

From Serials to Blockbusters: Media Industry Approaches to Comic-to-Live-Action Adaptations  
and Race

by

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“I don't remember when exactly I read my first comic book, but I do remember exactly how  
liberated and subversive I felt as a result.”  
— Edward W. Said, *Palestine*

For Mom and Dad, who taught me to be my own hero

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## **Abstract**

From Serials to Blockbusters: Media Industry Approaches to Comic-to-Live-Action Adaptations and Race

by

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This dissertation analyzes the relationship between comic-to-live-action adaptations and race from the 1940s through the present. Comic-to-live-action adaptations are increasingly lucrative and appeal to mass audiences, and as such the representations of race contained in these texts circulate widely and impact and interact with other media representations. Multiple media industries, including the comics, film, and television industries are involved in the live-action adaptation process. Each of these industries has its own set of expectations about the adaptation and its intended audience, and these assumptions circulate throughout the industries. I consider historical examples of comic-to-live-action adaptations, archival material from Marvel Comics relating to ideas about live-action adaptation of their characters, interviews with comics professionals and promotional materials from other industry workers involved with adaptations, and contemporary representations of Asian American and Latina/os in comic-to-live-action adaptations. Comics professionals often feel disrespected by the live-action industries, experience a lack of agency in the adaptation of their work, and choose not to have their work adapted. This diminishes the pool of available representations in comics, which in turn results in less diverse live-action adaptations. The historical status of live-action comic adaptation as a

lowbrow genre and how industries react to its increased prominence in the present day have also impacted how race is represented. Racial difference is often represented in higher-profile adaptations, but nuanced discussion of race and its meanings is rare. This dissertation contributes to existing work in media studies, ethnic studies, and media industry and production studies, particularly in examining how the processes involved at various levels of media production impact representations of race in media.

## **Introduction: The Big Business of Comic-to-Live-Action Adaptations**

In 2010, science fiction and comic blog io9.com published an article regarding the casting of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, arguing that the “last thing Spider-Man should be is another white guy.”<sup>1</sup> Although intentionally provocative, the article resonated with some fans, including actor and rapper Donald Glover, who jokingly suggested he should be able to audition for the role. Soon, a Facebook group called “Donald Glover 4 Spiderman” had over 11,000 members. This small, humorous fan campaign quickly drew backlash because Glover is black. Self-professed comics fans and experts elaborately detailed the reasons why Spider-Man could not possibly be anything but white, while conservative pundits like Glenn Beck accused First Lady Michelle Obama of scheming to replace beloved white characters in order to push an anti-white “diversity” agenda.<sup>2</sup> Both fans and pundits justified their positions by claiming that since Spider-Man has always been white, he could not be any other race, and to change his race would irreparably change the character.<sup>3</sup> Notably absent from the discussion was Sony Entertainment, the studio behind *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Sony went on to cast white British actor Andrew

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Bernardin, “The last thing Spider-Man should be is another white guy,” *io9*, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://io9.com/5549613/the-last-thing-spider-man-should-be-is-another-white-guy>.

<sup>2</sup> Noah Kristula-Green, “Glenn Beck Wants a Whiter Spider-Man,” *Frum Forum*, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.frumforum.com/glenn-beck-wants-a-whiter-spider-man/>; Margaret Hartmann, “Glenn Beck Thinks Michelle Obama’s Behind The New Biracial, ‘Gay’ Spider-Man,” *Jezebel*, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/5827942/glenn-beck-thinks-michelle-obamas-behind-the-new-biracial-gay-spider-man>.

<sup>3</sup> Albert S. Fu, “Fear of a Black Spider-Man: Racebending and the Colour-Line in Superhero (re)casting,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, January 13, 2015, 1–15, doi:10.1080/21504857.2014.994647.

Garfield, Marvel introduced a new black Spider-Man in their Ultimate Comics line, and the controversy was over. However, similar scenarios played out in the casting of other live-action comic book adaptations that followed. Why have comic book movies become such a source of tension over representations of race, and why do these controversies – and more broadly, these films – matter?

Over the past decade, adaptations of comics and animated series into films have become summer blockbuster staples and increasingly popular, as well as extremely profitable. Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* debuted with the strongest opening weekend of all time and is currently poised as the third all-time highest-grossing film, behind only *Avatar* and *Titanic* (and just ahead of fellow comic book movie *The Dark Knight*). Despite the blockbuster audiences viewing these comic-based films and television, much of the critical and popular discussion of has remained focused on comics' status as a niche medium, and on comic fans' reaction to the translation of these properties from niche to mass audiences.<sup>4</sup> Attention to how race, ethnicity, and gender are portrayed in these films has also become a topic of interest in both scholarly and popular media, although these discussions also largely still revolve around “fanboys” and their perceived intolerance<sup>5</sup> to changes made to comic book stories or characters.

The goal of this dissertation is to examine how the genre of “comic-to-live-action adaptation” has been articulated throughout its history and how the textual and industrial

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<sup>4</sup> “Should Hollywood Listen to Fanboys About Comic Book Movies?,” *Screen Rant*, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://screenrant.com/comic-book-superhero-movies-fanboys-kofi-105866/>.

<sup>5</sup> “10 Easy Ways to Piss Off a Comic Book Reader,” *Newsarama.com*, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://www.newsarama.com/15402-10-easy-ways-to-piss-off-a-comic-book-reader.html>; “5 Controversial Comic Book Movie Castings (That Became Fan Favorites),” *Moviepilot.com*, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://moviepilot.com/posts/2519175>.

practices that constitute the genre affect and interact with broader discourses around race, ethnicity, and the perceived value of particular popular media texts and their audiences. In *Genre and Television*, Jason Mittell argues that “the goal of studying media genres is not to make broad assertions about the genre as a whole, but to understand how genres work within specific instances and how they fit into larger systems of cultural power.”<sup>6</sup> Bringing together concepts and trends in a variety of bodies of literature is crucial to understanding the process of developing comic-to-film adaptations, as well as their impact on representations of racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender identities in popular culture.

This project incorporates textual, ethnographic, archival, and production studies methodologies to address the following concerns: how the “comic book movie” genre has developed in distinct periods, from film serials of the 1940s, television series of the 1960s-70s, and blockbuster films of the 1990s and how race/ethnicity been implicated in that process; how media industry professionals relate to one another between and within industries and how this impacts decisions in the adaptation process; how different industry professionals imagine the audiences for their media products and how these imagined audiences affect decisions about which stories to adapt and casting in ways that disadvantage non-white characters and actors; how Asian Americans and American Latina/os are represented within comics and comic-to-live-action adaptations and how these representations are implicated in an increasingly “whitewashed” multiracial racial formation.

This project responds to conversations in popular media studies and ethnic studies about

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<sup>6</sup>

Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Show to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 23.

racial representation in adaptations of “niche” media (such as comic books) to mainstream popular texts, focusing mainly on live-action adaptations produced by Disney/Marvel and Warner/DC. Much of the research on race and popular media has focused on fan reaction to representations, and has treated representations of racial minorities in these adaptations as a novel and/or contemporary phenomenon. I examine the history of media industry approaches to race within the comic-to-live-action adaptation process from the film serials of the 1940s to today’s blockbusters, and address the logics and decisions that contribute to the representations that other scholars have documented and analyzed. I argue that the comic-to-live-action adaptation genre that has developed a distinct set of conventions that still influence the adaptations produced today, and that these conventions – large budgets, ensemble casts, perceived “translation” of niche media to mass audiences – affect the kinds of representations of race available.

These media texts and representations are not simply the result of racist assumptions made by media industry professionals, or due to a presumption of racist reactions from the “niche” (assumed to be largely white) fan base, but involve a complex set of factors including creator experiences and perceptions of the adaptation process, genre conventions, industry logics and lore, and relationships between different media industries and their assumptions about how other industries work. Given the high profile, wide distribution, and financial success of contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations, the conventions and relationships underpinning this genre are crucial to examine in order to understand the representations being circulated by these films and television series to immense numbers of viewers across the globe.

One trend that has captured media attention recently is the “mainstreaming” of various

forms of niche media. Along with the superhero comic-to-live-action adaptations I focus on, other comic-based media such as AMC's *The Walking Dead*, fantasy novel adaptations such as HBO's hit *Game of Thrones*, and science-fiction themed films such *Interstellar* and *Gravity* have garnered a great deal of attention, popularity, and critical praise. Indeed, a number of media outlets have proclaimed (or in some cases, lamented) that “geek” fare is now “cool.”<sup>7</sup> While not articulated in popular media as such, this shift from regarding these media as aimed at niche audiences vs. at mass audiences is significant, and demands further examination. Is it that the media content has changed, that the aesthetics or genre conventions have changed, that the audience or marketing for these texts has changed, or something else entirely?

Along with the “mainstreaming” of media previously considered niche, a great deal of attention has been given to the representations of race, ethnicity, and gender in these formerly niche media. Critics and fans regularly debate the representation of women in *Game of Thrones* or the development (or lack thereof) of black characters on *The Walking Dead*. Conversations about representation in adaptations, particularly in superhero comic-to-live-action adaptation, have tended to treat issues of “diversity” in comics or comic adaptations as a novel phenomenon that has become relevant in the contemporary era, or only briefly mention the lengthy history of

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“Are We All Nerds Now?,” *Esquire*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/culture/we-are-all-nerds>.; Andrew Harrison, “Rise of the New Geeks: How the Outsiders Won,” *The Guardian*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2013/sep/02/rise-geeks-outsiders-superhero-movies-dork>.; “When Exactly Did It Get Cool To Be A Geek?,” *The Awl*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.theawl.com/2012/02/when-exactly-did-it-get-cool-to-be-a-geek>.; Kathryn Westcott BBC News Magazine, “Are ‘Geek’ and ‘Nerd’ Now Positive Terms?,” *BBC News*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20325517>.; Jacqueline Howard, “18 Science-Themed Gift Ideas That Prove ‘Geek’ Is The New Cool,” *Huffington Post*, December 1, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/01/science-gift-guide-photos\\_n\\_6194900.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/01/science-gift-guide-photos_n_6194900.html).; “When Did Geekdom Become ‘Cool’?,” *Den of Geek*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.denofgeek.com/other/geek/28644/when-did-geekdom-become-cool>.; “Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away,” *Forbes*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tarabrown/2012/03/26/dear-fake-geek-girls-please-go-away/>.

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comics, adaptations, and race. However, as this project demonstrates, the history of comics and comic-to-live-action adaptation are intimately intertwined with representations of race and circulation of racial formations, and need to be understood as a longstanding historical phenomenon rather than a contemporary, “PC” concern.<sup>9</sup>

Discussions of these controversies have also not significantly engaged with *why* certain changes cause controversy and other seem to pass by relatively unnoticed. Complaints about the casting of black actors Laurence Fishburne and Idris Elba as minor characters in *Man of Steel* and *Thor*, respectively, were widely discussed online and in entertainment media, while the re-imagining of *The Dark Knight Rise's* primary antagonist Bane as white rather than Latino drew little attention; the casting of black actor Michael B. Jordan as the Human Torch Johnny Storm in the upcoming *Fantastic Four* reboot has similarly been a source of controversy, while the casting of white/Latina actor Jessica Alba as Invisible Woman Sue Storm in the previous live-action incarnation of the franchise went largely unremarked on.

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. I argue that the net result of “racebending” in contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations has been to increase opportunities mainly for light-skinned and/or mixed-race Asian

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“Changing Face: Diversity & Change in Comic Books and Superhero Movies,” *Screen Rant*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://screenrant.com/comic-book-superhero-movies-race-diversity-discussion-kofi-126820/>; “Hey, That’s My Cape! Comic Books, Race, Change, & Hate,” *Newsarama.com*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.newsarama.com/8135-hey-that-s-my-cape-comic-books-race-change-hate.html>

9  
“Achieving Superhero Diversity Through Race-Changing,” *Comics Alliance*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://comicsalliance.com/diversity-race-changing-race-identity-momoa-aquaman-jordan-human-torch/>.

10  
Lori Kido Lopez, “Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in The Last Airbender,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 431–45; Mary Beltrán, “Fast and Bilingual: Fast & Furious and the Latinization of Racelessness,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 75–96, doi:10.1353/cj.2013.0070; Mary. Beltrán and Camilla Fojas, *Mixed Race Hollywood*, vi, 325 p. (New York: New York University Press, 2008), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/>.



American and Latina/o actors and for white actors, while decreasing opportunities for darker-skinned “non-passing” actors; representations of black and “non-passing” Asian American and Latina/o characters has increased, but has largely been relegated to the periphery of ensemble casts while white or proximally white characters dominate leading roles. It seems clear that there are consistent factors regarding what kinds of changes, which races/ethnicities are represented, and which roles or which actors cause consternation, but this phenomenon has yet to be explored in depth. There have been studies of representations of different racial identities in comics.<sup>11</sup>

This project builds on this work by examining contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations through the lens “racebending” – cross-racial, “colorblind,” and multiracial casting that changes the racial/ethnic background of a character through casting, and which has become a significant phenomenon in live-action comic adaptations. As Lori Kido Lopez and others have noted, this kind of casting can increase opportunities for mixed-race actors or actors of color, and can also challenge essentialist notions of race, but can also result in a “whitening” of multiracial and nonwhite representations

Controversies over casting and other narrative decisions made regarding *Thor*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, and other recent comic/animation-to-film adaptations and the narratives that emerged to explain these decisions provide a point of entry into an industrial analysis of the adaptation process and its implications, particularly around representation of racial and ethnic identities. This dissertation examines relationships between

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Examples include Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans* (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 2000); Frederick Luis Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); Frederick Luis Aldama, ed., *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

industries in regard to the process of adapting works from visual/textual media into live-action, focusing specifically on the comics, live-action film, and live-action television industries. The texts produced through these adaptations and the representations they present influence both popular perceptions and industry expectations about what kind of audience prefers certain kinds of films or television series.

### Genre, industry, and representation

The assertion that live-action comic adaptation represents a distinct genre of film and television is not an argument about the particular aesthetic features of these texts, or an attempt to represent the entire history of comics being translated to live action, but rather follows on from Mittell's conception of genres as "key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular concepts like cultural value, assumed audience, and social function."<sup>12</sup> Understanding live-action comic adaptations as a genre, with its own set of industrial practices and expectations, cultural value, and assumed audience illuminates how these films have interacted with and contributed to narratives about race and ethnicity that persist in today's climate of increased profile for the genre among critics, scholars, and audiences, and continue to influence representations of race and ethnicity that reach huge segments of the American population and are exported across the globe.

The popular and industrial expectations developed around and reinforced by these adaptations can have a profound impact on casting and marketing of the adaptations themselves,

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<sup>12</sup>

Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xii.

which in turn often influences the comics. Although the readership of the comics publishing industry has declined in recent years along with other print media industries, the “comic book movie” has become an increasingly profitable genre. These films attract enormous audiences of every demographic,<sup>13</sup> but the casting and marketing of these blockbusters does not reflect this demographic diversity, and the changes made to the films or television series in turn affect the range of identities represented in the print comics or animated series. As these comic series or characters are then adapted again into other live-action series, the diversity of representations becomes even less varied, or varied in ways that limit the possibilities of subverting or contesting stereotypes. The evolution of the “comic book movie” as a profitable and high-profile genre has profound implications for how the adaptation process affects representations of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality across media. Examining the context of these industrial decisions and the history of the genre provides a crucial intervention into how identity categories are formed, circulated, and transformed within popular media.

### Media industry negotiations and adaptation

Comics-to-live-action adaptations in particular involve a high degree of negotiation, not only between industries with highly differing structures, but also with different audiences (niche for comics, mass for live-action film and television). Scholarship on film adaptations tends to advance, either explicitly or implicitly, a “great man” narrative of authorship in both literature

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For example: “According to studio exit polls, *The Avengers* played evenly across all demographics with 50 percent of its audience under the age of 25. The Hollywood Reporter reported that couples made up 55 percent of the audience with families coming in at 24% and teens at 21%. Surprisingly, males only made up 60 of the audience.” (“Weekend Box Office: ‘The Avengers’ Grosses \$200 Million in Three Days,” *Examiner.com*, May 7, 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/weekend-box-office-the-avengers-grosses-200-million-three-days>.)

and filmmaking, which asserts singular creators/owners of a text and elides a great deal of industrial negotiation that occurs between multiple stakeholders. For instance, Jack Boozer's volume introduces the one section of the collection that does focus on production (rather than on aesthetics) by arguing that "Hollywood's 'activist' producers and major auteurs drive the script."<sup>14</sup> This argument is an example of the "great man" narrative that pervades discussions of authorship in adaptation; while it may provide some insight as to how film adaptations are imagined, it provides little insight into how negotiations between stakeholders actually play out with industry spaces. These negotiations, while not always apparent in the narrative presented to the public, are important in determining how the text of the film adaptation comes to be, and thus can have important repercussions on the representations in the film.

The structure of the comics and animation industry also tend to differ from literature in significant ways that these "great man" narratives do not address. For instance, while most novels have a singular author who writes the entire story and, for the most part, controls how it is licensed, most comics released by the major studios (Marvel and DC) are produced by teams of creative professionals who are recruited and contracted by the studio to produce a certain title. This kind of collaborative and unstable configuration of contributors is quite typical for comics published by the two major studios, and creates a much larger pool of stakeholders when the comic is adapted. The animation industry has an even larger number of contributors to any project, as the animation process requires a lot of "behind-the-scenes" labor, such as in-between animation, character design, and sound design. Media industry scholar Derek Johnson's chapter on the Marvel Comics character Wolverine explores the inter-industry relationships in the

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<sup>14</sup>

Jack Boozer, *Authorship in Film Adaptation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 31.

adaptation process in detail, noting how changes in Wolverine’s appearance made to make the character more physically attractive for the film resulted in changes to character’s appearance in subsequent comics; changes to the plot made to heighten drama and add romantic interest to the film were also incorporated into later comics.<sup>15</sup> Johnson’s case study demonstrates how the “brand cohesion” around the character of Wolverine suggests a hierarchy within the adaptation process – the comics often change to cohere to the character identity established by the film, rather than the other way around.

Analyzing the hierarchy between industries in the adaptation process requires examining common practices and issues such as licensing of characters, interactions between divisions within an industry, monetization of properties, and how companies craft and maintain brand identities. Johnson provides perhaps the most illuminating examples of industry analysis in comic-to-film adaptations. Johnson focuses on Marvel Entertainment’s franchising of its *X-Men* property across different media, particular from comics into film. His attention to both the “inter-industrial” and “intra-industrial” aspects of Marvel’s comic-to-film adaptation of *X-Men* is instructive. Negotiations occur and tensions arise not only between the comics and film industry in the process of adaptation, but also within industries.<sup>16</sup> Johnson’s work also illuminates the need to pay attention to how projects develop within the two markets; he notes that though *X-Men* was not one of Marvel’s highest-selling titles in comics, it was judged to be a good candidate for mass-market appeal because of demographic differences between the comics and

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<sup>15</sup> Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister, eds., *Film and Comic Books*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 80-84.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Johnson, “Franchise Histories: Marvel, X-Men, and the Negotiated Process of Expansion,” in *Convergence Media History*, Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 14.

general film and television audiences.<sup>17</sup> Johnson also engages with issues of monetization and how Marvel arrived at its current configuration, where the majority of its film adaptations are produced in-house through its parent company, Disney. These studies by Johnson that focus on how a particular publisher or company (in this case, Marvel) solidifies its brand identity demonstrate multiple sites for examining inter-industry relationships in the adaptation process and how certain adaptation decisions are made.

Archival research and attention to individual professionals can be productive for understanding adaptations without reducing the process to artistic decisions by a few parties. Santo provides a thorough “behind the scenes” look at the licensing and adaptation process, contrasting the successful adaptation of *The Lone Ranger* across radio and television to the comparatively unsuccessful television adaptation of *The Green Hornet*, and demonstrates how. While Santo focuses on George Trendle, who oversaw the franchising of both characters, he does not slip into the “great man” narrative by focusing only on Trendle’s participation. Santo argues that *The Green Hornet*’s television adaptations failed because Trendle disagreed constantly with television producer William Dozier and the studio, and the two could not reconcile their differing visions of both the character and the role of licensors in the adaptation process.<sup>18</sup> Santo’s careful balancing of evidence from Trendle and Dozier’s correspondence, textual comparisons of *Lone Ranger*, *Batman*, and *Green Hornet* adaptations, and marketing and advertising materials provides an excellent example of a productive and critical inter-industry adaptation analysis that

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson, “Franchise Histories,” 18.

<sup>18</sup> Avi Santo, “Batman versus The Green Hornet: The Merchandisable TV Text and the Paradox of Licensing in the Classical Network Era,” *Cinema Journal* 49.2 (2010), 64-65.

illuminates trends in media industries beyond just the adaptations under consideration. Santo's and Johnson's production-oriented analyses also address an important question of how to understand the texts that result from comic-to-live-action adaptations. These texts are not just single films or film series, but also incorporate licensing and merchandise, marketing, and other aspects. Chapter 2 uses archival materials, including licensing agreements and publishing trade press, to examine how the comics industry has historically viewed its relationship to live-action adaptation.

#### Niche to mass audiences, fans, and the specter of "fidelity"

As John Caldwell argues, "the rhetoric of studio press kits do not jive with explanations provided by production craftspeople" and the aspects of labor that go into producing content are often elided.<sup>19</sup> However, media industry professionals still often tell stories about "fidelity" to certain storylines or character traits from the source materials or "quality" as top priorities in adaptation. The stories relayed to the public via marketing statements, interviews, and convention panels in particular are fruitful sites to examine these "publicly disclosed deep texts and rituals," and to understand how these operate in highlighting certain aspects of the adaptation process and concealing others.<sup>20</sup> Mark Deuze and Denise Mann further address tropes or stories circulated about and within media industries in relation to convergence, particularly the convergence within media industries that blurs distinctions between different kinds of labor and

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<sup>19</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, "Cultures of Production: Studying Industry's Deep Texts, Reflexive Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosures." in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, Jennifer Holt and Alissa Perren eds. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 201.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 202.

the convergence of production and consumption.<sup>21</sup> These trends in convergence obscure certain decisions made in production, such as casting calls, costuming and marketing, as well as creating the appearance of a deeply-involved and influential audience.<sup>22</sup> The idea of audience as producers recalls the concept of “cult media” fans having a great influence in adaptations and preserving fidelity as a crucial element of comic-to-film-adaptations. Thomas Leitch contends that “...only bestsellers or cult classics are likely to bring out cinema audiences both large and devoted enough to the source text to threaten serious economic damage in the form of boycotts or badmouthing,”<sup>23</sup> and thus fidelity remains important for the profitability of “cult” media. Linda Hutcheon refers to cult media audiences as “demanding” of fidelity in their adaptations, and Pascal Lefèvre asserts that “some comics fans tend to consecrate the original work...filmic adaptations give superheroes fans a unique opportunity to show off their almost autistic-savant knowledge of a particular superhero comic book series,” suggesting that fans can be expected to be overly critical of adaptations that take any liberties with source material, no matter what the change.<sup>24</sup> Although fidelity is used to explain or even discount fan reactions to comic adaptations, the literature on identity in comics as well as on transmedia and franchising suggests that the fan relationship with comic-to-live-action adaptation may be more complex than simply

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Deuze, “Convergence Culture and Media Work,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, Jennifer Holt and Alissa Perren, eds. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 145.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>23</sup> Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins, *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2010), 64.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 29; Gordon, Jancovich, and McAllister, *Film and Comic Books*, 5.



lashing out against perceived “infidelity” toward the source material; ideals of racial/ethnic “authenticity” are also circulated by fans and professionals. The work that these two concepts perform in the adaptation process is at times conflicting, but can also be complementary.

