of no less than seven people each. In addition, none of the creative teams involved in the creation of these characters' adventures contained more than two African-Americans.

Meanwhile, Axel, an Hispanic editor, was working with two different White writers (Brian Azzarello and Scott Cunningham) on several different projects that dealt with race and identity themes. And Cliff Chiang, an Asian-

\(^2\) This list encompasses the title characters. In the case of comic books about groups, I list the
America, was positioning himself to work on a project with Judd Winick (a White writer) in which they would be creating a Black female character for the Batman comic books.

To some degree, this is reflective of the overall lack of African-American participation in the creation of mainstream comic books. But it also highlights the inherent dilemmas in researching either African-American participation or African-American representation, let alone both. There is no master list of African-Americans working in comic books. In fact, most African-Americans who work in the industry would be hard pressed to name even a small percentage of their African-American colleagues. And since – as I will detail later – the vast majority of workers are freelancers and the creative teams are always in flux, it’s damn near impossible to keep track of the few African-Americans who work in the industry once they are identified. As far as Black characters are concerned, most of them appear in comic books that feature an ensemble cast, and most of the people on the creative teams responsible for depicting their adventures are White men. And while it didn’t come up specifically, the same holds true for characters and creators of other racial and ethnic groups as well as on either side of the gender line. All of the members of comic book creative teams, regardless of race, gender or ethnicity, were vying with others to influence characters with

members of the team.
which they may or may not have shared a racial, ethnic, or gender affiliation. As much as I thought that the representation and participation of African-Americans – or any other group for that matter – was important, I couldn’t get around the fact that representation and participation are two very different, yet overlapping spheres. As a result, while I have decided to maintain African-American identity and participation as a unifying thread, I decided to focus on where the issues of identity and participation overlap. As such, this dissertation will focus on the processes by which identities are imagined.
Chapter 5
Tell Us About Your Trip!

Black and white images set against the backdrop of a golf course flash across the television screen. Children of various backgrounds and ethnic identifications tee off the green. The young voices overlap as they repeat the same phrase: “I am Tiger Woods.”

I am African-American. I am Asian-American. I am Hispanic. I am White. So what is going on when a reference to self comes through an articulation of racial identity? After all, race is not an immutable category, but it does describe a set of conditions, lays out a series of relationships, and reconciles the self with the other through the articulation of degrees of difference that separate the self from others. It is both the individual’s relation to histories and histories’ relationship to the individual. And while an articulation of identity may happen in the now, it is always a now referenced by the then.

As such – to borrow from James Clifford – it is the art of “finding meaning where it may (1988, p. 119),” a series of creative acts in which memories, histories, and archives are the means through which identity in contested, constructed, represented, and imagined. In the section that follows I will shed
additional light on what it is to find meaning where it may through such notions as *bricolage, vicarious witnessing*, and the *means of imagination*.


... two distinct modes of scientific thought ... two strategic levels at which nature is accessible to scientific inquiry: one roughly adapted to that of the perception and the imagination: the other at a remove from it. It is as if the necessary connections which are the object of all science ... could be arrived at by two different routes, one very close to, and other more remote from, sensible intuition.

Levi-Strauss refers to the implementation of sensible intuition as the *science of the concrete* and argues that it is part and parcel of the natural human urge to classify and order the natural world. He goes on to argue that “the decision that everything must be taken into account of facilitates the creation of a ‘memory bank’ (Levi-Strauss 1966, p. 16).” The notion of a memory bank is important because it delineates the known from the unknown. It is an assemblage of possible discourses, symbols, and narratives that can be brought to bear.
One such “memory bank”, to which Levi-Strauss refers, consists of myths and rites that he argues:

Are far from being, as has often been held, the product of man’s ‘myth-making faculty’, turning its back on reality. Their principal value is indeed to preserve until the present time the remains of methods and of observation and reflection which were (and no doubt still are) precisely adapted to discoveries of a certain type (Levi-Strauss 1966, p. 16).

Levi-Strauss uses the term *bricolage* to describe modes of inquiry and production that at once take from the memory bank and are “adapted to perception and the imagination (Levi-Strauss 1966, p. 15).” According to Levi-Strauss, the bricoleur:

Interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury [a memory bank or archive] is composed to discover what each of them could ‘signify’ and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize but which will ultimately differ from the instrumental set only in the internal disposition of its parts (Levi-Strauss 1966, p. 18).
Levi-Strauss contrasts the bricoleur to the engineer by arguing that

... the engineer questions the universe, while the 'bricoleur' addresses himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors, that is, only a subset of the culture (Levi-Strauss 1966, p. 19).

He goes on to state that “the engineer works by means of concepts ... the 'bricoleur' [works] by means of signs (1966, p. 15).” I would classify identity construction as a *science of the concrete*, a form of *bricolage*, that has a set of governing principles, many of which hinge on notions of *vicarious witnessing* as well as (see the chapter that follows), disappearance and circulation.

In his essay titled “The Ethnographic Surreal,” James Clifford opens with a quote from Walter Benjamin’s (1968a) “The Storyteller” in which Benjamin laments the transition from “communication based on continuous oral narrative and shared experience to a cultural style characterized by bursts of ‘information’ (Clifford 1988, p. 119).” Clifford uses this lead to argue that:
Reality is no longer a given, a natural, familiar environment. The self, cut loose from its attachments, must discover meaning where it may – a predicament, evoked at its most nihilistic, that underlies both surrealism and modern ethnography (Clifford 1988, p. 119).

Discovering meaning where it may isn’t limited to ethnographic surrealism. In fact, a similar sentiment is expressed in Claude Levi-Strauss’ notions of concrete science, the memory bank, and bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1966). It is also evident in my previous work (Carpenter 2001d) that hinges on the relationship between narrative and identity using Elizabeth Alexander’s notion of vicarious witnessing (Alexander 1995), Jonathan Boyarin’s notion of the means of imagination (Boyarin 1994), and Walter Benjamin’s “Theses of a Philosophy of History” (Benjamin 1968b).

Michel Leiris (1934, p. 216 quoted in Clifford, 1988, p. 168) is correct when he argues that a “journey makes sense as a 'coming to consciousness'; its story hardens around identity.” So to is Toni Morrison’s statement that, “narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (Morrison 1993, quoted in Ochs and Capps 1996, p. 22). To tell about a trip, to narrate is an act of creation – the construction of self and other – the traces and remnants of which will be (re) used, (re) circulated, and or (re) told. In the (re) telling symbols,
history, emotion, and desire coalesce; the connections between place, event, and identity become visible through description, images, and narrative. These statements have, within them, a built-in paradox: They simultaneously locate the subject within discourse, while at the same time, implicitly acknowledging the role of the subject in creating the discourse to which they owe their subjectivity.

Regardless of how this paradox is resolved, both Leiris and Morrison describe a subject that is in a state of perpetual becoming; a state that, I will argue, can be understood in terms of provenience, past, present, and future. Provenience, an origin point or source often designated by the prefix ur,\(^3\) refers to founding notions, underlying logics, mythical contexts, prototypical versions, trace remains, and artifacts. It is an archive – a repository of memories, symbols and (dis) courses. The past or histories are important, not so much as narratives of what has happened but as narratives that lead into or bring the present into being, narratives that set the stage, if you will. The present is a workspace – a site of construction, (re) action, the moment of experience, but what about the future? I would argue that the future is a (re) articulation, a (re) fraction, a (re) petition of the past as seen through the fears and desires of the present. Prediction, speculation, fortune telling, all of these concepts that lay claim to

\(^3\) As in "ur-history" a history of the origins of that present historical moment which, while remaining largely visible, is the determining motivation for ... interest in the past (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 47)."
seeing the future are, in actuality remembering the future! If Leiris and Morrison are correct, and I do believe that they are, then identity rests at the juncture where the present ends and the future begins. To understand identity, one must understand its construction, one must understand the present (experience) and its relationship to provenience (archives), the past (histories), and the future (desire). One must understand identity as a lived experience – in a perpetual state of becoming; always in the making, an art, a creative act ... of the imagination.

In a recent essay titled *What We Bring to the Table*, I address the relationship between place, space, memory, and kinship narratives in an African-American family (Carpenter 2001d). I used Elinor Ochs and Lissa Capps’ *Narrating Self* to argue that “the power to interface self and society renders narrative a medium of socialization par excellence. Through narrative we come to know what it means to be a human being (Ochs and Capps 1996, p. 31).”

In *Can You Be Black and Look at This?* (1995), Elizabeth Alexander argues that at the core of African-American identity is a "group memory" based on "witnessing" through the circulation of stories, rumors, objects, images, and narratives. Alexander uses slave narratives, newspaper articles, videos, and memoirs to demonstrate how "experience can be taken into the body via
witnessing and recorded in memory as knowledge [creating a sense that] 'it could be my turn next'” (Alexander 1995, p. 87). She argues that vicarious witnessing is marshaled in the effort to give name to “the ghostly or ancestral aspect of memory that vitalizes everyday life” (1995, pg. 82), a process that uses objects, images, and narratives to link the story of “that act” or “this occurrence” to “those people.”

This is very much in line with Paul Ricoeur’s argument (1984, p. 2) that as the present slips away it can only be recovered in the form of objects, images, and narratives – the traces “left” by the “past” – that can only “stand for” or represent it. This runs counter to the idea that history exists within a structure of homogeneous, empty time; rather, in accordance with Walter Benjamin’s Theses on the Philosophy of History, “time [must be] filled with the presence of the now” (1968b, p. 261). According to Jonathan Boyarin (1994, p. 11), Benjamin “reminds us of the demands our ancestors who died unjustly; [that] their death is, in a powerful sense, not “past”, but subject to the meaning it is given through action in the present.” Within this context, the objects, images, and narratives that transmit memory become a material resource for social, cultural, political, and community action. In fact I would argue, in part by borrowing a phrase from Jonathan Boyarin, that objects, images, and narratives are the “means of
imagination" (Boyarin 1994, p. 11) through which identity and community are defined and negotiated.

Conceptualizing identity – as a lived experience – brings into high relief the moment-to-moment appropriations, manipulations, resistance, and accommodations inherent in the construction of identity. Identity – as a lived experience – is the reconciliation of then and now; it is both the redemption of the individual in the face of history and history in the face of the individual; they are the indescribable syntheses of subjectivity and objectivity ... of self and other. Identity – as a lived experience – is a continual act of self-creation. Identity – as a lived experience – highlights the extent to which identity is in a continual state of becoming, a high stakes bricolage in which memories, images, narratives, and discourses become the means of production. Or should I say imagination? It reconfigures history; laying bare its functionality as a “map of relations” (Carpenter 2001d) that guide the individual along his or her journey through time and space.
Chapter 6
Archives and the Work of the Imagination

In the forward to Greg Urban's *Metaculture*, Benjamin Lee states that "the use of any cultural form both presupposes the existence of other forms and, as an action, brings about new ones (Lee 2001, x)." Levi-Strauss' *bricolage*, Alexander's *vicarious witnessing*, Boyarin's *means of imagination*, and Clifford's finding *meaning where it may* assume the existence of source material – in the form of media, history, memory, or some sort of cultural artifact – that is (re) produced, (re) worked, (re) cycled, and (re) contextualized. This source material is contingent, the end products of production processes and creative acts, all of which are mitigated by a variety of discourses (be they legal, market, aesthetic, political, or otherwise). Media producers use personal archives as the raw (or source) materials for media production. I would argue that we must also to look to both the work of the imagination and the affects of circulation in order to adequately address media production. Whatever the process or media form, the source material is engaged by the imagination and (re) circulated. I use the term (re) circulated to reflect the fact that media producers create their archives from source material already in circulation.
Archives are assemblages of source material that run the gamut, from idiosyncratic montages to rigorous orderings, the constitution of which not only set the limits, but also create new possibilities for the (re) presentation, (re) articulation, (re) constitution, and (re) or (dis) placement of culture and identity. In the section that follows I will further develop my use of the term archive to delineate assemblages of source material that are engaged by the imagination and (re) circulated. While the argument that the imagination, as a practice, creates social facts isn’t new I am particularly interested in literature that explores the link between the imagination and the production of media forms that circulate. To this end I will use Arjun Appadurai (1996) as a starting point precisely because he develops links between imagination to circulation. I briefly discuss Ackbar Abbas’ use of preservation and disappearance as well as his evocation of Paul Virilio (1991a; 1991b) and Walter Benjamin (1978; 1973) in order to articulate what he refers to as the politics of disappearance. I will use this to develop my argument that the value of the archive is its ability to marshal excess. I will use Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Greg Urban (2001), both whom work off of Benedict Anderson (1983) and Jurgen Habermas (1991), to address the role of imagination and circulation (respectively) not only as practices, but also as social facts that shape the individual and community. I will extend Anderson’s and Habermas’ notions of the imagined community and the reading public to address their role in the creation of archives by media producers.
Franz Boas (1898, p. 18, quoted in Levi-Strauss 1966, p. 21) once observed "that mythological worlds have been built up, only to be shattered again, and the new worlds were built from the fragments." This is the case, not because the mythological worlds are shattered, rather it is due to fact that mythological worlds are the assemblages of pieces (of stories, ideas, explanations, and wisdom). And while there is a tendency to view mythological worlds as a whole, pieces of these mythological worlds are a part of so many archives that, over time, the pieces (myths) are so often (re) contextualized that preceding mythological worlds inevitably lose their cohesion in favor of something else.

My use of the term archive delineates the assemblage of cultural artifacts; traces and remains that have been ordered for easy retrieval as evidence, justification, explanation, or the creation of something ... else. As such, to borrow from Appadurai (1996, p.5) "the imagination has become a collective, social fact. This development, in turn, is the basis of the plurality of imagined worlds." A plurality of imagined worlds that, I would argue, is built on a plurality of cultural artifacts put together in a plurality of combinations, all of which can be traced back to a plurality of archives. The archive – as an assemblage of cultural artifacts and excess – is inherently idiosyncratic, continually edited, constantly revised, and periodically (re) ordered. While cultural artifacts can be the
vicarious in vicarious witnessing, a deposit in the memory bank, a vehicle of discourse or the means in the means of imagination – they have a place within the archive because the cultural artifact is always a part of another whole. It is a point of access, that a group or individual can use to create, replace, or leverage discourse. As such, the parts of cultural artifacts and excess are often of greater value than their corresponding wholes.

Archives are repositories of cultural artifacts, leftover pieces of other orderings, trace remains of past experience, and the misplaced remains of something else ... the excess deemed worthy of preservation. Abbas reminds us that preservation “is not memory. Preservation is selective and tends to exclude the dirt and pain (1997, p. 66).” As repositories, archives house contradictions but do not resolve them. Rather, they let the contradictions exist side by side. And while an item may be removed from an archive – an act akin to denial, a form of disappearance – for the most part, contradictions are resolved through affirmation, substitution, and misrecognition. Archives remind but they does not remember. Nor does they forget. Archives preserve for later use. They are the last stop of forgotten remains and needful things. They are the possibility of (re) emergence in the face of utter oblivion and total erasure. An archive’s ultimate value lies in its functionality, its ability to maintain the possibility of (re) appearance in the face of (dis) appearance, a functionality rooted not so much in
order as in dissonance and discord. And yes, it will tend to exclude the dirt and the pain ... unless, of course, the dirt and pain are deemed useful.

In Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance, Ackbar Abbas looks at “the manifold relations between cultural forms in Hong Kong ... and the changing cultural space of the city (1997, p. 1).” He does so in order to “pursue a particular theme: the cultural self-invention of the Hong Kong subject in a cultural space that I will be calling a space of disappearance (1997, p. 1).” Written before the turnover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese control, Abbas is haunted by a paradoxical observation: that it is only the in face of its disappearance that Hong Kong culture seems to emerge. Abbas reconfigures the city of Hong Kong as an archive of sorts; a space that is in constant revision, in which the new replaces the old even as the old replaces the new. For Abbas, Hong Kong provides the means through which the Hong Kong subject is imagined ... an imagination that is indicative of what he describes as a culture of disappearance. Abbas (1997, pp. 7-8) argues that:

... disappearance here does not imply non-appearance, absence, or lack of presence. It is not even non-recognition — it is more a

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4 The difference between denial and cognitive dissonance is an important distinction. To deny is to refute while cognitive dissonance describes the belief in two incompatible views followed by the
question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else
... There is something very definite about dis-appearance, a kind of
pathology of presence.

Abbas (1997, pp. 7-8) identifies three forms in which disappearance
operates. I would argue that these forms of disappearance amount to perceptual
equivalents of cognitive dissonance. They are, 1) the reverse hallucination, 2) in
relation to representation, and 3) in conjunction with another disappearance.
The first form, reverse hallucination, is quite literally not seeing what is there. In
the second form, “disappearance is not a matter of effacement but of replacement
and substitution, where the perceived danger is recontaincd through
representations that are familiar and plausible (Abbas 1997, p.8).” Abbas argues
that, in the case of Hong Kong:

...its very existence is under threat, nevertheless, the way the city
has been made to appear in many representations in fact works to
make it disappear, most perniciously through the old binaries of
East-West “differences.”
The third form of disappearance, that being disappearance that works in conjunction with another disappearance consists of:

...developing techniques of disappearance that respond to, without being absorbed by, a space of disappearance. These are not techniques that go against disappearance; they cannot even be thought of in terms of critical strategies of resistance. Rather, it is a question of working with disappearance and taking it elsewhere, of using disappearance to deal with disappearance. For example, if reverse hallucination is the problem, then Stanley Kwan will use the figure of a ghost in his film Rouge to reverse these reversals. If visual representations make images disappear in cliches, it will be a matter of inventing a form of visuality that problematizes the visual, as in the films of Wong Kar-wai (1997, p. 8)."

Abbas goes on to address disappearance in relation to the ephemeral, speed, and abstraction. Abbas starts with an “allegorical reading of space that attends not only to what is there but also to what is no longer there or not yet there (1997, p. 9)” which, he argues, does not address “phenomena that do not merely disturb our sense of time but that completely upset or reverse it (1997, p.9). Then Abbas turns to the notion of speed developed in Paul Virilio’s book,
The Lost Dimension (1991b) and applies it to the ephemeral. Abbas argues that “under conditions of speed our concept of physical dimensions loses all meaning through sensory overload, the fusion and confusion of fast and slow, that absence of transition between the big and the small (1997, p.9).” Abbas addresses abstraction by applying Virilio’s notion of speed to Henri Lefebvre’s concept of social space. Abbas (1997, pp. 9-10) argues:

The more abstract the space the more important the image becomes (a point the Situationists also made), and the more dominant becomes the visual mode. This relation between abstraction and the image, however, must be understood in a specific way. The image is not compensating for abstraction, an amelioration of its lack of the concrete; rather, it is the ‘concrete’ form that abstraction now takes, what Lefebvre calls a ‘concrete abstraction.’ This paradox of a ‘richness’ and ‘concreteness’ that go together with abstraction is also the paradox of disappearance.

In his book Imagined Communities, Anderson (1983) argues that the emergence and circulation of print media restructures the notion of community. He argues that this paves the way for a shift from a notion of community that depends on face-to-face contact to the emergence of the modern nation state
requiring a horizontal identification with unseen fellow citizens. Jurgen Habermas develops a complementary argument in his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991). In it he argues that the public sphere, “a social imaginary that grew out of the circulation of and [face-to-face] discussions of novels, newspapers, journals, and magazines (Lee 2001, xiv)” lead to the rise of the middle class subject.⁵ Lee points out the commonality between Anderson and Habermas when he states that “the public sphere and nationalism grew out of the circulation, reading, and discussion of specific textual forms (novels, journals, and newspapers), but he differs in his focus (Lee 2001, x).”

Appadurai argues that, “ever since Durkheim, and the work of the *Années Sociologiques* group, anthropologists have learned to regard collective representations as social facts – that is, to see them as transcending individual volition, as weighted with the force of social morality, and as objective realities (Appadurai 1996, p. 5).” In his book, *Modernity at Large*, he addresses collective representations vis-a-vis two forms of circulation – the first being the circulation of people (mass migration) and second being the circulation of electronic media. He argues that “when [mass migration] is juxtaposed with the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensations, we have a new order of instability in

⁵ It is important to also note that these discussions took place in spaces in that were conducive to the illusion that the individual would set aside his private concerns in favor of a more general and
the production of modern subjectivity (Appadurai 1996, p. 4).” Within this framework subjectivity is the byproduct of the (re) combination of people and discourses (in this case transmitted by electronic media). Not only is community imagined, but so is self. As such, he argues, the image, the imagined, and the imaginary are important concepts:

The image, the imagined, and the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social

inclusive public good. The obvious racial and gender coding of these spaces is addressed in works by Nancy Fraser (1993), Robbins (1993), and the Black Public Sphere Collective (1995).
fact, and a key component of the new global order (Appadurai 1996, p. 31).

The imagination as social practice isn’t all that new, as evidenced by his own evocation of Durkheim. What Appadurai brings to the proverbial table is an emphasis on the qualitative impact of (accelerated) human migration and electronic media (as an accelerant) on the plurality of imagined worlds. He brings into high relief the effects of accelerated circulation.

Urban also works off of Anderson’s arguments about circulation and subjectivity but, instead of addressing acceleration in terms of the imagination or the plurality of worlds, he uses vectors, movement, acceleration and deceleration. In his book of the same name, he addresses “metaculture,” or, as Lee (2001, p. ix) describes it “culture about culture.” Urban addresses the construction of the cultural or media “form” as a means to an end, the end being circulation. For Urban, memory, while necessary, is also a form of inertia. Disappearance, misrecognition, and substitution are implicit elements within this process; so too is the notion of some sort of source material or archive that must be engaged by the imagination and (re) circulated. In his opening chapter, aptly titled “The Once and Future Thing,” Urban (2001. P. 1) puts forth culture as the answer to a riddle, the thing that is both once and future:
The Ghost-like journey of our thing (or is it things?) takes place along pathways, social pathways, that it itself lays down. It creates the space that makes movement possible. How can it accomplish this social world-building task? The paradoxical answer is that it must look like what has come before it, like what has already been done that way. Its secret is in the mixture of oldness and newness that makes the journey possible. The king is dead; long live the king!

I find his work particularly interesting because he explores the possibilities of the (re) circulation of ideas without falling back on the argument that (re) circulation amounts to a repetition. Instead, circulation is not only the end of cultural production, but just as in Abbas, Virilio, and Appadurai, it is also the means through which culture is transformed.

For Urban (2001. p. 2) “the essential dynamism of culture [is] its restlessness, its itchy movement into uncharted and mysterious futures.” Yet, culture seems to move forward with its head turned, forever looking back, captivated by the demons at its tail, demons that go by such names as history, memory, and the past. As if looking forward is a possibility, as if it is possible to
describe or articulate a future without referring to something ... else; as if the
something else has some uniform connection to all who look at it. That is the
problem – the dilemma – that ties the tongue, calling both speaker and speech
act to task. That is the problem – the dilemma – that haunts the cultural
producer as he or she constructs an archive. That is the problem – the dilemma
– that is reflected in debates about representation. Yes, "preservation is selective
and tends to exclude the dirt and pain" (1997, p. 66) but who is to say that the
pain that is evoked is uniform? Who is to say when, if, and under what condition
the use and deployment of source material that causes pain is legitimate? As
such, speech acts, cultural production, archives, and representations are
inherently clumsy, but they are all we have. Insofar as culture is dynamic,
restless, or moving forward, it does so in fits and starts, shuffling and stumbling
through time and space. Culture is itchy ... and it is this itchiness that concerns
me.
Chapter 7

Trees Without Roots

The Problem of Establishing a Black Comic Book History

“They say that a people without history is like a tree without roots.”

(Aswad 1987)

August 18, 2001, the tail end of a very long day at the Wizard Con in Chicago. Except for hour and a half respite to interview Brian Azzarello, I had spent much of the day wading through crowds and listening to panels. Saturdays are usually the busiest days of the major conventions. In addition to interviewing Brian, I bumped into Alex Simmons, Bill Foster, and Turtel Onli in artists’ alley. Artists’ alley is the name for the section of a comic book convention that consists primarily of individual comic book creators. Some of the creators are there to peddle their self-published work, some do commissioned illustrations, and, scattered throughout, are scantily clad women signing the illustrations that they modeled for. Artists’ alley is truly a mixed bag. Christian-themed comic books sit side by side with pornographic comics, and super hero comic books are next to horror comics.
This is where the smallest of the independent comic book companies set up shop and where a lot of the people who dream of breaking into the industry hang out. And there are a lot of independent Black comic book producers here, many selling comic books with print runs of less than a thousand. Bill was going through a stack of comic books by Black creators that he has recently purchased. He showed me his latest finds: Black Bastard and Mac Afro. I had picked up a copy of Black Bastard earlier that day. A frightening tale of misogyny and ghetto violence with an all-Black creative team, I would not have even bothered with it if not for my research. I had seen some of the Black and White creators of Mac Afro wandering around the convention in their 1970s-style clothing and Afro wigs but hadn’t yet found their booth. Alex, Bill, Turtel and I talked briefly and agreed to meet at a nearby pizza place later that evening.

That evening the three of us, along with Calvin Armstrong, David Brown, Greg Walker, and Leonard Reel, met for pizza. Except for Bill and myself, everyone at the table was new to Alex. In many respects, Alex has made it. Blackjack had received substantial critical acclaim, DC Comics had brought him to the convention as a guest for his work on Orpheus Rising, and he had recently signed the contracts for the Tarzan Sunday comic strip. And none of the independent comic producers at the table knew who he was. Alex wasn’t insulted. In fact, he was amused. Especially when one of the independent
creators commented that Aaron McGruder’s *Boondocks* was the first African-American comic strip.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

He was.

“But what about Ollie Harington and Jackie Ormes? What about *Mama’s Boys, Jive Gray, Jump Start*, and *Torchy Brown*?” I thought to myself as Turtel jumped in and responded. “This the problem, we don’t even know our own history, our own place in the comic world.”

Turtel coined the phrase “Black Age of Comics” to describe the brief moment in time during the early 1990s when the national press had turned its attention to Black comic books and comic strips. In fact, the *Comics Journal* used this phrase as one of the tag lines for its special issue on Black cartoonists. Turtel has always taken some umbrage to representations of the early 1990s that looked at Black comics through the lense of Milestone and Ania. Ironically, even that was before these independent comic producers’ time.
In all fairness to the independent comic book producers who shared the table with us, they were merely going off of what they had been told. In an industry where most of the creators are not visible, where we tend to think of comic books as the product of one or two people, not seven or eight people, how do people learn about the history of Black comics? While there are many stories of independent comics that “make it,” there are even more publishers who lack the financial backing, logistical support, or depth of creative talent to stay afloat. I would argue that comparative analyses of how African-American characters fair with independent, small press, and their larger corporate counterparts, while outside the scope of this dissertation, is vital. Still, my research has netted some insights into this issue. In general, the success rate of any comic book character is greatest when he or she is published by one of the major companies. Yet Alex’s experiences seem to argue that this does not necessarily hold true for non-White characters because of the inherent difficulties in building the necessary consensus around the representation and marketing of a Black character. After all, independent comics have always put forth products of relatively uncompromised singular visions. Still, Alex is an exception. Many Black independent comic book producers lack Alex’s industry contacts and personal relationships. And it is a young industry, as evidenced by the view of Milestone comics as ancient history. In Alex’s case, the decision to publish *Blackjack* independently resulted from a failure of consensus amongst comic creators,
editors, and publishers (see the upcoming chapter titled *Jungle Action and Dark Heroes*).

During my two years of ethnographic research, the lack of an accepted history of racial and ethnic participation and representation in comics was palpable. For the most part, what exists on this issue exists in journals and exhibition catalogues that have not enjoyed wide circulation.

Three exceptions to this would be the work of Jeffrey Brown (2000), Thomas Inge (1993), and Trina Robbins (Robbins 1993a; Robbins 1993b; Robbins and Yronwode 1985), each of whom have published books. Brown's book *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* provides an interesting ethnographic treatment of reader reaction to and appropriation of Black superheroes. Thomas Inge has produced or made significant contributions to works on Black cartoonist Ollie Harrington (Harrington 1993; Inge 1993). And Trina Robbins has produced several publications on women in comics but her work, while broad, represents a lone voice on the topic. Still, while these books address some of the issues related to representation and participation in the field of comics, with the exception of some of Robbins' attempts to address women in comics, there is no comprehensive historical backdrop for these works.
The Balch Institute (Hardy and Stern 1986) produced an exhibition catalogue with several articles on representation in comics. L.A. Williams (1993) wrote his senior thesis on Black characters but it deals primarily with the 1970s. Early on in my research I met Bill Foster, a professor at Nagatuk Community College working on a history of Black comics that has yet to be published. Foster (2001a), Rob Stull (1999) and Rochon Perry (1992) have given talks, presentations, and produced exhibits on the work of Black cartoonists. The *Comics Journal* published its special issue on the Black Age of comics, but as I will argue, it is narrow in focus, centering primarily on the tensions between Milestone Media, Inc. and Ania Press (see Groth 1993; Norman 1993a; Norman 1993b; Norman 1993c; Norman 1993d; Robbins 1993b; Sobocinski 1993; Winbush 1993). The recently created *International Journal of Comic Art*, currently on its seventh issue, has produced several articles and interviews of interest to the subject of representation and participation in comic books but, as I have stated, they lack an historical context (see Carpenter 1999c; Carpenter 2002; Cremins 2002; Foster III 2001b; Gage 2001; Robbins 2002a; Robbins 2002b; Sheng-mei 2001).

The non-academic press coverage of representation in comics is even harder to come by. And much of it fits within the recurrent theme of the discovery of THE Black cartoonist or character. Most of the mainstream press
focused on the emergence of Milestone. The Black press also had ample coverage of Milestone. In an ironic twist, there are quite a few articles in the Black press published after the emergence of Milestone that highlight local independent comic book producers as if they are the first!

As I went through what literature I could find, I felt like Dent in his book *In Search of African-America* (2000, p. 18) who, upon researching the emergence of a Black middle class, a phenomenon attributed to the 1980s, discovered an article in the *New York Times* on the newly emerging Black middle class published in 1895! It is as if there is a conspiracy to keep Black participation and representation in its infancy. Or is it some odd kind of collective amnesia? Regardless, it seems to support Paul Gilroy’s argument that “racism rests on the ability to contain Blacks in the present, to repress and deny the past (Gilroy 1987, p. 12).” And while I do agree with Gilroy’s statement, it does raise the problem of location. Who or what is to blame: the creators, the companies, the audience, or some amorphous process?

Open a comic book and you will be confronted by swashbuckling heroes, paragons of virtue, hard-luck cases, femme fatales, sinister evildoers, angst-ridden teens, everymen and everywomen – a vast and dynamic array of characters. Read a comic book and you will experience a multitude of narratives,
a multitude of tales of heroic action & adventure, tragedy, pathos, and melodrama with some young love and comedy to boot! Except for the ubiquitous flying men in tights, talking animals, and the occasional intergalactic threat, pay close attention and you the reader will enter a world not unlike your own.

The comic book world is metaphorical, employing all manner of iconic images, symbols, parody, and caricature to make the reader see his or her own world amidst the fantasy. It is difficult to avoid getting so caught up in the world of the comic book page that one overlooks the industry and social relations that underlie its production. The comic book industry, along with its newspaper counterpart, is built on the spontaneous generation of referential property units. The characters are trademarked and their stories copywritten. It is to the industry’s advantage that we become transfixed by the page. Superman prompts us to believe that a man can fly. Spider-man’s alter ego, the decidedly “unhip” Peter Parker, could be any of us, except for his odd abilities and strange clothes. And the Black Panther provides a model of Black heroism for our multicultural society. These images play on our desires and distract us from the social relations that underlie their production.

Within this context, value is determined not only by comic book sales but also by collector’s markets, fan magazine commentary, industry “spin,” licensing
fees, movie and TV deals (both real and imagined), promotional campaigns, and the fame of the characters' creative team. Within the field of comics, the cultural product in question (the comic book character) has the potential to be a medium of exchange in much the same fashion as corporate stock options.

The term referential property units refers to the trademarked likenesses of the characters and the copywritten stories in which they appear. The value of these properties is tied to both its circulation and associations within specific spheres. At the same time, the property's existence as a commodity form (separable from its creator) makes way for a multitude of relationships between it, its creators, referents, owners, and audiences. The comic book industry is engaged in the production of cultural artifacts for economic gain. It is information-based in that its product is intangible, a construction of legal regimes that allow for the spontaneous generation of property from ideas. The comic book industry is built upon this spontaneous generation of property (in the form of trademarked characters) and the subsequent maintenance of these characters' value in the marketplace. Superman is a franchise, Spider-man a valued piece of stock, the Black Panther a product on the auction block fetching a price from the highest bidder. It is precisely because the likeness as a commodity can be separated from its creator, is outside of the control of its referents, and is subject to multiple readings by multiple audiences that its ownership is so
coveted. To this end, legal definitions of authorship are crucial to the determination of ownership and, with it, the right to distribute the likeness' monetary value. However, while the owner may control the distribution of the monetary value, it is the social value, in the form of romantic notions of authorship, that determines what monetary value there is to distribute. Ironically, romantic notions of authorship, at one time the founding doctrine of intellectual property law, have become the commodity fetish responsible for sublimating the social relations of the industry.

While the comic book consumer responds to the contents of the comic book page, comic book professionals must continually reconcile audience desires with their own image as creator, the images he or she creates and notions of "authorship" that continually shift in definition from the legal to the romantic. By comic book professionals I mean both the creative and editorial talent as well as business people who derive all or part of their living from comic books. These shifts in definition, which can occur in response or resistance to the flow of capital, create opportunities for comic book professionals to exert partial or temporary control of the images in question.

As a result, I would argue that for comic book professionals, movement within the social space of the comic book industry (by this I mean access to work
on high-profile projects, favorable contract negotiations, and creative freedom from editors and publishers) hinges on one's ability to move in relation to shifting definitions of authorship.

Movement in relation to shifting notions of authorship is further complicated by the nature of the comic images that are in play. Intellectual property laws reify images by regarding them as ideas that are transformed into a commodity form. Ironically, the trademarked image is referred to as a likeness. This begs the question, “likeness to what?” This is the central issue of Arjun Appadurai’s essay, “The Social Life of Things” (1986), in which he argues that the creation of value, the difference between a potential and actual commodity, is derived from sociopolitical discourses. In the case of comics, the question of likeness (to what?) has different valences when applied to comic images and romantic notions of authorship. In the case of comic images, likeness connects the image to some generalizable notion of reality that, once unpacked, encompasses a series of sociopolitical and moral positions. The term audience appeal literally collapses sociopolitical discourses and moral positions into an abstract desire to purchase the image. In the case of romantic notions of authorship, likeness connects the author to the image. This is the result of the romantic assumption that as the product of a creative individual the image must bear some essential likeness to its creator. This is particularly relevant to the
comic book industry because it allows image producers (writers, artists, and even corporate entities) to add their social capital to the economic value of the image. Again, it highlights the importance of legal authorship/ownership in controlling the distribution of value.

The question of likeness is complicated by the fact that images have a certain pliability that open them up to a veritable world of possible narratives that obscure the agencies responsible for their production, circulation, and consumption. In the case of comics, characters' identities are totally constructed from referential, and often stereotypical, images that feed into audience expectations that the creator bear an essential likeness to his or her creation. As a result, a Black comic book character created by a White male creator is viewed in terms of its universal qualities while Black characters created by Black creators are viewed within the context of particular interests. Although a significant amount of work has examined the consumption of racially identified commodities, little has been done on the relationship between the products and their creators. In the case of comics, an intertextual universe filled with iconic representations, idealized forms, and caricatures come together to form a narrative. Racial identity is constructed from a limited set of images that are routinely resurrected around differing and often oppositional discourses of value,
that both encompass their creators and intersect with the processes of identity formation.

Comics have always used images of the exotic and the other to spin their tales. In fact, it was within this framework that the introduction of “diverse” or “multicultural” characters occurred long before the diversification of the work force. Ironically, Black characters that were created by White men inspired many Black creators to enter the field. As a result, notions of diversity and difference collided.

The comic book is quite literally a book of brilliant things – flashy colors, over-the-top stories, and melodramatic narratives that come together to tell the stories of men and women in tights – but look at the fine print. The comic book is a cultural product, an artifact, the endpoint of a production process that yields stories so fantastic that it is easy to address them strictly in terms of the reading experience. But in comic books, the small letters – the fine print – shed the most light on the production processes and negotiations responsible for the words and pictures on the page.

Go to a comic book store or newsstand and what do you see? The covers of comic books with their bright colors and dynamic images lined up next to one
another. If it's a recent issue of the *Justice Society of America (JSA)* the upper right-hand corner features the DC Comics logo. The left-hand corner is adorned with the Comic Code Authority seal of approval. It looks almost like a postage stamp. Created in 1954, the seal is supposed to let the reader know that the contents are acceptable for all audiences. Open the issue and the first thing you'll see is a splash page. A single dynamic image that sets up the story that will play out over the subsequent pages of words and pictures. And somewhere on the page you'll find the title for this month's installment of the Justice Society's ongoing adventures. Usually, on the bottom of the splash page – sometimes on an interior or back page – you'll find a list of credits. This is where the "creators" are listed along with their job functions. These functions are usually broken down into the following categories: "editor," "assistant editor," "writer," "artist," "inker," "colorist" and "letterer." At very bottom, you might notice the fine print – a small strip of white, about 1" by 6 1/2." Read it. You'll find all sorts of interesting information: the issue and volume number of the comic book, a copyright and trademark notice identifying the contents of the comic book as the exclusive property of DC Comics, DC Comics' address, and the logo of DC Comics' parent company, AOL Time Warner.

connections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate is ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own context of significance.” In my current research, which is reflected in this and previously published work (Carpenter 1999c; Carpenter 2001b), I have taken the issue of the representation of race and the use of stereotypical imagery and narratives to the comic book production process. In order to do this, I started by looking at the fine print, then I moved to the small print, the large print and, finally, the images. Along the way I tried to find people who were involved or had some kind of working connection to the issues raised by the fine, small, and large print, as well as the images. In Chapter 2, I used interviews with Don McGregor and Alex Simmons to counter the conception of the history Black characters and participation in comic books. In Chapter 11, I spent time at DC Comics and conducted interviews with two African-Americans who were involved in creating African-American incarnations of J.J. Thunder and the new Mr. Terrific. I also used these interviews to comment on the formation and publication of the most recent version of the Justice Society. Chapter 12 and Chapter 13 literally take the fine print and move backward to the places, interactions, and sources that influenced a variety of seemingly unrelated comic books.

The first economically viable comic book was created by pulp fiction publishers (Sabin 1993). As a result, Black cartoonists, most of who worked
exclusively for Black newspapers and magazines, were all but shut out of this burgeoning industry. The few Black cartoonists, such as Tom Feelings, who worked in comic books did so as ghost pencillers on books featuring White superheroes. And like their counterparts in comic strips published by majority presses, they were called upon to replicate the artistic styles (Carpenter 1999a; Nelson, et al. 1998)[Stull, 1999 #232] and problematic imagery of their White counterparts. And while there were a few heroic images of Blacks created by Blacks (Foster III 2001a; Inge 1993), such as the Jive Gray comic strip and All Negro Comics, these images did not circulate outside of pre-civil rights segregated Black communities. Black, as well other racial and ethnic, characters that did enjoy wide circulation in advertising [Gordan, 1998 #216], comic strips [Gordan, 1998 #216; Jones, 1986 #80], and comic books (Brown 2000; Davenport 1997; Foster III 2001a; Nelson 1986; Rashap 1986) incorporated offensive racial and ethnic narratives and imagery.

Protests by the NAACP (Hardy 1986) and sections of the Comics Code (Brown 2000; Davenport 1997; Nyberg 1998) sought to address racial stereotyping in comics. While these actions had more of a chilling affect than anything else, eliminating the use of any Black characters in mainstream comic books – essentially comics that targeted a White audience – I would argue that this cleared the way for what was to follow.
In the 1960s, Stan Lee began what is now referred to as the Marvel Age during which he created such characters as Spiderman, The Hulk, and the X-Men. What made these characters unique was that they were angst ridden. In spite of their powers they dealt with many of the problems of everyday life. It was within this vein that this company consisting primarily of Whites created such Black characters as the Black Panther in 1966, the Falcon in 1969, Black Goliath in 1971, and Power Man (a.k.a Luke Cage: Hero for Hire) in 1972 (see figure 4). And while Black Panther was very much influenced by the disintegration of colonialism and the re-emergence of Black control over African countries he was created at a time in which the Black Panther movement was not making national headlines. In fact he was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby precisely to fill the void of Black comic book characters (A&E Biography 1995; Brown 2000). The Falcon, Power Man, and Black Goliath, however, came into being as advocates of Black Power are challenging Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolent vision of civil rights and blaxploitation films are enjoying wide circulation. The 1980s and 1990s saw an increase in the number of Black superheroes by “mainstream” comic book publishers as well as the emergence of cartoonists and specialty publishers creating Black superheroes (Winbush 1993).
Figure 4. Above from left to right: covers to *Black Goliath* #1 (February 1974), *Black Panther* vol. 2, #11 (September 1999), and *Luke Cage: Power Man* #17 (February 1974).
While African-American participation within the comic book industry is still relatively low, the vast majority of African-American cartoonists who have worked in the industry entered it after 1970. And the proportion of African-American to White participation has increased steadily. This is consistent with non-White participation, in general. As a result, Baby Boomers who work in the comic book industry tend to be less diverse as a group but ranked higher within the organizational structures. For Baby Boomers, such characters as the Black Panther, Falcon, Power Man, and Master of Kung Fu were edgy by virtue of the color of their skin. As a group, Generation X is much more diverse; diversity that facilitated by attempts by Baby Boomers to be more inclusive. In addition, Generation X comic book creators came to the industry having read and, to some degree having identified with, the adventures of the Black Panther, Falcon, Power Man, and Master of Kung Fu.

