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Black Heroes Matter: Toward a Critical Race Theory Framework for Comics Education

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Introduction: Representation Matters

The case for comics, along with graphic novels, as an academic intervention has been made, so now a task at hand for educators is to understand how comics might allow teachers and learners to think more deeply about issues of race and representation. Rather than engage in faux relevancy or tokenism, by which historically marginalized populations are “often treated as representations of their category, as symbols, rather than as individuals” (Kanter 209), I argue that educators wishing to engage students in emancipatory and generative forms of education can do so through careful and serious examination of comic books as critical texts by applying a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens to their study.

Comics as a medium has been defined in several ways. The most held definitions posit that comics are sequential art, or as Scott McCloud suggests, “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). A comic is a single-issue, magazine-sized, oftentimes single chapter of a larger story, whereas a graphic novel is a collection of single comics in one volume, or a single story published all at once. Comic book superhero stories make up our “modern mythology” (Reynolds 42) and may be examined using CRT tenets—specifically, counterstory, racism as normal, and whiteness as property (Harris). These explorations can afford students opportunities to fashion a sense of agentic critical literacy and praxis (Chute; Eisner; Morgan; Lankshear and McLaren), conceptualize positive self-worth, and reimagine what it means to challenge dominant cultures, understandings, and authority.

When understood through a CRT lens, comic books can operate as counternarratives and reimaginings that invite students of color to “discover and play with the identification of [them]selves, where [they] are imagined, where [they] are represented” (Hall 470). When students have the critical tools, opportunity, and ability to reimagine themselves, they can

create for themselves emancipatory and transformative ways of thinking, knowing, and being. As David Buckingham notes, the goal of critical perspectives is to work with students so they may each become someone “who is never persuaded or fooled, who sees through the illusions the media provided” (146). Approaching comics as a means of critical literacy development through a CRT lens affords students the opportunity to engage in complex conceptions of self about race, gender, and class as well as others (Brown 41). These perspectives given theoretical and practical weight are rooted in resistance, determination, and an agentic humanity.

What might a CRT reading of comics look like? This essay aims to offer a way of approaching comics education and literacy that pushes understanding beyond the borders of artistic criticism, aesthetic functionality, and simplistic academic content delivery, and into realms of social and cultural awareness through analysis of the hidden and explicit messages and metaphors found on the page.

Theoretical Perspectives

In resisting curricular forms of marginalization and oppression, increasing cultural presence through representation is often positioned as a panacea of sorts. But simplistic representation alone, which is often little more than tokenization, requires taking up careful analysis.

Thinking about pedagogic and instructional possibilities for literacy pedagogy requires a critical examination of what counts as a text. This requires recognizing that adolescents’ literacies are not authorized or marginal practices but are instead “emerging [acts] of consciousness and resistance” (Giroux, qtd. in Willis 329). Many researchers argue for engaging with youth through their literacies (e.g., Alvermann and Hagood; Hull and

Katz), recognizing that literacy is linked to issues of culture and identity (Cummins; Moje; Yezbick et al.).

In 1903, when addressing education in the US, W. E. B. DuBois noted that schools “must teach life,” meaning education is not simply a matter of learning a trade or technical skill to be commodified and capitalized upon. Instead, a human’s worth must be developed, nurtured, and given an environment in which to flourish. Writer and activist James Baldwin reminded us of this when he said,

All you are ever told in this country about being Black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be. Now, in order to survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and recreate yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America. You have to impose, in fact—this may sound very strange—you have to *decide* who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its *idea* of you (5).

If students are provided with opportunities to create and critique their own sense of identity, can we then claim that education has the potential to be emancipatory? Only if students have the opportunity through which to speak authentically, honestly, and truthfully about their lives and selves can students begin to “aspire to equality and justice,” as advocated by Carter Woodson. The significance of this approach can be seen in recent educational research that notes the importance of developing competence, autonomy, and relatedness regarding mental health and motivation (Ryan and Deci). These opportunities support holistic well-being for students often situated on the wrong side of the good–bad binary and power dynamic.