Examining the stories circulated by both industry professionals and fans can illuminate why certain adaptations become more controversial than others, and how and why certain production decisions are highlighted while others are downplayed or obscured. Lori Kido Lopez addresses these convergence issues in her study on fan activism around the adaptation of the Nickelodeon cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Kido-Lopez’s analysis of why and how fans articulated their concerns and disappointment with the live-action film *The Last Airbender* through protests, boycotts, and media campaigns also engages the concept of racial formations. The characters whose casting led to the controversy were understood to be Asian and Alaska Native by fans and the creators of the animated series, but Kido Lopez notes that this idea is based on a particular conception of what these races/ethnicities look like or how they dress and behave.<sup>25</sup> The fans’ discourse of the adaptation being “unfaithful” to the original provided a foundation for explaining their discontent to the media, but as Kido Lopez articulates, this story of fidelity is only part of the equation, with issues of discrimination in casting and other industry problems forming a large part of the fans’ reason for boycott. Comic creator Laura Molina’s interview with Frederick Luis Aldama regarding what makes a Latina/o comic character “authentic” provides a similar story about racial meaning and realism. Molina argues that characters created by major studios are solely for profit and thus lack authenticity or faithfulness

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Lori Kido Lopez, “Fan-activists and the politics of race in *The Last Airbender*.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1.15 (2011), 5.

to real experiences: “I haven’t read Araña [a Latina character in the same universe as Spider-Man], but I’d say it’s a question of heart. When it comes from Marvel, when they create a Latina character but do so motivated by profits, they don’t go for the heart. They just don’t get it, because it’s all token. If it doesn’t have heart, the comic book character won’t last.”<sup>26</sup> In contrast, Isis Artze cites the *Love and Rockets* series as authentic, explaining that “one glance at the cover of Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez’s comic books is all it takes to ascertain that the heroes (who are usually heroines) are Hispanic.”<sup>27</sup> Paying attention to how professionals and fans talk among themselves and to other stakeholders illuminates not only how the adaptation process takes place and how decisions are made, but also how attitudes toward representing race and ethnicity inform the process, affect the media produced, and circulate within discussion of popular media.

Horace Newcomb suggests that an important, and often overlooked, component of analyzing media texts is to understand “whose industry” these texts are presented as coming from; he uses the example of the recent Writers’ Guild of America strike to illustrate how narratives and monetization of properties across different media have larger implications for industry practices and the texts that are produced.<sup>28</sup> In the case of comic-to-live-action adaptations, the adaptation is often presented as the “industry” of the film or television professionals – for instance, costume designer Mary Vogt, who has worked on multiple comic book films, including Tim Burton’s *Batman Returns*, noted that all of her direction on wardrobe

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<sup>26</sup> Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, 251.

<sup>27</sup> Isis Artze, “Building Characters: Latinos in Alternative Comics.” *Hispanic* 13.10 (2000), 42.

<sup>28</sup> Horace Newcomb, “Toward Synthetic Media Industry Research,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, Jennifer Holt and Alissa Perren, eds. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 264.

came from the director or other professionals on the film crew, and that she never spoke with any comics professionals when designing for the film. Comic writer Harvey Pekar and animation director Giancarlo Volpe have both expressed disappointment and disenfranchisement in relation to adaptations of their works – *American Splendor* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, respectively.<sup>29</sup> Even in Gordon et al’s *Film and Comic Books*, most of the discussion around the production of adaptations of the comics is centered on the film or television professionals and how the adaptations affect the comics. Kido Lopez’s article on fan activism surrounding *The Last Airbender* also briefly notes that some of the animation professionals for the animated series aligned themselves with the fans in protest, as did several well-known comics creators. These professionals certainly did not regard the adaptation as part of their work, although their protests against the film suggests that perhaps some comics professionals would like to see adaptation as at least partly “their industry.”

#### Race and popular media: The “color-muteness” of contemporary pop culture

In order to understand why representation in popular media and the decisions that go into creating these representations are important, one must begin with a foundational understanding of identity as a process, rather than as an essential individual or cultural category of meaning. Using the racial formation framework provides a foundation for understanding how and why media, including popular media, have an impact on individuals and on broader sociocultural concepts of race and other identity categories. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, racial meanings are established at an individual and societal level, and become “common sense”

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<sup>29</sup>

Gordon, Jancovich, and McAllister, *Film and Comic Books*, 187.

via reinforcement from media and social interaction.<sup>30</sup> Racial formation is defined as “the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings.”<sup>31</sup> These racial meanings are not static, but rather are influenced by social, cultural, political, and other factors; although they are not fixed, they are also not necessarily easy to change, and they can also be contradictory and fragmented.

Thus, representations are not just “positive” or “negative” and do not exist in a vacuum. For example, M. Night Shyamalan’s explanation that he cast white actors in *The Last Airbender* because he wanted the characters to appear mixed race and therefore be relatable to general audiences does not just represent an artistic decision on the part of a director, but also reflects a specific “colorblind” multiculturalist rhetoric that developed out of Reagan-era political and economic changes.<sup>32</sup> Although, as Catherine Squires demonstrates through content analysis of news media, the use of the phrase “colorblind” has waned in the years since the election of Barack Obama as U.S. president, colorblind ideology has changed and adapted to contemporary conditions and concerns. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes this process as “Latin-Americanization” or the “New Racism,” articulating how racism can continue in the seeming

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Inc., 1986), 106.

<sup>31</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media & Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 20; Angela D. Dillard, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner Now?: Multicultural Conservatism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

absence of legal or structural barriers to racial equality.<sup>33</sup> While Bonilla-Silva largely focuses on housing discrimination and other forms of institutionalized racism, he and other scholars also begin to consider the ways in which the emphasis on visible racial diversity in popular media covers over the perpetuation of stereotypes, as well as the reality of unequal opportunities and outcomes for whites vs. non-whites in the U.S.<sup>34</sup> Linda Williams, following on Susan Courtney's historical analysis of racial mixing in film, terms this ideology “color-mute,” rather than “color blind” - while diversity can be visualized through increased casting of non-white actors or references to non-white cultures, the historical and economic realities of race and racism cannot be discussed.<sup>35</sup> Although Williams does not apply this concept in-depth to the depictions of interracial sex she analyses, her articulation of the terms as a contemporary racial formation provides a lens through which to understand the seemingly paradoxical simultaneous increase in representation of characters of color and the “whitening” of these images (both in terms of appearance and in terms of casting). The current proliferation of characters of color in comic-to-live-action adaptations appears to bear out Williams' interpretation, particularly given that most of these characters are minor roles and/or have little attention paid within their stories to how their racial or ethnic identities impact their lives.

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Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*, Third (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010).

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Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Austin Ashe, “The End of Racism?: Colorblind Racism and Popular Media,” in *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 59; Ashley (“Woody”) Doane, “Shades of Colorblindness: Rethinking Racial Ideology in the United States,” in *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 15–20.

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Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscengenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Linda Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust,” in *Porn Studies* (Duke University Press, 2004).

Herman Gray's categorization and contextualization of Black situation comedies provides a very useful framework for thinking about how representations – whether in comics or live-action adaptations – function in relation to broader social narratives about race. Many of the adaptations, both historical and contemporary, operate along the lines of Gray's "assimilationist" shows, having a few characters of color in a largely white world who do not experience racism or discrimination based on their racial/ethnic identities. Gray's assimilationist sitcoms "integrated individual black characters into hegemonic white worlds void of any hint of African American traditions, social struggle, racial conflicts, and cultural difference"<sup>36</sup> – this type of representation of superheroes of color was standard for many years in mainstream comics, due in large part to prohibitions on discussing racial conflict in the Comics Code.<sup>37</sup>

This "color-mute" ideology goes beyond black and white, often incorporating other racial/ethnic groups in order to broaden appeal without alienating white audiences. In *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race*, Dávila examines how contradictory images of Latina/os in U.S. news coverage as both a threat to white American culture and as potentially exemplary citizens with traditional American values. According to Dávila, "dominant generic distinctions" that flatten out differences between Latino ethnicities are often used in order to interpellate Latinos as consumers, which reinforces the neoliberal idea that groups gain political power and inclusion into the U.S. public sphere through consumption – having power to

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<sup>36</sup> Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (U of Minnesota Press, 1995), 92.

<sup>37</sup> Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998). The Comics Code was established by comics publishers in response to Senate hearings regarding comics' objectionable content. The publisher self-imposed certain rules – such as forbidding certain depictions of crime, , outlawing the use of the words "weird," "eerie" or "creepy" in comic titles, and banning "exaggerated" female proportions and racial language.

purchase means that corporations and politicians will pay more attention to the needs of a group, and thus conditions for that group will improve. Increasing attention on the “growing” Latino middle class in political strategizing and news media coverage is evidence of this ideology at

<sup>38</sup> work. Within this framework, race/ethnicity functions as a commodity or accessory –

<sup>39</sup> something that makes a group interesting or distinguishable and can be mobilized when useful, but that otherwise is not particularly important, is not tied meaningfully to particular histories, and can be changed, blurred, or obscured with little effort.

Asian American characters may also be subject to the logic of “dominant generic distinctions.” As with Latina/os, there are generally no distinctions made between Asian American groups or their specific histories articulated in these representations. As Dávila and Molina-Guzmán note, marketers and advertisers see Latina/os as an increasingly profitable market as well, placing them in a similar position as exalted consumers. These contentious and often contradictory racial formations play a large role in the development of adaptations, as media professionals attempt to make their films as profitable and widely-appealing as possible.

To understand the seemingly contradictory role of Latina/o and Asian American characters or bodies in contemporary popular media and why certain representations cause controversy among fans, attention must be paid to how these representations operate, not just whether or not representations of minorities are present. Lisa Nakamura cites the prevalence of male athletes of color in sports videogames, where they are marketed to a mainstream video-

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Arlene Dávila, *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 25

<sup>39</sup>

Amy A. Hasinoff, “Fashioning Race for the Free Market on America’s Next Top Model,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 3 (2008): 324–43.

gaming audience that, despite changes in player demographics, is still largely coded by game developers and gaming media as white; Nakamura also notes that while these representations proliferate, they have not corresponded to an increase in video game or television professionals of color.<sup>40</sup> Nakamura also finds a considerable amount of tokenism or ethnicity-as-commodity in digital representations, noting that often the “identity is more important than the individual:” minority characters are more important for what they stand for, or the visible diversity they bring to a narrative than for their individual attributes or accomplishments within the narrative.<sup>41</sup>

The racial indefinability characteristic of these racial formations can also be uncomfortable, as it blurs the boundaries of who can be considered white or American; thus, these representations are never quite completely “whitewashed” or perfectly assimilated. However, this does not stop media producers from attempting to mainstream race/ethnicity – Charles Ramírez Berg quotes filmmaker Robert Rodriguez as saying that he wants his films about Latinos to “play to everybody,” and thus at times avoids references to specific historical events, places, or nationalities.<sup>42</sup> Molina-Guzmán addresses this phenomenon of “whitewashing” of race/ethnicity among Latina women in particular, using the term “symbolic colonization” to refer to the ways in which Latina women in the news and Latina characters in popular culture are used to mediate boundaries between blackness and whiteness –they have

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<sup>40</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 26-27.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 245.



exotic appeal, but are not so far from white as to be threatening.<sup>43</sup>

Shorthand visual codes that distinguish cleanly between one race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation and another may function to allow audience to understand stories and characters quickly, but can take on new meanings and call up stereotypes in live-action. Barker argues that the visual codes used in comics cannot necessarily be related to “real-world” referents due to comics’ inherent lack of realism: “Just because a witch-doctor appears, it does not mean he can be directly related to the mythical witch-doctor of racist legend; he is a witch-doctor within the transforming laws and structure of [the comics]. Therefore, he can ‘reinforce’ nothing.”<sup>44</sup> But what happens when this iconic witch-doctor is translated to live-action?

Race and visual culture theorists such as Anne Anlin Cheng, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, and José Esteban Muñoz have engaged the topics of binary oppositions, repetition, and stereotype in representation. They provide a useful lens for considering these issues in comic-to-live-action adaptations, which translate these “transforming structures” of comics into their real-world referents. In a popular media environment where racial diversity is easily seen, but rarely and uneasily discussed or explored, looking not only at what kinds of representations are available in both the source material and adaptations, but also at what is not being represented offers a lens into how controversies are covered by media and how fan groups mobilize around particular adaptation decisions, particularly within the contemporary “color-mute” ideology of American media. Cheng illustrates these issues in the position of Asian Americans within American society,

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<sup>43</sup> Isabel Molina-Guzmán, *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>44</sup> Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, 19-20.

noting that in the white/black (hegemonic/primary Other) racial paradigm of the United States, subjects who fit neither of these narrowly defined categories occupy a “ghostly” position; they are neither Us nor Them, and therefore are “indigestible,” illegible within the dominant national racial discourse.<sup>45</sup> Non-dominant subjects learn to be suspicious of themselves and their own tenuous positions, negotiating opposing forces of self-affirmation and self-loathing; Cheng explains that the result of this painful and complex process often produces internalization of normative ideals, but might also hold the potential for “shades of resistance” if the relationships between the “competing interests” that lead to internalization of identity can be uncovered and the ideal of “identity” itself destabilized.<sup>46</sup> The invisibility of certain identity categories or certain kinds of subjects in live-action adaptations in particular is attributed to a variety of constraints, including not having appropriate actors to fit the part, as well as not wanting to make characters or plots too confusing. At a San Diego Comic-Con panel, Marvel writer Zack Stentz described not wanting to combine too many identity categories in one character or take on too many “minority” issues at once as a reason for not dealing more overtly with queer sexuality or coming out in the company’s live-action and animated adaptations.<sup>47</sup>

Alongside the ghostly invisibility for certain subjects or identities that Cheng explores, dichotomous understandings of identity can also produce specific forms of hypervisibility.

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<sup>45</sup> Doane, “Shades of Colorblindness: Rethinking Racial Ideology in the United States,” 29; Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 19, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Zack Stentz, “LGBTX: The X-Men’s Queer Characters, Themes, and Fans” (presented at the San Diego Comic Con International 2011, San Diego, CA, July 21, 2011).

Attention to the contradictory and multifaceted nature of representations – even those that are “cheesy,” “campy,” or “one-dimensional” – provides guidance for examining a variety of comic-to-live-action adaptations, especially those unsuccessful or “failed” adaptations that are often derided for their stereotypical or “over-the-top” elements. This lens is also useful in examining why certain instances of invisibility or hypervisibility produce a high degree controversy while others do not. Celine Parreñas Shimizu notes that within the normative white/black American racial paradigm, Asian American women can emerge from invisibility through hypersexualization. Rather than encouraging audiences to disregard Asian American women, these portrayals push audiences to stare, whether out of erotic interest or out of disgust.<sup>48</sup>

Not only are dominant subjects and institutions – such as the mainstream Hollywood film industry – captivated by these representations, but even viewers from groups these images purport to represent are drawn in. Parreñas Shimizu acknowledges “the simultaneous elation, seduction, and horror of ‘Is that me/not me? I adore but it tortures me. Stop looking, oh no, keep looking!’”<sup>49</sup> Although the impulse for the marginalized subject is to identify these portrayals as *mis*representations, the inescapable presence of these representations triggers the complex processes of identification and disidentification that Cheng sees at work in the formation and internalization of identity. The complex nature of viewing and responding to “bad” or “stereotypical” material addressed by Parreñas Shimizu is also examined by José Muñoz in his work on “disidentification,” or how marginalized groups (in his work, queer people

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Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 88.

<sup>49</sup>

*Ibid.*, 4.

of color) can use popular culture and stereotypical representations of themselves to create something new. Given that cultural critics still often deride comic-to-live-action adaptations, particularly franchises, as “bad objects,” understanding that work that they do in circulating or (re)mediating representations to diverse audiences is important to consider.

In order to understand representations in both source material and adaptation, it is important not to fall into the trap of deciding whether a particular representation or text is a “bad object,” but rather to understand the context in which it developed, as that helps to illuminate marketing strategy, media response, and fan reaction in ways that allow for more than just a stand-alone textual analysis or listing of representations. Frederick Luis Aldama cites a variety of analyses and debates on the issue of “good” or “positive” representations of Latinos in comics in *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, commenting on the impossibility of resolving such a debate thusly: “Is it that they don’t situate their stories only in a trashed out barrio? Is it a question of having more variety of representations, so that it isn’t just the gangbanger-made-good superhero, but also the social worker, the family man, the schoolteacher, the aristocrat? Is it that their characters have more complexity?”<sup>50</sup> As Aldama points out, and as reviewing the literature on female superheroes supports, analyses that focus on whether a representation is “positive” or “critical” enough tend not to engage the complex sociocultural trends that inform characters’ development.

In looking at the texts that result from comic/animation-to-live-action adaptation, I focus attention on the representations presented in the live-action versions, and look at how these differ from the source material. Combined with an understanding of how the adaptation process works

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Frederick Luis Aldama, *This is Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 44.

and how decisions are made, this allows for a more complex understanding of these representations beyond the “bad object” or promoter of stereotype. Looking at representations from this lens also helps to address a prevalent issue in literature dealing with representation in comics: is this comic racist/sexist/homophobic or is this comic feminist/critical/complex enough?

## Methods

In order to examine how comic-to-live-action adaptations are produced, distributed, and marketed between two industries, and what implications this may have for how these texts develop and what kinds of representations they contain, I conducted a series of nineteen interviews with media industry professionals who worked on these adaptations, had their works adapted, or were involved with advocacy around the adaptations of particular comics or animated series.<sup>51</sup> I also conducted archival research on past adaptations and media professionals’ experiences with these productions. Although interviews with media industry professionals are often less candid and more controlled than interviews with fans or audiences, I follow on John Caldwell’s emphasis on industry “rituals” and narratives circulated by professionals as a productive site for analyzing industry rhetorics. Interviewees included Javier Grillo-Marxuach, television producer/writer and writer for Marvel Comics, Javier Hernandez, creator of independent comic series *El Muerto* and associate producer on the live-action adaptation, *The Dead One*, Gene Luen Yang, creator of award-winning independent graphic novel *American Born Chinese* and writer for *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Promise* comic series, and Jason

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Seventeen interviews were conducted in person at San Diego Comic-Con International 2013 and Latino Comics Expo Los Angeles 2013; two interviews were conducted via email.

“J Gonzo” Gonzalez, writer of independent comics, publishers of comics, and former employee of publisher and toy licensor Todd McFarlane Productions, Inc. Each of the professionals has had experience with the adaptation process as well as with issues of race and ethnicity in comics and adaptation.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, I also attended Chicago Comic and Entertainment Expo (C2E2) 2013, San Diego Comic-Con International 2012, 2013, and 2014, and Latino Comics Expo Los Angeles 2013. At these conventions, I attended panels and public interviews given by creative professionals working in comics, television, film, and other industries, and collected marketing and promotional materials related to comic-to-live-action adaptations for analysis. I also conducted archival research to present a case study of Marvel Comics' approach to representing racial/ethnic diversity and their vision of the company's role in the process of comic-to-live-action adaptations.<sup>52</sup>

For analysis of the adaptations themselves, close readings of both the source material and the adapted text are necessary; while not all adaptations have specific sources (for example, most Batman films are based on an amalgamation of comics and the film writers' own ideas), many cite particular “eras” or storylines in a comic as inspirations. Looking at the formal differences and similarities between a source text and an adaptation provides one lens into analyzing how the “comic book adaptation” genre is understood in the production process.

Another set of materials that contribute to the understanding of how the genre functions is marketing and promotional materials, as well as interviews and presentations about relevant

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Archival materials for this analysis were collected in July-August 2013 from the Stan Lee Papers at the American Heritage Collection, University of Wyoming.

adaptations. Some of these materials are readily available online, such as interviews with film directors or comic creators, promotional websites, and trailers. Online fan groups also have a variety of informal archives of marketing and promotional documents – for example, the group Racebending.com has a large collection of correspondence between members of the group and Warner Bros. film representatives regarding the casting of *The Last Airbender*, as well as casting calls for numerous comic-to-live-action adaptations.

### Chapter Overview

Although extensive histories have been written about the development of comics, particularly superhero comics, as well as the evolution of depictions of various racial/ethnic groups in American comics, there has been little work done on the history of the comic-to-live-action adaptation. For the first chapter of the dissertation, I examine the evolution of the comic adaptation from some of its earliest forms – in particular, 1940s film serials– to the late 1990s, with specific attention to how the genre of “comic book adaptation” has been constructed in relation to race and ethnicity. As Jason Mittell argues, “we should examine the cultural processes of generic discourses *prior* to examining the generic texts that have been traditionally viewed as identical to the genre itself.”<sup>53</sup> In accordance with this theory of genre as culture process, Chapter 1 begins by examining the practices – especially the institutional/industrial systems – that have contributed to the articulation of the comic book adaptation as a specific “genre” of live action film and television. This section also explores how differential industry logics of “success” have developed.

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Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 16.

Three particular eras in comic adaptation history are analyzed in detail. These periods represent eras in which multiple comic-to-live-action adaptations were produced, and were produced within the same medium (film serials, television, blockbuster genre film). Comparison within medium is an important element of understanding how media industry conventions and expectations influenced these adaptations; these periods also saw multiple adaptations with characters or actors of color in significant roles. A number of significant and popular adaptations, such as the 1950s television series *The Adventures of Superman*, the *Superman* films starring Christopher Reeve (1978-1987), and the *Batman* films directed by Tim Burton (1989-1995). These film and series are both exceptional – they were not released as part of “trend” of superhero texts and often did not overlap with other adaptations – and exclusionary, as they did not feature characters or actors of color in substantial roles or engage with race or discourses of racial difference; for these reasons, they are not included in the analysis.

First, the earliest example of live-action visual comic adaptations in the 1940s in the form of film serials; these serials, including *Batman*, *Superman*, and *Captain Marvel* often engaged anti-Japanese sentiments in promoting superheroes as protectors of the United States during World War II. The relatively low expectations and critical attention paid to these serials allowed them to articulate representations of racialized Others that more “highbrow” texts would not – or could not – present. Second, live-action adaptations of the 1960s and 1970s are examined, including the *Batman* and *Wonder Woman* television shows. These television properties are notable for casting actors of color without engaging issues of race/ethnicity, and also for their simultaneous engagement with feminism and ignoring of race-based civil rights discourse. Licensing and marketing of characters also played an important role in the popularity of these



series and the articulation of comics adaptations as properties expected to generate a great deal of revenue.

Finally, the period of late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of a short-lived but distinct trend in comic book adaptations: superhero films with black title characters. Examples include *Blade* (and its sequels), *Spawn*, and *Steel*. These films, produced as comics publishers struggled to stay afloat in a contracting marketplace, provided an important testing ground for both advances in special effects and comic-to-live-action adaptations as blockbusters films; however, while these films laid the groundwork for the contemporary era of high-budget, high-grossing comic book movies, their contributions are often forgotten in discussions of the evolution of the genre, and their emphasis on black leading heroes has not been analyzed extensively.

Comic-to-live-action adaptations also present a productive site to examine issues of branding, licensing, and hierarchies between and within media industries, which are necessary for understanding how decisions such as which stories to adapt, which actors to cast, and how to costume the characters are made in contemporary media conglomerates.<sup>54</sup> Chapter 2 examines how recent examples from Marvel Comics in particular demonstrate the conglomerate's commitment to brand cohesion and create a hierarchy of industries and professionals; the co-existence of multiple story continuities, or "universes," within Marvel's brand also demonstrates how race and ethnicity are implicated in these hierarchies. As Johnson has illustrated, current trends in media production, such as convergence between certain creative roles and increasing

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<sup>54</sup>

David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries: 2nd Edition* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 187.

attention to digital media, have augmented tensions between industries and reinforced the importance of branding and licensing agreements. The “Big 2” American comics publishers, Marvel and DC, have both responded to these trends with an increased emphasis on the importance of characters and character licensing.<sup>55</sup> These tensions and negotiations have had and continue to have important implications for how characters of color are created, marketed, and promoted.