The 1990s began with a call for African-American comic book characters that was answered with the formation of Milestone Media, Ania Press, and the publication of Brotherman. This same period also saw the creation of DC Comics' Steel as well as the resurrection of DC Comics' Black Lightning and Marvel Comics' Cage. This received a lot of press, especially from media eager to place Milestone Media and Ania within debates about multiculturalism and
Afrocentricity (Brown 2000). Ania folded almost immediately after its initial formation. By the end of the decade *Brotherman, Black Lightning, Cage*, and *Steel* disappeared from the shelves. Milestone Media had also ceased publication. The collapse of Milestone Media was a very public blow to those who demanded more diversity among comic book characters. It has even been used to argue that non-White characters are not marketable. Still, with much less hype by the major media outlets, African-American characters continue to be produced either independently or by the smaller presses. African-American characters by African-American creators have a high failure rate among the larger presses in part because comic book companies are uneasy marketing African-American characters that do not adhere to predetermined types. And many African-American creators are interested in producing characters that defy preconceived racial notions.

This dissertation contains examples in which writers and artists must simultaneously negotiate shifting notions of authorship and race on the personal level, in the context of their own work, and in contrast to the work of others. To this end it is also important to review the history of comics as it relates to romantic notions and legal definitions of authorship, as well as comic representations and the participation of African-Americans in the comic book industry.
In his article entitled "What Is an Author," Michel Foucault focuses on the relationship of the text to the author. He opens with the assertion (1998 p. 205) that "[t]he coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences." He follows this assertion by laying out the task of the article (1998 p. 205) "to deal solely with the relationship between text and author and with the manner in which the text points to this figure that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it." For Foucault the "author" does not make the work so much as he or she is created by the need to attribute the work.

The field of comics, however, was built on the annihilation of the individual romantic author. Comic book companies did this by resorting to a legal definition of authorship. This annihilation was implemented through a system in which noncorporeal corporate entities claimed legal ownership of the stories and characters, and creative teams were employed as "work for hire," meaning that they were paid for their labor and received no proprietary rights. The creation of legal authorship, through intellectual property laws, can be traced to the early development of the novel. Legal authorship was fueled by an attempt to grant proprietary rights to writers. As a result, according to Gaines (1991), copyright laws hinge on romantic notions of written authorship. Over time,
especially as the industry shifted from story-driven to image-driven products, the romantic notion of the author would reemerge.

Consequently, the development of intellectual-property law creates a subject position, the legal author, that is a precondition for the establishment of a comic book industry in which the ownership of characters can be centralized in corporate hands.

In her book Contested Culture: the Image, the Voice, and the Law, Gaines (1991) argues that consequences such as the ones described above are endemic to law. She does this through a peculiar reading of Fredric Jameson's notion of the fantasy bribe. First she quotes Jameson's argument that "the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated."

Then she argues that "in order for law to have viability at all, it needs to hold that 'genuine shred' of something, and it does so in the promise to uphold rights, to secure benefits equally, and to ensure 'liberty.' But [and here is the rub] the law holds out this promise, not to manipulate but to respond to its constituency. It cannot rule without seeming to be fair . . . to secure consensus,
the law must work for those out of power" (1991 p. 6). In so doing, the law – while attempting to secure rights by creating new categories of rights holders – creates subject positions.

The primary example that she uses is slavery. In this example, she argues that laws designed to protect the property rights of slaveholders did so by constructing the ‘slaveholder’ as a subject position open to be regulated (Gaines 1991 p. 6-7). A similar case can be made for the relationship of the author to the comic book industry. As I stated earlier, the comic book industry is built on the value of its characters: its intellectual property. As a result, ownership and control of resources go to the “legal author.”

The creation of a legal author requires that ideas be convertible into a property form and then attributed back to the author as the property holder. The creation of the legal definition of the author, however, according to James Boyle, is built on “the romantic [notion of the] author whose original transformative genius justifies [the creation of] private property” (1992 p.1415).6 This structuring of legal authorship out of romantic notions gives Foucault’s assertions (1998) concerning the discursive functions of authorship both a legal and strategic relevance for the comic book industry and its labor pool.
The first attempts at creating a viable comic book industry were the result of efforts of newspaper syndicates and pulp-fiction publishers (Sabine 1993 p. 145). At the time there was almost no African-American participation in the mainstream of either industry. Essentially, the comic book industry was founded by White men who created heroic narratives adapted from pulp adventure, science fiction, and fantasy novels. With the exception of funny animal stories and romance, other genres that would enter the field (such as crime, war, and Western) were narratives about White men in which African-Americans served as archetypes, symbols of subservience, and barbarism.

Although the legal author is built on romantic notions in an attempt to secure rights, it also redefines originality in terms of origin and creates new categories of rights holders – “noncorporeal” or corporate entities. These entities have a vested interested in at once proliferating the notion of the romantic author while depending on the legal definition of the author for its livelihood.

In the early days of the comic book industry when the emphasis was on copyright, this led, in part, to a division of comic book companys’ creative labor. For example, Superman was created by a team that included a penciller, inker,

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6 Boyle (1996 p. 109) argues that society desires to “romanticize a notion of subjective control of
writer, and colorist. This allowed DC to assert that it was the owner (read legally as point of origin) of Superman and any creation other of Superman's creative team (who were 'work for hire,' read as tools) was the result of DC's ability to bring the labor together. It is important to note, however, that copyright is built on the ownership of the idea/story. Ownership of the character is based on the character's inclusion in a story.

The current state of comics is heavily influenced by the Trademark Act of 1946, known as the Lanham Act. Until the 1970s the comic book professional existed in relative obscurity. He was not always cited within the pages of book and his or her image rarely, if ever, was recognizable to his audience. His reputation (read as political capital) within the industry was responsible for his advancement. Gains in pay (economic capital) were incremental, even restricted. Company or studio loyalty was paramount. The lack of credit and a public image hampered his ability to be seen as an author. This would change. Gaines (1991 p. 210) links the emergence of the Lanham Act to the rise of TV. Originally designed to protect the public from market fraud, the Lanham Act allows for a similar notion of legal authorship of the image of the comic character regardless of its relationship to a text. According to Gaines, "the transition of the character Superman from comic strip through radio and motion picture serials to television

private information."
series to motion picture features . . . corresponds to the period in which trademark law overtakes copyright as the governing principle of character protection in popular formats.” I would argue that this is responsible for a shift from story-driven/writer-centered comic book production to image-driven/artist-centered production. This would be reflected in the attribution of work in the credits box of the comic book and continue with the emergence of comic book conventions, and be influenced by labor disputes over creator ownership. The emergent artist centered production has led to the current situation in which romantic notions of authorship would be tapped to sell books.
Chapter 8

On the Field, Practices, and Processes of Comic Book Production

February 27, 1999. I was in Amherst, MA. at the Words & Pictures Museum for an exhibit featuring the work of African-American comic creators. Fiona Russell, curator of the museum, waded through the crowd of people and stood at the front of the room. Introductions were in order (Carpenter 1999b) and Fiona opened with the following statement: “Many people seem to think that there is a machine somewhere in the Midwest that stamps out comic books whole...”

Roughly two years later I was in New York City at the office of Axel Alonso – an editor at Marvel Comics – discussing the upcoming re-launch of X-Force when the phone rang. “Yes, I got your e-mail,” he said. “Well, I don’t know how useful it would be for you to come here.” Axel paused, listening to the speaker on the other end. “Yes ... a day in the life ... there wouldn’t be a lot for you to see here. You see, I function very much like an executive producer. I assemble the creative team, most of the work gets done by freelancers who work out of their homes.” Another long pause, “Well you’re more than welcome to come. Most of what you’ll see are [editors’] offices.” The conversation continued.
The single most salient qualitative distinction in the comic book labor pool is the distinction between freelancers and the non-freelancers. Non-freelancers owe their primary allegiance to corporate entities. A non-freelancer’s concerns about the artistic quality of their books are tempered by such corporate considerations as sales, the company brand, trademark, and marketing considerations and their primary responsibilities have to do with processes. The non-freelancers include assistant editors, editors, production staff, and the publisher. Freelancers work for themselves. They are hired to complete tasks. They compete against one another for work in an industry that has more people willing to do work than jobs to offer. A freelancer’s concerns about the artistic quality of his or her work has more to do with personal aesthetics and, to a lesser degree, satisfying the tastes of editorial gatekeepers. The freelancers include writers, pencillers, inkers, letterers, and colorists. In the comic book industry, freelancers outnumber company employees. The extensive use of freelance labor has been the norm for the comic book industry since its inception. However, as the use of freelance labor has increased significantly across many other industries, so to has interest in the norms and practices of freelance laborers. One such work titled *Free Agent Nation* by Daniel Pink (2001) distinguishes between the “Organization Man” and the “Free Agent.” Working from the aptly titled book *The Organization Man* by William H. Whyte, Jr. (1956), Pink describes the Organization Man as someone who works for a company as
opposed to the Free Agent, his term for the self-employed. Writing from the perspective of the 1950s, Whyte (1956) argued that the Organization Man – the man who subsumes his own individuality in exchange for the security of lifetime employment, pension benefits, and health care – is the pre-eminent symbol of the 20th century labor force. Pink (2001) attributes the rise of the Organization Man to both the ideas of Taylor and Ford and, most importantly, to the rise in cost of owning the means of production in an industrial economy.

For the most part, comic book characters are corporately owned while the creative talent consists of free agents. As result, the comic book industry is, by necessity, a blend of free agent and corporate organization values. As managers of the creative process, editors often function at the margins that separate corporate hierarchies from the shifting confederations that dominate the freelancer's existence. I borrow the term confederation from Pink (2001 p. 141). He describes a confederation as, "a regular collaboration between free agents akin to a law or accounting partnership – but in which the relationships are more fluid and the structure is set by an informal agreement rather than a legal contract." Pink argues that "the right mix between individual freedom and group power is the secret to confederations (Pink 2001 p. 135)." In a statement that is exceedingly appropriate for this paper, Pink quotes one of his informants about the confederation of which he is a part. "We're like the Justice League of
America. We’ve got these different superpowers, and we come together when the world is threatened. Then after we achieve the mission, we disperse to do our own stuff (Pink 2001 p. 135).”

Company employees and freelancers operate on different clocks. The divide between the company employee and the freelancer is, in part, a function of their uses of time. The company employee conforms to a work schedule in which he or she is compensated for equally valued segments of time. The freelancer creates a schedule and is compensated not for the time consumed but for the pages produced.

Company employees are wedded to a variation of the standard American corporate clock (working 10-6, five days a week with two weeks vacation per year). Freelancers work on a 24 hour clock – apportioning whatever time is required – for creative tasks that can vary in the length of time required for completion.

For the most point, comic book employees manage the creative process. Editors assign tasks and maintain quality control. The production department makes necessary changes that essentially fill in the gaps, inconsistencies, and mistakes between stages in the comic book production process. Marketing and
publicity get the word out in order to help ensure that there are consumers for the end product. Non-freelancers – assistant editors, editors, production staff, publishers, etc. – work out of corporate offices. The dress codes are lax and the walls and desks are usually decorated with an array of pop-culture artifacts – comic art, toys, and comic related merchandise. This segment of the labor force receives a regular salary and is expected to hold regular business hours, work 40 to 60-hour weeks, and they receive the standard array of corporate benefits. The non-freelance comic book workers derive their security from a single corporate source. With the major comic book companies the structure is hierarchical; assistant editors report to editors. A successful editor builds his career/capital within the company through his or her contacts outside of the company.

But amongst the freelancers the structure is horizontal. Writers and artists collaborate or confer with one another. Freelancers hedge their risks by diversify their work across several clients and projects (Pink 2001) both within and, in many cases, outside the comic book industry. A freelancer's status/security is linked to both the success of projects in which he or she has taken part and his or her ability to cultivate relationships with editors and potential collaborators. Freelancers are "selling insight, talent, expertise, creativity, and solutions (Pink 2001, p. 106)," These activities cannot always be quantified in terms of minutes, hours, and days. Otherwise, according to Pink
(2001, pp.103-23), "a bad idea that takes a long time to hatch will cost more than a good idea [that] the [freelancer] comes up with instantly." As a result, while the company employees divide their workdays into 8-hour days and submit time cards that determine their compensation, the freelancers distribute their finite tasks throughout a 24-hour day and are paid not for their time but for each completed page.

Freelancers – writers, pencillers, inkers, letterers, colorists – in the comic book industry work out of home studios or offices, offsite independently owned offices or studios, or offsite jointly held offices or studios. Hereafter I will identify these workspaces by the prefix home, offsite, or group. The difference between an office and studio is the type work associated with it. Offices are primarily writing spaces while studios are primarily sites of artistic labor. The most common arrangement is to work out of a home office or studio. I met very few freelancers who had offsite offices or studios that they didn’t share with other people in creative fields. The advantages of working out of a home office or studio are the low overhead, independence, and flexibility. The disadvantages are the cost of durable equipment and, depending on a freelancer’s living situation, a lack of privacy and limited access to other creative people. Freelancers with offsite offices tend opt for them because of space or privacy considerations. The advantage of getting a group of people together to form a group office or studio is
the access to other creative people that can lead to both collaboration and job leads. These group studios can be informal arrangements where each member pays a share of rent or they can be formal business arrangements in which the studio members work under a common name and share such resources as agents, lawyers, computers, copy machines, etc. Freelancers are paid for the work they perform which is, for the most part, measured in pages produced. Except in the cases of certain formal studio arrangements, a freelancer’s time is his or her own; however, this flexibility comes at the cost of the built-in security of working as a corporate employee.

Open a comic book and go to the credits. This is where the “creators” are listed along with their job functions. These functions are usually broken down into the following categories: “editor,” “assistant editor,” “writer,” “artist,” “inker,” “colorist” and “letterer.” Changes in technology have also seen the listing of color separations as job function distinct from those of the colorist. For simplicity sake I will use the term “named position” as a blanket term to refer to editors, assistant editors, writers, artists, inkers, colorists and letterers who are credited within the comic book pages. I will use the term “creative team” to refer to contributors (regardless of whether they receive credit) in a more general sense. While I do not refer to color separator as a named position, I will address its recent emergence as a named position in relationship to inking, coloring, and
production. Below is a brief summary of the general responsibilities of each named position followed by a brief discussion about the major divisions of labor and the politics of comic book production.

The editor bears ultimate responsibility for the book. Proofreading for proper spelling and grammar is a minor part of the editor's job. The editor selects the creative team, making him or her responsible for the overall look of the book. The editor is responsible for scheduling, payment of freelancers, communicating with freelancers about work terms and any restrictions on the use and representation of characters in the book, and ensuring that members of creative teams meet deadlines. The editor also settles disputes between members of the creative team, arbitrates on behalf of the creative team on such issues as the use of characters from other books. Proofreading does not stop at checking for spelling and grammatical errors. Of greater concern is the maintenance of the continuity within and between books. Examples of continuity issues within a book include ensuring that the right colors, used from panel to panel, ensuring that panel transitions are readable, and keeping an eye out for story elements that contradict previous stories. An example of continuity between books could include making sure that changes to a character in one book, such as a change in Superman's costume from Adventures of Superman, are reflected in another book, such as the Justice League of America (JLA). Editors also ensure that
characters behave within their conceptual limits. For example, Superman doesn’t kill, Batman doesn’t use guns, and Wonder Woman doesn’t swear. Most companies have several tiers of editors. For example, at DC Comics there are full editors, associate editors, and group editors, each of who are responsible for more than one book.

While the distinctions between associate, full, and group editors delineate rungs of the promotional ladder which will become more apparent as I describe the institutional politics of the industry, the assistant editor, in addition to being credited as such does bear some immediate explanation. The assistant editor works directly under an editor on one or more books. An assistant editor is at the bottom of the editorial food chain and is considered an editor in training. It is a nebulous position, the responsibilities of which are entirely at the discretion of the editor. Some assistants function primarily as traffic cops while others are, for all intents and purposes, totally responsible for the book.

The writer is responsible for creating the plots as well as writing the scripts and dialogue. For the most part the writer works within a defined set of restrictions, which I will refer to as the “brief.” A brief can be specific or vague. For example, it could list the circumstances under which a character will kill or it could restrict the use of certain plot elements (such as time travel or cloning).
The brief can also list options or required plot elements. For example, a poor-selling character may be slated for change and the brief may give the writer the explicit permission to replace, maim, or kill the character in an effort introduce a newer version of the character. Or a writer may be told that his or her character has to play a part in a crossover story involving certain villains or that a supporting character is slated to die in an upcoming episode of another comic book. Many writers work on multiple comic books simultaneously. Their pace varies in accordance with a variety of factors, including the use of full-script or plot-first (see below) production format and the participation of collaborators. For example, Brian Azzarello works almost exclusively from full-script and can work on up to three comic books at the same time.

The penciller is "the first part of the art team. The [penciller is] the person who draws the pictures in pencil. Pencillers share with writers the primary storytelling chores. The finished pencils are sent to the writer or editor for placement of the dialogue balloons (O'Neil 2001 p. 22)." While the pace of most pencillers varies, it is generally assumed that a penciller will produce a page a day.

Of all of the named positions, inkers are commonly the most misunderstood. They do more than trace the art. According to O'Neil (2001
p.22) the inker is "the artist who adds India ink to the penciled pictures to make them easy to print. The inker does a lot more than go over pencil lines with a pen or brush. Inkers add texture, shading, [and] shadows. If a panel has the illusion of depth, or convinces you that the scene is happening at night, or the figures in it are convincingly three-dimensional, thank the inker." In some cases, the inker edits the art, moving a leg, clarifying a confusing panel by omitting unnecessary lines, or fixing a nose. The best inkers, According to Rob Stull, "will change a panel without the artist even noticing it." Inkers are selected for their artistic compatibility. Inking tends to take less time than pencilling. Two pages a day are considered average. Most inkers juggle several books. The nature of an inking assignment is very much dependent on the habits of the penciller. Some pencillers produce art that includes explicit instructions about shading and textures while others leave such things to the inker's discretion. Some artists produce vague breakdowns that leave entire story elements such as background scenery, gadgets, and even faces to the inker's discretion. An inker brought in to finish breakdowns receives a higher rate. According to Rob Stull, a reliable inker will have a much more steady income than a penciller because, in addition to juggling multiple projects, its not uncommon for inkers to get spot work on books that have fallen behind. For example, a penciller will send two or three pages at a time, but when he or she falls behind schedule, he or she may send five or six
pages three days before the book has to go to the colorist, creating a bottleneck. As a result, a second inker will be brought in to help complete the pages.

The letterer is "the person who letters the copy and draws the balloons, captions, and outlines the panels in India ink (O'Neil 2001 p. 23)."

The colorist's job can be defined this way: "When the penciller, inker, and letterer have done their work, the entire job is photographically reduced to comic book-page size – 6 1/2 by 10 1/4 inches – and given to the last of the creative personnel, a colorist who uses a form of watercolor to bring the story to multihued life. In recent years, many colorists do their work on computers, which eliminates the need to reduce the page photographically – the art is simply scanned, then given to the colorist as a digital file. This ultra-modern method is easier and it gives the colorist a much larger number of options (O'Neil 2001 p. 23)."

Essentially, the writer, penciller, inker, letterer, and colorist work together in an assembly line-like process. The editor and the assistant editor manage the process. While the production process has many variations, there are two generally accepted formats. They are "full-script" and "plot-first." In the full-script approach, the writer produces a manuscript that resembles a movie or
television script (O'Neil 2001 p. 27). The full-script treatment will contain a page-by-page breakdown of the action, narration, and dialogue. The script is sent to the penciller who produces pencil drawings of the script. Then the inker applies the ink and sends the drawings on to the letterer and then the colorist. Plot-first owes its origins to Stan Lee, the founder of Marvel Comics. As a result, it is also called the "Marvel Way." In this format the writer gives the penciller a plot. The penciller draws the plot and sends the pencilled pages to the writer who determines the placement of narrative, dialogue, and thought balloons using a nonreproducible blue pencil. Next the pages go to the letterer who inserts the word balloons and panel borders in ink. The letterer then sends the pages to the inker who applies the rest of the inks and forwards the pages to the colorist (O'Neil 2001 pp. 25 - 26).

O'Neil (2001 p. 28) identifies three advantages to the full-script format:

1. The writer has full control of the story. He determines the pacing, which is something that might concern the writer more than the artist. The writer can be certain that all plot elements are represented in the artwork. (Occasionally – just occasionally – a penciller will become so involved in making wonderful pictures, or drawing what he likes, that he’ll forget about parts that may be
quiet, but have to be present if the story is to make sense. When
you see a story loaded with captions that explain the motives of the
characters or describe events that aren’t in the story, this is
probably what happened.

2. The writer can improve on his original idea. Sometimes,
in the middle of writing a script, a writer thinks of a way to enhance
the plot he began with. If he’s working plot-first, he’s stuck with
something he thought of days, weeks, or months earlier. Writing
full script he can let his new inspiration add luster to his readers’
lives.

3. This one is a bit sticky, but I should mention it anyway.
Writing full scripts, the writer is not relying on anyone else to get
his job done. If the penciller is, for some reason, late, the writer is
not forced to wait for the pages to arrive. His deadlines are his own,
to meet or ignore (if he’s an irresponsible no-goodnik), and not his
collaborator’s.

O’Neil identifies (2001 p. 31) three advantages to the plot-first format:

1. The writer can cover omissions in copy. Even working
full-script, pencillers sometime forget to put things in. If that
happens when the art exists before the script, the writer can do the necessary exposition in dialogue or those talky captions I mentioned earlier. If it happens working full-script, the story is usually compromised – dumbed down a bit.

2. The writer can be inspired by something in the art. This is the reason many good writers choose to work plot-first. An expression on a character’s face, a bit of body language, something in the background – any of these can suggest clever lines, characterization, even plot twists that improve the final product.

3. Lazy writers can let pencillers do their work for them. A really fine artist will handle some writing chores – pacing is the obvious one – and add interesting touches of their own while honoring the plot, allowing the writer to take credit for brilliance he might not really possess. Or, at least, quit work early.

The work proceeds in an assembly-line process in which the penciller will complete two or three pages and send them on to the next step in the process. For the most part the editor or assistant editor will review the pages between steps. The most common times when editors make changes are after the pages have been lettered and inked and just after the pages are colored. Once the pages have been lettered and inked they are usually proofread for text and storytelling.
Any changes can be either sent back to the artist or, as is often the case, the pages are sent to the production department where a staff artist will make the changes. Usually the changes involve whiting out and redrawing sections of the artwork in order to make changes. These changes could include moving the pointer on a word balloon, fixing a spelling error, or even removing, adding or changing a prop or character in a panel. Once the colorist is finished, a color copy is made. This is the last chance to make changes before the comic goes to press. At this stage, the primary concern is ensuring that the colors are correct. Color correction can be very important in comics, especially in superhero comics where the primary distinguishing factors between characters can be blue or green skin or a particularly flashy costume. In addition, color is often used for storytelling effect. For example, the ongoing *Starman* comic book featured several issues in which Starman communicated with his dead brother. These scenes were distinguished from other scenes by a black, white, and gray color palette. Color corrections are usually done “in house.” The color-corrected pages are turned into negatives and shipped to the printer. Usually the printer ships the books directly to the distributor. Although it is rare, in cases where gross errors or certain editorial concerns are raised after the negatives have been made, companies have retrieved and destroyed negatives and or entire print runs of books to prevent their distribution. The term for this is “to pulp.”
In 1999, I interviewed Dark Horse Comics' Senior Editor Diana Schutz, Freelance comic writer Walter Simonson, and freelance comic penciller Lee Weeks for an article detailing the creation of the *Tarzan versus Predator* comic book miniseries (Carpenter 1999c). According Schutz, it takes six weeks for her company to produce a twenty-two to twenty-four page comic book published in monthly intervals; scheduling appropriated to allow four to six weeks for pencilling, three to four weeks for inking, and three days for lettering. Because letterers juggle multiple projects, the company must allow two weeks for this task. The colors take from one to four weeks, depending on the process and the amount of preproduction that is rolled into the job. At first glance, it appears that even six weeks is not enough time to produce a monthly comic book. However, the comic book production process is set up so that the jobs (pencilling, inking, etc.) overlap in order to save time. The actual printing time is about a day, but the actual turn-around time is two weeks. In addition, common practice calls for the jobs of smaller companies to give way to those of larger competitors.

Within the comic book creative process, time is measured in monthly and yearly increments. With few exceptions, comic books are published monthly. Most comic books fall into one of four categories. An ongoing series continues publication until the publisher cancels it. Special oversized issues of ongoing series are published yearly and referred to an "annuals." A mini-series is a
monthly comic book that has a predetermined length – usually four, six, or twelve issues. A one-shot is a comic book conceived of as a single-issue story or event. A long-term freelance contract in the comic book industry lasts one year. As a result, additional monetary incentives or penalties for on-time performance are tied to producing a year’s worth – twelve issues – of work. However, as a rule of thumb, it takes six weeks to get a comic book from script to the point where it is ready to be printed. All of this contributes to a work environment in which time is at the source of many decisions and disputes.

One of the ways that the comic book production process makes up for lost time is through the use of unnamed contributors. During one of my phone conversations with African-American inker Rob Stull, I asked how many people had worked on the art of Slingers over the course of its first eight issues. Slingers (see figure 7) was a comic book that spun off from Spider-man written by White writer Joseph Harras and pencilled by African-American penciller ChrisCross that was published from March 1999 to March 2000 by Marvel Comics. It managed to maintain its creative team and ship on time for all of the eight issues that had been published at the time. We started with the seven named contributors. We figured that it was impossible for us to know for certain which staff at Marvel had their hands on the project so we only counted the assistant editor and the editor. But since they were already named we were still at seven.
Then we started counting all of the inkers and artists who had worked as assistants or been subcontracted to account for delays in the production process. We ended up with twenty-seven people.
Figure 5. Two of the four alternate covers for *Slingers* #1 (December 1998) pictured above. As part of a gimmick to increase sales, each alternate cover featured a sixteen page insert telling the story from the perspective of a particular member of the team. As a result extra production time had to be allotted for the covers and inserts.

Named positions: Joseph Harris (writer), Chrisscross (pencils), Rob Stull (inks), Felix Serrano (colors), Comicraft’s Liz Agrophiotis (letters), and Ruben Diaz (editor).
On the organizational side, unnamed contributors include the members of the production department, marketing department, and editorial administration. In addition, there are interns. While policies regarding interns vary from company to company, interns work for free. They perform many of the menial tasks such as delivering pages from department to department, opening submissions, and returning artwork to creators. It is difficult to be hired on by a comic book company as an employee (as opposed to being a freelancer) without previous experience. As a result, an internship is considered to be the bottom rung of the career ladder.

There are also a lot of unnamed contributors amongst the freelancers. When a company contracts out an element of the production, it does so with an individual or a studio. The freelancer is responsible for the quality of the work for which he has contracted. In order to meet deadlines, many freelancers often hire assistants. Most assistants are paid out of the freelancer's income. Becoming an assistant is similar to an apprenticeship in that it is seen as a way of learning the job, acquiring experiences and contacts, and/or breaking into the industry. The freelancer also has the right to subcontract to another freelancer. Subcontracting is tricky in that the freelancer will have to pay a subcontractor more than he or she would pay an assistant. And while, in theory, a freelancer could subcontract out everything, the reality is that, under such circumstances,
the editor would eventually stop dealing with the freelancer and go directly to the freelancer's subcontractor.

The whole issue of assistants and subcontracting highlights one of the advantages to forming a studio. A studio gives its members access to one another and to a common set of time-saving resources. Some jobs are contracted to a studio, thus allowing the members to divide the labor and the income. An individual who is behind will likely share his work with a fellow studio member. And just as an individual will hire an assistant, so too do studios. However, not all studios share space. The advent of cheaper and better access to communication technology has seen the emergence of virtual studios. Similar to Pink's confederation (2001), the virtual studio usually brings together freelancers with common interests and various skills. For example, Armada consists of Rob Stull, Chris Walker, and Kieron Grant. While each of them is an artist in his own right, Stull is known in the industry as an inker, Walker as a colorist, and Grant as a penciller. Stull lives and works in Manhattan, Walker in Brooklyn and Kieron in Columbus, Ohio! When one of them gets work, he tries to bring the others along. When they formed Armada, Stull was the only one of the trio working in comic books. They originally came together in order to pursue a common interest in doing interior art and mini comic books for Hip-Hop music CDs.
Chapter 9

Creative Mercenary Men and the Shadow of Comic Book Milestones

Thus far I have argued that comic book creators bring together their personal experiences and collections of source material (archives) in order to create images and narratives, many of which have racial, ethnic, or gender references. In “History in Monochrome” I recounted some of the events in comic book history that have had a lasting effect on the representation and participation of non-White males within the comic book industry. I documented the influence of early pulp-fiction novels on the burgeoning comic book industry. In particular, I mentioned the movement of Tarzan from pulp-novels to comic strips and comic books in the 1930s as well as the creation of Marvel Comics’ Black Panther in 1960s, both of which carry a jungle theme. In Chapter 8, I described the comic book producer a free agent, a creative mercenary, who moves from job to job.

In Chapter 4, I introduced African-American writer Alex Simmons, African-American artist Dwayne Turner, and White writer Brian Azzarello. Following previous comments by Diawara and Neal regarding the generation of Black cultural producers who grew up on Black culture as an accepted element of popular culture, I asked what this conceptualization of popular culture meant for
Hispanic, Asian, and White cultural producers. Just as African-Americans grew up in an era in which Black culture was a part of popular culture, it is the case that all cultural producers are and have been consumers of culture. As a result, it is not uncommon for Generation X comic book creators to sit side-by-side with the Baby Boomer who wrote or illustrated a character that inspired him or her to enter the comic book industry. Neither is it uncommon for a Generation X cartoonist to work on the characters that inspired him or her to enter the industry.

I will begin at a dinner table in San Diego with a group of African-American Generation X cartoonists and the White Baby Boomer writer who wrote the Black character that they all read as kids. I will use descriptions of my initial meetings with the people at the table to introduce some of their work. In this chapter I will pick up on a relatively recent event in comic book history, the rise and fall of Milestone Media, Inc. The rise and fall of Milestone begins where Chapter 7 left off. I am devoting additional space to it precisely because it is a moment in comic book history that has become synonymous with the issue of African-American representation and participation. So much so, in fact, that it has obscured many of the issues that I am concerned with vis-à-vis the industry practices and social relations, that I would argue, govern representation. But first, in keeping with Chapter 2, I will begin at a dinner table in San Diego. Many
of the examples in this chapter, and the one that follows, are loosely based on the pulp-fiction themes of jungle action and mercenary adventures that have taken root in comic books. In either case, the goal is to show how people, in the act of coming together, bring together different histories that, in effect, create new and different possibilities.

August 13, 1999: It is the second night of the San Diego comic book convention (San Diego Con). I am sitting at the dinner table with a group of African-African comic book creators. Except, that is, for Don McGregor and his daughter, both of whom are White. Don’s name had come up several times during my research. At the time of the convention, he was writing a Zorro comic strip, a Zorro comic book, and a Zorro spin-off comic book titled Lady Rawhide. But at this table of Generation X African-American cartoonists he is regarded most for his work on the Black Panther in Jungle Action. At the table are Dwayne Turner, Charles Holland, Karla Holland (Charles’ wife), Theresa (Charles’ assistant), and Daren McMillan. Dwayne and Derrick are at the San Diego Con to promote their upcoming creator owned project titled Butcher Knight – a comic book miniseries about a reincarnated Black knight (see figure 6). Dwayne has had a long career as a comic book artist that has included work on one of DC Comics’ first-ever creator-owned series titled Sovereign Seven (see figure 7) as well as Todd McFarlan’s creator-owned comic book character, Spawn. Charles is
a television writer with a long list of credits that has included *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. *Butcher Knight* is Charles' first foray into comics. Daren McMillan is currently managing the *Butcher Knight* web sight.
Figure 8. Cover to *Butcher Knight* #1 (December 2000) pictured above.

Named positions: Charles Holland (writer/co-creator), Dwayne Turner (pencils/inks/co-creator), Dreamer Design's Robin Sephar and Dennis Heisler (letters), Steven Firchow (colors), and Rene Gerlings (editor).
Figure 7. *Sovereign 7* #15 (October 1996) pictured above. According to Rob Simpson, *Sovereign 7*’s original editor, this comic book was a first of its kind for DC Comics. It was creator owned and inter-textual, in that it allowed creator owned characters to interact with DC Comics owned characters.

Named positions: Chris Claremont (writer/co-creator), Dwayne Turner (pencils/co-creator), Chris Ivy (inks), Richard Starkings (letters), Gloria Vasques (color), KGM Graphics (color separations), and Eddie Berganza (assoc. editor).
The San Diego Con is the largest annual comic book convention, boasting an attendance of more than 60,000 in 1999. As far as comic book-related events go, this one is also the most extravagant, featuring a vast array of comic book creators as well as comic book retailers and licensers. In part due to its proximity to Los Angeles, the San Diego Con is also attended by Hollywood representatives and features comic book and sci-fi film and television previews. Like most major comic book conventions, the venue is divided into four sections: company booths for comic book companies, retailer booths, individual stalls for artists and writers (artists' alley), and break out and ball rooms for panel discussions and movie previews.

Today was my first face-to-face meeting with Don. Alex Simmons, who couldn’t attend, had told me to say hello to Don for him. Don and Alex have known each other since the 1970s. They met through Billy Graham, an African-American comic book artist who has worked on such projects as Black Panther in Jungle Action, Sabre (see figure 8), and Killraven. The three of them – a White male from Providence, RI and two African-American males from NYC – used to drift in and out of the 1970s Harlem club scene together. But now I am getting ahead of myself. I managed to track down Don at one of the booths. He was there with his daughter, signing comic books and talking to fans. Sitting on the table, available for purchase, were recent issues of Zorro and Lady Rawhide.
comic books along with the *Sabre* and *Detectives, Inc.* graphic novels. Don’s daughter was dressed to look like Lady Rawhide. I introduced myself, taking care to mention Alex’s name as well as Walter’s. “I’m doing a project on race and comics,” I said.
Figure 8. Left: Cover to Don McGregor's *Sabre: Twentieth Anniversary Trade Paperback* (1998 edition), cover and interior art by Paul Gulacev. Lettering by Annette Kawecki.
“I don’t know how much I can help you. After all, I’m not Black.”

“Well, I’m trying to look at images of race through the eyes of the people who make the characters, and your work on Black Panther...”

“Sure, that was an interesting time...”

“Also, when I spoke to Alex he mentioned that you and he used to spend a lot of time with Billy Graham...” I stopped cold, as I recognized the change in Don’s expression from the happy go lucky writer to the man remembering a dear, departed friend.

“Yeah, those were some great times. Let’s talk.” We spoke briefly and agreed to continue our conversation later, perhaps over dinner at the Con or on my next trip to NYC. We exchanged phone numbers.

I continued on through the crowds. From a distance I could see a booth with a masthead over it with the name Butcher Knight (see figure 8) scrawled across it, the letters drawn to look as if they were painted in dripping blood. Across the sign in smaller letters was “from Dwayne Turner, the artist of Spawn!”
and "Charles Holland, writer of Deep Space Nine." Amidst the crowds I could barely make out Dwayne. I hadn't seen or spoken to him since the aforementioned Brother-Man Road-Trip. I didn't think he would remember me, but I approached anyway.

"Ah, Mr. Carpenter I presume," remarked Dwayne with a broad smile and extended hand, "How is your research coming along?" We shook hands and he introduced me to Charles Holland, the writer and co-creator of Butcher Knight. I briefly explained my research to Charles. He shook his head in acknowledgment.

As we talked, it dawned on me that there were no images of Butcher Knight at the booth. There were plenty of buttons and posters with the bloody Butcher Knight logo on them, but there were no images of the characters, or preview, or sample pages, just the name and the creators. And while the crowds who lined up to talk to Dwayne and Charles were asking about Butcher Knight, most of them wanted Dwayne to sign his previous work on Spawn. "So what's up with Butcher Knight?" I asked Dwayne. "What's it about, and why aren't there any images of the characters on display?"

"Well, it's about an immortal Black knight who changes into a monster, kind of a Jekyll and Hyde..."
"But what about him? Are there any pictures."

"Well, we're not releasing any yet. We thought it would be coming out around now, but there have been printing delays and it won't be out 'til December or January. We didn't want to let the cat out of the bag this far in advance, we didn't want anyone else to run with the idea, but we thought we'd at least come here and generate some buzz." Dwayne went on to tell me about how, in spite of the fact that he'd been in comics for over a decade, he had never self-published before. He added that now that he had made a name for himself, it was nice to be able to do something that was his brainchild. "I've known Charles for a while, and the idea for Butcher Knight had been swirling around between us." We continued talking for about five or ten minutes. Before I moved on I asked him what his plans were for the evening. "A group of us are meeting for dinner. Why don't you meet up with us?"

I did. And that's what brought me to the table with Dwayne, Charles, Charles' wife (Karla), Charles' assistant (Theresa), Daren, Don, and Don's Daughter (Lauren). I received plenty of chiding for not bringing my wife, after all, at the time we had only been married for a month. "Wow," said Karla, "she let you go out on your own so soon."
“Well, maybe he doesn’t get to go home,” remarked Dwayne. We all laughed at my expense. “So how is your research coming along? Has the convention been good for your information gathering?”

“It’s been great for meeting people but not for talking at any real length,” I replied.

“Who have you met up with so far?”

“Well, I caught up with Louis Small, Mark Morales, Axel Alonso, who introduced me to Brian Azzarello, and I also met Jeff Smith and Kyle Baker…”

“I started out with Kyle at Marvel. We were interns together.”

“Really, he did a Superbaby picture for me.”

“Oh, I heard about that.”

Earlier in the year, Kyle wrote and illustrated a story about Superman as a baby for an issue of World’s Funniest. In the story, the infant Superman is left
with a babysitter by his adoptive parents, Ma and Pa Kent. The story that follows is written tongue in cheek and includes a lot of slapstick humor that plays on his heightened strength and invulnerability. For example, the infant Superman picks up cow and drinks the milk straight from her udders, he sticks his finger in a light socket and is unharmed, and he dries himself off in a microwave oven that leaves him with an eerie kryptonian glow.

The story was approved, and the comic that it appeared in was printed. Literally, while the comic books were on the loading docks at the printer, Paul Levitz, DC’s executive editor, decided that the microwave scene was too risky to publish, citing concerns that it might encourage a reader to stick a child in a microwave oven. As a result, he ordered the entire print run destroyed or “pulped.” Pulping a comic book run is always considered an extreme measure because the publisher loses all of its production costs and has to pay for the actual destruction of the comic books. All of the comic books at the printer were pulped, and the comic books in transit were recalled to the distributor who would see to it that they suffered the same fate. The shipment to London, however, had already reached the comic book stores. These last remaining issues, of course, became immediate collectors’ items.
The *Worlds' Funniest* was reprinted without the Superbaby story (see figure 9). Kyle found out about the surviving comic books with the Superbaby story only after it was put up for sale on an online auction. He made a few calls to London and managed to track down one of the owners of the comic book and get a copy for himself. The owner tried to make Kyle pay for it, but Kyle managed to appeal to the collector's sense of fair play.
Figure 9. Panels from Kyle Baker's "Superbaby" story pictured above. In spite of the fact that the comic book that it originally appeared in was pulped, the story was reprinted a year later in the *Bizarro* Graphic novel (2001) published two years later.

Named positions: Kyle Baker and Elizabeth Glass (writers) and Kyle Baker (art/colors/letters).
“A lot of people were asking about it,” I said. “He ended doing a lot of Superbaby pictures. His wife was really on him to charge everybody...”

Theresa broke in, “Hell yeah, you know half of these kids are going to walk across the con and sell the pictures anyway...”

“That’s exactly what Kyle’s wife said.”

Karla interrupted, “This may be fun and games to some, but its also business. My man’s got a family to support.”

“That’s right,” said Daren.

“Isn’t it the case for all of us,” remarked Dwayne. “I mean for us its business and pleasure, but for our wives...”

“Hey,” interrupted Daren, “I’m a ‘ho. I sell myself to bring home the bacon. I’m a ‘ho. My wife’s my pimp and I’m her ‘ho.” A moment of silence overtook the table. “But I’m a good ‘ho,” said Daren with a sheepish grin. The laughter at the table drowned out all of the other conversation at the restaurant. We laughed and talked late into the night. The nature of the conversation was in
continual flux: writers and artists traded war stories about current work, a researcher asked all sorts of questions, wives wondered aloud when their husbands would grow up. Throughout all of this, there were moments when a White man from the Baby Boomer Generation held court, with all attention on him he told the story of his work on the Black character that these Black cartoonists grew up on.

But this wasn’t the only time that Black Generation X comic book producers would sit around a table while a White man told them about his work on the Black character they grew up on. The Falcon, Power Man, and the Black Panther were created by White men. Archie Goodwyn wrote Cage’s early adventures when he still went by the name of Power Man. Don McGregor wrote the Black Panther’s adventures in Jungle Action. And in an industry where most of the creative talents are freelancers – creative mercenaries – this was how much of the history, much of the knowledge of the comic book industry was transmitted. Yes, comic art and storytelling have gradually become a part of art school curriculums across the country. Yes, there are schools that specialize in comic or cartoon art and plenty of how-to books and fan magazines that explain the ins and outs of the industry. Still, amongst freelancers the best way to learn is from someone in the industry with more experience. And at the comic book conventions, the less experienced freelancers often gravitate toward the writers
and artists that made the work that they read when they were fans. Don’s work on the Black Panther influenced quite few African-American cartoonists ranging from the tail end of the Baby Boomer Generation to the older segment of Generation X. While the Black Panther can be dated back to the 1960s where he made guest appearances in the Fantastic Four, it was Don who wrote the Black Panther’s solo adventures in the comic book of the 1970’s titled *Jungle Action*.

