

**Between the panels: How anti-Black racism has recycled myths of the Black body in  
comic books**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts

MA Program in Social Justice and Equity Studies  
BROCK UNIVERSITY  
St. Catharines, Ontario

October 2012  
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### **Introduction: Where are we going?**

The mythic nature of comics endows ordinary people with powers that are beyond human capacity. The pages are full of individuals who can defy the laws of nature and battle overwhelming odds without a trace of fear or hesitation. For this reason comics have become immensely popular and have been used for a variety of ideological purposes (Coogan 2006:238). The comic book superhero remains a fantasy grounded in real world situations and history (Wright 2001:184) which makes them identifiable and enviable. Children (and some adults) want to be superheroes because they stand for something and exist as a metaphor for freedom from everyday concerns. When this much emphasis and importance is placed on a figure there exists a responsibility to shape a character that may have faults, but who would not send the 'wrong message'. This, however, is not the case with all superheroes. Some Black superheroes have been created from prejudiced typologies that have recast racist histories and stereotypes.

The continued use and recycling of racism has become a part of comic book culture and has literally been drawn into the very essence of Black superheroes. This work strikes a balance between understanding superheroes as a motif belonging to the world of comics and the racism that is inherent in the design and rendering of the Black superhero. Also, this work shows that there is no innocent reading of the blackness. As will be shown later, blackness is a category of definition which is very difficult understand and engage with objectively without choosing a ground from which to begin. This work selects an appreciable standpoint from which to look at Black superheroes as cultural creations which reinforce specious attitudes that continue to exist within North American society/culture

Contemporary readers and scholars of mythology have at their disposal historiographical and theoretical tools to trace the patterns of mythic transmission including the creation of mythic subject matter. This project does the same. My work traces the history of modern mythic motifs, and more specifically, the perpetuation of racist-mythologies of the Black male body represented in the popular medium of superhero comic books. By historically tracing the creation of the contemporary popular notion of the Black male body, I examine how racist images and narratives are communicated to audiences that read the versions of these myths.

For the most part, a study like this has not been done. The works of previous mythologists (Detienne 1986, Csapo 2005, Campbell 1956), psychoanalysts (Jung 1964, Fromm 1951) philosophers (Cairns 1962, Gordon 1995, Henry 2000) and cultural theorists (hooks 1992) study particular facets of racism or mythology as they either come out of cultural history or slavery but rarely (if ever) examine mythologies and racist discourse together. There have been few critical interpretive analyses which explore the intimate connections of racist depictions in comics with western hegemonic mythologies of the racialized other.

There are several problems with the way comic book scholarship has dealt with the notion of race. Very few, if any studies, take into consideration the tension which exists between the ideal world/life of a Black superhero and the real life situation of Black individuals. Comic book publishers, endowed with symbolic and social power, create images that are disseminated for entertainment but also contain ideological messages. On the surface, it appears that a canon of Black superheroes supports the continuation of multiculturalism and racial togetherness; however, the repeated and recast

stereotypes undermine this goal. Comic book scholars occupy their time with defining the art work, the social history and the genre categories of comics but not the inherent problems with comic creation. Therefore, this work challenges comic book scholarship to 'see through different eyes'. To dissolve the common methods and theories of comics study and focus on the negative ideologies that continue to reproduce White, hegemonic social norms.

Versions of Black male character types continue to populate contemporary media and in many ways these are analogous to minstrelsy theatre productions. These types or motifs have become invisible because they are used in such a way as to be naturalized. These motifs are naturalized because they fit so well into the literary/theatrical positions that have been created for them that they seem an appropriate and necessary piece of the story. The motifs are simply reworked in the name of progress each time a different medium makes use of them. Two problems arise from the recycling of these motifs. The first is that the racism inherent in each type is never removed. Authors of all sorts retool the portrayal or the interpretation of the motif to make it seem progressive while never addressing its specious and harmful origins. The second issue arises when authors unthinkingly use such a motif without its critical interpretation. By continuously using and re-producing these motifs, racism is not only recycled but it is implanted in popular culture as a viable means of telling or furnishing a story. Therefore, I take both the psycho-historic theory of Joel Kovel who instantiates a grand psychoanalytic theory for historically changing forms of racism and the historico-scripting theory of Ronald Jackson who expands upon the notion of "scripting", a discursive tool which brands the

bodies of Black men in popular media with racist labels, as a starting point to examine the naturalized mythification of anti-Black racism as a form of narrative entertainment.

Accordingly, studying the history of minstrelsy-era myths, entails taking on the study of racism itself. By uncovering racist narratives of representation that are embedded in superhero comic books, I am able to show that modern popular culture is a vehicle for the communication of racist mythologies. Not only are these comic books vehicles for racism, they are a vehicle for nearly unchanged representations of anti-Black racism that existed in the performance and representations of the post-slavery era in Canada and the United States. Comics are unique in that they are a fusion of text and art meant to convey a narrative. Comic book representations “epitomize the accessibility, disposability, and appeal to instant gratification that lie[s] at the core of modern consumer culture.” (Wright 2001: xiv) Therefore understanding the continued perpetuation of racism through comic books is a way of understanding an important facet of modern society’s way of having access to, consuming and redistributing racism

### **Comics and Racism**

Contemporary culture defines a comic as a graphic medium in which images and text convey a structured narrative. Not to be confused with a graphic novel or more “realistic” comics which depict real life scenarios, superhero comics are a genre of comic books in which the hero and often the antagonists have superhuman or extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, mystical skills or highly developed mental and physical traits (Coogan 2006:30). This genre is also often marked by the use of costumes which express the character’s biography or origin and are the main indicators of a secret identity (30). Because of the symbolic appeal to child’s play in the taking on of identities, this

genre, for the most part, has escaped critical examination of core racial tropes. For those who use comics as a tool, believing that comics promote literacy and stimulate the imagination, also ensure the genre is undervalued as a space for traffic in racist discourse.

Accordingly, the study of the communication of racism is necessary because of what I call symbolic ingestion. Consumption of the symbols/motifs that exist in the text is the intermediary step between what is on the page and the interpretive ability of the reader themselves. As such, I define this as a subcategory of narratology; the “ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that tell a story. Such a theory helps to understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives” (Bal 2009: 3). By studying the storytelling aspect of comic books and their repeated tropes, I uncover the transmission of racist labels through the representation of Black male characters. By illuminating the forms and types of anti-Black racism which are repeated in comic book art and narrative, I call attention to the serious issue of the continuation, rearticulation and legitimation of racism.

Furthermore, comics and graphic art are major parts of popular culture; they provide conventional and repeated tropes that characterize familiar stories of the culture in which they are created (Coogan 2006, Wright 2001, McCloud 1994). They also provide a unique discursive text which is actively engaged in by groups of loyal followers called ‘fans’ as well as a not so-totally-engaged population of casual readers. Because comic books draw from cultural memory to re-present common tropes and stock characters, I contend comic books with Black superheroes rearticulate racist tropes about Blackness and Black masculine identity into the cultural ‘fabric’ from which storytellers

draw their material. The inclusion of racism in the cultural memory is the defining way that stereotypes continue to be reused.

The question remains as to why I have chosen to look at Black superheroes rather than depictions of Black males in all forms of comics. The answer I provide is that apart from being the main stars in the medium that I have chosen, superheroes reside in a privileged epistemic place in contemporary western culture. Since their inceptions in the 1930s superheroes have come to represent several hegemonic culturally desirable character traits and have provided a form of literary escape for children and adults. In many ways the superhero is a metaphor for freedom, not just of freedom from physical limitations but also freedom from ineffectiveness (Coogan 2006: 14). Superheroes' impressive strength, intellect and meta-human powers set them up as idealized version of humankind. They do not have to obey the laws of nature and they can always do exactly what they want. They never have to wait for the right moment to act nor do they have to wait for the necessary means (like money or a car) to be available. In most superhero comics the hero has all of these essential objects at their disposal and if they do not have them, they probably do not need them. While Spiderman was never rich, he had no need for a car when his own genius and superhuman abilities let him swing from rooftops and flagpoles.

It is because of these fantastic powers and circumstances that superheroes are the ultimate metaphor for the Western conception of freedom and consequently, can also be used for ideological purposes. With names like Captain America, Captain Britain and Superman, superheroes are ideological creations that can stand in for idealized White male humanity, flawless patriotism and unblemished political sentiment. But with all of

these positive notions attached to the superhero personality and body, a great responsibility that should exist, is often missing. When one thinks of superheroes one thinks of the virtuous, but that is because we never see the heroes' faults and when those faults are displayed, readers categorize them in a literary fashion which adds depth to the character. Superheroes do not have liabilities like regular human beings (Peterson and Park 2008: 9). They are not embroiled in Ponzi schemes nor are they kidnappers and molesters in the "everyday" sense of the word. That would make them more like "ordinary" people. It is precisely their extraordinariness that is the source of their appeal.

Though the heroes represented in this study by the analysis of a Black African superhero are all "good guys", what must never be forgotten is that these heroes have been purposely created for the audience to enjoy. Fans would not delight in seeing Batman kidnap a child nor would fans dedicate themselves to a five issue run of the Hulk using his intellect to cheat the elderly out of money. However, when the creators are putting pen to paper they are not thoughtfully engaging with what it means to name and dress a Black hero in the likeness of an animal nor are they thinking about the nuances of Caribbean religion when they have Black superheroes shout out the names of Voodoo loas and spirits. These overlooked details are why I have chosen superheroes; they are supposed to be characters that the fans can look up to and emulate but when some heroes are shaded darker than their counterparts, there is a history that is invoked which is nearly always overlooked. Racism, once more slips through the cracks.

I have structured this work to help guide the reader through the certain pertinent aspects of comic book study. I start by laying out the method and theory that I use to study the comics followed by a chapter on the most influential literature in the fields of

comic book scholarship, race theory and the study of stereotypes as they are connected to my project. This gives the reader a feel for what is “out there” and how my work differs from what has been done. Chapter two specifically looks at the use of stereotypes in minstrelsy theatre and how these master tropes were developed in the social psychology of the dominant White hegemony. Chapter three picks up on the theme of the Black superhero body and how it is uniquely crafted to be a vehicle for distinctly Black stereotypes. Stereotypes (and psychohistory) are then used in chapter four where I analyze three eras of Black Panther publication. It is in this chapter where I make a case that racism has become a deeply entrenched ideal in Western culture, resulting in its continued use in comics. Black Panther serves as a unique creation of the White dominant culture, as, at the time, there were no cognate Black African superheroes. I end with a brief conclusion summing up the work and providing suggestions for further studies.

In summation, this project is aimed at exploring the mythologizing of racist stories and character types that have been almost unchanged yet greatly nuanced, from the time of slavery until the present. As well, the task of this work is the examination of the continued use of these motifs as subject matter for story lines and character histories/biographies. These characters (depictions/representations) have found grounding in the matrix of Western culture, much like other archetypal forms, and have become conventions that are commonly used in popular culture especially in the under-considered media of superhero comic books.

### **Methodology/Methods**

Comics and graphic art are central to popular culture. They are popular amongst the young and have a strong following with adults as well. Because they are so popular

they have become socially relevant texts which can be filled with images created from imagination and fantasy or real life situations. These images, however, can be symbolic of perceived beneficial social traits; like heroism and justice or negative human failings; such as prejudice and racism. Superhero comics are widely distributed and as such they serve as the perfect vehicle to carry ideological messages and images. To fully understand the importance of comics and their narratives, it is necessary to critically engage with and assess the images and texts that constitute them. As an academic comic book reader, I find it very important to challenge the notions of racism that can be found in mainstream superhero comics that feature Black superheroes.

For a better understanding of what makes the superhero distinct from other literary/ folkloric heroes and what makes superhero comics a distinct genre, I will iterate some of the aspects of what makes a superhero. Superheroes can be defined as any character with a pro-social mission who is in possession of super powers. These powers can be advanced technology, highly developed senses (mental or physical) or mystical abilities. Generally the superhero has a code name and an iconic costume which helps to define the origins and biography of the character (Coogan 2006: 30). This tells us exactly nothing, other than a superhero is mostly defined by the “super” aspect of their name. While it cannot be denied that when dealing with super heroes you have to deal with super powers, merely defining the powers does not give a clear indication of why they are considered heroes. Coogan’s definition above admits to the heroes having a pro-social mission which generally means the superheroes are selfless and conform to the common, hegemonic North American society’s understanding of what it is to be good. But this definition of the superhero more clearly demarcates them away from super villains

instead of moving them toward the category of hero. It is necessary to be pro social and selfless so readers are not confused between heroes and the concept of villains, their arch nemeses, who are often portrayed as selfish and anti-social.

Perhaps nuancing the definition may provide more clarity. According to Bradford Wright, the only motivation a superhero has is the desire to help humanity (2001: 185). This addition supports the superhero striking out into new ground. The commonly termed heroes of contemporary society (firefighters, military personnel etc.) and those of literature do not have this characteristic as part of their make-up. We all know that contemporary heroes are more often than not, human, and as such they have well documented feet of clay (Peterson & Park 2008: 9). They are frequently at the center of scandal and they certainly do not have the morally perfect character of a fabricated being. Literary characters, in comparison, are not always out to help humanity, although Joseph Campbell would say that the goal of their mission is to restore some power to their people (1949: 18). Even taking into account Campbell's notion of the return with experience, we see a limited opportunity for the powers that have been brought back to be used. It may be that the hero of folklore reaches out to a specific community or religious group and as such, can only make specific lives easier. In opposition to this, the superhero knows no boundaries. While Black Panther rules in Wakanda he has more than once travelled to America to stop some evil from being committed against his own people or the world. The same can be said about Superman (who can traverse the world in seconds) and the extraterrestrial exploits of the X-men, Avengers and Fantastic Four as they have literally saved the entire planet from more than one alien menace. This is not to say, however, that there is no overlap with folkloristic heroes. Religious heroes such as

Zoroaster, Jesus and Mohammed are commonly portrayed as bringing redemptive powers to the world to save humanity from some form of destructive entity. Having examined what makes a superhero super and distinct from other versions of heroes, I now turn to what constitutes a comic.

Comics have most famously been defined by Scott McCloud (1994) as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response” (9). Just as famously this definition has been derided because it is too vague. McCloud’s definition could include anything from the comic strips in the Sunday newspaper to a witty T-shirt or even the Bayeux tapestry and Egyptian hieroglyphics. McCloud has done a fine job of telling us what a comic would look like but for the purposes of academic writing he has left out many features that would distinguish a comic from any of the examples that I have just given. What McCloud lacks is a characteristic that can be considered part of a comic alone, something that sets it apart from any other pieces of fabricated sequential art. To fill in this oversight, Goggin and Hassler-Forest (2010) take a concept that is used in McCloud’s work and expand on it as the crucial aspect of what defines a comic.

Goggin and Hassler-Forest (2010) attach great importance to the ‘gutter’, the space that exists between the panels in a comic book. For them this is the determining formal and theoretical factor that must exist for a comic to be a comic (1). Without this space the reader is unable to perform the interpretive act that makes sense of: the passage of time, the performing of action or any other relationship that exists between two (or more) images that exists side by side (sequentially) (1). Unlike the Bayeux tapestry, a witty T-shirt or Egyptian hieroglyphics, the gutter marks off interpretive and

narratological space that sets comics up as their own medium. Certainly the gutter exists in the Sunday funnies, but for Goggin and Hassler-Forest it is not a problem to call those comics, after all they do share great similarities with comic books. What the authors are trying to get across is a more nuanced definition of what is essential for a piece of sequential art to be called a comic in general, which is most necessary for academic work to take place.

Lastly, Robert C. Harvey (2005) and Bradford Wright (2001) make two further distinctions. Harvey postulates, for a comic to be defined as a comic there must be an element of art in sequence as well as the gutter, but also the juxtaposition of words/text with the image of the characters. Without the inclusion of words the image is not able to convey its message (Harvey 2005: 19). For Harvey then, all comics are a sub-set of pictorial narratives that include a visual, not audio, representation of words that help the image convey its message to the reader/audience (21). Wright adds that comic books adhere to their own aesthetic vocabulary (Wright 2001: xiii), meaning that there are certain artistic conventions that are most commonly seen in comics. Generally, comics are created with bright colours, cartoon-like renderings of both people and objects and spaces between each panel. These characteristics are in opposition to the more structured and life imitating aspects of what has come to be known as “high art”. This, however, does not mean that all comics are brightly coloured children’s books, only that a majority of comics can be recognized by their distinct style. This particular artistic vocabulary allows for the comics to be created, distributed and marketed based on their own merits directly to the customer/audience (xiv) without having to ascribe to any pre-fabricated notions of what “Art” is.

When we take all three of these definitions together we are able to construct a matrix for the definition of a comic book. The comic book must be a sequence of pictorial narratives that include words in a visual and not audio format that are separated by narratological spaces which enable interpretive actions by the audience and which adheres to its own aesthetic vocabulary. When this form of art is bound together in a book format we have what could sensibly be called a comic book. Notice that this definition works for all kinds of comic books; I am wholly unconcerned with deconstructing the meanings of graphic novels, comic trade paperbacks, adult comics or any other of the myriad names that have been given to bound, sequential art with visual text and gutters. It will suffice to refer to the above definition to understand all of the other ‘types’ of comic books that can be mentioned. I was and am still concerned with a workable definition that allows for the construction of a precise argument on a strong and reliable base that will hold up to criticism. As such, for the remainder of this work when I employ the term comic book I am referring to the definition that has just been worked out.

Also, of central importance to my work are notions of race and even more specifically blackness. I have chosen to use the spelling Black (with a capital ‘B’) instead of “black” throughout the thesis for two reasons. In a study of art or visual culture the word black denotes a colour, a value on a scale that represents visible gradation. The second reason that I will capitalize Black when dealing with persons is ideological. I will be using Black as a substitute for African-American, Caribbean-American or any other combination of hyphenated Black-Western cultures. This is not only for simplicity but also to avoid misnaming or miscommunicating information about a particular group. Indeed, given that the characters I examine represent both Africa and the Caribbean

suggests a consistent nomenclature is required. This project is about anti-Black racism in general, despite the created nationalities of the superheroes.

The motivation behind this work of interrogating the representation of Black bodies in superhero comics is one that is based in understanding the relationship between the dominant hegemonic group creating the representation and the minority group being represented. To understand this relationship, one must accept a method of study which would be conducive to both the close reading of the texts that are involved as well as a philosophical system which would support that close reading. Also, the method must be able to catechize the historical continuity of the symbols and signs which make up these representations. Therefore, I have employed a semiotic approach in conjunction with discourse analysis to understand the relationship that exists between mainstream comics creators and the representations of Black superheroes in their comics.

My work deals with a system of communication called comics. Comics represent cultural artefacts that engage in a discourse with readers. By representing feats of meta-human abilities comics are able to do ideological work. Superheroes are symbols that signify allegories of freedom, morality, patriotism and other various ideals that are shaped by the dominant society. Because comics are created by a folk group, understood as any group that shares at least one common factor; in this case, the creation of comics (Dundes 1965: 2), comics become a vehicle for the ideals of that group. These ideals are translated into comics by the dual mode of picture and text, two forms of 'language' that are read by the audience. To understand what kind of language is created in the establishing of a comic, I turn to the work of Roland Barthes in which he considers specific forms of language "myth".

According to Barthes, myth is a system of communication (speech) that is defined not by the object of its message but by the way it utters the message (1957/72: 109). Barthes goes on to explain that myth does not have to just be oral or literary but can also be found in images, sports, publicity and various other mediums which can support mythical speech (110). Myth, being so pervasive, can easily be found in comics where text and image come together to form the narrative. Barthes also states that myth- speech must be historically chosen, meaning that the representation/message that is being conveyed has been around for a time and imbued with a social script. Anything can be myth if it is part of language, but only those messages which have existed and continue to exist, infused with a social-symbolic value, can truly be carriers of a social usage. To this end, Barthes gives the example of a tree being used in literature by a specific artist. That tree is readily identifiable as a tree but it has been adapted to a “certain type of consumption” in which it is laden with images and symbols and “literary self-indulgence” (109). The tree is not a tree that one sees outside of their window because it has been adapted to literature. The tree has become words on a page, in a certain setting, written in a particular mood and included in a scene which infuses it with symbolic meaning. In much the same way, blackness in comics is saturated with cultural meanings that are used in particular ways. I argue that this mythic depiction of blackness marks off the characters from other White superheroes as somehow inferior and in line with historical racist stereotypes.