Brand cohesion is important to the Marvel universe, with film or television adaptations often resulting in changes to comics to bring them in line with the live-action versions. Hierarchies among film, television, and comics are further complicated by the multiple “universes” within Marvel’s brand; Marvel’s “mainstream” universe is generally the source of characters and plots for live-action adaptations, while its “Ultimate” universe and other universes tend to be less mined for adaptations; these universes have also been where most characters of color have played lead roles, including *Spider-Man 2099* and *Spider-Man: India*. In 2010, a joking plea from comedian Donald Glover for an audition for the role of Peter Parker in *The Amazing Spider-Man* and the resulting controversy illuminated the roles of licensing, brand cohesion, and race in the Marvel universes.

While some fans began a “Donald Glover 4 Spiderman” campaign, others insisted that a Black actor could not embody the character. Even Stan Lee, Spider-Man’s creator, weighed in, saying that he thought Glover should be allowed to audition. However, because Sony Pictures Entertainment holds the rights for Spider-Man films, Lee’s input was not required; Sony did not

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Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 95–96.

respond to the campaign and cast a white actor. In the aftermath of the controversy, Brian Michael Bendis created a Black/Latino Spider-Man to take Peter Parker's place in the Ultimate universe comics, and acknowledged Glover as an inspiration for the character's appearance. Sony's lack of response to the Glover campaign allowed Marvel to capitalize on fans disappointed by the perceived disinterest in diversity from the film studio; however, their relegation of certain characters of color to the print "non-mainstream" universes only suggests that brand cohesion among the more prominent film and television versions of their characters may still be at the forefront of their brand strategy.

Building on the foundation of implicit inter-industry hierarchies from the previous chapter, interviews and press releases from professionals in the comic, film, and television industry are brought into conversation with "fidelity discourses" and rhetorics of "quality" and "artistic license" from the adaptation literature to illustrate how these adaptations take shape and to explain decisions about casting and marketing. Chapter 3 unpacks the rhetoric regarding ownership in the adaptation process by examining the roles and responses of individual media industry professionals, based on public interviews and panel discussions as well as original interviews. This chapter demonstrates that the foreclosure of possible avenues for presenting diverse characters and stories in comic-to-live-action adaptations happens not just as the result of racialized logics from the "Hollywood" film or TV industries, but is circulated at all steps of production, including creators of color opting to focus on "non-racial" stories to avoid being stereotyped or pigeonholed, or creators choosing not to pursue adaptation of stories involving characters of color due to assumptions about how "Hollywood" treats such stories.

In the case of the *The Last Airbender*, these texts generally identified M. Night

Shyamalan as the most important creative owner of the adaptation, despite the fact that the characters and story were not originally created by him; this emphasis on Shyamalan's ownership of the adaptation played a key role in defending the film against charges of racial prejudice in casting, as the changes in characters' ethnicities were presented as "artistic license" on Shyamalan's part. The director and producer of the upcoming *Iron Man 3* film have promoted narratives of irony and artistic license in defending their use of yellow-peril villain The Mandarin; director Spike Lee references his attention to issues of race and race relations in his previous films in order to dismiss controversy regarding casting and plot decisions for his upcoming remake of the Japanese *manga* series *Oldboy*. In contrast, fans, media professionals from the comics and animation industries, and civic organizations opposed to these changes or portrayals have cited profit, pressure from studios or conglomerates, or fear of alienating white audiences as reasons for these decisions.<sup>56</sup> Professionals in the film/television industries and the comics/animation industries have also had access to or chosen to use different outlets for expressing their views, which lends differing levels of credibility and visibility to these narratives. The framing of rhetoric promoted by these different groups also impacts discussions and decisions within the comics and animation industry around increasing diversity, which is then reflected in live-action adaptations of these properties.

Chapter 4 puts controversies around comic-to-live-action adaptations into conversation with critical scholarship on broader contemporary trends in the construction of Latina/o and Asian American identity, and examines how the comic adaptation genre relates to other media

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Groups involved in the campaigns include the Korean Resource Center, the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, the Japanese American Citizens League, and the East West Players theater group.

(such as advertising, news, music, and digital media) in its formation and presentation of racial/ethnic identity. In the fields of critical race/ethnic studies and cultural studies, a number of scholars have been interrogating the position of Latina/o and Asian American bodies in popular U.S. media, noting the complicated and often contradictory relationships of these identities to both whiteness and blackness. Both groups are constructed as simultaneously threatening to American culture and as the perfect consumers and exemplars of American values in differing, but parallel fashions. Multiracial/multiethnic Latina/o and Asian American characters have also been used as a site for the entry of white bodies into “mixed race” racial formations; white actors have the opportunity to portray mixed-race Latina/o and Asian American characters and to be read “multiracial,” while few Latina/o and Asian Americans actors (and nearly no black actors) are afforded to the same opportunity to embody “mixed” roles.

The tenuous positioning of Asian Americans and Latina/os is particularly evident in a variety of recently released, upcoming, and proposed comic/animation-to-live-action projects and has been central to a number of controversies over casting calls, actual casting of actors, and marketing of adaptations in recent years. Although the fan group Racebending.com and other Asian American entertainment and civic organizations have decried the casting of white actors as Asian/Asian American characters in adaptations of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*,<sup>57</sup> *Oldboy*, and *All You Need is Kill*,<sup>58</sup> as well as stereotypical representations in other adaptations (including 2013's *Iron Man 3*), less overt controversy has occurred over casting decisions and representations in *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and other upcoming projects. Although race/ethnicity is

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<sup>57</sup> Adapted as *The Last Airbender* (2010).

<sup>58</sup> Adapted as *Edge of Tomorrow*, marketed as *Live Die Repeat: Edge of Tomorrow* for DVD release (2014).

the main focus of this dissertation, the literature in critical race and ethnic studies has demonstrated that gender and sexuality are highly implicated in racial formations; thus, this chapter also gives attention to intersections between race/ethnicity/gender/sexuality in the adaptation process. This chapter employs textual analysis of a number of contemporary adaptations and their source material(s) as well as analysis of marketing materials and interviews/statements from media professionals and fan groups in order to contextualize these representations in the broader field of racial/ethnic representation in popular media.

## **Chapter 1: “Comic-to-live-action adaptation” as genre: industry practices, racial formations, and representation**

Scholars, practitioners, and fans discuss the comic book industry as having four major eras, defined by both content and industrial practices: the “Golden Age,” the “Silver Age,” the “Bronze Age,” and the “Dark” or “Modern” Age.<sup>1</sup> These “ages,” while arguably arbitrary, serve as markers of periods in which the comic industry experienced tangible shifts in industrial practices,<sup>2</sup> and in which comics were most frequently adapted in live-action television or movie series, due in no small part to changes within publication and in live-action media. During these periods, the genre of “live action comic book adaptation” coalesced around a set of both textual and industrial markers, and in its establishment solidified particular ways of representing and addressing race and ethnicity. For live-action adaptation, the Golden, Silver, and Dark Ages represented significant peaks of activity and interest regarding the adaptation of comic book properties.

This chapter examines three distinct periods in the history of comic-to-live-action adaptations: the 1940s (the “Golden Age”), the 1960s-1970s (the “Silver Age”), and the late

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Grant Morrison’s graphic novel *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery* (New York: Vertigo, 2012) provides an illustrative quote about the perception of these eras’ comics among readers and creators: “It all started back in the ‘30s and ‘40s... Yeah. They call it the ‘Golden Age’... collectors, I’m talking about. It was pretty simple then... musclemen in costumes, idealized masculine figures, the Charles Atlas hard body. Homoerotic wish-fulfillment... Then came the Silver Age, when superheroes were reinvented and that’s when it started to go a bit weird... Strange transformations, multiple realities, dreams, hoaxes... It was like the hard body began to turn soft, the masculine heroes becoming fluid and feminine, always changing shape... All that stuff was like, like a prophecy of the arrival of LSD on the streets of America... the comic writers and artists intuited the social transformation in their work... Now the superheroes are as fucked-up as the fucking rejects who write about them and draw them and read about them.”

2

William Schoell, *The Silver Age of Comics* (Duncan: BearManor Media, 2010), 11.

1990s (the “Dark Age”). During these periods, multiple live-action comic adaptations were released, and one medium dominated the genre. Additionally, the adaptations examined were all distributed widely and, in the case of television series, lasted for more than one season. A number of notable texts, which have been analyzed in detail by other media scholars, are not discussed – for instance, *The Adventures of Superman* television series (1952-1958) and the *Superman* (1978, 1980, 1983, 1987) films, *Batman* (1989), *Smallville* (2001-2011) – because there were few or no other comic adaptations of the same medium released at the time. With the exception of *Smallville*, which is discussed in Chapter 4, these texts also did not engage with discourses of race circulating more broadly in their time periods and did not feature characters or actors of color in substantial roles. Focusing on these periods allows for comparison of comic-to-live-action adaptations can be compared with one another as well as within the history of a specific medium and its production practices.

Rather than attempt to explicate the entire history of the genre or to catalogue representations of racial difference throughout the genre’s history, I examine specific conventions and practices that developed during these crucial periods in the genre’s development. The low-budget and low-expectation production of film serials in the 1940s, the ensemble-driven and episodic affordances of television mobilized in the 1960s and 1970s, and the advent of computer-generated special effects and reliance of the comics industry on other media industries in the late 1990s produced particular types of representations of racial difference that influence the comic-to-live-action adaptation genre in the contemporary era.

#### Film serials of the “Golden Age” and the nation’s Others

The Golden Age of comic books represents the period from the establishment of the first



popular comic titles and characters to the decline in readership and advent of the censorious Comics Code of America, spanning a period from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. This era saw the largest readership comics have ever had in the United States, not only among children but also among adults; for example, comics accounted for twenty-five percent of all reading material shipped to American soldiers abroad during World War II.<sup>3</sup> During this time, a number of comics publishers competed for readers, talent, and titles, and creators had little control over the characters they created or what kinds of stories they would get to work on. Characters and titles were generally owned solely by the publishing companies, who often licensed them for use in radio, animation, and film. One use of licensed comic characters that proved popular during this time was in live-action film serials. These serials represent the earliest texts in the live-action comic book adaptation genre, and demonstrate how racial formations and depictions of race have been fundamental to the genre from its very beginnings.

Film serials were not the most prestigious form of adaptation for comics. Listeners tuned in to favorite radio programs and went to the movies intentionally, but film serials were being seen by default – they played in 15-30 minute installments before the feature film, or in between the two parts of a double feature, and generally ran between 10 and 15 chapters. Though some viewers were certainly going to the theater to see the next chapter of a film serial, they did not command the same kind of attention or revenue that feature-length presentations did, nor did they receive the same level of promotion from film studios. As a result, film serials were often produced in a short time frame with a very limited budget, and gained a reputation as being cheap, “low-quality” productions, with corny dialogue and poor special effects.

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<sup>3</sup>

“History of Comics Censorship, Part 1 | Comic Book Legal Defense Fund,” accessed July 1, 2013, <http://cbldef.org/history-of-comics-censorship-part-1/>.

Serials were primarily shown during afternoon matinees, either before the main feature or in between the two parts of a double feature. According to a marketing guide issued by Universal in 1927, “How to make money with serials,” most successful serials were produced with children in mind, and/or from licensed character properties from popular genres, such as westerns or science fiction. Although serials were not solely restricted to Saturday matinees or to younger audiences, the general industry perception at the time was that serials ought to be produced with these venues and audiences in mind. Serials were also produced on meager budgets. Major film studios of the time had sets, actors, and technicians employed by the studio to use on their productions, but the independent film studios or subcontractors for major studios who produced film serials usually did not. They had to employ a variety of cost-cutting measures on the serials, particularly on the sets and effects. Cliff-hangers between portions of serials that resolved themselves off-screen were one such budgetary technique, but also resulted in a choppy or confusing story. Frequent reuse of costumes, sets, and props also contributed to the “cheap” look of the serials, since they were often not able to use costumes fitted to the actors or sets designed for the particular story.<sup>4</sup>

Film serial scholar Guy Barefoot quotes a number of film critics, as well as studio-produced trade publications regarding the production of serials; he finds that the general perception of film serials was that they were “a low-budget 'B' product with limited distribution and an appeal primarily to hyperactive children.” Although some serials, such as Superman and the Lone Ranger, were financially successful and had wide distribution, most serials were regarded by critics and producers as filler material for Saturday afternoon matinees and to keep

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Jim Harmon and Glut, Donald F., *The Great Movie Serials: Their Sound and Fury*. (Woburn Press, 1973).

children entertained before the picture. However, Barefoot suggests, in accordance with his research into actual audience demographics and geographic distribution, that “‘children’ may stand-in [sic] here for those lacking in cultural capital,” as serials also tended to have more distribution in rural and working-class areas.<sup>5</sup> Serials were so strongly associated with children and “unsophisticated” poor or working-class audiences that critic Charles Rossi believed not more “intellectual” audiences avoided the theater altogether when serials were shown, so as not to have to be around these less desirable viewers.<sup>6</sup> This attitude toward film serials informed the earliest incarnations of live-action comic adaptations, as they were film serials rather than feature films, and cemented the genre as one that was largely perceived as juvenile, of poor quality, and not of interest to urbane film-goers who appreciated quality cinema.

This association of live-action comic book adaptations as being campy, cheesy, and cheaply made persisted through the adaptations of later eras, and is at times still referenced in regard to contemporary texts in this genre. The lack of attention given to these features and reputation for camp, however, also allowed the live-action comic book adaptation to be a genre in which risks could be taken, in terms of both production and content, and allowed for the circulation and re-formation of racial representations that might otherwise have been subdued for being in poor taste or “unrealistic.”

Comic books of the Golden Age revolved greatly around the events of World War II, and were often used to foment national identity, pride in the United States, and feelings of superiority to a common enemy. Although some popular characters, such as Captain America, were pro-

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Barefoot, “Who Watched That Masked Man? Hollywood’s Serial Audiences in the 1930S,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 31, no. 2 (June 2011): 183, doi:10.1080/01439685.2011.572604.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 181.

intervention from the start and fought Nazi and Fascist enemies, other heroes stayed out of the fray until the Japanese military bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, an event that prompted the United States to enter the war in no uncertain terms. After Pearl Harbor, even Superman, whose creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster had envisioned as an expression of their feelings of alienation and difference as Jewish Americans, was encouraging readers to “slap a Jap” by purchasing war bonds.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis on physical and national difference between Americans and visual Others (particularly Japanese) was exemplified in the comic-based film serials of the 1940s, which drew on both comics' and news media's emphasis on nationalism and patriotism and on live-action film's codes for representing racial difference. As scholars such as Christopher Murray and Sam Keen have noted, comics during this era adhered fairly closely to depictions of Japanese Others in particular as subhuman, with sallow yellow skin, buck teeth, and barely-rendered eyes.<sup>8</sup> These representations were common in propaganda posters and print material and in political cartoons of the time, and carried over into live-action comic film serials, resulting in more overtly caricatured representations than in other popular films of the time. American films about the Pacific Theater in World War II produced during this era did portray the Japanese largely as sinister villains, but not typically with posters' and cartoons' use of subhuman physical features or by using white actors in yellowface. When yellowface was used, such as in 1941's *Behind the*

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed?: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda During World War II* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, Inc., 2011), 34, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*, 199 p. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/\[u\]: mdp.39015040104815](http://hdl.handle.net/2027/[u]: mdp.39015040104815).

<sup>9</sup>  
*Rising Sun* and 1944's *Dragon Seed*, it was used to portray sympathetic Asian characters. Exceptions, such as *Little Tokyo, USA* (1942) and *We've Never Been Licked* (1943), which featured white actors in yellowface as Japanese American spies, were low-budget and only modestly successful at the box office, and were discouraged by the Office of War Information because they did not present Japanese villains as serious enough foes.<sup>10</sup> It is unclear if film serials did not fall under the purview of the OWI, or if they simply did not care to police content seen as frivolous.

The most overt circulation of a non-white racial representation in the comic-based film serials is seen in the 1943 15-part *Batman* serial by Columbia Pictures.<sup>11</sup> In this serial, Batman and Robin fight an evil Japanese mad scientist named Dr. Daka, played by white actor J. Carrol Naish in yellowface. Naish portrayed the evil Daka as a mixture between a menacing Fu Manchu and a bumbling incompetent who had difficulty executing his schemes. The contradictory aspect of these two elements of the character – frightening and impotent – reflects a combination of representations of the Japanese being circulated in media at the time. On the one hand, comics, films, and cartoons portrayed Japanese soldiers as automatons and unintelligent, lacking the mental faculty to disobey ridiculous orders given by their superiors.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>9</sup>  
*Behind the Rising Sun* features J. Carrol Naish as a Japanese man opposed to the brutality of the Japanese government and army; *Dragon Seed* stars Katharine Hepburn and several other white actors as a Chinese family who resist Japanese occupation.

<sup>10</sup>  
Jessica Lauren Wagner, "An Unpleasant Wartime Function": *Race, Film Censorship, and the Office of War Information, 1942–1945* (ProQuest Dissertations, 2007), 96.

<sup>11</sup>  
Lambert Hillyer, *Batman* (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1943).

<sup>12</sup>  
Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed?: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda During World War II*, 218–221.

Japanese generals and other authorities were shown as superhuman monsters, whose tyranny could only be overcome by brave (white) American intervention. In *Dr. Daka*, these two opposing portrayals are re-formed into one figure who is simultaneously threatening and easily defeated by Batman, a hero who has no actual superpowers. The low budget and unsubtle special effects used in the *Batman* serial render *Dr. Daka* and his schemes even more ludicrous, as he is able to be defeated by a few plastic contraptions and soft punches from Batman and Robin. Also notable is that Batman, the hero most like a regular citizen, is the one to face a Japanese villain, rather than heroes with mystical powers such as Superman or Captain Marvel. It is presented as believable and desirable that a determined crusader would be able to stand up to a Japanese villain, since his technology and schemes are inferior to those of evildoers from Europe, the United States, or even outer space.

The *Batman* serial is also blatant in its use of anti-Japanese racist language, with Batman himself addressing *Dr. Daka* as a “Jap” at least five times, despite the two characters sharing screen time only in the last volume of the serial. *Daka*’s own henchmen do not respect him due to his ethnicity, and consider him to be shifty and untrustworthy because he is Japanese. Even *Daka*’s hideout is not of his own design; he is able to hide in plain sight because he operates from a Japanese ethnic enclave in the United States that has been emptied by internment. The film goes farther than just making the evil *Daka* a figure of disdain and ridicule, and reproduces negative conceptions of Japanese Americans in general, referring to Little Tokyo as “part of a foreign land, transferred bodily to America” and praising internment as “a wise government

round[ing] up the shifty-eyed Japs.”<sup>13</sup>

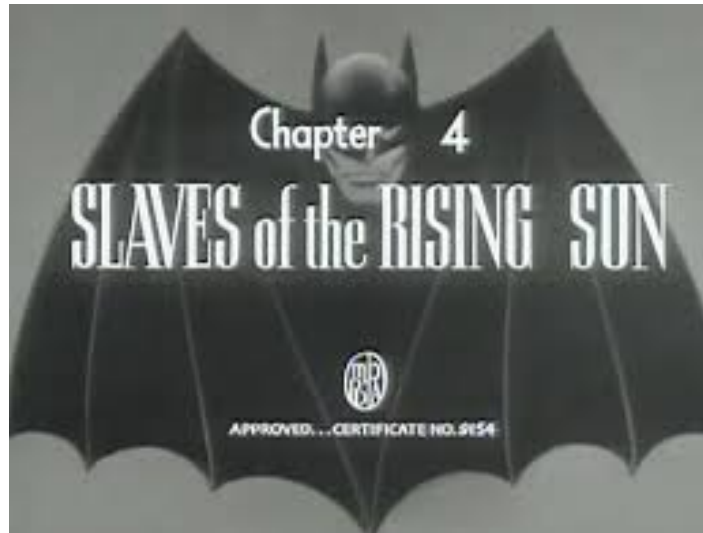


Fig. 1.1. The *Batman* serial presents Japanese and Japanese Americans as threats, but ultimately ineffectual “slaves.”<sup>14</sup>

As Ruth Mayer argues, the yellow peril archetype embodied in Fu Manchu is itself a “serial character,” which Mayer defines as “flat, immediately recognizable, iconic, and fated to execute a stock repertoire of actions and attitudes ...the serial figure extends outside the diegesis into various forms of public discourse and circulation.”<sup>15</sup> Although Dr. Daka is not literally Fu Manchu, he inhabits the same role: a brilliant, marginalized, evil, and ultimately ineffectual Asian threat to whiteness and white nationalism. The threat of Fu Manchu is sinister, yet he can always be defeated by enterprising, patriotic white heroes like Batman and Robin. His impotence in carrying out his schemes is directly attributable to his Asianness. The original Fu Manchu

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<sup>13</sup> Hillyer, *Batman*.

<sup>14</sup> Image from grayflannelsuit.net (Republic Pictures)

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Mayer, “Image Power: Seriality, Iconicity and The Mask of Fu Manchu,” *Screen* 53, no. 4 (December 12, 2012): 398, doi:10.1093/screen/hjs036.

character developed in response to fears about Chinese threats to British imperialism and the “corrupting” influence of Chinese immigrants in Britain, but the flatness and generality of the character allow it to easily be reworked to address World War II-era anxieties about disloyal Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants.

While Mayer notes that part of Fu Manchu's seriality is a reliance on material markers of Asianness, such as flowing costumes, his distinctive mustache, or oriental objets d'art strewn about his lair. Dr. Daka does not neatly fit these visual markers – his skin is darker than the white characters and his eyelids are taped according to cinematic yellowface tradition, but his outfit is a fairly generic black suit and string tie and his hideout largely lacks the sumptuous oriental trappings that Fu Manchu reveled in. This particular representation is attributable to both industrial practices and larger discourses around Japanese Americans at this time. Republic, the studio producing the serials, had formed out of the consolidation of six smaller “Poverty Row” studios.<sup>16</sup> The studio regularly used sets and materials rented from major studios, and costumes from a variety of genres had to be repurposed because they did not own a large supply of costumes as major studios did. It may be that Dr. Daka's suit was originally created as a costume for a Western villain (as the string tie suggests) or other villainous white character, and that a more obviously “oriental” costume could not be found for the character. Likewise, elaborate “oriental” set decoration were also likely in short supply at Republic Pictures, leading to only a few “Asian-looking” statues and chairs in Daka's hideout.

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<sup>16</sup>

“About Republic Pictures,” accessed July 3, 2013, <http://www.republicpictures75th.com/about.html>.





Fig. 1.2. Dr. Daka's low-budget outfit.