Dwayne McDuffie, a late Baby Boomer who wasn’t at the convention, was also affected by Don’s work on *Jungle Action*. McDuffie entered the comic book industry in the late 1970’s as an intern at Marvel. By the 1980’s he had risen to the position of editor. He had also written such high-profile Marvel Comics’ characters as Spider-man and Deathlock. In 1993 he would make headlines – along with African-Americans Denys Cowan, Derek Dingle, and Mike Davis – for the creation of Milestone Media, Inc. Milestone was a comic book company that – with the backing of industry giant DC Comics – had the express goal of creating a multicultural superhero universe. Many of the people whom I interviewed have argued that the story of the rise of Milestone in the 1990s and its collapse towards the end of the decade has cast a long shadow over the issues of Black

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7 I interviewed the creators of Milestone Media in 1993 for a newspaper article that appeared in *The Oregonian*. As part of my dissertation research, I conducted follow up phone interviews with Dwayne McDuffie in 1999. I will cite information gathered during the 1993 article.
participation and characters in the comic book industry. I will address this issue in greater detail in my conclusion.

In a 1993 interview for the *Comics Journal* by Tony Norman, McDuffie recounted his early encounters with Don’s work (Norman 1993b, pp. 73-4).

McDuffie: I read my cousin’s comic books, and I read my brother’s comic books, and they were OK, I liked them. It was never a big deal for me. But then I picked up Don McGregor’s *Jungle Action*, and I was riveted. And at the time I could not have told you why. But now I’m older and wiser, and I know that what happened was seeing a Black man with that kind of dignity, seeing myself reflected in a medium that I was interested in, validated me. Suddenly, everything was possible: I could be a King, I could be the good guys, I could be the bad guys, I could be the street sweeper, I could be a surgeon, I could be a hero. What we want to do is recreate that incredible feeling of validation in *all* kids. I look forward to the first day when some Latino kid picks up a copy of Blood Syndicate and sees Tech-9 and goes, “Yeah! I can be special too.”
Norman: You know, I remember picking up *Jungle Action* around the same time...

McDuffie: Unfortunately titled. [Laughter]

Norman: Right. And I did catch the irony of the title at the time; I thought, "Well, they just don't know any better." But I remember reading that and just being really enthralled because, for one thing, Don McGregor will put as much as he possibly can in every single panel. I mean, these things were like a thesis, each page, it was so much ... And I remember going to one of Phil Seuling'scons up here in New York – a couple of buddies and I jumped on the train and came up from Philly – and I met Don McGregor for the first time, and was absolutely shocked that he was a short, White man.

McDuffie: But I'll tell you what he is: he's a writer who cares about his characters, and he said, "I'm going to write the Black Panther, and I'm going to think about who this guy is, and I'm going to think about his society, and I'm going to figure out how he's going to interact with that society, and I'm going to treat him with
dignity,” and that stuff came through, and he got me. He got a fan for life.

During my 1993 interviews with Milestone’s creators, they told stories of being inspired to become cartoonists by a few stereotyped representations of Black people made by White men. The problem, recounted Dwayne McDuffie is that there were so few non-White characters that the non-White characters become too representative. So, he decided that there would be lots of non-White characters and that the creative teams of these comics would reflect the diversity of the characters in each book. If a comic featured a lesbian, Asian and an African-American, it would be reflected in the creative team (Carpenter 1993). This was an interesting "take" on affirmative action, by essentializing the creative team in order to de-essentialize the comic characters (see figure 10).
Figure 10. Milestone Media, Inc. began its publication of its multicultural super hero universe with Static, Icon, Blood Syndicate, and Hardware. Images of Blood Syndicate #31 (October 1995), Hardware #33 (November 1995), Icon interior ad (November 1995), Static interior ad showing his original costume (May 1993), and Static Shock #2 (February 2001) showing the costume design for the current animated series of the same name, pictured above.
Mine wasn't the only article on Milestone. During the next several months, *Time*, *Newsweek*, National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, *Ebony* magazine, *Black Enterprise*, and many other newspapers around the country would run articles on this burgeoning comic book company. In spite of the demand for Black-identified commodities in the late 1980s and early 1990s there were very few comic books being produced by Black creators. Milestone capitalized on this market oversight along with its relationship with DC Comics to become the media anointed front-runner in the race to create Black comics. The media spotlight that shone on Milestone was beneficial in that it called attention to an issue that otherwise would have been ignored. Some Black comic creators benefited, some capitalized, and some who had been around for a while resented being in the shadow of this new Black or "High Yellow" comic company with 'White' ties.

As the debates among Black cartoonists bubbled into the mainstream media, Ania Press (see figure 11), a consortium of self-described Afrocentric comic books, emerged as the symbol of the opposition against Milestone. Although the representatives of Milestone and Ania are interviewed in separate articles (Groth 1993; Norman 1993b), their feud also weighs prominently in "Sims Brothers: Start Your Own Business and Do Your Own Thing" (Norman
and “The New Black Age Of Comics” (Winbush 1993). The Sims brothers were the creators of Brotherman (see figure 12). A comparative reading of these articles reveals a much more complex picture than the mainstream portrayal of the Milestone/Ania feud. Both companies invoked the rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement in their ad campaigns. The phrase “the revolution will not be televised” was picked up and recycled by Milestone. Ania’s mantra was "Black written, Black drawn, Black distributed, Black marketed, Black controlled, Black Power!" In media coverage that evoked the Martin Luther King/Malcom X debates, Milestone was framed as the Black Liberal voice while the founders of Ania were dubbed militants, radicals, and reverse racists (see figure 11). Ironically, this “controversy,” along with its subsequent framing of Milestone and Ania hit the public before the comics hit the stands.
Figure 11. Above right to left: covers to *Ebony Warrior* #2 (June/July 1993) and *Herm: Son of Asaur* #1 (April 1993), both published by Ania.

*Ebony Warrior* named positions: Eric Griffin (writer/creator), Steven X Routher (co-plotter/pencils/inks), Suzanne Little (editor), and Mshindo I. (cover artist).

*Herm: Son of Asuwar* named positions: Roger Barnes (publisher/writer/artist), Sheldon Jones (editor), and In Color (color separations).

Figure 12. *Brotherman* #1 (April 1990) pictured above was created, owned, and self-published by brothers by the Simms Brothers.

Named positions: Jason E. Sims (production manager), David J.A. Sims (creator/pencils/letters), and Guy A. Sims (writer).
It could be argued that structuring the coverage of Black comics around the Martin Luther King/Malcolm X debates served to simplify the issues of Black comic producers for White audiences. I disagree. I look at this portrayal of Black comics as ‘White noise’ – repeated familiar sounds used to tune out the many voices and diversity of issues that Milestone and Ania intersect with. This became readily apparent with the publication of the June 1993 *Comics Journal*, which contained a special section of interviews of Black cartoonists. The frame for the issue is set in an editorial by Carol Sobocinski (1993 p.5), the managing editor of *Comics Journal*:

“There are some in the comics community who welcome the broadening influence [of non-White male] while others view this as an intrusion on their world. . . The growing pains within the community have been reflected in the pages of the *Comics Journal*. . . as the comics art medium matures and expands to include a more representative sampling of the world at large, we’re beginning to see that comics aren’t just for White guys any more.

She goes on to argue that the publication of a greater diversity of comic titles has necessitated a re-evaluation of the relevance of “larger social issues such as prejudice, social environment, and the symbols chosen to portray these
conditions.” In place of describing the upcoming special section she instead writes about the editorial meeting in which the section was planned:

Since the first editorial meeting regarding this issue, our staff has been forced to consider the ethical basis for printing a magazine whose theme was skin color. Some staff members felt that this was akin to affirmative action whereas others deemed it to be patronizing and racist. As the issue continued to be assembled, we received phone calls and letters from outside the community expressing the same type of polarization.

On a personal note, I am against grouping creators on the basis of race, religion, gender, or even hair color. While any of these factors may play a part in the stories which are written, the main factor to consider in critical analysis comes down to this: is it substantial work? By categorizing creators into ghettos, we open the door to more division and more polarization. Consider, for example, the absurdity of doing an issue of the ‘Journal’ devoted to ‘White Guys In Comics.” If the case could be made that minority creators have been overlooked, then the onus is on our publication to draw attention to these works on a regular basis, not regulate
them to a theme park where they will be regarded as something other than standard.

In bringing up White male concerns about “affirmative action” and feelings of “intrusion,” Sobocinski draws a connection between mainstream rhetoric and the “comic community.” The invocation of community and community members' feelings allowed this special section to succeed in spite of what I consider to be a problematic opening statement. Previous coverage was presented as “news” requiring that it fit within the context of easily identifiable symbols. Instead of falling into the mainstream trap of evoking Civil Rights debates and inserting the Black comic creators into predetermined roles, this special section contained nine articles, most of which were done as transcribed interviews, to allow multiple voices and positions to emerge. Over the course of these nine articles Robert Boyd, Tony Norman, Gary Groth, and Jeffrey Winbush interviewed Boyd Maliki (Niyathi), Ossie Ogwo (Sergeant Tutu, Inspector Zuma), Stan Shaw (The Alan Bland Story, Bass 9-1-7, Billy Nguyen, Private Eye), Nabile Hage (Motorbike Puppies, Zwanna, Son of Zulu, spokesman for Ania Press), Sietu Hayden (Tales From the Heart), Dwayne McDuffie (Editor-In-Chief, Milestone Comics), Denys Cowan (creative director, Milestone Comics), Derek Dingle (president, Milestone Comics), Michael Davis (director of talent, Milestone Comics), Craig Rex Perry (Hip-Hop Heaven), Jonathan Smith
(Rockwood), Brian McDonal and Wayne Cash (Harry the Cop), Turtel Onli (Malcolm 10, Sistah Girl), Eric Griffen (Ebony Warrior), Roger Barnes (Huru, Son of Ausar), Clint Johnson, (Faithwalker), Ho Che Anderson (Black Dogs, King), Jason and David Sims (Brotherman).

While Groth and Norman's articles appear as transcribed interviews, Winbush (1993) writes a prose style review of the works of Craig Rex Perry (Hip Hop Heaven), Jonathan Smith (Rockwood), Brian McDonald and Wayne Cash (Harry the Cop), Turtel Onli (Malcolm - 10, Sistah Girl), Eric Griffen (Ebony Warrior, an Ania title), Roger Barnes (Huru, Son of Ausar, an Ania title), Clint Johnson (Faithwalker). He builds his piece around an examination of "Afrocentric" comics, forcing Ania to be viewed as one among many 'Afrocentric' voices. Winbush (1993 pp. 79-80) draws a sharp line between the black comic book creators and Ania:

With the exception of the brothers at Ania, nobody would rule out working with Marvel or DC . . . They realize that being a successful artist includes the ability to effectively market one's talents.
However, greater audience exposure at the price of losing control of their creations is one price Black creators are unwilling to pay . . . Black creators have to weigh how far they can go to pull white readers, collectors, and advertisers without watering down the content of the books that appeal to Black readers. Their concern is that by diluting the 'Blackness' of their books, the titles become no different than the chocolate covered Negro superheroes of DC, Marvel, Image, and Valiant.

Ania Press was started by Eric Griffen as an attempt to bring together independent Black comic creators/publishers. Nabile Hage was one of Griffen's first recruits. Hage is Ania's most outspoken and controversial figures. In 1992, in an effort to gain publicity, he climbed the Georgia state capital building in a leopard-skin loincloth. (Groth 1993 p.39) He is on record as referring to Milestone as “traitors” (Groth 1993 p. 41), “Uncle Toms,” “wanna-bes,” and “house niggers,” as well as encouraging a boycott of their products (Winbush 1993 p.83). According to Winbush (p. 80), however, “other black creators don't think much of Ania's 'Blacker than thou' rhetoric."
Hage’s most critical remarks are rooted in political viewpoints and personal concerns about ‘White’ corporate structures that, I would argue, run the risk of an essentialist idea of “Blackness” and “Black Identity.”

“I wish [Milestone] would stop lying by saying they are independent,” remarks Hage, “I can’t see how anybody can claim they’re independent when they don’t own shit. I opened up their book, and it clearly says all characters [are] the distinct likeness [of] and everything [is] trademarked DC Comics. I don’t want them . . . taking money from the neighborhood, giving it to Time-Warner and lying about it (Groth 1993 p.41).

Hage argues that he is fighting a economic system that is fundamentally racist (Groth 1993 p. 42):

“When DC rolls in, takes a market away that Black people worked so hard to put together and claims it as their own, it is racist imperialism. Because over the years, conservatives have long been shouting, ‘down with welfare! Why can’t Black people get out and work? Why can’t they do something for themselves?’ Well, goddamn it, as soon as we get out there and do something for
ourselves, it’s the same White people that come and take our shit!

That’s racist imperialism!

However, this stance did not win Ania many fans with other Black producers precisely because they attacked Milestone so directly. Black comic book producers tend to take the phrase “by any means necessary” as a defense for Milestone. Afrocentric cartoonist Turtel Onli directed some of his comments at Ania (Winbush 1993 p. 83):

There’s nothing Afrocentric about any brother jumping on another brother and calling him a ‘house nigger.’ [He] can’t call [himself] Afrocentric and do something that counterproductive, that’s stupid. If you’re going to be truly Afrocentric, you have to be co-supportive.

Although they may agree with the brutality of the business end of comics, the creators of Milestone are not so quick to invoke the “r-word.” According to McDuffie (Norman 1993b p.72):

Whether it’s institutional [racism] or not, it’s not intentional, and it’s irrelevant to what they’re doing. They’re a big machine that
does something. And if your vision is in the way... they're going to roll right over you. And I might experience that as, 'oh man, that's racism,' but the fact of the matter is they're going where they're going, and they don't stop to think, about me being in the way.

I would argue that Ania and Milestone's respective positions are more an effect of their respective strategies. As an insider, Milestone must defend, and even apologize, for the actions of their bedfellows while Ania's position, as an independent company, makes challenging the established system an economic necessity.

The question of ownership was one of the first issues that was discussed in the Milestone interview with Tony Norman (1993b pp. 67-8). Derek Dingle explained that there were two reasons for the creation of Milestone:

We wanted to show a range of Black images through the superhero genre. . . We wanted to have a line presence in the comic book market. We felt the best way to do that was [to] create a producer model much like an independent film production company, or a record label to a major record company . . . Time-Warner, DC, does not have an equity position in Milestone.
[To this comment, Denys Cowan added] Milestone, as a company, was formed before negotiations were opened with DC. In the arrangement, DC is licensing the characters and paying Milestone to create, write, draw, and edit the characters.

Dingle: By contract we have full creative control.

Although Hage was wrong about the ownership of Milestone's characters, we have only to look back at Winbush's article to see that Hage's comments share some commonality with the concerns of Black cartoonists regarding the Blackness of their work. These concerns are not, however unique to comics, they are economic arguments about ownership that can be traced to Malcolm X. In an interview with the Sims Brothers (Norman 1993d p.98), the concerns of Black cartoonists found a better articulation of this position:

J. Sims: [We] knew when DC got involved [with Milestone] that we would not look at it as a Black comic book thing. The whole issue is: Who's going to control the images of African-Americans?
Norman [referring to the Milestone interview again]: Well, Denys Cowan and Dwayne McDuffie would say, “We’re controlling the images because we write and draw. The only thing that we don’t do is distribute it.”

J. Sims: When you control distribution, you can cut it ... everything I [hear] about [Milestone] – DC is going to be controlling marketing, distribution, and financing ... it’s very naive to think that just because you draw the product you control the operation.

Norman: [he inserts himself here] And what’s also naive is that they believe they can be affiliated or associated with the whole Time-Warner corporate structure over there. [referring to his interview with Milestone] “They would say, ‘Well, we just have a distribution deal with DC and we have a different thing and they have a different thing, but we all blood in the end, right? Right? Right? And that’s their whole thing, it seems to me, and they seem to be pretty happy with that because it really only entails doing their own thing and picking up a paycheck. It doesn’t really entail doing all the things that you folks are doing. which seems to be building a
truly independent – I can't even use the word ‘industry.’ You're a family owned company, a family run company, you're building a market."

D. Sims: That 'is' building an industry.

Norman: Yeah, I guess I'm just unclear in my own head as to what 'industry' means . . .

Hage also takes issue with Milestone’s representation of Black people. (Groth 1993 p. 41):

"[They are] traitors to themselves. Take a look at ‘Blood Syndicate.’ What is that? Brothers killing brothers – exactly what Ania is trying to come out against. We're trying to bring unity, so Blacks can know we can come together, co-exist peacefully with White people and the Latinos. Well, here you got Blood Syndicate. You don't even know who is the hero and who is the villain – they're just blowing each other up. You've got characters taking crack. And then you've got the so-called 'Icon' – Republican superhero! I mean what the hell is that, when the majority of African-Americans
are either Democratic or Independent? Are they trying to tell us that we have to assimilate and become Republican and put on coat and tie?

I don't see why I get all this criticism because I come out with a strongly liberal Black character, Zwanna, Son of Zulu.

He clearly sees the only role of Black superheroes as being tools for the enoblement of Black people while Milestone is looking to create a “reality” different (Norman 1993a, p. 68-9) from that of mainstream comics:

McDuffie: My problem - and I'll speak as writer now - with writing a Black character in either the Marvel or DC Universe is that he is not a man. He is a symbol. He is all Black people. You can't do a character. On the other hand, if you write a White character... . If Milestone had just one book, whoever that character was would have been limited to being what Sidney Poitier was in the 1950's movies.

Cowan: [on the reason for starting a new company as opposed to working from within Marvel or DC] It is not [Marvel or
DC's] place to speak for our people or even a section of our people
... it is our concern.

Norman: As a matter of cultural nationalism?

McDuffie: No, not at all. It's an artistic matter. People write
about themselves. And people should write from their own
experiences and transmit the experiences through fiction.

This would come up again in later section of the interview in which
McDuffie said (Norman 1993b p. 72):

My contention is that one of the reasons that comics are so
stale is because they're all drawing from the same well. Black,
White, whoever, all of us are guys who grew up reading Stan (Lee )
and Jack [Kirby’s] Marvel [Comics].

In spite of all the attention that Hage has received for his remarks
slamming Milestone, his criticisms of comic-industry press are the most
compelling (Groth 1993):
When I first came out with *Motorbike Puppies*, I turned them into Diamond – and I gave it to them well before the deadline. They chucked it into the back of the [catalogue], with the late comics, because they had a perception that Black super heroes and Black-owned companies would not sell. [They said to me], “Why don’t you make these guys White?

In a press release dated April 26, 1993, Hage referred to Don Thompson -- owner/editor of *Comics Buyer's Guide*, the industry's leading trade magazine -- as 'J. Edgar Thompson' in an effort to compare Thompson's activities to Hoover's attempts to thwart the Civil Rights movement. “Don Thompson has damaged my sales, disrupted my business . . . I will fight your bigoted behind publicly and privately, on any level – physically, emotionally, editorially.

When asked to be more specific about his grievances against Thompson, Hage recounts several instances that echo his experiences with Diamond and accuses Thompson of calling him a racist. Hage continues (Groth 1993 p.44):

Don Thompson is supposed to report comic book news in the nation. I climbed the state capitol, threw comic books down on
people. Did it ever see any play in the *Comics Buyer's Guide* or *Comic Shop News*? No way! This thing got major play, worldwide. It was on CNN, it was on the *Today Show* with Bryant Gumbel, it was on television all over.

But the *Comics Buyer's Guide* – even though Don Thompson told me that reporters called him and told him about this, and he got a number of faxes – did not put it in there. This was the first indication that made me think: "This guy's either on his own ego trip or he has something against Blacks . . ."

Hage is not the only one to have specific grievances with Thompson. In the interview with the Sims brothers (Norman 1993d p.99), they state:

**J. Sims:** The first feature article that we were in was *The Dallas Morning News*. That was May 29, 1990. They talked to the people at the *Comics Buyer's Guide* who said that they attributed the lack of a Black presence in comic book stores to a lack of disposable income and the illiteracy rate among minorities.
Norman: Don and Maggie Thompson, yeah. They know a lot about Black people, don't they? [laughter]

J. Sims: And when Milestone's first major story hit in November, I was interviewed. I talked to the reporter for about 45 minutes, and they cut out everything I said and put a quote from, I think, Don Thompson. All they said about us was, "Books like the popular Brotherman without financial backing lack the capabilities for national distribution."

These comments cannot be easily discarded. Although they were less specific, almost every article in this special section had mentioned distribution and lack of industry press as two of the areas in which they do not feel they have been given a fair shake (Groth 1993; Norman 1993a; Norman 1993c; Norman 1993d; Winbush 1993). In the case of Milestone, they acknowledge it as challenge that was solved through their affiliation with DC (Norman 1993b). Not surprisingly, this has garnered them both criticism (Groth 1993; Norman 1993d) and admiration (Winbush 1993). In this respect, the most telling comments can be found in Sobocinski's editorial (1993 p. 5) in which she recounts the genesis of the Comics Journal's special section when she says:
There was time when this magazine provided a safe haven for White guys to debate the relative merits of each others' work. We're beginning to see that comics aren't just for White guys anymore. [Some] view this as an intrusion on their world.

In an industry in which product lines are referred to as universes, is it any surprise that the creators would be inclined to exclude that which they do not know? Is it any surprise that the gatekeepers would be biased to what is familiar? For all its fantasy elements, comics seek to bear some sort of allegorical relationship to the "real." Is it really surprising that many non-White characters, creators, and stories could be left out because White folks can't see a connection or don't get the joke. Could it be that it's just a Black thing and White male creators just won't ever understand?

If only it were that simple. The rise and fall of Milestone is an important chapter in the history of comic books because it crystallizes a series of important issues. Whatever the failings of the special issue of the Comics Journal may have been, the journal showed a diversity of opinions amongst Black comic book creators. As such it calls into question much of the essentialism that some of the interviewers and interviewees espoused. Still, in the effort to show all sides, many of the industry professionals that I spoke to were critical of the Milestone-
Sims–Ania debate on the grounds that it didn’t take the participants, history of production into account. In the years that preceded the 1990s “explosion” of Black comics, McDuffie and Cowan, Milestone’s founders, were personally involved in the creation of more comic books than all other participants in the debate combined! While most of the people whom I spoke with had a great deal of admiration for the Sims Brothers’ work on Brotherman, the reaction to Ania was much more mixed. Brotherman lasted ten issues, each of which have undergone multiple printings. None of the Ania titles went beyond three issues. Yes, Milestone’s rise and fall is an important chapter, but it was just that, a moment in time. Unfortunately it has become a moment of time that has clouded, instead of clarified, issues of race and representation.
SECTION THREE: DOCUMENTING A CULTURE OF PRODUCTION

(The Story So Far)

So what were they thinking? Why these characters and those images? How do these heroes make the journey from the imagination of a few to a product that is consumed by many? Where does race come from and how does it come into play in a medium such as comic books?

Thus far I have described comic books as the byproduct of a decentralized production process in which teams of freelance workers and company employees use their own personal experiences and archives to imagine the identities and adventure of privately owned characters. I have argued that media and cultural studies tend to rely too much on thematic analyses that mistake the perceived wholeness of a media representation for the wholeness of the racial, ethnic, or gendered subject. As a result, media and cultural studies too easily fall back on essentialist notions of identity. I have expanded on Levi-Strauss’ (1966) concept of bricolage and Clifford’s (1988) notion of finding meaning where it may to argue that these acts of creation mirror the processes by which identity is imagined, created, and maintained in everyday life. In particular I have borrowed from Abbas (1997), Alexander (1995), and Appadurai (1996) in order to
highlight role of disappearance, witnessing, and circulation. Diawara (1998) and Neal (2002) argue that Generation X is the first generation to grow up in an era in which Black culture was part and parcel of popular culture. I have asked what this means for the creation images of race, gender, and ethnicity in comic books, an industry in which stereotypical imagery are routinely deployed by creative teams in an effort to create a world. I call this the dilemma of cultural production in a *post-soul world*.

In Section One, I argued that culture and identity are complex, messy, contingent, contradictory, and fragmentary concepts. In Section Two, I described the commonalties – the guiding principles – that govern the construction and maintenance of culture and identity. I argued that the messy contingent nature of identity is rooted in its multi-cultural construction. I also argued that the issues of racial, gender, and ethnic representation and participation are intertwined. From this, I derived the notion of the dilemma cultural production in a *post-soul world*.

In this section, I will show the dilemma. In this section I will detail the contingencies, many of which are brought about by the decentralized nature of comic book production, that are responsible for images and narratives of race, gender, and ethnicity in comic books. Chapter 10 will literally pick up where
Chapter 9 left off. Chapter 9 documented the rise and fall of Milestone Media, Inc., a comic book company with the express goal of creating a multicultural super hero universe. Chapter 10 will focus on the work of Don McGregor and Alex Simmons; two figures that, I would argue, have and continue to contend with Milestone's rather long shadow. Chapter 10 will look at the elements that come into play in the creation of two African-American comic book characters for the revamped *Justice Society of America*. Chapter 12 and Chapter 13 look at, what I refer to as, the matrix of relations. Chapter 12 is structured as a journey through space in time in which I will describe the contingent nature of the bonds between comic books and their creators. Places in Common looks at the corner of 72nd and Broadway as a nexus, a place that several of my informants have in common, whether they realize it or not.
Chapter 10

Jungle Action and Dark Heroes

In Chapter 9, I argued that Milestone Media’s rise and fall is an important chapter in the history of African-American representation and participation in comic books. But it was just that, a moment in time. Unfortunately it has become a moment in time that has clouded, instead of clarified issues of race and representation. Comic book characters are the end products of creative processes that bring together creative teams of individuals of different backgrounds, each of whom bring their own experiences, skills, and personal collections of archives to bear. As such, one cannot underestimate the impact of personal relationships among creators, many of which will and have crossed racial, ethnic, class, and gender lines. The founders of Milestone stated that they were, to some degree, influenced by Don McGregor’s run on the Black Panther in Jungle Action. In this chapter, I will turn my attention to the work and influential relationships of Don McGregor. In addition, I will interview Alex Simmons, an African-American friend and early collaborator of Don McGregor’s, who has gone on to self-publish Blackjack, a comic book about a Black soldier of fortune, and write the Sunday addition of the Tarzan comic strip.
Don McGregor is an interesting figure in debates about the representation and participation of African-Americans in comic books both for his work on the Black Panther, which has inspired many African-American comic creators, and his relationships with a variety of other projects and creators. In particular, African-American comic book creators Billy Graham and Alex Simmons. Now deceased, Billy Graham collaborated with Don on several creator owned projects as well as comic books for Marvel comics and Warren Publishing. So too did Alex Simmons who has gone on to produce an award winning creator project titled Blackjack, Batman: Orpheus Rising for DC Comics and the Tarzan Sunday comic strip for United Features Press Syndicate. The Milestone Debates are useful in that they collapse a lot of issues vis-à-vis race, access, and representation into a roughly one and half year period. I would argue that taking a longer view, one that addresses the relationships between creators over decades, puts race and representation in a different light – one that highlights role of personal experiences and industry practices.

I started my discussion of Milestone with Dwayne McDuffie’s recollections of the Black Panther. So I will do the same regarding Don and Alex. The Black Panther was originally the brainchild of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby – two White
Jewish men— who wanted to create a Marvel Universe that audiences would connect with. The Black Panther was created in 1966. Lee and Kirby wanted the New York of the Marvel Universe to look like the New York of their readers ... except for the presence of spandex clad super heroes, that is. The Marvel Universe had its hippies, squares, geeks, and outcasts after all, so it only made sense that there would be a few non-White characters in the background. The Black Panther was, and still is, a product of his time, a pivotal moment in American History in which images of Black people ran the gamut from stereotypical jungle bunnies, savages, and sambos, to civil rights marchers, advocates of Black Power, and Africans struggling to shed the shackles of Colonialism. And for good and ill the Black Panther played on all of these images.

Don’s much referred to run on the Black Panther began in 1972. Long before then, he had already built a reputation for himself as a writer who was always pushing the envelope of acceptability. A few months after my dinner with Don, at the San Diego Comic Book Convention, I met up with him in New York for an extended interview. I interviewed Alex on three occasions.

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8 Stan Lee has not spoken explicitly about the impact of his Jewish identity on the characters that he has created. But there are quite a few articles and interviews, many of which were compiled in *The Jack Kirby Collector*, that discuss the connections between Jack Kirby’s ethnicity, faith, and the characters and storylines that he created (Boyd 1999a; Boyd 1999b; Ensign 1999; Morrow 1999; Wyman and Hohfield 1999).
According to Don, by 1972 he was working as a proofreader at Marvel comics. At the time, Marvel was expanding its product line. In addition to its original titles, such as Spider-man and the Fantastic Four, Marvel was also producing several comic books that contained reprints of older work. This was a standard comic book formula. Usually the comic book would have a thematic title and feature reprints of previously published material. Since the creators of the reprints were already paid and, at the time, there were no royalties for members of the creative teams – the economic incentives for this are obvious. One such reprint book was titled Jungle Action. "It was just objectionable," remarked Don.

Not only was the title problematic but its interpretation of just what constitutes 'jungle action' was broad. One story that struck Don in particular centered on an Indian hunter. "At the end of the story it ends up being Abraham Lincoln. He slaughtered a dozen Indians and he was the hero! I couldn't believe that Marvel comics would put that out." Don lobbied to have the story dropped or re-done:
I remember saying, 'maybe you want to rethink the way the story is going. Or maybe you don’t want to print it. Or maybe, if you’re going to print it maybe we should find a way to re-work it.'

At some point during the conversation Don found himself criticising many of the other reprints that had graced the pages of *Jungle Action*;

I couldn’t believe Marvel was printing these [stories about] blonde jungle gods and goddesses saving the natives ... stories in the 1970’s! If you’re going to do a character set in Africa, [it] should be a black jungle character. I wasn’t even thinking about Black Panther. And I wasn’t thinking of doing it. I just thought they should do it.

Not long after Don leveled his criticisms it was decided that the format of *Jungle Action* would change from being a twenty two page bi-monthly reprint comic book, to a comic book that would lead with a thirteen to fifteen page original Black Panther story followed by a jungle themed reprint story. Don was assigned the writing chores for Black Panther. Don knew from the outset that this would be a difficult assignment. Thirteen to fifteen pages is not a lot of space to develop an audience for a lead character, let alone the supporting cast, especially in a bi-
monthly comic book. With the two month gap between issues, a character that
appeared in installment number one, had no appearance in installment number
two, but made a return appearance in installment number three, would be out of
sight for four months! As a result, Don would try to give every supporting
caracter at least one panel.

I heard much later, after I left Marvel, that the reason that they gave
me the Black Panther and [the sci-fi hero] Killraven was that jungle
[themed] books weren’t known to sell very well in comics. Not too
long before that time, Joe Kubert had done Tarzan for DC and it
hadn’t flown. [Science fiction wasn’t selling well either.] I think
they really had high hopes for Killraven in the beginning, but with
the three creative teams in the first three issues I think they had,
more or less, given up on it. [Eventually] I was told that they gave
me these books [thinking that] they would die.

Don speculated that if his book failed that he would have been told that he
was “given a shot” but that he blew it:

If they wanted me at all for the staff job it was because they
didn’t want [anyone] with political ambition. Certainly if I
[had any political ambitions] I was going about it in all the wrong ways. I didn’t want to be editor-in-chief. I just wanted to write my stories but even doing that became ... well, it was a fight from issue to issue.

But the fight wasn’t limited to putting new material in the back of *Jungle Action* because he didn’t want to reprint old 1950’s reprints. As an editor, Don wasn’t getting paid for writing new stuff for *Jungle Action*:

I remember being caught in the hallway after hours [by another comic book creator]. “What are you doing Don?” he asked me. I didn’t understand what he meant. “Well you’re giving Marvel comics stuff for free and [now] they’re going to be expecting the same thing out of us.” I understood their point, they had a point and I didn’t want to give Marvel comics anything for free.

The only thing I wanted to do was have a book that I could look back 30 years later and hold in my hand. I wanted a book that I could live with. Thirty years later my name is still on that book, people still bringing it up for me
to be signed, I’ve never heard anyone say, hey Don, why did the editor do this to this book. Or what was your purpose for doing this book? I didn’t want that betrayal in my book.

Don did not work in a vacuum. He came to the project with insights that had been gleaned from friendships and previous work with African-American comic book creators Billy Graham and Alex Simmons. Like many before him, Don came to the industry as a fan. He was an avid reader of comic books and he wanted to write for comic someday, but it was the fan letters that he wrote that first got him noticed:

Before I was doing comics, the first time I went to a comic convention I took a bunch to Jim Warren [to get them] signed. I’d never met him [in person] before. When I got up there to get [my comic books] signed, he realized I was Don McGregor. He says, “You’re Don McGregor?” and I’m amazed why would he know me? How could he know me?

Years later, when he was writing the Black Panther he would find himself on the other side of the proverbial fence.
If people are writing to every single book you do and they’re writing in-depth letters about what you do and how much those stories mean to them, you’re going to get to know their names. I mean that’s how I first met people like Dean Mullaney and Ed Via. Those people wrote to almost every single book I did. You get to know their names.

Jim invited Don to a gathering at his hotel room. That was where Don met Alex Simmons for the first time. They were a few years apart, with Don being the elder. At the time, Don was living in Rhode Island. Alex was living in New York City. “The one thing we had in common were all the shows [movies and television] that we loved and comics,” recalled Don. “I’ve often said that I had to leave RI and go up to Spanish Harlem to find people who understood what the hell I was talking about. Alex and I had a passion for those kinds of things.”

Shortly afterward, Don and Alex decided to collaborate on a comic book together, titled *Detectives Incorporated*. Don wrote it and Alex illustrated it. The idea was to use it to showcase their talents in a finished product that could be passed around. They completed it within a year and took it to the NYC Comic Convention. The two creators went from panel to panel and handed them out. It was during this convention that Don and Alex met Billy Graham:
We had gone into a panel and as the people were going up on the stage, I handed them copies of *Detectives Incorporated*. It wasn't a bad idea because in most of these panels, if you see anybody who's not talking they're bored to death. They're looking for something to do and if they have your book in front of them ... [*Detectives Incorporated*] had a shocking bright pink cover, so you could always tell when somebody was looking at our book. On the other hand, you could be sure that I had no plan here on how to approach this...

Or I certainly wouldn't have done what I did next. Jim Warren was up on a panel and, at that time, he was [talking about] taking his magazines and going strictly mail order with them. This way, in terms of content, he could put more into his magazines without having to contend with supermarkets and grocery stores and mom and pop shops who might object to some of the material that was in some of the magazines. I don't think he ended up doing that. It was a plan he was certainly thinking about. I don't know what ultimately made him decide not to go that route. But, at any rate, he was up there talking about that, then he said that he made
the best comics, that he was able to do things that other
[publishers] couldn't. I raised my hand and Jim called me up, you
know, to ask my question and I said, "well, if that's true Mr. Warren
then why are you publishing the kind of crap you're publishing?"

Jim Warren went ballistic ... totally crazy. You should
remember that these are people that I'm going to ask when they
come down off the panel if maybe I could do some writing for them.
So, it probably wasn't the most, um, correct way to go about things.
When Jim Warren came off the stage, he came right up to me. He
was irate. "How dare you ask me a question like that? Name one
story, hotshot," he began to call me hotshot that weekend. And I
named the story and it happen to be a story that Billy Graham drew.
So, Jim Warren says, "come with me." So, Alex and I go with him
and we go into one of the rooms where they're showing the films. I
don't know what we're doing there and Warren's going down the
side aisle looking up the aisles, he's obviously looking for
somebody. We don't know who [it is but] he motions to somebody
and this guy comes out. And Jim Warren says, "Don McGregor,
this is Billy Graham, Billy Graham, this is Don McGregor. Don
McGregor tell Billy Graham his work is crap."
I said, "I didn't believe I said that."

"What do you mean?"

I said, "I'm talking about the stories, not the art."

After that Warren said, "Play your cards right kid and maybe I'll take you out to dinner." And he did, he took Alex and I out to dinner. Billy was there as well and that's where I started a long friendship with Billy Graham.

We had a lot of great times, [but] I'm [not] going to tell you [all of them]. I loved working with him and I loved hanging out with him, you know, we had some tremendous time. Its funny, 'cause Billy use to tell me, "Don, you're so effervescent." but Billy was the one who was effervescent, not me. Billy was ... he had so much energy and you know, he also did stand up comedy, so there was a lot of really funny stuff, you know, amongst the serious stuff and I can remember and I still have this on tape somewhere, Alex is doing John Wayne. He's dong a voice impression of John Wayne,
and Billy and I are humming “God Bless America” in the background, trying not to laugh and break the mood and Alex is giving this fairly wild speech. It was hysterically funny. I have pleasant memories of it right to this moment.

But, according to Don, wanting to do it and getting it done were very different issues, even if there were legitimate storytelling reasons. “You have to find a way to be able to get it to reality, to get it down there, to get it on the page because if you don’t, all of that energy, all of that time is lost.” And to do so, Don had to work in concert with other writers, editors, and artists; not all of who shared Don’s views. In one instance Don submitted a script that involved an interracial kiss:

I had to figure out a way that I could get to do it because very early on [a member of the creative team announced that], “if Don is going to do this inter-racial thing, then I’m quitting the book.”

And then, I called the office and [spoke to one of the editors who asked], “now are you intending to do that Don?” If I said that I was at that time, forget it, it wasn’t going to happen.
This is not to say that Don wasn't going to be able to get his way. What it meant was that he had to be careful. The sudden departure of a member of the creative team could prevent the comic book from coming out on time. And in the case of a bi-monthly book like *Jungle Action* ... these are the kinds of behind-the-scenes things that can sink a comic book. In some cases, a writer can finesse a situation like this by waiting to submit scripts until the last possible moment. This, in turn, would force the artist to either turn in pencils that didn't match the script, quit at the proverbial eleventh hour, or appeal to the editor. And in an industry that is deadline-driven, nobody wants to be blamed for a late book. As a result, working on creative teams with like-minded people has its benefits:

You have to get an artist who's not going to have a problem drawing some of the things you're asking for. Because now you're talking about different sensibilities and different artists are going to have different sensibilities. Let's take *Sabre*, with Billy Graham. I could say, "hey Billy, I want to do a birth sequence and we're going to show the baby being born." Billy Graham is not going to have a problem drawing it. I can say to Billy, "I want to have 2 guys kissing." Billy's going to draw it. Billy had no problem with that. I'll tell you right now that there are other artists, that [if they had]
drawn in that book ... there's no way, they would never have drawn it ...

When Don said this last line, I broke in and asked him if he saw it as a form of protest. Don was hesitant to label it in political terms. He continued:

It's not their own point of protest. It's just that their sensibilities go, "oh, I'm not touching this. I'm not going to do this." I had a sequence recently with a character where the male character was changing clothes into their secret identity. [We'd done the same thing with] a female character at an earlier point. [The disrobing was illustrated as] a step-by-step process ... where [at the end] you saw her naked. But the artist didn't want to draw the male that way. And I said, "I tell you right now, if you don't draw it this way before the book comes out, it will be in the book. [Otherwise], I think people have absolutely every right to say that we were being sexist." This is the same scene, it's just now a man going through this transition from one character to the other. Therefore, we had to be as straight as we were when we did it with the female character ... just getting the artist to draw it!
In the case of Sabre, Don was working with a lot of themes, such as interracial and same-sex relationships, that had not been dealt with before in popular comic books. “I don't know whether it was the first time or whatever,” said Don, “but it was probably one of the first times in American comics.” Still, Don was adamant that he was motivated less by politics than writing a compelling story:

If I was going to do a character, I felt that it had to be a dynamic heroic character ... it stunned me that there was never a Black Erol Flynn. Why wasn't he there? The guy [Sabre] is revolting against slavery. [I wanted to put] that in the future and make it a Black character.

I had somebody tell me when I was shopping Sabre around, “well, Don, who's going to buy a book about a Black guy with a lot of guns? What are his gimmicks?”

“He doesn’t have any gimmicks,” I replied, “It’s him, he’s Sabre.”

There's a lot of flack too because [Sabre's love interest] was White and the relationship was very sexually explicit. But I said to
Dean, "if I'm going to do a heroically themed book then I want to break the rules of what we normally see in traditional and heroic fiction." And, I think we probably did.

I just think we should be exploring other avenues [in comics]. This [was and still is part of] the context. *Sabre* was coming out after my [work] on the [*Jungle Action*] comics. It took almost two years to produce that book. In effect, audiences weren't seeing much of my work in that two-year span. They were coming off of two to three years worth of Black Panther [in *Jungle Action*] and *Killraven*. [During that time] they were following [me] every two months with each book. And while everyone calls *Sabre* a graphic novel, [it was still] thirty-eight pages of comics. Thirty-eight pages of comics that had to compete with all those books that [I had] done over a three-year time span. I was well aware that when I came out [with my own characters]. I was on my own, there was no one standing over me saying, "Don, you can do this, you can't do this." There [had to] be something there that people would lock on to.
When we did *Sabre* issue seven – [the one] where the babies were being born – we also had two men kissing. When Billy handed in the artwork for the first half of the book, he had already drawn a segment in which Sabre and Melissa had twins. The first baby was being born (I think at that point the audience knew that it was going to be twins) ... and we’ve seen it. So I get a call from Jan Mullaney, who was working with his brother Dean. And Jim was very concerned, “Don,” he said, “you’re going to cost us thousands of copies and sales if you keep this baby being born in the book.”

I said to Billy, when I was describing the sequence that he could be as discrete or explicit as he wanted to. To me child-birth is a normal, natural thing. It depends on how you want to approach it. But in my descriptions it was pretty apparent. So Billy had no problem with that and Billy drew it very naturalistically. So when Jan called me I said, “I tell you what Jan, the birth sequence takes place when a lot of violence is happening all around the main characters. There’s a war going on. Ask me to take out an act of violence out of this book and I’ll take it out. The babies’ stay because that’s what this book is about. [You’re] having a problem showing a baby being born but you have no problem with limbs
being ripped off! And, if I give into this because you say it’s going to affect sales and that there will be protests from the distributors and protests from the store owners and then such ... all I’m doing is portraying what Sabre is about in my mind. So, when the second batch of pages came in from that issue. There on one of the first pages – two guys kissing.