Finally, in understanding the myth of blackness in comics, I turn to the notion that mythical speech is material that has already been worked on. For Barthes, mythic speech can only be made of the materials that are made suitable for communication (110). This

means anything that is historically chosen as discourse has been modified and shaped to represent the ideals of those who have shaped it. In many cases this can be a form of censorship or modification for the time in which it was created. A readily available example is the collection and recoding of fairy tales. These stories were oral tale types told for amusement. When the stories were collected by their compilers they could not be published exactly as they were heard. Even if the collectors had tape recorders they could not account for dramatic pauses, intonation and the varying of pace for dramatic effect. Therefore, even the most careful recorder of stories has the job of making the tale “read properly”, which involves personal choice, judgement and tastes (Hallett and Karasek 2002 :xvi). The more a work is passed down and retold, or in the case of comics, rewritten and drawn by different artists, the more modification and mythologizing can occur. According to Barthes, it is in the continuous modification and re-presenting of material that mythologizing takes place. Authors add their own modifications and the work becomes more suitable for communication to the various audiences across both time and space. Consequently, Black superheroes have been modified and “worked on” by several artists, each one making a cultural, historical, symbolic and personal modification to package the hero as desirable during the time on which they worked on them. As I will go on to demonstrate, while this can nuance the superhero, it most often results in differing layers of racism being worked and reworked into the essence of the superhero and comic.

Barthes and the semiological approach can only account for half of the method needed to study comics. To fully understand how the mythologizing and symbolic representation of language is enacted and employed by writers and artists I turn to critical

discourse analysis. As I have stated, my aim is to explore how racism is communicated through comic books with Black male superheroes; in this endeavour I engage in a critical historical analysis through the use of critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis can be an ambiguous term, sometimes referring to the close reading of a text and other times meaning a genealogical exposition of a field of study (Steckley and Letts 2007). Moreover, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a critique of social inequality, focusing on the role of discourse in reproducing dominance (vanDijk 1993: 249).

Dominance is defined as the exercise of social power by groups, institutions or elites that results in social inequality, which includes political, gender, racial/ethnic, class or cultural inequality (249-250). Critical discourse analysis allows the researcher the ability to understand the strategies of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events that play a role in production of these inequalities. Though not all types of discourse serve to create inequality, CDA focuses on those that attempt to legitimate illegitimate claims on social power. Subsequently, CDA examines rhetoric that aims at the concealment, playing down and leaving implicit of social power by powerful social actors (250). In my current study of comics, this means an application of CDA to comic books made by the major publishing house, Marvel comics. Marvel's size and relationship with fans allow it to generate rhetoric of social progress by displaying different forms of Black superheroes. Interrogating the Black Panther comics as a representation of how Marvel deals with Black superheroes demonstrates how social power, in the hands of the elite (comic creators and editors), continues to reproduce social inequality in the form of recycled racist tropes.

More specifically, for my work, CDA is used to engage the power structure that continues to reproduce the social inequality of racism. Racism is most often found to be a controversial topic especially among the elites who more often deny its existence than recognize it as a serious issue (vanDijk 1999: 147). I use elites in the same way as vanDijk as socially powerful groups or institutions who are able to affect society. Explicitly, I have in mind Marvel entertainment. Most of the social elites in institutions like Marvel view themselves as progressive and liberal and therefore think it preposterous that anything they are creating could be considered racist (147). Therefore, they do nothing about the continuous negative representation of Blackness in the comics. Moreover, the non-biologically based forms of racism (sociocultural and hierarchical categorization) appear in self-legitimizing media like comics (147). By constantly referring to a small canon of Black superhero narratives, Marvel legitimates its self-indulgent multicultural vision. Marvel engages in manipulation: “communicative or symbolic forms of manipulation as a form of interaction” (vanDijk 2006: 360), with its fans and the wider public. They make others believe that continuing to support Marvel is supporting a publisher that maintains an ethnically diverse and non-racist narrative universe. Accordingly, the dismissive attitude of many academics toward the historical study of racism compounds this issue by never taking a critical look at how comic books can influence racial thinking (vanDijk 1999: 147). As vanDijk states “racism is about power and dominance...and hence about groups and institutions and more complex social arrangements of contemporary society.” (148). Comic book publication as a social institution, requires critical study with an eye toward racism, eyes which are not served by the myth.

In summation, vanDijk, makes it clear that CDA engages with dominance and power. Power is necessarily made of two aspects; action, which is force and cognitive control which is exercised through text and talk (1993: 254). Physical force plays almost no role in this work; however, cognitive and epistemic control is a central theme. By applying a psychoanalytic theory concentrated on race, discussed in theoretical framework section, through the lens of the cognitive control focus of critical discourse analysis I was able to look past the material artefact (comic book) and engage with the significance of the content/message as a symbolic of a wider meaning (Barthes 1972: 111).

In the endeavour to understand how racism continues to be part of Black superhero comic books I have been instructed by several important texts from diverse fields including literary theory (Gates 1988, Bal 2009), comic book theory (Coogan 2006), education (Freire 1968), race theory (Fanon 1967), cultural theory (Zizek 2008) art/visual culture (Pieterse 1992, Nelson 2010) and philosophy (Henry 2000). The value of such a transdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis is the comprehensive amount of information that it covers not only historically but also contemporaneously.

Subsequently, along with the above reasons for critical discourse analysis as a method, I engage with CDA because I agree with Ronald Jackson's notion of scripting. For Jackson, all bodies are inscriptive surfaces (2006: 5); areas on which the dominant group is able to construct, write and impose a narrative that takes on assigned social meanings regarding Blackness (12). These social meanings have long historical precedents that connect the history of the Black body to mistreatment and misrepresentation approximately starting with slavery/minstrelsy and continuing through

the medium of popular culture up to contemporary time. By analyzing the scripting that takes place on the Black body I am able to understand how the corporeal text is written and socially interpreted.

The character selected for analysis is The Black Panther, an African King and superhero operating out of the fictional country of Wakanda in Africa. This choice was based on the notion that there were no similar or cognate characters in print at the time of his debut. This means that this character is drawn from the popular mythologized American conceptions of what African male superheroes should be. Black Panther is identified as being 'Black' and has origins in a place traditionally inhabited by Black populations. This character is also portrayed as being deeply embedded in his respective African traditions (Black Panther is a tribal African King). The justification of character choice, therefore, relies on the notion that this character is supposed to be a representation of Black culture that has a well-documented colonial history. These artificial constructions of Blackness from the dominant White society erase identity by defining Black characters solely by their country, their perceived customs or their colonial history. In essence, the characters become stereotyped notions of blackness as it is popularly believed to be acted out in Africa.

Black Panther was created and is still owned by Marvel Comics, an internationally renowned publishing house based in New York, New York, USA. I have chosen this publishing house because their comics are globally distributed and they are commonly thought of as being leaders in the field. Along with their rivals DC, Marvel is often considered one of two major comic book publishing companies (Brown 2001:4). The wide distribution of their work ensures that many readers have been exposed to the

content of their comic books. Marvel's size, influence and long history make it a prime example to be used in a project such as this.

The narratives for Black Panther start in a period that had yet to see a serious Black comic book character and even more, a serious Black superhero. I trace Black Panther's stories from the late 1970s, the start date of his stand alone comic book, and follow the narrative to the time of this research (2011). The early 1970s were a politically important time, being the central apogee of the implementation of civil rights and Black power movements. It is a period of time in which the politically motivated group called the Black Panthers were also active. Although my work covers over 30 years of time, it will not be 30 years of continuous publishing. Comics are often produced once a month and sometimes stories (or 'arcs' as they are called in comic publishing) are cancelled only to be picked up years later. Arcs can be anywhere from a few comic books dealing with a particular story or long narratives that constitute a major part of the mythos of the character's history. While I will survey a great deal of the Black Panther publication, much of my material will come from the milestones of this characters' biography in the 1970s, 1990s and 2011.

Giving a precise number of comic books for examination is a difficult task, though arcs often deal with particular stories they do have the tendency to run into one another if the same artist is creating them or if the stories are similar. Therefore, I look at approximately 20 issues.

From the 1970s I have read Black Panther numbers 1-10 which encompassed three story lines: King Solomon's Frog (Nos. 1-5), The Sacred Water Skin (Nos. 4-7) and Jakarra/The Black Musketeers (Nos. 8-10). The second period I chose was from an era in

which the Black Panther makes his return, this time drawn by a Black artist. The 1980s were not kind to the Black Panther and the series was cancelled for a large part of it; this is why the project moves forward to the 90s, specifically to the 1991 re-launch of Black Panther mini-series/graphic novelization “Panther’s Prey”. Finally, from 2011 a series of six issues (513-518), which dealt with T’Challa’s abdication of the throne, loss of his powers and return to America where he takes up the protection of Hell’s Kitchen, a Manhattan territory that had, until then, been protected by the White superhero Daredevil. In this way, three distinct periods of Black Panther writing and drawing are represented that correspond to major occurrences in those time periods. The creation of Black Panther’s stand-alone comic titles in the 1970s, the re-launch of Panther’s comic in the 1990s and finally a contemporary look at Black Panther (2011)

As stated above, the purpose of this project is to explore how comic books with Black superheroes communicate racist and stereotypical images of Black masculinity. Therefore, I followed two themes in which comic book racism may be interrogated; negative historical stereotypes, and depictions of the exotic. Each of these categories can be applied to the two fields on which I have built my study; visual culture and narratology. The following criteria informed my reading of both the text and visual images.

1) Negative Stereotypes: the first theme is about the host of negative stereotypes which have been perpetuated in the early period of “race science” and minstrelsy theatre. There are several stereotypes ranging from (1) negative physical depictions (exaggerated lips and eyes); (2) negative mental depictions (dim witted, gullible) (Lehman 2007:9-10); (3) the popular notion of Blacks as criminals (Tucker 2007:4) and (4) Blacks as overly

sexualized (Fanon 1967:155-156). Attention is paid to a particular trope which stereotypes Blacks as being savage, tribal, cannibalistic and generally not modern (Fanon 1967:142, Nelson 2002:5). In summary, any depiction of Black superheroes as being somehow worse or less capable than other superheroes of the genre based on their inherent racial characteristics is analyzed.

2) Representations of the exotic: Artistic conventions have long had the ability to place the subject of their art in particular landscapes and settings. These settings can be as damaging or pejorative as the rendering of the characters themselves. This theme is interrogated when Black Panther is deliberately placed in a scene which calls to mind exotic locales and colonial exploration narratives (Pieterse 1994: 67). The colonial exploration narrative is a way for White authors to depict Africans as merely “part of the scenery,” or an impediment to discovering something new which in turn valorizes the abilities of the White explorer. The exploration narrative often treats the African as part of the landscape, a passive observer in their own land. This colonial practice was used to reinforce the exotic and strange nature of the “other.” If the superhero could be in any other setting or is acting merely as part of the land I define it as a use of exoticization. I also look at the exotic notion of the noble savage or savage warrior, two tropes that depict the Black male as little more than animalistic despite having a distinct culture and technology (79).

While these are not the only forms of racism which may remain as part of a text, they are the most recognizable in the Black Panther comics. During my analysis of the different eras of the comic’s run I also make extensive use of metaracism, a theory that will be discussed shortly, and the significance that it has to the overall approach to Black

Panther. I now move into my theory section in order to clarify how I have used my method in determining the racism that is perpetuated in main stream comics about Black superheroes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the previous section I discussed approaching comics with a critical discourse analysis. CDA as a method allows me to better understand and interrogate the structures of power that are inherent in the creation of a comic and which show up in the comic by way of motif and narrative choices. Method, however, cannot work alone. Methods and methodology represent a philosophical world view about comics as well as the tool with which I am studying them. What is missing, is the theoretical framework; the application of the structure which explains why I have chosen comics and how I will read the comics through the use of critical discourse analysis. In this section I will look at two categories of theories which are deeply connected and serve as the framework for this project. I explore a brief condensing of psychoanalytical material in the tradition of Freud so that I may connect it to the theories of racism in light of the psychohistory of Joel Kovel. By unpacking some of Kovel's ideas, I show that other theories of racism do not do a sufficient job in the exploration of contemporary stereotypes which continue to be attached to the Black superhero.

Sigmund Freud espoused a particular version of the psychical powers of the human being. As I give fuller definitions below, I will find it sufficient at this time to name them and give a brief statement of their purpose. They are; the ego, super ego and the id. The Ego is the part of human psychical activity which is always in contact with the outside world (known as perception). The super ego is the intermediary between the ego

and the id and acts as a parental figure which censors the impolite and specifically culturally taboo desires of the id. Lastly, as just mentioned, the id is a storehouse of repressed unconscious desires which can be dangerous, tangential and harmful to society and/or the individual (Freud 1960: 14). These distinctions are always at work in the individual and as such they are always at work in society. Society is developed and sustained by way of psychological activity, that is, society generally follows the same rules that Freud has laid out for the mind. Important or relevant ideals/ideas or institutions bear a symbolic importance and are readily understood by society. Harmful, dangerous or unimportant ideas are collectively repressed or moderated by the societal super ego. It is important to mention that just like the laws of physics, nothing is ever created or destroyed by the psyche. Psychological objects may be preconscious (just below consciousness but may be easily recalled and are hence influential) or repressed (only able to be recalled with great difficulty) into the unconscious but they cannot be destroyed (4-5). Therefore, when one accounts for “regular” racism, an anachronistic view of racial distinctions (Kovel 1970: 211), it can be considered repressed, but certainly not forgotten.

I mention the unified theory of Freudian psychoanalysis as only one part of the theoretical framework of this project. Psychoanalysis has undergone many developments which are irrelevant to this current discussion. I say this, not to be dismissive, but to draw attention to the way Joel Kovel uses this same type of psychological distinction when he applies psychoanalysis to the changeability of racism in American society. Kovel, as I will explain below, accepts the principles of Freudian psychoanalysis and applies them to historical and institutional developments in American history. His application of

psychoanalysis demonstrates the way the racism has moved from a conscious and dominative activity to an aversive avoidance of the Black body to a final period in which the state “represses” the notion of race, continuously perpetuating itself, but never eradicating the racism on which it was built. I use Kovel’s theory as the major foundation on which my argument is constructed because of his historical approach. By framing his theory in light of the racism which is not individualistic but part of an historic collective (white) unconscious, I am able to read Black Panther as part of U.S psycho-history and not simply as a part of the psychology of Jack Kirby, his creator. Black Panther then, is read as a symbol or cipher for the racism which still undergirds society and cannot be easily explained as an individual choice or isolated creation. Black Panther recycles and maintains the preconscious racist attitudes that Kovel explains are part of society’s symbolic fabric. Further, Black Panther is superego-like in that he is part of a collective memory of racist tropes (which will be discussed later). The creation of his body and surroundings mediate the repressed racist desires of past periods, shielding the collective perception, or society’s ego, from the harsh and anachronistic forms of overt racism. By imposing a collective White fantasy on the body of Black Panther his social appearance is that of progress and inclusiveness while such appearances only serve to hide the racist foundations on which the character was conceived. Therefore, I maintain the central importance of Kovel’s psycho-historical theory in my work and as a viable theory/method to read the creation and racialization of Black superheroes.

As I mentioned above, Freud is the first theorist to set the foundational rules for psychoanalysis. Later, I will review the works of Frantz Fanon, a Black psychoanalyst who is also important to my project and who operates from some of the same theoretical

underpinnings of Freud's work. But for now I am going to discuss the work of Kovel. Of most importance to this and Kovel's work is the way that Freud couched the notion of the unconscious in his later thought. Freudian psychoanalysis is based on a tripartite division of the psychical into the ego, the super ego and the id as well as stimulants which excite and engage consciousness, preconsciousness and unconsciousness. For Freud, the ego and consciousness are closely related; so much so, that when one perceives something it influences the consciousness and becomes part of the ego. If this stimulation is not 'useful' at the time it can be passed into the preconsciousness (an area where things are latent but can be recalled) or the unconscious where the psychical energy can be repressed and blocked by resistances which make it difficult to recall (1960: 4). Kovel operates on this same system explaining that culture is made of a shared system of symbols which society recognizes as institutions of civilization. These institutions are given life depending on which symbolic value they fulfill (1970: 4-5). As such, these symbols act on consciousness and are either kept present in mind, or are passed into the preconscious or unconscious of humanity. Society keeps the myths and symbols of institutions that are familiar ready at hand, like the institution of marriage or capitalism; assigning each a relative value to the continuation of civilization. With the historical and sociological growth of a society, these values may change or be pushed into the unconscious but they are never destroyed. Symbols retain the force of their representational values in varying degrees forever. To derive the symbolism and fantasy that continues to underlie racism, research must study the historical emergence and transformations of racism simultaneously (6). Consequently, psychoanalysis which shows

the effects of the past on the present is the preferred method by which to explain the 'why' of racism.

If we accept that culture is built on shared systems of symbols then it must follow that comic book culture does the same. Comics then, are symbolic cultural artefacts that have a value and meaning to all of culture. This value may be more important to fans than it is to the wider public; as fans have more of a need to keep the value closer to their consciousness than do other members of society, but nevertheless, comics are a viable medium for psychoanalytical study. Racism too, being a product of culture, has a symbolic value attached to it. Understanding the symbolic value that racism has to society/culture can expose the reasons why culture continues to be affected by it. By combining the historical and symbolic study of both comics and racism and how they have developed and continue to develop, psychoanalysis can lead to meaningful conclusions about the interrelationship of these two institutions.

And so, because of the combination of the above theories I am able to read the comics in light of the theories of Frantz Fanon. Fanon was a psychoanalyst who sought answers to questions about the experiences and identities of Black individuals (Fanon 1967:8). I have included Fanon because he was among the first to raise the issue of racism in comic books. Moreover, he provides a decolonizing strategy for dealing with identity and culture. Through a reading and application of his work, *Black Skin, White Masks* I explore the existential violence toward blackness existing in Western culture which has inscribed Black bodies with stereotypical and damning meanings. I posit that all racism is violent in an existential (not necessarily empirical) way, a way that damages the image/mind/essence of the Black body. For the purposes of this project I do not

investigate the physical violence that can come from a racist regime; instead, I theorize about the existential violence that is inherent in anti-Black racist discourse. In general, all racist discourse and representation is injurious to the “Other” because it is the by-product of White supremacist aggrandizement.

### **Theories of Racism**

Historically understood as a practice, racism subjugates a group of people based on characteristics or traits perceived to be inherent and unchangeable. Far from being a simple aberration of thought attributed to a misinformed few, racism still survives in the carefully demarcated sense “that has governed the study of its history” (Fredrickson 2002:141). As an imposed belief, racism is seen as genetic or cultural markers that are somehow inferior to those of the dominant culture of the time. “Race,” as a concept, remains resilient and instrumental for shaping identities and institutions as well as configuring exclusionary devices to be used against “racialized minorities” or those who do not share the colour or ideals of the dominant group (Wallis & Fleras 2009: 252).

It is because race, and consequently racism, is so embedded in current western culture that anti-racist scholarship is needed now more than ever. Resistance to racism must be creative and innovative to address the adaptable forms of prejudice that continue to pervade society on all levels from law and social institutions to art and popular culture. Therefore, the study of racism in comic books is timely and necessary to interrogate how Black bodies continue to be reduced to stereotypes and racist tropes.

A further word about the use of the term racism in this project; having defined “regular” racism above, as the subjugating of a group based on inherent and unchangeable differences, I now move on to talk about different and equally important

forms of racism. Although, I find that other theorists have mistakenly attached their theories to a certain facet of racism and do not do a good job at explaining the “why” of racism’s continued existence. For a more full, robust and necessarily historical discussion I will turn back to Kovel, whom I introduced in connection to psychoanalysis/psychohistory.

Theories about racism are few, but represent a meaningful cross-section of academic traditions and disciplines. English Literature, Social Sciences, Communication and, of course, African American/Ethnic studies have all produced academic work which attempts to define, categorize and explain what race and racism are. The various schools of thought, however, have yet to yield a unified theory that is both theoretically sound and internally cohesive. It is for that reason that I explore some of the theories that have been published on racism as a precursor to the psychohistorical model that I use in this work.

The “new racism” is a theory which has had different incarnations over the past 20 years. It was first used by Martin Barker to explore the notion of immigration. Barker posits that racism, as based on racial superiority, is gone and in its place is a system which is based on unavoidable and natural cultural differences (24). That is not to say that racism is inherently biological, just that many of the notions which cause one culture to avoid another culture can be loosely based on humanity’s need for space and security. For Barker, the new racism was really a pseudo-biological culturalism which was based on two defining notions; shared value and difference and the fear of the other (1981: 128). Racism operates by the biological notion that humanity does indeed share various ontogenetic similarities, however, humanity also forms bounded units that mark ‘us’ off

from ‘them’. Added to this notion is the natural fear of the unknown (other) and thus, a theory is created in which humanity wishes to keep certain people out of or away from, their own part of society. This theory was loosely based on phylogenetic structures that appear in nature and hence, Barker called it pseudo-biological.