Thus, it is important to different/other/comic/graphic modes of cultural expression because students may receive different ideological and social messages from the media they produce and consume than what they receive from the adult figures in their immediate

environment. In an era of so-called “alternative facts,” in which truth and justice are in seeming short supply for so many, it is perhaps more important now than ever to provide opportunities for students to voice their concerns and resist erasure by writing their own stories on their own terms. Their complex conceptions of self are significant not only for their own personal flourishing, but also for the benefit of democracy. While this section focused on the creation of stories as a form of sociopolitical resistance, the following section examines exploration of existing stories through facets of Critical Race Theory, including counternarrative.

Critical Connections: CRT and Superhero Stories

Critical Race Theory originated as a legal framework focusing on the struggle against racism and has been used by educational researchers to foreground racial inequity in education (Bell; Ladson-Billings and Tate; Solórzano). Critical race theorists in education hold several tenets about the field to be true. First, curriculum itself is beholden tacitly and explicitly to a white dominant script and racist Master Narrative (Takaki). That is, there is a version of what is and is not acceptable and what did and did not happen that is authorized by a racist dominant ideology, and these forms are almost exclusively socioculturally white. This normalization is largely accomplished through both commission and omission, with a “hidden curriculum” (Giroux, qtd. in Willis; Apple) that sorts and selects what is academically and socially considered important to know and understand. These become the stories that are told to, about, and by teachers and students.

As race and racism are central to American society, CRT also holds that counterstorytelling is a primary means through which people of color might combat racism. Scholars and writers have used CRT to show how narratives, both fictional and nonfictional, create spaces for change and reform, and as a means of creating those narratives by and for

themselves. CRT theorists hold that the most publicly available stories are told from a majoritarian perspective. Therefore, counterstorytelling is necessary and involves subverting these ways of storytelling through reconstruction and reimagination in literary texts or forms. Critical race theorist Richard Delgado notes that counterstories play a role in challenging preconceptions, showing new possibilities, stirring the imagination, and deconstructing or destroying beliefs (2414).

Drawing from CRT's position in education, this article "theorizes race and uses it as an analytic tool for understanding school inequity" (Ladson-Billings and Tate 48). Because CRT is specifically concerned with social constructions of race and racism, this framework can be used to critique and understand superhero narratives through the lenses of counterstory, normative racism, and whiteness as property. These tenets can be useful in exploring how teachers and students might mobilize these texts as pedagogic forms of resistance. For example, CRT examines how cultural forms of knowledge are crucial to analysis of and teaching about systemic racism through counterstory (Solórzano and Yosso). Often, these cultural forms wear tights and capes and are embedded as part of a learning community's "funds of knowledge" (González et al.). I argue that it is possible for students to develop critical ways of thinking, knowing, and being through these forms and that these spaces will provide them with the skills needed to respond to the functions of systemic racial inequality.

Salience of Counterstories

While texts created by people of color may often be an appropriate site for analysis, an absence of overtly stated racial themes or characters of color should not preclude teachers and learners from engaging in a CRT analysis and framework. CRT is principally interested in highlighting and critiquing how racism and white dominance is normal rather than

“aberrational” (Delgado and Stefancic 7), but these do not need to be explicitly present.

Indeed, racism does not need to operate in explicit forms, and it is often evidenced in the tacit social, political, or cultural outcomes regardless of intent. This absence of intent was present, for example, in Derrick Bell’s focus on the predominance of curriculum that excluded the history and lived experiences of Americans of color and imposed a dominant white narrative on history.

Historically, comics, particularly superhero comics, have either avoided depicting characters of color or, more troublingly, relied heavily on destructive stereotypes (Howard and Jackson). As evidence of the former, Black Panther did not make his debut until 1966, over thirty years after the comic book format was introduced; furthermore, nearly another decade would pass before he or any other superhero of color received an eponymous title. Regarding the latter, though Singer notes that recent superhero comics such as *Black Panther* and *Black Lightning* have allowed for nuanced depictions of non-white characters, they “have [still] proven fertile ground for stereotyped depictions of race” (107).