Billy called me later, you know, and Billy said, “Jan got the pages done.” I said, “Yeah, how did it go?” He said, “Well, he picked up the artwork and he looked at the page and saw two guys kissing and he looked up at me and then he looked back down at the artwork again and says, “I guess there’s no sense in talking to Don about this.”

But, you know, that never hurt Sabre. In terms of sales, not having the book on the stands for five months at a time, that hurt the book! The thing is that they predicted that the sky would fall upon our heads and actually the readers were very accepting of the characters because they liked the characters.
It prompted me to do this kind of silly caption on the cover, “For those of you who thought you were born in a paint can or brought by the stork, this comic tells you were you really came from.”

Don, Alex and Billy didn’t see as much of each other during his work on the Black Panther. According to Don:

By that time, I was living up in Queens, so it wasn’t like when I first started trying to get in the business, [when I would visit] New York often. [When I visited], I would stay with Alex or with Billy. I would buy a two-way bus ticket, so I could always get back to Rhode Island and I would stay as long as I had money. I wasn’t trying to sell comics then, I was in magazines and prose.

By the time I was doing the Black Panther I was living in New York City. My wife and daughter were there, so we didn’t see each other all the time, but we communicated on all those books, on the Black Panther books. I remember when we did the klan story. Billy called me up and said, “Don, do you really want to do this?”
I replied, “well, I don’t know, they may get upset, [but] they ain’t coming to Harlem to get me. They got a sense of humor don’t they Billy?”

Well, maybe not. Billy wasn’t the only one to worry about Don’s safety. During a series of interviews that I conducted, Alex also recounted that time period:

When he did the storyline of the Black Panther that involved a KKK-like organization, there [was concern] that there was going to be some kind of retaliation. [People said] he shouldn’t do this story. I mean, even I was worried for him, cause there was some activity going on in the Northeast, at that time, by the KKK – some stuff happening in small towns. And I just said, “You know, just be clear of what you’re setting yourself up for.”

And he responded, “yeah but they’re there, I want to do this story and this is the perfect story, blah, blah, blah.” But there was some static for awhile about doing it. These are things that he went through which I guess, to a large degree is maybe why I’m more attached to [the Black Panther] through McGregor then anything else.
Alex's story is one of the many African-American perspectives that is often overshadowed by the rise and fall of Milestone. A close friend of Don and Billy, Alex's involvement in the industry precedes that of Milestone's founders. He didn't write for Milestone but he appreciates what they accomplished. Still, it is only as Milestone fades from memory that his work has begun to be recognized and enjoy wide circulation. When I asked him about his early influences he went down a list of old adventure television shows and serials. I asked him directly about the extent to which Black comic book heroes, such as the Black Panther and Luke Cage, influenced him.

I liked the Black Panther a lot because again the difference, the backdrop was different, and my friend was writing it — I know it was created by Jack Kirby and then Stan Lee and all that — and it was, you know he ran around with the FF. I liked the Wakanda setting. I really liked that. But I didn't follow the [Black Panther] that much until my friend Don McGregor started doing the series. The stories, the people, the village, it was all happening there [in Africa]. Now it was fascinating for me to read. So I was reading that. Luke Cage? I was in and out of Luke Cage. I wasn't anti-Luke Cage; I wasn't an ardent follower of Luke Cage; I like his attitude
sometimes, again to me it was Doc Samson with Black skin. You know what I mean? He was big power guy, you know he was a BROTHER! You know that kind of difference. Put a little tone difference there, a little accent on certain sil-eye-buls,⁹ he’s a little different that way. I like the movie theatre thing; I like what they were doing. I had a friend; an artist by the name of Billy Graham who drew it for a while, and that was fun to me. You know, watching Billy work on that. That made it exciting.

The other heroes, you know, and again this is not a put-down, but it was very clearly my feeling, I was glad to see people of color in the spectrum of heroes. But 99% of the time we were sidekicks, we were one-shots. You know it was 19 superheroes, one of which was Black. It was a lot of the heroes; the male heroes in particular were social workers or teachers. Its like OK, OK plot number 17, change the costume but we’re still using all the basics. So, a lot of them didn’t hold me. Black Goliath was Henry Pym [Giant Man] as a Black man. Well, actually his skin was colored differently, he wasn’t all that Black. Ah, to me also, Black people are not one type of human being. There is a massive array of

⁹ Intresteing moment. Alex stops to clarify his intonation of the word brother by an intentional
personalities, jobs, backgrounds, attitudes and so forth, and the portrayal of us during the 1970s and 1980's was predominately, we either had to be cool or fools. So I didn't hold on passionately to a lot of the characters of that time period. I just didn't.

You mentioned that you knew Don McGregor when he was doing Black Panther. Did you ever get a sense as to what the inner-workings of that character were? What sense did you get from Marvel about that character?

I got to hover around marvel a lot at that point because I knew Don, I was also privy to conversations with John Romita, Sr., Stan Lee, Marie Severens, some of those folks. There was a time period when I could weave in and out of the offices, it was when they had the bullpens, and things were a bit more laid back and less corporate on that level. Stan's office door, 60% of the time was wide open.

During that time the echoes that I heard went something to the affect that it was cool to have Black character like that especially since Jack Kirby and Stan created it. It was cool for him to have his

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miss-use of English and prununciation. Play on ebonics.
own series. It was right for the times, it was PC and we didn’t have
that phrase then -- "politically correct." But they didn’t want him to
be too black. You know they didn’t want him to be, they didn’t want
the series to get too much into the personal experiences of African-
Americans, because most of the people up there, I’m not saying
they’re bigots, but bottom line they didn’t connect to that. It wasn’t
their world. Some of the editors were very supportive of what Don
did, some of the writers and artists were very supportive, others
were absolutely not. And I remember hearing one phrase shot at
Don, in affect, saying that he was too close to the Black experience.

Now Don, recognizing the fact that he was a short little
White guy from Rhode Island, and at that point he had been living
in Rhode Island all of his life, until, like a couple of years before he
started doing that character for marvel. He moved to New York
City in the mid-1970s. He was in his 20’s at that point (I think late
twenties). He was writing for Warren Publications and then he
started to get other jobs and wound up [doing] editorial work on
marvel and eventually started doing writing for marvel. So, he
recognized, you know, “I come from a pretty much milk-and-cream
kind of American background.” But Don is also the kind of person
who, if he meets you and he likes you, it doesn’t matter what color you are. If you’re a jackass, you’re out of his life and that’s it. So he’d met me, he met a lot of other people, he’d met Billy Graham who, I [will have] to say was, Black because Billy unfortunately passed away a couple of years ago. He [Don] knew Billy. He hung out with us and Billy lived in the core, center, hub of Harlem and Billy was the kind of brother who you could call up and say, “Billy can we hang out Friday, Saturday night, whatever?” And when you got to Billy’s you had no idea what kind of adventure was ahead of you. But the world of Black folks in Harlem was suddenly open wide. And you were going to meet two tons of characters. So, here’s what McGregor is being exposed to. Among other relationships here’s what he’s being exposed to. And McGregor is a human recording machine. He hears people. Hears what they say. He tries to here the message behind it. He hears tones and inflections. Because as a writer he says, how can I convey this stuff if I’m not listening? So he was coming back to the Black Panther series with that experience. With at least spending time, some time, you want to call it research time, you want to call it hang time, whatever. He was bringing some of that to the series and this was bothering some folks. And he got called out on it a couple of times. He got called
out, and this wasn't even marvel, he got called out by an artist, who shall remain nameless, over an interracial relationship he did in one of his creations of *Sabre*. And McGregor was like, screw you!

Alex would also come up with an idea that would challenge the status quo of the industry in the form of a character called Blackjack (see figure 13). An idea that came into being in the 1985, long before the advent of Milestone and Ania, *Blackjack* would not see publication until after Milestone's documented rise and fall. "The idea came to me as a comic book," he said, "I'm not sure why that happened but I remember thinking [it would be cool because] I could not only get an adult audience but [also] a younger audience."
Figure 13. Above left to right: cover to *Blackjack: Blood & Honor* #1 (January 1998) of the four issue miniseries and cover to the *Blackjack: Blood & Honor* (1999) graphic novel that reprinted the series of the same name. As the owner, creator and writer, Alex Simmons did a significant amount of contracting.

Named positions: Alex Simmons (writer/creator), K. Lashley (artist), C. Batista (artist), Ceasar (artist), J. Igle (artist), Grey and the Studio (artist), R. Stull (artist), P. Novin (artist), W. Wong (artist), N. Messingil (artist), Gould (artist), Ken Bruzenak (letters), Elizabeth (design director), and William McCay (editor). Cover to miniseries by Greg and Jim Hildebrandt. Cover to the graphic novel by Brian Stelfreeze.
Simmons came to the character with a variety of influences. "I grew up watching old TV shows and serials," he continued; "I was hooked on the hero, I was hooked on the adventure, the excitement of going up against evil, combating it, persevering and coming across and saving lives." But the Black characters on Simmons' childhood TV and movie screen were primarily of the "step-and-fetch-it" variety. Simmons was an adult during the blaxploitation film period. "There was Slaughter and Shaft, but I still wasn't seeing the kind of hero character portrayed by one of us [African-Americans] that I wanted to see. I don't have any problem with them [the blaxploitation characters] existing, I do have a problem with them being all there is."

Simmons knew that there were things that Black people had done that the vast majority of the public knew nothing about. At the time, however, he had a sense, more so than full-blown evidence, that there must have been Black soldiers of fortune. Simmons described this to me as if he were thinking aloud:

If I [were to] stay out of the United States and I traveled these troubled areas people [would] pay me good money to carry a pistol, to do this, to do that, I could actually live the life as a, AS A MAN! You know that kind of macho thing. I know that because otherwise [I'd be] coming back to the United States to be what? A Pullman
porter, shoe shine, elevator operator, janitor, struggling in the street, whatever. I knew that some of us must have had that attitude. So, I said to myself, I’m going to create one. I’m going to start to build up his past and his family. And he’s going to live in the 30’s, like the Shadow and Doc Savage, he’s going to live in that era which is so rich with all kinds of things, including naïveté. Except this time, you’re going to see it from a man of color’s P.O.V. And that’s going to give me all kinds of story lines that have not been done before, stories more interesting to me as a writer.

Simmons wanted to make people aware of the historical and human dramas of Blacks and other marginalized people. It was important that Blackjack not be a street character, but instead an educated man, especially since his adventures took place in the 1930s, a time which saw the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance.

You had Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston. Folks of our background who came up from families of cotton pickers ... or from the streets of Harlem, who followed through, on an educational level and could sit with the Rockefellers and pontificate at that time. I wanted to build Blackjack’s persona in a way that would show that
this type of human being did exist. I got the idea and I began writing like crazy, mapping him out. The story came to me, so I was using the story to help me find out who this character was.

The more Simmons thought about it the more he realized that he had to back up his ideas with historical research. This was how he came upon Eugene Jacque Bullard, one of the historical inspirations for Blackjack. As a youngster living in Mississippi, Bullard was told by his father that in France, all men are free. At age eight, and already tired of southern style racism, Bullard stowed away on a German freighter. He made it as far as Scotland before he was kicked off the ship. Over the next few of years he worked his way across Europe to Paris, working an assortment of jobs, such as miner, store clerk, boxer, and so on. He joined the French Airforce and flew for the French during World War I, encountering plenty racism along the way. He stayed in France, opened a nightclub and became a fixture among both the elite and the lower ends of Paris social life. He knew Josephine Baker and during World War II, was a member of the French underground. Bullard was the first of many “discoveries” that influenced Blackjack. In fact, the historical figures that Simmons researched are featured in a section at the end of the Blackjack comics titled “Shades of History.”
It wasn’t long before this project became Simmons’ own personal journey through history. “The project took hold of me. I’d start reading about these places just to give myself a little bit of an idea of what kind of story I’d want, I’d come across more people who I felt some character should be based on or that should somehow filter through the story,” Simmons said.

Simmons took the concept to Dick Giordano at DC Comics. “Dick was a sweetheart with me,” said Simmons. “He mentored me for about four to six months. We reworked the script so it was in a stronger format. He tested me on elements of it.” The first story that Simmons showed Giordano did not take Blackjack outside the Unites States, to which Giordano remarked, “if you're going to introduce him as a globetrotting hero your first story should at least have him travel somewhere else.”

In response, Simmons created the story titled “Second Bite of the Cobra.” Once the first draft was complete, Giordano attached another DC employee to the project, to rally additional support before it was presented to the DC upper echelon.

The other DC employee suggested certain cuts. At issue was some of the background history of Blackjack. Simmons felt it was important to include these
elements because the character defies many stereotypes, and that without the background Blackjack would come across as "just another Black man with a gun." The editor felt it would be better to focus on Blackjack's "coolness." In spite of his concerns, Simmons went along with this change in focus, knowing that if the project was approved he could introduce the historical elements in future stories. Giordano also convinced Gene Colan to do some sketches of such characters as Blackjack, Tim Chang, and the Cobra.

Although Simmons did not submit it as a creator owned project, he assumed he would retain some creative control and appropriate creator credit. This is about the time that creators were starting to fight for more control over their work. "I remember I wanted DC to do the comic," said Simmons; "I remember that I wanted to maintain some of the rights on it but it was definitely not going to be an Alex Simmons comic or a Dark Angel production which didn't exist then." Blackjack was not approved by the DC executives. DC said that they wanted more character development. They wanted some history about Blackjack and his parents. Bottom line — they wanted a better understanding of the character, in part, because he defied stereotype. Simmons resubmitted Blackjack with the changes and it was rejected a second time. There was a changeover in editorial personnel and direction. A year later, DC decided to publish Doc Savage and the Shadow, two previously established characters with adventures
that took place at the same time as *Blackjack*. The decision was not so much a slight against *Blackjack* as it was a decision to go with characters that were already established and easier to market

Simmons put *Blackjack* on the proverbial shelf for a couple of years. In 1990 he showed the *Blackjack* proposal developed for DC to Eclipse. At that point, Simmons had a stronger image about what he wanted this series to be. He wanted to control all the creative elements of the book. This meant writing the script and hiring the artists, letterers, etc. Eclipse would copy edit, publish and distribute the book. Simmons would be responsible for all costs associated with the creative side of the book, and Eclipse for advertising, printing, and distribution costs. As Simmons put it,

My ego was intact because I [knew] that [I was] going to do the best that I could to produce the best story possible. I was also very close to it [*Blackjack*] and as a professional, you have to understand that your vision may not be as clear to everybody else as it is to you. So you bring in people you can trust (or you hope that you can trust) to guide you in the process, so ultimately, the property becomes a little bit theirs too. Then it becomes accessible to [a larger] audience. So that was the deal with them. It took about a year to negotiate the
deal. And then I went into the process of finding [financial] backers... I knew for myself that I would want to be able to promote it in some way, shape, or form so we were looking to put additional money in the kitty...

In finding a creative team, Simmons “ran into some egos, some discouragement and, people I could not afford.” Eventually a friend recommended Glasshouse Graphics.

Glasshouse represents American and Brazilian artists. I told [them] what I was trying to do, what my budget was, and they came up with a number of artists who I looked at. Joe [Bennet's] work immediately jumped out at me. Not only could he draw strong characters and figures, he really could draw people. There was a film noir mood to his art and he was affordable. And he uses the camera well, he was not afraid of angles and subtleties. He was the cinematographer I wanted for my project. Joe started drawing the first book based on the script I had written. He had it finished and he was starting to work on the second one, then things took a turn for the worst.
It was 1994, at the Philadelphia comic book convention. Simmons stopped by the Eclipse booth to check out the promotional material for *Blackjack #1*. There wasn't any. "There was a lot of confusion," Simmons said. He knew something strange was going on but he could not quite figure out what it was. A few weeks later Eclipse announced that it was filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, creating a delicate situation. "We were racing the clock," said Simmons, because if the company went Chapter 11 before the contract was voided, Simmons' property would have been frozen. If this happened, Simmons would have had to wait until someone bought Eclipse before he could even negotiate to publish *Blackjack* elsewhere. However, Simmons had supporters inside the company who helped see to it that he was able to walk away from this situation. "We got it done," Simmons said, "and now I'm standing there [with] a fully drawn book. I've got my contract back, I've got half of another book underway, and I've got no place to go."

At this point, Simmons was contacted by a friend at Harris Publications. She had followed Simmons' previous attempts to get *Blackjack* published and had seen the DC proposal and the one and one half completed issues. According to Simmons:
I am reluctantly going into this good night, as it were, because I don’t want to be a publisher at that point. I still want to be a writer, a writer/creator, I want to get the property out. I want to be able to focus on doing the art. When I say art, I mean the art of writing, getting the drawings done. And making this comic book, this film, this entity called Blackjack. This is where my head was. I didn’t want to have to deal with distributors and retailers and all of that. That’s all too much administrative propaganda. It’s a talent, in and of itself, that I did not want to have to learn. And I didn’t want to know how good or bad I was at it either. There are people who are creative with numbers, there are people who are creative in marketing, in plans and procedures. There are people who are brilliant with money because that’s what they do and they’re damn good at it. And that’s what you want. You want those people on your side, working with you. And you’re brilliant, you’re great, you’re creative, you’re talented at putting pen to paper and creating this visual image or words to a page and blowing people away with that. I was a writer. I had had artistic training. I was an intelligent enough man to know how to do business to some degree but I had no desire to be a businessman on that level. I wanted to create the book and give it to people who already had that machine going, who
already had that staff, and the promotional people and all of that. So that if I did my job right and they did their job, right *Blackjack* had the optimum chance of success. For me, finding a home for him with those pieces in place was key.

The contract negotiations lasted six months. Sorting out the property issues was particularly difficult. Simmons' experiences had made him particularly protective of his ancillary rights.

At that time ... the value and the money making possibilities of merchandizing was becoming clearer to the business people in the comic book industry. So immediately everybody wants ancillary rights. The [non-comic] publishing industry – novels and so forth – they [already knew this]. Now the comic industry was getting it. So Harris wanted that, and I'm not knocking them for it but I didn't want to give it. I wanted to share. I would give up a little of this and make sure they kept their hands off of that. So there was negotiation ... I wanted to be sure that I had established the character strongly enough before other people started rolling with it. Because again, he was not going to become just another Black man with a gun.
After six months of negotiations a contract was drawn up. But just before the meeting to sign the contract, the publisher reneged. Simmons’ friend who had sponsored the project was caught totally unaware by this turn of events.

This was also a devastating blow to Simmons. He had no idea for sure where things broke down but he could imagine how it happened, “for every ten people that have gone crazy over this idea there has been at least one who hasn’t. And unfortunately, most of the time that one person is in a position to create a problem.” Simmons believed that throughout his attempts to get Blackjack published, that race was a factor, but he is hesitant to declare any company racist. Using DC as an example, Simmons said, “If that was the case, then [their people] wouldn’t have sat with me for four to six months trying to help me. Gene [Colan] wouldn’t have jumped at the chance to draw it. That’s not the reality.”

The reality is that even if a character such as Blackjack is the product of a singular vision, publishing through an established company – be it a large or small publisher – requires a consensus between the creative, editorial, and business sides of the prospective publisher. The bottom line is that people work best with characters they can identify with and stories they can relate to. While identification can transcend race and stories can be related to in a multiplicity of
ways, comics are a staid medium, in which it is easier to work with what has already been proven – and comics have a long history of using White characters as universal subjects. Couple that with the fact that race has long been a touchy subject in the American context and the problems of consensus building become more apparent. While Simmons is quick to defend many elements of the comic book industry, he is critical of this process which – in many cases – creates opportunities for people, through their anxieties and misconceptions, to sink projects that address non-White characters. These anxieties and misconceptions tend to be rationalized as marketing or audience concerns. According to Simmons, some comic book companies:

have no idea how to market [non-White characters]. [They] have no concept how to do the stories and get Wall Street, Madison Avenue, and Middle America to get behind it. A good deal of the time fear prevents it. This confusion and fear absolutely stops it [the process]. I have actually had [an editor] say to me, ‘if you’re going to put black characters in this whitebread series that we’re doing, how would we write them? Now this is a full-grown adult editor, who’s also a writer asking me, ‘how would you write this?’
When [I approach someone] to publish, market, or promote something that they are totally unfamiliar with, there [is usually one of two reactions]. Either [they] get all juicy at the mouth for the challenge and acknowledge what they don’t know and say, ‘OK, how can we do this thing, what are your thoughts, I’m going to call so and so who does it.’ And you see their eyes get big and you see that energy build, or they go, ‘We don’t usually do this, I’m not sure this is really going to work and well, you know.’ And they’ll back off just as fast they possibly can, cause they don’t want to look bad or they’re afraid that they’ll offend or whatever. There’s a lot of people who step away from things as fast as possible. With DC, I think that if someone could have shown them how this would have worked, they would have tried. I don’t see an editor sitting there going, ‘well, we can’t do a book with coloreds in it.’ I don’t see that. I can see an editor going, ‘OK, now how do you guys plan to do this book?’ I can see [somebody] at the meeting saying, ‘I don’t know, ah, gee, maybe we could do this but I don’t know.’ And that’s all that’s needed [to play on an editor's anxieties concerning the book’s viability]. That’s all that’s needed for the editor to go, ‘Look, if you don’t know what to do with it then what are we doing with it?’ That’s happened at intervals in my life on different projects and
other people’s projects. I’ve been there inside the door watching a project die on the table because the person that should have been there to answer certain key questions about promoting wasn’t. The agent was there and the agent was going purely on hype fumes and no substance and that doesn’t work all the time. So again, in terms of the comic book industry, there are racists in the comic book industry, like everywhere else in the world, yes. [And] there are lots more people who will do anything for you if they think it’s a great idea [and] if you can show them how to do it.

In order to keep Blackjack alive Simmons did have to become publisher. “I did have to start dealing with retailers,” he said, “I did have to start dealing with the ‘head-trips’ that I started to encounter.”

While his initial print run of 10,000 issues of the first Blackjack miniseries may seem small for the comic book industry, one cannot underestimate the potential impact of the publication of an independent comic on its creator. Simmons has continued the Blackjack franchise, producing a second miniseries, a graphic novel, a comic strip, and an audio drama. More importantly, Simmons’ work on Blackjack has demonstrated his ability to successfully use comics to tell a story about a Black character that defies stereotypical notions while still
garnering a racially diverse audience. His fan base reaches from “from L.A. to New York and from Cairo to Copenhagen (Carpenter 2001a).”

In an e-mail, Simmons (Carpenter 2001a) remarked, “When you put your work out there, you better be sure it’s your best effort, because you never know who’s watching.” Simmons’ decision to publish independently, in an effort to avoid the pitfalls of consensus building, did not go unnoticed among both his supporters and detractors. Simmons recently finished *Batman: Orpheus Rising* for DC Comics. Due out in August, this mini-series will introduce a major Black character to the *Batman* comic books. He is currently working on a *Scooby Doo* story for DC Comics’ Cartoon Network line and two Tarzan stories, both of which will appear in the Sunday editions of the syndicated *Tarzan* comic strip.

In particular, the irony of being an African-American and working on Tarzan, is not lost on Simmons. I asked Simmons if there are any specific elements of Blackjack or Orpheus that translate into his work on *Tarzan*. He responded,

Honor, respect, knowledge, awareness, love, [and] courage.

Both *Blackjack* and *Orpheus Rising* deal with racial issues in ways *Tarzan* does not have to. But even their perspectives differ because
of who they are and the era in which they live. Still I attempt to display common denominators of human nature.

Tarzan lives among blacks in Africa. The level of his relationship and feelings about the Black Africans around him differs according to who is writing the story. The constant I plan to use is if you do not give him reason to be your enemy, you're his friend, or acquaintance. Should I get the chance, I plan to explore more of the culture, and people. How he sees them, and how they view him.

I'm sure the people who read my work can identify my ongoing themes better than I can. For me, its 99% about telling a good tale.

Creating consensus requires agreement. And within the comic book industry, the creation and publication of an African-American character, requires a predominately White industry to reach a consensus, most often with a small minority of non-White creators, on one of America's most contentious issues – race. As such, is it really any wonder that an African-American creator would feel
the need to publish independently in order to avoid the Sisyphean task of reaching such a consensus?
Chapter 11

Just-them, Just-us, or Justice Society

So what happens when, as I argued in Chapter 5, one looks at the small and fine print of a comic book? This chapter will address the creation of race in Mr. Terrific and J. J. Thunder, two African-American superheroes that were created for the recently revamped *Justice Society of America (JSA)* comic book by DC Comics. I will focus on the people and the processes that brought these images into being. I will discuss propriety issues, creative accommodations, and negotiations that influence the generation and development of these comic book characters. In this particular case, I will hone in on the creative utility of *cool* in the face of changing notions of heroism and justice. By creative utility I mean the ways in which *cool* is used – or latched onto – in order to address creative, marketing, and representational concerns, precisely because it has different meanings amongst a variety of contexts and racial and ethnic identifications. But first, some background on the concepts, history, and characters in question.

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10 JSA is the acronym for Justice Society of America, Just as JLA is the acronym for Justice League. The most recent comic books featuring the adventures of these two teams are titled JSA and JLA respectively. Still, in an effort to avoid confusion, except in quotations, I will spell out the names of the groups and I will use italics to highlight when I am referring to the comic book as opposed to the teams. The Justice Society of America (JSA) and the Justice League of America (JLA) are two different superhero teams. While the JSA predates the JLA, the JLA has greater name recognition among non-comic book readers.
DC Comics – a division of AOL/Time Warner – own the Justice Society and all of its associated characters. Comic book stories are copyrighted and the characters' likenesses are registered as trademarks. This is significant because trademark registration offers greater proprietary protections than copyright, affording comic book companies greater flexibility in licensing (Gaines 1991). This is also significant because it focuses the comic book production process on creating characters with visually identifiable attributes. In order to retain its trademark (ownership of its characters' likenesses) DC Comics must periodically publish each of its respective characters, creating an economic incentive for DC Comics to update even its most anachronistic characters. While DC Comics occupies three floors of a New York City skyscraper, most of the production takes place offsite, in the homes and studios of freelance employees. Of the seven aforementioned named positions, only the editor and assistant editor are actually employees of DC Comics. The other members of the creative team are freelancers working under contracts that define them as work for hire with no proprietary rights. As owners of both the characters and the end product, DC Comics decides the parameters the creative team must work within. For example, all the members of the new Justice Society had to have some kind of connection to previous incarnations of the team. While, the editor and assistant editor do have creative input, their primary job is to represent DC Comics by enforcing both the brief and company editorial policies as well as manage the other members of the
creative team. Members of the comic book creative use their own research, personal experiences and personal collections of source material (an archive) to fulfill their tasks, while keeping in mind the restrictions of the brief. Easily identifiable images that lack specificity ‘draw in’ or ‘connect’ with the reader. They also create a connection between the page and the reader’s world that serves to contextualize more specific images (McBean and McKee 1996). This continual movement between general and specific images - as well as the introduction of visual elements with no connection to the narrative - opens the door to the juxtaposition of conflicting imaginaries, while giving the “world” of comics a (false) sense of depth.

While the comic book industry is centered around the creation of identifiable likenesses, its stories are about the conflict between good and evil. The hero is usually one man who fights for the powerless. They are power fantasies. Within this context, imagery from the Black Power movement and blaxploitation films emphasizing fighting ‘the man,’ the portrayal of sexual and physical prowess, images of cool become fodder for the creation of such Black superheroes as Black Lightning, Black Panther, the Falcon, and Power Man. But given the lack of face to face interaction between White creators and Black communities and the perception of the comic book audience as White and male,
when does the appropriation of *cool* become just another method of circulating negative stereotypes?

Ironically, the fact that these characters were Black and *cool* would attract Black creators to become a part of the comic book industry in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Still these Black comic book producers are not uncritical of the Black superheroes whose exploits they followed. The same holds true for the characters they work on. And they still grapple with the nature of their White counterpart’s appropriation of *cool*, an issue made all the more complicated when a creative team consisting of White and Black participants work together to create Black characters.

The Justice Society of America is the first super hero team to appear in comic books. DC Comics originally conceived them of in the 1930’s. This team brought together several DC Comics characters in order to boost sales. The original Justice Society consisted of Green Lantern, the Flash, Dr. Midnight, Hourman, Dr. Fate, Hawkman, Wonder Woman, Wildcat, Starman, the Spectre, and the Atom (see figure one). While the roster would expand and contract over time, over the years the Justice Society of America has been associated primarily with Golden Age superheroes. Other members would include Johnny Thunder and Mr. Terrific. As a result, all of the characters in the new Justice Society of
America would have to either be a former member or have some relationship to a former member. For example, in current DC continuity the Flash, Green Lantern, and Wildcat were still alive. Starman and Black Canary had passed their mantles on to their children. They were in, along with the new incarnations of the Atom, Hawkwoman, Hourman, Sandman, and the Star-Spangled Kid. Except for Wonder Woman and the occasional appearance of Hawkwoman (Hawkman's wife) all of the members of the original Justice Society of America were White men. These characters were very much a part of their time. A time that saw the birth of comic books.
Figure 14. Above left: the original Justice Society of America from page one of the Millennium Edition reprint (June 2000) of *All Star Comics* #3 (originally published winter 1940).

Above right: the new Justice Society of America from the cover of *JSA* #26 (September 2001)
Many of the narrative elements of early comics can be traced to the turn of the century pulp adventure novels. The pulp adventure novel had a broad impact on American popular culture. In addition to inspiring and providing material for adventure film, publishers of adventure novels were influential in starting the comic book industry and the super hero genre as we know it. Credited for making the comic book industry a viable product, pulp fiction publishers introduced a type of formula writing to the comic book that emphasized “stripped down, entertaining stories on a tight budget (Sabin 1993, p. 145).” In the 1930’s they used their writers and editors to establish shops and studios that specialized in producing specific genres of comics. The studio system allowed publishers to create comic books at such a rate that if a title’s sales were lagging, a studio could cancel and replace it with a new original character and story in a few short weeks. From this time on, the comic book was truly a mass media form. Through the emergent adventure and super hero comics, these publishers would also exert a great deal of influence over the content of comic strips.

Beginning with the publication of _Tarzan_ and _Buck Rogers_ as comic strips (both in 1929) the era of the adventure strip had begun. These comics were aimed at both young and adult audiences (Reitberger and Fuchs 1972, p. 63) and incorporated themes, characters, and talents from pulp fiction. The Phantom – a masked rider, lord of the jungle, and enemy of piracy – was the first masked
adventurer, as well as, the first masked comic book super hero (Horn 1975, p.551). Like his unmasked predecessors in comics and novels, the Phantom functions within a colonial narrative in which he, a White man, pacifies the dark continent. Early comic strips depended heavily on already established works, as well as on original ideas by such pulp writers as Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Ray Bradbury. The writers whose works were adapted often had direct input into the products of their adaptations. Many of them worked through newspaper syndicates under established agreements with pulp fiction publishing houses. In effect, the introduction of this new talent pool blurred the line between the comic strip and the pulp novel. Originally, a format for reproducing newspaper strips, comic books became economically viable when they started featuring original stories about characters modeled, in part after such pulp heroes. After all, these pulp mainstays were the heroes of their day. They were big game hunters, colonial explorers, urban vigilantes, hard boiled detectives, and cowboys – with few exceptions – they were White men who brought their own particular brand of order to chaos, men who took the law into their own hands so as to create their idea of a just society. Much like their comic strip cousins, comic books also borrowed from pulp fiction that hinged on the Eurocentric worldview that permeated much of popular culture at the turn of the century. Darwinian and eugenics paradigms had come to dominate the meaning of race (Bernardi 1996) and the “enthusiasm for the imperial project was
spreading beyond the elites” (Shoat and Stam 1994), Africa, the Middle East, and the “Orient,” as narrative necessities in literature moved quickly into the popular consciousness.

For the most part, these comic book characters were White men in spandex with lots of power. And these men of power found other men of power, primarily to satisfy the marketing concerns of their creators, and formed their own special society. A Justice Society of like minded White men righting the wrongs as they saw it, proudly striving, valiantly fighting and marshalling their incredible power to create a just society. While such characters as Batman, brings to mind the hardboiled detective, and Superman, the ultimate policeman, many of the Golden Age superheroes who would eventually come together to form the Justice Society of America, are essentially White guys with Asian, Middle Eastern, or African origins. One of these superheroes was a man, the pinnacle of human achievement, able to acquire any skill with little effort. He donned a mask and a red, yellow, and green costume, called himself Mr. Terrific and fought crime in the name of “fair play.” His role on the team was to be the ultimate role model ... and he was White. Johnny Thunder was one of the least mature members of the team. He discovered a powerful force from a foreign land, a real live genie. With an utterance, the power of his words, this not so mature man became the genie’s master, using the genie’s might to make wrongs
right, he called himself Johnny Thunder. Aladdin revisited, re-imagined, or colonized? Carter Hall, a White male museum curator, became Hawkman after discovering that he is the incarnation of an Egyptian Pharaoh. A magical element found in a pyramid allows him to levitate and the wings that he constructs gives him the control necessary to fly. Dr. Fate receives a magical helmet and mystical powers while on an archaeological dig in Egypt.

Green Lantern and Johnny Thunder both derive their powers from magical entities and have origins modeled from the story of Aladdin. Hawkman and Dr. Fate hinge on the existence of a lost civilization that once ruled all of Africa, a civilization assumed to be ruled by White people. They use their roles as explorers along with western technology to claim some mystical power that was lost when the continent descended into savagery. Be they comic book or adventure novels, these stories play a vital role in configuring the African continent in the American popular consciousness. North Africa and the Orient serve as a place of mystery and a buffer between European civilization and Sub-Saharan Africa. Africa's status as a fallen European outpost further emphasized the danger of allowing the darkness in Africa's heart to spread (Mudimbe 1988; Rigby 1996).
Then came the 2nd half of the 20th century. The mostly White male comic book creators continued to imagine the adventures of superheroes. But the world had changed. Colonialism was revealed to be a failed enterprise, there was no more westward to expand into, the world wars gave way to a cold war. The task of tallying the collateral damage had begun, the might that had previously made the rights – and the heroes that became their avatars – were questioned in the name of civil and human rights. The comic book endured. But where did its heroes stand in this new world? So what of these comic book heroes and their just society? As they moved beyond the times of which they were born, how were they to be judged? How were these imaginary heroes and the justness of their society (re) imagined in order to accommodate the fact that, while the images of these heroes endure, the world to which they are connected, the actions that they commit, the very justness of their causes are questioned?

And as the 20th century came to a close the owners of the old Justice Society decided it was time for a new Justice Society. This new team of heroes would look a bit more like America. Still, it incorporated the “surviving” members of the original team – a bit past their prime and grappling with their place in this new world – but filled to the brim with experience and willingness to help show these new heroes the way. Of the original team, Mr. Terrific was dead and Johnny Thunder suffered from Alzheimer’s. But their heroic mantles would
be passed on. Enter a man of unparalleled intellect – an inventor with amazing potential – contemplating suicide over the death of his wife. He is persuaded to walk in the footsteps, to become the new Mr. Terrific by the Spectre, the original Mr. Terrific’s former teammate on the Justice Society of America. And a boy with few manors – intelligent but rude, immature with the mouth of a sailor – stumbles upon a pen, a magical pen that houses the magic thunderbolt that was once controlled by Johnny Thunder. He isn’t quite ready to be a hero – some would call him reluctant, others would call him a coward – but he has the power and the Justice Society has members who will guide him, members with courage to spare. The successors to Mr. Terrific and Johnny Thunder – a flawed man of incredible potential and the latter, a boy who wears his manhood like an ill-fitted suit, the next in line, they are Black and they were made to be cool.

I initially found out about plans to revamp the new Mr. Terrific in February 1999 from L.A. Williams, at the time an assistant editor at DC Comics. I was in the office at DC Comics that he shared with Harvey Richards. Harvey and L.A. are both African-American. Harvey and I didn’t realize that Mr. Terrific had been redone as a Black super hero. Harvey and I started rummaging through a back issue pile in the corner of the office for the new Mr. Terrific’s first appearance. “Hey Stan,” said L.A., “while you’re at it why don’t you toss me the list we made,” a reference to the list of Black cartoonist that he and I, along with
four Black cartoonists had constructed and stored on Palm Computer during a recent road trip. As we rummaged through the piles, Harvey and I kept asking each other and L.A. why he was considering a new version of Mr. Terrific? Although Harvey and I both professed some nostalgia for the character, we just couldn't see why L.A wanted to salvage this character in particular.

Harvey found the new Mr. Terrific's first appearance. He started flipping through the pages. "Toss it this way," I said. The pages fluttered through the air as Harvey lofted the comic book across the office. I caught it and started flipping through the pages. The new Mr. Terrific's introduction took about four pages in one of the final issues of the *Spectre* — a comic book about a detective who shares his body with a spirit of vengeance. This is significant because most of this comic's storylines dealt with vengeance and redemption. The new Mr. Terrific, was a Black man, who after losing his wife and fortune, was contemplating suicide. The Spectre approached him and told him that he reminded him of the original Mr. Terrific and should carry on the name, thus the new Mr. Terrific was born. In the next scene the new Mr. Terrific is walking onto an inner city basketball court sporting sunglasses and a black leather biker's jacket with the phrase "fair play" embroidered on it. He intercepts the basketball that a group of Black youths toss back and forth (see figures 15, 16, and 17).
“Who do you think you are?” says one of the boys.

“I’m the new Mr. Terrific,” replies Mr. Terrific.

“You a superhero,” says the boy, “so what are your powers?”

The new Mr. Terrific tosses the ball up in the air. He makes the basket, a perfect swish, nothing but net. “I don’t need any powers, I’m cool,” replies the new Mr. Terrific.
Figure 15: Spectre 5#4, page four (June 1997). The Spectre tells Michael Holt about the original Mr. Terrific in an effort to convince him to take up the mantle.

Named positions: John Ostrander (writer), Tom Mandrake (artist), Todd Klien (letters), Carly Feeny (colorist), Digital Chameleon (color separations), and Peter Tomasi (associate editor).
Figure 16. Above and below: Spectre #54 (June 1997). Above: page seventeen, panels one and two, members of the original Justice Society speak to the ghost of the original Mr. Terrific. Ironically, he is more valuable in death in that it paves the way for the new Mr. Terrific pictured below. Below: page 19, panels one and two.
Figure 17: Spectre #54, page twenty (June 1997). The new Mr. Terrific displays his cool to a group of Black teens.
The new Mr. Terrific was created by John Ostrander, a White male Baby-Boomer. While L.A. acknowledged that the new Mr. Terrific may have seemed dated, he also argued in no uncertain terms that Ostrander deserved a lot of credit form creating characters of color when he just as easily could have made them White.

L.A. went on to explain that when DC Comics decided to revamp the Justice Society of America, they also decided that it would be done in three stages. First they would do a Justice League of America/Justice Society of America team up story, followed by a JSA Secret files comic book and then Justice Society of America #1. The story that they created for the Justice League of America/Justice Society of America team up called for the creation of a new Johnny Thunder. Somewhere along the way they decided that this new Johnny Thunder should be Black and, in a play on ebonics, intended to name the character J.J. Thunda. The White creators of Johnny Thunder approached L.A. for input regarding current Black fashions ... the current state of cool. L.A. made several suggestions. The first of which was to drop the use of ebonics in the character's name.
When he saw the preliminary pages for the Justice League of America/Justice Society of America story he was not happy. The new Johnny Thunder was called J.J. Thunder. L.A. thought the character came off as a thug. He was an incredibly smart Black kid who stumbled on his ability to control the magic thunder bolt while robbing a bank! L.A. commented, "Here we finally get another Black superhero and he's standing up next to Superman and he's got to be a foul mouthed kid holding his crotch and cursing. Correction, they used the squiggly lines to cover the offensive wording."

When L.A. spoke to one of the people who originally enlisted him in J.J. Thunder's creation he was told that the language and gestures were "appropriate to [J.J. Thunder's] socio economic background ... this gives him an edge." L.A. interrupted his recollection to say. "Robin and Superboy have an edge but why does the Black character have to get his edge like this. Why is it that they created Black Panther in 1968 ... and since then the images of us have gotten worse." This is an important issue for L.A. who, while at the University of Massachusetts, wrote his senior thesis on Black Superheroes in comics (Williams 1993). He continued:

The second Robin, the Jason Todd version, was a character that was meant to be a rebel from the beginning. In fact, Batman discovered
him trying to steal the hubcaps off the batmobile! But he doesn't curse. The new Superboy lives in Hawaii and chases women. He was made to be a rebel, to do the things that Superman wouldn't do, but he doesn't curse either. These are things that would not be done with White kids but they couldn't imagine a Black kid from the hood not cursing. Hitman, the lead character in a comic book about a hired killer, didn't curse.

According to LA, he asked several editors if they cursed when they were kids. All of them said yes.

But when they want to show that a kid is from the 'hood' they have to use ebonics and swear words. On the one hand they came to me because they didn't know. Let a black man from Harlem tell them something else and all of a suddenly they're experts. We are not dealing with the real world, we're dealing with the heroic ideal. [J.J. Thunder] was held to a different standard. [Whatever heroic ideal J.J. Thunder represented] it was built [in part on] how [the creators] thought black people act.
L.A.'s problem wasn't just the cursing and swearing so much as the context, that being the DCU. There are adult themes, slang and language, even the use of the "n" word in DC Comics mature readers line, Vertigo. But there are editorial policies in the DCU that are designed to keep the books at an *all audiences* level. As a result:

... cursing is not the norm in the DCU.\(^{11}\) I thought JSA would be a hot book. I always wanted to create Black characters, revise Black characters, I wanted us in there. A lot of the characters were already set. It could have been Hawkgirl, Amazing Man, J.J. Thunder, or Mr. Terrific. I felt Mr. Terrific filled a unique niche as far as the JSA was concerned.