While Barker attempted to base his argument in nature, it draws attention to the general failings of his theory. Though he claims that racism is only “pseudo-biological”, the largest part of his theory is based on the phylogeny of natural groups. Further, although he admits that humans have more in common than they have apart, he places more value on our differences. What does seem new about Barkers theory is that he acknowledges differences as being cultural instead of matters of biology and hence “fate” and “destiny”. This idea moves racism out of purely corporeal spaces and into the culture which is created by social institutions. While I do not believe that Barker’s theory is a viable tool to study comics, I respect his recognition of racism being a cultural phenomenon instead of a purely biological one.

Patricia Hill Collins takes up the term “new racism” 20 years later in her discussion about sexuality. For Collins, the new racism is not a semi-biological construct, but a racist system in which the Black body is oppressed due to both skin colour and sex/gender. Racism and gender are inextricably linked and as such they must be dealt with together (2005: 5). Collins insists that the institutional pressures and prejudices are compounded for Blacks who are also women. Not to be biased, Collins also states that men can be doubly oppressed too, having to deal with the hyper-masculine stereotypes which follow Black men. Again, with sexism and racism deeply intertwined, Collins does not give a full symbolic account of why racism continues to exist. Instead, she focuses on

the post-civil rights era and the addition of gender as a problematic category to the struggle against racism.

New racism, in both incarnations, continues to repeat the problems associated with the common definition of racism, adding categories which enrich the study of racism but which do not satisfactorily explain its continued existence. Further, both of the definitions of the new racism do not engage in a theory that explains how racism can be so easily hidden in comics, such that the Black body becomes a palimpsest apparatus for continued scripting. New racism defines and categorizes types of racism, but my work wants to say something meaningful about the way historical racism has continued to be relevant but has not continued to exist as a hierarchical structure. Sut Jhally and Tim Wise attempt more thorough investigations of racism and its endurance through two theories that interrogate the history of particular stereotypes.

Sut Jhally (1992) gives an explanation of contemporary racism as “Enlightened racism”, a form of racism which perpetuates the notion that the Western world is a raceless society. Jhally interviews audience members of the “Cosby Show”; an iconic, all Black casted television sitcom, which depicted the life and times of the family of the successful (medical) Dr. Huxtable and his attorney wife, Claire. Inside the Cosby world, life was ‘good’, the family dealt with issues of race but those could be solved in half an hour and with more than a few laughs. This portrayal of life was unrealistic and opposed to the reality of Blacks living in the 1980s and 1990s (1992: 6-7). Jhally found that the audience did not see this sitcom as levelling the racial ground and providing entertainment for all. Instead, Jhally recognized the audience as maintaining racist beliefs that Blacks (or other racialized bodies) had no barrier to success in America as it was

depicted in the sitcom. If a minority group fails, it was because they were lazy and did not work hard enough.

If I can extrapolate the theoretical findings of Jhally; he posits that there continues to exist a certain blindness of White society to the real plight of racial minorities. The average audience member believes that the idyllic sitcom portrayal can be achieved by 'hard working' Blacks despite the crippling institutional racism which exists in various forms. While this may explain a particular facet of racism in contemporary society, it does not explain how society has gotten to this point. Jhally is focusing on the audience and the discourse of "blaming the victim" without addressing how the audience has maintained that belief. Also, Jhally does not fully engage with the notion of veiled racism. My project is an attempt to uncover how racism continues to be part of the creation of cultural artefacts and not how it is to be measured by an audience's response. The repressed nature of metaracism is far more difficult to uncover than the opinionated and focused racism that Jhally discusses.

Subsequently, Tim Wise (2009) who theorizes about Racism 2.0, a theory of racism which is to include Blacks, Latino, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Indigenous persons and people from the Middle East (8), attempts to explain how society has gotten to the point of accepting ethnic minorities who occupy recognized places in civilization. Wise's theory of racism 2.0 is able to celebrate the successes and achievements of minority persons but only because they are seen as "different from a less appealing, even 'pathological'" Black or Brown body (9). Only those who can transcend their Blackness (which is still symbolically coded as evil, dirty and stupid) are worthy of praise, and in that praise is the "proof" that the Western world is no longer racist. The

problems with this, Wise states, is that it is not only demeaning but it also creates another set of archetypes, these ones positive, that Blacks have to live up to. And while the archetypes are benevolent and laudable, they are almost unreachable due to social pressures and institutional racism.

This theory is sound and well-presented and gives an historical genealogy that explains how Blacks have been seen as dirty and vile but have made it to a place where they can indeed have success though this success is generally unreachable for the largest number of minorities. Once more the problem arises, however, of not addressing the social institutions which 'do not see race' and thus, continue the perpetuation of the racism on which most Western White social institutions are founded on. For Wise, his focus is on the attention paid to the "good" Blacks that get hired or promoted which attributes a very selective and conscious process to the White dominant majority.

The final theory I will be addressing before approaching Kovel is that of Frances Henry and Carol Tator. Democratic racism, for the authors, is a large scale, societal ideology which permits and justifies two conflicting sets of values (1994: 1). These values are those which have been historically attached to the Liberal and democratic state. First; the commitment to the egalitarian values of fairness, justice and equity, second are the attitudes and behaviours that include negative feelings about people of colour. These feelings and attitudes justify unequal treatment and discrimination for minorities (1). Henry and Tator make this a macro-theory in which all Western liberal, Democratic states play a part. While this theory is closer to that of Kovel's, I still find it lacking in certain respects. As I will go on to show, Kovel agrees that liberalism and democracy, due to their historical precedents, are based on property and it is property

relations which cause particular aspects of racism, especially aversive racism, to arise and become stronger. However, what Henry and Tator are missing is the discussion of what Kovel will call metaracism. Like Wise above, Henry and Tator prefer to discuss democratic states and how the state ideology supports racism, instead of explaining how the state, through social institutions, continues to hide and recycle racism while presenting a multicultural attitude.

The above theories cover a lot of theoretical ground and many times are very specific to their time period. All of these ideas, however, continue to hold intellectual space and value, although, for my purposes, those theories do not go deep enough. Each theory discussed above represents a certain aspect of racism and its relation to society. Applying the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis/psychohistory through the method of critical discourse analysis uncovers and explains the relations of power as well as the history of racism. Kovel does just this by explaining the symbolic nature of both society and racism.

Kovel makes the case for the changeability of racism, from overt slavery to *de jure* late-nineteenth century racism; Kovel argues that racism is an adaptable practice which finds ways to be naturalized in a culture while continuing to be preserved (Kovel 1971: 211). For this work based on anti-Black racism, modern slavery (not the slavery of antiquity) is taken as the progenitor of overt racism, which Kovel calls dominative racism. Though Kovel's theories can be applied to ancient cultures and periods, I believe it necessary to focus on the effects modern slavery had on the contemporary world. Dominative racism is the practice of acting out bigoted beliefs (54). Physical altercations, lynching, jeers and any opportunity to use force in dominating the Black body is a form

of this kind of racism. As the overt use of force became less acceptable, bigoted actions gave way to bigoted beliefs. Racism adapted to the time and became a practice that was not visible until Blacks were in close proximity to Whites (52). Far from being a “kinder” form of racism, aversive racism is the psychologizing and believing that Blacks are inferior to whites, although no overt action is taken in defense of this belief. The Aversive racist will ignore the existence of Blacks, act coldly and dismiss Blacks without violence (54). Having said that, the aversive racist is not above lapsing into dominative racism should the Black make any perceived or believed threatening movement. I say threatening not necessarily as a move toward violence, but a perceived threat in the White inner psychic world. This ‘threat’ may be something as simple as the Black getting ‘too close’.

For Kovel there is one last stage of racism which has been brought to bear on the modern world. A form of racism which has been adapted from both the dominative and aversive forms that came before. The last historical form of racism is that of metaracism. Metaracism comes out of the “advancing edge of history” (1970:55). Meta-racists do not act or behave like a dominative or aversive racist; instead, they make conscious attempts to be non-racist. The danger of metaracism enters through the notion that this type of racism is unconscious. Metaracism is deeply and symbolically embedded in the cultural matrix. By being a part of the matrices which shape culture, racism is able to pass relatively easily into texts (visual or narrative) largely undetected. The cultural matrix furnishes racism with all the symbolic tropes that were “left over” from slavery and legal racism without being accessed on the same cognitive plane. If we take racism to be pervasive and as such part of the cultural matrix and the collective unconscious; then

human psyches are all directly connected to it. This means that every individual is able to access the racist beliefs and motifs that are part of this repressed psychical entity. Further, when individuals with power form groups who become dominant they have a collective energy which may be fuelled by metaracism. This is the theory behind the creation of comic books. There is a caution; however, those in power are not consciously picking out the stereotypes which would do the most damage. As has been mentioned, metaracism is unconscious and so it cannot actively be accessed. Instead, the makers of cultural artefacts, whatever they may be, are truly attempting to make something satisfying for their audience. The problem arises in the dominant hegemony acquiescing “in the larger cultural order which continues the work of racism” (212). By not attempting to define or eradicate racism, the state/industry/hegemony continues to perpetuate the racism which it is built on. Thus, the state maintains and reproduces cultural values. Though the dominant powers do not actively behave as racists, they continue to do the work of racism.

The same maintenance and reproduction of cultural values can be attributed to the individual metaracist. Though this work primarily deals with the institution of comic book publishing, individuals contribute to the continuance of racism as well. The public imagines they are helping to create a race-less society by buying the dominant cultures version of anti-racist material (cognitive or physical). In the current example, Black superhero comic books are consumed because they represent a movement forward; the inclusion and inclusivity of Blacks into society. In reality, these books hide the racist stereotypes which have been the foundation for much of Western art and narrative. Therefore, on both levels of society (the powerful and the public); metaracism works by

being unconsciously reproduced/recycled and re-presented with the aim of eradicating (racial) difference.

As I noted above, critical discourse analysis is meant to examine power relations. When applied to a text, CDA seeks out the “cognitive control” of vanDijk and deconstructs it to a level where it can be seen for what it is; an attempt to arrest the attention of a viewer/reader and deposit a suggestion. Accordingly, I use Kovel’s psychohistorical model through the lens of CDA to interrogate the racist images and cognitive controls which can be found in mainstream Black superhero comics. By constantly recycling racist tropes and images, comic books are reinscribing prejudiced knowledge into the catalogue of narrative which is then used by popular culture. As the educational theorist Paulo Freire says, Depositing of any knowledge, racist or otherwise, is not a mutual act, but a one-sided hegemonic action (Freire 1979:58) and I contend that comic books continue the cycle of racism by persistently deploying and depositing these racist tropes into the culture.

### **Contribution**

What is being done in this project is similar to what has been done before in the realm of folklore and studies of mythology when a particular type of literature or tale-type is examined. However, my project differs greatly because it looks at motifs as a source for the continued spread of racism. I look at depictions and representations of the Black male body in popular media and as such in the Eurocentric cultural imagination. What is unique about this study is that it focuses on the social construction of a mythology that is firmly and irrevocably attached to the Black male body. No other scholarship has undertaken a full study of the Black male body in comic books to explore

how it has become mythologized as literary and artistic motifs. Consequently, my work will contribute to the study of folklore/mythology as well as social justice by reasserting that comics are not just popular and childish materials, but are instead serious cultural artefacts. I believe that a work like this is timely because it fills a gap that continues to widen between analysis of race in literature and cultural theories about comic books and graphic art. Combining discourse analysis, psychoanalysis and historical analysis this project brings to light many issues that have heretofore gone relatively unnoticed.

## **Chapter 1: What has Been Said: Literature review**

Critical writing about Black superhero comics is difficult to find. While the field of comic book studies continues to grow at a slow and steady pace, it lacks a clear focus when it comes to the examination of race in comic books. Authors commonly work in areas which allow them to apply literary or artistic categories to types of comics, trace social histories of comic book development, engage with fans and comic book culture or attempt to define what aspects of a comic book constitute it as a comic. What is missing is critically engaged literature which argues for the social and symbolic mistreatment of Black superheroes. As I will establish below, many of the authors who do attempt to argue for the social relevance of Black superheroes often succeed in reproducing the White hegemonic ideals that have stymied the creation of critical research into the appearance and significance of Black superheroes.

While much has been written about Black identity and body politics, not much of this literature has been connected to comic books in a meaningful way. More specifically, theories on the depiction of the Black male body in comic books have been generally ignored to fashion theoretical pieces about social history, publishing houses or cultural symbols as opposed to the way racism continues to exist in comics. By continuing to theorize about how comics are put together and how they have served as a mode of entertainment this type of technical writing obfuscates knowledge about how the Black male body has been represented in art throughout history. Several books and papers look at the overall effect of racism instead of the way the Black body has continued to bear stereotypes and tropes that have come from earlier racist character types. Further, there is no literature that takes the minstrelsy character types and interrogates them as literary

motifs that have made their way into the popular narratives of superhero comics. This section reviews the most pertinent literature that deals with identity, stereotyping and comics (both mainstream and independent). The works examined here are a mix of academic literature in the form of traditional research and essays as well as the graphic novelization of important theoretical investigations.

I have drawn heavily from sources that deal with Black identity as a topic, which I then apply to the study of the Black male body in comics. The most important piece of Black identity literature for my project is the work of Frantz Fanon, a trained Black psychoanalyst. In his first book, *Black Skins White Masks* (1952/1967), Fanon seeks to understand the psychological condition of the Black individual as it relates to colonialism and everyday life. Fanon draws heavily from psychoanalytic theory in constructing the arguments that the Black agent (individual) must construct an identity within the confines of White oppression due to years of colonization. The colonization, for Fanon, is so complete that it even enters into popular art. Fanon was the first author to seriously critique the image of Black bodies in comics by recognizing that, quite literally “the Negro is a toy in the White man’s hands” (140). Comic books were created by “White men for little White men”, which served as the central problem for the representation of Blacks. Fanon recognized that the comics were populated with racist depictions of Blacks as cannibals and villains which would do the symbolic work of making the White hero champion. By constantly depicting White heroes, Black children who enjoyed adventure stories would have to identify with the hero and, as such, adopt the White man’s attitude toward Blacks (147). Further, Fanon acknowledged the psychological power that heroes and consequently comics, have. He postulated that every society needed a channel or

outlet through which aggression could be released (145). By imbuing heroes with the power to vanquish evil and thus imbuing them with the symbols of goodness, society could vent their frustrations through reading comics. What this does, is serve the function of releasing aggression directly toward the Black body. White heroes created by White artist for White children, had endless encounters with “phobogenic” Black villains who were the sole recipients of the hero’s swift and violent form of justice. By continually connecting notions of savagery with the Black body, comic books reinforce colonial ideology and demonstrate that Blackness is constructed out of oppressive anecdotes and stories (111). This cognitive or epistemic oppression fractures the Black consciousness and identity leading to a severe loss of “self” and normlessness which drives the Black individual to believe that being White is the best answer to “fix” the fractured selfhood.

The colonial aspects of popular culture are further expounded upon by John Rieder (2008) whose full length study of the effects of colonialism on the arts traces the creation and development of science fiction through the lens of colonialism and imperialism. Rieder argues, much like Fanon, (or later, Said) that colonialism is inextricable from culture and creates particular tropes which are recycled in the art of its time. He goes on to state that when dealing with popular culture, one is not dealing with dreams or neurotic symptoms, but with conscious works of art (21). Therefore, whatever makes it into the popular literature/art of the period is deliberate and part of a vocabulary that is shared by artists/authors. The vocabulary of artists and authors, as we have seen above, is both a conscious and unconscious apparatus. It is conscious because authors may draw from perception and represent that which is “real” or visual. It is unconscious because, as Barthes has demonstrated, their works of art take on a symbolic and

mythologized meaning. For science fiction this means many imperialist and racist images are foundational to its creation and continued recognition of it as a genre. The same can be said for comics. Science fiction and comics share many similarities in their origins. Science fiction deals with “fantastical plots, far off worlds...and striking portrayals of the future” (Nama 2008: 2), which are all common themes in superhero comics as well. For Rieder this racism informs the creation of science fiction and subsequently the creation and subject matter of the comic book. Both the works of Rieder and Fanon trace historically the implications of a colonial regime on culture and those who are part of it.

Unsurprisingly, stereotypes and stereotypical depictions of racial groups form the base of their own studies. While this is an engaging and necessary field of study, it rarely if ever, interrogates the stereotypes found in the study of comics. As I will demonstrate later, the character types and racist figures that are found in the literature of historical and cinematic stereotyping can be found within comics. As mentioned above, Rieder makes a study of science fiction and the tropes that are an integral part of it. However, Donald Bogle as well as Stuart and Elizabeth Ewin make significant contributions to the study of stereotyping in distinct but related ways. Much like Rieder, Bogle (2001) chooses to focus on a particular area, film. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* Donald Bogle traces the history of negative depictions of Blacks in cinema. The work consists of several time periods that are sequentially analyzed for the recurring stereotypes from which the book gets its name. The book’s subtitle denotes it as “an interpretive history of Blacks in American films”, but it is less interpretive and more interrogative of American culture and the types of roles it has created for Black characters.

Ewin and Ewin (2006) expand the study of these types and look toward the history of stereotyping in general. In *Typecasting: on the arts and science of Human Inequality* the authors do not confine themselves to a single medium. Instead, they survey the long and varied history of categorization from Biblical myth and the doctrine that grew out of it, to contemporary cinema/television. The strength of the work is in the layering of historical information. Ewin and Ewin make use of early categorization schemes such as those of Linneaus and Winckelmann as well as the works of phrenologists to show that typecasting has been around for most of human history. In the later sections of the book, these classificatory schemes are shown to be the predecessors to many of the common stereotypes and prejudices that remain prevalent today. While this work does not focus exclusively on the Black body it informs many of the discussions linked to the continued othering and labelling of Black individuals.

Moving away from focusing solely on typecasting and stereotypes; there are several authors in the field of comic book studies who attempt to contribute to the discussion of how these categories affect comics. What many of these authors offer, are cursory glances and shallow analysis of depictions of racism in comics. Jeffery Brown (2001), until very recently was considered a leader in the field of race and comic books. In his work *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* Brown uses interviewing and discourse analysis to better understand what makes an 'authentic' Black comic book narrative. Through his work, Brown discovers that many modern large-scale publishers create racist and stereotypically hypermasculine Black characters in the name of diversity. These mass produced and marketed superheroes are often little more than White characters coloured Black or stereotypical representations of Western discourse

about the Black “Other”. Disturbing though the findings are, they are very much in line with the arguments of Rieder who recognizes the colonial history that has informed the creation of the science fiction genre. The problem with Brown’s work is that constant concentration on the politics that play out between a Black-owned and operated comic house (Milestone comics) and the mainstream, White-owned comic houses. Brown does nothing to further articulate the problems that arise from the continued scripting of the Black masculine body as animalistic, cannibalistic or marked by any of other racial tropes that have been examined throughout history. His narrow focus on hypermasculinity is not meaningfully applied to mainstream Black male superheroes and as such it is rendered ineffective and shallow. As I will show, one has to understand how the damaging stereotypes continue to recur in comics with Black superheroes before a meaningful analysis of their function can be undertaken. While Brown’s work is still considered one of the best in the field, it is more an ethnography of comic book fans in White comic-culture than it is a critical examination of Blackness.

Marc Singer (2002) undertakes the task of reviewing some of the literature that debates the function of race in comic books. He assesses how well mainstream comics of the 1990s dealt with depictions of multiculturalism. Singer examines the concept of “double consciousness” in two comics with Black heroes that have secret identities. His assessment draws attention to the notion that comic books continue to re-cycle damaging images of Black males into popular culture. Lacking from Singer’s work, much like Brown’s, is a direct examination of the scripting of the Black male body due to the negative history of stereotyping. Singer does not draw a definitive line from the categories of minstrelsy theatre to the negative representation of Blackness in comics.

Instead, he focuses on how multiculturalism is depicted in comics of a general era and not on the scripting of Black bodies in particular. Both Singer and Brown are important authors for testing the significance of Black superhero narratives as these authors have collected and studied many comic books to come to an understanding of what makes a Black superhero successful and what makes them irrelevant and dangerous (racist). Though both of these authors make strong claims about the lack of racial diversity in comic books they do not present any arguments for the benefits of having mainstream Black superheroes. Adilifu Nama, a Black sociologist and popular culture expert, takes up this lack of scholarship and presents an interesting take on popular Black superheroes.