Fig. 1.3. Dr. Daka's low-budget outfit and sparse hideout.<sup>17</sup>

Due to Republic's status as a small-scale "poverty row" studio, they simply could not

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<sup>17</sup> Images from [antiscrIBE.com](http://antiscrIBE.com) and [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) (Republic Pictures)

afford many of the visual markers of Japanese Otherness that circulated in popular films and serials of the time. Thus, the *Batman* serial ended up presenting a more explicitly racist vision that related directly to the perception of Japanese Americans as enemies within, rather than displacing these fears onto more fantastical foreign characters; it also seems to have evaded the Office of War Information's campaign to present the Japanese as serious enemies and not to raise fears over Japanese American spying or sedition. Mentions of Japanese American internment were also seen as distasteful by the OWI, and the Office condemned a 1942 film called *Little Tokyo, USA* for portraying Japanese American spies being interned, but internment is explicitly mentioned and even praised in the *Batman* serial.<sup>18</sup>

Discourses about Japanese immigrants and even American-born Japanese Americans during the World War II era centered on not being able to identify "enemies within;" any person of Japanese descent was regarded as a potential traitor, justifying the blanket punishment of internment for Japanese Americans. Anxieties about being unable to distinguish friends from foes and foreign imposters from "real" Americans almost certainly influenced the portrayal of Dr. Daka as someone who does not stand out in the same dramatic way that Fu Manchu does. The narration's characterizations of Little Tokyo as a foreign entity transplanted to the U.S. and of Dr. Daka hiding in plain sight overtly articulate the idea that the enemy is not easily recognized because Americans have become desensitized to foreignness. According to the narrator, the government has wisely sought to eradicate these ethnic enclaves, but it will take an ultra-patriotic hero to completely defeat this traitorous menace.

Although less blatantly racist in their depictions of non-white characters than the *Batman*

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<sup>18</sup> Wagner, *An Unpleasant Wartime Function*, 83–84.

serial, the *Adventures of Captain Marvel* and *Superman* serials, which were also produced during the post-World War II period, utilized depictions of “foreignness” in order to emphasize (white) American unity and power. In *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*, released in 1941, American archaeologist Billy Batson travels to Siam for an expedition, where he and the rest of the crew are threatened by an evil hooded figure called the Scorpion.<sup>19</sup> A magic statue grants Billy the power to transform into the hero Captain Marvel by saying the word “Shazam!” Billy is tasked with protecting his other team members from the Scorpion. In the end of the serial, the Scorpion turns out to be one of the surviving expedition members, intending to kill or scare off his colleagues in order to take the glory for himself. The villain of *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* turns out to be a white American man, yet he is set apart from the rest of the team by the dark cloak he dons; his whiteness is literally masked from the viewer for the majority of the film's run.

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<sup>19</sup>

William Witney and John English, *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* (Republic Pictures, 1941).



***The Scorpion in Republic's  
"Adventures of Captain  
Marvel" ('41).***

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Fig. 1.4. The Scorpion's mask and cloak.

He is also distinguished from the rest of the team by his relationship with the native population. Although the rest of the crew has little interaction with the local residents, the Scorpion employs a number of native henchmen to carry out his schemes. When the Scorpion's true identity is revealed, one of his minions murders him. This scenario mirrors the one seen between Dr. Daka and his goon in the *Batman* serial; Daka's henchmen distrusts and turns on him due to his Japanese background, and the native employee of the Scorpion kills his master out of a sense of betrayal and out of revenge for the Scorpion disrespecting the villagers' sacred objects.

In both *Batman* and *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*, Asian characters end up being untrustworthy and violent. Furthermore, Captain Marvel saves the day by destroying a mystical Siamese scorpion statue, the source of the Scorpion's power. The Asian landscape is one that is

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Image from westernclippings.com (Republic Pictures)

full of perils and threats; although these mystical powers can be controlled by white men like the Scorpion, ultimately they must be destroyed by a benevolent white American force – in this case, Captain Marvel – due to their corrupting influence. These discourses about Asians' backwardness, disloyalty, and inability to help themselves, while not explicitly racist as in the Batman representations, serve a similar function, emphasizing the virtues of whiteness and Americanness and the inherent inferiority and suspect nature of anything or anyone perceived as “foreign.” The *Captain America* serial, released three years after *Captain Marvel*, has a very similar plot, but with the villain using a Mayan artifact and calling himself the Scarab.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 1.5. The Scarab attempts to mummify Captain America's girlfriend.<sup>22</sup>

In one scene, the Scarab attempts to mummify Captain America's lady love according to the “native” Mayan religion's traditions; this act is represented as normal in the “native” culture and

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<sup>21</sup> Elmer Clifton and John English, *Captain America* (Republic Pictures, 1944).

<sup>22</sup> Image from filesofjerryblake.com (Republic Pictures)

is used to characterize this non-white spirituality as dangerous and ridiculous. Again, the white villain manipulates nonwhite native Others through their adherence to superstition and illogical natures, and is himself corrupted by this dark, non-Christian spirituality.

Although disparaging racial language does not factor into the *Captain Marvel* serial, racial difference is made explicit in the opening titles, where the archaeologists' expedition is described as bravely venturing into an area that has until now been “taboo to white men” and which is “jealously guarded by native tribes unconquered since the dawn of time.” These natives are dressed in a hodgepodge of stereotypical Orientalist outfits, wearing turbans, long beards, flowing white shirts and trousers, and banging a gong to signal their charge. *Captain Marvel*, also produced by Republic Pictures, likely used costume pieces from a variety of productions, resulting in a mixture of “oriental” styles that, perhaps unintentionally, reveals the attitude that one Asian group is easily substituted for another – the only difference that matters is that between whites and Others. In the serial, the natives, angry that the explorers might disturb the ancient tombs and release a curse, attempt to storm the camp and drive the “white men...from the Valley of the Tombs,” but are stopped by gunfire from the camp's artillery, and ultimately convinced to leave by the archaeologists' native guide, Tal Chotali. The natives are portrayed as superstitious and prone to violence, in contrast to the “logical” and scientific white explorers who want to preserve and document the region’s history. Tal Chotali, played by a white actor in brown face makeup and a turban, is superstitious and believes in the Scorpion's Curse, which earns him the derision of the expedition's crew. <sup>23</sup> For a time the curse appears to be coming true when the Scorpion attacks and kills members of the crew, but it turns out that the “curse” is

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<sup>23</sup>

Witney and English, *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*.

actually the work of one of the expedition's scientists who wants to take the credit and glory for himself. The mystic artifact that powers the curse is real, yet it has no power until it is manipulated by a white scientist.

All of the live-action comic adaptation serials set up a dichotomy of magic versus science, with magic being associated with non-white peoples and villains and science being associated with white (usually American) heroes. Even Superman, despite coming to Earth from a completely alien planet, is associated with science, as his arrival on Earth is due to his scientist father Jor-El's successful prediction of the destruction of Krypton. The planet is destroyed when the other Kryptonian leaders refuse to believe Jor-El's prediction, but he manages to engineer a rocket to get his young son safely off the dying planet and to Earth. Although Superman could conceivably have any manner of appearance due to his extraterrestrial heritage, he resembles a white American man and is noted to be descended from a race of scientifically advanced

“supermen.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast, most of the villains (with the exception of Japanese American Dr. Daka) are white scientists or learned men who have turned to the “dark side” of primitive magic when their scientific ventures have failed or not become as profitable as they had hoped. In the *Captain America* serial, the Scarab is frustrated when his input into the Mayan expedition and analysis of artifacts ends up with a job at a museum rather than a high-paid research position. His office is a sinister collection of “primitive” artifacts, including African masks and South American statues that signals his corruption by these nonwhite powers.

### Racial harmony and female trouble: “Silver Age” comic television

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Spencer Gordon Bennet and Thomas Carr, *Superman* (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1948).

During the period spanning the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, the most popular and monetarily successful live-action comic adaptations were television shows, most notably *Batman*. These shows marked a transition from the earlier comic serials in terms of diversity in representation and production practices, but features of the genre carried over. In particular, the ideas that these shows were self-reflexively campy and had less-than-exceptional special effects and production values again allowed the shows to avoid scrutiny for circulating certain kinds of themes and representations. The live-action comic adaptations of this era were also focused on a newly dominant media culture: television.

In contrast to the comics and comic adaptations of the 1930s, 40s, and early 50s, which traded on discourses of national pride and fear of foreignness and otherness, the 1960s saw an approach informed by the changes in the American social and political landscapes. The comics of the “Silver Age” incorporated a more diverse cast of characters, particularly women and people of color, but did not necessarily deal explicitly with the feminist and civil rights movements; they also drew heavily from the burgeoning drug culture and new age spirituality, and as such often explored cosmic rather than national themes.<sup>25</sup> These comics emphasized unity across the universe, and are characterized today as “new age” and silly, in contrast to the earnest patriotism of the earlier comics and ironic antiheroism that would follow from the mid-1980s to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Batman*, which premiered in January 1966, utilized the advantages of television production and expectations of the television audience. Although the series did not premier until January, it was an instant ratings success, and ranked fifth in the Nielsen ratings for the entire

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<sup>25</sup> Schoell, *The Silver Age of Comics*, 9–10.



1965-1966 season.<sup>26</sup> The series was produced by William Dozier's Greenway Productions, which also licensed and produced a number of other characters that carried over from the 1940s and 1950s serials and radio shows, such as the Green Hornet and the Lone Ranger. Their approach to the character of Batman was distinctly less serious and more colorful than the tortured "Dark Knight" persona that had been the character's origin. At the time the show was being produced, the American comics industry had self-imposed the Comic Code Authority after a series of senate hearings that painted comics as dangerous for children and created public

outrage about comics' content.<sup>27</sup> The Comics Code was self-imposed by the publishers in order to avoid government regulation and helped publishers of superhero comics by putting wildly popular horror and romance publishers out of business. However, the Code also introduced difficulties with characters like Batman, whose appeal was largely based on being outside of the law and able to combat crime in ways the police could not.<sup>28</sup> In order to continue the character, he had to have a closer relationship with the police and fight villains who were more silly than threatening. This aspect of the comics became the basis for the television series, as these humorous and episodic stories allowed for a large cast of celebrity guest stars and colorful costumes and sets.

*Batman* tended to focus its episodes around the series' villains, rather than around the heroes, utilizing the serial nature of a television show to its advantage to introduce a large cast of

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<sup>26</sup> Kimberly Ann Owczarski, "Batman", *Time Warner, and Franchise Filmmaking in the Conglomerate Era* (ProQuest, 2008), 11; "CTVA-Nielsen Ratings 1965-1966," accessed April 30, 2015, [http://ctva.biz/US/TV-Ratings/CTVA\\_NielsenRatings\\_1965-1966.htm](http://ctva.biz/US/TV-Ratings/CTVA_NielsenRatings_1965-1966.htm).

<sup>27</sup> For an in-depth historical analysis of the Comics Code, its contents, and its effects, see Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

guest stars. Although Adam West and Burt Ward were relative newcomers to television, the actors cast as recurring villains were, for the most part, established and popular film actors. Not only were the central villains of the comics portrayed by popular celebrities, including the Joker, the Riddler, and Catwoman, but new villains who had not appeared in the comics were created in order to bring celebrity guest stars on to the show. For example, the character of Egghead – a villain obsessed with eggs – was created specifically for renowned horror actor and “B” movie star Vincent Price, and the villainous pianist Chandell was created to bring in flamboyant musician Liberace. Many of these characters were then “reverse imported” back into the comics narrative due to their popularity with viewers; a similar phenomenon would occur in the 1990s on *Batman: The Animated Series*, which was also largely villain-driven and introduced several popular characters into the Batman continuity.<sup>29</sup> This format was innovated by the 1960s live-action adaptation as a strategy to engage casual viewers and non-comics-readers, who might become confused by a narrative that required a lot of background knowledge of the characters or information about long-running story arcs. The series also utilized references to other popular media and celebrities for humor and to engage viewers who were potentially unfamiliar with the characters; one such strategy involved familiar celebrities or characters from other programs leaning out of windows to chat with Batman and Robin while they climbed up the sides of buildings.

The 1960s *Batman* television series also introduced some psychedelic elements that further led to the show's characterization as campy and not to be taken seriously; for example, a go-go dance called the “Batusi” was invented for the character, and two episodes featured the

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<sup>29</sup>

Schoell, *The Silver Age of Comics*, 54–56.

caped crusader doing this humorous dance. Popular celebrities also often made cameos in humorous sequences, such as leaning of windows to make jokes while Batman and Robin scaled buildings. The series also used a bright color palette, with many of the villains clad in neon greens and purples. The producers of *Batman* were also arguably more interested in marketing merchandise based on the character than on writing involved plots or carefully attending to continuity. In fact, William Dozier, the head of Greenway Productions and executive producer, had never read a Batman comic book prior to beginning work on the series, and believed that audiences would not be interested in a more serious take on the character; a dramatic Batman series had already failed to materialize, adding credence to Dozier's presumption about the character needing levity.<sup>30</sup> The more humorous style of the series also allowed it to be more episodic rather than plot-heavy, thus encouraging casual viewing and allowing viewers to jump in at any point during the series without being confused or overwhelmed.

This attention to episodic and casual viewing marked a change in industrial practice from the live-action comic adaptation's origins in film serials, which for the most part needed to be viewed in order and completely to be comprehensible. However, both approaches to the live-action comic adaptation, although based in medium specific assumptions about audience viewing habits, imagined that viewers were not necessarily paying attention to the productions. Film serials were monetized mainly by selling them to theaters for a flat fee per serial, while the comic television series made much of their profit in licensing the characters for appearance on clothing, lunchboxes, food products, and even in television commercials. Again, a large number of viewers were watching the live-action comic adaptations, but the assumption that they were not watching

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Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 59.

carefully or had little investment in the actual media texts resulted in circulations of racial and ethnic representations that were widely disseminated but with little scrutiny.

Evolutions in television production of the era heavily influenced the production of *Batman*; according to Spigel and Jenkins, “After 1955, the networks increasingly replaced their expensive live formats with relatively cheap filmed westerns, sit-coms [sic] and adventure shows produced by Hollywood studios.”<sup>31</sup> Genre programs, which could reuse sets, plots, and costumes, replaced live broadcasts. *Batman* as a highly formulaic show – each episode revolved around Batman and Robin foiling a villain’s scheme – fit in well with this emerging trend in television production. *Batman* also attempted to capitalize on the Pop Art movement and its adoration of “low culture” objects like advertisements and comic books by giving the characters a colorful treatment. In one promotional event for the show, Andy Warhol and other celebrities associated with the Pop Art movement were given a special screening of the pilot episode at the York Theater in New York.<sup>32</sup> In addition to this association with Warhol and pop art, devices such as exaggerated props, on-screen cartoon sound effects such as “Biff!” and “Pow!,” and addresses from Batman that at times broke the fourth wall were used to encourage a camp reading of the text by adult audiences.

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<sup>31</sup> Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins, “Same Bat Channel, Different Bat Times: Mass Culture and Popular Memory,” in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 122.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 122–123.



Fig. 1.6. Batman lamenting to the viewer that “some days you just can’t get rid of a bomb.”<sup>33</sup>

Fig. 1.7. “Boff!” sound effect appears on screen<sup>34</sup>

Although the transition to filmed shows and shows based on licensed characters had its basis in budgetary concerns rather than stylistic choices, the producers of *Batman* and other television shows of the era also attempted to gain critical cache for these texts by associating them explicitly with the best-known fine arts movement of the time. However, critics largely ignored the association between *Batman* and Pop Art, and instead “eased [anxieties about the

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<sup>33</sup> Image from knowyourmeme.com (Warner Home Video).

<sup>34</sup> Image from comicbookmovie.com (Warner Home Video).

Pop aesthetic] by shifting their focus to *Batman's* 'camp' qualities.”<sup>35</sup> As Spigel and Jenkins argue, “The camp sensibility gave adult readers, who had previously displayed disdain for mass culture, a comfortable distance from the show's comic book materials....”<sup>36</sup> Spigel and Jenkins’ interviews with viewers who had been fans of *Batman* as children found that “all [viewers interviewed] insisted that they, like the adult spectators constructed by the 1960s critical discourse, had always been 'in on the joke,' had always read the series as camp.”<sup>37</sup> Even young fans’ viewing experiences are articulated in hindsight through the idea that the show and other shows in its genre are not to be taken seriously and are not “good” media products.

The cast of *Batman* included a number of popular celebrities as the villains of Batman's rogues’ gallery. Perhaps the most popular of Batman's nemesis, the Joker, was played by Cesar Romero in clown makeup. The show made no attempt to hide Romero's distinctive “Latin” looks; as Romero refused to shave his mustache for the role, it was painted over with white makeup and red lips, but was still quite obvious to viewers as a marker of Romero's background, and enhanced the idea of the Joker/Romero as a campy and silly presence.

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<sup>35</sup> Spigel and Jenkins, “Same Bat Channel, Different Bat Times: Mass Culture and Popular Memory,” 123.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 133.



Fig. 1.8. Romero's distinctive mustache, visible under the Joker makeup. <sup>38</sup>

Likewise, when Julie Newmar departed the series after two seasons, Eartha Kitt was cast as Catwoman. The casting of two popular actors of color in frequently recurring roles on a major television series was remarkable, yet the show itself never commented on the race or ethnicity of the characters; in fact, *Batman* rarely gave backgrounds to any of the characters, keeping with the light and humorous tone rather than exploring the tragedies that created the villains (and heroes).

Kitt's Catwoman, moreso than Romero's Joker, has been the subject of scholarly analysis on how the characterization of a sexy yet chaste black supervillain broadened the available representations of black women in popular media. As Adilifu Nama and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley have argued in their analyses of black superheroes, Kitt's purring delivery and skin-tight (yet covered-up) attire as Catwoman allowed the character a degree of sexuality that was often

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<sup>38</sup>

Image from comicbookmovie.com (Warner Home Video)

denied to black female characters, who were frequently seen as nonthreatening, asexual maids or motherly figures.<sup>39</sup> Although Catwoman became a defining role of Kitt's career, Kitt appeared as Catwoman in only five episodes of the *Batman* television series.<sup>40</sup> The association between Kitt and Catwoman and the continuing scholarly and popular attention to Kitt's portrayal, despite her short tenure as the character, illustrates the importance of this character, but also the extreme paucity of compelling representations of black women on television at this time. As Nama<sup>41</sup> and Whaley argue, Kitt's seductive-yet-restrained portrayal of Catwoman certainly opened up the possibilities of roles as superheroes or villains for black women, including the opportunity for Halle Berry to portray a heroic Catwoman as the leading character in the 2004 film of the same name; Kitt's influence is also seen in Jada Pinkett Smith's portrayal of the original villain Fish Mooney on Fox's *Gotham* television series (2014-). However, *Catwoman* (2004) was a critical disaster and box office flop, and it is unlikely that another film starring a female hero (or villain) of color will be produced – as of 2015, none have been announced.

Though Kitt's characterization of Catwoman was undeniably meant to be alluring, the character was much less flirtatious with Batman and more sinister, opening up a space for a black female villain to be sexy but not sexually available, but also seemingly demonstrating a fear of

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Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, "Black Cat Got Your Tongue?: Catwoman, Blackness, and the Alchemy of Postracialism," *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 2, no. 1 (June 2011): 9, doi:10.1080/21504857.2011.577280; Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (University of Texas Press, 2011), 127.

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A biography of Kitt quotes her as saying, "People still remember my name because of Catwoman" (John L. Williams, *America's Mistress: The Life and Times of Miss Eartha Kitt* (Quercus, 2014). Julie Newmar portrayed Catwoman in 13 episodes, while Lee Meriweather appeared as the character in one television movie.

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Although Nama argues that Kitt's portrayal of Catwoman opened up possibilities for representations of black women in superhero adaptations, the only example he cites is Halle Berry's Catwoman; all the other examples he traces from Kitt's Catwoman are male characters (127-129).



insinuating miscegenation between a black Catwoman and a white Batman. As Whaley argues, the character of Catwoman as embodied by Kitt “...took a sharp turn from feline fatale to plain fatal,” and “the visual animation of Catwoman as played by Kitt made way for additional sexual frameworks and sexual object relations” beyond unrestrained sexuality or sexless servitude.<sup>42</sup> Whaley cites in particular Kitt’s debut episode, in which Catwoman crashes a beauty pageant, protesting that she is better-dressed than Batgirl, who is receiving an award for her attire. Catwoman “ruins” the pageant by giving all of the white contestants large curly hairdos reminiscent of afros. Catwoman’s assertion of her own beauty and confrontation of beauty standards can be read as “overturn[ing] hierarchies of beauty, hair, and their dependent relationship to race.”<sup>43</sup> However, this scene also mocks the afro hairstyle, which was presented throughout the 1960s and 1970s as a symbol of black pride and an alternative to white beauty norms; Kitt’s Catwoman sports long, pincurled hair.



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<sup>42</sup> Whaley, “Black Cat Got Your Tongue?,” 9–10.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 10–11.

Fig. 1.9. Catwoman crashes a beauty pageant.

As Kitt's debut as Catwoman demonstrates, *Batman* was willing to mock "extreme" aspects of the social movements of its era explicitly, while the more progressive features of its casting and characterizations played out in more indirect ways. Similarly to *Batman*'s ridicule of afros as a marker of radical blackness, the show provided opportunities for women – including a woman of color – to portray strong heroes and witty villains, but also created a villain meant to poke fun at the emergent women's rights movement and feminists. In one 1968 episode, the character Nora Clavicle, created specifically for the television series and portrayed by veteran stage and soap opera star Barbara Rush, attempts to destroy Gotham City by replacing Commissioner Gordon and all of the city's police force with women. The humor in this scenario is predicated on the idea that women could not possibly be effective police officers, as well as that they are easily manipulated – Clavicle tries to put her plan into motion by deceiving the mayor's wife into believing this proposal is a good idea. Convinced by Clavicle's campaign, the mayor's wife refuses to cook dinner or do his laundry, thereby forcing him into replacing the police force with women; he tells Bruce Wayne that he had "no other choice" due to having to wear the same shirt for a week.<sup>45</sup> Later in the episode, the female police officers are seen being silly and ineffective – one officer refuses to chase a gang of bank robbers because she might ruin her "new Givenchy shoes," while Batgirl finds that the officers can't help to defeat Clavicle's

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Image from [mentalfloss.com](http://mentalfloss.com) (Warner Home Video).

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Oscar Rudolph, "Nora Clavicle and the Ladies' Crime Club," *Batman* (Los Angeles: ABC, January 18, 1968).

army of mechanical mice because they are afraid of rodents.<sup>46</sup> At this point in the series Batgirl is frequently called upon to help stop crime in Gotham, but this portrayal of a capable heroine is counterbalanced with the episode featuring evil feminist Clavicle and a comically inept all-female police force.



Fig. 1.10. Nora Clavicle's inept, miniskirted female Gotham Police.<sup>47</sup>

*Batman's* cast was relatively diverse for its day, with two major characters played by actors of color and a number of action-based roles for women. However, the heroes remained a relatively traditional white nuclear family. Batman, Robin, Batgirl, and the supporting “good guys” were all played by white actors, and lived together with Batman's butler Alfred and Robin's Aunt Harriet providing parental guidance and taking care of the house. An oft-referenced legend holds that Dozier suggested the Aunt Harriet character, who did not exist in the comics, in order to erase any suspicion that Batman and Robin's relationship was untoward – the characters had been accused of secretly promoting homosexuality during the Kefauver hearings by anti-

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<sup>46</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>  
Image from bat-mania.co.uk (Warner Home Video).

comics psychiatrist Fredric Wertham.<sup>48</sup> In fact, many of the female characters had been promoted as possible love interests for Batman and Robin to make clear that the two crime fighters were not lovers; the increased roles of Catwoman and Batgirl in the comics were less reactions to the feminist movement and demand for better representations of women, but rather as a reaction

against perceived homosexuality.<sup>49</sup> The expectation that a comic-based series would be campy or risible allowed for the series to experiment with casting and narrative, but its relatively high profile within the genre of live-action comic adaptation resulted in less overt representations of racial difference or other unpleasant themes than the racially-charged and often violent film serials of the 1930s and 40s; the only overt references to ongoing feminist and black power movements were to ridicule “extreme” elements of these ideologies.<sup>50</sup>

*Wonder Woman*, which debuted in 1975, followed on *Batman*’s example, presenting the episodic adventures of the superheroine and a large ensemble cast. The series was also self-reflexively campy to a degree, using similar bright color schemes and live-action comic book effects to demonstrate that it did not take itself “too seriously.” The series also took *Batman*’s approach to representing race and to engaging with social issues of the day; although the series’ lead character was portrayed by a Latina woman of mixed ethnic background, the character is

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*Batman* star Adam West presented this story as fact during a panel at San Diego Comic-Con International 2014. Co-stars Burt Ward (Robin) and Julie Newmar (Catwoman) also indicated familiarity with the legend; Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1954), 189–190.