As I stated earlier, the members of the new Justice Society of America had to be related to the original Justice Society of America. All but one of the membership slots were already filled by existing White characters. This left only three possible Black candidates for the remaining slot: J.J. Thunder, Mr. Terrific or Amazing Man. Amazing Man was a hard sell. He wasn't in the Justice Society when the book first came out in the 1940's but he was added to the roster

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\(^{11}\) DCU is an acronym for DC Comics Universe, a term used to describe the universe that is shared by most of DC Comics' mainstream characters, such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. For the most part these stories are considered to be for all ages.
retroactively in 1980’s as part of flashback story. His grandson has since carried on the name in the present. Unfortunately, the grandson is currently assumed dead. This doesn’t mean he couldn’t be brought back to life. Since he could only get one Black character on the thirteen member Justice Society of America L.A. had decided to make what he could of the new Mr. Terrific.

The biggest pressure to deal with JJ Thunder, however, was the fact that Grant [Morison] had introduced him in the Justice League of America. The push to put Mr. Terrific in *JSA Secret Files* was the result of previous conversations in which we had talked about including him somewhere around issue number six. The only way to make those conversations real was to put him in Secret Files since, as a book, its supposed to introduce things the reader doesn’t know yet. I figured if fans thought Mr. Terrific looked cool, if they were looking out for the character, then Mr. Terrific stood a better chance.

L.A. mulled over several possible candidates to redesign the new Mr. Terrific. A pseudo-manga style is “in,” in both comics and Hip-Hop, could this or that person do a pin-up and costume design that brought the manga and Hip-Hop styles together? L.A. wanted the new Mr. Terrific to be *cool* in all the ways
that mattered, all the ways that J.J. Thunder wasn’t, a way that would appeal to Black youth without portraying Black youth in a negative light. Some of the questions were related to DC’s internal politics. What other work have they done? Would the artist bring name recognition? Was the artist reliable in the eyes of L.A.’s Editor? Is the artist working on any other projects at DC that this assignment would disrupt?

Grey was selected as the artist for this assignment. Grey and L.A. wanted the character to be “fresh,” “cool,” and have cross-cultural appeal. The original Mr. Terrific wore a red mask and a green jacket with the phrase “Fair Play” on it. Using the 1970s blaxploitation character Shaft, Grey updated the jacket and replaced the mask with sunglasses. After some consideration, L.A. and Grey decided not to use this design, thinking that it would look “cool” and “retro” to White readers but “played out” and “dated” to Black readers. Using images of Hip-Hop youth in motorcycle gear and tattoos, Grey outfitted Mr. Terrific in a leather bodysuit and a ‘T’ shaped mask – resembling a facial tattoo – that exposes the brown flesh of his forehead, cheeks, and chin.

This version of the new Mr. Terrific was based on the outfits worn by Black inner city bikers, a style that is distinct from the traditional Harley Davidson garb and is featured in rap videos and Hip-Hop magazines. According to L.A., DC
Comics’ Billing Department wanted to pay Grey less than the standard rate for a character design. Their rationale was that this wasn’t really a redesign of the character because the new costume was really civilian clothes and not a superhero costume. It is ironic that being cool in the street sense serves as both the selling-point of Black superheroes in the comic book marketplace while the very fact that this cool is rooted in the streets is the rationale for undervaluing a Black superhero during the production process. It is doubly ironic that this devaluing of cool could have negative professional repercussions for L.A. The decision to pay out at a lower rate is significant, not just in terms of Grey’s pay, but also L.A.’s reputation among other freelancers. In this business, editors and assistant editors get paid to attract and manage talent. Still, pissing off Grey was a secondary concern. L.A. wasn’t all that concerned about his reputation so much as the issue of fairness.
Figure 18: pictured above are the original Mr. Terrific (right), B&W roughs for the new Mr. Terrific (center), and a color version of the New Mr. Terrific.
Figure 19: Johnny Thunder with the Thunderbolt (above left) and J.J. Thunder with the Thunderbolt (above middle and right). While both characters control the same Thunderbolt the racial difference between Johnny Thunder and J.J. Thunder is underscored by the Thunderbolt’s use of Black slang.
At times, the story of a comic book character's creation reads as an endless recitation of 'might-have-beens.' In theory, Hawkman could have been black. He is the reincarnation of an Egyptian Pharaoh. As a character he was defunct, in a medium in which race is really and truly made up. But in practice it is unlikely. Ironically it is unlikely precisely because race in comics is really and truly made up by teams of creators that are dominated by particular perspectives, sensibilities, and identifications. Within this context, race is a problem to be solved as opposed to an experience to validated, represented, shared ... or lived.
RICE UNIVERSITY

Imagining Identity:
Ethnographic Investigations into
the Work of Creating Images
of Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Comic Books

(VOLUME 2)

by

Stanford W. Carpenter

A THESIS SUBMITTED
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Chapter 12
Six Days in September

The chapter that follows is the first part of, what I am calling, the matrix of relations. In this chapter, I will use my movement through space and time to describe the contingent nature of the bonds between comic books and their creators.

It is Tuesday, September 12, 2000, in New York City, on 53rd and Broadway, in an interior office at DC Comics with no natural light. It was too nice to wait inside. Harvey was pretty distracted; after all he did have to work for a living. Joan Hilty walked across the hallway to drop off some pencils for (something from cartoon network). I sat at L.A.'s desk, still empty since his departure several months ago, thumbing through a stack of recent comics, many of which had not yet been delivered to the retail outlets. Essentially, I was killing time.

I got up to use the rest restroom. The hallway was pretty non-descript. It could have been any office except for the word balloons containing the names of the occupants. For the most part, the art on the hallway walls are conservatively framed comic related art. The offices themselves were standard corporate fare – a desk, bulletin board, and a purple I-Mac desktop computer - however the walls
and desks were adorned with unframed comic art posters, cover proofs, and action figures. Each office was both a work and personal history of its inhabitants with the dominant aesthetic being the current work. Not surprisingly, there is a noticeable absence of non-DC characters. To my right were the offices with the windows reserved for full editors, to my left were the windowless offices shared by the assistant editors. At the end of the hallway was a corner office. The door was cracked. I could make out the shadow of a four-foot tall cut out of Superman pasted to the window. From the hallway I could barely hear the echo of DC Comics executive editor Mike Carlin’s voice from behind the cracked door. I turned the corner toward the bathroom and walk down another hallway. On one side is a framed poster of the Justice League by Alex Ross. On the other side is a large bulletin board with the covers of all of the DC, Vertigo, and Wildstorm comics coming out during the month divided neatly into rows according to there shipping dates. As I get to the end of the hall I enter a space that used to be a reception area. The walls contain framed pictures of the wedding of Superman and Louis Lane as well as an illustrated timeline of the post-Zero Hour DC Comics continuity.

I pop my head back in Harvey’s office. “Hey, I think I’m going to go wait out front on the front steps for Phil. We were going to meet here but its pretty nice outside. If he ends up here could you tell him where I am?”
“Sure.”

“I’m supposed to meet up with Alex and Eric tomorrow for a ‘Hanley’s run.’ You want to want to try for lunch tomorrow or maybe meet up with us at Hanley’s?”

“I don’t know about Hanley’s. Staff meeting tomorrow. Maybe lunch.”

I head for the elevator. As I wait for the elevator an intern with a mail cart passes by. He fumbles with his security card and waives it across the sensor in order to gain entrance to the editorial offices. I pause in front of the mural containing a veritable who’s who of DC Comics characters. The characters are almost life-size, each one being an enlarged image drawn by a different artist. The characters stand as if posing for a group photo. To the right is an 8 1/2” x 11” drawing of the mural with the characters rendered as numbered color-coded silhouettes. The legend in the corner of the drawing, names the artist of each image. There is no listing of the characters’ names.
As I ride down the elevator, I go over the day in my mind. It began just across the street at the Art Café for breakfast with DC Comics publicist Peggy Burns.

I met Peggy Burns along with Brian Azerello, Jill Thompson, Darick Robertson, and Garth Ennis about a month before, at a dinner hosted by Axel Alonso, just after the 2000 Wizard Comic Convention in Chicago. I originally met Axel through a colleague of mine about year before. On the last day of the Wizard Con, Axel told me he was getting a group of people together for dinner. We met at the hotel bar. When I first joined them, they were rehashing their impressions of the convention and series of encounters with fans. As they were talking, Darick was sketching caricatures of the fans on napkins. “He was really attractive ... except for the Superman suit, then he called me Lois!” remarked Peggy as she shivered with disgust. Darick passed the napkin with a caricature of [Peggy’s] Superman across the table to Jill and Peggy, prompting the three to talk about doing a comic book about some of their stranger fan encounters.

Peggy Burns wasn’t the only person that I met at the Art Café. In the months to follow I would also interview Asian-American comic book artist Cliff Chiang. I originally met Cliff through Walter Simonson. At the time Cliff was Walter’s assistant. At the beginning of my research I met up with him again at
the DC Comics offices. At that time he was an assistant editor on the Vertigo line. Midway through my research, he quit in order to work as a freelance penciller on projects that would include *Golden Age Secret Files*, a *Wonder Woman* Annual, and the creation of Black female protagonist, Jossie Mac, for the Batman books (see figure 20 and 21).
At the time of our conversation, Cliff was working on a back up story for Detective comics in which Batman and a Black female cop search for a missing child. In the description the cop was named Josie McDonald. The story is currently being published under the title *Josie Mac*. At first Cliff didn't realize that she was supposed to be Black. There are some references to a Black neighborhood, but, according to Cliff, "There was no real mention of race in the description."
At the same time, Cliff was concerned about how to show her race since the story doesn’t center around scenes that would show her home life, her friends, or where she hung out. He was concerned about how to do this, in part because of his own background as an Asian-American, the fact that he was the only person of color on the creative team.

Cliff got his B.A. from Harvard University where he took a course on the representation of Blacks in film from Spike Lee. It was in this context that he saw blaxploitation films *Sweetback and his Bad Ass Song* and *Superfly* for the first time, both of which he related to, as a person of color. "I feel like I’m the only one who cares because of who I am, my experiences ... I found myself trying to bring this stuff up without offending the people I work with ... I didn’t want to be seen as PC."

As our conversation continued, Cliff emphasized that, as the penciller, his primary impact on the development of the character would be on how she looked, and not on how she was written. At the same time, his control over her appearance would not encompass the actual color of her skin, a job left to the colorist. Cliff recalled class discussions about Black hair that influenced his decision to give her braids.
I sat on the gray concrete steps just outside the offices of DC Comics reading the latest issue of *Newsweek* magazine. A group of mostly White men and women — most of whom wore black clothes and sunglasses, a few with their portfolio cases leaning against their legs — stood on either side of me. Just across from me is the 53rd street subway stop of the B and F line. Kitty-corner, at 50th and Broadway is the 1 and the 9. I peer up from my magazine whenever I see movement from either direction. I see Phil crossing the street, coming up from 50th. This is our first actual meeting of any real length. I originally met him while I was hanging out in the office that, at the time, Harvey and L.A. shared. It was a brief introduction. He literally had just popped his head in to say hello to L.A. A couple of weeks later while I was still doing my preliminary research, Axel mentioned that Phil might be someone to talk to. About a month later Axel e-mailed me Phil’s phone number. Still, it would be several months, before I contacted Phil. In the meantime, I did see Phil speak on panel at the 2000 San Diego Comic Convention titled “Gay Cartoonists Speak Out.”

Phil called out from across the street, “Hey Stanford.” I roll up the issue of *Newsweek*, put it under my left arm, and extend my right hand to Phil. We exchange pleasantries and decide to grab a bite to eat at the Cosi Sandwich Bar on 51st and Broadway. As we cross the street, Phil asks me what I’m reading. I
tell him that it's the latest *Newsweek* containing a special report titled "Redefining Race in America."

"It's pretty interesting. It talks a lot about how race in America isn't so much about Black and White so much as it is about other racial and ethnic combinations."

"Really? I've always been interested in race and language," replied Phil. As we entered Cosi, he asked me what I thought about political correctness. I was caught off guard. Usually when I first speak to someone in the comic book industry, their immediate reaction is to ask me what I think about Black superheroes or if I have spoken to any of the founders of Milestone.

"I think it's about etiquette," I said. "It kind of pisses me off that it's been appropriated by the right. I mean, think about when it was first used in the 1980s it was all about referring to people in the terms that they were comfortable with. Now it's a dirty word. The irony, is that it seems to me that the same people who decry political correctness are always hearkening back to the good old days of community and civility yet they complain about not feeling free to insult people."
“So, tell me more about your research.”

“Well, I’m trying to write about race comics but I want to get away from focusing on just the images on the comic book pages. I want to look at how production, the way comics are made, affects the images on the page. I want to look at it from the point of view of comic creators and editors.”

“Give me an example.”

“I’m thinking about [L.A.’s] work on J.J. Thunder or Axel Alonso’s work on 100 Bullets.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, with L.A. you’ve got a Black assistant editor who revamps Mr. Terrific, in part because, he didn’t like the way J.J. Thunder came out. And the irony is that he was one of people involved in making J.J. Thunder...” (See Chapter 11.)

“I remember that.”
“And look at Axel. Think about it, an Hispanic editor who brings a Hip-Hop sensibility and aesthetic to the DC’s Vertigo Line. It’s kind of interesting that it’s the Hispanic editor who seems to be more successful [than L.A.] at dealing with Black identity. At the same time its kind of like the Newsweek articles, we’re so used to dealing with and talking about race in the terms of Black and White that we forget that its also about all sorts of other combinations.”

Wednesday, September 13, 2000. As Harvey Richards and I approach the lobby, we shuffle past the huddled smokers sitting on the concrete steps. We had just finished lunch and I was heading up with him to his office. We were planning on meeting up with two African-American comic book creators, Alex Simmons and Eric Battle, at Jim Hanley’s, a popular NYC comic book shop, and we were going to see if either of them had left a message as to when we were to show up. Harvey was still “on the fence” as to whether he would be able to meet us. He had a 3:00 p.m. editorial meeting.

As we walked toward the elevators, a familiar figure approached. It was Axel Alonso, an Hispanic Editor at DC Comics’ Vertigo line. Walking fast and looking a bit weary, at first he didn’t notice me. I had tried in vain to contact him before I came up to NYC. I was a bit apprehensive as to why I hadn’t heard back from him until my earlier lunch conversation with Harvey. Joe Quesada had
recently been made the new editor in chief at Marvel Comics. Apparently, Axel had just been promoted in an attempt to dissuade him from jumping ship to Marvel. Axel was a hot commodity, in part, for the recent success of *100 Bullets*. I say “in part” because *100 Bullets* is only the most recent successful project developed by Axel for DC's Vertigo Comics line. And that in *100 Bullets* – just as in *The Unknown Soldier, Human Target*, and *Congo Bill* – Axel had created a critical and market success using previously unheard of talent (see figures 22, 23, 24, and 25). While Axel is credited for developing new talent and innovative ideas, I would argue Axel’s talents, and ideas are rooted in notions of race and identity that are less a part of Axel’s personal politics than his personal experiences.

Axel, an Hispanic male in his mid-thirties with short salt-n-pepper hair and a goatee, grew up in Northern California where he got his undergraduate from UC Santa Cruz. He didn’t always want to do comics, in fact he fell into it shortly after completing his MA in journalism at Columbia University. Still, he wasn’t a stranger to comics, citing *Master of Kung Fu, Luke Cage: Power Man*, and *Love & Rockets* as titles that left a lasting impression.
Figure 22. Pictured left is the cover art for *Unknown Soldier* #1 (April 1997). *Unknown Soldier*, a four issue miniseries by the DC Comics Vertigo imprint, was published from April 1997 to July 1997.

Named positions: Garth Ennis (writer), Kilian Plunkett (artist), James Sinclair (colorist), Digital Chameleon (separations), Ellie DeVille (letterer), and Axel Alonso (editor). Cover art by Tim Bradstreet.

Figure 23. Pictured left is the cover art for *Human Target* #1 (April 1999). *Human Target*, a four issue miniseries by DC Comics Vertigo Imprint, was published from April 1999 to July 1999.

Named positions: Peter Milligan (writer), Edvin Biukovic (illustrator), Lee Loughridge (colorist), RobertSolano (letterer), Len Wein (consultant), and Axela Alanso (editor). Cover art by Tim Bradstreet.
Figure 24. Pictured left is the cover for *Congo Bill* #1 (October 1999). *Congo Bill*, a four issue miniseries by DC Comics Vertigo imprint, was published from October 1999 to January 2000.

Named positions: Scott Cunningham (writer), Danijel Zezelj (Illustrator), Lee Loughridge (colorist), Clem Robins (letterer), Axel Alonso (editor). Cover art by Richard Corben.

Figure 25. Pictured left is the cover art for *100 Bullets* #1 (August 1999). *100 Bullets*, an ongoing series by the DC Comics Vertigo imprint, began publication in August 1999.

Named positions: Brian Azzarello (writer), Eduardo Risso (artist), Grant Goleash (colorist), Digital Chameleon (seperations), Clem Robins (letterer), and Axel Alonso (editor). Cover Art by Dave Johnson.
When he came to DC's Vertigo Line, he was put off by the dominance of
gothic, horror, and magical themes. "It was the same thing all over ... there is
more to life," he recalled. While, as editor it's not his role to actually write or
draw the books, he describes his role as akin to Hollywood producer, picking
projects and assembling teams. One of his first moves was to do an *Unknown
Soldier* miniseries with the major theme being an exploration of patriotism, for
which he tapped Irish writer Garth Ennis. His next project, *Human Target* was
all about identity crises, in a story in which the protagonists become other people
in a literal and racial sense (see figure 26). For this he chose a Croatian artist.
Figure 26. Left: page fifteen from Human Target #1 (April 1999).

In Human Target, the main protagonist is a bodyguard who uses his talents as a master of disguise to impersonate the people he is assigned to protect. In this miniseries there are two intertwined storylines: one involves his impersonation of an African-American preacher and the other has him up against his equally talented protégé. Both storylines explore crises of identity and identification as well as impact of becoming someone else on the relationships of both the impersonators and the impersonated.
At the same time Axel was put off by my suggestion that the work was about any kind of overt identity politics. He likens the “political stuff” to high concept story elements. “This is comics, it’s a genre medium ... it can’t be about race, [I] can [however] do high concept stuff as long there are enough explosions ... I don’t do this to be political ... there has to be a story that people identify with.”

In fact, this statement about genre is realized in his descriptions of his projects. For example, he described *Congo Bill* as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* meets contemporary African politics. The story emerged out of conversations with Scott Cunningham, an independent comic book and animation writer who frequently deals with politics in his work, over beer. According to Axel, “I had been following the news about Mbutu and the Congo.” While Axel and Scott had both read *Heart of Darkness*, Scott’s take on the whole *Congo Bill* idea was influenced by his marriage to a primate anthropologist! Ironically, *Congo Bill* doesn’t appear in the miniseries until the last issue. I asked Axel why they even bothered to kept it a Congo Bill Story. After all, Congo Bill does not appear in the first two issues and it bears a stronger resemblance to *Heart of Darkness*. Axel admitted that he stayed with *Congo Bill*, in spite of both the problematic nature of the original character and the fact that past attempts to resurrect the character
failed, because "a market plan could be built around it. And it [Congo Bill] was the immediate inspiration." In separate conversations, Axel and Scott both revealed that although the heart of the story is not Congo Bill, so much as, Congo Bill was the conduit through which to sell the miniseries internally within DC and market it externally to comic fans.

The original Congo Bill told the adventures of White male hunter who acquired a ring that allowed him to exchange his consciousness with an ape. The Congo Bill miniseries by Axel, Scott, and Danijel Zezelj used the Congo Bill concept to retell Heart of Darkness through the eyes of an African-American mercenary. Glass is sent into the Congo with a team of mercenaries to locate and eliminate the party or parties responsible for the slaughter of CIA backed guerilla rebels. As Glass moves from the city to jungle, traveling mostly by boat, he is haunted by the image of an innocent child that he killed on a previous assignment. At the same time, he is confronted by his lack of connection to the Congolese people. By the end of the third issue, Glass discovers that party responsible for the deaths of the CIA backed rebels is none other than Congo Bill who, in the process of repeatedly exchanging his consciousness with an ape, has become deranged. Just as Heart of Darkness shows the extent to which colonialization has dehumanized the colonizers, so too does Congo Bill chart a similar trajectory for Congo Bill and the CIA.
We talked about the fact that Congo Bill doesn't appear until very late in the story. We went back and forth, Axel told me that a fan referred to it as bait and switch (see figure 27).

"Sometimes a bait and switch is preferable?" I asked.

“Yes,” replied Axel, Congo Bill is all about "the mission, what happens after the bullets have been fired . . . the consequences of colonialism." Glass is a man used to following orders, a killer first and an African-American second. This miniseries explores "what happens when [Glass is] faced with the consequences ... [its about] redemption."

While Axel agreed that *Congo Bill* is historical fiction he emphasized that it was "historical fiction to a point ... It's more of a good B film." He described the "historical stuff" as a hook, something to draw the readers in and breathe meaning into the story. Axel sees all "good" entertainment as ultimately connecting to some deeper issue.
Figure 27. Above: pages thirty and thirty-one from Congo Bill #3 (December 1999). The Congo Bill miniseries tells the story of Thomas Glass, an AfricanAmerican mercenary sent to the Congo to find and eliminate the party (or parties) responsible for the violent disruption illegal CIA covert operations and the murder of CIA operatives and CIA backed African rebels. As the journey unfolds, Glass is haunted by memories of an innocent Black child that he killed during previous assignment. Throughout his travels from the U.S. to Kinshasha, and finally the Central African Jungle, Glass ponders his relationship as an African-American to the Africans that he encounters. In the scene pictured above, Glass sees his quarry for the first time. It is Congo Bill, a superhero/colonial explorer, driven mad by the ring that allows him to exchange his consciousness with a gorilla. Like Heart of Darkness, the book upon which this miniseries was modeled, this encounter takes place near the end of the story, in this case, the last pages of the third issue.
100 Bullets and the upcoming Codename: Knockout were, and are (respectively) built on the successes of The Unknown Soldier, Human Target and Congo Bill. If not for the fact that Axel had spearheaded three series based on unused, second tier, already established DC characters, it would have been difficult to sell either of these concepts internally.

But I digress. As Harvey and I got closer to the elevator Axel did notice me. He motioned as if to pull me aside. Harvey continued on to the elevator, gesturing to me to give him a call. "Hey Stan," said Axel, "Look man I'm sorry I haven't gotten back to you but things are totally crazy ..." Axel continued, giving me the 411 on the bidding war between DC and Marvel. The stress was written all over his face. "It's a good position to be in, but it's still a really hard choice, 100 Bullets is finally on its feet..." He told me that he wasn't sure what he was going to do but that he had a lot to deal with.

We exchanged a few pleasantries and I decided not go up, instead opting to go onto my next appointment, a meeting with Louis Small Jr., an African-American comic book artist. I have done this trip before. Axel at DC, followed by the five block walk to the building on 47th street, an elevator ride to the fifteenth floor studio that Louis Small Jr., at the time, shared with several other African-
American cartoonist. The first time, a moment in which I truly realized how small the comic book industry could be, was just after the 1999 San Diego Comic Book Convention. We saw each other briefly at the convention but there wasn’t any time to talk. Axel asked me how it went. I told him that I had roomed part of the time with Louis and one of his models. Although he had not met Louis personally, Axel knew his work. “He can do women,” said Axel referring to the fact that most pencilers are far more proficient at illustrating a variety of men, while the women tend to be the same set of cover girls and soft porn pin-ups replicated over and over with different hair and outfits. The concern was not so much about whether or not the characters had idealized or over sexualized appearances so much as that they a) look feminine, and b) be distinguishable from one another. I would come to hear the same concerns about drawing women echoed in my interviews with other editors.

I followed up by asking him about the similarities and differences in recruiting and developing artists versus writers. “You only debut once,” he said, “with an artist [the reader] has an immediate reaction ... a writer can grow on you.” While he does meet a lot of writers and artists at the comic book conventions, Axel recruits a lot of his talent internationally. In the case of 100 Bullets artist Edward Rizzo, Axel first saw his work in a French comic book. It took Axel a year to track him down and another year to find the right title for his
debut. Even though Axel was looking for an artist for Human Target when he found Rizzo, he decided to wait for a more appropriate debut project, "I spent a year finding him, I didn't have to hire him immediately." Axel's discovery of Croatian artist Danijel Zezelj, the penciler for Congo Bill, was a similar story, this time, however, the work was originally seen in an Italian comic book compilation. In fact, many of Axel's "discoveries" are "discoveries" only to the American market. I would argue that international market needs to be looked at more closely in conjunction with the use of international talent to create, what is put forth in comic books as, an image of America.

I asked Axel for an example of a project in development. "What are some of your main considerations?" I asked.

He told me about this idea that he had for buddy book, that he described alternatively as "a play on the bad girl books, sort of Thelma & Louise meets My Best Friend's Wedding meets James Bond." As for this new female 007 character, he wanted her to appeal to the same low common denominator as the then popular Danger Girl "but with a higher intelligence quotient," he said, "I want to create a woman that men want to fuck and women want to be." Lots of "T&A" but with a gay sidekick whos T&A is also equally present. He would later refer to her as "Ally McBond." The buddy and writer that Axel had in mind was
Robert Rodi, the openly Gay author of *Fag Hag* (1999) and *What they did to Princess Paragon* (1994). Axel was still trying to figure out who the artist would be, he was looking for someone who was good at drawing women, “someone like Louise Small,” he said. Ironically, I had already arranged to visit Louis later that same day. Louis would eventually be offered and accept the job which is currently being solicited as *Codename: Knockout* along with the tag line “get some I.Q. with your T.&A.” While Axel already had a firm idea of how they wanted the gay male sidekick to be, they pretty much left the female lead as a blank slate. Still, the general assumption was that she would be White.

I initially met Louis during the Brotherman Road-Trip (see Chapter 14). It was at the beginning of my fieldwork in February 1999. Rob Stull (an African-American inker) had invited me to go with him, Louis, Lateef Williams (an African-American assistant editor), Grey (an African-American penciler), and Mark Morales (an African-American inker) to Amherst, MA to attend an exhibit featuring the work of African-American comic creators at the Words & Pictures Museum. Alex Simmons (an African-American writer) and Steven Hughes (an African-American artist) met us at the event. The trip itself was three days and two nights during which time we attended the opening. Rob, Louis, Grey, Mark, Alex, and Steven gave a workshop during which they demonstrated the stages of comic book production. Throughout the trip, everyone made frequent references
to Louis as "the man," as in ladies man. During a break from the demonstrations, the audience crowded around the comic creators asking questions, getting their comic books signed, and requesting small illustrations.

The crowd around Louis consisted disproportionately of mothers and daughters. It's not entirely surprising. Louis is soft-spoken and he rarely stands, preferring instead to look the young girls in the eyes. "I'll draw each of you one picture, whatever you want," he says several times as he passed out the small illustrations and accepted hugs from the recipients. He was charming. And the mothers were also under his spell. One mother asked him when he was coming back and even offered to let him stay at their house on his next visit. "Thank you, I'm really not sure when I'm coming back," replied Louis.

This exchange did not go unnoticed. Rob leaned back smiled and whispered to Alex, "Yo man, check this out."

"Damn, don't they know to hide their daughters!" remarked Alex.

After the event we all went out to eat. Rob and Alex gave Louis a hard time for the proposition. "You see, this what's wrong with America. Nobody keeps the children safe," joked Alex.
Rob, Mark and Grey joined in on Alex's ribbing of Louis. Louis was still soft spoken but sarcastic about the proposition. Although he seemed loath to express it, the whole situation clearly made him uncomfortable.

Shortly after our return to New York, I visited the studio that Louise and Grey shared along with Steve Harris for the first time. It was on the top floor of a fifteen-story building just off 43rd and Broadway. The space was cramped, filled with piles of papers, illustrations, magazines and action figures. Each artist had his own desk and the area around it reflected his recent and current work. Illustrations of Mercury Max, Impulse, and the new Mr. Terrific littered the area around Grey's desk, while the dominant theme of Steve's space was Batgirl and Robin. Louis' space contained illustrations for Vampirella, a comic book that he had been penciling for over a year. Vampirella is a comic book that blends horror, heroics, and soft porn (see figure 28). Vampirella, the lead character is a scantily clad female vampire that hunts other vampires and battles supernatural evil. The brief described her as looking Eastern European. Most of Louis' sketches were of topless women. At the side of his desk were a couple photos of women – some topless and others in bikinis. I also noticed a lot of corrugated boxes and a few envelopes full of photos on top of them.
Figure 28. Vampirella, an ongoing series published by Harris Publications. The character has gone through numerous creative teams.

Pictured left is the cover art from Vampirella #12 (November 1998) by Louis Small Jr. and Dean.

Named positions: Seven Grant (writer), Louis Small Jr. (penciler), Gary Martin (Inker), Dean White and Richard Isanove (colorists), Kell-O-Graphics (lettering & film output), Seth Biederman (assistant editor), and David Bogart (editor).
I was introduced to Steve and two friends of Grey who sat in the corner barely able to pull their eyes away from the television playing a video. The video was a Medieval Hong Kong action film in Chinese with no subtitles.

I sat down in a chair in the center of the room. During a break in the conversation, Grey casually walked over to one of the corrugated boxes, opened it, and pulled out a couple of envelopes. Tossing them across the room he said, “Stan check this out.”

He smiled as I fumbled with the envelopes. Louis’ expression was unchanged. I flipped through the pictures. All of them were of women, taken either in the studio or on the roof. Eighty percent of the women in the pictures were topless or naked. As I looked through the pictures, the two men in the corner watching television got up, walked across the room, and started going through Louis’ boxes to check out the photos. Louis was visibly annoyed, but he said and did nothing about this intrusion. Almost all of the women wore bikinis. The few who wore leather or vinyl accessory wore them over or with the bikini. The few photos that showed the women interacting with men featured the men fully clothed. Ninety percent of the women in the photos were Asian, Latin, Black
or racially mixed. For the most part, the faces and the hair of these women were unfamiliar, but the bodies and the poses were Vampirella.

Things started to fall into place – references to Louis as “the man,” the remarks at the opening, Louis’ ease with the mothers and daughters, and his discomfort with their attention – as I looked more closely at the changing body types of Louis’ Vamipirella sketches. Just beneath his work is a sexual economy - that is literally fueled by Louis’s charm - in which women exchange their images for personal and economic gain.

“When I first started, I did Frankenstein women,” said Louis in reference to the female forms that he composed from various soft-porn magazines. When he started doing Vampirella he decided that he needed to be able to “really draw women.” Having no budget, he started by approaching women in on the street, in clubs, and Kinko’s. In exchange for allowing him to take nude or partially nude photos of them in his studio or on the roof he offered them an 8 1/2" x 11" drawing, copies of the photos, and the ‘honor’ of appearing as Vampirella. A lot of these women said yes. Some of them referred their friends to him. According to Louis, most of these women had never modeled before. A few of the women have since become models. The ones that either were or have become models incorporate the photos and drawings into their portfolios.
Louis has enough models that he is able to incorporate them directly into his artistic process. When he starts on a project he does a series of thumbnail sketches which he develops into page lay outs. Then he has his models pose in a series of positions, many of which, will correspond to the page layouts (see figures 29 and 30). Later he will sit at his drawing board and use both the photos and sketches to put together the final product. The result is a Vampirella with body types that shift ever so slightly from panel to panel between that of the predominately Black, Asian, and Latin women who he uses as models. Though Vampirella’s body type may shift from the broad hips of his darker models to the slighter frames of their Asian counterparts, Vampirella remains perpetually White. While Vampirella may occasionally have an ethnic looking facial features, the ethnicity of Louis’ models comes out most in Vampirella’s supporting cast.
Figure 29. From left to right: a picture of two models posing on the roof of Louis' studio. Louis' inked pencils based on the photograph pictured to the left. The final colored version as it appeared *Vampirella* #21, page 6 (November 1999). In the illustration Louis exaggerates the models rear, shifting it further away from a Caucasian body type. Note the strategic placement of smoke in the final image.
Figure 30. Above: photographs by Louis Small of one of his models. Left: Pantha #1, page twenty-seven (July 1999).

Note the changes in race and body type between these models and final images and those pictured in figure 29.
Aside from using them as source material, Small always brings one or two models with him to comic book conventions. This is a common practice. In fact many companies will hire Playboy models to make appearances as their latest female incarnations. They sit with him at his booth in artist’s alley. They mind the shop when he is away. It helps attract the fanboys who commission Small to do drawings and pay a fee to have their picture taken next to the model. The models get a flat fee, paid expenses, and half the take on the photos. For the most part, Small prefers to bring the less inexperienced models. “They have less attitude. The fanboys relate to them better.”

While the use of models is not uncommon amongst cartoonists, the extent of Louis’ use of models is atypical. “Louis is like your Uncle Fester,” said one male comic book professional, “he’s your hero for what he does ... and he creeps you out for the same reason.” And while Louis clearly benefits from the use of models, both in terms of image and his art, it can not only create awkward moments, but it has also complicated some of his professional dealings.

In 1999, I attended both the Wizard Comic Book Convention in Chicago and the San Diego Comic Book Convention in San Diego. While the San Diego Comic Book Convention is the larger, the formats for the convention are similar. The convention floors are divided into three areas: company booths, artist’s alley,
and the dealers section. The rooms are reserved for panels, workshops and movie previews.

As I wondered through the crowds past the Harris Publications booth at the Wizard Convention, I saw a medium brown Hispanic woman in a black and gray leopard print hip boots, a cape that came down to the middle of her back and a thong bikini. It was Patty. I had seen Louis’ photos of her and heard quite a few stories about her. I started to motion to her in order to get her attention ... and then I abruptly stopped myself. It wasn’t unusual for me to introduce myself to someone who I had heard about but hadn’t met. However, whenever I did introduce myself I always told the person that so-and-so had mentioned them to me. But how do you start a conversation with, “I saw the naked pictures of you?” In addition, the stories that I had heard about Patty had to do with tensions between Louis and Harris Publications over the control of Louis’ models.

Louis started using Patty as his Vampirella model three years ago. In fact, he went to Harris Comics, Vampirella’s publisher and asked to put her in a Vampirella costume during the ’97 comic convention season. They said no. They thought she was too “ethnic.” Not too ethnic to be Vampirella, but to ethnic to appeal to the mostly White corn fed Midwestern fanboys. Instead, Harris hired a former Playboy playmate. Louis continued to request that Patty wear a
Vampirella costume at other conventions. Whether or not Harris had plans to bring a Vampirella model or not, the requests were denied. Louis brought Patty to the 1998 San Diego Comic Book Convention anyway. Instead of putting her in a Vampirella suit, he put her in black and gray Leopard skin lingerie and had her stand next to him at the opposite end of the Harris table. According to Rob, "most of the fans walked right past [the White former playmate and current Vamperrella model] to get their picture taken with Patty. As they came up to get their photos, they asked Louis who she was, "Uh, Pantha," he said. By the third day of the convention the editors were saying that she was character "in development." There was so much "buzz" in the form of comments at the convention and letters to Harris' offices in NYC that, shortly after the con, a *Pantha* comic was released by Harris comics. As for the Vampirella model, according to Rob Stull, "she got pissed and walked out early." Shortly thereafter Patty was selected for a photo-cover of a new title based on the Pantha concept (see figure 31).

The irony here is that Harris Publications also owns the Hip-Hop magazine *XXL* which regularly features ethnic looking people alongside non-ethnic looking people. In the wake of the Pantha incident, Patty has since graced the photo cover of the recent *Pantha* comic book. In a marketing move, Patty was also selected for a photo spread in an issue of *XXL* (see figure 31). Although
no photo exists in which Patty wears an actual Vampirella costume, the text that accompanied the XXL photo spread did mention that Patty was once ... a Vampirella model.
Figure 31. Top left to right: Photo covers of Vampirella #21 (November 1999) and Pantha #2 (August 1999).

Bottom left to right: photos of Patricia Delassario taken by Louis Small for his work on Vampirella. Photo to the far right was taken by X as part of a series of photos that appeared in XXL (August 1999).

This description continues on the next page.
Figure 31 (continued). Pictured above left is a photo cover of Vampirella #21 published November 1999. In it we can see Harris Publication's preferred image of the woman behind the character.

Named positions: David Conway (writer), Louis Small Jr. (penciler), Kamning Ng (inker), Haberlin Studios' Andy Troy & Pete Tobolsky (coloring), Dan Saraceni of Kell-O-Graphics (letterer) Nicole Wiley (editorial assistant), and David Bogart (editor). The model for the cover is Julie Strain and the photographer is Benjamin Hoffman. This issue also features a six-page Pantha back-up story. Named positions: David Conway (writer), Dorian Cleavenger (artist), Dan Saraceni of Kell-O-Graphics (letterer), and Kell-O-Graphics (film output).

Pictured above right is a photo-cover of Pantha #2 published July 1999. Patricia Delassario, the Patha cover model, was considered too ethnic to wear the Vampirella bikini.

Named positions: David Conway & Steven Grant (writers), Mark Texeira (artist), Dean White (colorist), Dan Saraceni of Kell-O-Graphics (letterer), Nicole Wiley (editorial assistant), and David Bogart (editor). The model for the cover is Patricia Delassario, however no model or photo credit was given. This issue also features an eight-page Vampirella back-up story. Named positions: David Conway & Steven Grant (writers), Louis Small Jr. (artist), Dean White (colorist), Dan Saraceni of Kell-O-Graphics (film output), Nicole Wiley (editorial assistant), and David Bogart (editor).

Below (left and middle): Louis' picture of Patty in a leopard print bikini cut like Vampirella's costume.

Below (right): XXL photo of Patty by Benoit Pevereli. The article mentions Patty as the model for Vampirella although there are no images of her in the actual Vampirella costume.
The 1999 San Diego Comic Book Convention was two weeks later. Louis and I had made arrangements to room together. When I arrived at the hotel the person at the desk informed me that the other “guests” had already arrived. “Guests?” I thought to myself. I went up to the room. I knocked first. No answer. I opened the door slowly and scanned the room. The bed closest to the door was untouched. On the desk were an assortment of pencils, bristol board, a sketchbook, comic books, and an envelope full of photographs. On the floor across the room, peaking out from behind the second bed, was a pair of feet. On the bed was a Korean-American woman, naked from the waist up, lying on the bed. I recognized her from Louis’ photographs. I turned my head and stood in the doorway as Louis awoke and his model, Sohmi, covered herself. Louis formally introduced me to Sohmi and the three of us sat around the room and worked out the logistics for the next day. Louis wanted to get to the Convention early. He had a table in artist’s alley. He wanted to make sure that they didn’t get a table too close to Harris. Since Harris wasn’t paying for him to be there, he didn’t want people to think of them as their property. This wouldn’t, of course, stop him from having his Vampirrella work prominently displayed. He briefed Sohmi on what he expected. He needed her to man the booth when he was away or distracted, be friendly to the male fans, tactfully prevent the fans from taking pictures with their own cameras, and “be sexy.”
After Louis finished, he and I went for a walk. I mentioned that I had seen Patty in Chicago, but that I didn’t introduce myself. Louis grunted. I would later find out that Harris had paid Patty to go to Chicago but had snubbed Louis. This wasn’t the only time that something like this had or would happen. Louis is protective of models for this reason. While he doesn’t pay them to pose for his sketches, he does split the money that he generates from the photos of them with fans. He likes working with inexperienced models at the conventions because they seem to thrive on the attention and they “have less attitude,” an important quality because, according to Louis, most of these fans “haven’t seen a naked woman that didn’t have a staple in her belly.” In addition, he pays the models their expenses and a percentage of revenues from the pictures to give the models incentive to entice more fans to pay for photos. He also tries to make sure that the models make more money by going with him to the conventions as opposed to Harris so that its harder for Harris to “steal them away.”

The initial sketches that Louis did for Codename: Knockout (see figure 32) were based on a mixed race model. For the purposes of the pitch, Louis created several versions of the character, many of which were either White or racially ambiguous. Axel knew that Louis was working from a model, so he asked Louis to have her sign a DC Comics model release form. I have heard from multiple sources that many heads turned on the day that Louis brought his model in to
sign the paper work. All of this played a major role in the decision to make the lead female character mixed race.
Figure 32. Pictured (above left) is the cover art and (above right) the inside front-page for *Codename: Knockout* #0 (June 2001). *Codename: Knockout*, an ongoing series by the DC Comics Vertigo imprint, began publication in April 2001.

Named positions: Robert Rodi (writer), Louis Small (penciler), George Freeman (inker), Moose Baumann (colorist), Jack Morelli (letterer), Axel Alanso and Tony Bedard (editors). Cover art by Chiodo.
I took the elevator to the 15th floor, got off, and walked the flight of stairs to 16th floor of the building that housed Louis’ studio. Pictures of naked and scantily clad models were strewn about Louis’ desk alongside the corresponding thumbnail and panel sketches. I let myself in through the unlocked door. Louis was on the phone with a potential model. After Louis got off the phone we stepped out onto the roof for a chat. Our conversation was interrupted several times by gestures from the people in the offices across the way. As I looked across the roof toward the offices of the building across the street, I realized that this was the same backdrop as many of Louis’ most revealing photos (see figure 33).
Figure 33. Above: photographs of two of Louis’ models on the roof. During these photo-shoots work stops in many of the offices as the workers gesture and flash signs in the windows.
Jim Hanley's Universe sits just across from the Empire State building. Eric Battle was already there. Eric got started in the business through Milestone comics but he is most known for his stint as the artist of *Aquaman*, a job that few people would instinctively attribute to a medium dark skinned, six foot tall, African-American male with dreadlocks. But hey, even some of the people on *Aquaman*'s creative team didn't realize they were working with an African-American artist (a story for another time). But Eric's racial anonymity is not entirely uncommon. In fact, there are several comic book professionals lurking amid the comic fans and the wannabe cartoonists that frequent this establishment.