In his book *Super Black: American Pop culture and Black Superheroes* (2011) Adilifu Nama attempts to re-appropriate the creation and social significance of several popular Black superheroes. Nama argues that many of the Black superheroes stand as symbols for race relations in America. Although the relationships between Whites and Blacks in the 1960s and 70s were unsteady due to several social factors, Black superheroes bridged the gap by displaying symbolic powers that represented upward social mobility, anti-colonial thinking and an anti-slavery message. Flight, super-strength and steel hard skin are all coded as semiotic manifestations of social mobility and resilience in the face of difficult social and economic times. These powers could be created by White or Black artists; what matters to Nama is that the Black superhero marked a turning point for the superhero genre and America as a society. An admirable message and some very strong, persuasive arguments give his work a unique place amongst comic book scholarship. While Dr. Nama attempts to make a convincing case for the symbolically coded powers of the heroes, he rarely addresses the overwhelming

number of racist themes that also occupy the comic pages. Instead, Nama presents repackaged White hegemonic ideals. By continuously defending superheroes that are clearly marked with racist trappings, Nama does nothing to further critical scholarship about Black superheroes, Black masculinity or the way that racism is recycled into the culture. He spends little time tracing tropes and stereotypes and argues that those who do connecting racist tropes to Black superheroes are “near-sighted” and “superficial” As I will go on to demonstrate, the early Black Panther comics, which serve as a template for other Black superhero comics, are filled with racist imagery which becomes a recurring indicator of the Black Panther’s powers throughout his history. Dr. Nama, does not approach this pivotal animalization which is the most distinguishable form of racism that has remained unchanged. Therefore, our two readings of the encoded body differ greatly based on the way the Black body obtains and displays its’ met-human powers.

One final author to be discussed in connection to the superhero is Peter Coogan (2006). In his work *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* Coogan discusses the history and rise of superheroes as a distinct hero-type that gave rise to their own genre of comics. For Coogan, the hero embodies ideas of freedom and inspiration as well as ideological propaganda. What is curiously missing from Coogan’s work is a discussion of Black superheroes. While he spends all of the work talking about the different facets of superheroes including their conventions, costuming, branding and use as political tools and allegories; he never once touches on the importance of Black superheroes. I include Coogan in this list because his work is seminal in understanding the genre of superhero comic books, yet he wilfully encourages the dominant hegemonic reading of White bodies without making mention of the Black body. My work avoids such wilful neglect

and structures a reading of the Black superhero body with an eye toward the status of Black people in comics. When undertaking a historical and discursive analysis of superheroes as a genre, it is important to understand the social scripts that are imposed on both the White and the Black. Coogan chooses only to examine the mainstream, White metaphorical use of superheroes.

Understanding the importance of well-crafted Black characters is something that is missing from mainstream comic book publishers. As has been noted above and is explored throughout this work, popular comic books subscribe to recycled character types that are part of the White hegemonic ideal. In reaction to the use of minstrelsy formula characters, to explore more relevant issues and to create more “believable” characters, several Black comic book artists and authors have independently published work which does not rely on these racist images. Two of the most important Black authors/artists are John Jennings and Damian Duffy. Duffy and Jennings have edited and published collected essays as well as comics that seek to create characters that do not participate in the White imagined ideal.

In *The Hole: Consumer culture Vol.1* (2008) Duffy and Jennings explore the consumption of Black identity, allegorically, in comic form. The story is based largely on Voodoo and is a critique on how the White hegemony views Voodoo as a source of money, fear and entertainment. This is further reinforced by Duffy and Jennings as they supply the reader with short historical essays and a teaching guide to explain how and why Voodoo is spiritual practice and not a spectacle to be used to frighten or entertain audiences. In popular culture, they note, many films use Voodoo as a plot device that marks the Black characters as inherently magical and evil, a common stereotype in itself

(154). They provide a list of films in which Voodoo is seen making use of black magic, kidnapping and ritual murder. This spectacle of Voodoo is supposed to be used as part of the film narrative and hence as a source of entertainment for the audience. Contrary to this view, the authors establish Voodoo as a historical practice which is spiritual and part of a creolized tradition starting with slaves in the Southern United States. While the comic itself is truly entertaining and engagingly written and drawn, it is also informative and makes use of Voodoo spirits in a way that does not cheapen or make a mockery of them. What these authors have done is create an independent comic which returns dignity to the Black body as a viable character in a story.

Subsequently, Duffy and Jennings are not alone in making comics that are socially aware and beneficial to the image of the Black body. In another offering called *Black Comix: African American Independent Comics Art and Culture* (2010) Duffy and Jennings introduce their audience to several Black independent comic book artists. The value of this book is that it engages the reader with the art of many independent creators while also giving valuable information about Black comics art conventions, awards and websites dedicated to various aspects of comic book culture. There is a varied mix of superheroes, fantasy characters and satiric takes on everyday life all with an African American focus. Unlike their previous work, Duffy and Jennings celebrate the creativity and accomplishment of several artists, often commenting on how they have revolutionized Black independent comics as in the case of *Brotherman* created by Dawud Anyabwile (17-25). This book is a valuable resource for understanding that not all comics have to be produced by mainstream publishing companies. In point of fact, it

demonstrates that those Black characters that are not created by major publishers are more engagingly created because they are not based on damaging stereotypes.

The interdisciplinary nature of my work draws on many areas of scholarship; two aspects of which have not yet been reviewed are visual culture and mainstream comic books and graphic novels as a medium. It is necessary to explore both of these fields because they provide much needed background information for the analysis of Black superheroes in comic books. Visual culture expressed in the work of Pieterse sets a precedent for understanding how the Black body has been treated in popular cultural art pieces and advertisements. This information is readily abstracted and can be applied to comics, as comics and popular art installations share many similarities. The accessibility, the mass appeal and the easily procured nature of both comics and popular art allow them to be studied in the same way. Additionally, understanding comic book scholarship is as it has been “traditionally” done until this point is necessary in understanding where it fails to incorporate Black scholarship and interests.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992) is concerned with the tracing of stereotypes and depictions of the Black body in several different time periods as they appear in popular culture. It is important to note that Pieterse is not necessarily looking at high or fine art which is meant to be viewed in galleries or showings; instead he is primarily focusing on the type of work that would be available for popular consumption. Pieterse does this by looking at advertisements and art work that were set out for widespread viewing mainly from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the time of his writing. He draws on historical sources and traces many of the African stereotypes to earlier eras and then applies those foundational findings to the works that have been created for the public. Of utmost

importance to my work is the discussion about Africa and the many forms of racist illustrations which have been done throughout history. Pieterse reports on artistic developments and the use of this art by the dominant culture as it applies to the minority. Much of the work that Pieterse discusses is art that existed openly in the public for several years at a time. I rely heavily on the work of Pieterse to inform the theory of visual narratology that surrounds the Black body.

Connecting the study of visual culture to the historical significance of the comic book world is done through Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation* (2003). Wright traces the history of not only superheroes but all types of comics through the lens of a social historian. In his work he makes a case for the significance of comics as part of the youth culture in America. Wright shows that youth culture influences the wider culture as those youth, who were attuned to simple comics, grow up and evolve their tastes. The continued maturation of the young readers inevitably creates a market for more serious and "mature" comics later in life. These evolving tastes and sensibilities give rise to the superhero comic, crime/mystery comics and even comics dealing with horror. Wright ends his work with a special chapter dedicated to the responses of superhero comic creators, authors and characters to real world situations, most importantly the September 11, 2001 attacks. Though Wright undertakes a study of the social history of comics as it has influenced youth culture, it is necessary to note that while some Black superheroes are discussed, their significance is incorporated into other overarching social themes. Therefore, his analysis has very little to say on the significance of Black superheroes to the politics of race or Blackness in North America. The incorporation of Wright's work,

therefore, is for his expertise on the history of comics and their development, rather than his discussion of race in comics.

Finally the work of Scott McCloud (1994), a comic book artist and author, discusses the way comics should be read. McCloud defines terms which are traditionally connected to comics as well as providing terms for the constituent pieces of the comic book (ie. The space between the panels on a page); he also gives the reader the tools to understand artistic convention, the passage of time and the logic of sequence in a typical graphic art piece. McCloud is not exhaustive in his definition of comic conventions but he does explain several hidden features of a comic which can lead the reader to a deeper reading of a comic book panel. McCloud being a comic book author draws examples from history and art theory in the development of his arguments. He asserts that comic books are indeed an art form and can be read as such.

Writing about comic books and comic book culture has largely been dominated by Western hegemonic ideals. The authors who have tried to engage critically with comics as a text often created works that are technical guides about how a comic is constructed or how it has become part of social history. Authors such as Wright and Nama create dynamic works that seemingly bring new and refreshed ideas to the field of comic book study, but in reality they are re-presenting the dominant ideology of Western hegemony. Only through critically evaluating comic book's depictions of the Black body will researchers be able to better understand the how and why of racism continued appearance in comics. As I will go on to demonstrate; racism in the form of specious tropes, continue to be irrevocably attached to Black superheroes affecting both their narrative and the way racism is recycled into the culture.

## Chapter 2 What Minstrelsy has given us

What I argue in this chapter is that the codification of anti-Black images came from a rather specific form of artistic expression: that of the minstrelsy shows of 19<sup>th</sup> century America. That means anti-Black images came from a specific psychological, philosophical and artistic attitude that was played out in the public sphere. Theories of Blacks being less than human, which helped to foster and expand those images, arose from the slightly earlier period of the Enlightenment. While there is no doubt that anti-Black racism existed before this, the emergence of minstrelsy theatre collected these images, systematizing and classifying “types” of Blacks that were meant for entertainment and as a source of information for the White public. Performers taught the audience about the White perception of Black culture but also something about the way White culture viewed itself. These performances, however, were enacted with the conscious goal of mimicking, as closely as possible, the White ideal of Black mannerisms. By the continued use of these rigid performances and character types White performers were able to mythologize the Black body; stripping away opportunities for Black self-identification and replacing it with imposed larger than life, over dramatized tropes that became the new “norm”. As I will demonstrate, White hegemonic norms drew on a repertoire of images that had previously existed and were fuelled by Enlightenment thinking. By publicly displaying these character types the White majority was able to shape the development of meaning attached to the Black body, effectively turning the Black image into a recurrent character type that “stood in” for reality.

I want to start by describing the way that minstrelsy was used by White performers and audiences to help constitute a “White” identity. While this chapter is

meant to focus on the creation and instantiation of Black stereotypes that will later be found in comic books, minstrelsy is a multifaceted practice that reinforced both notions of blackness and whiteness. Minstrelsy theatre was open to the public and as such, people from different social/class groups were able to attend and find a sense of togetherness. On stage, performers claimed to be kin, pupils and ‘students of the Negro’ thereby authenticating their performance and reassuring the audience that they were not just there to be entertained but also educated collectively (Roediger 1991: 116-117). By “authenticating” their performance in light of claiming to have ‘studied’ Blacks closely, the performance of blackface took on a dimension which was more than just derogatory to Blacks. The performance became a social institution that provided a form of education which crossed class boundaries. Workers, middle class and elite could all attend a blackface show and share in the knowledge that the performers were imparting. This “education” strengthened the White cultural perception of itself. Here was an educational show which bound different classes together in the knowledge that, despite their social standing, they were at the least, superior to Blacks.

By drawing together large groups of White audiences, blackface minstrelsy demonstrates the psychoanalytical principles of group psychology. Freud and social psychologist/social theorist Gustav Le Bon agreed that the larger the group, the stronger the compulsion (Freud 1959: 16). This means that the wider the group that is effected by a performance or an ideal, the stronger that ideal becomes in all those effected. The individual loses his/her power of criticism and lets him/herself slip into the affect of the group, getting caught up in the excitement. The minstrel performers excited the ideal of White superiority and as such, excited the same ideal in the White audience. This is not to

say, however, that all those who watched a minstrelsy performance automatically believed in the inferiority of Black individuals and culture. Rather, it suggests that those who did accept as true the inferiority outnumbered those who did not, and as Freud said, “It is clearly perilous for him to put himself in opposition to it [the opinion of the group], and it will be safer to follow the example of those around him and perhaps even ‘hunt with the pack’” (17).

Further, it should be noted that blackface minstrels were, at the time, the only self-conscious White entertainers. By blacking up on stage (which will be discussed in more detail later) the White performer put on a simple physical disguise but a complicated cultural one. The act of putting on blackface served to emphasize that whiteness was really underneath the make-up and whiteness is what truly mattered (Roediger 1991: 117). The black makeup served only as a mask, a removable and ‘false’ identity. It was the White actor underneath who brought that makeup to life and imbued it with cultural relevance. Without the White performer, blackface would only be a lifeless façade signifying nothing. Under the black face paint several nationalities performed; Irish, American, German, Jewish all were recognizable due to accents and mannerisms but above all, they were all being made White. By constantly having various nationalities take the stage performing under the one constant, blackface, the institution of minstrelsy served to create the symbolic Whiteness with which the audience identified (117-118). Though the various ethnic groups were recognized and drew ethnic-specific mockery from other groups, what remained was a “common, respectable and increasingly smug whiteness under the makeup” (118).

Once more psychoanalysis describes the way in which this ‘empty whiteness’ became culturally significant to the identity of the White audiences and culture. Jacques Lacan, a student of Freudian psychoanalysis, posited a formative stage of image recognition in the life of a child. Extrapolated from individual-based psychology, the mirror stage, as it is called, helps define the way White audiences created their own space through minstrelsy performance. According to Lacan’s theory humans are able to identify with their mirror image at an early age and take delight in making the image move along with their body. By investing so much energy in the apparent mastery over an other, powers of maturation are given to the child through an exteriority (2006: 76). In the same way, the White audience performs an act of homeomorphic identification with the whiteness under the blackface makeup and delights in the mastery over blackness. The mastery over blackness is constituted by the knowledge that a White actor is in control of the actions of the Black character. Making the Black character move, sing, dance and speak is all within the power of the actor. Recognizing the blackness as something which is not part of whiteness (an act of heteromorphic identification), the White audience identifies a space for “us” and a space for “them” continuing to identify with their own and thus, leaving blackness as a necessary but separate other (77).

Consequently, the class-less togetherness felt through the education and entertainment of blackface performances coupled with the psychological identification with whiteness and othering of blackness was supported by philosophical theory created during the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinking reinforced the othering qualities of the Black body and excluded it from notions that were seen as belonging to the dominant White culture only. These philosophical theories served to treat the Black body as not just

an other, but as less than human. As I will demonstrate below, Enlightenment philosophy set up these categories of human and non-human, so as to extol the virtues of whiteness and demonstrate the lack of civilization, maturity and human nature of Blacks.

The notion of the Black body being something less than properly human did not start in the age of American minstrelsy theatre. Rather, this notion is traced back to the Enlightenment when many of the major theorists were expanding on the notions of modernity and the paradigm of equality. Modernity was characterized as a period of moral egalitarianism in which all men were created free and equal. Whether political or scholarly, texts written during the Enlightenment trumpeted unqualified human equality (Mills 2006: 211). Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Kant and Hegel were a few of the political/social philosophers that contributed to the notions of what constituted complete human autonomy. This narrative of freedom, however, was not extended to all humans; as the narrative was meant to be applied to White European, and by extension, White American males only.

One of the leading figures of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, set out foundational classifications of human beings by ranking groups by colour. Kant's deductive anthropology created a moral system in which all colours and hence ethnic groups (according to the philosophy) were degenerative developments of whiteness, considered the original and most morally perfect of the colours (213). In his work on Anthropology, Kant categorized the most reasonable and hence morally perfect group as White Europeans followed by Yellow Asians, Black Africans and Red Native Americans (Eze 1995: 210). Blacks, for Kant, allowed all sorts of imagined ills to take place in their countries because they were so far from being reasonable. That is to say, reason and

morality were closely related in the works of Kant and as such made a dual system which prescribed how “human” you were. The less reasonable a group was, the less moral they were and as such they could not be fully engaged in “humanness”. Because of the lack of reason and morals and for being “idle, lazy, prone to hesitation and jealousy” Africans had to be trained (they were not intelligent enough to learn) and the best way to train them was through the use of physical force (211). The inspiration for the “training” of Africans no doubt came from Kant’s knowledge of the slave trade. Seeing slavers use whips and canes to move slaves encouraged the Enlightenment thinker to prescribe the same treatment for all Black Africans as a way of motivation.

Subsequently, Charles W. Mills develops an argument about the use and presence of racism in Enlightenment thinking and philosophy. For Mills, the most important classification which debuts in the Enlightenment is the distinction of who can be considered a person (human) and who is a “subperson”. A subperson refers to “those humans, who, though adult, are, because of their race, deservedly not treated as full persons” (Mills 2006: 214). Mills demonstrates that the Enlightenment thinkers, while extolling the virtues of freedom for all, were really concentrating their philosophy on freedom for White Europeans and Americans. Blacks were not allowed to be part of this freedom as it had been philosophically “demonstrated” that they did not partake in enough reason to be considered fully human. This type of exclusionary racism became part of a normative system in its own right that occupies the same conceptual space as the Enlightenment philosophy of Freedom and who can partake in it. Because of this, Mills says, it has to be acknowledged that the Enlightenment thinker’s racist statements must

be seen as part of the overarching theory of egalitarianism which demarcates how rules for Whites and non-Whites differ (213).

What this demonstrates is that the philosophy coming out of the same time frame as slavery was one of racist discourse and separation. The philosophical system of egalitarianism and modernity applied only to White bodies which imbued the White male body and consciousness with an attitude of permissiveness. White action, no matter how vile or corrupt, was seen as morally reasonable and part of the highest order of humanity. When any physical or mental harm was done to Blacks it was allowed on the notion that the Blacks had to be trained and could/would not do anything without such force. It set up the dichotomy of person (White) and subperson (Black) which made minstrelsy theatre more than just entertainment, it became a physical representation of the hegemonic philosophy of the time.

The action of replacing humanity with 'thingness' (becoming an object of the White gaze), continues with the modern consumer of popular culture. The stereotypical character roles of minstrelsy theatre continue to exist largely unchanged. While they have undergone some cosmetic rearranging appearing in slightly modified forms, they still fall into the same categories. What is more, the new use for these character types is often hidden and glazed over because the racist history is rarely revealed. Television, movies, art and literature all make use of these common stereotypes without attempting to modify the roles. For this reason Blacks are continually promoted as lazy, stupid, criminal, and given over to biological instincts. In what follows I will attempt to make a case for why these types still exist, how they exist and why they have been so effective in shaping the tone and creation of contemporary popular culture.

White aesthetic attitudes toward the Black body have been of caution if not disgust (Jordan 1974; Kovel 1970; Fredrickson 2002). Attitudes can be defined as the thoughts and feelings, as opposed to actions, that are attached or directed to an object, in this case the Black body and Blackness in general (Jordan 1974: ix). From the earliest records of the encounters of White missionaries and explorers, blackness has been described in opposition to whiteness, both of these terms carrying great moral and ontological significance. According to Jordan, it was the English description of the Negro as black (the colour), which he calls an “exaggerated term for complexion”, which proves the appearance of the Black body made an unforgettable impact on the White gaze (4-5). Most importantly the terms Black and White connoted much for the people that designated their use. Blackness stood opposed to the ideals of purity, cleanliness and virginity as well as ideals of moral goodness and intellectual advancement which were inextricably bound up in the use of the term White. Blackness, then, by comparison meant that which was dirty, objectionable and corrupted (6). Not only was blackness an indicator of dirt, but it pointed to the morally unclean as well. The immediate impact of a dark complexion prompted the White majority to assign it a colour that was as far from their own selves as they could imagine. This assignment went deeper than the skin and was generally meant to set the Black body aside as other and foreigner.

As I noted earlier in the chapter, there are deep psychological and philosophical reasons for the identification of White audiences with White minstrel performers and consequently, an othering and degrading of blackness. I will now make a case that it is the belief in blackness as inherently bad and imitable that will drive White actors to created imagined “types” of Blacks which became part of slavery era culture and which

continue to influence the art and culture of modern society. Accordingly, there are no media which can be considered safe from the use of these objectionable stereotypes, including comics.

The only public display of Black culture in late 18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America was through religious service and the White-performed minstrelsy shows (Jackson 2006: 19), every other area of that expression was private and done outside of the master's presence. Therefore the only exposure the White majority had to the Black body was through church or a ridiculous presentation of perceived Negro characteristics in black face performances. Over a period of 150 years (approximately 1769-1927) minstrelsy became a popular institution that was celebrated for the dehumanizing and yet entertaining characterization of Blacks (21). During the early years of minstrelsy, the average (not elite) White majority dominated the theatres and at first clamoured for egalitarian characters and themes that would promote the superiority of American culture (Toll 1971: 38). However, before long that superiority complex would turn inwards and that same White majority would look to proclaim their superiority over the Negro.

The very core of blackface performance revolved around a White actor blackening their face with burnt champagne corks, a gruesome mockery as Whites celebrated the perceived inferiority of Blacks by using the cork of a drink variously considered the symbol of joyous celebration and affluence. After the blackening was done, which often took place on stage to add to the spectacle (Jackson 2006: 24-25); the actors would then begin the performance and act out their image of Black people (Toll 1971: 39). One of the most recognizable features of the performance was based on the exaggerated physical features that represented Black physiognomy. Unnaturally reddened

and widened lips were coupled with exaggerated eyes, which stood out shining white against the deep black of the face. Without these characteristics the audience would “not know” that you were portraying a Negro, but soon as these requirements were met it was unmistakable which “race” you were playing. These features will be one of the most outstanding and recognizable characteristics that still exist in modern popular culture. The very centrality of these indicators to the performance marks them as symbols for all those that came after. When one sees engorged lips and wide, bright white eyes, there is an immediate connection to the make-up process of the minstrelsy theatre.