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Pearson and Uricchio, *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, 150.

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Avi Dan Santo, *Transmedia Brand Licensing Prior to Conglomeration: George Trendle and the Lone Ranger and Green Hornet Brands, 1933–1966* (PhD dissertation, University of Texas, 2006), 360. <https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2006/santod77474/santod77474.pdf>; Avi Santo, “Batman versus The Green Hornet: The Merchandisable TV Text and the Paradox of Licensing in the Classical Network Era,” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 2 (2010): 77.

portrayed as white, and both feminist and racial issues are either downplayed through the use of traditional white femininity or mocked as “extreme.”

In contrast to the *Batman* series' focus on zany antics and famous guest stars, which acknowledged burgeoning movements for equal rights by casting large, action-oriented roles for women and actors of color, *Wonder Woman* a decade later acknowledged its relationship with the feminist movement at least subtly, and tried to balance feminist demands for more independent and capable representations of women with backlash that favored traditional depictions of femininity. In the pilot episode, aired as a television movie, *Wonder Woman* must fight to convince her fellow Amazons that non-Amazons, men in particular, are worth protecting and helping, and that her superior Amazon strength would be better used helping vulnerable humans (Americans, of course) defeat evildoers than lounging about the all-Amazon Paradise Island. In order to disguise her power, *Wonder Woman* takes on the identity of mousy military secretary Diana Prince. This interplay between *Wonder Woman*'s strength and her beauty and appeal to viewers is mentioned explicitly by producer Douglas Cramer in his DVD commentary on the pilot episode; according to Cramer, it was important that the actress who played *Wonder Woman* should be strong and have an authoritative presence, but she should also be feminine, beautiful, and nurturing. He notes that many actresses who came to audition approach the role in a completely “wrong” fashion, acting like “lady truck drivers” rather than ethereal Amazon princesses.<sup>51</sup> This description illustrates the attitudes underlying the representations presented in the *Wonder Woman* series; while producers wanted to engage with concerns about the changing role of women in American society, their main concern was still licensing the character to sell

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Leonard Horn, “Commentary by Lynda Carter and Executive Producer Douglas S. Cramer,” in *The New Original Wonder Woman*, *Wonder Woman* S1E1 (Pasadena: Warner Bros. Television, 1975).

merchandise and advertisements, and thus the representation of Wonder Woman could not be too threatening or unfeminine.

Representations of racial/ethnic diversity were largely absent in the *Wonder Woman* series. The series provides an opportunity for a leading hero of mixed ethnic background in German-Mexican-American leading actor Lynda Carter, but whitewashes her appearance into a vaguely “Mediterranean” white ethnic background for the character. All of Wonder Woman's fellow Amazons are white women. Although the series is set during World War II, the villains fought by Steve Trevor and Wonder Woman are mainly European, including Nazis and other fascistic white villains; non-white characters do not even appear as stereotypical villains, but rather are excluded altogether. Representations more contemporaneous to WWII in live-action comic adaptations such as the *Batman* serial focused explicitly on encouraging identification between Americanness and whiteness through representations of racial difference; the *Batman* television series avoided discussion of racial difference just prior to and then during the height of the American civil rights movement. In yet another formation of representing race and nationalism in live-action comic adaptations, the Wonder Woman television series focused on gender difference, and downplayed racial difference in order to engage with feminism without making the series too controversial or “unlike” reality. The idea that the genre of comic adaptation is most successful when approaching only one “hot button” social issue at a time is one that recurs through the present day, and demonstrates the continued specter of the “non-serious” associated with comic films, as well as the position of comic adaptations as cornerstones for multimedia franchises and thus not appropriate or viable areas to take risks like engaging

with controversial issues.

While *Batman* relied on the new technique of making the series driven by guest stars and “special events” (rather than plot-driven) in order to reel in new viewers and keep repeat audiences tuning in, and *Wonder Woman* used similar techniques as well as an appeal to nostalgia for traditional femininity and simultaneous acknowledgement of feminist issues, the live-action comic adaptations of the Dark Age used another new production technique to generate interest: special effects. For film in particular, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw major advances in computer-generated special effects, and many blockbuster movies of the period relied heavily on CG graphics to illustrate larger-than-life stories; they also attempted to capitalize on the popularity of black action heroes and sports stars with white youth. These trends, in combination with an economic crash that saw mainstream comics publishers eager to sell the rights to their characters for adaptation, created a brief but significant period of mainstream superhero films that did, at least to a degree, provide representations of black leading heroes.

#### The computer-generated black superhero of the “Dark Age”

Although *Batman* relied on the new technique of making the series driven by guest stars and “special events” (rather than plot-driven) in order to reel in new viewers and keep repeat audiences tuning in, the live-action comic adaptations of the late 1990s (the “Dark Age”) used another new production technique to generate interest: special effects. The precipitous crash of the comics collecting market from 1993 to 1997 resulted in a number of comics publishers closing shop, while others looked for buyouts or licensing agreements to maintain solvency.

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Zack Stentz, “LGBTX: The X-Men’s Queer Characters, Themes, and Fans” (Convention panel, San Diego Comic-Con International 2011, San Diego, July 21, 2011).

Marvel declared bankruptcy in 1997; post-bankruptcy, they shifted away from self-distribution and attempts to produce licensed merchandise in house. Perhaps most significantly for the future of comic-to-live-action adaptations, they also licensed a number of their characters for live-action films. New Line Cinema's *Blade* (1998), based on a Marvel character, was emblematic of a brief but noteworthy period of effects-heavy superhero films featuring black protagonists that set the stage for today's CG-filled blockbusters. Producers, licensors, and film studios entrusted these properties to inexperienced directors and focused mainly on experimenting with computer-generated special effects. This focus suggests that these films were imagined as visual spectacles rather than plot- or character-driven stories. The hiring of writers and effects specialists to direct the films also served as a cost-saving measure and shortcut to finding innovative special effects talent, as these directors were all well-acquainted with artists and animators on the cutting edge of effects.

For film in particular, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw major advances in computer-generated special effects, and many blockbuster movies of the period relied heavily on CG graphics to illustrate larger-than-life stories. The aesthetic of these films shares similarities with music videos, particularly hip hop videos of the time that were popular on MTV and BET; some of the directors of these films had previous experience in directing music videos as well as in special effects. These films attempted to capitalize on the popularity of black culture and black celebrities – particularly black sports stars and hip hop artists – without alienating white audiences. The popularity of black professional athletes and the status of hip hop as a

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Amanda Dyanne Lotz, "Segregated Sitcoms: Institutional Causes of Disparity among Black and White Comedy Images and Audiences," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 142; Jason Rodriguez, "Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 6 (December 1, 2006): 645–68, doi:10.1177/0891241606286997.



mainstream genre were firmly solidified by the late 1990s. The U.S. men's national basketball team won back-to-back gold medals in the 1992 and 1996 Summer Olympics with majority-black teams; the first iteration of the team was admiringly referred to as the "Dream Team," and both years' teams featured some of the biggest stars in professional sports. As hip hop theorist Tricia Rose notes, white consumers represented 64% of the purchasing market for hip hop by 2002.<sup>54</sup> Rose also notes that the popularity of hip hop with white audiences reinforced discourses of colorblindness and multiculturalism at the time, and prompted mainstream hip hop artists and producers to embrace these discourses, deemphasize hip hop's black political and cultural roots, and present more stereotypical representations of black culture that would be easily recognizable to white consumers.<sup>55</sup> The approaches of these black-hero-led blockbuster films to representing blackness on screen through familiar aesthetic lenses while still appealing to white audiences similarly reinscribes this colorblind discourse, but also presents characters and actors of color as marketable franchise stars.

*Steel* (1997) starred basketball star Shaquille O'Neal as a black inventor who creates an armored suit that allows him to fight crime. *Blade* featured Wesley Snipes, whose tough characters in actions films such as *New Jack City* and *Demolition Man* were popular throughout the 1990s, as a half-vampire. *Spawn* was based on writer/artist Todd MacFarlane's best-selling comic and featured martial artist Michael Jai White as a demonic anti-hero. As in previous eras, live-action comic adaptations were among the pioneers of these new techniques because

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<sup>54</sup>

Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* (Basic Books, 2008), 88.

<sup>55</sup>

*Ibid.*, 228–229.

producers were willing to take risks with these properties that they would not necessarily take with original content. Superhero films in particular are seen as having a built-in audience of loyal fans who will go to see the movies no matter what, particularly fans who are children and/or devoted readers of comics.<sup>56</sup> Comic readers may be stereotyped as difficult to please with live-action adaptations or extremely picky about minutiae relating to their favorite character, but their viewing of these adaptations is taken for granted.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the increase in budget and profile of live-action comic adaptations from film serials to television series and cinema blockbusters, the genre continued to be perceived as juvenile or low-quality in terms of artistic merit. Although the 1960s *Batman* series was extremely popular during its first two seasons, a number of critics regarded it as silly, childish, or generally not aimed at a sophisticated audience. One critic argued that Batman had a credibility problem due to its campy tone, where children who wanted to take the program seriously would become upset when their parents would laugh at the ridiculous antics of the characters.<sup>58</sup> Spigel and Jenkins found that even among fans who were young when the program aired tend to characterize their memories of the show as savvy to its silly and campy aspects; even these fans do not “admit” to taking the program seriously or perceiving it as well-made.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, the comic adaptations of the late 1990s are often recalled fondly or enjoyed

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<sup>56</sup> Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins, *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2010), 64.

<sup>57</sup> Ian Gordon and Matthew P. McAllister, *Film and Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 5; Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 29.

<sup>58</sup> Pearson and Uricchio, *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

ironically for their perceived poor quality. *Blade* in particular was initially praised for its action-oriented style and well-crafted special effects, but contemporary reception tends to focus on the slip in quality from the first feature film to its sequels or on Wesley Snipes' erratic and violent behavior on the set of *Blade: Trinity* and subsequent imprisonment for tax evasion.<sup>60</sup> *Steel* and *Spawn* are almost exclusively enjoyed ironically for the special effects, which look quite crude in comparison to today's more fully realized CGI, or for the stiff performances of some of the actors.

In order to attract larger audiences and increase the chances of these adaptations being blockbuster hits, producers emphasized the new special effects used, as well as using stunt casting in some cases and engaging issues of race and masculinity. The most financially and critically successful of these late-1990s film live-action comic adaptations, *Blade*, premiered in 1998. *Blade* stars Wesley Snipes, at that point a well-known action star who often played villains, as a half-vampire “Daywalker” who hunts and kills vampires in order to avenge his human mother, who was bitten and killed by a vampire during Blade's birth. Blade can go out in sunlight, unlike other vampires, and controls his urge to drink blood with the help of a serum developed by his mentor. The character Blade was created in the early 1970s for the Marvel comic *Tomb of Dracula*; creators Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan wanted a character who was conflicted about his vampirism as a counterpoint to Dracula, and also wanted to create a black character inspired by the popularity of black sports stars turned actors like Jim Brown.

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“That Time Wesley Snipes Choked David Goyer on the Set of Blade 3 | Blastr,” accessed July 4, 2013, [http://www.blastr.com/2012/11/the\\_time\\_wesley\\_snipes\\_ch.php](http://www.blastr.com/2012/11/the_time_wesley_snipes_ch.php); “Wesley Snipes Attacked & Tried To Make Director David Goyer Quit BLADE: TRINITY,” accessed July 4, 2013, <http://www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/nailbiter111/news/?a=70355>; “Out of Jail, Does Wesley Snipes Have a Second Act? - The Daily Beast,” accessed July 4, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/07/out-of-jail-does-wesley-snipes-have-a-second-act.html>.

According to Colan, the creators felt there weren't enough representations of black characters in comics: "...I wanted to be one of the first to portray blacks in comics. There were black people in this world, they buy comic books, why shouldn't we make them feel good? Why shouldn't I have the opportunity to be one of the first to draw them? I enjoyed it!"<sup>61</sup> However, Blade appeared only on and off after his initial success as a character, as writer Wolfman did not feel he had a good understanding of how Blade's dialogue should sound.<sup>62</sup>

The character regained prominence in the 1990s, as "darker" and "edgier" antihero characters became more popular, due in large part to the success of a group of former Marvel and DC creators who left to found their own studio, Image Comics. The absence of editorial oversight with Image's creator-owned-and-operated model and lack of concern for affecting the reputation of other titles in the brand allowed the Image creators to appeal to teen and adult readers with increased violence and sexuality in their comics, and the Big 2 soon increased their focus on antiheroic characters and titles to try to keep with up Image in attracting older readers. The reintroduction of Blade in the comics was due in part to industrial changes in comics publishing regarding the rights and control of individual creators over content; the *Blade* film was also precipitated by changes in the comics publishing industry.

During the late 1980s through mid-1990s, comics collecting and speculation became a huge market, fueled by the explosion in new titles and new "No. 1s" of classic titles,<sup>63</sup> as well as

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<sup>61</sup> "Comic Book Artist Magazine #13 - Gene Colan Interview - TwoMorrows Publishing," accessed May 26, 2013, <http://www.twomorrows.com/comicbookartist/articles/13colan.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> "No. 1s" involve a title being restarted at issue "No. 1," with the belief that these issues will be more valuable than issues that appear to be later on in a series' run, and will attract new readers and collectors.

by trends such as variant covers and other incentives for retailers to order large quantities of books. However, this market quickly reached saturation, and the sheer number of books produced soon devalued these collectors' items. The crash of the collector market resulted in huge losses for all comics publishers, including Image and the Big 2 publishers. In 1996, Marvel was forced to declare bankruptcy. This financial blow and the loss of publishing as a profitable venue led Marvel and other publishers to focus more on licensing characters for film and other media, and try to establish "brands" for their characters in order to generate more profit through character merchandise. The period following the financial collapse of the comics publishers saw an increase in live-action adaptations based on characters not previously considered recognizable or unique enough to carry a franchise on their own. *Blade*, which Marvel licensed to New Line Cinemas, became one of these second-tier titles to be adapted in a live-action format.

As films expected to fill seats and generate profit but not necessarily garner high marks from critics, more risks and/or shortcuts in production can be taken with adaptations of lesser-known superheroes than with original material or adaptations of more "highbrow" subject matter. Similarly to the cheaply produced serials of Republic, the computer-graphics-heavy superhero films of the late 1990s were able, due in part to the already "risky" nature of their technological experimentation, to present more explicit depictions and discussions of race, including casting black actors in lead roles. For example, the *Steel* production diary emphasizes the rushed nature of shooting due to Shaquille O'Neal's NBA schedule, the imperfect nature of the special effects, and the relative inexperience of many of the actors and behind-the-scenes crew members.<sup>64</sup> The "riskiness" of the film's white director taking the script to South Central Los Angeles for review

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"Steel: Production Notes."

by urban teens to guarantee its authenticity is also emphasized in *Steel's* production narrative. For *Spawn*, features on the making of the film again focus on the innovative special effects used, as well as the challenges of trying to create a “dark” and “edgy” superhero film without getting an R rating that might shut out younger fans.<sup>65</sup> *Spawn's* director, visual effects supervisor and computer animator Mark A.Z. Dippé, had never directed a feature film prior to *Spawn*; *Blade's* Stephen Norrington had only directed one film and was primarily known as a special effects artist. *Steel's* Kenneth Johnson had extensive experience in science fiction television writing and had directed some procedural dramas, but was also a newcomer to directing a feature film.

*Steel*, released in 1997, was based on a second-tier DC Comics character. When DC attempted to attract new readers and generate publicity with their “Death of Superman” event, new heroes who possessed certain attributes of the now-deceased Superman were introduced to fight evil in the DC universe in a storyline called “Reign of the Supermen.” One of these characters was inventor John Henry Irons, based in part on the African American folk legend about super-humanly strong railroad worker John Henry and modeled to look like basketball star Shaquille O'Neal. *Steel* was originally intended as a companion to a Superman live-action adaptation based on the “Death of Superman” storyline, but that film was never produced. DC's financial struggles resulted in the need to produce an adaptation that would be profitable and perhaps generate a new franchise. The film adaptation changed the character's background, de-emphasizing the connection to Superman (and to comics in general) and capitalizing on Shaquille O'Neal's popularity by casting him in the title role. *Steel* also relied heavily on newly-developed computer generated effects to render Steel's armored suit.

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Mark A.Z. Dippe, “Feature Commentary,” in *Spawn* (Hollywood: New Line Cinema, 1997); Mark A.Z. Dippe, “Todd McFarlane: Chapter and Verse,” in *Spawn* (Hollywood: New Line Cinema, 1997).

Although *Steel* was a critical and commercial failure, the film does deal with race, class, and ability in different ways from other films of the same period. Producer Quincy Jones and writer/director Kenneth Johnson wanted to portray life for low-income teens and young adults of color in Los Angeles, so Johnson took the script to South Central Los Angeles and discussed it with a group of young residents, incorporating some of their particular slang and mannerisms into the film.<sup>66</sup> These urban adolescents appear mainly as villains in the film to contrast with hero John Henry Irons' well-educated background, and critics panned the dialogue as sounding forced; however, Johnson's interest in appearing "authentic" to young black and Latino filmgoers was an unusual approach in a genre generally aimed at "mainstream" (read: white) audiences.

*Steel* was also the first live-action comic adaptation to feature a black hero (or villain, for that matter) whose power was based in intelligence rather than in super strength or physical ability. Non-strength based black heroes in comics date back to the 1970s with the introduction of architect John Stewart as the Green Lantern, whose powers are based on willpower and magic technology, but depictions of a highly educated super hero were all but unheard of in live-action adaptations at the time. *Steel* also marked the first live-action portrayal of a superhero with a disability, Steel's partner Sparky. Sparky was paralyzed in the accident resulting from the weaponizing of Irons' technology, but she becomes an elite technological specialist and aids Steel in his heroism.

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<sup>66</sup>

"Steel: Production Notes," accessed May 31, 2013, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080411223603/http://movies.warnerbros.com/steel/cmp/production.html>.



Fig. 1.11. Steel and Sparky (Shaquille O’Neal and Annabeth Gish).<sup>67</sup>

Again, while DC and Marvel comics had had two major superheroes with disabilities – Oracle, who is a paraplegic and uses a wheelchair, and Daredevil, who is blind – for more than a decade, live-action adaptations had not portrayed diversity in ability up to this point. Although the producers of *Steel* had certainly hoped for a blockbuster hit and possibly a profitable franchise, the relatively low profile of the character contributed to the film creators' ability to take risks and circulate portrayals that were not common in “popcorn fare” films or television series at the time.

These representations came out at a time when black/white tension in the United States was particularly pronounced, especially in California and New York where much of the production on these films took place. Within a few years during the 1990s, black and Jewish communities in Brooklyn had clashed over the case of a young black child killed in a hit-and-run accident by a Jewish resident, riots had erupted in Los Angeles after white police officers were acquitted of beating black Angeleno Rodney King, and the OJ Simpson murder trial verdict had

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Image from [thecomicscode.weebly.com](http://thecomicscode.weebly.com) (Warner Bros.)



demonstrated huge gaps in how black and white Americans related to the legal system. Although some dramatic films and television series, particularly those focused on crime or law enforcement, addressed these issues in their storylines, the idea of representing complicated “real world” class and racial tensions in a genre known for being silly, campy, and not necessarily well-made was quite radical.

*Spawn*, *Blade*, and *Steel* were revolutionary in portraying black superheroes, yet these films did not necessarily push the envelope in terms of discourses about ideal or model minority heroes, instead offering white audiences a supposed view into the lives of black characters that was decidedly non-threatening; for instance, the dialogue “authenticated” by the *Steel* director’s visit to South Central L.A. was almost entirely spoken by young criminals who are quickly defeated by the upstanding black hero. All three heroes also have white sidekicks or mentors who keep the heroes from going too far and keep them on a path oriented toward protecting “law abiding” citizens and punishing criminals.

*Blade*, *Steel*, and *Spawn* also all feature black superheroes fighting against white villains. *Blade*’s nemesis in the first film, Deacon Frost, is a centuries-old vampire who believes in the inherent superiority of vampires over humans, and seeks to enslave humans to serve vampires. There is nothing explicitly racist or even race-related in Frost’s scheme, but his plan clearly parallels and draws on white supremacist rhetoric in order to set up a contrast between his vampirism and *Blade*’s. However, this binary distinction between the two characters is complicated by the fact that *Blade* is himself half-vampire, and often faces accusations of betraying “his kind” from vampires who see humans as inferior.

Although *Blade* and *Spawn* in particular fulfill certain features of the “angry black man” or “scary black man” stereotypes that many television series, films, and comics have been

criticized for perpetuating, representing these characters as heroes who ultimately defend “normal” humans against evil forces bent on subjugating humanity does another kind of work as well. These characters are made safe and palatable to mainstream (read: white) audiences because despite their difference, they function as protectors of the status quo, even when it hurts them to do so. Blade kills vampires despite being half-vampire and suffers by denying his thirst for human blood. Spawn fights against the demonic forces that give him his powers in order to protect humanity, even after he was assassinated by his own military superiors for questioning the morality of their actions. These heroes could use their powers to foment revolution or raise their own status, but they instead choose to protect the institutions that have failed them. Although comic readers purchased titles featuring tortured antiheroes and extreme moral ambiguity in record numbers, the live-action adaptations of these characters, particularly those featuring black antiheroes, toned down some of these characters' violence and moral ambiguity.

The media industry professionals behind *Steel*, *Blade*, and *Spawn* were willing to take some risks with unknown directors and black protagonists due the perception of live-action comic adaptations as sophomoric popcorn flicks, even if these films did not push the envelope in critiquing broader systems of racial inequality. In contrast, the producers of the era’s highest-profile comic adaptation *Batman and Robin* were less willing to take risks with tone due to the perceived need to appeal to young audiences and focus on merchandise. Of all the live-action comic adaptations of this period, only *Batman and Robin's* director, Joel Schumacher, had extensive experience writing and directing feature films.