Not much time passed before Alex Simmons arrived. Alex is the writer/creator of *Blackjack* and the soon to be released DC Comic miniseries *Batman: Orpheus Rising*. As we meet and greet one another, we are interrupted by a regular African-American customer, who knows Alex and wants Alex to read and critique a story proposal to be submitted to the Batman books. Eric and I drift away, turning our attention to the new comics. I move through the aisles more quickly than Eric, skipping past many of the DC Comics that I had already seen this morning when I initially stopped by to meet with Harvey.
Alex, Eric, and I make our purchases and head down the street to grab a bite to eat. I missed a cell phone message while I was on the subway. It's Harvey. Axel resigned at the staff meeting. I'm not surprised. Axel's distance begins to make even more sense. Just as in other publishing and entertainment industries, when someone leaves DC for a competitor they are lucky if they are aloud to stay through the rest of the day, let alone two weeks. It's not personal so much as it is a protective measure. Especially in the case of someone like Axel, who is being headhunted as much for his rolodex as his editorial skills. The first priority of DC will be to contact as many people on Axel's rolodex as possible in order to prevent them from jumping ship. Axel's first priority will be to beat DC to the punch without letting the word get out.

Three days later, I was in Chicago sitting with Brian Azzarello. We met at Starbucks just across the street from Wrigley Field. Brian is concerned. Brian, a White male, grew up in Cleveland and worked in construction. He spent a year in Baltimore came back to Cleveland and then moved to Chicago. Brian likes working with Axel because he is "attentive" and they are friends. Axel gave Brian his first break. It's a" low conflict situation," said Brian. Axel spoke to him about it. Brian assured Axel that he would work for him at Marvel.
However, DC has been after Brian to sign an exclusive contract to keep him from moving to other companies. Axel's resignation has upped the pressure. Marvel had previously offered Brian work but he can only write three books a month and he was already doing *Hellblazer* and *100 Bullets*. DC wants him to write *The Authority*. If he accepts then he might as well sign an exclusive because he won't have time for much else.

Brian spoke with Eduardo Risso, the artist for *100 Bullets*, the night before our conversation. Eduardo lives in Argentina. He speaks very little English and Brian speaks very little Spanish. "It was a lot of Tarzan talk ... me Brian ... me Eduardo ... you good. Axel leaving ... bad." Brian sends the edited scripts to Eduardo who has them translated, produces the images, and sends or faxes them back to the U.S. Axel hired Eduardo after seeing some of his published work. Axel and Brian think that Eduardo does some of the best Hip-Hop imagery in comics. But there was a breaking in process. The original sketches for the first issue, according to Axel and Brian looked like something out of a Michael Jackson video. "We saw the original pictures and immediately scrambled to send Eduardo copies of every Hip-Hop magazine that we could find! Thank god we got them to him in time to fix the first issue." Brian doesn't like working too much from pop culture. Instead he prefers to go out on the streets and observe. On occasion, he shares his writing with the people that he
observes. He showed the basketball scene in issue #2 (see figure 35) to some of the kids who inspired the dialogue and "they got into it and gave me some pointers."

All told, it took about two years to develop and publish *100 Bullets*. According to both Axel and Brian, Axel's ability to sell the idea internally at DC was very much a result of the success of previous non-creator owned concepts. Once they got the go ahead, they had to get final approval of the first story arc from Karen Burger. They put forth the Dizzy storyline because it had a female lead, in part, to sell it internally to Karen. The fact that this arch featured a woman of color was more coincidence than design (see figure 34).
Figure 34. Above: pages four and ten from *100 Bullets* #1 (August 1999). Dizzy’s release from jail, guilt over the death of her son and husband. Agent Graves approaches Dizzy and gives her a file and briefcase containing a gun an 100 untraceable bullets.
So where does Brian fit into this? Where do the ideas come from? Why aren’t the characters White guys from Cleveland, Baltimore or Chicago? Brian immediately eschewed any notion that he was striving for any type of political statement. According to Brian, “the best stories are in the metro section of the newspaper ... What would be the fun of writing people like me? I’d go crazy,” he said. On the face of it, *100 Bullets* appears to be a pretty lowest common denominator concept. If you had a gun and 100 untraceable bullets what would you do with it? Yet, Brian has used this concept in order to write stories about an Hispanic woman just released from jail and grappling with the death her child; inter-racial grifting couples; a White mother struggling with the reality of her absent run away daughter; and a Black absentee father meeting up with his delinquent son. All of these stories take place against the backdrop of an international conspiracy ... as seen through the eyes of the people, Brian observes.

Still, *100 Bullets* is a very much a group project. Axel described it to me as a reflection of the world, the seedy side, but a reflection nevertheless. The overarching concept of *100 Bullets* insures the requisite level of action expected in the comics, but the book depends on the writing and a diversity of protagonists in order maintain the reader interest. During our talks, Axel drew a parallel between, the making of *100 Bullets* and the Black, Brown, and White guys that he plays pick up basketball with (see figure 35), “they have different politics,
different ways of speaking, and different lives. They aren’t all good or all bad. They just are. And they come together to play the game.”
Figure 35. *100 Bullets* #2, page five (September). Brian wrote the dialogue for this scene after watching a series of pick up basketball games. After he wrote the sequence he showed it to the players whose dialogue he mimicked in order to get additional suggestion. During my interviews with Axel, Axel used a lot of Basketball reference. At one point, he told me that he wants his comics to reflect the streets they picture. However, he could only go so far.

"I hear the word 'bumba clot' all the time," Axel said, "but I wouldn't let it be used, not so much because of the meaning but because few readers would get it."

While Brian described himself to me as an observer, Axel described himself to me as a participant.
Axel was involved in the development of five of the six comic books that I have, in this chapter, briefly discussed. Much like Congo Bill in the Congo Bill miniseries, Axel doesn’t appear in this paper until the narrative is well under way. Congo Bill wasn’t about Congo Bill so much as it uses Congo Bill to retell Conrad’s Heart of Darkness through the eyes of African-American mercenary in Africa. And just as in the Congo Bill miniseries, this narrative is not so much about Axel as it figures him in prominently in an effort to revisit my field experiences and explore the creation of identity in comic books. Much the same could be said about places, which, in this paper, lack a true sense of proximity to one another, so much as, they serve to frame encounters. And these encounters between people highlight the interconnectedness of creators, creations, practices, and identity in comic books.

In Unknown Soldier, an Irishman writes about American patriotism. While Unknown Soldier is literally faceless, he is White. Becoming other people is literally what the character known as the Human Target does. In the Human Target miniseries he protects a Black man by becoming the Black man that he is protecting. The Congo Bill miniseries retells the Heart of Darkness through the eyes of an African-American mercenary, recasting colonialism as covert operations. Congo Bill, the character that the miniseries is named after, is a White man with the ability to exchange his consciousness with that of an ape.
100 Bullets asks the question across class, racial, and ethnic boundaries, “What would you do with a gun and 100 untraceable bullets?” Codename: Knockout brings together the racial, gender and sexual sensibilities of My Best Friends Wedding, James Bond, Ally McBeal, and Louis Small's Vampirella.

Unknown Soldier, Human Target, and Congo Bill are based on preexisting DC owned properties. There is an inverse relationship between the popularity of the characters and the extent to which the creators depart from the original concept. With the publication of each successful series, Axel acquired more political capital within DC Comics affording an ever-increasing amount of leeway in future projects. Thus, 100 Bullets and Codename: Knockout, both creator owned concepts, are possible only with the success of Unknown Soldier, Human Target, and Congo Bill. In addition, Louis' recruitment and use of multi-ethnic models directly influences the race of the lead character of Codename: Knockout.

Not only did the success of The Unknown Soldier, Human Target, and Congo Bill increases Axel’s mobility within DC Comics, but it also increased his mobility within the rest of the comic book industry. While a comic book company may own the characters, or at least the publication rights in the case of creator owned projects, the success/value of the characters is derived from the efforts of
mostly freelance labor. Editors assemble creative teams and serve as company point persons in corporate efforts to maintain the value of its property. As a result, even though Axel's departure from DC Comics was on good terms, it couldn't be anything but a tense situation. Axel's departure will be reflected in the DC Comics' Vertigo line both in terms of editorial vision and creative talent.

While I do agree that personal politics are often reflected in creative work, I would argue that the fact that comic book production takes place amongst multiple creators across multiple locales and is the product of negotiations between creators obscures most attempts to realize political agendas in full. Instead, I would argue that these colorful stories mask the everyday lives and experiences of their creators.

Axel wasn't trying to sell a political agenda when he pitched Human Target, Congo Bill, 100 Bullets, and Codename: Knockout to his bosses. His vision of the world, however, was very much influenced by current events in Africa and playing pick up games of basketball. Louis wasn't trying to create a new ethnic character. But if you look at his recruitment and use of ethnic models it seems inevitable that he would eventually wind up on a creative team that would encourage him to do so. Brian writes about the differences that he observes. And multiple creators introduce multiple perspectives, opening up the
narratives to multiple interpretations and wider audiences. In the end, *Congo Bill* is every bit as much about world politics, the wrath of nature, colonialism, pulp-adventure, identity and man and beast. *Codename: Knockout* is every bit as much about challenging the gothic horror aesthetic as it is about gay heroes, heterosexual desire, and a very real sexual economy. While the printed newsprint tells many extraordinary tales we often overlook the ordinary, everyday stories of work and play. We forget that identity - while it has a political dimension - is the bedrock of our existence precisely because it is at once lived, imagined, negotiated, and constructed.
Chapter 13

Places in Common

The chapter that follows is the second part of, what I have previously referred to as, the matrix of relations. In the last chapter, I used my movement through space in time to describe the contingent nature of the bonds between comic books and their creators. This chapter, titled Places in Common, looks at the corner of 72nd and Broadway as a nexus, a place that several of my informants have in common, whether they realize it or not.

Most of the issues in comic books boil down to one simple question why this or that image at this or that moment? As much as it can, these sections will rest on a thick description of interactions and ethnographic encounters with comic book creators Phil Jimenez (writer/artist of Wonder Woman), Rob Stull (inker of Slingers and Iron Man), and Alex Simmons (writer/creator of Blackjack and Orpheus Rising) at and around a Starbucks Coffee shop in Manhattan. I will introduce Daniel Pink’s arguments about the (re) emergence of free agent labor as well as the use of the terms third space and confederation in effort to highlight the connections (as well as the lack thereof) between the everyday work lives of comic book creators and the fantasy worlds they create.
For the most part, comic book characters are corporately owned while the creative talent consists of free agents. As result, the comic book industry is, by necessity, a blend of free agent and corporate organization values. As managers of the creative process, editors often function at the margins that separate corporate hierarchies from the shifting confederations that dominate the freelancer’s existence. I borrow the term confederation from Pink (2001 p. 141). He describes a confederation as, “a regular collaboration between free agents akin to a law or accounting partnership – but in which the relationships are more fluid and the structure is set by an informal agreement rather than a legal contract.” Pink argues that “the right mix between individual freedom and group power is the secret to confederations (Pink 2001 p. 135).” In a comment that is exceedingly appropriate for this paper, Pink quotes one of his informants about the confederation that he is a part of. “We’re like the Justice League of America. We’ve got these different super powers, and we come together when the world is threatened. Then after we achieve the mission, we disperse to do our own stuff (Pink 2001 p. 135).”

Amongst the freelancers the structure is horizontal. Writers and artist collaborate or confer with one another. Freelancers hedge their risks by diversifying their work across several clients and projects (Pink 2001) both within and, in many cases, outside the comic book industry. Freelancers are "selling
It is March 1999. The 1 and the 9 local meet the 2 and the 3 express at 72nd and Broadway in Manhattan's Upper West Side. I hate going in and out of this stop. The main entrance to the stop sits on an island in the middle of the road where Broadway crosses Columbus. Once inside, the uptown and downtown platforms have different entrances and the stairs are so narrow that it is difficult for people to go up and down at the same time. At times the people in the crowds, in an attempt to make their trains, are overcome by their worst instincts. They target the old, the weak, the small, the hesitant, and plow through. Maybe if I weren't so often among the hesitant I wouldn't mind this stop so much. But I always come back. This is where the relatively slow pace of foot traffic meets the faster pace of rail travel. This is where the express train meets the local train. This is one of those locales where the speeds of travel are more important than the distances between places in determining what is close and what is far. It is twenty-five minutes from the offices of DC Comics which sits on the corner of 53rd and Broadway. It is thirty-five minutes from Eric's home just across the river in New Jersey. It is twenty-five minutes from Harvey and Monica's Harlem apartment. It is forty-five minutes from Alex's home in the Bronx but a mere five minute walk from the school that his son attends. It is less than a five-minute
walk from Rob, Phil, and Cynthia’s respective apartments. It is a four hours by train and car to my home in Baltimore.

Above ground and across the street is a Starbucks Café – a coffee franchise, one of thousands of Starbucks that dot the urban and suburban American landscapes. But they don’t just sell coffee, like many other franchises they sell familiarity, the promise that the consumer can get the same taste and sit in the same space in New York and Oklahoma. Eric, Harvey, Monica, Alex, Rob, Phil, Cynthia, and I are worlds apart yet we are linked by work, common interests, friendship, and chance encounters facilitated – in part – by this Starbucks. This Starbucks is a third space, neither home nor work, it is the site of a blending of the personal and professional, a link in the chain of events that form a small piece of the production of Wonder Woman, Iron Man, Blackjack, Batman: Orpheus Rising, and the Tarzan Sunday comic strip.

Harvey, Monica, and I step off the number 9 train onto the subway platform at the 72nd street stop. Its around 10:000 p.m. This is where I get off and where Harvey and Monica wait to switch to the number 2 or 3 express train to their apartment in Harlem. Harvey Richards is an assistant editor at DC Comics. His wife, Monica Patton, is a Broadway actress.
I met Harvey through his former officemate at DC, L.A. In stark contrast to Lateef, Harvey has a quiet demeanor. Before coming to New York, Harvey and Monica both lived in Akron, OH. Harvey started out as a production assistant at Acclaim. He then took a position as an editorial intern at Milestone. Throughout this period he also worked as ghost penciller. After Milestone ceased publishing its line of comics he became an assistant editor under Joan Hilty and Andy Helfer.

As Harvey, Monica, and I waited for their express train I feel a tug on my backpack accompanied by the sound of a familiar voice, “Stanford, is that you?”

I turn around and make eye contact with Cynthia Lee. Cynthia and I were at Columbia University together. She is Chinese-American. It wasn’t a particularly happy time for either of us but we shared a lot of good moments together. I turned red, a mixture of joy and embarrassment over having not let her know that I was in town. I wrapped my arms around her, “Oh my God, Cyn!”

“Ha, I knew I recognized that bag,” she said as she squeezed me tight. “Some things never change.”
“It’s so good to see you!” I said pausing a moment to add, “hey, its not the same bag. The last one had green trim. This ones all black.”

“And your point is?”

I turned to Havey and Monica, “this Cynthia, we go back to Grad School at Columbia.”

“Its so nice to meet you,” said Monica as she extended her hand, “I’m Monica, and this is my husband, Harvey.” Before I could reply the number 3 express train arrived. “This is our train. It was good meeting you,” she said as she and her husband got on the train.

As the trained pulled away I could see Harvey through the window putting his hand to the side of his face as if he was holding a phone. He mouthed the words, “call me.”

I turned to Cyn, “I take it you still live in the same place.”

“Yep.”
“Want to walk and talk?”

“Sure.” She said as we started walking up the stairs. “So what are you doing here?”

“Believe it or not, fieldwork. Harvey is an assistant editor at DC and I’m staying the night a couple of blocks away with a comic book inker.” As I walk Cyn to her apartment we briefly catch up on old times and agree to meet the next morning at the Starbucks on 72nd street. We say our good-byes.

It’s a three-block walk from Cyn’s to Rob’s apartment. I enter his building and approach the Hispanic doorman. At my behest, he calls Rob’s apartment, “Yes, Stanford Carpenter is here.” There is a slight pause as he listens to what sounds to me like crackling gibberish. Then he gestures for me to head over to the elevator. I ride the elevator up to Rob’s floor, exit and walk toward his door. It is already cracked open. As I enter I can see that he is sitting at his art table talking on the phone. He holds the phone to his ear with one hand and a brush in the other hand. Beneath him on the table is a half-inked page of Tellos. He covers the mouthpiece of the phone with his right hand, careful not to get ink on himself, “What’s up Cap’n,” he says in a voice loud enough for me to hear but soft
enough as to not interrupt the person on the other line. Rob's cat comes over to see who has entered the apartment.

Rob relocated to New York City from his native Boston, MA in 1998. He never considered the move to be permanent. Shortly after his arrival, he got a regular job as an inker over ChrisCross on Slingers. It was a crazy time for him, he started work before he started moving. As a result he was still moving into his modest two-bedroom apartment a year later. Rob lives in a two-room apartment which he sub-leases from his sister. With a small kitchenette at one end and window at the other end, this modest room was originally meant to be a kitchen/living room. The adjoining room is similar to the first room, except for the bathroom that occupies the space, that was reserved for the kitchenette, in the previous room. Rob uses the outside room as his studio. This room consists of an art table, computer, oversized flat filing cabinet, stereo, CD racks and shelves which house a small portion of his comic book collection and rather large assortment of super hero action figures. The inside room consists of a bed, futon couch, dresser, table, and entertainment center complete with television and VCR. Rob's studio is meticulous. Every item looks as if it has been carefully placed, the file cabinet contains previous artwork, photocopies of pages that he has inked, as well as photocopies of other artists' penciled pages that he uses for practice and for making recent inking samples.
I could vaguely remember the sounds of Hip-Hop music and my conversation with Rob the night before. The last image in my mind before my world went dark was Rob hunched over his drawing board. That was 2:00 a.m. I was on Rob’s studio floor. Beneath me a sleeping bag, to my left Rob’s stereo and a pile of CDs, and just in front of me, a stack of recent comic books. The blanket covering my head was not here before I drifted away. I staggered over to Rob’s drawing table to check the progress of the page he was working on the night before. It was finished. He had to have stayed up at least a couple of hours after I drifted away. I pulled my watch out of the shoe that I left it in the night before. I could barely distinguish the big from the little hand. I needed caffeine. It was 7:00 a.m. I was already behind schedule. I had a 7:00 o’clock at Starbucks with Cyn, a 10:00 o’clock and 12:00 o’clock at DC Comics with two different editors, a 3:00 o’clock at Hanley’s with another freelancer, and a 6:00 o’clock with a group of Black comic book freelancers and company employees at the Virgin Megastore. I curse myself for trying yet again to straddle the ten-to-six world of comic book company employees and the nocturnal existence of its freelance labor force. If I am to survive this, I will need caffeine. Lot’s of it. A shower wakes me up just enough to drag my ass across the street. Before I leave I let tell Rob that I will call during the day to let him know what’s going on later on in case he wants to meet up. He grunts. I leave.
Cyn is already at the coffee shop when I arrive. She's looking chipper. I, on the other hand, am not. "Sorry I'm late," I say. She gives me a look of sympathy and tells me to get some coffee. I order earl grey tea, my usual. Cyn and I met in December 1993 during her first year in Columbia University's Ph.D program in Anthropology. Her research was on the relationship between circus sideshows featuring ethnic (specifically Asian) people and imagery, the development of China Towns, and Chinese identity.

As Cyn and I spoke, a familiar figure passed the window. "Funny," I thought to myself, "that guy looks like Alex Simmons. But it couldn't be. He lives in Bronx and besides, how many freelances would be up a this time?!?"

I ran out to him and tapped him on the shoulder, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm dropping off my kid at school. What's your excuse?" he said.

"I'm crashing at Rob Stull's and I was in the Starbucks catching up with a friend from grad school at Columbia. Why don't you come in and join us?"
"I didn’t realize Rob lived near here. Funny I drop my kid off here all the time. I got a few minutes."

I introduced Alex to Cyn and described her research. Alex described his recent work on *Blackjack: Blood and Honor*, a comic book about a Black soldier of fortune that takes place in pre-WW2 Japan and China. At the conclusion of our conversation Alex gets Cyn’s phone number so that he can confer with her about his representations of China and Chinese-Americans.

It is April 2001. Phil’s entry catches me by surprise. “I got something for you,” he says as he hands me a comic book. It is the latest issue of *Wonder Woman*, hot off the press. It won’t be on the stands until the following week. It is the first part of the “Civil War” story arc that he had mentioned previously.

“I finally feel like I’m getting to write the book,” said Phil. This was actually Phil’s fifth issue as the writer and artist. His remark was a reference to the fact that the first story arc was a crossover with Batman, and because he was considered a new writer, it had been decided that the Batman crossover issues would have to be co-written by one of the regular Batman writers. Phil would also have to confer with the Batman editor.
"That's got to be a pain in the ass," I said, "having to wait this long to have a sense of control." Still, sales of Wonder Woman shot up after Phil came onto the book. So much so, that they were already after him to sign on for another year. Phil draws a direct connection between the increasing sales, his new contract, and the fact that coloring issues that he had been seeking to address early on are finally being addressed.

Wonder Woman and Paradise Island are steeped in Greek and Roman mythology. As such, previous incarnations of Wonder Woman's Paradise Island have always featured Greco-Roman architecture and stone work. While Wonder Woman, and the amazons of Paradise Island, have always worn colorful togas, jewelry, and armor – the buildings, columns, and statues have, for the most part, been left white or stone gray. When Phil first started developing his image of Wonder Woman's Paradise Island he did envision Greco-Roman architecture, but he wanted the stonework to feature the various hues and colors that adorned the Greco-Roman architecture when it was first built and the pottery to take on the these colors as well. He wanted Paradise Island to be a living contemporary Greco-Roman culture not an archaeological site. As the writer, penciller, and inker of Wonder Woman, Phil has a lot of functional control of the look of the book. While he did send color reference to the Wonder Woman colorist, she
chose to do the stonework and pottery in white and gray. It is the editor’s job to sort out any differences between members of the creative team. For example, an editor could get involved either by making additional requests, returning the work or reassigning the work. But the question is, is it worth over it the color of stonework and pottery? Is this a situation that the audience would care about? Is it worth returning the work and possibly having the book ship late? Not, to mention how will taking sides affect the relationships between him (or her) and the members of the creative teams? And will this affect other projects? Each of these questions has a personal and financial component. For instance, if the pages are returned, the colorist will have to eat the cost of her labor. If they are reassigned DC will have to eat the labor costs of the additional colorist. If the book runs late it backs up production. If it ships late, there could be a loss of audience. How an editor addresses these situations are ultimately about priorities – priorities that change and shift over time. The color of stonework and pottery just isn’t a high priority ... unless, of course, the writer/artist of the book is credited for bringing up the sales and you’re trying to get him to sign a contract that will keep him on the book for another year. Phil takes it all in stride. He knows the drill. He understands why his coloring issues weren’t addressed months ago. He’s not annoyed or bitter ... just relieved that the book is doing well and as result it is inching closer to his vision of where he wants to take it.
Still, he isn’t under the illusion that he has total control. Like most projects the book came with a set of conditions and restrictions as to what Phil could or couldn’t do. When Phil came on the sales were down. Phil’s first story arch which was going to last four issues and include a team up with Batman would have to be co-written by one of the Batman writers. The entire DCU was required to participate in the “Jokerism” storyline. That would account for one issue. It had already been decided that Wonder Woman’s mother, Hypolita, was going to die as part of summer crossover event titled “Our Worlds at War.” The “Our Worlds at War” crossover stories would account for two issues. Essentially, this meant that seven issues out of the twelve issues for which Phil was contracted were predetermined. Also, it meant that five of the issues would somehow involve the Joker, one of the Batman’s villains.

I asked Phil how things were coming along on the current issue. “I’m having a lot of fun writing Diana and her Mother,” he said with a tinge of regret. Phil had unsuccessfully tried to convince DC to let her live.

“What about?”

“Mostly Mother/Daughter stuff. I’ve got them in a café, talking in Greek, of course.” Phil went on to describe the scene. He really enjoys the dynamic in
part because, according to current continuity, Diana’s mother was the original Wonder Woman. Phil is building on the tensions created by the fact that Diana’s mother has come out of retirement as Wonder Woman to fight alongside the Justice Society — a move prompted, in part, by her boredom as Queen of the Amazons. On one hand, according to Phil, Diana feels that her mother is shirking her responsibilities to the Amazons, on the other hand Diana feels overshadowed and jealous of her mother. “I wish I had more time ... space.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s a lot to squeeze in,” he replied, “someone has to get jokerized and then I have the ‘Worlds at War’ crossover, not to mention Wonder Woman’s love interest.”

Phil is getting closer to the introduction of Wonder Woman’s romantic lead. He has already decided the character will be African-American. Phil was telling me his plans to introduce the character. He was going to do a day-in-the-life episode where Lois Lane (the wife of Superman’s alter ego Clark Kent) follows Wonder Woman for twenty-four hours in order to write an article about her for the *Daily Planet*. The idea was that Lois, unaware that Wonder Woman had recently been forced to give up her royal title and a bit jealous over the fact that
many people assume that Wonder Woman and Superman are romantically involved, would be looking for the chink in Wonder Woman’s armor. “Let’s face it,” said Phil, “Wonder Woman is an amazon princess, she’s a super hero, and she [does good through] her Wonder Woman Foundation ... she’s privileged ... perfect.”

He prefaced the next part of the conversation with, “I hope you don’t mind and I hope this doesn’t come of as White-boy-has-a-question-so-lets-ask-the Black-friend. I’ve been asking other people the same thing. But since you are Black ... and you are here.” We both laugh as the people sitting next to us try their best to act as if they hadn’t been listening in. Phil continued to explain that he wanted to build up to a scene in the United Nations where somebody mentions the name of the perspective love interest and Wonder Woman stops talking to Lois and goes over to him and asks him out on a date. “I want him to say no ... I want Lois to be like ‘that’s it, that’s the chink in the armor.’ I want Wonder Woman to be shocked and I want somebody, I’m not sure who, to be like ‘but you’re Wonder Woman!’ ... I want him to say no because he sees her as [too] privileged ... she just assumes he’s going to say yes (see figure 36).”
Figure 36. Left: cover to Wonder Woman #170 (July 2001) titled “A Day in the Life” centered around an interview of Wonder Woman by Superman’s wife, Lois Lane. This issue introduced Trevor Augustus Barnes. While Jimenez wrote the plot, he split the scripting chores with Superman writer Joe Kelly. Essentially, Jimenez wrote the Wonder Woman dialogue and Kelly wrote the dialogue for Lois Lane.

Below: Wonder Woman #170 page fifteen is the first appearance of Trevor Augustus Barnes.
Phil also wanted to develop some other political differences between the two. He sees the fact that she “preaches peace and then kicks ass on the six o’clock news” as being part of it. “But as an amazon, I don’t think she would see it as conflict ... the thing is I don’t want her to find out why [he says no] until later. I want something to happen later where she gets to ask him why ... [and] I want something to happen where he changes his mind. Does this sound creepy to you? I mean having him say no [for political reasons] then having him change his mind and say yes? What do you think would make him say yes?”

“I can totally see it happening, an African-American responding to that [Wonder Woman’s] level of privilege that way,” I responded. “But once he takes that kind of a stand it would be really hard for me to see him going back ... with that kind of pride it would take a lot to get him to swallow it. She would have to be humbled ... or somehow have her privilege stripped away...”

“Yeah, but I want Diana to ask him why he said no. I don’t want him to save her or pick up the pieces.” Phil shifted the conversation slightly. “He still needs a name,” Phil said, “something Black but not too Black” in part so that the readers, who will hear his name earlier in the story, will not have an image of him till he appears at the end of the book. “This isn’t too weird is it?” he remarked.
We batted names back and forth. Phil liked the idea of using Reid as the last name. He had a friend in mind for the characters physical appearance. He was thinking of Anthony for the first name but he wasn’t totally sold on it. Eventually I pulled out my palm pilot and started scrolling through the names. One of the early entries, the Augusta Savage Gallery struck a cord. “Augustus Reid. Sounds more like a middle-name though. Anthony Augustus Reid, Augustus is good but I still need a first name.”

It is June 2001. Alex, Rob and I are sitting in Starbucks around a small round table sipping coffee and lattes. Rob and I are sitting in the oversized velour wing chairs. My initial meeting with Alex and Cyn two years ago had become a regular occurrence. Usually, I meet up with him here in the mornings just after he drops his son off at school. That Alex would meet me here more often than Rob is not a surprise in light of their jobs.

Alex can write in spurts, dropping out of touch for days or weeks at a time with equally long breaks to recharge. Rob’s work is a bit more of a grind. “A good inker who makes his deadlines can always find work,” he once told me. This is, in part, because there is always a comic book out there that is running behind schedule. And when this happens, the pencilled pages tend to be spread out between many inkers. That is the upside. The downside is that he’s been known
to pull twenty-four hour shifts to keep up. But his twenty-four hour shifts are a bit different than a comic book writer because he can work with a greater deal of distraction.

The irony is that although this Starbucks has become a regular spot for Alex and me, and while I know Rob through Alex, Alex and Rob have never met here before. “Check this out,” says Rob, as he lays his portfolio on the table to reveal photocopies of the finished inks for an upcoming issue of Iron Man. Alex and I peruse through the photocopies as Rob summarizes the storyline that they go to. These images and the accompanied storyline won’t start for several months. As Alex and I continue to look through the Iron Man pages, Alex stops briefly to hand Rob some of Dwayne Turners pencils on Batman: Orpheus Rising (see figure 37).
Figure 37. Above (left to right): covers of *Iron Man* #44 (September 2001) and *Batman: Orpheus Rising* #2 (November 2001).
Batman: Orpheus Rising was a four issue mini-series featuring Orpheus, an African-American super hero that DC Comics contracted Alex to create. If the character was successful, Orpheus would become a regular guest character in the Batman comic books. This project came into being, in part due to the success of Blackjack. As I documented earlier in Chapter 10, Blackjack was originally presented to DC Comics, shelved, and then self-published many years later. By the time Alex self-published Blackjack, many of the DC employees who had initially helped him had long since moved on to other companies or retired from the industry all together. Still, even though Blackjack didn’t enjoy a huge initial circulation it did get the attention several people at DC, two of whom were White male group editor Denny O’Niel and African-American assistant editor, L.A. Williams. In what ended being among their last acts as DC employees, L.A. and O’Niel encouraged and tweaked Alex’s proposal. When Bob Schreck took over as the editor of the Batman books he turned the project over to one of his assistant editors, Michael Wright, who according to Bob, “was totally excited by the concept ... a real advocate.” Bob Schreck and Michael Wright are both White males.

“Wow, these are awesome,” said Alex as he looked through the Iron Man pencils.
“Here, check these out,” said Rob, as he put another folder on the table. It contained a series of hip-hop inspired concept drawings for some creator-owned characters. “This is what we’ve really been working on ... our own stuff.”

“Wait, so this is the same artist as on *Iron Man*?”

“Yep, getting Kieron to do the *Iron Man* stuff was like pulling teeth.”

“But it’s great stuff.”

“Yeah, but who wants to be doing funny books all their lives? Besides, there are other areas, if you can just break in, that pay more with less hassles. Oh, well I’m just in a bad mood. I feel like I’m getting jacked around again,” he said, a reference to his experience on *Slingers*. *Slingers* was Spider-Man spin off series written by Bob Harris (a White male), penciled by ChrissCross (an African-American male), and inked by Rob. Shortly after issue #4 Rob and ChrissCross heard rumors that it was going to be canceled. They went in to the Marvel offices and asked their editor if the rumors were true. The editor denied it. At the time, Rob was turning down work in order to meet his commitments to *Slingers*, among them a long term gig on one of DC Comics’ better selling books. For the most part, work gets doled out several months in advance. Long term positions
open up when somebody leaves or a new book is started. If a book is canceled suddenly, the lag time between looking for work, getting work or a position opening, and actually getting paid can leave a comic book creator without an income for months. Of course, these concerns are at cross-purposes within company concerns. It isn’t uncommon for a creators to find out a book is being cancelled several months down the line and, as a result, leave the book early or let their work suffer in favor of new opportunities. Rob and ChrissCross were told that *Slingers* would not be canceled. Unfortunately, it was ... on very short notice.

“What do you mean jacked around again?” I asked.

After the cancellation of *Slingers*, ChrissCross landed a job as penciller for a new ongoing Marvel series titled *Captain Marvel*. Rob went on to ink several projects. During this period of time, Marvel group editor Bobby Chase (a White woman), was a strong advocate for ChrissCross and Rob. In fact, she brought Rob on to *Iron Man* and Rob, with a little bit of arm twisting, convinced Kieron to do some pencil sketches. According to Rob, Chase loved Kieron’s take on *Iron Man*. The plan was to use Rob and Kieron along with Frank Tieri to revamp *Iron Man*, who’s sales had been flat. They were three issues into their run on *Iron Man* when several of Chase’s books were either cancelled or reassigned. The
writing was on the wall. Chase’s star was unlikely to rise under new editor-in-chief, Joe Quesada. In addition, Rob and Kieron were put in limbo as to how long Chase was going to be in control of Iron Man and no promises were being extended that would have guaranteed the jobs of any member of the Iron Man creative team.

“Still,” remarked Rob, “It seems like, whenever I get ready to leave the industry something pulls me back.”

“Hey Rob, if I could come up with the printing cost, is there any way that you could get me copies of this packet?” asked Alex referring to the Armada Packet. “I was thinking, maybe I could show it around when I’m talking to other people...”

“You don’t have to...”

“No really, I don’t know exactly what good it would be but it’s worth a shot. I was also wondering, and whether I can do it kind of depends on a few other things, if maybe you guys could do a Blackjack promo picture. It’s going to need to be done and the exposure...”
“Alex, for you? Come on I can eat the copies and as far the promo goes, as long as it gets seen we can work something out.”

“Well, you know how it is. I didn’t want to just assume. Sometimes we forget that we’re all in this to make a living.”

It is June 2001. I had spent most of the day uptown at the Columbia University Library writing and trolling through the stacks. I had also taken some time to buy some books at Labyrinth, an academic bookstore on the edge of Columbia’s campus. By the time I got to Starbucks I was a bit frazzled ... and very sick of words on paper. Still, I figured some caffeine would keep me awake while I passed the hour going through the books I had purchased. I was wrong.

I awoke to Phil’s voice, “What are you reading?”

“That’s a good question,” I responded.

Phil laughed, “I’m gonna get some coffee. You look like you need some more, what are you having?”

“Almond latte.”
I rubbed my eyes and wiped the drool from the side of my mouth. Phil returned with two cups, one of which contained my almond scented liquid consciousness. He literally collapsed into the chair; "I so needed to get away from the art table! So, how have you been?"

We exchanged pleasantries. "You seem pretty wiped out yourself."

"I was at the Charlotte Comic Book Convention. I wish you had been there. I was on a panel with titled 'writing the other.'"

"I take it that hasn't done much to keep you up with writing and illustrating Wonder Woman."

"Yeah, I also was up late checking some of the Internet message boards."

"So what's it like, the message boards I mean?"

"It's all over the place," he remarked. "It's weird, I don't know what it is about Wonder Woman but she seems to have a lot of African-American readers, maybe it has something to do with her being a woman."
"What do you mean?"

"Well, she’s a strong female character. And where you have lots of single parent households, having been in one myself, you have strong women ... also, I keep thinking about the whole image of the Black woman as strong, in your face. What do you think? Not that you speak for the race but since you are right here in front of me..."

"I don’t know, I could never relate the whole single parent thing. In fact, it’s always kind of weirded me out, growing up in situations where people assumed because I was Black that must come from an unstable home. I’ve always related to her because she was marginal, always fighting preconceptions. I guess that’s why I’ve always faded in and out of reading her depending on the creative team. I haven’t really thought as much about how I feel about her character as I have of others.” Even though it hadn’t happened yet, there were rumors in circulation about Wonder Woman’s perspective love interest so I had to ask, "What kind of reactions are you getting about her upcoming Black love interest?"

Phil shook his head and rubbed his temples, “It’s all over the place. Some of it’s scary ... there’s one fan, a lesbian, who keeps writing in because she’s pissed
that Wonder Woman isn’t a lesbian. ‘You know she is from an island full of women after all.’

“Does she know that you’re gay?”

“Yes,” responded Phil, “But that doesn’t change the fact that I totally think that Wonder Woman is heterosexual.” Phil went on to explain it in terms of Wonder Woman’s origin. Wonder Woman was unique, even on Paradise Island. She was fashioned from clay and given life by the gods. The rest of the amazons came to the island, originally as the spirits of abused women, thousands of years before. In relation to her amazon sisters, Wonder Woman is a child and always will be a child. In addition, her existence is also built around a mission: to be an ambassador to man’s world. She’s definitely not looking for a man but she doesn’t have the same hostilities or history as the rest of the amazons.

“Is that the worst you’ve gotten?”

“No, I had one fan, a fan who has written before. He always seemed nice, but in his last e-mail he wrote, ‘get your bottom boy ethnic fantasies out of my comic book.’ I didn’t ... I still don’t know how to react. These characters, the fans
don't just read them but they take ownership, they take it personal.” (See figure 38 for Wonder Woman and Trevor Augustus Barnes' first date.)
Figure 38. Above (left to right): cover to Wonder Woman #178 (March 2002) features Wonder Woman’s first date with Trevor Augustus Barnes. Page nine features the first kiss between Wonder Woman and Trevor Augustus Barnes.
“Bottom boy ethnic fantasies?” I said in disbelief.

“Yes, bottom boy ethnic fantasies.” We sat in silence for a while. Then Phil shifted the subject to something different ... but related. “The con was cool because I got to spend some time with Robert Jones, remember the African-American fan who wrote in about having a problem with the carjacking scene. Well I got a chance to hang out with him. We exchanged books. He gave me this one by Nathan McCall. Have you heard of it, its called *Makes Me Want to Holler* (1994).”

“I’ve heard of it. But I must confess I haven’t read it. So how does it affect your process?”

“I never thought of it quite that way, as a process I mean. It’s just, if I’m going to write about people who aren’t like me then...”

Phil looked out the widow at the advancing evening, “are you hungry?”

“Ollies?”

“OK”
We walked to Ollies. The ground rumbled as the downtown 1 and 9 passed beneath us. “So Phil, I was going over some of my notes and our talks and I was wondering about how you identify yourself. I mean, in my notes and in our conversations I refer to you as Hispanic more often than you do. Most of the time you refer to yourself as a ‘gay man’ and sometimes as a ‘White boy’ yet there are moments when you refer to yourself as Hispanic also…”

“Yeah it is kind of strange. It has been coming up a lot more lately, since we’ve been talking. Sometimes it feels strange being referred to as Hispanic. I was raised by my White mom in Southern California, [not my Mexican father]. When I see Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Buffy is me! If anything I identify with valley girls.”

“I never thought of it that way but it does make sense. For me, growing up in a stable middle class Black family in mostly White, relatively conservative, suburbs left its marks. I mean there were times when I almost felt ... I don’t know ... guilty for not having a broken home, for not having a more intimate connection to the stereotype.”
“Yeah, it can feel odd, laying claim to an [Hispanic] identity when so much of my life is about being part of a gay community that’s very White identified.” The conversation shifted again once we got to Ollies. As always it was good, and so was the food.

The following week Phil and I met again, this time at his apartment located a scant few blocks from the Starbucks of our previous meetings. Phil lives in a two-room apartment with a rather large foyer (by New York Standards). The foyer was painted a deep red, taking me immediately back to one of our conversations from almost a year ago. We had gotten tired of talking at the Starbucks so we hit the pavement and wandered into the Barnes and Noble a few blocks down the street. Phil was looking for source material for Paradise Island. He knew that it was going to be devastated by the “Our Worlds at War” crossover meaning he could redesign the island to his whims. He had also been doing a slow burn over the coloring of the book. He didn’t like the idea of the stone architecture being done in white so he also wanted to put together another color palette. We started at the bargain books and worked our way through the architecture and home improvement sections. Phil lost me at home improvement, “what are you looking at?”
“Bathrooms and studies. We’re finally starting to paint the brownstone we’ve been renovating and ... well, I like yellows and greens but Vivian feels like there’s too much yellow and green in the house.”

“What about red.”

“Don’t you think it would be a bit strong?”

“I did, until I finally bit the bullet and just did it in the foyer to my apartment.”

And here I was in his foyer surrounded by red ... and it worked. To my left was the bedroom. To my right was the living room. The living room was set up as an all-purpose room: a couch and chairs with a coffee table in the center, his art table in the corner just in front of the window, opposite the art table was a kitchenette with stools and a breakfast bar. There were fresh cut flowers on the coffee table in a glass vase and the bookshelves contained superhero action figures and statues alongside issues of *Legion of Superheroes* that he had had professionally bound. As I approached his desk he spread out the pencilled pages of the issue of *Wonder Woman* that he was working on. On either side of the Phil’s art space lay an assortment of bathing suit catalogues. I could make out a
two page spread of head shots of Wonder Woman, most of her supporting cast, and a lot of amazons with energy coursing between them. I also noticed some rough pages of Wonder Woman side-by-side with Darkseid, one of the arch villains of the entire DC Universe. “What’s up with this,” I asked, “Darksied and Wonder Woman fighting together? Didn’t he kill several thousand amazons a few years back?”

“Oh, its part of the ... wait, are you sure want me to ruin it for you?”

“It wouldn’t be first time. I already know the plots for the next year of Orion from Walter. It does change the reading experience but ... now that you mention it, you can’t leave me hanging.”

“OK, but I won’t tell you everything,” Phil went on to explain that, as part of the war, the amazons were going to share their energy, their sense of belief, and give it over to Darksied, in effect super charging him to combat the oncoming intergalactic threat. “You see, I think that gods need to be worshiped to exist. Otherwise, why else would they be rulers at one time and not another. Also, what else would separate them from superheroes, and I believe that there has to be separation. Walter [Simonson] and I have had talks about this. I believe that they need to be worshiped, he doesn’t. What do you think?”
“Well I’ve had the same discussion with Walter. I kind of fall on your side. I’m not sure how you maintain the difference between superheroes and gods, otherwise.”

“There is the whole immortality thing.”

“But even some of the superheroes could, in theory, live forever.” We went back and forth for a while.

“Let’s continue on the way to the restaurant.”

“Sure, but before I forget,” I opened my backpack and pulled out a copy of Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women? (Moller, et al. 1999). “Remember, I mentioned it when we were talking about possible templates for Trevor and Diana’s relationship?”