Like other forms of entertainment, blackface minstrelsy depended on types of folklore (39), stories and traditions that were passed down from generation to generation about what Negroes did and how they acted. Despite claiming to be ‘students of the Negro’ this folk-wisdom and knowledge went beyond truth and helped to create an exaggerated myth of Black culture that was promptly seized upon and acted out with great enthusiasm. The first minstrel shows used narrative in many different ways, from scripted and acted pieces to musical interludes, however, all relied on; “an objectification of black characters in comic set pieces, repartee, [and] physical burlesque” (Lott 1992: 28). Essentially then, blackface was organized around the explicit myths of Black culture for White dissemination and profit (Lott 1992: 23).

When one interrogates the performances of blackface further, they are confronted with a set of characters that helped to move the minstrelsy performances along. As the “art” of the performance grew, so did the intricacies by which it was acted out. Gone were the days of actors blackening their faces to make a farce out of the Black body; in their place arose distinct characters that would be immediately recognizable by those who

frequented the theatre. These characters were no less damaging than the generic type that came before and quite possibly could actually be considered more dangerous as they began to create a new version of popular culture. These named and defined characters lent themselves to other media as the years passed. They became stock types for literature, cartoons, film; and were part of the “minstrel formula”; a set of characters that made up a basic performance.

Contemporary theorists were the first to point out the clearly demarcated “versions” of Blacks that grew out of the minstrelsy formula (Bogle 2001; Jackson 2006), that is to say, a formula which drew on the typologies which existed in White cultural expressions furnished by the philosophical and psychological imagination of the era. However, that is not to say that these character-performances were not named during or slightly before the minstrelsy era. For instance Sambo was a clearly defined character at the time of these performances and is generally thought to be the first injurious theatrical representation of Blacks (Jackson 2006: 21). As time moved forward Sambo and the coon became interchangeable names for the same stock type (Jackson 2006: 26). What was missing from those early stage performances was a general set of rules that underlined the performances. Only when minstrelsy began to evolve did actors get the chance to choose a character and play it the way that “it had always been played”. Retrospectively looking at these performances and comparing them to modern actors, Bogle found striking characteristics that would become the profile for at least four types of characters.

The tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy and the black buck are all types of characters which owe their codification to minstrelsy era performances. Bogle recognizes these as the master tropes that guided the development of the Minstrelsy

plays. Each character type comes along with definitions that mark them off from each of the other characters that would be on display. For the purposes of this work, I am primarily concerned with two: the coon and the buck. The tragic mulatto and the mammy, while fascinating and damaging in their own way, are not often found in contemporary comic books. Further, this study is looking at the Black male body and not the female body or the double-raced body and so while I appreciate the work that has been done on the mulatto and the mammy they just do not fit into the scope of what I am doing at present.

Consequently, a definition of the coon is hard to pin down. For Bogle, the coon ran a very close second to the famous tom and was considered an object of amusement and buffoonery (2001: 7). What was more telling is that the coon was known for his unwavering love of Whites and he was prominently featured in minstrelsy shows and radio broadcasts as a lover of music and singer of songs (Jackson 2006: 26). The coon stock type had three variants; the pickaninny, the uncle Remus and the pure coon. The pickaninny was just a child version of the coon, there for cheap laughs; they would often be styled with wide eyes and would have outlandish reactions to being frightened or surprised. One of the most famous depictions of this type was the eponymous character of the literary work *Little Black Sambo* and Buckwheat of *Little Rascals*. Not only did Buckwheat have over exaggerated gestures and lines but he was made to be unintelligent and his hair would stand on end when he was scared. A despicable depiction of Black children all around, the pickaninny was meant to signify that even Negro children were stupid and a source of hilarity.

Uncle Remus, by comparison was supposedly styled after Joel Chandler Harris's reworking of Aesop's fables entitled *Uncle Remus: His songs and sayings* (1881) (Jackson 2006: 30). By all accounts Remus was a god loving character that understood his oppressor's behaviour and accepted it because that is what the Whites wanted him to do. Much like the pickaninny, Remus was a source of amusement but for a different reason. Remus did not make funny faces but instead was a preacher type that could be laughed at because he was greatly unaware of what was going on and would take the abuse from Whites with good natured humility.

Subsequently, if you combine the defective personality of both Remus and the pickaninny a clearer picture of the pure coon emerges. The pure coon was a source of entertainment that both caused laughs (like the pickaninny) and was a point of laughter (like uncle Remus). It was the goal of the coon to act and sing and dance, which, to the audience, confirmed the notion of Blacks' overt love of and affinity for music. The White majority observed the singing of songs about freedom and work while overseeing slaves in the fields and transformed that common action into a stock type, a motif that defined the Black body as an object obsessed with singing and dancing.

This character type still clings to the contemporary world in the form of Blacks being depicted as street dancers and rappers, creating an image of simplicity; their intellect so low that they can do little more than create music which keeps their friends amused. By superhero standards, this characteristic is not inherent in many of the White heroes but in Black heroes there are often moments of musicality and dancing. For example, Black Panther lures Ororo Monroe to him by being an adept flute player (Storm: Marvel Comics: 2007) and the 90s reimagining of Luke Cage often sees him with

headphones and being styled after the hip-hop aesthetic (Nama 2011: 62). While these actions and styles may seem rather harmless on its own, Black Panther uses this same musicality to entice Ororo into sexual relations and Luke Cage in his “rapper” persona operates out of a strip club and exemplifies hypermasculinity.

As mentioned above, the coon is not the only type that still exists today and is prevalent in Black superhero comics. The Black buck, quite possibly the most mythologized versions of the Black body still exists and it started with yet another stock type that graced the stage of minstrelsy but was made famous in film. Bucks are the bestial instincts of the Black body, the untamed and wild inner selves that were tamed during slavery. There was “Black rage” that always seemed to simmer just under the surface of all Blacks according to White imagination. Wild sexual impulses were matched only by Blacks’ regard for violence and hatred. Two main subtypes appear in the buck; there is the “regular” buck which is the sexualized Negro and the brutal buck which is the violent Negro (Bogle 2001: 13).

The myth of slavery contentment is the notion that slavery had to be used to tame these wild aspects of the Negro and as such, the Black body inherently carries with it the inscribed characterization of these two bucks. What had to be tamed was something primitive and so the “taming” was aimed at the baser instincts of either sex or violence, a common White opinion that was recognized as part of the White hegemonic unconscious by Frantz Fanon (1967). Through the act of mythologizing, the Black body took shape as a sexualized character type that was always over sexed and savage (Bogle 2001: 14). This image was made most famous by the character Gus in *Birth of a Nation* who directs his savage sexual attention to a White female character. Bogle recognizes the tie between sex

and racism in the character of Gus as he is made to personify the high sex drive that accompanies every Black body. Further to this, it is imagined that there is a desire in every Black man for an insatiable amount of White flesh. It seems as if the Black will go to any length to have sex (by consent or by force) with white women (14).

Not unrelated, then, is the brutal buck which stands in for that violence. Just as the Negro is over sexualized and ready to rape a White woman if he gets the chance, he is also ready to cause havoc by employing violence if he is not monitored and controlled. Of this notion that Blacks are inherently violent Jackson notes that the popular conception was that Black bodies were indiscreet, irresponsible and devious (2006: 41). Further, Jackson points to how this has become glorified in the image of Blaxploitation characters such as John Shaft who marry the two images together, a violent street cop and a notorious lover of women (43). Though the goal of a character like Shaft may be to subvert and play with the stereotype; no less than two incarnations of the character have acted in the same way. Richard Roundtree, the Shaft of the Blaxploitation film (1971) and Samuel L. Jackson, the modern Shaft of the remake (2000). Though Roundtree may be a symbol of the implementation of civil rights and the attitude of 'no more Black oppression', Samuel L. Jackson stood for ultra-cool, suave and savvy violence. Jackson establishes a different but related facet of the character type. The buck as understood through the "Shaft" movies demonstrates how the stereotype may be played-with but inevitably does not change.

Why does any of this matter when we are talking about superheroes and not White actors who were able to choose rigidly defined characters to portray in front of a dominantly White audience? By introducing these characters into popular culture

(minstrelsy was the popular culture of the time) these stock character types were elevated to a position of motif. Just like the Hero or the Wise Helper of Joseph Campbell's study of the Hero myth (1956), these characters recur in different parts of the world, under different guises but still remain the same at the core. While John Shaft was indeed played by Black actors (Richard Roundtree in 1971 and Samuel L. Jackson in the 2000 remake/revival) the character has changed little if at all. Sure there was more swearing and more violence, but does that make them any different than the standard stock character that was described above? It would seem that it makes the stock type stronger and more effective at lasting in the cultural memory.

By introducing these characters and stock types, the collective unconscious is able to draw on them for inspiration, which inevitably ends in using them to make and define stories. The myths of heroes and gods follow a similar pattern in regards to the use of motifs; without their usage, stories would be uninspiring and boring. If Harry Potter (a hero) did not have a Lord Voldemort (a villain) to fight, what kind of morality tale, or even story, would that be? As readers and watchers of films, people are drawn to stereotypical depictions of mythologized tropes so that they may immediately recognize who the good guy is and who the villain is; who is a hero and who is betrayer and who is a helper and who is a hindrance to the protagonist. Just like these master tropes, the Black body has been inscribed with characteristic types that immediately alert the audience to what type of character they are going to play. Pimp, drug dealer, rapper, faithful helper, basketball player, or thug; the Black body carries with it a mythologized message.

The next chapter analyzes the construction of the Black body in superhero comics. I use Black Panther as a type of narrative metonymy, to show how the Black male body is

treated in mainstream comic books as the creation of other Black superheroes was greatly influenced by his appearance and success. I also look at how whiteness is naturalized and lauded in the creation of such superheroes as the X-men, the first mutant superheroes whose powers are inherent.

### Chapter 3: What makes a Black Superhero?

The question posed in this chapter is a rather simple one when first presented, what makes a Black superhero? In an artistic sense this question is easiest to answer, a Black superhero is a superhero that has been shaded darker than white on a spectrum of browns and blacks. What is so surprising about this otherwise simple answer is that it may be correct in more than one way. Many of the Black superheroes that exist in comics tend to just be white heroes who have been shaded darker than their counterparts; this means that their ideals and their portrayal is nothing but hegemonic whiteness under a different face. What is more important, however, to this chapter is the exploration of what it *means* to be a Black superhero. How do they get their powers, where do they live and what exactly sets them apart from the white faces that populate the more popular books? Black Panther, the “first” Black superhero will be our model as I explain why Black superheroes are colonial narratives writ large.

Reading a comic is not a passive activity. This does not mean, however, that fans are actively resisting hegemonic and racist depictions of their favourite characters. It does mean that audiences are bringing a certain level of interpretation to the act of reading (Brown 2001: 2). Readers keep a large storehouse of culturally sanctioned social facts in their mind that includes such things as the origin of the character, the real identity of the character, where they live, their arch nemesis, famous battles and of course the array of superpowers that can change from issue to issue depending on character evolution and who is writing the book. Dedicated fans know all of that information and much more, but even the casual fan would be familiar with the major traits of any given superhero and their story. Because readers have to keep up with all of this information the comic book

industry is uniquely placed to influence their audience. By creating characters and story arcs that are so far reaching and intricate, the comic book industry forces readers to bring inter and intra-textual interpretation to every issue. Inter-textual because readers have to remember what happened in issue number one as well as what happened in the subsequent issues which could number into the hundreds (or more), and intra-textual because readers have to be aware of any crossovers (where characters from one book appear in other series) as well as any of the real world issues that have taken place that may affect what the comic creators are doing. This can be anything from the hiring/firing of an artist to socio-historical events like the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S, which indeed did make it into several comic books.

Consequently, reading a comic is not as simple as it first appears. The North American mainstream comic book industry is full of Eurocentric popular culture stereotypes, myths, folktales and legends as well as ideas about things like masculinity and heroism, all of which can be manipulated at the stroke of a brush or computer key. These images are clearly distorted and favour White, straight, masculine ideals, paying little attention to the voices and images of ethnic, gendered and sexual diversity. Thankfully there are those resisters such as Black comic book authors and artists like Damian Duffy and John Jennings who I mentioned in the literature review. Authors like Duffy and Jennings resist these hegemonic myths and create powerful stories that respect not only the Black body but also the canon of Black myths and legends. Though such authors are usually independent and not part of the mainstream publishers, their work reacts to the dominant social norms and creates counter narratives and resistance to the continued use of stereotypes. Space does not allow for me to list the number of characters

and comic books from Marvel publishing that deal with White, straight males and their ideas of what it is to be a hero. However, due to the small number, I am able to list the names of the few famous Black superheroes. Characters such as Black Panther, Ororo Monroe (Storm of the X-Men), The Falcon, Luke Cage and Brother/Doctor Voodoo are some of the major Black figures that exist in the Marvel Universe.

Subsequently, of those Black heroes just listed only one is a female (Storm) and none of them are homosexual (unlike at least 5 White heroes in Marvel's roster); Black Panther is married to Storm, Luke Cage to Jessica Jones, Brother Voodoo is unmarried but has had sexual relationships with women and Falcon was a petty criminal and heterosexual pimp in his early career. All stereotypes of the hyper-sexual, hyper-masculine buck-like Black man to be sure. Although, one may argue that the creation of substantial Black superheroes is indeed counterhegemonic and progressive. Taking into account the (sometimes) complex background narratives of Black characters could be seen as a way of "levelling the playing field" and making an attempt to introduce ethnicity to the otherwise White dominated superhero comics' space. One has to be careful, however, of attaching too much importance to the creation and publication of Black superheroes as counterhegemonic; some are no longer published in their own books such as the Falcon; are the backseat sidekicks to white heroes, as in the story arcs that have Luke Cage joining the New Avengers; are left out of major titles or have been unceremoniously killed off to further the story of White hero dominated comic books, such as Dr. Voodoo.

Accordingly, North American society has been recognized as erasing the importance/ evidence of the positive contributions made by Black cultural identity in

favour of the ideas of whiteness (Brown 2001: 3; Jackson 2006:3; Singer 2002: 107).

This is largely done through the creation/perpetuation of stereotypes and the recycling of racism, an act that takes those racist images such as the minstrelsy characters, turns them around, repackages them and uses them again to brand the same style or type of character. The comics industry, being at one with the literary forms of this recycling, is able to easily slip one (or more) of these character types into their pages and explain it away by means of an origin story and superpower. I have in mind here the animalistic physical appearance and actions of the Black Panther, which will be described later as well as the unquestioning loyalty of the Falcon to Captain America in the early days of his creation. Both of these characters represent the animal/buck typology as well as the unquestioning and submissive uncle Remus characters.

Aldo Regaldo (2005), in reference to the creation and narratives of Tarzan, uses an encompassing term to describe this phenomenon, “literary blackface” (90). The use of literature to mark the body in the same tradition that the stage shows of minstrelsy did. This literary blackface is a dangerous tool knowingly and unknowingly used by White and Black authors that situate the contemporary Black body in the same anachronistic forms of racism that have come before. Black superheroes are little more than minstrelsy characters with the ability to fly or shoot lightening out of their fingers. When the artists are done repackaging these Black superheroes it is assumed that they have made the comic book world more diverse, although, this is rarely case (Singer 2002: 110-111). As I explained above, this does nothing but reproduce the White majority’s ideas of what it is to be Black to the readers of the comics. While reading these mainstream White or Black superhero comic books the Black readers have to identify across the boundary of race

(Brown 2001: 3). Black characters may look like the Black reader, but they do not act or speak like the Black reader and neither do the White ones. Mainstream superhero comic books have no connection to Black cultural identity, heritage or history. They are manufactured with the hegemonic audience in mind and are filled with the common stereotypes that populate the White hegemonic imagination. Black readers cannot see themselves in any of the heroes that fill the pages of their favourite comic books. What Black readers are seeing are the images of Whiteness reflected back to a White audience; a closed circuit loop is created, in which the dominant culture has created heroes that are based on their core notions and values which include the exclusion of Black identity. White and Black superheroes become symbols which carry strong ties to entrenched racism and bigotry. Like all cultural symbols of significance, the unconscious mind holds on to them and they become part of a timeless mould (Kovel 1971:101)

I would like to turn now to the Black superhero origin story, which includes an analysis of the Black superhero body and the powers that are intimately tied to Black superheroes. The creation of a Black hero does not follow the same lines as the creation of White heroes and while this may at first be applauded as a move that could help define what it is to be a Black hero; it soon turns into a device that uses popular notions of the savagery and primitiveness of the Black body.

Black Panther is the prime example of what it is to be a Black superhero. He is the first major Black character created by Marvel and subsequently the first major Black superhero (Scott 2006; Brown 2001). Therefore much of my analysis rests on the way that this character was treated; not just as a superhero, but also as a cultural and social commentary. What holds true for Black Panther also holds true for the few Black

superheroes that were created as near contemporaries. While those that followed may have different origins, they all show very similar signs of creation and use.

T'Challa is the "real world" name of the Black Panther; it is not so much a secret identity as he is known both in his home country and in America by both names. When T'Challa is not fighting crime or serving up justice he is (or more correctly was), the king of the fictionalized nation of Wakanda-- somewhere on the continent of Africa. Wakanda is a country that is full of dichotomies. It is a jungle paradise replete with dense foliage and deep bodies of water but it is also a technological playground that boasts state of the art and futuristic defense systems, medicine, transportation and architecture. It is a blend of the ancient, modern and future that protects one of earth's most desired ores--vibranium. Vibranium is a space rock that landed in Wakanda which has the ability to dampen vibrations of all sorts, making it an invaluable tool when constructing weapons and armour. Until recently Wakanda grew rich off of this resource as it was highly sought after by the outside world but was completely controlled by T'Challa and his family. Interestingly, Adilifu Nama (2011) postulates that the blending of ancient and future technologies in Wakanda is not so much a racist commentary as it is one of equality. Nama reads Wakanda as a nation that flourished by not being touched by White Colonialism and slavery and as such, is a commentary on how Africa could have developed without hegemonic interference (66). While his insights are persuasive, I believe that Wakanda was created as an untouched land so that comic book authors could continue to exploit the lush jungle landscapes as backgrounds most befitting the jungle cat which is the Black Panther. Without having such a stereotypical, albeit techno-savvy version of Africa, Black Panther would have been a very different hero. Sleek, modern

and technologically advanced, Black Panther would have been on the same level as his White counterparts Batman, Iron Man and a host of others. By remitting T'Challa to a jungle landscape, creators were able to dress him in animal skins and have him rule over spear wielding tribal warriors.

Nevertheless, Black Panther is a religious and governmental approved title that is given to the rightful heir, and mightiest warrior of Wakanda (Black Panther #8 1978). To get this title the chosen (Black Panther has been held by other members of T'Challa's family) must undergo gruelling tests of physical strength and athleticism to find and procure a magic heart shaped herb, which when prepared in a mystic ceremony grants the candidate supernatural strength, athletic ability and heightened senses such as hearing, vision and smell (Black Panther: Panthers Prey: Part Two: 1991). The ingestion of a heart shaped herb already calls to mind racist fantasies of cannibalism. While the herb itself seems innocuous and must be prepared in a special ceremony, the shape of the herb suggests T'Challa gaining his powers from eating the representation of the anatomy of his predecessors. Each Black Panther that has come before T'Challa must undergo this symbolic initiation, and so, through generations, each successive title holder has eaten the heart of those who has come before. This unbroken line of cannibalistic thought is one of the first problematic racist fantasies that confront the reader. In many ways the Black Panther takes on the characteristics of an anthropomorphized cat, which is not coincidental as the trials of the herb are presided over by Bast, a giant *white* panther that is evocative of the Egyptian god of a similar name. The choice of colour for Bast is never explained, though in her comic book incarnations she appears as a stark white animal against the rich colours of a jungle background. T'Challa successfully completed his

trials at a young age and won/garnered the title of Black Panther, one that he has held on to officially for most of his narrative history. In the recent narrative arcs, T'Challa, while still known as the Black Panther and who still wears the religious "costume" had to abdicate the throne to his sister after being severely wounded by his arch nemesis, Dr. Doom (Black Panther: Deadliest of the Species:2009). Currently, T'Challa resides in New York City where he has agreed to watch over the citizens of "Hell's Kitchen" for his friend Matt Murdock, otherwise known as Daredevil (Black Panther: The Man Without Fear! 2011).

We can learn something from this character by taking a close look at how his body has been structured according to comic book as well as some colonial conventions. The analysis of Black Panther's powers is a telling critique of how the mainstream, mostly White, artists continue to see the Black body as brute and still part of a primitive culture (i.e the Noble savage).