Although it is important to engage in the critique of existing narratives, it is only a partial reckoning. Another site of analysis within comics and CRT is that of counternarrative. CRT holds that race and racism are central in American society, and further, that racial advances are tolerated only to the degree to which they serve white self-interests, or “interest convergence” (Delgado and Stefancic). Consequently, theorists also assert that stories are largely told from positions of dominant ideology and tend to favor wealthy, white, heterosexual men (Solórzano and Yosso). *Counterstorytelling* must involve subverting these norms through the reworking of literary texts. One example of this in superhero comics would be Roxanne Gay’s *World of Wakanda* (2017), which focuses on disrupting dominant conceptions of gender, queer identity, and nationalism by telling the story of two queer-identifying Dora Milaje, protectors of the Wakandan throne and potential spouses of the king.

They fall in love and run away together, defying Wakandan sociocultural and political expectations and norms. These two women love each other as fiercely as they love Wakanda itself and spend the series fighting on behalf of the marginalized (particularly women and the poor) as well as against traditional patriarchal and monarchical power structures. This story, created by a team of queer Black women, offers teachers and learners opportunities to engage in real-world discourses to disrupt the erasures too often embedded in standardized majoritarian methods of storying and storytelling; as an exemplar, it centers relationships other than white, heteronormative, patriarchal ones so often found in comics and graphic novel panels.

From a pedagogic perspective, counterstorying can serve to disrupt deficit subjectivity in educational spaces and environments. Many students of color are viewed from a deficit standpoint (Valencia 18), which externally positions them by what they are perceived to lack rather than for the assets they bring to the classroom. Much like the mutant students in *X-Men*, who attend a special covert school/training facility called Charles Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, students of color are mostly viewed by outsiders as different, potentially hostile, and a danger to normal society, even if a very few might be "good." By providing opportunities to explore stories that feature heroes who have, until recently, been erased or muted, educators can take a step toward providing these students with outlets for constructing forms of identity that resist or counter prevailing cultural expectations. Self-verification, identification, and self-efficacy (Stets and Burke 224) are often established through careful and critical examination of self and in-group identity performances, as communicated through publicly mediated outlets such as comics.

According to a 2020 study from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 41% of children's books are about white characters compared to 12% for African American characters. When students cannot

and do not see themselves represented, it is difficult for them to imagine a different story and develop a voice to speak truth to power. It is incumbent on educators to invite students in to participate in opportunities for emancipatory imagination through (re)storying. It is through making these stories of self that students begin “constructing and negotiating social identity” (Bauman 113). And it is this knowledge of self through storying that can be transformative and emancipatory. It is an opportunity for students to engage in “naming one’s own reality” (Delgado).

In addition to simply making stories featuring characters or protagonists of color available to students, additional pedagogic attention should be paid to explicit disruption of oppressive ideologies, including the logics of white supremacy. Learning communities can work toward this through what Emdin calls “reality pedagogy,” which takes seriously the value of cultural forms of knowledge and lived experience. Classrooms can center notions of belonging and heroism by engaging questions that critically analyze writer, audience, and subject, such as, with whom is the audience supposed to sympathize? How are concepts of good and evil or right and wrong positioned? What is considered “normal” in this story? There are, of course, many questions and conversations in addition to these, and grade level, context, and myriad other variables should be considered; however, the crucial point is that the presence of texts alone is not sufficient in working toward transformative and generative learning experiences.

Racism as Normal Behavior: Evolution of the X-Men

Born during the great comics boom in the 1960s, the X-Men were always “different.” Unlike their Marvel predecessors, they were not from another planet nor were they victims of a tragic experiment gone awry. They were not millionaire genius playboy philanthropists. They were kids whose genetic makeup was different from those considered normal. Their

“gifts,” or mutations, gave them extraordinary—or extra—powers simply because, as their creator Stan Lee said, “They were born that way” (Hiatt). Their differences, from abilities such as optic blasts, flight, and telekinesis, to indestructible claws, were what set them apart and what consequently made them suspect to “normal,” coded as white, humans. Intended or not, the X-Men comics have come to be stories about “racism, bigotry, and prejudice” (Wright 117), with the main characters often interpreted as ciphers for minoritized or socially ostracized groups.