“Oh, cool. Hold on,” Phil went through his bookshelf and pulled out a copy of What They did to Princess Paragon (Rodi 1994). “This the book that Robert [Rodi] wrote.” Robert Rodi was the writer/co-creator of Codename: Knockout (see Chapter 12). What They did to Princess Paragon is a parody of the
comic book industry. Written in 1994 it tells the story of a gay writer/artist who is given free reign to revamp Princess Paragon, a super heroine that functions as the books stand in for Wonder Woman. In the book the gay writer artist decides to make Princess Paragon a lesbian. As result, one of Princess Paragon’s straight male fans assaults and kidnap the writer artist at the Chicago comic book convention.

“Do you think you could get me in touch with Robert Rodi? I’ve already interviewed Axel and Louis about Codename: Knockout.” I continued in a semi-sarcastic tone, “I’ve already got the straight Hispanic and Black male perspective.” We both chuckled.

“Sure,” said Phil, as we headed out the door for the elevator. The conversation shifted back to the panel on writing the other. According to Phil, the panel seemed to fall on two opposing sides. One side argued that race doesn’t matter, that anyone could write anyone else because we share a universal human experience. The other side, of which Phil was a part, disagreed. They argued that there are differences. And that in writing the other was about trying to figure out and writing difference. Coincidentally, the advocates of a universal subject position were all White males. As we walked down the street with the rumble of
the 1 and the 9 train below us we joked back and forth, both of us wondering how universal any real experience could be. This continued into the restaurant.

At one point I state in my most authoritative voice, “I guess ‘with great creative power comes great responsibility!’”

Phil offered an obligatory courtesy laugh. It was a bad pun.

While I chose the Starbucks at the corner of 72nd and Broadway, I just as easily could have discussed the Virgin Megastore or BBQs in Times Square or Jim Hanley’s Universe just across from the Empire State Building. It’s not the spaces that are important so much as what happens in them. In his book, *Free Agent Nation*, Daniel Pink describes the evolution of the term freelance from its origins as a term to describe medieval mercenaries. Comic book freelancers are creative mercenary men and women that are hired for their skills and experiences to participate in a decentralized production process. While Pink uses the *confederation* and the *third space* to make arguments about the structure of everyday life, I am using them to articulate the connection between the fantastic and the not so fantastic. Comic book scholarship that emphasizes thematic analyses, tend to regard the comic book as text with little or no connection to lives of the text’s creators. In affect, the comic book creators, as subjects of study
are disappeared. Which is ironic when one considers that in the effort to draw the connections between the flashy colors and heroic narratives in comics and the realities of everyday life, it is everyday life that gets lost. Ironic, given the fact that it is the everyday, the mundane, the utterly banal particularities and inconsistencies that creep into the fantasy world of comic books that constitute the connections, that make these fantasies seem real.
SECTION FOUR: GOING QUIETLY INTO THE GOOD NIGHT

(The Story So Far)

In Section One, I described comic books as the byproduct of a decentralized production process in which teams of freelance workers and company employees use their own personal experiences and archives to imagine the identities and adventure of privately owned characters. I argued that media and cultural studies often mistake the perceived wholeness of a media representation for the wholeness of the racial, ethnic, or gendered subject. And in the effort to create a whole racial subject, media and cultural studies have overlooked issues raised by comic book creators’ existence, as I described it, at the crossroads of the imagination, commerce, myth, and law.

Thus far, Section Two and Section Three can best be read as being in tension with one another. In Section Two I described identity construction and comic book production. I also argued that identity construction and comic book production operate on similar governing principles, those being finding meaning where it may (Clifford 1988), bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1966), and vicarious witnessing (Alexander 1995), each of which involves the development, use, and
deployment of personal, public, and private archives. I also introduced Mark Anthony Neal’s (2002) notion of the post-soul generation and put forth the argument that identity—like character generation in comic books—hinges on the development, use, and deployment of archives.

Section Three is a series of ethnographic encounters. I presented very few theoretical arguments, opting instead to show the interactions, experiences, negotiations, and compromises that constitute the comic book producers’ existence at the crossroads of the imagination, commerce, myth, and law. I did this in part by dividing my accounts into chapters that corresponded to different ways of looking at the participants in the decentralized comic book production process. I also not only allowed, but highlighted, some of the moments in which the participants’ lives bled into what is usually seen as an isolated production process. Whereas Section Two addressed principles that govern the creation, use, and deployment of archives, Section Three showed the contingencies upon which archives rest. Section Four will bring this dissertation to a close by addressing and, to some extent, resolving the tensions between Section Two and Section Three.

Section Four will be divided into five chapters: Chapter 14, Creative Mercenary Men Revisited; Chapter 15, Dead Nigger Storage Revisited; Chapter
16, Following Metaphor Revisited; Chapter 17, The Work of the Imagination Revisited; and Chapter 18, Authenticity in the Context of Cultural Production. As implied by the titles, Chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17 pick up on chapters from Section Two. Chapters 16 and 17 will discuss and bring to a close the issues raised in Chapters 2 and 6, respectively. Much of Chapter 15 is built around an interview with Brian Azzarello, and Chapter 18 will return to this interview one last time in order to draw some final conclusions.

In Chapter 14, I will open with my last extended visit to New York. I spent a month in New York City and left my car with Walter and Louise Simonson in New York State. On my last day in New York City I met up with Walter and we drove back to his house together. During this visit he was informed that his current project, Orion, was going to be canceled. This will provide an opening for me to discuss, in broad terms, what happened to everyone over the past two years. I will also recount my interviews with Walter Simonson and Lee Weeks regarding their work on the Tarzan v. Predator comic book miniseries. This chapter will highlight the ways in which, as well as draw some conclusions about, how mobility and industry practices impinge on comic book production.

In Chapter 18, I will open with two accounts: the continuation of my conversation with Brian Azzarello and the first time that I saw the movie Pulp
Fiction. In Chapter 14 I cited John Jackson’s (2001) discussion about Quentin Tarantino’s use of the “n-word.” I saw *Pulp Fiction* for the first time with John Jackson (see Chapter 4) and Cynthia Lee (see Chapter 13). I will recount this experience as well as the discussion that followed. I will hone in on the perspectives that we brought to it as an African-American filmmaker, a Chinese-American curator, and an African-American cartoonist, respectively.

In Chapter 16, I will also include my interview of David McGee about our discussions at Birra Poretti’s. David made the important observation that we all talk about the table as if everyone was there at the same time when, in actuality, it was much more fluid. In Chapter 2, I argued that the table brings together divergent histories and ideas. In this section I will discuss how the table is recalled. Also, I will pick up on my earlier question from Chapter 3 (Is There a Guiding Principle That Governs the Messy, Contingent, and Contradictory Realm of Representation and Identity Construction?) in order to argue that what the table does is more important than what it is. I will use this as an opening to pick up on the issues related to disappearance, dissonance, archives, and history that I raised in Section Two (see Chapters 5 and 6). Essentially, I will argue that concepts like the table (and spheres of production) depend on a degree of essentialization in order to manage the contradictions through disappearance and substitution.
Chapter 18 will return again to my interview with Brian Azzarello (see also Chapters 4 and 15). I will pick up on our discussion about his work with Corben on *Hellblazer, Banner* (a comic book miniseries featuring the Hulk), and the upcoming *Cage*. In particular I will discuss Corben’s artistic style as both “racially problematic” and popular amongst African-Americans. My final words will address Neal’s notion of the *post-soul* generation and Diawara’s articulation of identity fatigue. I will end on my argument that the processes of construction don’t change, but that the archives that they draw from are in constant flux. I will sort out my usage of authenticity, authenticating processes, contingency, and essentialization. I will argue that the processes of identity construction, be they corporate or personal, exist to authenticate different configurations of archives and source material.
Chapter 14

Creative Mercenary Men Revisited

Wednesday, June 27, 2001, it was the last day of a month-long stay in New York City. I checked my clock and noted the street numbers – 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th – as I rushed up Broadway toward the Virgin Megastore at Union Square. Walter and I were supposed to meet there between 7:00 and 7:30 p.m. I was running late. I knew that Walter would be pretty much occupied at the Bizarro book signing but that didn’t make me feel any less guilty.

When I came up to New York at the beginning of the month, I dropped my car off at Walter and Louise Simonson’s house in New York State. I had originally planned to take the bus back out to the Simonsons but those plans had changed. When I spoke to Walter on the phone a few days before he told me that he had to come into DC Comics to meet with Joe Cavalieri, Mike Carlin, and Paul Levitz. “I don’t know what it’s about,” remarked Walter, “but they wanted to meet in person. It’ll be either good news or bad news, they’ll either have a job for me or cancel Orion.”

Orion, the comic book, was named for and featured the lead character from the New Gods, a comic book created by Jack Kirby. New Gods along with
Mister Miracle and the Forever People, was created in 1971 by Kirby for DC Comics as part of his Fourth World series. Kirby, a writer/artist, along with writer/publisher Stan Lee, was one of the primary creative forces behind Marvel Comics' Fantastic Four, Avengers, Hulk, Thor, and X-Men. He, along with Stan Lee, was also the creator of the Black Panther. When Kirby left Marvel for DC Comics he was given free reign to create his own series of comics within the DCU. The Fourth World series is built around the Norse myth of Ragnorok. In the story of Ragnorok all the good and evil gods square off against each other in a final battle. Also referred to as the "twilight of the gods," this battle brings about the end of the all the Norse gods, but it is foretold that from the ashes of the old gods shall rise new gods to take their place. The comic books that form the Fourth World series share the same villain: Darkseid, ruler of the war planet known as Apokolips and pursuer of the anti-life equation, a formula for the elimination of free will.

I entered the Virgin Megastore and wandered through the isles, trying to find the signing. As I looked across the record store toward the café, I saw a crowd of people around a long table. A line of people holding the just-released hard cover Bizarro Comics graphic novel stretched from the table and out the back door. The café was blocked off so that the attendees at the book signing have to enter through a different door. My cell phone rang. It was Walter
wondering where I am. I told him that I was on the other side of the store. I exited the store and walked around toward the back door. I shuffled past the people in line. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Walter on the other side of the glass amidst a crowd of people. He was speaking with Joey Cavalieri. I reached over and knocked on the glass just as Walter and Joey walk away from the glass to speak with someone else. Peggy Burns, DC Comics’ publicist, turned around. She looked a bit shocked but smiled and waved nevertheless. I tried to point over to Walter but she was distracted by the crush of people. I waded past the people in line to have their copies of Bizarro Comics signed. It’s loud and crowded. I spotted Walter talking to Kyle Baker. Ironically, the Superbaby story that had been pulped two years ago (see Chapter 9) had been reprinted and included in the Bizarro Comics graphic novel.

As Walter and I took the number 9 train to the parking lot where he left my car, I asked him how his meeting went. “They canceled Orion. They’ll probably let me go until issue #24 or so but I have to wrap it up,” he said.

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, well they were really much nicer about it than they had to be, and they are going to give me a few issues to wrap up the current storyline.” This was
true. And I have seen comic company employees and freelancers afforded a lot less dignity than Walter was but it doesn’t do much to alleviate my anger. We make our way over to the apartment where I left my luggage, stopping for sushi along the way. It’s a relatively quiet walk followed by a relatively quiet dinner. At one point Walter comments that he’s feeling “a bit cranky.” We shuttle my luggage to the car via taxi and leave for Walter’s house about an hour away from New York City.

They let Walter down easy. Over the past two years I observed a lot of turnover amongst both the company employees and freelancers. When I started, L.A. Williams was an assistant editor. Half-way through my research he resigned over a series of disputes with his group editor. L.A. Williams’ departure was particularly hard on Eric Battle and Grey both of whom had received numerous assignments from him. This was also the case with Joe Illidge. Harvey Richards was still an assistant editor when I left. Bob Schreck had just come on as an associate editor when I began my research and was promoted to group editor halfway through my research. Axel left from DC to take position at Marvel. Cliff Chiang left his post as an assistant editor for DC’s Vertigo line to concentrate on freelance art projects for his former employer.
When I started, Eric Battle had just finished his run as the regular penciller on *Aquaman*. He went almost a year without work before he got an opportunity to work on Alex Simmons' *Blackjack*, the *Tarzan* Sunday comic strip, and some fill-in work on the *Justice League of America* and *Green Lantern*. Over the course of my research, Alex Simmons went from publishing his own creation, *Blackjack*, to developing an African-American character for DC, writing the *Tarzan* Sunday comic strip, and doing a fill-in issue of *Superman*. Rob Stull worked with few interruptions but went from *Slingers* to *Tellos* and *Iron Man*. In the meantime he continued to grow Armada with the help of Kieron Grant, and Chris Walker. During my research, Dwayne Turner pencilled his creator-owned project titled *Butcher Knight* and the *Batman: Orpheus Rising* miniseries for DC. He is currently doing work outside of the comic industry for several gaming companies. Don McGregor continues to work on *Zorro*, and he teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

Upon my initial visit (see Chapter 4), Grey had just completed the designs for Mr. Terrific and was doing some fill-in work for *Impulse*, a comic book edited by L.A. L.A.'s departure was the beginning of a long drought as far as comic book work went. Like Rob Stull, however, Grey ended up doing Hip-Hop related artwork. When I began my research, Louis Small was the penciller for *Vampirella*. A few months into my research, he was offered *Codename:*
*Knockout*, a project that was plagued by missed deadlines. The studio that Grey and Louis were both a part of, broke up under contentious circumstances. As of this writing, Robert Rodi continues to write *Codename: Knockout* for a rotating team of guest pencillers that will include Phil Jimenez. Phil Jimenez started on *Wonder Woman* shortly after my research began and gave his notice shortly after I completed my research. He is currently developing a creator-owned project for DC’s Vertigo line.

As we drove to Walter’s house my thoughts went back to a previous visit in the summer of 1995, a visit that inspired the methodology for this dissertation.

It was sometime after 10:00 p.m. and before 4:00 a.m. at the Simonson home. Louise Simonson is a comic book writer; her husband, Walter, is a comic book writer and artist. Their house doubles as a place to live and a site in the production process that creates comic books, in this case the *Tarzan vs. Predator* comic book miniseries (see figure 39). In spite of the overt visual presence of the comic book medium they work in, these comic book professionals are the faces behind the manifestations of their labor, making appearances at conventions and occasional signings at specialty stores. For all the attention that their comic books garner, by and large these comic book professionals lead relatively private lives. The Simonsons’ choice to live in this sleepy town in New York State is not
unusual. The vast majority of comic creators are freelancers. Once they are established they can live anywhere that has express mail service and phone lines.
Figure 39. Above and below: covers of issues #1-4 *Tarzan vs. Predator* comic book miniseries (January through April 1996). Above (left to right): issues #1 and #2. Below (left to right): issues #3 and #4.
The sounds of locusts filled the background. The night had a rather timeless quality. Although the Simonsons lived at the end of a culdesac, the wooded lot that they inhabited created the illusion of isolation. The steep incline of the twisting driveway was the subject of many Batman references. Walter's drawing tables and light box are barely visible amidst the vast array of licensed toys, models, action figures, magazines, complimentary comic books, and comic book pages (in various stage of completion). The walls throughout the house were decorated with original comic book art and paintings, a combination of Walter's work and the work of other artists. Bookshelves held the Simonsons' collections of pulp fiction, sci-fi, fantasy, mythology, and mystery novels as well as sci-fi films and comic books. The dominant theme of the house, however, was dinosaurs – dinosaur movies, pictures, comic book pages, posters, toys, and novels.

Munchie, the Simonsons' dog, had begun to settle down. Munchie liked to think of himself as vicious, unfortunately for him he was white, fluffy, and less than a foot tall. He wandered aimlessly, teetering a bit . . . punch drunk. He picked up the Superman action figure by the head and left the helpless "Man of Steel" at my feet. I threw Munchie's "kryptonian prey" across the room. He ran a few feet, then walked over to it, fell on top of it, and growled. However curious, however "cool" it may be to have a house filled with licensed toys, models, action
figures, magazines, complimentary comic books, and comic book pages (in various stages of completion), these items were an archive, source material, the tools of the Simonsons’ trade.

Louise was in the study on the second floor, typing away. Strewn about the floor were photocopies of the rough pencils for the latest issue of Superman: Man of Steel. She had to finish the script before she went to bed. She spent the last few days with nothing to do but wait for the pencils to arrive. They arrived this afternoon. The letterer needed the pencils, along with Louise’s script two days ago. Walter is on the phone in the kitchen. The evening calls were usually from the West Coast. It’s Frank Miller calling from Los Angeles.

I was in the reading area rifling through the piles of past roughs and scripts. One side of the page contained rough plots and page layouts from the Tarzan vs. Predator comic book miniseries (not yet published at this time); the other is “The Death of Superman” storyline from 1992. The Tarzan vs. Predator side featured a ranch-style house that sits in a jungle clearing. Above, the caption reads:

Africa ... deep in the heart of the untamed wilderness. Here on the vast estate, as far from the confining shackles of civilization as
distance will permit dwells Lord Greystoke, peer of the British Empire, and his wife, Jane. Lord Greystoke, better known as Tarzan of the Apes

In the next three frames Tarzan, Jane, and Muviro, were chatting and then they ran across the room to answer a call for help, beamed into their African home through the Gridly Wave Radio. Tarzan and Jane were dressed in Western style safari garb. Muviro, their African friend, sported a loincloth, spear, and a fluffy headdress that looks like a blonde Afro-wig with two large teeth dangling at either side. Tarzan listened with concern as he heard a desperate message from Abner Perry, an old friend and fellow adventurer. Pellucidar, an empire located at the Earth’s Core, was under attack!

Tarzan would go to Pellucidar where he would fight to save this vast yet unknown civilization from all manner of beasts ... and savage alien Predators. This was the beginning of a succession of images of heroism and villainy, good and evil, enlightened civilizations and barbaric jungles, all of which were built on the likeness and adventures of Tarzan, a likeness and a series of adventures that, in the eyes of many, were, and still are, racially charged.
It is the fact that the Tarzan imagery is racially charged that rendered this opening sequence so ... uncanny. A ranch house in the jungle! Tarzan in Western garb as opposed to his usual loincloth chatting with his African compatriot friend— a far cry from older representations in which the Africans were Tarzan’s loyal subjects. An African with a “traditional” headdress that could be mistaken for a current hairstyle. Needless to say there is something here to write about!

I read through the Tarzan vs. Predator prose descriptions and compared them to Weeks’ pencils. I glimpsed pieces of dialogue that didn’t quite match the images. I could see where Weeks improvised and where his panels were exactly as Simonson describes. Some pages stood out. For example, in one sequence, an ambassador visited Tarzan (see figure 40). Tarzan, Jane, and the ambassador were in Western garb while the Africans were in the background wearing loincloths. Tarzan’s residence was a ranch house in a jungle clearing. I was uncomfortable with this scene in which the African jungle and its dark-skinned inhabitants seem to served as a counterpoint to the civility and progress represented by Tarzan, Jane, the ambassador, and the ranch house. Walter let me have the photocopied scripts and inked pencils. Several years later I conducted a series of follow-up interviews with Walter and Lee Weeks on the relationship between their creative processes and the representation of race in the Tarzan vs. Predator miniseries. I read these interviews against a work of critical fiction by
Jamaican writer Neville Farki titled *The Death of Tarzana Clayton* (1985) in order to argue the importance of the role of production processes, creative negotiations, and legal restrictions in the representation of race in comic books. The paper was published in the *International Journal of Comic Art* (Carpenter 1999c).

Although the idea dates back to 1994 and production began in 1995, the *Tarzan vs. Predator* comic book miniseries was published in 1996 by Dark Horse Comics, using licensed properties owned by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc. and Twentieth Century Fox Films, respectively. The idea for the *Tarzan vs. Predator* comic book miniseries took form in Dark Horse’s marketing department. Lee Weeks was approached to draw the series because he had already done a successful *Predator* miniseries for Dark Horse. He agreed on the condition that the writer be Walter Simonson, with whom he had always wanted to work.

According to Weeks, the licensing agreement was worked out by Dark Horse in the form of a “two or three page long” brief. It stipulated how Tarzan and Jane would speak and under what conditions they would kill. The Predator characters had particularly tricky stipulations because the license for the two films had different timelines. As a result, by contract, the Predators had to be based on the first film. Also, the flying disk could only be used in the first issue. As for Tarzan’s African “friends” – there were no contractual proscriptions.
Weeks and Simonson signed separate contracts with Edgar Rice Burroughs Inc., Twentieth Century Fox Films, and Dark Horse Comics, agreeing to adhere to the brief as well as relevant deadlines. They received their contracts in the mail at their home offices. As far as licensed properties go, this project was uncomplicated.

Simonson decided that he would place the story within the continuity of the Burroughs' novels and ignore other Tarzan incarnations. He did this in part for his sanity. "All the Tarzan books are written by Burroughs and can be considered one piece," Simonson said, "Once Tarzan became [corporate] and started spinning off into other media forms, you almost had to deal with the incarnations separately."

Still, the images and storylines that served as reference for the *Tarzan vs. Predator* comic book miniseries had been filtered through multiple media forms. These previous media forms include pulp magazines, pulp novels, films, comic strips, and comic books. All of these media forms pull from different sets of already circulating images, such as the uncivilized jungle or the monstrous predator hunting human prey. Simonson's decision to work from Burroughs' novel did not prevent other incarnations from creeping in because, as indicated
already, comic books are a team effort. Also, good writing reference does not necessarily make for good art reference. In the case of *Tarzan vs. Predator*, Simonson's sources were of little use to Weeks, since Simonson the writer limited himself to the Burroughs novels, Weeks the artist had to work from many of the sources that Simonson had intentionally ruled out.

The *Tarzan vs. Predator* comic book miniseries brought together two separate storylines, Burroughs' pulp novel *Tarzan at the Earth's Core* (Burroughs 1964) and the Twentieth Century Fox *Predator* films (Hopkins (dir.) 1990; McTiernan (dir.) 1987). *Tarzan at the Earth’s Core* was conceived as a crossover between two of Burroughs' previously successful series (*Tarzan* and *Journey to the Earth's Core*, respectively). While the Tarzan pulp novels featured the adventures of a British lord who is raised by apes to become the lord of the jungle, the Earth's Core series featured a group of American adventurers' exploits in Pellucidar, a lost civilization located in a prehistoric jungle that occupies the Earth's core. The two *Predator* films tell of the encounters between humans and an alien race that comes to Earth to hunt humans and take place in the 20th century Amazon jungle and 21st century Los Angeles, read quite literally as a concrete jungle. The *Predator* films and associated books and comics feature a revolving cast of alien Predators and human prey, most of whom die horribly.
The basic idea behind *Tarzan vs. Predator at the Earth's Core* was pretty much spelled out in the title. The alien Predators begin using Pellucidar as their hunting grounds. This upsets the balance of power, allowing a race of malevolent pterodactyls to take control of Pellucidar. The rulers of Pellucidar, who also happen to be the American adventurers from the Earth's Core series, are friends of Tarzan.

As with many of the pulp novelists and filmmakers of the time, Burroughs used the jungle setting to represent the flip side of modernity. Within this framework, Burroughs' protagonists, each of whom ends up ruling over their respective premodern environments, are the first wave of European "progress" and "enlightenment." In *Tarzan*, the jungle is racially marked by its location within Africa, "the dark continent." Its "uncivilized" African occupants (the fictitious dark-skinned Waziri) regard Tarzan, and all that he represents, as their lord and savior.

The jungle in the Earth's Core series is filled with prehistoric monsters and ape-like barbarians, a representation of the jungle different from that in *Tarzan*, but nevertheless a continuation of the representation of the jungle as the flip side of modernity. The fact that the jungle in Burroughs' *Tarzan* and his Earth's Core series emerge as near interchangeable symbols of the premodern further
highlights Christopher Miller’s argument that, “If Africanist discourse had not existed prior to the advent of the novel, one would have had to invent it” (Rigby 1996). The fact that Burroughs’ heroic protagonists are White men who represent European ideals as a universal good reconfigures the White male subject as a universal subject.

While bringing enlightenment to premodern people is central to Burroughs’ work, the aliens in the *Predator* films coalesce racialized and gendered imagery in service of a postmodern nightmare. In these films the humans serve as prey for hi-tech alien Predators, who possess laser-guided bombs, cloaking devices, and flying razor-sharp disks. The Predators are essentially hi-tech big-game hunters, an activity associated with White men. However, their appearance and actions have an entirely different set of referents putting forth an image of modernity gone awry. They look like masked body builders with clawed hands and feet and dreadlocked or braided hair, a hairstyle associated with Black people. Unmasked, the Predators’ faces are mostly mouth and fangs bearing an odd resemblance to a vagina. While the Predators’ technology put forth the possibility of a rather clinical hunt in which the prey is either captured or killed quickly and painlessly, this is not the case. The Predators’ hunt is a barbaric, ritualistic affair; their technology brutally effective tools for disarming and physically immobilizing the prey. Once captured, the
prey is skinned alive, after which the head and spine are ripped from the body by the Predator's bare hands. The remaining flesh is removed from the prey's head and spine, which then adorn the Predator's lair as trophies.

In the Predator films, books, and comic books a multiethnic "we" is the prey of the embodiment of the violent merger of negative stereotypes and the tools of progress. In the Predator films, novels, and comic books, the alien Predator is always taken down by one of its prospective prey. To do this, the prey must overcome the fact that it is both technologically and physically outmatched. Still, the Predator is clearly other (in both a racial and terrestrial sense), raising a host of ultimately unanswerable questions about exactly what makes the Predator evil – its technology, its activities, or its identity.

Comic book creators deconstruct previous representations in order to create new ones. Complicating this is that the creators' job functions require that they deal with the same property (characters, settings, etc.) as well as the production of stereotypes in very different ways. As a writer, Simonson deals with race in terms of words and narrative structures that inscribe power relations. As an artist, Weeks deals with race through his use of stereotypical images (both negative and positive) as well as the relationship of the images to one another (placement in the foreground, background, etc.). For instance, in panel five, page
seven of issue #1 of the *Tarzan vs. Predator* miniseries, Simonson highlights the racist predisposition of the ambassador, as well as society, by his near use of the word "jungle bunny" in reference to Africans (see figure 40). Weeks further addresses the ambassador's attitudes on panel two, page eight of the same issue by showing his expression of surprise at Tarzan's assertion that Jane and Muviro (Tarzan's compatriot) will accompany them to the savage land (see figure 40). While this example is an intentional story reference to race, the differing orientations of the writer and the artist regarding the representation of race holds true throughout the comic book.
Figure 40: Text from the plot for Tarzan vs. Predator #1 (page 7 – page 8, panel 2) by Walter Simonson. Lee Weeks used this texts to create the pencils and inks.

Shortly, in a comfortable room with one side open to the jungle, the ambassador sits, fortified with a drink. Tarzan, Jane, and the Wizari chief are also present. The ambassador has reservations about Jane and especially the Wizari chief but Tarzan isn’t interested in them. You can tell your story or get back on your plane.

The ambassador hurrumphs and then begins his story. He describes the ice breaker’s encounter with the “meteor,” two months ago. At least, something entered the atmosphere on a trajectory that would strike the earth near the pole. The problem is that there was no strike. At least no record of one. And no way it could have been avoided unless the object what entered the atmosphere was guided! There are other possibilities he says, portenseously, and makes a veiled reference to the polar opening, secrets of governments and all that. But there is great consternation in Washington and London about anybody, any nation, that might have the capability of creating an object that could actually exit and reenter the atmosphere in a controled fashion.

So the U.S. and Great Britain are launching a joint expeditionary force to determine exactly what happened. The fear is that this is some sort of weapons test by the Nazi regime or possibly the U.S.S.R. In any case, it is essential for the security of the West to learn exactly what’s happening at the pole. The British government wants Tarzan recruited because of his experience on the previous private expedition to the North Pole. Personally, this ambassador thinks Tarzan is a waste of time and government money but he doesn’t make these decisions. And what an excellent salesman he makes of his case, Tarzan looks at Jane.

Tarzan, Jane, and the Chief confer in front of the Ambassador; Tarzan concludes that he’ll go on the Polar Expedition because the timing is coincidental. He suspects what’s happened at the North Pole has some connection to Pellucidar via the polar opening. And he can always continue on to Pellucidar through the opening if the Army and the Ambassador become convinced that whatever occurred didn’t affect Pellucidar. And he’ll take Jane and the Waziris! The ambassador does a spit take!
Figure 40: Tarzan vs. Predator #1, page 7. Finished pencils and inks without text. Because Weeks did the pencils and inks he submitted finished pencils and inks to Simonson who scripted the panelas and forwarded them to the letterer.
Figure 40: Text from the script for *Tarzan vs. Predator* #1 (page 7 – page 8, panel 2) by Simonson. These was added to Weeks’ completed illustrations. Script in bold text indicates bold letters in comic.

**Page 7:**

1) Cap: And shortly . . .

2) Tarzan: So your intelligence services have in fact no real idea of the exact **nature** of the object?

3) Sneftly: None. But there was no impact, no explosion . . .

4) Sneftly: . . . And no **trace**. Which means it was maneuverable.

5) Snejty: And **that** makes **trouble**.

6) Sneftly: It’s been over ten weeks and nothing further.

    Sneftly: The OS boys think the Germans are up [to] their damned tricks again . . .

8) Sneftly: . . . but I’m betting its some Bolshivick business of the Russians!

9) Sneftly: The Brits are worried too. That’s why they agreed to mount a secret, joint expeditionary force . . .

10) Sneftly: . . . to overfly the **pole** and deal with whatever they find there.

11) Sneftly: However, the limey government insisted that you be contacted about signing on.

12) Sneftly: Some minister noted your experience in the area we’re investigating.

    Wanted to give you free hand!

13) Sneftly: Not my idea, you know.

14) Sneftly: But ambassadors don’t make policy. They **implement** it!


16) Sneftly: That’s why I’m an ambassador and not some damned jungle b . . . well . . . that is . . .

17) Tarzan: We each have our particular skills, Mr. Ambassador. Yours, apparently, is diplomacy.

18) Tarzan: Jane?

19) Jane: So I’ll pack for the **arctic** instead of the jungle.

20) Jane: . . . or perhaps I’d better pack for **both**!
Figure 40: Finished pencils and inks without text. Close up of Ambassador Snejtly “spit take” (page 8, panels 1-2). Because Weeks did the pencils and inks he submitted finished pencils and inks to Simonson who scripted the panelas and forwarded them to the letterer. Figure 4.2 Text from the script for *Tarzan vs. Predator #1* (page 8, panel 2) by Simonson. These was added to Weeks’ completed illustrations. Script in bold text indicates bold letters in comic.

Page 8:

1. Snejtly: **What?** A **woman** going?
   - Snejtly: This won’t be a picnic.
   - Snejtly: Talk her **out** of it, man!
   - Tarzan: ‘Chuckles!’ I wouldn’t stand a **chance** . . .
   - Tarzan: . . . but you needn’t be concerned, Mr. Ambassador.
   - Tarzan: My wife is quite capable of handling herself.
   - Tarzan: And Muviro and his Waziri will guard her more closely than I could myself.

As a media form, the completed comic book obscures the issue of writing vs. drawing race by not highlighting that, in comic book production, the writing and the art are separate tasks. This is borne out on pages seven and eight (see figure 40) where Tarzan and the ambassador talk about the upcoming mission. While Simonson decided that Muviro and Jane would be present for this discussion, Weeks made the decision to dress Tarzan, Jane, and the ambassador in Western garb and Muviro in a loincloth (see figure 40). Weeks was also responsible for making Tarzan and the ambassador central visual elements in the panel, while using Jane (the woman) and Muviro (the African) as peripheral framing elements to the White male protagonists. In an instance such as this the completed comic book page is of limited use in determining whether this portrayal is part of a concerted effort to denigrate women and minorities or the result of standard comic book panel composition that happens to contain a White character that, by contract, must be central.

The cleavages between Simonson's written prose and Weeks' illustrations relative to the Africans become more apparent when the two reveal their source material. Simonson built the narrative around Burroughs' early novels; Weeks emphasized more contemporary sources. Simonson worked from a narrative structure and slotted the characters within it; Weeks had to identify the
characters visually. In either case, the only proscriptions that Simonson and Weeks had to acknowledge regarding the Waziri had to do with "taste" — meaning, the avoidance of anything that the editor thinks would clearly offend readers. Ironically, the editor for the *Tarzan vs. Predator* comic book miniseries, lived and worked in Oregon, the statistically least diverse state in the United States of America and was responsible for policing ethnic images produced by creators who lived in close proximity to New York City, one of the most diverse places in the United States!

As the writer, Simonson's objective was to place property units into a narrative structure. Finding source material wasn't difficult for Simonson. He had conceived of the story as a follow-up to Burroughs' *Tarzan at the Earth's Core*, a book he had read "many years ago." The Predator characters were even less complicated to construct, as Dark Horse and Twentieth Century Fox wanted them to stay mysterious to the extent that they were mute. "They're not characters," remarked Simonson, "so much as forces of nature."

Their only commonality is that they hunt, Simonson said. For this reason, Simonson wanted this story to take place in a nondescript jungle. However, Simonson was well aware of the pitfalls of using an African setting. "The template for Africa is so different today," Simonson said, "even if you write
Tarzan the same way, he will be read differently. Africa may have been a blank slate in the past but it isn’t any longer.” Ironically, The Earth’s Core provided a perfect stand-in. As Simonson described it, intentionally playing off the parallel between this and previous uses of Tarzan as a symbol of civilization in Africa, Burroughs’ *Journey to the Earth’s Core* was, “enlightenment goes to the heart of the Earth.”

Simonson did not have any specific source material or African groups in mind when he wrote of the Waziri. “We’re creating drama,” he said; “The Waziri are characters that you can do something with. So when [Muviro’s] nephew dies (see fig. 41) it’s an emotional moment . . . you can’t do this easily with Tarzan.” He used the Waziri to fill a void in the narrative framework. “I was [copying the structure] of the Allister McClain books. There’s a hero who’s omnicompetent, ordinary [but with] an indomitable will. As the story progresses, the [hero] always picks up a second banana, a civilian, ordinary but basically the one [for the hero] to turn to.” Simonson went on to describe the Waziri as “co-equal but not co-billed,” this was illustrated by a scene in which Tarzan attempts to free them from jail only to discover that they had freed themselves. While Simonson’s sending Tarzan and the African characters to the Earth’s core, making them all strangers in a strange land created a sense of equality, by contract, the Africans could not be co-billed.
Figure 41: “A dramatic moment.” Finished pencils and inks without text from Tarzan vs. Predator #1 (page 13, panels 3-7). Because Weeks did the pencils and inks he submitted finished pencils and inks to Simonson who scripted the panels and forwarded them to the letterer. Below: Muviro loses nephew Below: Muviro loses nephew from Tarzan vs. Predator #1 (page 14, panels 1-3)
As the artist, Weeks' labor was organized around the use of iconic representations and identifiable stereotypes, which he did by adhering to the brief, as well as rendering Simonson's script. In some sections, Simonson was specific about what he wanted; in others, he left the images up to Weeks. In one of my interviews, Weeks reflected on his part in the Tarzan vs. Predator miniseries. Coming up with the visuals was not difficult, Weeks said, as this was his second Predator miniseries, and he already had Predator source material. In addition, Twentieth Century Fox sent him several complimentary packages of Predator movie stills.

Tarzan was an entirely different issue. According to Weeks, the Burroughs Corporation did not provide visual source material for Tarzan or his supporting cast. As a result, he decided to model Tarzan after the version played by Christopher Lambert in Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes (1983) movie. This is a stark contrast to Simonson's use of the old pulp novels. Constrained by the Greystoke version, Weeks felt compelled to represent Tarzan as "a man of two worlds" which he depicted in the opening scene with Tarzan in Western garb, literally standing between his Western home and African compatriots. "I struggled with what to use for Tarzan's home," Weeks said.
Eventually he settled on using the porch scenes from the movie *Out Of Africa* (1985). The change to a loincloth was in Weeks' eyes "symbolic, ceremonial."

Simonson's lack of specificity concerning the Waziri gave Weeks the opportunity to use source material of his choice. It also gave him an opportunity to save time. The Waziri were the only Black people in the story, allowing Weeks' to approach them in terms of their differences from the other protagonists. He used an amalgam of "various images" of Africans, a result of which was the use of readily identifiable stereotypical images. He said he "swiped" the headdress design from Joe Kubert's work on previous *Tarzan* comic books in part for its iconicity. Discussing his drawing of racial differences, Weeks was reflexive. He expressed irritation over racial representations in the 1970s:

The faces [on all the people] were the same [but] with different coloring. [Still], I used to be self-conscious about racial representations but you have to rely on certain racial characteristics. . . This is not to say that race is equivalent, but when I draw a gun [or anything else] I want it to be a certain type of gun . . . We need a certain amount of racial stereotyping in this medium. We have to define the limits who is what, then [we] can stretch it.
While *Tarzan*, the Earth's Core series, and the *Predator* films put race within specific frameworks, the *Tarzan vs. Predator* comic book miniseries had to reconstitute these characters' and settings within a narrative and related imagery that maintained the characters and settings' connection to previous (and often problematic) representations. This was further complicated by the fact that *Tarzan*, the Earth's Core, and *Predator* are the property of corporations with vested financial interests in the continuity and maintenance of these characters. As a result, these companies use contracts to ensure that offensive representations are downplayed, de-emphasized, denied, justified, or even redeemed, as opposed to being denounced or excised from continuity. The character briefs play a central role in maintaining the image or likeness of the characters. This is something that cannot be overlooked, the "name of the game" in comic book publishing is maintaining the value of these published properties. Not only does maintaining a consistent "likeness" make the character readily identifiable to its potential audience, but it also creates the legal justification for trademarking the image of the character.

Trademarked characters can be licensed out to other entities to create new stories or to distinguish other products. Without trademark protection it becomes impossible to prevent others from using the characters in other media forms. Trademark protection, originally conceived to protect consumers by
creating a legal guarantee of authenticity (Gaines 1991), establishes the right of
the property holder to authorize or not authorize the use of protected characters.
This right of control lays the foundation for likenesses, such as Tarzan, to amass
incredible amounts of market value over time. As a result, corporate entities will
regard the use of these likenesses with “a proven track record” as a safe place to
bet the money that acquiring the licensing rights entail. It also serves as a barrier
to entry for new characters with a less problematic history.

While a thematic analysis of the Tarzan vs. Predator miniseries would
provide some provocative commentary, it would fail to address the inherent
tensions of the production process. Although comic book creators may appear to
be free to move between specific and stereotypical images, this is not the reality –
especially not with licensed characters. According to Weeks, “The difference
between creativity and what passes for creativity [in comics] is that true creativity
is born out of limitations.” These limitations include the fact that when comic
book creators begin working the project is frequently already behind schedule,
and the creators are working from briefs that dictate what creators can and
cannot do with the characters. In light of this, any concerns for the
representation of ethnic others has to take into account contractual and time
constraints. This is further complicated by the fact that most of the characters in
use, including Tarzan, were created in an era in which there was no concern for
the representation of ethnic others. In addition, many of these older characters were created under the assumption that the White male subject position was a universal point of view.

What makes the *Tarzan vs. Predator* miniseries interesting, as far as trademark issues are concerned, is the obvious complexity engendered by the fact that it brings together multiple authors and property owners. I say obvious because the same issues are in operation in the ethnographic examples in Section Three. In the case of the Justice Society of America, we see the creation of a multi-ethnic team of superheroes from already existing characters. And, as in the case of *Tarzan vs. Predator*, they bring with them quite a bit of baggage. This is also the case with *Congo Bill* as well as *Unknown Soldier* and *Human Target*.

There are some interesting themes that emerge from taking a closer a look at *Tarzan vs. Predator*, *The Justice Society of America*, and *Congo Bill*. Each of these comic books picks up on some of the ideological and thematic concerns raised by such scholars as Bernardi (1996), Dorfman (1991), Fanon (1982), Rigby (1982), and Shoat and Stam (1994). *Tarzan*, the original Justice Society of America, and the original *Congo Bill* were created at a time when, as Bernardi argues, Darwinian and Eugenics paradigms had come to dominate ideas about race and, according to Shoat and Stam, "The enthusiasm for the imperial project
was spreading beyond the elites.” And there are many scholars who argue that the image of Africa during these periods, and even now, perfectly fits a narrative necessity as a symbol of barbarism and chaos or, to put more broadly, the other. Still, a thematic analysis of *Tarzan vs. Predator, The Justice Society of America*, and *Congo Bill* that does not account for the intersection of creative and economic considerations would do little to explain the continued use of stereotypes and problematic themes. I would argue that the use of stereotypes and problematic themes are inextricably tied to their creative and economic utility.

Within the context of comic book production, stereotypes create distinctions and make characters recognizable to general audiences, easing the way for the communication of larger concepts while blurring the lines between the stereotypical and the iconic image. This is typified by a remark made by Lee Weeks, a White comic book illustrator who worked on the *Tarzan vs. Predator* miniseries, in a recent interview, “when I draw a gun [or anything else] I want it to be a certain type of gun . . . We need a certain amount of racial stereotyping in this medium. We have to define the limits of who is what, then you can stretch it (Carpenter 1999c).” Without delegitimizing the critics of comic book narratives who decry the use of stereotypical imagery and narratives in comic books I agree with Weeks. I would argue that the use and deployment of stereotypical imagery
and narratives has a certain amount creative utility, especially in the shorthand of visual media such as comic books.

Davenport (1997) and Rashap (1986) are right to point out that Black characters a) wear costumes that expose their skin in order to show their Blackness, b) are more likely to use slang expressions than their White counterparts, c) have names that identify their ethnicity such as Black Panther and Brother Voodoo, and d) have powers that refer to ethnic stereotypes such as physical prowess and voodoo magic. However, how does one apply these criticisms in a medium in which the lines between the recognizable, stereotypical, and iconic are dependent on the subject positions of not one, but multiple authors? How does one address industry practices that assign economic value and legal protections to narratives and images that are stereotypical in nature? How does one address the use of offensive imagery as a starting point in order to tear these images down? And what are the obligations of an individual member of a creative team as they relate to the use of stereotypical imagery?

I would argue that Weeks articulates the inherent disconnect between debates about representation and the difficulties of creating representations. While debates about representation proceed without respect to time, cultural
producers operate under deadlines that, for good or ill, at once force compromises and influence debate.