White superheroes more often than not, get their powers from science or mutation; their intelligence gives them the ability to transform their bodies into weapons that are then used for the benefit of society. Characters like Iron Man use their genius to invent suits of armour that can fly, shoot lasers and take staggering amounts of damage; Peter Parker, while gaining his spider senses and strength from an irradiated spider bite, proves his intelligence by creating the iconic web shooters that allow him to swing through New York, as well as the super thin fabric that allows him to cling to buildings. Captain America, a White, scrawny but ever so passionate youth, is transformed by the power of science into the ultimate weapon of truth and justice and Dr. Steven Strange, a respected doctor gains his mystical powers through hard work and dedication to the

mystic craft. Even those characters that get their powers through accidents become glorified through their ability to control their new found powers such as the Fantastic Four. But of all the white heroes, the most interesting category is the mutant; genetic anomalies that manifest unbelievable powers that elevate them above the mere human.

At the forefront of this movement were the original X-Men, a group of mutant youth brought together by super-psychic Dr. Charles Xavier. The original X-Men consisted of five young, White people that had manifested, to use a term associated with the group, uncanny powers. Jean Grey is one of earth's most powerful psychics, Scott Summers is able to shoot powerful lasers from his eyes, Bobby Drake can turn his body into pure organic ice and subsequently manipulate all forms of frozen water, Hank McCoy a genius in his own right, had super strength and other animal like abilities and finally Warren Worthington III had white feathered angel wings that grow naturally from his shoulders which allowed him to fly. The world had seen nothing like this before the creation of X-Men #1 in 1963, the comic book audience was familiar only with alien and scientifically created superheroes. The X-Men were able to usher in a whole new way of looking at the meta-human, Whiteness, militarism and masculinity. The X-Men stood for internal and inherent power, they did not even have to ply their intellect to get what they had, and they were; for all intents and purposes, the perfect version of a superhero. No travelling from distant planets, no painful experiments, no laboratory explosions or spilled chemicals. Their physical body had adapted to give them what others had to work for and in turn created a standard for whiteness that the comic world would not modify for many years.

The bodies of the original X-Men stood as signs for the inherent powers of the meta-human, but it also stood as the inherent goodness of being white. The creators did not see fit to include any other races when they designed the X-Men. Whiteness and the hegemonic ideology that comes with it were reinforced by the powers that this team had. The X-men were marked by their whiteness and as such any physical differences/ mutations were subsumed by that whiteness. In much the same way, Anna Beatrice Scott goes on to say about White heroes that their differences are augmented by their whiteness (2006: 296), that is, their whiteness is another power that they possess and in the case of the X-Men, it is also completely natural and important. Years later, X-Men creators would give Hank McCoy blue fur, but his original incarnation was that of a White man. Creators would also go on to bring in multicultural examples of mutants from all over the world, but this still posed problems when it came to the Black body as is the case with Storm, a mutant that can control the weather. Her body was not inherently special; instead she was given over to manipulating natural phenomena, connecting her with primitive, earth/sky-goddess motifs instead of the ideals of intrinsic physical greatness. A comparison can be made here between Storm and Jean Grey, as both are strong female characters that use the power of their mind to manipulate their surroundings. Ultimately, however, that is where the connection ends. Jean Grey was portrayed as an innocent girl who has a near infinite amount of psychic energy that she can draw from and manipulate. Her mind is her biggest asset and it is intrinsically superior. Storm on the other hand, was portrayed as a thief and street urchin whose power is limited to the manipulation of weather. Jean Grey is near god-like in her ability to manipulate the fabric of reality while Storm is continuously referred to as a “weather witch” and a goddess, but a goddess who

is prayed to so she can water crops and calm chaotic waters. In many ways, Jean Grey is the White master, able to move about freely and exercise her power with absolute permission while Storm occupies the position of a “subperson”, a practical mutant whose powers make her dangerous but also handy. In this instance, while the powers may seem similar Storm is truly regarded as a piece of nature, an inconvenient if powerful, stumbling block that must be waited out while Jean Grey epitomizes what it is to have complete and genuine control over physical objects and human minds.

So it seems as if the Black body was excluded from the inherent natural talents of being a mutant. When Black Panther was created, Jack Kirby sought to fill a lacuna in the market by delivering a Black superhero, but what he created aligned with racist and colonial ideas of what the Black body was worth. T’Challa did not have the ability to shoot lasers from his eyes nor did he wake up to find that he was super strong and fast. He was subjected to an over-determining narrative that had existed hundreds of years before his inception.

When dealing with images, it is sometimes better to ask who the creators are before asking who the consumers are (Pieterse 1992: 10); in this case it is no different. We have already gone over the fact that the comic world is influenced by White masculine ideals and as such many of the heroes that are created behave in such a way as to reinforce these ideas. What comes out of this then, is an industry where the artists (Black and White), writers and executives consciously or unconsciously apply exclusionary and oppressive vocabularies of themes and images that “sell the dream but not the reality” (Regaldo 2005: 86). These images are historical and part of a vast array of racism that has been codified according to the “rule” of popular consumer culture. The

first and only rule of popular consumer culture is to please the majority. Without pleasing the majority of your viewers/readers/fans you have no product. This is seen every year when television stations line up dozens of programs which last for a few episodes and then fall victim to ratings. When the critics and audience have had their say, the dozen or so shows are reduced to a handful that has the staying power to be picked up for a season or two. This same rule applies to comic books. Hundreds of titles have failed only to be picked up again in the future in an attempt to gain a larger and sustained audience.

Racism, as I have been describing it, is constructed as a phenomenon that is meant to please audiences, not the overt type, but the subtle type that can make an audience laugh or smile or believe that a character is promoting racial equality. That racism is quickly codified and reused as a stock type, a motif that can be inserted into any work. By inserting codified and time trusted racism, writers and artists are sure to have a hit. For racism to be codified it has to become a stereotype, it is the popular stereotypes of the Black body that are played over and over in comics and it is what is so very prevalent in Black Panther.

Pieterse (1992), in his work about racism in images talks about what makes an image into a stereotype. He directs his attention to cognitive psychology in which stereotypes are based on the notions of simplification and generalization (1992: 11), a concept that will be repeated by McCloud in his discussion about recognition.

Cognitively, humans must simplify things; Freud takes this concept for the base of his analysis of joke telling. He believes that telling a joke allows us the pleasure of a mean/nasty tendency or intention that would otherwise not have given us satisfaction. We do not analyze or deconstruct a joke when we hear it and as such our psychical dynamism

is not “drained”, in that we have economized our energy (Freud 2000: 113). Jokes are the “shortest distance” between something that often times is inappropriate and something that makes us laugh. This same economy is at the root of stereotyping, instead of thinking through any given situation it is more convenient to come up with a pithy statement about it. In racist form this has led to the beliefs that Blacks are closer to nature, more emotional, superior athletes and are sexually aggressive/uninhibited (Pieterse 1992: 11). Moreover, this imbues that Black body with mystical potential as they are not part of the scientific world, but a remnant of the old, superstitious one.

This is what Scott McCloud was talking about in his work *Understanding Comics* (1994). McCloud opines about a concept which he calls “amplification through simplification”, he says; “By stripping an image to its essential meaning and artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t.” (30). Comics do this in many ways, not just the rendering of figures, but through iconic tropes that identify the characters. The simple outline of a bat alerts fans to the presence of Batman, the concentric red, white and blue bands of a circle with a star in the middle is the sign of Captain America and the stylized ‘S’ in red, yellow and blue can mean nothing else but Superman. When any one of these images is seen they bring to mind not just the character but everything that comes with their identities. Red, white and blue mean more than just Captain America, those colours stand for fighting and dying for freedom, they stand for the colours of the American flag and patriotism. Superman’s ‘S’ is a remnant of his Kryptonian heritage which alerts the reader to the back story of his doomed planet and subsequent landing on earth. By stripping down an image, artists are able to fit a lot of meaning into a small space, when those images are attached to superhero costumes they

are essentially imbuing that character with a history and significance. It removes the specifics of a character's alternate identity and makes them into a superhero (Coogan 2006: 33).

Black superheroes are identified in the same way, for Black Panther it is through a skin tight cat suit, which not only brings to mind grace and agility but it stands in for animalization and the trope of being close to nature. For Falcon it is a set of red and white wings, again a nod to the closeness the Black body has with the natural world. Unlike Warren Worthington (Angel) discussed above, Falcon is named for an animal and not a semi-divine being. Also, Angel has the inherent ability to grow the wings while Falcon must purposely put on his suit to elevate himself from street level criminal to superhero. Dr. Voodoo gets some face paint and the cloak of levitation which once belonged to the White Dr. Strange who teaches and guides him. For Dr. Voodoo then, his costume brings up very little about who he is, but rather the history and powers of the former owner. What is all the more intriguing about stereotyping and amplification through simplification is that when a White character removes their costume they once again become 'normal'; White characters are naturalized back into society and can move around without any disruption. When Black superheroes remove their costume they are left with their Black skins, a certain text that has already been coded and scripted for them. The stereotypes of amplification through simplification do not end at the spandex-polyester blend but continue to mark them as different and typified. It is not just the wearing of a cat suit that brings to mind the "animal nature" of the Black body it is also the Black skin that has been previously marked with that trope.

Due to these stereotypes, the racism inherent in Black Panther becomes more visible, he must go on a quest to find a mystic, anatomically shaped, herb while being denied the use of science to help him get to it. Instead, he must use his superior athletics to find the spot in which it hides. When he does retrieve it he is put through a carefully guarded mystic ritual to give him (reinforce?) the instincts of a jungle cat. At no time does T'Challa (who has a degree in Physics from a prestigious ivy-league university and is ranked the 8<sup>th</sup> smartest man in the world behind 7 other White characters) get to exercise any sort of intelligence. He is rendered into a brute force of nature that survives according to instinct and reaction. The racist tropes of minstrelsy and colonialism are essentially written on his body. The closeness to nature is found in his sourcing of the herb as well as the "transformation" that gives him cat like senses. The reinforcing of the athletic stereotype is his only "super power"; he goes from an incredible athlete to an extraordinary one and his aggression is seen through his wearing of a cat mask and dangerous claws which he uses to fight the enemy.

Subsequently all of this is bound up in the fact that his genius level intelligence is downplayed as a consequence of leaving his home to travel abroad. The White American publishers made T'Challa smart, but when he returns home he is expected to fill the religious and governmental obligations which require him to check his smarts at the door and put on a black cat suit to crawl around the jungle. Scott notes that all Black heroes share these same magical tendencies, situating them in the realm of pharmacopic magic, spells and "ritualized anger" (Scott 2006: 304-305). This cannot be further from the White heroes who earn their powers through intelligence, accidents or sheer force of will. The Black body is somehow already magical, part of nature that technology has

forgotten. By undergoing ritualized trials the Black body connects with its latent tendencies and becomes more than plain human. In many ways then, the Black superhero is a meta-caricature; the quasi-mystical, ape-like, primitive Black body becomes the super-form of those stereotypes turning into the fully magical, animal-like, earth spirit that takes up the cause of justice.

Comics continue to perpetuate stereotypes, whether it is through token characters that serve the whims of White characters (Falcon was Captain America's side kick) or who exist to exemplify racial clichés (Singer 2002: 118). Black superheroes exist in a semi-magical realm that reproduces a colonial narrative. Black Panther has served as the example because while being the first major Black superhero, he continues to exist today almost unchanged. He still wears a black cat suit, he still swings around the jungle (concrete or actual) and even though he has been moderately depowered due to the abdication of his throne, his wits only serve as a means for him to use his cat-like reflexes and brute force to stop criminals.

In the next chapter I will provide a fuller analysis of the Black Panther comic books from three different eras. I look at the way the Black superhero body is coded as different and other as well as how Black Panther exemplified obedience to White characters. As stated before, I take the Black Panther as a model for other Black superheroes because he was the first serious attempt at a Black superhero and he did not have any cognates at the time of his creation. Also, I draw connections between some of the actions and images of the Black Panther to minstrelsy theatre, demonstrating how iconic parts of blackface entertainment can be found in contemporary comics.

#### **Chapter 4: Black Panther and the New Minstrelsy**

In this chapter I show how three separate eras of Black Panther comic books help to promote the recycling of racist motifs. Here I follow the last of three types of racism that are central to the psychohistory of Joel Kovel: metaracism. I start with the earliest Black Panther comics of the 1970s, move into his return in the 1990s and finish with work that was completed in 2011. Each of these eras gives a good indication of how the Black body is treated in narrative form. By narrative form, I mean the mythologizing of the Black body in story form, not as an isolated character type, but as part of a larger and continuous arc. To better understand how metaracism continues to be a part of comics, I give a brief review the other two forms of racism which appear before metaracism's emergence. My review of the category of metaracism is to situate it historically and more importantly, psychologically, before I interpret metaracism in the context of the Black Panther comic books.

Joel Kovel writes a striking history of racism as it is seen through the eyes of not just a historian but also a psychoanalyst. Under the title of psychohistory, Kovel is able to explore the reasons why racism has appeared in different guises but remains a social fantasy which is shared by all (Kovel 1971: 53). Kovel does not mean that everybody in society is a racist in the overt form; instead he opines that racism is part of the social fabric and as such we are all aware of it to differing degrees. By stratifying the awareness of racism and the degree to which people partake in it, Kovel compartmentalizes history to explain the emergence of three distinct forms of racism. The historical eras discussed by Kovel are complicated and part of a larger social fabric. That is to say there are many economic, social, societal and individual processes and occurrences which contributed to

the development and recognition of these forms of racism. Though those processes are important they are not going to be covered in detail here, rather, I look at the forms of racism that develop in these eras to support my own arguments about how racism is still used in comics. I do not want to seem too blunt or categorical, but it is important for this work to extrapolate the theory of racism so that it may be applied to the analysis of superheroes. To that end, I give a synopsis of Kovel's theoretical explanation of racism rather than his history because superhero comics did not exist in all of the periods of which he speaks. Also, it would be erroneous to connect Kovel's historical periods of racism with contemporary comic books. That is not to say, however, that the racism which developed in those periods is still not at work in contemporary society due to their influence and appearance during the minstrelsy era. Minstrelsy, as has been demonstrated, has had a continuing effect on the development of comic book narratives. A brief description of these forms of racism follows.

Dominative racism is the first type that Kovel describes. This is the overt racism that acts upon bigoted beliefs and is the most well recognized form of racism. As Kovel says; it "Represents the open flame of racial hatred" (1971: 54). This racism is most noted for being the type to keep Blacks "down", to erase opportunity and if necessary to destroy the Black body totally. Most commonly dominative racism brings to mind the use of physical violence, but many subtler forms can be found in any instance where a Black body is harmed by the word or deed of another. While physicality is the most clearly visible form, hate speech, slurs and any other directed racist activity would fall under this rubric. Bigots transform their own racist fantasies into a type of personal reality that allows them to act in a manner that fits their ideas (55).

Historically, this type of racism stems directly from slavery and it takes what had been accepted in those days and turns it into a fantasy of “today”, anachronistically assuring the racist that what s/he does is the correct course of action (59). In many ways this behaviour mythologizes the past; it takes the beatings delivered at the master’s/overseer’s/driver’s hand and makes it a trope, an idealized action which harkens back to “the good ol’ days” as well as the justification provided in Enlightenment philosophy. Just as we have seen the stereotyping of the Black body through continued and repeated character types; actions too, take on symbolic values when they are rationalized as being natural. When one engages in dominative racism it is a conscious action that is meant to hurt and damage, it is not accidental and it is directed at the Black body purposefully. As this type of racism is highly visible, it does not occur as often (anymore) as the second type which can pass nearly undetected in everyday life.

Aversive racism belongs to those who acknowledge White supremacy but who do not act on it in an explicit way. These bigots try to avoid contact with Blacks or ignore them totally (54-55). This is the racism that promotes social reform, so long as it is done through impersonal means. The racist would allow for the Blacks to gain some social mobility as well as some rights and privileges but they would only allow the upward social mobility if the aversive racist were not involved, that is to say; if the aversive racist had to be involved in the promotion of the Black body, the Black individual would be shunned or denied. This racism is always one step away from being dominative, if the Black body crosses a boundary (real, as in neighbours or imagined, as in the thought of a Black person marrying a family member) it can become violent and destructive. In all

ways, the aversive racist is the midpoint between dominative racism and the third type - metaracism.

Historically, Kovel points to the White search for personal gain as the beginning of the aversive racist era. After the abolition of slavery, open racial violence in the market (i.e. slave trading) had to cease and therefore the only way to make a profit was for White hegemony to stop engaging in open dominative racism. As such, the White hegemonic structure came to ignore the existence of the Black body instead of actively and overtly attempting to harm it (60). Psychologically, this form of racism is equated with the superego, a go between attempting to dampen the incessant and primal desires of the Id while transforming those desires into pleasant outward expressions of the ego. The psycho-social structure is such that the state creates or maintains an aversive policy, symbolically transforming the dominative racist aspects into aversive, non-physical strategy. Individuals, influenced and supportive of the state, maintain and reproduce this effort at a cultural level thereby completing a circuit which adopts an aversive attitude towards blackness. In practice, aversive racism does not act boldly but instead hides itself in gestures and policy that denies social mobility or benefits to minorities. Institutions may refer to the rule of law or the need to uphold rules/policy to provide a justification for the action without having to refer to racial motivations. A silent form of racism, aversion is the form of racism before the most difficult to detect: metaracism.

Any actions which do not explicitly reveal racist tendencies but appeals to the unconscious persistence of racial fantasies can be considered metaracism (55). What this means is that not only is metaracism difficult to find, it is also difficult to define. Let us start with what it is not: it is not violence in the conventional sense like dominative

racism and it is not a subconscious avoidance like aversive racism, neither is it a mixture of the two such that when a Black person moves in next door you have a sudden urge to move. Rather, Metaracism passes “beyond consciousness holding only to its inner connections with the symbolic matrix” (211). The symbolic matrix, as described in the introduction; is a cognate of the collective unconscious, the psychical area in which society has attached meaning to the symbolic value of social institutions. Metaracism, then, is an inherent fault in the social institutions which continue to “paint over older symptoms with a newer one in order to protect the underlying disease” (211). By continually ‘painting over’ the earlier forms of racism, social institutions have created a symbolic system which continues to oppose the attempted conscious eradication of racism. Psychoanalytically, any force which continues to oppose the conscious release of a psychical object, in this case, racism, is considered to be repressive (Freud 1960: 4). Because social institutions have refused to confront and eliminate the racism which has arisen from the dominative and aversive eras, social institutions have “repressed” racism into the unconscious and have “created” metaracism. Kovel describes metaracism as the most modern form of racism because racial distinctions have become anachronistic, society, in place of these distinctions, has created a new form of racism which continues to preserve the “inner plague” but which does not make use of racial divisions (1970: 211).

Psychoanalysis has explained how metaracism has developed, but I have yet to discuss how it works. Metaracism operates through the continued acquiescence of the state and individuals to the larger cultural order. The state implements consciously non-racist practices which reassure the individual of the “goodness” of the social order.

However, this social order has its own aims and ends which are prefaced on the racist ideals which continue to exist repressed, but not destroyed. Therefore when an individual partakes in any action sanctioned by the state, it continues to reproduce the racism which is at the core of Western culture. The state is multicultural only insofar as it doesn't care about the colour of the worker's skin, so long as the worker helps the state achieve its own ends. Workers, meaning anybody who helps to continue the reproduction of social norms, are preferred to be perfectly interchangeable nonentities that create as little disturbance as possible in the continued creation of products (and ideals) for social consumption (216). When seen in this light, it does not matter what colour the worker is, so long as they are doing the work of the institution. A discourse of non-racism and multiculturalism arises because both Black and White are capable of reproducing cultural norms when employed by the state.

I posit that contemporary Black superhero comic books are indeed full of meta-racist discourse and that they almost exclusively work in this form. Metaracism still makes use of stereotypical tropes which provide a sense of group continuity and thus seamlessly find their way into comics. Black superhero comic books become tools of social reproduction because they serve as a sign of "progress" but also because they build upon the formula of superheroes that has proven (financially) successful with audiences while still engaging with racist stereotypes. Despite the changes that have come to mainstream Black superhero comic books, the books remain mired in racism even if it is not easily visible. To this end I will now demonstrate how Black Panther comics from the late 70s, early 90s and the 2000s fit into this model and display characteristic traits of each of these racist forms.

The Black Panther comics have a long history, starting in 1976 as a stand-alone title and it is still being published as of the writing of this project. This has not been a continuous publishing as it was cancelled a few times and then restarted by different artists and authors. I selected key time periods instead of key issues in my assessment because this gives a more fair representation of the style and narratives that were taking place. By not purposefully selecting certain comic book issues or story arcs I have been able to put together a more thorough argument than if I had selected just those issues that dealt with overt racism.