*Batman and Robin* was the most high-profile and high-budget live-action comic adaptation of this era; consistent with the conventions of high-profile adaptations including only white characters, not only did the film not engage with issues of race relations or even portray

any major characters of color, it actually “whitewashed” the Latino character Bane by casting white actors to portray him and eliminating his background story. Rather than simply excluding characters of color, *Batman & Robin* used a Latino character from the comics, but changed the representation to remove that aspect of racial difference. Given that a number of contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations have used Latina/o and Asian American characters, especially those who (like Bane) are supposed to be of mixed race, as site for including white bodies in the formation of “multiracial” representations, it is worth assessing *Batman & Robin*’s treatment of the Bane character in order to understand how this “racebending” trend developed.<sup>68</sup>

The portrayal of Bane in *Batman & Robin* demonstrates one of the most pervasive trends in the comic-to-live-action genre – the issue of cross-racial casting. While cross-racial or colorblind casting can be used to provide more opportunities for actors of color and more representations of non-white characters, the practice in comic-to-live-action adaptations has been criticized by both fans and scholars for mainly changing secondary characters from white to nonwhite, while re-casting leading characters who are supposed to be nonwhite with white actors.<sup>69</sup> In the Batman comics and animated adaptations, Bane is a genius supervillain from the fictional South American country of Santa Prisca, who made himself superhumanly strong through the use of an illicit drug. Bane is portrayed as incredibly smart, powerful, and a formidable foe to Batman; in one memorable instance, Bane broke Batman’s back, and has since

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The character of Bane is also portrayed by a white actor in the 2012 adaptation *The Dark Knight Returns*; this characterization will be examined in detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>69</sup>

Lopez, “Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*”; Fu, “Fear of a Black Spider-Man”; LeiLani Nishime, “The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 34–49, doi:10.1353/cj.2005.0011; “Our Campaigns,” *Racebending.com*, accessed January 12, 2014, <http://www.racebending.com/v4/campaigns/>.

often been referred to admiringly as “the man who broke the Bat.”<sup>70</sup> The character has been portrayed as the son of a British father and South American mother, and is consistently identified as being Latino and from South America. Bane has been voiced in various animated series and features by both white voice actors and prominent Latino screen actors, including Carlos Alazraqui, Hector Elizondo, and Danny Trejo. However, in *Batman and Robin*, Bane is mute, and functions as a servant for Poison Ivy. He is portrayed as a convict injected with a strength serum by Ivy’s villainous mentor. While his super-strength is intact, he seems to have little cognitive function, and is easily defeated by the heroes. Bane’s luchador mask and wrestling singlet hint at a Latino background for the character and the film portrays him meeting Poison Ivy somewhere in South America, but no explanation is given for his outfit or for why he seems unable to speak. The character is also played by white actors in both his diminutive “before” experimentation and hulking “after” phases.<sup>71</sup>



Fig. 1.12. Bane before his transformation in *Batman & Robin*.

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<sup>70</sup> Chuck Dixon, *Knightfall, Vol. 1*, New ed. (DC Comics, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> Joel Schumacher, *Batman and Robin* (Warner Bros., 1997).

Fig. 1.13 Bane after his transformation in *Batman & Robin*.

The use of Bane as a “colorful” and visually appealing secondary villain with an ambiguous background demonstrates some continuity with both film serials and television series, which utilized actors and/or characters of color to populate large casts, but did not give these characters much screen time or development. The treatment of Bane in this film also foreshadows the “whitewashing” of non-black characters of color, especially mixed-race characters, that is prominent in contemporary high-profile comic-to-live-action adaptations.

#### Genre and racial representation

In each of these eras, the most “high profile” character or property tended to receive the highest budget and take fewer risks in terms of production with the live-action adaptation; though not always resulting in a more profitable or better-reviewed final product, the perception of needing to attend to “quality” also resulted in less engagement with race/ethnicity and fewer or more subtle representations of non-white characters. *Superman*, which multiple anthologies and analyses of film serials characterize as one of the “best” and most successful serials of all time (not just of those adapted from comics), does not portray any non-white characters, in clear contrast to the overt representations of racial Others in *Batman*, *Captain America*, and *Captain Marvel*.

Although not having explicitly racist depictions of villains of color may in some ways suggest a more progressive attitude, the substitution of a generic white character for an

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Images from [batman.wikia.com](http://batman.wikia.com) (Warner Bros Entertainment)

intelligent and often sympathetic villain of color (as in the case of Bane) demonstrates that the choice is not between racist and anti-racist representations – rather, it seems to be between racist representations or no representation at all. *Batman and Robin's* focus on merchandising and increasing the family-friendliness of the character also seemed to result in a deracinating of the story – a villain explicitly represented as Latino in the comics was rendered unmarked racially and portrayed by a white actor, while there were only two minor roles for actors of color. This “whitewashing” of the Batman universe again stands in sharp contrast to other live-action comic adaptations released around the same time, which tended to feature black heroes and engage with racism and racial discrimination to varying degrees; the differences in funding strategies, performance expectations, and imagined audiences for these films resulted in distinctly different portrayals of characters of color, with the higher-profile project keeping with the convention of white heroes and even casting a Latino character with a white actor. The brief period of black leading heroes in the late 1990s seems to have been interpreted by the industry as a fluke; examination of the context that led to these films suggests that a particular confluence of economic downturn, technological advancement, and prominence of race relations in news media led to these unusual films. Contemporary adaptations, as I will argue in Chapters 3 and 4, have taken their “lessons” from the more high-profile, broadly appealing, and franchise-able television series of the 1960s and 1970s as budgets increase and the need to make these franchises financially successful is critical.

In the contemporary era, as live-action comic adaptations have gained some degree of respect and increased expectations as a genre, the genre’s representations of non-white characters have diminished, and discussions of race and ethnicity have decreased as well; I argue that this “whitening” of the live-action comic universe is in part of a result of the increased profile – and

thus decreased ability or incentive to take risks – of the genre, reflecting the tendencies of the higher-profile adaptations of the Golden and Dark Ages, as well as the television series of the Silver Age – to downplay racial difference, and to present characters of color largely in supporting roles that do not engage with their racial/ethnic backgrounds. This trend in contemporary live-action comic adaptations also parallels trends in popular media in general of deemphasizing racial difference and promoting “color-mute” representations of racial difference, where, as Linda Williams explains, visual racial differences are acceptable but cannot be historicized or discussed.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>

Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust,” 303.

## **Chapter 2: Marvel's self-promotion, franchising attempts, and the impact of live-action, 1960s-2000s**

When Marvel Entertainment was purchased by Disney in 2009, a number of commentators speculated that this acquisition would result in increased merchandising and branding pushes for Marvel characters, as Disney is famed for saturating all aspects of children's entertainment and lifestyle commodities with its characters.<sup>1</sup> After the success of the slate of Marvel movies that built up to 2012's hugely successful *The Avengers*, these comments about Disney's influence on Marvel were revisited and re-circulated. Although Marvel's recent live-action film success can certainly be attributed in large part to increased efforts in brand recognition and merchandising, the idea that a comics publisher would want to increase its profile through media outside of comics and by focusing on individual characters rather than elaborate storylines or “universe” histories is not a new one. Franchising and merchandising have been important goals of comics since their inception; a glance into comics from their earliest heyday in the 1940s and 1950s reveals a plethora of Superman, Batman, or Dick Tracy-themed goods, ranging from cereal and lunchboxes to shaving razors and cheese.

Letters between creators or rights-holders and potential licensees, company memos on licensing, and internal promotional materials produced by Marvel from the late 1960s through the early 2000s similarly reveal that “breaking in” to mainstream public consciousness through

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Brooks Barnes and Michael Cieply, “Disney Swoops Into Action, Buying Marvel for \$4 Billion,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 2009, sec. Business / Media & Advertising, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/business/media/01disney.html>; Ethan Smith and Lauren E. Schuker, “Disney Nabs Marvel Heroes - WSJ.com,” accessed December 21, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB125172509349072393>; “Disney Buys Marvel For \$4 Billion,” *Kotaku*, accessed December 21, 2013, <http://kotaku.com/5349341/disney-buys-marvel-for-4-billion>.



successful franchises and character recognition has been a goal of the company since near its inception. Marvel's acquisition by Disney has not “turned” Marvel into a character-marketing machine or somehow “Disney-fied” the company's goals; rather, the resources made available by the purchase have facilitated a long-standing goal of Marvel's. The ways in which Marvel as a corporate entity has represented or envisioned its position as a manufacturer of famous characters exemplifies how the comics industry views its position in popular media and in relation to other media industries.<sup>2</sup> These visions and goals of major comics publishers are frequently at odds with the articulated ambitions of individual comics creators (as Chapter 3 examines), but greatly inform the industry's structure and influence the perceptions that creators hold about different popular media industries.

This chapter examines how a major comics company has managed its licensing and merchandising, and how its goals and approaches have evolved over its lifetime. This chapter also looks at how the economics of live-action comic adaptations – one of the major factors in successful licensing and merchandising of comics characters – affects representations of race in a company's products. Derek Johnson has argued that the success of the *X-Men* live-action film franchise has resulted in changes to the character of Wolverine in other media to bring him more in line with Hugh Jackman's live-action portrayal.<sup>3</sup> I argue that this is not only true for this particular character, but that successful live-action adaptations in general influence how characters are portrayed in publications and merchandise. As the cases in this chapter and in Chapter 1 demonstrate, as these live-action films become more “mainstreamed” and less overt in

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, 80.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Johnson, “Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?: Marvel's Mutation from Monthlies to Movies,” in *Film and Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 285–300.

their representations of racial difference, the comics and merchandise relating to these films also become less racially diverse or more “color-mute”<sup>4</sup> in their representations of race.

### Early franchising dreams and first live-action success

Derek's Johnson's 2007, 2009, and 2013 pieces about Marvel's increased attention to creating and promoting successful media franchises built around popular characters posits that Marvel has shifted its self-presentation from “monthlies” (or published comics) to character license holder, and examines some of the ways in which increased conglomeration and convergence have facilitated or even precipitated this shift.<sup>5</sup> Johnson traces Marvel's relationship to franchising through their X-Men characters back to the 1970s,<sup>6</sup> but Marvel's attempts at fashioning brands around its characters extends back to its earliest years. Examination of Marvel's office memoranda, licensing agreements, and internal promotional materials from the late 1960s to the early 2000s suggests that having its characters – rather than its story worlds or published books – involved in a variety of licensed merchandise opportunities and forefront in popular media has been a stated ambition of the company since its early years.

Rather than changing a focus or self-perception of the company, increased conglomeration and convergence have simply facilitated an already-present aspect of Marvel's production. In the company's earliest days, marketing and licensing were handled by the company's executives (including Stan Lee) in conjunction with small firms or attorneys. As

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust,” in *Porn Studies* (Duke University Press, 2004), 303.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, “Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?: Marvel’s Mutation from Monthlies to Movies.”

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, 80.

communications reveal, these dealings were often protracted and scatter-shot, as executives tried to handle all of the company's business with a small staff. Now that the company is owned by Disney, who employs or has connections to a cadre of licensing and marketing specialists, these opportunities and the attendant monetary and professional resources needed to capitalize on them are easier to take advantage of.

Materials contained in Lee's archive of Marvel paperwork from the late 1960s through the 1980s include memos regarding staff vacation and pay, discussions about who needed to approve certain materials before they went to the publisher, negotiations with publishers over fees and timelines, licensing contracts and communications, and notes of concern from employees that they were wearing "too many hats." Three memos in particular illustrate the numerous and varied tasks for which a small number of employees and firms were responsible; these memos also demonstrate the relatively minor nature of the licensing contracts Marvel was engaged in at this point. One note, left for Lee by his personal secretary, details a list of thirteen tasks that await action and asks him to decide which he will be able to accomplish and which will go uncompleted. Another document asks for an order of "twelve dozen" *Incredible Hulk* t-shirts to be printed and sold. Although the exact structure of licensing and merchandising at Marvel during this period is not entirely clear,<sup>7</sup> an order for such a small amount of merchandise overseen by the highest-paid (and highest-profile) employee of a company suggests that this aspect of the business was relatively small in scale and handled similarly to other day-to-day concerns of the company. A third document, from the mid-to-late 1970s, lists Marvel's licensees, the products being manufactured, and the advance and yearly minimum payments being made to

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Johnson's chapter in *Media Franchising* provides a helpful diagram overview of the internal structure of Marvel circa 1995 (80) and provides narrative descriptions of some of the company's structure in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the exact specifics of who is in charge of what in terms of licensing are still not fully clear.

Marvel for the licenses. With the exceptions of a contract with Hanna-Barbera for development of animated TV series and the beginnings of a contract with CBS for *The Incredible Hulk* live-action TV movie, the contracts were exclusively in the realm of children's products, and most were under \$5000 in advance payments and yearly minimum payments. A total of 21 licensees are represented in the document. This glimpse into Marvel's licensing contracts demonstrates that while Marvel was intent on creating marketing opportunities and increasing brand recognition, they were not yet engaged in creating major media franchises or even laying the groundwork for connected cross-media products. These opportunities would be revisited in the next phase of Marvel's expansion: live-action television.

From 1968 until 1986, Marvel Comics Group was a subsidiary of Cadence Industries Corp., which largely owned publishing and paper-products companies. During this time, Marvel was overseen by three presidents: Lee and two publishing executives from Cadence, Al Landau and Jim Galton. Although internal promotional materials and published interviews with Lee during this time emphasize Marvel's preeminence as a licensor and owner of "famous characters," the structure of the company and scope of its licensing agreements are still more reflective of a traditional publishing company than of a major multimedia corporation.

Despite Marvel's continued operation as a company mainly focused on publishing, efforts to license their characters and create merchandising opportunities were highly emphasized in internal company memos and promotional material, as well as in attempts at establishing a successful live-action television series. A number of live-action adaptations are discussed or proposed by Lee and other Marvel staff during this time, including a Spider-Man film with Henry Winkler in the lead role and another Spider-Man film directed by James Cameron. A Christmas card sent to the company by Cameron in 1972 expresses enthusiasm for the upcoming

film; this film would be discussed and promoted in Marvel’s internal and external communications until Marvel’s bankruptcy, which led to a court determination that the Spider-Man live-action film rights Marvel had optioned to a small studio in 1985 had expired, and with it the rights to scripts by Cameron<sup>8</sup> and others (both the rights and scripts were subsequently acquired by Sony).<sup>9</sup> A live-action *The Amazing Spider-Man* television series ran for 13 episodes from 1977-1979, while live-action TV movies of *Doctor Strange* and *Captain America* in 1978 and 1979 failed to be picked up to series; speculation is that these franchises were not seen as promising enough by CBS, who aired all these series as well as *Wonder Woman* and *The Incredible Hulk* during this time, to offset the danger of becoming stereotyped as “the superhero network.”<sup>10</sup> *The Amazing Spider-Man* in particular would later be downplayed and more or less disavowed by Stan Lee in interviews, with Lee claiming he had little input into the series and calling it “a total nightmare.”<sup>11</sup> As analysis of Marvel’s contemporary franchising efforts demonstrates, the strategy of implying or outright stating that Marvel’s “in-house” live-action adaptations or adaptations into which Marvel personnel have more input, broadly defined, has been a cornerstone of Marvel’s franchising strategy since its early years, but particularly after its first efforts at live-action television. The distinction between “in-house” adaptations and those

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One 1992 company bulletin promises the release of the Cameron film in “late 1993/early 1994”).

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Ronald Grover, “BW Online | April 15, 2002 | Unraveling Spider-Man’s Tangled Web,” *BusinessWeek*, April 15, 2002.

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Paul Brian McCoy, “‘Jamming It Down Their Throats: Captain America & Captain America 2 (1979)’ @ Comics Bulletin,” *Comics Bulletin*, accessed December 23, 2013, <http://www.comicsbulletin.com/columns/683/jamming-it-down-their-throats-captain-america-captain-america-2-1979/>.

11

“A Talk With The Man, Stan Lee,” *Comics Feature*, January 1985.

produced by outside corporations has persisted, and allowed Marvel to take advantage of its willingness to try “new” kinds of characters in comics while simultaneously not diversifying its live-action franchises in terms of race.

The most high-profile live-action adaptation to emerge from Marvel’s properties at during this period was the live-action *The Incredible Hulk* TV series, which ran for 82 episodes from 1977-1982, and was followed up with three live-action made-for-TV movies in 1988, 1989, and 1990. These television movies introduced the characters of Thor and Daredevil, perhaps in an attempt to build to a “team-up” film like *The Avengers*, but changes in Marvel’s ownership and the increasingly poor health and eventual death of lead *Hulk* actor Bill Bixby in 1993 prevented further efforts at establishing a live-action franchise with multiple starring characters. Close readings of the *Hulk* character in comics have pointed to the anxieties about masculinity and American nationalism engaged in the comics’ storylines,<sup>12</sup> but the live-action television adaptation downplayed the Cold War-era anxiety of the character in favor of a *Fugitive*-style formula, where the mild-mannered Dr. Banner and the raging Hulk wander the globe, helping a variety of people solve their problems while trying to find a cure for Banner’s Hulk side. This structure allowed the series to tackle a variety of hot-button “social” issues, but the serialized nature of the show required that these “problems” be resolvable in a one-hour timeslot. *The Incredible Hulk*’s status as Marvel’s primary live-action franchise at the time is also evident in *Hulk*’s treatment of race and racism as individual problems often created by misunderstandings or personal vendettas, rather than as systemic and historical prejudice that might interrogate

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Adam Capitanio, “‘The Jekyll and Hyde of the Atomic Age’: The Incredible Hulk as the Ambiguous Embodiment of Nuclear Power,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43, no. 2 (2010): 249–270; Robert Genter, “‘With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility’: Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (2007): 953–978.

whiteness or white privilege. The treatment of these issues is limited to “very special episodes,” wherein the main character assists minor characters, who are never seen again, with solving issues of discrimination. This structure is particularly suited for serialized television, which, particularly in this era, was largely centered on “characters and dramatic action,” and did not lend itself easily to in-depth or historicized treatments of single-episode characters (as remains the case).<sup>13</sup>

Among *The Incredible Hulk*’s 82 episodes and three made-for-TV movies, a number of episodes deal explicitly with racism or mistreatment of people of color. The way these episodes are presented is consistent with a model of understanding racism prevalent in television in the 1970s and 1980s. In this formulation, racism is engaged only in episodes specifically about racism; racist acts are not shown or acknowledged in other episodes, and characters of color are largely present only in racism-themed episodes. In addition to this “assimilationist” model of addressing racism, which stresses individual cooperation and downplays or dismisses the

historical roots of racial categories,<sup>14</sup> *The Incredible Hulk* also engages some of the stereotypes – particularly those regarding Asians and Asian Americans – presented in the early live-action comic adaptation film serials; while these stereotypes are somewhat updated for the time period – the “yellow peril” threat is the Chinese mafia rather than Japanese spies – the presence of these overt racial stereotypes is a continued feature of live-action comic adaptations’ role as a space where outdated or offensive racial representations can be circulated due to its “campy,” lowbrow nature.

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<sup>13</sup> Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”* (U of Minnesota Press, 1995), 85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–87.

The episodes “Kindred Spirits,” “Sanctuary,” “Babalao,” and “Slaves” all involve Dr. Banner trying to help characters who are victims of racial prejudice; however, in all but one of these episodes, the “real” villain is not a white character or institution, but rather is a character of color. “Sanctuary” involves a Latino crime lord trying to get a young Latino boy deported because he is a witness to a crime, while “Babalao” sees Dr. Banner help a medical doctor debunk a voodoo “witch doctor” who is scamming fellow black residents.<sup>15</sup> “Slaves” goes a step further in portraying racism as individual acts of malice, with the central plot involving a black criminal who kidnaps and enslaves only whites to work in a mine.<sup>16</sup> “Kindred Spirits” espouses this philosophy explicitly when a Native American wise man explains why the hero of a certain legend, who bears a resemblance to the Hulk, is green: “If he were yellow, or brown, or red like us, or even white, any of the colors of man, whichever he was, that people would think they were superior. So he is green, the only one. And that makes the rest of us the same.”<sup>17</sup>

The episodes “East Winds,” “Kindred Spirits,” and “The Disciple” all rely on long-standing stereotypes about Asians/Asian Americans and Native Americans, portraying them as mystical and wise but simultaneously unmodern and unsophisticated. “East Winds” features a “good” middle-aged Asian woman character who speaks broken English, wears stereotypical “Asian” robes and dresses, and makes numerous mistakes in her language usage (such as referring to a catalogue as a “cattle book”). She also attempts to help Dr. Banner by ordering him

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<sup>15</sup> Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness,”* 85; Chuck Bowman, *Sanctuary*, Action, Adventure, Drama, Sci-Fi, N/A; Richard Milton, *Babalao*, Action, Adventure, Drama, 1979. The theme of whiteness/science versus otherness/magic, which was prevalent in the live-action comic adaptation film serials, also recurs in “Babalao,” which paints black voodoo practitioners as superstitious and uneducated; one scene involves Dr. Banner explaining fireworks to the bewildered locals.

<sup>16</sup> John Liberti, *Slaves*, Action, Adventure, Drama, Sci-Fi, N/A.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Pevney. *Kindred Spirits*. Action, Adventure, Drama, Sci-Fi, N/A..



a subservient young Chinese woman to be his “mail order bride,” which is played for laughs as a comical misunderstanding. Dr. Banner exasperatedly explains that “in this country [the United States], you can’t order a bride through the mail!,” while the neighbor does not understand why an American man would not want to participate in such as “backward” (as Banner’s reaction suggests) practice as arranged marriage.



Fig. 2.1. Dr. Banner’s neighbor (far right) introduces him to his Chinese mail order bride (middle).

The episode also elides distinctions between Asian cultures by having the Chinese villains use a traditionally Japanese food item (blowfish, which can be poisonous if prepared incorrectly) as a murder weapon. <sup>18</sup> “The Disciple” presents an aging Asian sage whose wisdom can only be carried on by a promising young white disciple, in the vein of popular martial arts

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<sup>18</sup> Jack Colvin, *East Winds*, Action, Adventure, Drama, 1981.

series *Kung Fu*.<sup>19</sup>

### 1986-1996: Continued franchise ambitions and first live-action successes

After the period of instability that began with the liquidation of Marvel's parent company in 1986 and lasted through Marvel's bankruptcy filing in 1996, Marvel sold the live-action rights to many of their properties, and saw their first bonafide box-office successes in the *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* films. These franchises of live-action films, produced by Sony Pictures Entertainment and Twentieth Century Fox, respectively, produced enormous profits and generated numerous licensing opportunities for the characters portrayed in the films.

Cadence Industries, Inc., the publishing corporation of which Marvel was a subsidiary, liquidated in 1986. Marvel was then purchased initially by New World Pictures, and then sold again to McAndrews and Forbes Holdings in 1989. In 1992, Marvel went public, and began acquiring subsidiary companies in order to increase merchandising opportunities and improve the value of their stock – Marvel purchased two trading card companies, a toy manufacturer, a sticker company, and a company to distribute its comics to retailers.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately for Marvel, despite an increase in licensing revenue, the capital outlaid for these purchases, combined with the bursting of the comics speculation bubble resulting in huge financial losses.<sup>21</sup> The company

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<sup>19</sup> Reza Badiyi, *The Disciple*, Action, Adventure, Drama, Sci-Fi, N/A. Although the main character of *Kung Fu* is meant to be half-Chinese, he was played by David Carradine, who is not. One popular legend holds that the series was meant as a vehicle for Bruce Lee, but that TV executives were nervous that a show with an Asian American lead character would not be popular.

<sup>20</sup> Comics are distributed from publishers to individual retailers by distributors. Currently, there is only one distributor in the comics market (Diamond Comics). Marvel's attempt at distributing their own comics through Heroes World Distribution was the last major competition to Diamond Comics; Heroes World folded in 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1; David Leonhardt, "What Evil Lurks in the Heart of Ron?: Critics Say

was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1996, and auctioned off most of its acquisitions, including the trading card and sticker companies. The structure of Marvel was in flux from its bankruptcy declaration in 1996 to its reemergence as Marvel Entertainment in 2005, shortly before Marvel began producing its own slate of live-action films that eventually led to the successful *Avengers* franchise. During this period of instability, Marvel experienced its first major franchise successes with the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* live-action film series. Although *Blade* was the first financially successful Marvel live-action film franchise, rather than becoming the “face” of Marvel films, *Blade* tested the waters for lesser-known comic-based blockbusters, and paved the way for bigger film franchises centered on attractive white male characters.