As for the selection of specific representations, stereotypical images and themes are readily identifiable, requiring little or no space for explication. Simply put, stereotypical imagery are accessible. The comic book creator uses additional sources from his or her personal archives to add specificity to the representations in comic books. These collections, however, are essentially idiosyncratic accumulations, the use of which constitutes a relatively significant investment of time. The use of stereotypical images, when not blatantly offensive, further simplifies the task of likeness or property management. As a result, there is very little built-in incentive in the production process to address this issue.

In fact, a character such as Tarzan is an ideal situation for a corporation. The stereotypical and iconic elements of Tarzan are so intertwined and the character has such a long history that the problematic elements of the story can be rationalized as part of what makes Tarzan a part of his time. The same could be said about the decision to bring back Congo Bill or the Justice Society of America. It is a vicious circle.
Axel Alonso's decision to revamp *Congo Bill, Human Target,* and *Unknown Soldier* are an acknowledgement of this. In each of these circumstances he worked with properties that were perceived by DC Comics to be of little or no current value. The success of *Congo Bill, Human Target,* or *Unknown Soldier* would add value to the properties. And the downside was mitigated by the fact that DC already owned the characters. As a result, if the characters proved to be very popular they would not have to pay out any additional royalties should they decide to do a series with a different creative teams or develop a film or television project based on the characters. Or, as was the case with Axel, when he left DC for Marvel, all that he could take with him was his phone list. Ironically, it was the perceived lack of value that gave Axel and his creative teams the freedom to explore the themes of racial identity in *Human Target* or imperialism in *Congo Bill,* themes that DC Comics might shy away from in connection with its higher-profile characters.

Creator-owned projects such as *100 Bullets* and *Codename Knockout* may offer more creative freedom, but their profit potential on the corporate side is limited. However, they do serve a vital purpose. They create incentives for editors and freelancers to stay with the company, as opposed to leaving to create the characters independently or with another company.
The revamp of the Justice Society of America, in particular the creation of Black versions of Mr. Terrific and J.J. Thunder, could be looked at as the inverse of Axel's work on such underachieving properties as *Congo Bill*, the *Human Target*, and the *Unknown Soldier*. The Justice Society of America consists of an assemblage of popular and not so popular characters that can be traced back to the 1940s. Also, the Justice Society of America as property has gone in and out of publication several times over the past 60 years. And while, I have pointed their "African and Asian" origins in a previous chapter, these characters have gone through so many incarnations over the past 60 years that many readers would likely overlook these thematic elements. But the element that is unlikely to go unnoticed is the racial and gender makeup of the team.

Comic books that are named for and feature a single protagonist, such as *Human Target* and *Congo Bill* have a built in justification for the exclusion of non-White characters. That being the fact that they focus on single character who happens to be White. Still, changes and updates can be made to characters in order to make the representations less problematic. For example, comic books with White protagonists in today's market commonly give the lead character a diverse supporting cast. Of course this does relegate the non-White male to a supporting role, a critique often levied by many scholars who are quick to make arguments about ideological or thematic content but fail to address the economic
rationales responsible for content. A point brought home by Walter’s remark that even when a character is co-equal, it may not be possible for it to be co-billed.

But with a title such as the *Justice Society of America* all of the characters are “co-billed.” As a result, issues of representation tend to be dealt with at the level of membership. Having a Black character or having a female character are of much greater concern than the actual content of that character. As was pointed out in remarks by Dwayne McDuffie (Norman 1993b) and Christian Davenport (1997), when a character is created to be THE Black character, the focus shifts. In such cases, making him or her an interesting protagonist can take a back seat to efforts to show the reader that the protagonist is authentically or essentially Black. The perceived value of the Justice Society of America, as indicated by its previous incarnations and the member characters’ popularity, along with a roster that could support many characters with connections to other books, garners a greater deal of corporate attention. The upside is that it affords an opportunity for greater inclusion at both the level of production and representation. The downside is that with so many people involved it is difficult for a single vision to dominate. So a Black assistant editor can contribute to the look of the character while another employee’s stereotypical views of Blackness and poverty can influence the characters’ actions within the story.
Within the context of comic book production, the character's history increases its monetary and nostalgic value while both reducing the incentive to change and calling on the creators to resort to increasingly stereotypical representation. Whereas Axel can assemble a creative team and proceed with the project relatively unfettered, Walter and L.A. are awash in contractual concerns and creative input from many parties. For example, as Tarzan's value increases, more attention is paid to maintaining and increasing the accumulated value through contracts and briefs. In effect, the representation and construction of Whiteness is policed through the management of the value of Tarzan's likeness, through the affirmative use of contracts and briefs handed down to the creators by the property holders. While there are many racially problematic representations that persist within the Tarzan stories, these representations persist not so much as the result of affirmative acts to degrade non-Whites. Rather they are the result of the lack of affirmative acts to protect or add value to non-White characters.

In light of the legal, production, and creative constraints, what are the obligations of an individual member of a creative team as they relate to the use of stereotypical imagery? While debates about representation proceed without respect to time, cultural producers operate under deadlines that, for good or ill, at once force compromises and influence debate. This is not meant to absolve
individual creators of responsibility for representation in comic books, but it does speak to many of the issues that, as I stated earlier, predetermine the representational landscape.

My interviews with comic book creators have led me to resist trying to locate the politics of comic book representations. While I do agree that personal politics are often reflected in creative work, I would argue that the fact that comic book production takes place amongst multiple creators across multiple locales and is the product of negotiations between creators obscures most attempts to realize political agendas. Instead, I have come to see comic book production as the working out of the politics of everyday life. I would argue that these colorful stories mask the everyday lives and experiences of their creators that once incorporated into the comic books, open up the narratives to multiple interpretations and wider audiences. While the printed newsprint tells many extraordinary tales we often overlook the ordinary, everyday stories of work and play. We forget that identity - while it has a political dimension - is the bedrock of our existence precisely because it is at once lived, imagined, negotiated, and constructed ... with very mixed results.
Chapter 15

Dead Nigger Storage Revisited

It is August 18, 2001 at the Wizard Con. I am just about finished with my first beer. Brian is starting his second beer as he finishes off his second cigarette.

When we started our talk thirty minutes before, I opened my conversation with a recollection of a conversation I had had months before with Axel. At the time Axel, then new to Marvel, was developing the new X-Force. Axel’s office bulletin board was littered with color copies of Mike Allreds’ character sketches for the new X-Force. When Axel was given the title he was also given free reign to re-imagine the book.

After looking through past issues of the X-Men and its many spin-off titles one of his observations was that they keep talking about Prof. Xavier’s dream of humans and mutants living together, but it never happens. Drawing a parallel to race relations, he added that, “Even today, with all the talk about race, there are some who have made it, who have transcended. I’m thinking Michael Jordan. I’m thinking Dennis Rodman. They are celebrities. White people love them, but would they let them sleep with their daughters? Does the fact that people root for them make them any less racist?”
As we talked about the relationship or lack thereof, between Xavier’s dream changing notions of race, Brian came up. According to Axel, Brian was catching flack on the Internet for using the “n-word” in some of his comic books, all of which were published as a part of DC Comics’ mature-readers’ Vertigo Imprint. So to make a long story short, my conversation with Brian began where my earlier conversation with Axel left off.

“I am not a racist,” said Brian. “On one of the Usenet boards somebody accused me of being a racist because I’ve written racist characters. I’ve written women too. No one’s ever accused me of being a woman.” We both laughed for a few seconds before Brian interrupted in a serious tone:

It’s a sensitive issue for me. I can write racist characters ... I myself am not a racist. That’s that. [But] when you call somebody [a racist online] it takes on a life of its own. I wasn’t going to say anything. I figured it’s not something I should even address ... so I didn’t really address it. I didn’t address whether or not I was a racist. I addressed it as a writer, you know, you’re writing characters, and the fact of the matter is that there are people like these characters that I’m writing, and they are racists.
And this was the crux of the issue. How do you write about racism without working from a collection of racist symbols and terms? Where is the line between representing repugnancy, performing a repugnant act, and being repugnant? At the time of this conversation the first installment of the "Highwater" story arc—"Highwater" was a four-issue storyline in *Hellblazer* in which John Constantine, the comic book's antihero and main protagonist, went up against a group of White supremacists in Idaho. At the time of the interview I hadn't yet read the story so Brian summarized it for me.

As he described the plot I broke in, "Let's face it. It is kind of hockey when you've got the White supremacist chasing somebody down and the worst they'll say is 'Boy'."

"Yeah," he responded, "Who uses that word anymore? Nobody uses boy. Except, well, I think that's another word that's been, sort of, twisted, cause I know a lot of Black guys who call White guys 'Boy'..."

"As in 'You're my boy'.”
“But,” and there was a long pause, “I'm not a racist just because I write this stuff. I write a lot about people who kill people too. I've never killed anyone,” he paused again, looking down at his near-empty beer glass. He raised his head and continued in a sarcastic tone, “Or at least, I've never been convicted of a killing.”

We both laughed for a few moments. I responded, “You haven't killed anyone? You just don't do good research.”

“I know. How about it, I'm such a liar.”

“When you do research for this stuff its got to be hard, though, because you've got to take in all this stuff.”

“You really have to be a sponge. In everything I write, I like it to be grounded in a certain bit of realism. Even though these are fictional stories, the environment has to ring true. And ... it's hard. I've never been to prison either. But I had to do a lot of research on prisons for the Hellblazer story.”

Brian was referring to the “Hard Time” story arc. A reference that sent me back to a moment in Axel’s office when he was still at DC. It was very early in my research (see Section Two). I was taken aback by the opening to “Hard Time” in
which a White inmate is raped by Black inmate (see figures 2 and 3). Axel asked me if I had seen *Pulp Fiction*, "What did you think about dead nigger storage?" 

"A lot," I thought to myself. I saw *Pulp Fiction* during its opening week with John Jackson (see Chapter 4) and Cynthia Lee (see Chapter 13). John and Cyn were both Ph.D. students and I was a M.A. student at Columbia University. The movie sparked a heated debate. John was a filmmaker before attending Columbia for his Ph.D. He picked up on most of Tarantino’s cinematic references. He understood it, both as a narrative and a pastiche of film genres. I couldn’t get past the dead nigger storage and the rape scene. 

My mind was jolted back to the present by Brian’s voice. “There’s a book, in fact one of the books I read before I started to do that prison [story] arc. It was called *You Are Going to Prison* (Hogshire 1994). It was written by a guy who was in prison. It basically was a survival guide.”

“A survival guide to prison?

“Yeah that’s what it was. It was like, ‘This is going to happen to you.’ And you’re better off knowing this ahead of time.’ One of the things he said was ‘You
are going to be raped.’ Obviously, this is written for first timers. Cause once you go back…”

“You kind of know the drill…”

“Or you are doing the raping at that point, I guess. There’s nothing you can do about it. Fight back, [it’s] the one thing you must do. That is your only chance of not being raped. And even then, they still might rape you. But you will gain some respect, and it probably won’t go on for a long time. If you can’t fight back, buddy up with the rapist and become his … then you become property. You’re a punk, but you will survive. That is one way to live.”

We both sat in silence for a few moments. I thought back to the rape sequences in *Pulp Fiction* and the Hellblazer, “Hard Time” story arc (see figures 2 and 3) – the first, a victim of racist aggression and the second, a punk … someone’s property. “Don’t judge me,” said the White inmate as he waited to use the toilet that his Black owner/rapist urinated on. Then Brian brought it back to the “Highwater” story arc.

Brian continued, “probably, the most eye-opening research that I’ve done recently, is [for the “Highwater” story arc] I’m doing right now on *Hellblazer* … it
deals with the Christian identity and White supremacy movement in the Pacific Northwest. And doing that, it's just been mind-blowing what these people believe. I decided to do it because I wanted to do something that dealt with hate crimes. But I didn't want to portray these racists as purely evil. Because I think we all agree that what they do is evil, it's abhorrent, it's definitely against the law, it's evil, it's bad, nobody wants to do it ... but they believe what they're doing is correct. How can you..."

"Would you say that you're trying to preserve pure evil for something else? Because it seems like, on one hand..."

"I don't believe that there's pure evil. I think that these people actually think what they're doing is right. Christian identity looks to the Bible for justification. And they have a very twisted, I say it's twisted, they don't think it's twisted, interpretation of the Bible. I'm sure that..."

"To them everybody else is crazy?"

"Right. To some, Catholicism could be considered a twisted interpretation of the Bible. It's sort of 'If your not on my side of the fence, you're twisted' as far
as religion and politics goes. That's why you’re not supposed to talk about it because you’re not going to change somebody’s opinion.”

Brian went on to describe how the Christian identity movement pulls their racist beliefs from the bible:

For example, they believe that when God created Adam [that] the name Adam can be interpreted [as] ‘to show blood in the face.’ Which means [to be able to] blush, which means [Adam was] white. OK, so God created Adam and Adam was special. Then God brought all the animals to Adam. He gave Adam [dominion] over the garden and all the animals. [He got] to chose helpers. When we were kids we were taught that there wasn’t anybody for Adam. Adam got lonely. They interpret that [to be] that the animals are [of] other races. And Adam was dissatisfied with that so he [God] had to create Eve, a white woman to carry on the white race.

Reading this stuff has been mind-blowing. And it’s also helped me to understand why these people believe what they do. I don’t think that anybody’s motivated completely by hatred. I’m sure that there are but, you know, the worst fucking racist ...
somebody loves that guy, so there's got to be one thing good about him. He's married; he's found somebody who believes the same thing he does!

We both laughed. Then I broke in, "I get the sense that it's also an issue of power. I keep thinking when I was in grade school – a kid who was a friend of mine and then ceased to be a friend of mine – I had done something to him, I don't remember what. It was a legitimately annoying thing. He said to me was 'If you don't stop such and such, I'll call you the "n-word."' Remember the whole logic of it was...

Brian interrupted, "He already did. He basically already did. Any time you can do something that's forbidden it's a grab for power. That goes back to Satan. [When] I was brought up, we did not say that word. My parents were really, really adamant about it. Plus we lived in a pretty clearly integrated neighborhood. So it was like, 'YOU DO NOT SAY THAT.' [I remember] because I had heard somebody say that and I went home asked. [For some people] it's like the first time you hear fuck ... you start making up song like, 'Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, Fuck,' and your mothers eyes shoot up..."
I interrupted, "Next thing you know you're in the woodshed... The irony is that I never really started using that word till I was 18 or 19, when I was in college. Because when I was growing up, when I was little, my Dad took me aside and was like, 'OK, if anybody uses the "n-word," you're supposed to fight them. It doesn't matter how big they are, you're supposed to fight them,' and I was like, 'Oh great.'"

"Yeah, really," responded Brian, "Thanks Dad," he said as if he was a younger version of me. "You know," he continued in his own voice, "the first time I heard it really banded about I was in second grade. It was a kid, a really close friend of mine. I went over to his house. With his mother and father, they're all sitting there [using the "n-word"], and I was, like cringing. How did I feel? I don't know if it was fear, I knew ... well you go over to your friend's house and you'd like to think that they're good people. And suddenly, it's like they're not good people, it like his parents are bad because they're using this word all the time."

There was a long pause as Brian looks down at his glass and shook his head. He spoke softly, "Yeah, its something ... you know, as a kid, your mind, your brain doesn't process that kind of stuff. It's like you're in a place that you shouldn't be. You've got to go home. [I was] very uncomfortable..."
“And I bet you didn’t even know how to leave, necessarily,” I said.

“Then you become a teenager and that’s why [some people] use that word, it’s like any other word that you were told not to use. You know? You’re with your friends and you just say it. [Like] shit or fuck, the more you can pepper your language with that kind of stuff ... you’re rebelling.”

I changed the subject slightly with my next question. “I remember the last time I interviewed you, one of the examples that you gave me was watching people talk at the basketball court and picking up the dialogue. Have there been any other ... or I should ask are there other places that you go to regularly to pick up on dialogue, or do you usually just hop around?”

“I hop around, but there are places where I just know that I’m going to hear some good stuff, like sitting out in front of the church at the end of my street and there’s a school too. I love listening to the kids. The eighth graders, their speech pattern is so ... you know, it’s a Catholic School so it’s really diverse, racially. But they all talk the same. It’s jarring sometimes. And you hear the word.” Brian didn’t say nigger or the “n-word.” He tilted his head and pointed his palm up like he was handing something to me and made an almost inaudible
“n” sound. “You hear that word thrown around. But it's like Spanish kids, and White kids, Black kids, and Asian kids saying it and referring to each other that way. When I saw it, I thought to myself, that word means nothing anymore.” He went on as if he was imitating the kids, “My nigga, my nigga, hey nigga.”

“Do you think that they really distinguish between n-i-g-g-a and n-i-g-g-e-r?”

“What the hell is that?” responded Brian with hint of annoyance.

I added, “I always thought that that was just made up for the media.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Brian. He continued in a voice not his own, “I didn’t really say ‘nigger’ I said ‘nigg-ah,’ that’s different, one’s a term of endearment.”

“No. [For example] There are certain bars I like to go to in the morning [but] it’s got to be when I really don’t have anything else to do that day because I don’t want to sit there and drink coffee. ’Cause, immediately people will be like, “What are you doing here?” You sit there with those old guys and drink a beer
with them. You know those hard-core [alcoholics] who show up at 7:00 a.m., with the little glasses, sip their beer all day, watch TV. You sit among them and after their third or fourth, beer I love to start talking to them because it's always a good time. It's NOT something I do regularly, [but] maybe once every three or four months I'll just go check that out. Afternoon drunks are good too, but the mornings are the best. [Evening drunks] tend to get rowdy, you know. The day drinkers are mellow. All they want to do is drink.”

“I was thinking, as you were talking, about Cage and 100 Bullets. One of the things you said [in an earlier conversation] was that you had trouble distinguishing what you were going to do with 100 Bullets and Cage.”

“Yeah, and I really did. That was [an issue] when Axel offered me Cage. That was something [that was touched on even] when he was at DC, while I was doing El Diablo. [He asked me if I wanted] to do another [DC character]? ‘What are the characters at DC that are interesting to you?’ And I said none. Marvel had all the interesting characters.

“In my first interview with Axel [while he was still at DC] I asked him, ‘If you could do any character what would it be?’ And he said immediately, Cage and Master of Kung Fu.”
"I said the same thing. [If I could] do Shang-Chi ... ‘Well’, said Axel, ‘We [DC Comics] have Richard Dragon.’ I don’t know Richard Dragon. Who cares about [Richard Dragon]? When Paul Gallacy and Doug Moench were on Shang Chi it was one of my favorites. It was Bruce Lee in a James Bond movie. It was like so cool. Just the villains ... it had that James Bond sensibility. I loved it. I also liked Luke Cage when I was a kid. I didn’t buy Luke Cage regularly but I had a lot of friends who bought Spider-Man and X-men and Thor and all the other shit. They hated Luke Cage. “He’s just bullet-proof and he’s strong,” [they said]. They thought he was stupid. I was like “well, you don’t like him so I guess I should. [And the] Black Panther, when it was written by Don McGregor, when he did that whole Wakanda thing. He had the nutsiest villains. He had Killmonger trying to take over the nation and he had these insane henchmen. Black Panther was a book that I just went apeshit over. Then it just sort of petered out.”

“Actually I interviewed him about that. He got so much flack for writing that book. They [his editors] were always asking him, ‘Why don’t you have more White people in it?’ And he was like because...”

We both said in unison, “HE’S IN AFRICA!”
Brian rubbed his chin and said in an ironic tone as if he was responding to Don's editors, "'Can I get the rights to Tarzan? I'll throw him in.' Nah really, I really liked that book."

“So what made it difficult for you to distinguish between the two? What did you originally go into Cage with?”

“I thought that the only story that I could tell for Cage would be a [swipe of] 100 Bullets. And Axel caught that vibe too and said to me, ‘Well you don’t seem really want to do this and I really want you to do this. I don’t think you going to be this [robbing 100 Bullets]’ but he couldn’t convince me I wouldn’t be robbing from myself. And about six weeks ago, I had an epiphany. ‘Oh God, this would have no business being in 100 Bullets.’ Basically, I ... well, maybe it was because I really didn’t have a handle on Luke Cage’s character, what I wanted to do, or [how I] wanted to comment on the character. And now that I do, it’s like they are night and day and it’s going to be two completely different stories. I looked to Suge Knight for inspiration for that character.”

“Suge Knight?” I knew the reference but I didn’t quite get the connection.
“I want Luke Cage to be that guy that everybody’s afraid of. You know, the brothers respect him, and to White people he is the embodiment of ... [he spoke in a voice not his] ‘This exactly what we don’t like about you people.’ ”

“So instead of trying to take him away from being the walking stereotype, you just embrace it?”

“Yeah, I guess. You know, I don’t know if it’s a stereotype but just like...”

“I’m assuming he’s not going to be wearing yellow any more.”

“No, we’re taking him out of that costume, but he’s larger than life and he’s immensely confident in himself. And I think that’s something that a lot of White people are afraid of. Especially [when it’s] somebody who’s not afraid to use his physicality to make his point.”

“Are you doing it more as a superhero book or almost as a noir book?”

“Basically I’m putting him inbetween a gang war. He’s out for himself. He’s out for Number One. The very concept of Luke Cage is not a very altruistic
one anyway. He’s a ‘hero for hire.’ You’ve got the money, [he’ll] do it. Taking the heroic side of it too; whatever you want [him] to do, [he’ll] do it for money."

"Are you going to toy around with Iron Fist at all in this?"

"No, no I’m not doing any other of his supporting cast at all. I’m going to use some of Marvel’s mob villains like Hammerhead and Tombstone. Tombstone could be a really interesting character. He’s an albino. He’s Black. And he’s a mob boss. There are issues there ... racially, Luke Cage was also a character I was really reticent to do. Um, I guess because I have been judged a lot by, you know, race, within my work. That’s all I need. I can’t wait for the announcement to come out and then have people say this shit about how it should have gone to a Black author.” The conversation paused for a moment and Brian continued, "And maybe I thought so too. But, at the end of the day it became like, if I could tell a good Luke Cage story then I should tell a good Luke Cage story. And I’m only going to tell one story."

"So it’s going to be a miniseries as opposed to an ongoing series?"

"Yeah, its going to be a miniseries."
"Of course the miniseries could end up doing well, and it could end up as an ongoing series."

"I don’t think I will. Just because I don’t want to do ongoing stories anymore, really. Other than 100 Bullets which was, well, there’s an ending to that. I’m about to finish up Hellblazer. [As for] the Authority, I’m just going to do eight issues of that. There’s going to be questions of race in that too ... I guess I just can’t get away from it.

"Are you sure you want to get away from it?"

"I don’t. I guess I don’t. Maybe it’s something that..."

"Its kind of sounds like Southern writers," I remarked. "What is it about Southern writers that somehow Southern writers always deal with race? There is something about life in the South where the history is so much about race. I mean, think about it if you’re in the south. Being on the losing side of the Civil War, so of course you don’t just get over it."

"Yeah you don’t get over that stuff too easily. When you lose a war. My God, we had to attack Iraq to get over Vietnam."
"Who's going to do the art?"

"Richard Corben."

"I don't know, I figured that if you're going for a hip-hop look or sensibility, especially with the Suge Knight reference, you'd go with more of a manga style."

"Yeah, I thought of that too. But Axel doesn't go for the manga stuff."

"His stuff's a bit ... edgy..."

"You talk to a lot of people about this stuff. What do the brothers think about Corben's art?"

I was immediately taken back to Abbas' comments (Abbas 1997) about preservation, how it tends to exclude the dirt and pain and Alexander's remarks (Alexander 1995) about vicarious witnessing. During this conversation we had touched on a lot of sensitive territory. We dwelled on our own personal dirt and pain as it related to the "n-word," yet for every painful moment or recollection
there were several moments of laughter ... and acknowledgments of the creative utility of such a word in the medium of comics. We had each borne witness to each others' stories, the ways in which we both relate to history as well as how history relates to us. While we both related to one another's sense of feeling cornered by a six-letter word beginning with 'n', the circumstances were so different. When I heard the word I was supposed to stand and fight whether or not I stood a chance. When Brian heard the word he was supposed leave the familiar territory of what he thought were good people. In either case, we were stuck, trapped by our own prescribed actions. Still, when Brian uses the word to construct an imaginary world – that, as I have argued, gets its power from the fact that it could be our own – it comes to the reader minus Brian's own personal "dirt and pain." Instead it leaves the reader to witness this particular configuration of public, private, and personal archives from the perspective of the reader's histories and experiences.

And herein lie both the shortcoming of thematic analysis and the double edge to *bricolage*. *Bricolage, finding meaning where it may,* and *vicarious witnessing* are incredibly efficient in that they allows us to take in and incorporate new perspectives, experiences, and symbols. But as a methods of construction, as ways of making sense of the world, they substitute the meaning of the moment for all of the possible meanings and, as such, are open to a variety
of interpretations. Ironically this isn't all bad, especially from a media production standpoint. The opening sequence to the "Hard Time" story arc is a good example. At is most cynical, whether it is White supremacist who wants to validate his perspective of Black men as sexual predators or a Black nationalist who wants to revel in the degradation of a White male at Black ... hands ... the rape scene sells. More important, however, is the question of whether or not it would turn people off of the book all together. This is a doubtful proposition given the fact that it was such an obvious reference to the HBO series titled OZ, a series that has a larger share of the very demographic that Hellblazer is after.
Chapter 16
Following the Metaphor Revisited

David McGee once asked me what it is that I see in surrealism. In spite of its problematic use of otherness to fill the West's own self-imposed psychological void, surrealism fills me with hope. David once told me that what Tierney Malone and I have most in common is an irrepressible urge to make history a fact in the here and now ... to make it present and undeniable. For all its faults, surrealism has never run from the unconscious images and desires, the distractions and excess that impinge on our everyday lives. In fact, for good and ill, it has embraced them, made them the objects of representation, holding out the hope that a moment and all of its layers and dimensions can be made a visible, undeniable fact. Rene Magritte once wrote in a letter to Sarane Alexandrian that he saw surrealism as:

... the science of juxtaposing colours in such a way that their actual appearance disappears and let's a poetic image emerge ... there are no 'subjects,' no 'themes' in [surrealist] painting. It is a matter of imagining images whose poetry restores to what is known that which is absolutely unknown and unknowable. Surrealism has no room for the fantastic when it is elaborated without inner need: it is
not so much the description of the impossible as the evocation of
the possible, supplemented by desire and the dream (Alexandrian
1985, p. 9, quoting a letter from Rene Magritte).

Stripped of its romantic tendencies, surrealism reaches for something
other than the visibly obvious, something as elusive as the unconscious,
something as ephemeral as desire, something as tricky as memory, something as
fickle as the emotions that push, pull, and tug us along our journey through this
world. In giving form to the ephemeral, surrealist methods hinge on acts of (dis)
and (re) appearance.

If Paul Gilroy is correct when he argues that “Racism rests on the ability to
contain Blacks in the present, to repress and to deny the past (1987, p. 12),” then I
see hope in the methods surrealism. I see hope in the representation that offers a
moment in which past, present, and future collide against the juxtapositions of
the images of traces, remains, memory, history, excess, and desire. I see hope in
an artistic form that has made the unconscious images and desires, the
distractions and excess that impinge on our everyday lives, its very object of
representation. I see hope in the Sisyphean task of representing the unknowable
and evoking the possible. I choose to see the possibilities laid bare by
contradiction, cognitive dissonance, collage, montage, and juxtaposition. Most of
all, I have faith in the imagination. But my faith in the imagination is not blind. In fact it is tempered by my experiences as an artist and ethnographer.

In *Following the Metaphor* I described Tuesday nights at Birra Poretti's. I recently interviewed David as part of the RISD Museum Art in Context Program (Carpenter 2001c) during which he pointed out that whenever we speak of Bier Periti's we do so as if everyone was there from 6:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m., when in actuality, we drifted in and out. Still, it was all about the dialogue. And it was about everything in the world but the work and then we realized that all those things we were talking about really was the work:

I didn't know what we were doing until probably ten, twelve meetings deep ... like wait a minute, the same cats are showing up every week, every Tuesday, the same cats are coming in, always sitting at the same table every Tuesday. The same cats drinking the same drinks every Tuesday. The same cats basically having the same conversation but with new current events.

So if [we were] going to grow as persons, as artists, as socialists, or whatever. [We needed] to be a part of this thing cause at that point [we were] not getting what [we] needed from any
sector of town ... from Rice, from Third Ward, from any region. So, [we] were looking for a tribe, a community, you know, lucky for [us], lucky for the other cats [we] found it with some artists who happened to be Black. And then the group started getting bigger. Then all races started coming in. I don’t think it ever really grew outside of ten ... maybe [we] were trying to find some other things to mix in [our] own soup. To try to enhance what you were already doing.

All of those conversations were filled with a lot of the situation. Of course there [were] a lot of organic things going on and there was a lot of people’s serious expertise in certain things. There were a lot of different cats in that group.

Yes, we were all looking for something. And, yes, it was very personal. But it also informed our work, it became a part of our language, a point of identification; it was incorporated into our own personal archives from which we drew upon to create within our respective mediums.

Earlier I borrowed the term *third space* from Pink (2001) in order to describe those places that are neither home nor work, the site of a blending of the
personal and professional, a link in the chain of events that forms a small piece of the production process of freelance worker. I also borrowed the term *confederation*. Birra Poretti’s was our *third space*. It facilitated the formation of our *confederation*, affording us just “the right mix between individual freedom and group power (Pink 2001 p. 135).”

When Neal wrote about the *post-soul* generation he examined the images but forgot to explore the third spaces; he detailed the end products and glossed over the production processes. In an industry dominated by freelance laborers who come together to form creative teams that manufacture identity as part of decentralized production process, these third spaces matter. These *third spaces* matter because they shed additional light on not only the social networks and confederations that constitute creative teams, but they also shed light on the archives from which the members of a creative team draw from. It matters that a White comic book writer from Rhode Island hangs out with Black comic book artist and a Black comic book writer in the Harlem club scene. It matters that an Hispanic editor plays basketball and listens to Hip-Hop music. And it also matters when a White editor has little or no interaction with people unlike himself outside of the office, instead choosing to get his ideas about race and class from second-hand images on the television screen.
Throughout this dissertation I have moved between the issues of Black participation and representation. They are intertwined precisely because the images that circulate are continually incorporated into personal archives and (re) deployed in a multitude of creative processes, one of which – that being comic book production – I have detailed in this dissertation.

I recently had a conversation with John Jackson, author of the book *Harlem World* (2001), an in-depth ethnographic analysis of notions of race and class amongst African-Americans in the Harlem section of New York. He argues that race and class are performed through a series of creative acts of appropriation. In response to learning that the current writer and artist of *Cage* are both White men and that the current writer and artist of the *Tarzan* Sunday comic strip are both African-American, John remarked, “I guess you can’t judge a book by its color.” But thematic analyses do just that.

I mention Jackson’s arguments and my concerns about thematic analyses because they highlight stakes of thematic and textual analyses within the context of public debate. It comes down to control of the archives from which people operate. How an image is deployed, who gets to use what words, what mediums are appropriate for which narratives, these questions speak to, not only the connections that one draws between the self, the symbol, and the other, but also
to the resources from which the self, the symbol, and other are constructed. If there are no Black heroes than the only way that an African-American can lay claim to a heroic narrative is through an erasure of the self ... through acts of disappearance.
Chapter 17
The Work of the Imagination Revisited

Representation is an uncomfortable subject because it reminds us just how itchy culture can be. Itchiness, an uneasy irritating sensation that illicits a restless desire for something else ... something other than the current feeling or state of affairs. Just as representations stand in for or communicate ideas, so too do they remind us of those past moments and conflicts we’d just as soon forget. Among the most contentious, the most powerful, the itchiest of representations are those derived from stereotypes. And while it is easy to criticize stereotypical images as harmful, it is impossible to deny the impact that these images have on creative processes.

In comic books, creative teams must routinely create entire worlds from blank sheets of paper, intellectual properties, and a few vague half-baked ideas; worlds that make us forget that a man cannot fly. To do this they use their own research, personal experiences, and personal collections of source material (an archive) in a process, that I refer to, as “world building.” This has been borne out during my fieldwork amongst comic book creators. Briefly, easily identifiable images that lack specificity “draw in” or “connect” with the reader (McBean and McKee 1996). They also create a connection between the page and the reader’s
world that serves to contextualize more specific images. This continual movement between general and specific images - as well as the introduction of visual elements with no connection to the narrative - opens the door to the juxtaposition of conflicting imaginaries while giving the "world" of comics a (false) sense of depth. When a writer or artist engages in the act of creating a world, there are images that are too recognizable and too ingrained in the public consciousness to be ignored. And when a writer or artist creates a character many of these images are derived from stereotypes. For example, Shoat and Stam (1994), Rigby (1996), Mudimbe (1988), and Keim (1999) argue that stereotypical images of Africa circulate as intellectual property and that they endure in the form of collectibles, artifacts, and other ephemera. As a result, I would argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to create an African comic book character without, in some way, engaging the African imagery that came before it. This is the point that many scholars try to make when they create thematic analyses of the representation of race in comics. They argue that these images have become the starting point from which contemporary images of Black people and cultures are created as well as the standard by which the contemporary imagery is judged.

They imply that there could be a more appropriate, more accurate, more authentic representations, but, in my opinion, their arguments fall short. They
fail to account for the fact that images and representations are in a continual state of flux. They are (re) used, (re) deployed, and (re) evaluated not just by creators who were – and still are – readers, but also by fans, and by other reading publics for whom comic book images are read primarily to support social, political, or cultural ends.

I set out to describe the existence of comic book creators as life at the crossroads of myth, the imagination, commerce, and law, in order to argue that the construction of identity does have a set of governing principles. I posited the existence of archives that constitute the means through which identity is imagined. What I have yet to return to is the extent to which all of this rests on series of disappearing acts.

In Chapter 6, I quoted Abbas (1997, pp. 7-8) argument that disappearance "does not imply non-appearance, absence, or lack of presence. It is not even non-recognition – it is more a question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else." He goes on to say, "there is something very definite about disappearance, a kind of pathology of presence."

Not unlike many other media forms, early comic book imagery and narratives bare the imprint of the "isms" of their time. Still, as I have argued in
Chapter 14, there are substantial economic incentives that influence the decision to continue publishing a character's adventures. In addition, once a character or story is published, it becomes one of the many potential cultural artifacts from which new cultural products will be created. The more popular a character, the more opportunities it has to appear in wider array of forms. All of the cartoonists whose studios I visited contained a vast a array of comic books and comic related products. And just as there were a lot of commonalities between the collections, the differences were also significant.

One of the most common tasks that comic book producers are called on to do is to revamp a character – cleanse it of its problematic baggage – in affect disappearing the character's past in order to move it into the future. Grey surrounds himself with Hong Kong action films and Hip-Hop magazines and he brings an urban flare to the new Mr. Terrific. Louis Small keeps boxes of photographs of naked women that he uses to create female characters. Walter Simonson is known for his work on mythological characters and monsters. It is no surprise that he has an incredible collection of books and dinosaur stuff. These archives, and the experiences they represent, are very much a part of what these people are selling. And it is elements from these archives, that once deployed, breathe new life into old ideas.
Comic book creators do not, in fact they literally cannot, eliminate problematic images and narratives that have become associated with characters they work on. Instead, they displace one element for another. Walter creates the conditions for a series of mis-recognitions. The Waziri are still the Waziri, but Walter portrays them as co-equal. Tarzan may be Lord of the Jungle but not of these men. Africa is too bogged down in racially problematic narratives so he maintains the jungle theme by sending him to the Savage Land where he can substitute the African fauna with dinosaurs. Still, all of these moves take on their significance only in relation to the very things that they cover up.

The end result of these substitutions, displacements, and mis-recognitions is an ever-growing archive of cultural products and excess that is continually (re) deployed, (re) cycled, and (re) configured. And this speaks to a broader concern. In Chapter 6, I argued that Appadurai's argument that we exist within a "plurality of imagined worlds (1996, p. 5)" was built on a plurality of archives. If, as Appadurai (1996, p. 31) argues "the imagination has become an organized field of social practices ... central to all forms of agency," then what? If this is the case, and, as Abbas argues, disappearance leads to a pathology of presence then what can be said about identity when the archives from which identity is constructed grow ever more vast? Racially problematic images and narratives do not go
quietly into the good night. They go ... but they have a habit of coming back to haunt the living.
Chapter 18

Authenticity in the Context of Cultural Production

But what about Corben's art, which at the time of this conversation had not yet graced the pages of Cage, but had received positive responses from fans for its depiction of John Constantine in Hellblazer and the Hulk in the recent Banner miniseries? My first thoughts were my recollections of reading Critical Race Theory: an Introduction (2001) in which Delgado and Stefancic remarked that it is ironic that American English has only one word for race given its prominence in American history. I paused for moment as I struggled to put my response into words that addressed the complexity, the intersection between my feelings and what I knew of others'.

"I don't know," I responded.

"What do you mean?" asked Brian, a bit more insistantly.

I recounted my first reading of the first installment of the "Hard Time" story arc. It was between my first and second meeting with Axel. It was during that intervening time that I purchased every book that Axel was editing. I immediately picked up on the references to Heart of Darkness in Congo Bill. I
found the storyline of *Human Target* to be compelling in its foray into identity crisis. But *Hellblazer* left me cold. I didn’t know Brian at the time but I had some insights into Axel’s penchant for trying to bring a gritty reality other than the gothic and horror elements that had so dominated DC’s Vertigo line of comic books. Axel and I talked at length about Quentin Tarantino’s use of the “n-word” in *Pulp Fiction* (see Chapter 4). I continued to read *Hellblazer* paying particular attention to the art. I also asked other African-American comic book creators how they felt about it. Most of them didn’t have as much of a problem with it as I did. Most of them immediately recognized it as a takeoff of the HBO series titled *Oz*. A lot of them recognized the artistic influences of Corben’s art. And with few exceptions, they loved his work on the Hulk. But the big eyes and lips, the dark and creepy layouts – even though they were evenly applied to all of the characters, regardless of race, color or creed – it was a bit edgy – in an itchy, uncomfortable sense – when applied to Black characters. Not a problem for a prison story in which there are no heroes or a Hulk story in which there are few Black characters but, I wondered aloud, “I don’t know how it will read with Cage.”

“I can see that,” replied Brian.

“But the *Banner* stuff kicked ass! I mean there is something about your writing and Corben’s art that just works well together.”
Figure 42. Above (left to right): cover to *Luke Cage: Power Man* #17 (February 1974), cover to issue #1 of the *Cage* miniseries, and *Cage* miniseries issue #1, page three (March 2002). Named positions for *Cage* miniseries: Brian Azzarello (writer), Richard Corben (art), Jose Villarrubia (color), Comicraft's Wes Abbot (letters), Joe Miesegaes (assistant editor), and Axel Alonso (editor). As promised Azzarello and Corben took Luke Cage out of the yellow costume and gave him a more "street look."
Figure 43. Below: Cage miniseries issue #1, page six (March 2002).
Of course, this has been the crux of this dissertation, how to define working well together. There are so few Black creators and characters in comic books. In fact, when a Black character has an all-Black creative team it is the exception, not the rule. And the same could be said for Asian, Hispanic, and female characters. As such, it has to be acknowledged that racial, ethnic, and gender identity in comic books is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-gender construct. There is one exception to this rule: straight White male characters still have a decent chance of having an all White male creative team. And even when they don't, with few exceptions, strait White males represent a clear majority on comic book creative teams.

If Appadurai is right in his argument that we have to look at the social life of things in order to understand value, then what? If this is the case, then how does one grapple with the accumulated value of a Tarzan, Batman, and Superman and the relative lack thereof of a Blackjack, Mr. Terrific, or Cage?

If Urban is correct in his argument that we have to look to the ways that media circulate in order to understand subjectivity, then what? How does one go about discussing the stereotypical images or referents in comic books? I cannot help but to look at it within the context of such notions as *bricolage, finding meaning where it may*, and *vicarious witnessing* methods of creation that, for
good and ill, continually (re) assembles cultural artifacts and excess into both
evermore complex as well as relatively simple configurations. New
configurations come together and fall apart at such an alarming rate that it
guarantees that all of the excess will eventually be (re) incorporated into the
system as long as it is preserved. It is this speed, this unrelenting pace, bolstered
by a penchant for looking at the end products as opposed to production
processes, that allows us to forget, if but for a moment, that identity is always in
the making. Archives are continually being updated, (re) ordered, (re) deployed,
and subjected to interpretation. As such, there is no “authentic” or “essential”
racial or ethnic identity, just an ever-increasing number of racial or ethnic
configurations that are (re) deployed or (re) enacted.

As Brian and I sat at the bar – talking about race, comic books, and the “n-
word” while nearby patrons pretended to not be listening in – we were
interrupted by the waitress. “Are you two doing OK?”

I looked at my watch, noting that more than an hour had gone by, and said
to Brian, “I know you didn’t have more than an hour, and I don’t want to keep
you maybe we should go...”

“It’s OK, if they really need me they’ll send a search party.”
I turned to the waitress and said, “Another round please.” We continued talking for another half-hour or so, our conversation moving along only as a result of the strategic essentialism that we could identify what was Black and what was White or how White people or Black people saw things. Looking back on the conversation I am struck by the extent to which our conversation about race belied its multicultural construction and I realized that comic books – hell, any medium – cannot make an authentic anything. Yet, there is a way in which media production, be it through the diversification of its labor and products or the use of recognizable imagery and narratives, makes a promise of authenticity that cannot ever be delivered. Authenticity is an illusion, the end product of a production process, a process of rationalization ... a process of authentication.

And our conversation moved along. We held to our strategic essentialisms even as we undermined them. To do otherwise, to try and unpack it all and be functional was just out of the picture. We only had so much time and energy; as it was we were squeezing this conversation in-between all of the other things going on at the Wizard Con.

A disembodied voice emanated from the speakers overhead, “Brian Azzarello, please report to the DC Comics signing booth.”
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