### **The Black Panther of the 1970s**

I start with a brief synopsis of the first ten issues of the Black Panther stand-alone comic. The King Solomon's Frog story and subsequent issues deal with T'Challa as leader of Wakanda setting out abroad to help Mr. Little, a white antiquities dealer, retrieve a magical device that can transport beings from the past or the future to the present. Along the way he meets with danger and a group known as the Collectors, who want the frog for themselves. Having returned the frog to its rightful resting place, T'Challa's home land is threatened with a missile strike and thus, he is coerced into helping the Collectors find the Sacred Water Skin, a pool of life replenishing water that can make the drinker immortal. Once again saving the life of Mr. Little, this time from the guardians of the sacred water, T'Challa vanquishes the foe, returns the water (which was being stolen) and escapes from the Collectors so they cannot pressure him into any more missions.

On his way back to Wakanda, T'Challa encounters and subsequently rescues, strangers who are adrift at sea only to find that they are mobsters who, now having been

lifted out of the water, inevitably attempt to steal T'Challa's helicopter. In the ensuing chaos the helicopter's control panel is damaged and the helicopter crashes. Surviving the wreckage, T'Challa is forced to walk across the desert in search of a way home. The comic takes a small break to show what is happening back in Wakanda which is now a country bereft of its spiritual and governmental leadership. The interlude opens with T'Challa's half-brother, who has experimented on himself and has turned into a raging monster. The regent (standing in for the lost T'Challa) orders members of the royal family to take up the mantle of the Panther God and fight this menace. Not having the same mystical enhancements as T'Challa, his family is almost killed until the absent Black Panther steals a jeep, makes his way to Wakanda and destroys his now monstrous half-brother. These actions may not seem incredible by comic book conventions but when they are analyzed closely there are some surprising covert forms of racism.

T'Challa is a King, a great priest-king who is also the religious leader of his people. Yet for the time he spends with Mr. Little he acts completely subservient, often being addressed as a "jackanape". This is a term; defined by Webster's dictionary of 1914 as, "an ape, a conceited fellow or mischievous child", a definition that plays not only on a lack of intelligence but also on a similarity to primates. This definition sounds much like the racial stereotypes that were present in the 1970s as well as those that came from antebellum America. Though these words are put into the mouth of a villain, the Black Panther does not react or correct Mr. Little's continued verbal abuse. The comparisons of Black males to apes appeared early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the rise and spread of phrenology (i.e. scientific racism), a system by which humanity could be categorized and catalogued as other taxonomic creatures. While Whites were classified as

superior, Blacks were seen as a degenerative form of humanity that shared the same anatomical structure as apes. According to the geometric rules of visual portrayal designed by Petrus Camper, apes and Black Africans occupied the same taxonomical spectrum (Ewin & Ewin 2006: 113). Not only was this a facial recognition technology, but also a White ideal that extended to the intelligence and habits of Africans. This classificatory system grew out of earlier attempts to define beauty and lasted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century by creating a “scientifically” endorsed hierarchy of humanity (113-115). Science had supplanted the contemporary philosophical hierarchy by designing experiments and treatise that relied on measurement, sight and physical experimentation, not just theorization and observation.

The similarities and allusions to animals do not stop with the dialogue. In many frames T’Challa is described (and depicted) as leaping like an “angered jungle beast”, striking with “cobra speed” or moving like a “jungle cat”. This direct reference to the Black Panther’s animal nature is repeated to the audience as each comic begins with a prologue which reads; “With the speed of a jungle beast, the prince of Wakanda stalks both the concrete of the city and the undergrowth of the veldt, for when danger lurks he dons the garb of the savage cat from which he gains his name...The Black Panther!” With such a detailed and animalized prologue, repeated in the same words for several issues, it is no surprise that, “past fears and antagonisms are encoded in images and symbols, in sayings and rationalizations which set self and others apart” (Pieterse 1992: 9). What is being communicated is nothing less than the animalization of T’Challa. Even though his costume and name and hence religious and political status, is crafted in the likeness of a panther, it is still necessary for the authors to (taxonomically) classify every

move and every description of T'Challa as that of an animal. This continued repetition of animal poses, actions and descriptions is nothing less than scripting the Black body with colonial images of Africans as part of nature. Moreover, Pieterse tells us of the hidden text, the subscript of narrative, that carries with it cultural assumptions about Africa and Africans (30). This erases T'Challa's high standing and includes him in the fantasy of the savage African that cannot be told apart from the flora and fauna of his native land (35).

I include this type of writing and drawing as a form of metaracism, these images are sold as being progressive and inclusive; creating a Black superhero that has an African identity. As I stated earlier, this was a way for the social institution of comic book publishing to sell more books and make more money. It was a self-serving end which paid little attention to the colour of the character. What was (and is) important, is that the comic was successful and it created a fan base for another of Marvel's creations. The inherent racism and stereotypical depictions of the Black male body is the recycling and re-presenting of the racist ideals which continue to exist as part of the cultural matrix. The continued use of prejudiced images targets the Black body as other and once again creates separate psychological spaces for Whites and Blacks. By designing fantastic adventures set in the "undergrowth of the veldt", Marvel recreates a fantasy that has existed in the psycho-historical collective unconscious of White hegemony.

Psychoanalytically the creation of the Black Panther comic allowed for the release (sublimation) of psychical energy. According to Freud, images lead to an incomplete form of being conscious (preconscious) (1960: 11). For complete consciousness to occur the image must be accompanied by an explanation. Thus, the goal of psychoanalysis to heal through the association of words with images (i.e. dream analysis, word association

etc.). The images, in this case, those created in the comic, serve as a bridge between the repressed (cannot be accessed) energy of the unconscious and the energy of the preconscious (not conscious/aware but can be influential). By depicting Black Panther as subservient and animal-like the comic book authors/artists enact mnemonic residues that infuse the character with the collectively repressed racism of previous eras. Therefore, Black Panther serves as a popular image of multiculturalism but also as nostalgic colonial image.

Accordingly, the continuous patronizing and racist discourse of a Black king bowing to the whim of a rich, White, antiquity collector who demeans him as an ape (to which T'Challa never objects) is a form of preconsciously influenced racism that fits with Kovel's explanation of metaracism. Furthermore, T'Challa is seen praising the White collector in dialogue by saying things like he would never "dare disobey" Mr. Little or that Mr. Little "Always proves himself right" (Black Panther 2-3). The subtext of Black subservience and acquiescence is made abundantly clear. The deep animalization and brute strength of T'Challa attach the character very closely to the Black buck stereotype; however, the quick and unfailing compliance with White characters' demands also script him with the Uncle Remus typology.

Jack Kirby, the White artist and story teller has crafted a convenient African character that looks and acts just like he wants him to. A proud king does the bidding of White colonialists who want nothing more than to enter Africa and steal artefacts from long lost kingdoms. Instead of fighting this clear representation of colonialist thinking, the Black Panther agrees to go with them and help them. Even though the White figures never enter Wakanda, they psychologically have entered T'Challa. Semiotically, the

colonizers have colonized, if not the mind, then the behaviour of the King of the nation they are trying so desperately to enter. In many ways this makes Black Panther the epitome of a Remus character, willing and able to do the bidding of a White master without questioning the outcomes. What message is being sent when the only Black superhero in the first few issues is ready and willing to steal from his acknowledged continent for the pleasure of White collectors?

I briefly turn to the analysis of literary science fiction at this time, due to the many similarities that the two genres share. John Rieder (2008), a science fiction theorist, puts a name to this type of story that is common in early science fiction writing. He calls narratives like the above a “discoverer’s fantasy: We know very well that there are people living in this land, but we act as if it were empty before our arrival” (31). The collectors get T’Challa to move into spaces that are occupied by living people, but who are denied any sort of real existence. In this case that place is Africa. T’Challa is made to be a beastly brute, pure body and no mind that acts like an animal to fetch the items required/desired by the White majority. While working for the Collectors T’Challa is largely away from home and is beholden to their cravings. Also, the Collectors later reveal a missile that is pointed at the nation of Wakanda. This means that there is not only a threat of violence to T’Challa’s home but a real, intrusive threat of violence to the Black body

Another anachronistic visual code of racism that I found was a simple gesture that happens six times in ten issues, the donning of the hood. T’Challa was gifted with a ritual suit that resembles a Black Panther. It is often mentioned that this suit is not just some superhero outfit, but a proper uniform that is meant to hide T’Challa’s identity and to

bring him in tune with the Panther spirit. A Superhero's costume, much like religious, professional and ethnic clothing of the real world, suggests devotion and many times a mission. The robes of a priest or the tuxedo of a maître D'hôtel express a certain type of service that is going to be rendered by that person, while the turban of a Sikh and the yarmulke of a devout follower of Judaism are outward expressions of devotions and religious connection. Certain resonating artistic conventions occur, however, when T'Challa puts on the hood. His eyes grow large and white and all of his features are erased so that he very much resembles a simplified version of a large Black cat. Alone, this is a standard gesture as even White heroes have to put on their masks. It is the connection to Minstrelsy blackface that gives the Black Panther's gesture its racist connotation.

Earlier, I discussed some of the conventions that made minstrelsy what it was, one such convention was a deliberate scene in which the performer is seen putting on blackface before the performance can begin, signalling to the White audience that the actor (and whiteness) has left and in his place is a Black 'character' ready to take the stage. Not only did the actor paint his face black, but often he would greatly exaggerate his eyes and redden his lips. T'Challa is often shown in a frame, by himself, putting on the ritual hood before the action can take place. This scene can stand alone or it can be accompanied by text such as; "The time has come to don the ritual mask and fight as the Black Panther" (Black Panther #3 1976) or "I'll clear up your confusion once I adjust this ritual hood" (Black Panther #6 1977). To draw such attention to the wearing of the black face (mask) seems a re-presentation of the trope of a blackface minstrel getting ready to put on a show. As a result, this is what the Panther does: he puts on a mask before he

fighters/’puts on a show’. Symbolically, this erases the man and creates the cat. The 8<sup>th</sup> smartest man in the world, who is a ruler and scientist, is consumed by his alter ego and the racist stereotypes that are coded into both the animal and the face-blackening scene. Furthermore, this act is central to the comic as the superhero emerges from putting his/her costume. Suiting-up is an interpretive break in all superhero comics; the actions that have come before the hero putting on his costume can be considered necessary narrative but after the suit-up, action begins. The reader is no longer dealing with the mundane human aspect of the hero; they are now faced with the super-hero.

In the case of Black Panther, his “Blacking-up” is a complex layering of racial performativity which has been constituted through whiteness. His mask is not just that of a superhero, but a creation by the artists which draw a very strong connection to the make-up of minstrelsy. In many ways is a double-Blacking, his skin serves as a code for certain tropes and the mask serves, independently, for another set. By putting on the mask T’Challa is ‘reset’ and his original blackness becomes a palimpsest tablet onto which new script may be recorded. His humanity, to use an example already stated, is erased and his animal nature becomes more prominent. The same can be said about his pharmacopic history, quasi-mystical powers and most importantly his tribal connection, all of these impositions are coded into the mask and are settled on to T’Challa when the audience sees his deliberately put on his mask.

Though the ritualistic donning of an alter identity is not unusual for superheroes, the added layer of racist history imbues the Black superheroes mask with a symbolic dehumanization. Not only is it reminiscent of the blackening up ritual, in the case of T’Challa it is a definite animalization. Much like the minstrels, when T’Challa puts on

the cat mask it signals the removal of the man (T'Challa), replacing him with a performance of perceived blackness.

Further, it cannot be denied that the name Black Panther was loaded with political meaning at the time. In 1966 the Lowndes County Freedom Organization first used the image of a Black Panther in opposition to their political rivals; the Alabama Democratic Party, whose symbol was a White Rooster. The Black Panther image was meant to be symbolic of independence and self-determination (Nama 2011: 39). Consequently, when the cry for “Black Power” went up in the same year, Negroes became socioculturally identified as ‘blacks’, which became the appropriate term for political consciousness and a type of aesthetic. By becoming a social adjective used to describe not only a people, but also part of the civil rights movements, ‘black’ became a buzz word to rally around and to embrace (42-43). With the rise of the civil rights movement group, the Black Panthers, Jack Kirby was forced to rename the comic book character several times. However, through historical work credited to loyal fans and academics it has been shown that the comic book character was created before the establishment of the Black Panther Party (Cronin 2008, Nama 2011). The logo, however, that was used by the Panther party was in use at the time of the Black Panther’s creation. It could be the case that Kirby drew from the logo as a source of inspiration for the creation of the character. Although I would rather avoid speculation on such matters, this information reinforces the notion that popular symbols/folklore that exist at any given time can be used unconsciously as an impetus or stimulus for contemporary ideas. Further, it demonstrates how the symbol can be used differently. The Black Panther party adopted a symbol which was the direct opposite of their White “rivals”, while Kirby may have adopted it as symbol for the first

Black superhero. Each of these uses of the panther image code a symbolic meaning; the first is Black Power as enacted by a politically motivated party of like-minded individuals, the second, an attempt by a White comic book creator to make a canon of multicultural characters for profit. If it is the case that Kirby adopted the panther image for this reason, it reinforces the effect of metaracism. Kirby adopted part of Black “culture” so that he may create something which continues to serve the needs and wants of his White publishing house.

Referring to the aliases that Kirby created during the 70s, I have found that they are just as racist as the character’s original name (Cronin 2008). “The Coal Tiger” and “Black Leopard” are just as animalistic while the “Nubian Prince” marks the character off as distinctly African. In each incarnation, Black Panther has been intimately connected with his place of origin or animal like qualities. As such, when understood in the political climate of the 60s and 70s, Black Panther can be read as symbol for White America’s distrust of Black revolutionary individuals. In many ways, Kirby was putting the Black Panther “in his place” when we read the first several issues of his stand- alone comic. T’Challa’s powers and high station mean nothing because he is continually subjected to the will of the dominant White characters. By so closely allying the name of his character with the political group (Coal Tiger and Black Leopard are functional equivalents to Black Panther), Kirby made a statement about how Black civil rights activists were seen by the popular imagination.

All of this is to say that I do not think that Jack Kirby intentionally studied black face minstrelsy adapting it for the (then) only Black superhero. Instead, I postulate that Kirby was using the trope/motif of blackface that was already in the collective imaginary;

just as he may have been influenced by the panther symbol, so too was he influenced by the image of Blacks in popular entertainment. By having these symbols ready to use Kirby was able to make a statement by incorporating it into his comic. The donning of the mask was to be a lasting attribute of Black Panther and can still be seen in the modern texts. Again, this reinforces the notion that metaracism is not a conscious decision. Racism has fallen into repeated use and recycling which has mythologized it and set it aside as a ready-made object to be inserted into texts when the author needs a story telling convention.

### **The Black Panther of the 1990s**

Having looked at the early years, let us move forward into 1991, the year that Black Panther makes a triumphant return to the pages of Marvel comics as a short series put together by a White author and a Black artist. “Panther’s Prey” tells the story of T’Challa, who is now back in Africa, fighting against the importing of drugs into Wakanda. His main enemy is Solomon Prey, a genetically manipulated Black male (human) who has taken the shape of a gargoyle, complete with wings and razor-sharp claws. Prey is heading the drug ring, as well as an expedition to kill Black Panther and seize control of the Vibranium mound. Vibranium is the lifeblood of the technologically advanced Wakanda, it appears nowhere else on earth (in the same quantity) and has incredible destructive and protective qualities. Controlling the mound for centuries has rendered T’Challa’s family line exceedingly rich and powerful. To own the mound is to be a major world player.

Once again racism is found in an otherwise socially aware comic about the dangers of drugs and gang violence. Even though he shows his political influence by

having ambassadors in a foreign country, T'Challa is still so strongly connected with his cat-like appearance that he is on average, divested of his name four times an issue to be called nothing more than "The Great Cat" and sometimes the "Great Black Cat". One of the main differences in this mini-series, however, is the way Black Panther interacts with White characters. The few White individuals that exist within this book either respect T'Challa or despise him depending on which side of the drug cartel they are on. Although there are White characters who hate him, none of them make him do their bidding nor does he act subservient in their presence. If anything, this book revitalizes the proud African spirit the Black Panther is supposed to have. There is no help offered by American characters either, though, and T'Challa is still set apart from most American characters as are his Wakandan Ambassadors.

Although the Ambassadors live in America and some wear standard American suiting, they are all of Wakandan descent and as such work in offices that are reminiscent of their jungle homeland. Even though the reader does not spend much time in the Wakandan-American offices, they are all coloured in shades of sand yellow and are filled with plant life and bear a resemblance to the scenes of palace life in Wakanda. I would be remiss, however, if I did not point out one beneficial decorative aspect of the main office as seen in book four. The walls are adorned with pictures of tribal life as well as famous African Americans, of particular note Muhammed Ali. The artist's (Dwayne Turner- an African American) choice to include this art work in the offices which features prominently in the panel, symbolically joins the Wakandans with Americans in a harmonious race relationship where race becomes a common factor instead of one of

difference. Unfortunately the Wakandan-American offices are seen only briefly and are not major scenes/spaces for most of the comic narrative.

This mini-series takes place largely with the Black Panther away from American soil although, book three and a section of book four are spent in America where T'Challa rekindles a relationship with an ex-girlfriend who becomes a fiancé; investigates a sector of the drug ring and meets with his Wakandan ambassadors. For most of the rest of the narrative he is back in Africa doing what he “should” be doing: ruling his nation. His brief trip to America, however, is punctuated with his attempted murder by being buried alive by White gangsters. A symbolic gesture which codes the “Back to Africa Movement” in a violent yet aversive way, making use of White gangsters, literally, *leaving* the Black Panther to die. The message is clear; Black Panther belongs in Africa and not on American soil.

While this may seem reminiscent of the ‘Back to Africa’ movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in which the American Colonial Society (A.C.S.) sought to “help” freed slaves go back to Africa through both violent and non-violent means (Patton 1992:165), it is more telling of the aversive racism that wished for African Americans to just “go away”. A clear form of dominative and aversive racism, the Black Panther comic picks it up in its symbolic, meta-racist form. The continual othering of the Black Panther (a grave in the woods, secluded offices, his fiancé's small apartment) all demonstrate the pre-consciously influenced racism as it was discussed above. As I will demonstrate below, being left to die is not the only sublimated meta-racist symbol that appears in the comics. Rather, the 1991 version of the Black Panther continues to other Black Panther as an unwanted foreigner who belongs in his own, stereotypically depicted homeland.

On the inside back panel of book number one we are alerted to Dwayne Turner's art style, which is lush and brings "fresh perspective to Panther's Prey". It doesn't seem like anything is fresh or new, we still recognize Panther through his wide, white eyes that are reminiscent of minstrelsy times and we still see (and hear of) him as the great black cat. What is new are the artistic conventions that render the Black Panther more 'realistic', gone are the cartoon-like appearances of Panther and the cast of characters. In their place stands a more deftly crafted version of Wakanda and her protectors.

These books make the reader feel as if s/he has entered Wakanda. It is seen as a lush, tropical paradise full of technological wonders that is covered in dense foliage. The country is protected, nonetheless, by spear (and gun) wielding self-proclaimed warriors. It is an isolationist and aversive fantasy land where Blacks mix with Blacks and most of the White characters die. This mini-series is a visual study in how to read colonial visions of Africa, even though T'Challa has spared no expense to retrofit Wakanda with the latest technology, it is nothing more than a tropical landscape that is populated with African scenery. The only people who stand apart from the trees and tribal carvings are the warriors, a brave lot who ride dinosaurs and carry futuristic guns. One cannot help but be reminded of the colonial notion of Africans as warriors and little else. Even with all this technology the main focus is on the 'noble savage' and his proud aggression as he attempts to repel the outsiders. When this noble savage is not reigned in he is at liberty to use his cruel beastliness to fend off his attackers (Pieterse 1992: 79). The action happens in Africa, makes a small detour to America and finishes in Africa. All in all it seems as if the White author wants nothing to do with the African body except to craft a Eurocentric

vision of Afrocentric ideas. In many ways the author has helped/sent the Black Panther “Black to Africa” so as not to have him on American soil.

Africa and especially Wakanda, take on a distinct tribal feel, a fantasy land created out of White imagination. Though the artist on this series is Black, metaracism works on the premise that colour does not matter. Turner is being used for his artistic ability, a worthwhile end in the service of Marvel publishing. His race is of no consequence to Marvel so long as a well-crafted piece of art is created. Turner (re)creates images that reproduce social norms so as to make the comic a viable selling point for the publishing house. The images of Wakanda, just like those of the Black Panther, come from repressed racist depictions. The publisher has built this land for Black characters to stay in and not stray from.

As Sidney Willhelm (1964) asserts, when the Black body demands equality the White hegemony disengages, sequestering the Black body to ghettos and other spaces (3). The problem for Willhelm is one that arises from the change from exploitation to uselessness. Black Panther, while a superhero that has worked in America and saved it from a drug cartel is now no longer needed. Just like the Civil Rights activists, he is “not so much oppressed as unwanted; not so much unwanted as unnecessary; not so much abused as ignored” (3).