*Blade*'s R-rating in and of itself hampered the film from becoming the kind of intensely marketable franchise that either of the PG-13-rated *X-Men* or *Spider-Man* movies could become, as retail stores and fast food chains (two of the major sponsors of the marketing pushes for the latter two franchises) are often reluctant to associate their brands with R-rated content. *Blade*'s main character, as explored in more depth in Chapter 1, is an aggressive black man; while his central mission is to protect humans (of all races) from vampires, the “scary black man” stereotypic characteristics he embodies are associated more with smaller-market R-rated films than with family-friendly blockbusters. The character's racial identity and presentation and the film's rating are intertwined, and work together to limit the film's potential as the leading franchise of a company like Marvel, whose ultimate goal is to establish franchises and market characters that reach broad audiences. The biggest star of 2000's *X-Men* at the time was arguably Halle Berry, who was well-known for playing a “Bond girl” in *Die Another Day* and in between *X-Men* and its sequel *X2* would become the first African American woman to win the Academy

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Perelman Is Gutting Marvel's Comic-Book Business,” *Business Week* (January 22, 1996): 44.

Award for Best Actress. However, as Johnson examines, the central character of the *X-Men* franchise is Hugh Jackman's Wolverine, rather than Berry's Storm.<sup>22</sup> As the franchise has grown, Wolverine has become even more clearly its center, as the character has received two of his own solo films and appeared in all the *X-Men*-related films, including the prequel *X-Men: First Class*. As Johnson explains, the physical appearance of the character in the comics and on merchandise has changed to look more like the tall, conventionally handsome Jackman, rather than the character's original short, stout appearance.<sup>23</sup> The use of Wolverine as the story's center also emphasizes other white X-Men who are associated with Wolverine, including Cyclops, Jean Grey, Professor Xavier, and Sabretooth. 2013's *The Wolverine* is set in Japan and features numerous Japanese characters as well as a Japanese love interest for Wolverine, but due to the film's standalone nature, these characters are unlikely to be revisited in future installments of the franchise. *Spider-Man* is similarly centered on a handsome white male lead; despite being set in New York, none of the franchise's significant characters were nonwhite until the release of *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* in 2014.<sup>24</sup>

The success of the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* franchises and the perception that the leading characters of these two franchises have widespread appeal suggests that these films' formula seems unlikely to change; since *Blade*, no major live-action comic adaptation franchise has been either R-rated or centered on a female or nonwhite character. As analysis of the casting of 2012's

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<sup>22</sup> Johnson, "Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?: Marvel's Mutation from Monthlies to Movies." Gender also inarguably plays a role in this decision – until late 2014, no comic-to-live-action adaptation had been announced that starred a female superhero. Of the three that have been announced as of early 2015, none stars a woman of color.

<sup>23</sup> According to Marvel's official character wiki, Wolverine is 5'3" ([http://marvel.com/universe/Wolverine\\_%28James\\_Howlett%29](http://marvel.com/universe/Wolverine_%28James_Howlett%29)); Hugh Jackman is approximately 6'2".

<sup>24</sup> Jaime Foxx as villain Electro; however, the film also features a white supervillain (Paul Giamatti as Rhino).

*The Amazing Spider-Man* and Marvel's reaction to the controversy demonstrate later in this chapter, this formula might be changed (at least briefly) in comics, but the brand cohesion created by the live-action franchises keeps white characters at the center of franchising and character merchandising efforts. The relative success of *Blade* is treated more as a fluke or an exceptional product, rather than the basis for a successful formula, whereas the blueprint "created" by *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* represents the extension of a logic that stretches back to the beginning of comics: handsome white male characters will appeal to the widest possible audience.<sup>25</sup>

#### The "Marvel Cinematic Universe," brand cohesion, and superheroes of color

Although Marvel's desire to have recognizable characters licensed in a variety of media/markets is not new, their attention to brand cohesion has certainly increased in recent years, especially after the success of *Iron Man* led to the building of a "Marvel Cinematic Universe" and re-acquiring their live-action character rights. Johnson emphasizes how Marvel has dealt with brand cohesion, and how the attempts to provide consistency across media result in changes to stories or characters.<sup>26</sup> One strategy Marvel has used in recent years to increase brand cohesion is to intensify hierarchies between different arms of Marvel Entertainment (especially film vs. publications); these hierarchies have largely resulted in white characters representing the brand in live-action, which in turn has resulted in more promotion for these characters in comics and merchandise. This is reflected in Marvel's ambitions as early as the

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*The Avengers* is also predicated on this format, with the female superspy Black Widow the only hero character that has appeared outside *The Avengers* who does not have her own film.

<sup>26</sup>

Johnson, "Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?: Marvel's Mutation from Monthlies to Movies."

1970s as demonstrated by the proposed Winkler Spider-Man film, and is also influential in how creators view their positions and the relative positions of the comics and live-action media industries, as will be examined in Chapter 3.

The hierarchies established between different media within Marvel are also interacting with hierarchies that exist within Marvel's story universes. Marvel has a number of different universes; in publication, the two main universes are the Earth-616 primary continuity and Earth-1610, the Ultimate universe. The 616/primary universe is the one from which most of the stories and characters for film adaptation are drawn; although these film and animated series have their own universe designations, most are inspired by the 616 continuity. The designation of 616 as the "primary" continuity gives it something of a prominence over the other universes.

Moviegoers or TV viewers who aren't comic readers are more likely to know characters as they appear in this universe. Characters of color feature in their own solo titles less frequently in this "main" universe, and when characters are adapted from other universes for film or TV, they are often presented with the identity of their "main" white counterpart.

The very existence of the "multiverse" creates opportunities for capitalizing on trends or exploring new ideas without altering the most familiar continuities or binding other licensed media to particular characters/stories; this has been part of the purpose of having multiple universes since the concept was introduced in Marvel's publishing. One effect of these universe designations is that characters of color are often shifted to rarely-visited or less licensed universes. For instance, when Miles Morales debuted as Spider-Man in the Ultimate universe, there was attention given to the fact that Spider-Man was Latino; Marvel already had a Latino Spider-Man in the 2099 universe's Miguel O'Hara, but this universe had not been active in some time and was not remembered by many readers. After being introduced in 1992, the character

was seen regularly until 1998, a handful of times from 2002-2007, and then not again until <sup>27</sup> 2013.

Like the Miles Morales version of Spider-Man, there has also been little merchandising for this character, with one appearance on animated television and none on film. When asked about potential merchandise or appearances outside of comics for Morales at a 2013 convention, Marvel Director of Communications Arune Singh directed fans to the animated *Ultimate Spider-Man* cartoon featuring Peter Parker and remarked that Marvel was looking for avenues to promote Morales, but did not mention any specific plans. Instead, he suggested that Marvel “likes making money” – whether or not this was meant to suggest that fans could expect Morales

merchandise or not was not explained. <sup>28</sup> Despite this caginess about promoting the Morales character, Marvel publicized Morales' 2014 appearance on an episode of the animated series *Ultimate Spider-Man: Web Warriors* to an exceptional degree, particularly emphasizing that Donald Glover would provide the voice for Morales, again positioning themselves as progressive

and willing to take risks that “Hollywood” studios would not. <sup>29</sup> In 2015, the rights to live-action Spider-Man productions reverted to Disney/Marvel and a new live-action Spider-Man film was immediately announced; although some fans had hoped Marvel would make the Morales version of Spider-Man the main character in order to differentiate their film from the recent *Amazing*

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<sup>27</sup>

“Spider-Man 2099 Comics - Comic Vine,” accessed December 22, 2013, <http://www.comicvine.com/spider-man-2099/4005-40524/issues-cover/>.

<sup>28</sup>

Arune Singh, “Marvel: Next Big Thing Panel” (presented at the Chicago Comic & Entertainment Expo (C2E2), Chicago, IL, April 28, 2013).

<sup>29</sup>

“Hear Donald Glover Voice Miles Morales in Marvel’s Ultimate Spider-Man: Web Warriors,” *Marvel.com*, accessed December 18, 2014, [http://marvel.com/news/tv/23128/hear\\_donald\\_glover\\_voice\\_miles\\_morales\\_in\\_marvels\\_ultimate\\_spider-man\\_web\\_warriors](http://marvel.com/news/tv/23128/hear_donald_glover_voice_miles_morales_in_marvels_ultimate_spider-man_web_warriors); see Chapter 3 for more discussion of the “Donald Glover 4 Spiderman” campaign and its effect on *Ultimate Spider-Man*.

*Spider-Man* and *Amazing Spider-Man 2*, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige announced that the lead character would again be Peter Parker, without acknowledging Marvel's previous promotion of Morales as an alternative to Sony's live-action films.<sup>30</sup>

The relative lack of branding or merchandising of these Spider-Men of color is consistent with work on racial formations in contemporary era; it seems to be important for Marvel to be able to say they have a black and/or Latino Spider-Man, but not necessarily to make these characters household names, lest they confuse the branding of the original Spider-Man.

### Marvel's goals and representation

Although Marvel's media franchises have become more profitable and more recognizable as "Marvel franchises," franchise-building and merchandising of famous characters has been a goal of Marvel's from the company's inception. Contrary to the rhetoric that comics has "become" an idea farm for the live-action film and television industries or that it has "transitioned" its goals from publishing comics to producing franchises, this investment in live-action projects and promoting individual characters has simply become more successful, rather than being imposed from outside through acquisitions like Disney's purchase of Marvel.

This desire to reach "mainstream" audiences and provide appealing characters to a wide demographic through live-action film and television has also resulted in less engagement with racial difference and more presentations of race through a familiar white-centered lens in live-action comic adaptations than in comics themselves. As these live-action adaptations become the central foci of Marvel's various franchises, the comics then are revamped to more closely

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Eliana Dockterman and Tim Nudd, "The New Spider-Man Will Be a Teenage Peter Parker, Again," *Time*, 57:39, -05-01 15:20:54 2015, <http://time.com/3819499/new-spider-man-marvel-teenage-peter-parker/>.



resemble the live-action portrayals or splintered off into lower-profile “universes” in order to preserve brand cohesion. This process then results in comics becoming less racially diverse or less overt in representations of racial difference (except in cases where publicity can be generated by creating/promoting non-white characters, such as the Miles Morales version of Spider-Man); as these comics are then revisited as source material for subsequent live-action adaptations or merchandising, this results in a gradually narrowing variety of racial representations.

Chapter 3 examines the industry lore that comics creators and other media professionals involved with live-action comics adaptations circulate and engage with. These professionals’ understandings of the position of the comics industry relative to other media industries and their opinions and experiences working with other industries are strongly influenced by the rhetoric of Marvel and other comics publishers, although the way these logics are interpreted and applied to creators’ own work varies. The ways in which the structure of the comics industry versus other media industries has influenced the circulation of these rhetorics is also assessed, as well as how these industry traditions and structures affect the attitudes of creators of color in particular toward live-action comics adaptations.

### **Chapter 3: “ Either your involvement or the dollar amount is going to change”<sup>1</sup> - Creators on the live-action adaptation process**

In March 2015, Marvel colorist Ronald Wimberly posted an illustrated anecdote of an incident he'd had with a Marvel editor, wherein he was asked to lighten the skin tone of a minor character he believed was meant to be black and Latina.<sup>2</sup> In the anecdote, Wimberly demonstrates some of the structures and conditions of his work in the comics industry that lead to the incident. Wimberly colored “a couple pages” of an X-Men story, and chose a brown color for a minor character based on what he believed to be her racial/ethnic background (having looked up the character on an online comics database). After submitting his pages, Wimberly received an email from the series' editor, asking him to instead match a different, lighter color for the character's skin. Wimberly was taken aback, but emailed the editor with his reasoning for the color he chose, and received a response that the comics “need[ed] to go to the printer tomorrow” and that the character's background had been changed to white and Latina. In the end, Wimberly chose not to change the color and the pages were accepted without further comment. Wimberly speculates that either the editorial staff forgot or did not care enough to ask him to change it a second time, or realized that their request could be construed as offensive. Wimberly ends his piece by musing that he was never asked to change or explain different ways he colored the green-skinned character She-Hulk, but perhaps that is because “...corporations are less discriminating when it comes to the color green.”

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<sup>1</sup> From my interview with Jason “J. Gonzo” Gonzales, describing the decisions creators face in negotiating live-action adaptations of their works.

<sup>2</sup> “Lighten Up — The Nib,” *Medium*, accessed April 14, 2015, <https://thenib.com/lighten-up-4f7f96ca8a7e>.

Wimberly's brief story demonstrates a variety of issues that impact work in the comics industry, and how these structures and assumptions impact creators' approaches to representing characters of color. One prominent feature of the story is the communication between Wimberly and his editor, as well as his role in the production of the comic. Wimberly receives his assignments and communicates with his editors via email; he presumably works from home or a personal studio, as most comics professionals do. Wimberly indicates that he thought about including a joke about making the character look whiter by giving her some hipster accessories (a latte and a Haruki Murakami novel), but did not do so, instead phrasing his response in the form of a question – "I thought Melita was black and Mexican, no? Maybe she's in a different light ;)"

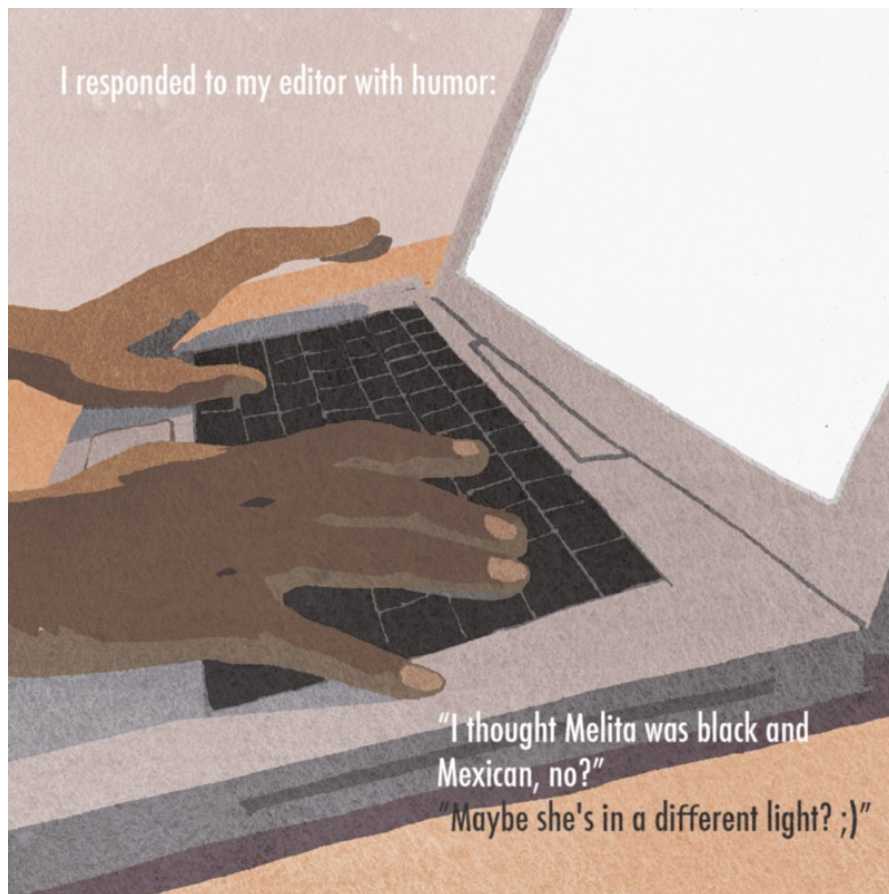


Fig. 3.1. Ronald Wimberly's joking response to his editor's request.

The comics industry is non-unionized and most professionals work on a freelance basis; only a few have exclusive contracts with Marvel or DC that guarantee their employment for a specific series or length of time. Wimberly's delicate response to what he perceived as an unreasonable and possibly racist request illustrates the tenuous positions of most comics professionals; asserting his knowledge of the character (who belongs to Marvel, and not Wimberly or any other artist or writer) or his authority as a creative worker could possibly jeopardize his career. Wimberly also wonders if a black editor would have asked him to change the skin tone after pondering the place of "social literacy" in comics, perhaps doubting his own reaction to the incident; he then however notes that he would not know, as he's never had a black editor in over a decade of work at Marvel. Although Wimberly is a well-known and successful enough artist to relay this incident, however gently, he still makes mention of how relatively racially homogenous the "higher ups" are. Also notable is that Wimberly makes no mention of discussing this issue with other artists, including other black artists or other artists of color; he has to get the pages back to the editor quickly, and is working on them alone. He deals with the incident individually, and only relays it after the situation has been resolved. Individualism, isolation, communication, and other features of the comics industry have a huge impact on what kinds of representations are available in comics for live-action adaptation, and how and why creators do or do not produce or want to have work that explores race and ethnicity in complex ways adapted.

Industry lore and assumptions can result in creators of color feeling pigeonholed into working on characters that are "relevant" to their background, marginalized if their work is either

“too” ethnic or not ethnic enough, and assumed to be less creative or versatile than their white counterparts. When comics produced within an industry saturated with racialized and gendered logics are then adapted by the live-action film or television industries, which also circulate identity-based assumptions, the resulting texts have passed through two sets of racialized and other expectations. This dual layer of “gatekeeping” – which Karine Barzilai-Nahon as noted involves a number of processes performed by various parties, including “...selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard, and deletion of information”<sup>3</sup> – as well as creators’ awareness and/or internalization of industry lore, results not just in less production of stories centered on characters of color, or marketing that downplays racial difference as an aspect of a series’ or film’s success, but creates two distinct “gaps.” The first is within the comics industry itself between mainstream and non-mainstream comics: the creators most interested in telling complex stories about nonwhite characters often self-segregate this work into independent or self-published venues (or into non-comics work entirely) and resist having it adapted. The second “gap” occurs between comics source material and live-action film and television. The few mainstream sources of stories about heroes of color – which, as Chapter 1 argues, are now nearly exclusive as a source for comic-to-live-action adaptation since both DC and Marvel are owned by conglomerates that produce their adaptations “in-house” – are subsequently subjected to further racialized logics surrounding casting, audience expectations, and marketing. This second gap is addressed in Chapter 4 through analysis of contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations and their casting; this chapter examines the first gap through in-depth interviews with comics

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Karine Barzilai-Nahon, “Toward a Theory of Network Gatekeeping: A Framework for Exploring Information Control,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 59, no. 9 (July 1, 2008): 1496, doi:10.1002/asi.20857.

professionals.

This chapter demonstrates that the foreclosure of possible avenues for presenting diverse characters and stories in comic-to-live-action adaptations happens not just as the result of racialized logics from the “Hollywood” film or TV industries, but from industry lore circulated at all steps of production. The results of these expectations include creators of color opting to focus on “non-racial” stories to avoid being stereotyped or pigeonholed, creators choosing to pursue independent projects or working for small presses rather than the “Big 2,” and creators choosing not to pursue adaptation of stories involving characters of color due to assumptions about how “Hollywood” treats such stories. As media industry scholars such as Timothy Havens and Jimmy Draper have demonstrated, all media industries have their own industry lore regarding why certain creators or projects are successful and others are not, as well as expectations about audiences that affect how media texts are created, marketed, or promoted; this lore is fairly consistent across industries when it comes to the downplaying of “identity” categories like race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> The effects of this lore are multiplied in the comic-to-live-action adaptation process by the multiple layers of lore and expectations to which these adaptations are subject; comics that present stories inconsistent with or challenging to comics, film, or television industry lore are both less likely to be adapted for live-action and more likely to be produced or promoted in ways that downplay or assimilate these challenges to industry lore.

The effects of comic industry lore around the process of adaptation to live action include: a perception of disrespect from the film and television industries towards comics and comics

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Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York, N.Y: NYU Press, 2013); Jimmy Draper, “‘Gay or Not?!’: Gay Men, Straight Masculinities, and the Construction of the Details Audience,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, no. 4 (October 1, 2010): 357–75, doi:10.1080/15295030903583630.

professionals, a relative lack of agency experienced by comics creators in the adaptation process, creators opting out of having their works adapted for fear of misrepresentation, and racialized expectations for what kinds of stories certain creators should produce and what kinds of stories will make for good adaptations. This lore and creators' reactions to it constrain the field of available representations in comic-to-live-action adaptations, resulting in a genre of film and television that is typically less racially diverse and less able to present nuanced depictions of characters of color than its source material. Although the nineteen creators I interviewed at San Diego Comic-Con, Latino Comics Expo, and via email work in a wide variety of settings, on different kinds of projects, and often in a number of different media, their responses consistently reflected explanations of both the comics industry and live-action film and television industries given by other creators in published interviews, at convention panels, and on blogs and social media. Remarks by another group of professionals involved in live-action adaptations, casting directors, are also analyzed for the assumptions they reveal about the comics industry and how certain live-action film and television industries perceive their own roles in live-action comic adaptations.

#### Industry structure: Isolation, collaboration, and expectations

One recurring theme among comics industry professionals is that their work at times feels isolating and they have relatively little interaction among themselves, even among professionals who are working on the same title. This isolation can lead to perceiving comics work as more rote than artistic and choosing to pursue artistic expression in fields outside comics, which again leads to "opting out" and narrows the available pool of works to be adapted. The isolation aspect can also create situations in which different workers can take credit or avoid blame for certain

decisions in representation. This isolation is a long-standing and consistent characteristic of work in the comics industry, whether in mainstream or independent comics, and has fostered a culture of individual achievement and self-reliance. While this culture encourages artists to pursue a variety of avenues, including self-publishing and work in other industries, in order to fulfill their creative passions, it also discourages cooperation or solidarity between creators and encourages the internationalization and re-circulation of industry “horror stories” and other lore that discourages creators from engaging with the gatekeeping of mainstream comics editors or live-action film and television professionals. These works are still subject to gatekeeping, but creators’ comments suggest that gatekeeping from audiences and from peers is more legitimate or otherwise preferable to that from “mainstream” industries.

Comics publishers have historically promoted the idea that comics have a collaborative and fun work environment, yet comics creators have not sat together in a “writers’ room” or “bullpen”-style configuration, even at the Big 2 publishers, since at least the 1960s, instead communicating mainly with editors through telephone, mail, fax, and now email or digital voice technologies.<sup>5</sup> Most work in the comics industry is freelance, with writers and artists finding work by being approached by editors (or, in the case of some artists, approached by writers) with short-term and/or project-based contracts. In addition to writers and artists, there are professionals who do other kinds of work on comics, including inking and coloring an artist’s pencil renderings, digitally manipulating images and colors, lettering the dialogue, and other tasks. Many artists who work in the comics industry also do freelance work in other industries, including video game concept art and character design, film storyboarding and concept art, and

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Kendall Whitehouse, “Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the Mythical Marvel Bullpen,” *Wharton - University of Pennsylvania: On Technology and Media*, February 13, 2013.



television storyboards. The comics industry is notoriously not unionized, in contrast to most work in the film, television, or theater industries, and information on comics' professionals salaries, benefits, working conditions, hours, or other aspects of work has been difficult to access. Comics scholar Benjamin Woo has recently completed the first large-scale survey of comics professionals regarding the specifics of their work; while Woo is still analyzing data, he has presented some initial findings.<sup>6</sup> One trend is that while most professionals who answered the survey said that they felt appropriately compensated for their work, a significant number also agreed that as a whole, the comics industry does not compensate workers adequately. One explanation for these findings, which is consistent with how the creators I interviewed explained their work, is that these professionals believe that they individually are successful and reasonably paid for their work, but that others are struggling. Indeed, a number of creators I interviewed suggested that they were successful because of their merits and despite any kind of a perceived racial or gender discrimination, but that there exist some creators who are not able to overcome this prejudice. Although not explicitly articulated, the implication in some of these "horror stories" of poorly-treated creators is that these individuals are or were naïve, not savvy enough to avoid being taken advantage of, or were not skilled or successful enough to fight back. In an industry where work is largely based on word-of-mouth and on promoting one's own publications, the risk of emphasizing structural conditions that impede success is high, while the rewards for solidarity are low. Thus, industry lore is paradoxically both challenged through the circulation of "horror stories" and the emphasis on accessibility of self-publishing and independent comics as venues for creative expression but is also reaffirmed through narratives of

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Benjamin Woo, "Hired Hands: Making Art And/or Making a Living in the Comic-Book Industry" (Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference 2015, Montreal, QC Canada, March 25, 2015).

individual merit.