Early X-Men stories were largely dedicated to mutants proving their humanity by showing their commitment to defending the status quo, saving so-called normal humans and their governments from a literal Brotherhood of Evil Mutants while not meaningfully changing the functions or ideologies of the former. As the struggle for civil rights in the real world became national and international news, readers of the comics began to draw parallels between X-Men stories of “otherness” and the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1975, the X-Men team evolved from four white kids into a diverse group of characters from various racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds, including a blue German, an African goddess, a Canadian, an Apache US Veteran, and a Russian (Wein et al). This seemingly multicultural approach to telling comic stories, while novel, did very little to address issues of direct and systemic racism apart from reiterating the notion that people fear most what they do not know or understand. By the early 1980s, however, the X-Men stories by writer Chris Claremont began to deal with racism directly. In the “Days of Future Past” storyline in the *Uncanny X-Men* comic, mutants were either exterminated or placed in concentration/internment camps, and in the famous, standalone X-men graphic novel *God Loves, Man Kills*, a wildly popular religious leader calls for the extermination of mutantkind, which he calls an “abomination.” These stories are considered milestones because they finally brought the conversation of fundamental, systemic racism to the fore. Despite the

tensions, flaws, and criticisms that the mutants-as-civil-rights-leaders metaphor entails, the stories recognize that racism is deeply rooted and embedded in the structures of contemporary society. Indeed, the X-Men continue to face persecution because bigotry is ideological and a discrete, unrelated series of actions.

So-called “normal people,” very often understood in comics to be white, do not embrace the mutants as a welcome addition to humanity, but instead perceive mutantkind as a threat and Other. Ordinary people here, read as white, are at least nominally aware of what it and, by proxy, whiteness have historically done when placed in positions of social, cultural, and political power. Therefore, because many in dominant, hegemonic positions assume everyone rational must act in the same manner, those embracing whiteness as an ideology strike out because of the entrenched belief that their fear is “rational” and therefore their actions are reasonable as well. It is this supposition, that racism is a normalized function and facet of society, that drives CRT as well as the DNA of virtually every contemporary X-Men story line. Again, these stories of (mostly) white teenagers hated and feared by society for their differences serve as a cipher for very real societal differences such as race and ethnicity.

Indeed, in almost every contemporary X-Men story, racism is “neither aberrant nor rare” (Taylor 4). From the fundamental religious ideologies of William Stryker and the Purifiers, who terrorize and murder mutants just for being mutants (a comic version of the Ku Klux Klan), to the political machinations of Robert Kelley, a senator who proposes a Mutant Registry List (eerily prescient of the post-9/11 Muslim Registry), these stories point to the fundamental problems of societal and structural racism. In the 1990s, for example, during the height of the AIDS crisis, X-Men stories saw the heroes encounter the “Legacy Virus”; mutantkind were especially vulnerable to this deadly virus, which particularly targeted those with the X, or mutant, gene. There was little support and even fewer resources offered by the larger society to help these mutants. This clearly mirrored and commented on the Reagan and

Bush administrations' relative inaction on the real AIDS epidemic because it was a "gay plague." HIV infections continue to impact African Americans the most (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). What drives such political, social, and cultural institutions is the fundamental positioning of racial inequality based on the dehumanization of people of color. These graphic novels and comics illuminate these problems in a variety of speculative and fantastical ways in order to invite readers, teachers, and learners to think about their own positionalities and to investigate critically the operations of these systems and ideologies.