Lastly, a note on the fetishization of the body as opposed to the fetishizing of Wakanda as a colonial space meant for both isolation and exploration. All four books (around 45 pages each) center on T’Challa’s meta-human athleticism and his panther likeness, though this story goes even deeper by having a panel in which T’Challa actually communes with Panthers in a scene where his face and a panther’s face are nearly

identical (Panthers Prey Book 3 1991). Though the panthers may seemingly understand him, an editorial note runs, "...Not that they understood a word he was saying. HEY! He wasn't Tarzan or Dr.Dolittle" (Book 3). This is a small comfort that he should not be aligned with Tarzan although the artist creates several frames of T'Challa swinging from trees, branches, cable cars and flag poles. Once again, like Wakanda the land, the Black body is made an object for admiration and fear. T'Challa represents the animal- like senses and sympathies which are attached to the mystical nature of Blackness.

### **The Black Panther of the 2000s**

My final category of analysis is divided into two parts, first the contemporary version of T'Challa and the Black Panther franchise from his major story arc (Man Without Fear!) and second a youth-marketed version, both from the 2000s. In *Black Panther Man Without Fear!* (2011), T'Challa has once again returned to America, taking over for Daredevil (the original Man without fear). This time T'Challa does not have the blessing of the Panther god as he had to abdicate his throne and title to his sister. After a particularly nasty battle with foreign powers, T'Challa has destroyed the Wakandan source of Vibranium and has been left with a need to "prove" himself as a hero. Now without powers, without the wealth of Wakanda and without his high tech vibranium gadgets, T'Challa is attempting to regain his status as a worthy warrior and protector of innocents while Matt Murdock (Daredevil) is away.

The series starts with T'Challa taking an assumed name: Mr. Okonkwo, which is interesting to note, is the same name as the main character in the historical novel *Things Fall Apart* by Nigerian born author Chinua Achebe. In the novel Okonkwo is a successful Ibo villager who is renowned as a warrior, wrestler and farmer, which is not very

different from the accolades of T'Challa. Importantly, the novel addresses the need to look at Africa differently, especially the customs that have disappeared. It stands as a text which calls for the serious study and respect of African customs and history (Olende 2007). Though the similarities end there, it is a point of interest that the comic book authors would draw from African literature, which will be seen again in the children's version of the Black Panther where they use the name of two gods. This choice plays no role in the comic, but it creates a question of metanarrative connection. Are the authors attempting to connect T'Challa with Achebe's character or was it a ready at hand name to insert? Further are the authors trying to invoke the anti-colonial tone of Achebe's novel? These questions unfortunately remain unanswered through the analysis of the comic and subsequently this work. However, it is an important fact to note that there is a connection drawn between modern comic creation and African literature.

The opening issue, #513, has some of the same feeling of subservience without the overt connotations. T'Challa, now disguised as Mr. Okonkwo- a refugee from the Congo- is seen accepting forged immigration papers from a former lawyer and collaborator of Daredevil. Though the ex-lawyer has already been disbarred he feels threatened by performing such an illegal action as fabricating documents of American citizenry. To quiet his fears, T'Challa says that he would "**Die**" (sic) before letting any harm come to his new ally. Again, this may seem a kind platitude or an over exaggeration to mollify the fears of somebody who has gone out of his way to help a former African king, but the promise to die before harm comes to a White subordinate character (who is in the series for one page) recalls the earlier Black Panther's willingness to die for Mr. Little and his clandestine schemes. Again this subverts the stature of T'Challa, putting

him at the mercy of a White character. Metaracism has T'Challa being swallowed into a White cultural system, forsaking his former political power and influence. No doubt T'Challa could have called on one of his ambassadors or lawyers to do the same work that is being done. Instead, he is put at the mercy of a non-descript White character to which he has pledged his life. The similarity to the earlier stories of the 1970s is striking and unnecessary. While T'Challa has abdicated his throne he is still in contact (and in the good standing) with his political advisors, peers and countrymen. The skulking in the shadows and doing underhanded deals with White character reduces T'Challa to "a toy in the White man's hands" (Fanon 1967: 14), both in the story and as a character being manipulated by a White social institution. The racism is not overt, but it is recycled and a prominent part of the story.

Another meta-racist factor that finds its way back into the comics is the continued use of T'Challa's face and facial features. The first issue has "Mr. Okonkwo" wearing a set of eye glasses that obscure his actual eyes, essentially whitening them out and making them appear as the largest feature on his face. This technique is again used in issue #515 when the reader sees T'Challa welding together some new weaponry. The welding glasses are goggle styled, round and all white. Both of these ocular devices bring to mind the enlarged and whitened eyes of minstrels as well as the earlier incarnations of the Black Panther when he is in his full Panther uniform. The uniform in this arc whites out the Panther's eyes, but not as severely as in the past. Therefore, it is left up to the use of glasses and welding goggles to tie in the blackface practice of enlarged and whitened eyes.

Through careful attention to each page I found other forms of recycled racism in the art work itself. The tones and drawings in this series were darker but so was the rendering of T'Challa in his Panther uniform (which he should have given up as he is no longer the leader of Wakanda). Issue 516 has T'Challa so convincingly rendered as a silhouette of cat that it was difficult to distinguish if he was meant to look human at all. His body was large but sleek, with no definition of muscle, his neck was extended and his jaw protruded from his face to give him a distinctly animal like appearance. So complete was the animalization of T'Challa that only through context is the reader able to tell it was him. Once more the authors were also keenly aware of the Black Panther's litheness, and though he no longer has the magic of the Panther god the readers are reminded, quite clearly, that he has the strength and athleticism of a "Peak human" (#515).

Although this series appears twenty years after 'Panther's Prey' and is artistically and narratively more refined, the racism inherent in it did not change. The racism adapted and became part of the story, it was no longer as overt as the 70s subservient narratives and it did not display the same kind of aversive feelings as the "stay in your own country" stories of the 90s. Instead the racism is so well integrated that it becomes part of the reading experience, a motif that exists contiguous with the all-encompassing 'good vs. bad' motif of most superhero comic books. T'Challa is still the Black Panther of repressed racist feelings and hence, the White imagination, in name and certainly in body and action.

During my discussion of the Black superhero body, I made mention of the Black body being as stereotypical as the costume that they wear, that the costume and the Black body are both scripted with racist stories. *Man Without Fear!* continues to support this

assessment. Although no longer under the magical protection of a god or the pharmacopic power of the mystical heart-shaped herb, T'Challa does not need his superpowers, his Black skin serves as the source of his otherness and quasi-mystical abilities. Metaracism is evident because T'Challa's Blackness confirms the radical difference that Fanon (1967), Kovel (1971: 62-63) and Jordan (1974: 5-6) talk about; differences not just from the White body but also difference by way of having a super athletic, beastly and quasi-mystical body that is attuned to nature because it is primitive. It the modern version of T'Challa is not all that different from the versions that have come before.

Metaracism works by sublimating the cultural myths of society into a preconscious state in the psychical apparatus of social institutions. These myths about the Black body have been shaped in this culture and continue to be used as story motifs. By scripting and enforcing these roles and stereotypes on every character of stage, screen and page, authors have created a mythologized repertoire of motifs that are easily accessed. As Kovel defines it, myth is nothing more than a cultural story that is complex (made of historical, folkloric and social biases), but rooted in fantasy and given conscious value (1971: 63). This is what the Black Panther represents: a complex story based in White hegemonic cultural evaluations of the Black body. The fantasy of Blackness lives on with the notions of sexual prowess, giant genitals, superb athleticism, beastliness, cannibalism and all the other myths and legends that surround the Black body (63-73).

### **The Black Panther for Children**

Lastly, I want to briefly engage with a single issue of a "kid friendly" version of the Black Panther. As this is not a project about children or their preferences, I want to assess this comic in the same way I have handled the other version of the Black Panther.

Therefore, I will not engage in a discussion about youth culture, instead I want to draw attention to how metaracism continues to work in all versions of comics not just those for “adults”. The *All ages Marvel Adventures Super Heroes Black Panther* is meant to be a comic that kids can read unsupervised so that parents don’t have to worry about nudity, sex or violence showing up when you least expect it. The advanced versions of Black Panther have become increasingly violent and emotionally driven and aimed toward a more mature audience. What I found in the youth version was exactly what the publisher promised. There was no overt sense of violence, there was absolutely no sex and the art work was kid appropriate. By that I mean there were no advanced artistic techniques, instead, the characters were rendered in a cartoon like fashion and there were very few scenes of a brooding Black Panther ready to rip the throats out of villains.

The introduction was written on a stereotypical African tribal shield made of hide which was blocking out the better part of a gorilla which had managed to stick its grimacing face out from behind it and at the base of the shield was a skull. The issue was titled “Law of the Jungle” and is a throwback to the original appearance of Black Panther in the Fantastic Four comics of the 1960s before he was given his own stand-alone title. The Original Black Panther lured the Fantastic Four through various traps in Wakanda to see if they were worthy warriors and allies. Of course the Four succeed and Black Panther befriends them for several issues before starring in his own title. This kid friendly and contemporary book deals with the Fantastic Four illegally importing Vibranium from Wakanda. They did not know it was illegal at the time, they just thought that they were getting a deal on the world’s most precious and rare ore. Black Panther shows up to stop them on American soil, but instead of using his wits and intelligence he unleashes giant

robots which look to be made out of wood with carved Africanized faces surrounded by grass.

The robots are named, Shango and Ogoun, which for most children would mean precious little, although for those with an eye toward Afro-Caribbean mythology they would know those are the Yoruba names of the god of Fire/Thunder and The god of Iron, hunting and war. The Fantastic Four make short work of these “mechanical gods” and then fly to Wakanda so they can explain the mix up to T’Challa himself. Ben Grimm (The Thing) arrives with the rest of the Fantastic Four in Africa, wearing a safari suit and they are almost immediately attacked by a mechanical elephant before they spend a few pages chasing T’Challa through the trees and finally into the (supposedly) impenetrable country of Wakanda. There they find typical warriors and serving women who are serving a meal of peace and friendship as well as adorning the Thing’s rock-like head with flowers because the Thing “Resembles a protector spirit from our most cherished legends” (Marvel Adventures Super Heroes Black Panther #20). In the end the corrupt importers find their way into Wakanda, disturb the peaceful meal and are vanquished by the White superheroes as T’Challa’s guards are woefully outmatched due to their being armed with wooden spears.

These findings continue to become more startling. This is the type of comic book that is strictly being marketed towards the youth. Whether parents agree or not, this small comic has as much if not more racism than the mature audience offerings described above. What can be taught to children about heroes, mythology and Africa if this is what is being created? Here we see metaracism in possibly its most unadulterated form. The youth market is one that is quickly fading from comic book publishers as they continue to

move into more mature and complicated story lines. In an attempt to reinvigorate its young audiences, Marvel appeals to bright colours, simple stories and cheerful heroes without any attention being paid to the racism that continues to be recycled. The market, a social institution, perpetuated on the repressed racism of former eras, makes no distinction about young or mature audiences, rather, Marvel moves ahead using the talent of the artists to create an object that can be sold for profit. Accordingly, serious racism continues to be reproduced as part of a social norm. Fanon echoes very clearly when he said “Willy-nilly the Negro has to wear the livery that the White man has sewed for him. Look at children’s picture magazines: out of every Negro mouth comes the ritual ‘Yassuh, boss;’” (1967: 34) Undoubtedly there will be those who continue to say that comics are still just coloured pieces of paper that do not mean much, but as I have tried to prove, comics recycle stories and ideas that become damaging when they are repeated.

### **Positive Depictions of the Black Panther?**

While the major focus of this section has been the ways in which negative depictions of the Black body exist in contemporary superhero comics, it should be mentioned that there have been attempts to handle the Black Panther differently. Positive attempts at narrative have been undertaken by few artists during the Black Panther run, however, the artists and authors who have taken the lead on these projects try to infuse the comic with a sense of ‘racial awareness’ or a reflexive quality that attempts to avoid the specious tropes that have been enumerated above.

Don McGregor, Christopher Priest and Reginald Hudlin have all brought their particular style to the Black Panther comics. When these artists/authors were given creative control of Black Panther they turned him into a narratively “believable”

character that had to face trials and tribulations in both his home country of Wakanda and abroad in America. In one of the most intriguing handlings of the Panther, Christopher Priest situated T'Challa in a "hip-hop" aesthetic. This urban rendering of the hero attempted to bridge the gap between the African origins of the character and the predominantly white readership. T'Challa became a suave, interesting and all around "cool" character that belonged to a sharply different aesthetic than he had belonged to in the past. With the new urban feel of the comic the Black Panther left behind the overt cat-like mannerisms and became a thoughtful and brooding detective-like character that used his mind, rather than his scripted body, to solve the problems he faced. Also, this version of T'Challa held on to his African roots, often making mention of his homeland as well as employing his tribal bodyguards, who, without the outmoded and colonially nostalgic 'African costume', became a reasonable version of a protector of a political personage.

Unfortunately, this space does not allow for a full exegesis of the works of all of these authors, but it is important to note that they do attempt to give the Black Panther a sense of identity rooted in the black experience. Though the black experience is different for each of these artists, the similarities of moving T'Challa away from the caricature of colonial nostalgia is appreciable and distinct from much of the rest of the character's history.

### **Conclusion: Where do we go?**

This project has done two things; first, it has taken a look at comic books as a cultural artefact that reproduces cultural norms. The psychological/psychohistoric model of society which I have employed in this work explains how racism continues to be recycled through the creation of cultural artefacts as a bridge between what is repressed and what is preconscious. Cultural norms are based on a largely repressed set of racist beliefs that have come from past eras. Minstrelsy theatre remains one of the largest influences of coding and scripting the Black male body with stereotypes which are integrated into the cultural matrix which provide ready-made story telling apparatuses. Second, this work has interrogated the use of Black stereotypes in a contemporary cultural media. By uncovering how the Black stereotypes continue to be reused in comics, this work has illuminated how comics remain a literary and artistic source of racism. Taken together this means that I have tried to understand the appearance of race, and more specifically the Black male body, in comics as a motif.

Reviewing the sections of this work calls to mind the words of Jan Nederveen Pieterse when he asked, “How much of Western culture is made up of prejudice about other cultures, how much of Western identity is constructed upon the negative identities of others?” (1992:9). The Western world has been so saturated by images and ideas about blackness that are negative and damaging to the Black body image, that it has continued to permeate into what used to be considered a form of entertainment for the youth. Admittedly, comics “grew up” and now are entertainment for both adults and youths, and as such have a wider audience and distribution. By studying the forms of racism in Black superhero comics, I have found that it reinforces the notion that White Western identity is

founded on comparative principles between “us” and “them”; in this case the “them” are Blacks. The colonial struggle between civilized and primitive, cultured and savage, White and Black continues on in the art and narrative of superhero comic books. Further, dominant society takes these distinctions and codifies them so well that they become, literally, the stuff of stories.

On the topic of stories, one has to turn to Joseph Campbell and his most famous work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell attempts to trace the history and continuance of the hero myth through several cultures. He does this for two reasons: first because he wants to know if the monomyth-- a type of myth that is shared through all cultures when it comes to the folklore of the people--really exists. Some folklorists believe that he is successful while others feel that the monomyth is a synthetic idea that cannot wholly be applied to any one given hero and as such it fails (Dundes 1980: 232). The other reason why he did it was because he sensed and recognized the way that myths stay with a society. Campbell was inspired by the way motifs reoccurred in everyday life; on this point, he famously wrote, “The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of forty-second street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change” (1954: 4). I have recognized the same thing. Stories are powerful and the images that come with them often endure for centuries. These stories can be romantic and light; happy with a “fairy tale” ending, or they can be malicious, disappointing and harmful. Whichever way the story is created and perpetuated, it has a lasting effect when it becomes part of the dominant culture. In the case of the stories and images created about the Black body from the Enlightenment and minstrelsy their legacy is one of harm and racism. The specious images of blackness were

supported by philosophy, art, literature and culture which made them endure almost unchanged until the present day.

In this work I recognized the racism that was inherent in a Western culture two hundred years ago and how it continues to shape and use the same cast of characters now. The repressed racism of the dominant culture continues to influence the modern shaping and telling of stories. Metaracism, influencing both Black and White authors, insinuates itself into the distinct genre of superhero comics, demonstrating that the racist figures and characters that existed in the minstrelsy era continue to exist today just the same. As more reactionary and self-aware Black comic book authors continue to create favourable superheroes, they must continually contend against the “traditional” racist heroes that are waiting for their turn to cross on forty-second and Fifth Avenue.

This project has relevance to the contemporary world. It is important to study racism and its effects no matter where they are found. While I do not want to turn into a comic book apologist, I will say that comics are not only understudied they have been studied incorrectly. As I mentioned earlier, the social history and artistic conventions of comics are worthy areas of study, but they often do not go deep enough or far enough to explain the symbolic function of comic books. By bringing awareness to the reproduction of social norms premised on racism, works like mine can uncover the power relations that are inherent in mainstream comic book culture. Superheroes continue to stand as metaphors for freedom and ideology and accordingly they inspire a wide variety of people. Being aware of the underlying nature of mainstream heroes is necessary as people are going to continue to hold superheroes up as an ideal. Perhaps with more time and research in this area, mainstream Black superheroes can be created with more awareness

of the racism which has occurred previously, offering the audience a viable and conscious alternative to the historically faulted and racist predecessors.

So where do we go from here? I think that a project like this can be analyzed for elements that will facilitate further study. Most pressing on my list is a study of the Black female body. T'Challa is married to Ororo Monroe (aka Storm), one of the few mutant African heroes in comics. It would be interesting to see if she is constructed on the same framework as the African male body. Storm has been featured prominently in several Black Panther issues and is the star of her own standalone comic which details the onset of her powers and her first meeting with T'Challa. While Ororo is presented as a strong, intelligent and capable superhero in her own right, she is often attached to teams (X-Men, Avengers) or her husband. A full study of Storm would lead to a better understanding of not only the female Black body but also how it stands in relation to the Black male body. Much the same with this current study, I believe that studying Storm would uncover more ideals of coloniality and White male hegemonic power. Though she is a powerful mutant and thus inherently worthy, she is also named after a common weather phenomenon and indeed has the power to control the surrounding atmosphere. An in-depth study of the erasure of her identity as a physical force would provide a great complement to what has already been done here.

Another important direction that could be taken from this work is a deeply historical tracing of the tropes that arose in minstrelsy shows. Much like the work of folklorists, tracing the appearance and migration of these stereotypes could be a fruitful endeavour for those who want to show how the stereotypes crossed over from field to stage and stage to comic book. What has been completed above was a sampling of the

depth of these stereotypes and how they affected the creation of an African superhero. Going forward, a study focused solely on the dissemination of the stereotypes would bring fruitful knowledge to the field of comic book studies. Pre- and post-reconstruction America helped shape these characters into the versions that have become known in contemporary literature. The study of earlier versions of these stereotypes would be valuable as they could show stronger links to both the creators of these stereotypes and the mainstream versions which were interrogated here.

As I have stated several times throughout this work, comics are multifaceted cultural artefacts worthy of study. To this end, another underdeveloped area of inquiry is the representation of other people of colour and the racist discourses that are associated with their groups. Consequently that inquiry can be carried further and a study of hegemonic discourses that affect other marginalized groups such as the LGBTQI community would prove beneficial for exposing the bigotry that remains in popular mainstream comics as well.

Finally I believe that this work can contribute to the field of folklore. Many other disciplines have taken to studying comics but few folklorists have entered this arena. Specific psychoanalytical and vernacular theories (Local theories which deal with the creators and what they believe they have created) which exist in folkloristics could continue to grow the comics study field. The historical tracing of tropes, the structural understanding of the function of comics and the importance of comics to the folk-groups known as fans and publishers could uncover some interesting information about the 'how' and 'why' of comics creation. Being able to study comics historically and narratively according to the principles of folklore (social scientifically or literarily) would

enrich our understanding of how society viewed and continues to view heroes, villains and the humans who are caught between them.

Of most importance, this is a work of social justice. I am challenging the notions of racism in general and anti-Black racism in particular. By developing a theory to be applied to the rarely studied medium of comic books I am also challenging the way anti-racist scholarship has been done. Kovel has demonstrated that White dominant society continues to use racism in a variety of ways which has embedded it into the cultural unconscious. Stories, television, movies, art and comics can all suffer from forms of recycled racism that continues to script the Black body with motifs and tropes that are directly connected to severely racist stereotypes. It is not enough to know that those colonial ideals continue to exist; rather they must be actively sought out and exposed in all their forms. Social justice research should aim at correcting a problem or at the least, bring awareness to an issue or an understanding of that issue. By connecting the study of racism and comic books I have brought awareness to a problem as well as continued the dialogue between academics and the comic community (several of whom belong to both group). To this end I believe that this project is fully immersed in social justice.

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