It is important to engage the systemic nature of these issues because it is far too easy for audiences to distance themselves from the explicit bigotry displayed by individual characters or to shirk responsibility for meaningful action toward equity by reducing racism and injustice to the acts of a few so-called bad apples. Further, these structures must be reckoned with to resist the "colorblind" (Haney-López) limits of liberalism, wherein it is argued that since we "are all human" underneath, we can all get along without fundamentally addressing inequitable societal structures. By addressing these racist tendencies as the rule rather than the aberrant behavior of extreme individuals or groups, it is possible to confront meaningfully what Joyce King calls "dysconscious racism" (135), an attitude that simply takes inequity as the way(s) things are.

When approaching comics as an educative endeavor, it is critical for both teachers and students to read these texts with a more critical eye toward the implicit and explicit sociopolitical and cultural messages they carry and exploring them through a CRT lens allows audiences to do so.

Whiteness as Property, or White Makes Might: Traditional Conceptions of Superheroism

An important focus for thinking about CRT and comics is Cheryl Harris's concept of "property functions of whiteness," that is, the subjectivities and social positions that make the "American Dream" a feasible reality for whites as citizens more than any other demographic. The whiteness that some people possess is like a piece of property, in that having it grants privileges to the "owner"; thus, a person of color might never be afforded the same privileges, such as access to education or to literacy. This is fundamentally different from the concept of white people in that whiteness is directly linked to social concepts of power, what is considered good and normal and acceptable in majoritarian narratives, and *white people* as a phenotypic description.

This concept of whiteness as property can be directly seen in the tradition of normative superhero representation. Youth of color experience various social, academic, and cultural traumas in many social situations, such as those at school, based on majoritarian conceptions of civilized and desirable behaviors. This might be volume or comportment, or language or other sociopolitical boundaries dictated by whiteness. Mediated representations serve to delineate, replicate, and internalize these identities and expectations. And, while Stuart Hall rightly notes that a simplistic and linear conception of internalized "maps of meaning" (169) ignores individual agency, historically speaking, superheroes have been white, mostly male, and promoters of forms of hegemonic and patriarchal normativity.

According to an estimate based on 2020 US census data, 60% of Americans are white. However, major superhero comic titles continue to be predominantly male and, at the very least, white. Batman? White. Spider-Man? White. Captain America? White. Wonder Woman? White. As Superman has demonstrated, it is not even necessary to be from Earth. Heroism in superhero comics, with very few exceptions, has been exclusively a white trait. This tendency can be understood through the lens of Harris' concept of whiteness as ultimate property rights. Regardless of any other gendered, class, or social positioning, whiteness is

the ultimate thing “owned” by persons that grants them social, cultural, and political rights and privileges. This majoritarian ownership of a positive, normalized identity is a prized asset that is not only irrevocable but, for many, something that must be ferociously defended at every turn (Brown 27).

In 2013, when Marvel Comics, specifically writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Sara Pichelli, introduced Afro-Puerto Rican Miles Morales as Marvel’s new Spider-Man, there was a palpably vitriolic response from white males that “Spider-Man is Peter Parker”—code for “Peter Parker/Spider-Man is white.” As Albert Fu observes, these notions “are structured by a racial hierarchy and ideology” that heroes must be white. There was a similar refrain two years later when Jason Aaron passed Mjolnir, Thor’s magical hammer, from the hands of the Son of Odin to Jane Foster, a female human. Many responded by saying, “That’s not ‘really’ Thor,” despite Aaron’s statement, “Yes, this really is Thor.” Once again, for many, popular heroes are “supposed to be” a particular way, in this case, white and male. Any deviation from this is unacceptable for those to whom identity as white and male has become culturally synonymous with good and heroic. This positioning must be held by them and them alone. The corrosive feature here is that if white maleness continues to be explicitly and rhetorically conflated with heroism, imagination of other possibilities may continue to be limited for larger society. Other conceptualizations of who can be a hero (e.g., Miles Morales, Kamala Khan) are significant in this regard as they serve to disrupt the majoritarian narrative that white males make right.

Interestingly, the ideologies underpinning arguments regarding the fictional “real” history of characters can be seen as mirroring the debates over very real history curricula in very real schools. For example, during the 2009–2010 academic year, the Texas State Board of Education proposed revisions for the state curriculum that ostensibly focused on what they decided were key figures and events in American history. These proposed changes for a more

efficient, streamlined textbook provoked an immediate public uproar because they largely erased or ignored the achievements, stories, and struggles of non-white Americans and omitted significant, troubling aspects of American history, such as enslavement. This centering and privileging of dominant ideologies at the expense of others directly parallels the reactions that some comics fans had when they thought their way of life, indeed their very being, was under attack (Carroll; Perry) and that they were being “replaced.” This fear continues to animate atrocities. In 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, white supremacists marched with torches, chanting, “You will not replace us,” revealing the real racism that informs the ways they move through life. Multiple mass shootings in Buffalo, New York, and Charleston, South Carolina, for example, have been carried out by white male shooters who fear being replaced. And once again in 2022, the issue of what books, histories, and curricula are “appropriate” for students to learn from became an animating force for segments of the population concerned with preserving whiteness as the normative curricula.

While comics fans bemoaning political correctness in comics may not actively be a part of the KKK, “in both fiction and non-fiction, race certainly plays a role in whether or not people believe someone is qualified for a job or belongs in a position” (Fu 14), a sentiment that undoubtedly applies to gender as well. The response that Miles Morales is not the real Spider-Man has to do with similar racist complaints of qualification and fit that are found in racially hostile workplace environments, where claims are made that a promotion or hiring was based on factors other than merit. For some, a white person has earned it, while a person of color is taking a job they are not qualified for. The character of Miles Morales is seen as an inferior replacement, much the same way a person getting a promotion, or a job, is also an inferior replacement for someone more deserving due to inherent, laudable capabilities such as determination and hard work, which are socially understood to be properties of whiteness. The cultural, political, and social value that these representative identities hold for many

comics readers, especially those who identify as white and male, is both immense and intense. These fictional characters are not “actually” anything, but for some they represent everything. These heroes may exist only in the imagination of the audience, but the sense of self-worth and ideological certitude they represent for these people is real. Consequently, they complain that such and such character is “actually white” or that a recent addition “isn’t necessary” or is part of an agenda of political correctness.

Going forward, an interesting analytical perspective might be to note not only the literal changing faces of heroism in mainstream comics, but the possible implications these changes have for understanding of self and others. Students may consider what it means that, in the plot to Ms. Marvel’s eponymous title, the antagonist is the evil terrorist organization HYDRA, who is using legal (albeit racist) gentrification strategies, such as eminent domain, to take over Jersey City. Or, a teacher might provide learning opportunities for students to explore similarities and differences offered by stories told from a specific perspective other than what has historically appeared and been normalized by their textbooks. For example, a teacher might inquire about how the stories of Hal Jordan’s Green Lantern, John Stewart’s Green Lantern, and Minh Lê’s Green Lantern differ, if at all, and why this is important. They may also inquire about how background can/should/must influence the stories and characters. Students might be invited to develop a critical perspective regarding who is telling these kinds of stories, who they are intended for, if and why they work or fail to work. The decentering of whiteness in classrooms and superhero texts must begin with what Cheryl E. Matias and Janiece Mackey call “self-interrogation” and an acknowledgement that it lies at the very heart of many of the ideologies people hold dear, such as truth, justice, and indeed the American Way.

Implications for Teaching and Practice: CRT in Comics Education

Instructors using comics in their classroom can employ analyses through these CRT frameworks in their pedagogy and take up critical questions as they study these stories in their courses to powerful effect (Nash; DeCuir and Dixon). This type of critical literacy formation can take a so-called high interest text, often used for simplistic academic content delivery of plot, formula, or historical dates, and historically dismissed as lowbrow and even dangerous (Hajdu) and use it as a springboard for the creation of what Paulo Freire (6) calls *conscientization*, or critical consciousness.

[Conscientization] focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions.

Critical consciousness also includes acting against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding. (Mustakova-Possardt 4)

When collaborating with students and indeed when selecting a comic text for curricular inclusion, it is important to foreground several questions and keep others in mind:

- To whom is this text applicable? Are there analytic threads and discussions about race, gender, etc., throughout the text? Is prior knowledge, age, or culture assumed?
- Who is the intended audience? Are there valorizations or tacit normalizations of whiteness, masculinity, ability, etc.?
- How might it interrupt racist, hegemonic structures prevalent in traditional curricula, and why might this be important to do?
- Are characters of color present? What are their roles and functions in the narrative?
- Are other cultures ignored, excluded, trivialized, or otherwise erased?
- What way(s) does the author challenge or perpetuate understandings of race, gender, identity, and their intersections?

Responses to these questions may take many forms in the classroom. For example, students exploring comics through a CRT lens could create their own syllabi or reading list, or engage in another kind of collaborative inquiry project that brings together resources that discuss and explore the themes in their primary comic text. This offers both students and teachers the opportunity to collaborate and build cross-disciplinary lessons. Returning to Black Panther as a character, there are social studies facets to explore such as colonization, isolationism, and political philosophies, such as monarchies and democracies. Science can be brought to bear in terms of tensile strength with Vibranium and other metals, but students can also analyze how and why value is placed on natural resources. Finally, Afrofuturist narratives abound in Wakanda and are worth exploring and building upon. A classroom might also look at the works of Octavia Butler or Nnedi Okorafor and trace similarities and differences regarding how people of color envision the future and why.

Students could also examine real-life historical perspectives of a given character. Take for instance the character of Luke Cage. Originally a creation of the blaxploitation movement who used problematic jive talk and cleaned up the streets in the mode of Dolemite or Shaft, Cage has evolved over time into a leader in the pages of the comics. At one point, he was the leader of the Avengers, Marvel Comics' premier superhero team. A character that was once seen as a gimmick or a joke, over time and with careful writing by writers and artists of color, has become respected and accepted to the point that he recently had his own Netflix show and was featured in several others. Students may be given the opportunity and resources to examine the hows and whys of representation over time. This pushes comics education well beyond the simple identification of plot devices to consider the racial and cultural understandings of representation.

Another possibility would be to take up superhero comics that explicitly explore issues of oppression and racism, such as Marvel's *Truth: Red, White, and Black* (2004),

written by Robert Morales and illustrated by Kyle Baker. The series, inspired by the Tuskegee Experiment, reexamines the fictional history of the serum responsible for the creation of Captain America. *Truth* follows an all-Black regiment of US soldiers who are forcibly used by the US Army as test subjects to recreate the lost formula that transformed Steve Rogers into Captain America. The experiments lead to the company's wholesale mutation and death apart from Isaiah Bradley, who manifests the same powers as the previous Captain America. He is imprisoned by the US government and is largely unknown to the wider public but becomes a legend within the African American community. Clearly, there is ample room for discussion and exploration of US history and to examine how artistic narrative can afford opportunities to consider real-world implications.

Drawing on the success of soundtracks from recent superhero films such as *Black Panther* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, students might curate their own playlists using musical recordings that examine and explore social, political, or cultural issues raised by a given text, as well as its genre-specific, aesthetic, cultural, and generational implications, and import. Given the online nature of youth musical consumption, these playlists might be shared online with selections being presented in class and given context for inclusion on their mixtapes. Finally, a generative possibility might be to envision how students might create their own comic narratives. This is not a new idea as many have previously considered the pedagogic merits of student-generated comics (Cary; Bitz; Morrison et al.; Hughes et al.), but none of these studies have explicitly explored bringing a forthright analysis of race or social justice into the conversation.

Students and classrooms engaging in a deep reading of these comic book texts can learn how to look beyond the Boom! and Pow! to examine how cultural, social, and racial representation is created, transmitted, and reproduced. These CRT readings of comics may well afford students and learning communities the opportunity to think about how to

meaningfully engage with these cultural forms, toward what Ernest Morrell sees as a way to “promote academic achievement, and to prepare students for critical citizenship in a multicultural democracy” (75).

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