Jonboy Meyers, who has worked on concept art for video game companies, said that he enjoys his work on video games because it provides opportunities for collaborating with and learning from other artists and allows for more creative expression than some of his work in comics.<sup>7</sup> Other artists who have worked in multiple industries echoed Meyers' characterization of the comics industry as particularly isolating.<sup>8</sup> Gabrielle Gamboa, a zine writer and comic creator, explained that she joined a collective of independent comic creators when she started in comics precisely because the work can be isolating, especially for professionals working on mainstream titles for Marvel and DC.<sup>9</sup>

Work such as zine-making, concept art for film and television, animation direction, teaching art in schools or programs, and character design for video games is inarguably more collaborative than the experience of working for a major comics publisher. However, this work is also time-consuming, and often results in artists deciding to pursue this other work as an occupation and working on comics as a hobby or side project. In turn, not devoting time to their comics work reduces the artists' chances of being offered work or being able to accept work with major publishers. Not all creators want, or should have to want to work for Marvel or DC, but these experiences do illuminate one situation that leads to self-selecting out of work that is more likely to be adapted for live-action. The qualitative data of interviews cannot be used to conclude that these experiences are more prevalent for creators of color than white creators, but the

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<sup>7</sup>

Jonboy Meyers, Interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 17, 2013.

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Ricardo Delgado, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013; Jamal Igle, Interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 20, 2013; Scott Benefiel, Interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 18, 2013.

<sup>9</sup>

Gabrielle Gamboa, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 18, 2013.

experiences articulated by my participants do reflect that these kinds of decisions are important for creators of color.

In contrast to a television series or film production, where creative professionals quitting rarely dooms a project,<sup>10</sup> many comics, even those produced by the “Big 2,” have only two or three people working on them; when an artist or writer leaves, a title will often go on hiatus before being assigned to another creative team or be canceled altogether. Two examples illustrate how the isolation and relative lack of communication between professionals in the comics industry can directly result in less diversity of representation. Trevor Von Eeden has discussed feeling misunderstood or being harassed by superiors at Marvel and DC due to disagreements about how characters should look or how colorists or inkers should collaborate with Von Eeden’s art. Von Eeden’s recollections of his time with Marvel and DC illustrate the effects of racist or racialized expectations in the comics industry. Von Eeden has articulated that he was assigned characters of color because he is black, and then when he left a company because he felt disrespected or not allowed to work to his full potential due to being a black artist, the stories he was working on – which revolved around black characters – are often discontinued.<sup>11</sup> Since Von Eeden left DC, there have only been two short comic series featuring the character in title role, and few other appearances for the character. Again, the pool of available or desirable characters of color for adaptations is limited by creators’ experiences with the comics industry and other media industries. The “horror story” of Von Eeden’s tenure in mainstream comics is

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<sup>10</sup> “Fired ‘Walking Dead’ Creator Frank Darabont Sues AMC for Profits,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/fired-walking-dead-creator-frank-666176>.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron S. Bias, “Interview with Trevor Von Eeden,” *The Arrow Cave*, September 8, 2011, <http://trickarrows.blogspot.com/2011/09/interview-with-trevor-von-eeden.html>.

also frequently shared in industry publications such as *The Comics Journal*; this and other “horror stories” provide a background against which creators articulate their decisions to avoid mainstream comics, or to position themselves as “easy to work with” and accepting of the limitations within mainstream comics while challenging its stereotypes and expectation<sup>12</sup> independently.

In addition to isolation and lack of feedback, the creative leeway artists have with the visual look of the material varies widely by company and project. Contributors other than the writer and penciller often have relatively little input.<sup>13</sup> Writer and artist Howard Shum, who often works as a freelance inker, indicated that he approaches inking work as a task that should be completed according to the penciller's directives. Shum described that he began writing and drawing his own comic series in order to express his own ideas, since inking work does not lend itself to creative expression.<sup>14</sup> Shum's creator-owned comic, *Gun Fu*, combines his love of kung fu movies and hip hop, while another of his independent titles, *Fat Boy and Harvey*, presents the experiences of two young adults, one an Asian immigrant and one Asian American.<sup>15</sup> Although Shum describes *Fat Boy and Harvey* as being able to be enjoyed by readers of any background, it is clear that Asian American experiences and culture inform these work and are important for

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<sup>12</sup> Jamal Igle, Interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 20, 2013; Howard Shum, Interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 19, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Marvel, DC, and certain other publishers will offer contracts to writers and artists who they anticipate will create hit series; most workers in the comics industry work on a freelance basis, moving from project to project without continuing contracts from a publisher.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Shum, Interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 19, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

him to represent.<sup>16</sup> Writer and artist Eric M. Esquivel similarly articulated that while the projects he works on for publishers do not necessarily incorporate issues that are important to him, such as opposing racism and homophobia, he tries to “sneak” social commentary into the titles in such a way that the themes will not be overt, but still feel like they are relaying a message. For instance, Esquivel cited his work on a comic about cheerleaders fighting zombies, which he described as being mainly about “boobs and brains,” but explained that once he started working on the series, he was able to include themes about social conformity and discrimination.<sup>17</sup> The demarcation of “necessary” work that pays bills but is not particularly close to creators' interests or experiences from “personal,” generally self-published work that reflects the creators' own background and values was a common theme expressed by the interviewees, and again demonstrates how beliefs about what kind of work is expected or desired in different aspects of the comics industry affect how artists approach their work. Work that is more nuanced in its depiction of race or racism is more likely to be self-published or independent, and thus less likely to be mined for live-action adaptation, as it is not owned by Marvel/Disney or DC/Warner.

### Race and gender in the comics industry

In an industry that is highly unregulated, non-unionized, and dependent on publications, web presence, and word of mouth, it is not surprising that industry professionals rarely comment on race or ethnicity unless explicitly asked, and often downplay instances of perceived racism or other forms of discrimination until after they have left the industry. Although some creators have

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<sup>16</sup> “Kung Fu Hollywood: Howard Shum Talks ‘Fat Boy & Harvey’ - Comic Book Resources,” June 2, 2005, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=5122>.

<sup>17</sup> Eric M. Esquivel, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013.

gained notoriety for challenging racist, sexist, or homophobic responses (from fans or from fellow industry members), these creators are often well-established, white, straight, and male. In 2011, Brian Michael Bendis, an established writer with Marvel Comics, killed off the Marvel Ultimate universe's Peter Parker and installed a new character as Spider-Man in the wake of his death. One of the Marvel Ultimate universe's "rules" is that those who are dead really stay dead (in contrast to the main universe, where characters are killed and resurrected frequently), with the implication that the new Spider-Man, black/Puerto Rican middle-school student Miles Morales, would be Spider-Man for the foreseeable future. A vocal contingent of fans and other commentators, including right-wing political pundits, criticized the decision as a cynical cash-grab and "diversity for diversity's sake;" Bendis, as a well-regarded white author, rejected these claims and insisted that the changes were in service of producing the best story possible, and after the debut of the new character, the controversy died down and the title has become both critically acclaimed and touted as a success by Marvel.<sup>18</sup>

Because Bendis has a long history of well-regarded comics work and because he is white, Bendis' rejection of the claim of using race in order to "make a statement" could not be discounted by assumptions that his own background was influencing his creation of the character. In contrast, Trevor Von Eeden, who co-created the character of Black Lightning (one of the first black superheroes), felt that he was assigned to the book because he is black, and that he was being given work based on his race rather than his particular interests or talents for illustrating characters. Although Von Eeden had reservations about the appearance of Black Lightning's "Afromask," which he felt was stereotypical and not reflective of what a black hero

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"Should Ultimate Spider-Man Miles Morales Move to the Marvel Universe?," *Comics Alliance*, accessed November 13, 2013, <http://comicsalliance.com/ultimate-spider-man-miles-morales-marvel-universe-crossover-cataclysm/>.

might find the most useful, Von Eeden was assumed to be the creator of the costume not just because he was the artist – as many of the artists interviewed explain, they often begin with character sheets detailing what characters and their apparel should like – but because he and the character are both black.<sup>19</sup> The assumptions made by those in the industry as well as fans and other readers that creators of color “must” create or work on characters of color because of their own racial background, but that white creators might instead be creating the “best” characters for the story reflects deeply embedded prejudices and assumptions within the industry. These prejudices are not necessarily unique to comics, but the opaque ways in which characters are developed and realized on the page due to the industry's structure encourage assumptions and myths about exactly which professionals are responsible for which decisions. In this atmosphere, then, the racialized logics that circulate in the popular imagination lead to differential assumptions about white and non-white professionals that disadvantage the latter, and encourage them to pursue work in non-mainstream comics, which is less likely to be adapted for live-action than mainstream titles.

A number of creators explained that their decision to self-publish either all their comics or particular comics that were personally fulfilling or interesting was due to the experience or the assumption that interference from editors or other corporate representatives would prevent them from producing their work as they desired. Graphic designer and creator J. Gonzo, whose comic *La Mano del Destino* deals with Mexican *lucha libre* wrestling, attempted to sell his idea to different studios, but was unsuccessful in finding one that he felt understood his concept; he felt that he had to reject publishers who could not understand the cultural elements of the story, such

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Trevor Von Eeden, Interview by author, email, September 4, 2013; Michel Fiffe, “Interview with Trevor Von Eeden: Interview Extras,” *Michel Fiffe*, 2009, [http://michelfiffe.com/columns/trevor\\_von\\_eeden/index.html](http://michelfiffe.com/columns/trevor_von_eeden/index.html).

as why the main character would never take off his mask and reveal his face because these companies would not know how to promote the story effectively or might try to influence the direction of the story.<sup>20</sup> Gonzo decided to self-publish the comic, using funds from his graphic design work and other comics-related work (such as a past position working for *Spawn* creator Todd McFarlane's company) to support the endeavor. J. Gonzo also described being rejected by publishers who expressed enthusiasm for the work but were not sure how to market it or felt that it did not fit in with their brand. According to Gonzo, some publishers were also concerned about becoming the “*lucha libre* company” because they had done wrestling or *lucha-libre*-themed stories in the past. Gonzo noted that while it seems to be acceptable for publishers to find themselves branded as “the superhero company” or otherwise being pigeonholed as producers of a specific genre, being the “*lucha libre*” company is undesirable.<sup>21</sup> Other creators shared similar stories of trying to balance freelance work with more personal projects so that they could have the creative freedom to do the kind of work they felt most reflected their interests and talents; although these creators in some cases cited comics, including mainstream comics, as a venue where more diverse stories could be told than in live-action film or television, they also articulated their decisions to work primarily in independent comics as a result of comics industry lore that disadvantages or otherwise “doesn’t get” work by creators of color and/or that engages with racial identity in significant ways.<sup>22</sup>

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In *lucha libre*, many wrestlers wear masks to conceal their identities. Many do not remove their masks unless they lose a public wager (*lucha de apuesta*) with an opponent and are forced to do so; Jason “J. Gonzo” Gonzalez, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013.

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Ibid.

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Eric M. Esquivel, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013; Jules Rivera, Interview with author,



### Industry perceptions of the comics audience: creators at odds

In the week prior to Latino Comics Expo Los Angeles, where a number of the interviews used in this chapter were conducted, a controversy arose in the comics industry and fan communities over comments made by several famous creators that insinuated to various degrees that comics are a medium best suited for the enjoyment of straight white men. *Spawn* creator Todd McFarlane argued that comics are too “testosterone-driven” to appeal to women and that he would not recommend comics to his daughter, while *Punisher* co-creator Gerry Conway absolved creators from portraying more women and characters of color as heroes by insisting that comics “reflect society” and characterizing attempts to increase diversity as inappropriate for the genre: “It’s like saying, ‘Why are there no medieval stories about female knights?’ Because there was only one, you know, Joan of Arc. ... It’s an inherent limitation of that particular genre, superheroes.”<sup>23</sup> Conway also suggested that the biggest factor in why comics lack diversity is because readers simply don’t like to read about female heroes or heroes of color.<sup>24</sup> Conway’s comment notably does not consider either the possibility that there were female knights written out of history because of their gender, or the reality that superheroes are entirely fictional and thus could be any kind of being; rather, he takes for granted and circulates the racialized and gendered assumptions about comics audiences that the creators I interviewed identified. In the wake of these comments, I asked a number of creators at Latino Comics Expo about these

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Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013; Trevor Von Eeden, Interview by author, email, September 4, 2013.

<sup>23</sup>

“Mark Millar and Todd McFarlane: Ladies, Comics Aren’t For You,” *Observation Deck*, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://observationdeck.io9.com/mark-millar-and-todd-mcfarlane-ladies-comics-arent-f-1095912572>.

<sup>24</sup>

Jessica Gelt, “TCA Press Tour: PBS’ ‘Superheroes: The Never-Ending Battle,’ a Documentary Made by and for Fanboys,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/showtracker/la-et-st-pbs-superheroes-the-neverending-battle-documentary-fanboys-20130807,0,2640758.story#axzz2kCcv9ark>.

comments, and whether or not perceptions like those expressed by these established creators affected how they approached their work.

The creators' responses clearly demonstrated that these assumptions about comics' readers and about “quality” storytelling in comics are pervasive in the industry, particularly mainstream comics, but also that comics creators believe that comics and animation are more capable of presenting diverse stories than live-action film or television. This hierarchy, in which comics professionals perceive their work to be regarded as “lesser” than live-action film or television but also more potentially challenging to normative representations of race and gender, leads to the “gap” I argue exists within the comics industry between the complex representations of racial diversity that creators believe can be presented in comics and the pool of representations available for live-action adaptation.

Writer and artist Jules Rivera pointed out that Todd McFarlane obviously does not really believe that comics readers do not want diverse characters because he has made millions of dollars on a comic (*Spawn*) whose main character is black.<sup>25</sup> She and other creators interviewed at Latino Comics Expo suggested that these comments were reflective of an “old boys' club” mentality that remains pervasive in comics, despite the popularity of diverse characters and creators. Rivera's and others' emphasis on how this attitude contradicts actual sales figures underlines that these attitudes are learned industry lore, not simply observations made from actual financial data or other metrics. Comics scholar Stanford Carpenter explains that the “greatest superpower” that white male heroes seem to have is their ability to keep reappearing after being killed in-story or having their titles canceled, while female heroes and heroes of color

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Jules Rivera, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013.

seem to, for the most part, have much shorter shelf lives, and are often killed off permanently or forgotten after a storyline has finished.<sup>26</sup> Frederick Aldama has catalogued all the appearances of Latina/o superheroes in Marvel and DC titles. While he notes that Marvel's Latina/o heroes have been better received critically, better selling, and longer lasting than DC's, most of the Marvel characters he discusses either exist in one of Marvel's non-primary universes (as discussed in Chapter 2) or are minor characters on superhero teams that change membership frequently.<sup>27</sup> Recently, Marvel has been rumored to be planning to end its second-largest universe, the Ultimate line.<sup>28</sup> While some fans believe that an upcoming crossover that finds Miles Morales in the “regular” Marvel universe could mean that character would still be used if the Ultimate Universe ends, this move would discontinue a number of heroes of color, perhaps most notably Ultimate Iron Man Antonio “Tony” Stark.<sup>29</sup> Although rumors about certain universes or stories being discontinued are common and often turn out to be false, they demonstrate how tenuous the positions of heroes of color, even those with high-profile identities like the half-Latino Ultimate Iron Man, are in relation to white heroes in the company's primary universe.

Although comic creator and animation director Ricardo Delgado did not directly discuss

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<sup>26</sup>

Jonathan Gayles, *White Scripts and Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books*, 1080/24p 16:9 (California Newsreel, 2010).

<sup>27</sup>

Frederick L. Aldama, “Spandexed Latinos: Geometric Storytelling in Superhero Comics” (presented at the Latino Comics Expo Los Angeles, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013).

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Kiel Phegley et al., “Will Ultimate Cataclysm End Marvel’s Ultimate Universe?,” *HitFix*, accessed November 13, 2013, <http://www.hitfix.com/news/will-ultimate-cataclysm-end-marvels-ultimate-universe>; “Marvel Teases ‘Cataclysm’ For The Ultimate Universe,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, accessed November 13, 2013, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/marvel-teases-cataclysm-ultimate-universe-592587>.

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Nick Bryan, “Should Marvel’s Ultimate Universe Die, or Do We Hunger for More? | Many A True Nerd,” August 26, 2013, <http://manyatrue nerd.com/2013/8/26/should-marvels-ultimate-universe-die-or-do-we-hunger-for-more/>.

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whether or not he would want to create live-action adaptations of his creator-owned comic, his observations on the case of *The Last Airbender*, on which he worked, illustrate how a professional who works across industries experiences the adaptation process and circulates a perspective on industry expectations. In Delgado's perspective, film and animation are capable of producing texts that engage with race and gender in complex ways, but industry lore results in the downplaying of these elements of a text's success and are used as an explanation (or excuse) for dismissing objections to live-action adaptations' lack of diversity. Delgado reiterated the perception that the film industry often does not respect source material, especially when it comes to race and gender, and that the film and TV industries underestimate their audiences' ability to enjoy media starring women and characters of color. Delgado suggested that the root of the problem is that Hollywood is afraid to take chances on new kinds of stories or representations. Delgado pointed out that Black Widow, a female super-spy, has appeared in more of Marvel's recent live-action adaptations than any other character, but has not received a movie focused on her because "they're afraid it won't make money." Delgado countered this assumption by arguing "if there's seven or eight Marvel movies and Black Widow has been in five or six of them, there's a reason for that" – Marvel clearly knows that the Black Widow character is popular since they continue to use her in films, but they revert to gendered assumptions about their audience and what the audience wants to watch when asked about a solo film for the character. He also mentioned the seeming perception that a compelling and financially successful Wonder Woman

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Delgado's major comic series, *Age of Reptiles*, centers on dinosaurs and is told with no dialogue and minimal text. This may be part of why he did not address live-action adaptation, as I was clearly interested in representations of human characters in live-action.

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Ibid.

live-action film would not be possible, countering that as long as the story was interesting, audiences – including Delgado himself – would want to see the film. He suggested that having a traditional “hero's journey” tale but with a female protagonist would be unexpected and gratifying to audiences because viewers are tired of the “chosen guy” finding himself and saving the day.<sup>32</sup>

Delgado pointed to past examples of successful films involving complex female protagonists, such as *Throne of Blood* and *Alien*, to refute what he sees as the industry's idea that action movies about women don't work. Speaking on issues of race, particularly the film adaptation of *The Last Airbender*, Having worked on the Nickelodeon cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, on which the live-action film was based, Delgado emphasized that the creators and crew of the cartoon put a great deal of effort into researching and reflecting aspects of different Asian cultures, and that the film's predominantly white cast showed that the producers did not understand or care about the representations the cartoon was trying to put forth: “There’s episodes that reflect very deliberately Vietnamese culture, Korean culture...we did as much research as we could on a limited budget to make sure that was reflected. That’s stuff’s important to retain the cultural aesthetic...I’m pleased the public was smart enough to see that and go, nah.” Delgado expressed disappointment in the film industry's treatment of race and gender in live-action adaptations, but suggested that audiences are more receptive to different kinds of stories than studios give them credit for, citing the harsh criticisms from viewers about *The Last*

*Airbender*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>  
Ibid.

Another example of companies' perceived lack of faith in characters of color involve DC's live-action adaptation *Green Lantern*. This issue was brought up and addressed by the founders of Milestone Comics at San Diego Comic-Con in 2012 and 2013. These creators, who all have extensive experience and success in comics as well as other media, expressed their opinions that DC did not believe that adaptations starring black characters could reach a mass audience, despite past evidence to the contrary. The Milestone creators expressed particular frustration that Warner Bros did not capitalize on the popularity of the *Justice League* cartoon series, which featured African American architect John Stewart as the Green Lantern; these creators felt it was a missed opportunity that Warner Bros developed the live action *Green Lantern* film well after the cartoon series had ended, and with white test-pilot Hal Jordan instead of Stewart, who he felt would be more recognizable to film-goers because of the cartoon.

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While the creators' impressions are not conclusive evidence of the company's bias against characters of color, their perceptions of what DC/Warner executives believe will succeed and what will not illustrate industry lore that these creators have heard and re-circulate that lore through interviews and spaces like conventions.

Although the Milestone creators' comments at San Diego Comic-Con and in other venues have touted the ability of nuanced, diverse stories about race to be presented through comics as they believe Milestone's series did, these creators have also largely left the comics industry to pursue work in other fields where they feel they have more creative control and can produce

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Denys Cowan et al., "Milestone: The 20th Anniversary Panel" (San Diego Comic-Con International 2013, San Diego, CA, July 19, 2013).

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work that expresses their own visions more clearly. Additionally, Michael Davis, the Milestone founder who has most continued to engage with the comics industry and who has been outspoken about what he feels are stereotypical representations of characters of color and mistreatment of creators of color, was not involved in the January 2015 announcement that Milestone Media properties will return to publication and adaptation with DC/Warner; popular media sources speculated this was because of Davis' outspokenness regarding race and racism in

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comics. Delgado and the Milestone creators' arguments demonstrate their belief that comics can and do present nuanced stories about characters of color, and are often better than live-action film and television at doing so; however, these creators' lack of involvement in mainstream comics (and, in the case of Davis, strong criticism of it) demonstrates how industry lore interacts with creators' decisions on where and how to publish their work. The circulation of this lore can have direct consequences about what kinds of stories creators produce and what kinds of stories are made available for live-action adaptation. The pool of stories available for adaptation tends to be more influenced by assumptions about audiences, and thus less diverse than those stories creators do not want to have adapted due to these expectations.

### Opting in and opting out

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Of the four Milestone founders, only Michael Davis regularly works in comics; Denys Cowan and Derek T. Dingle have largely moved on to television animation and magazine publishing, respectively. Dwayne McDuffie passed away suddenly at the age of 49 in 2011; at that time, he was writing occasionally in comics, but was primarily working in television animation. McDuffie was fired from writing a DC title in 2009 after his answers to fans' questions about editorial control at DC were published ("Dwayne McDuffie Fired from Justice League," *Robot 6 @ Comic Book Resources*, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://robot6.comicbookresources.com/2009/05/dwayne-mcduffie-fired-from-justice-league/>).

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"The Whitewashing Of Michael Davis From Milestone?," *Bleeding Cool Comic Book, Movie, TV News*, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2015/02/02/whitewashing-michael-davis-milestone/>.

Although expectations about how either major comics publishers or “Hollywood” studios treats creators or their work, particularly works involving characters or creators of color, were implicit in many of the participants’ interviews, a few participants explicitly articulated their experiences of deciding to “opt in” or “opt out” of having their comics adapted for live-action film and television. When asked about their least favorite live-action comic adaptations, most of the creators indicated that they felt the producers of these adaptations fundamentally did not understand the characters and did not respect the source materials or the values the characters represent; again, the comics industry lore that “Hollywood” does not respect comics creators and particularly is not capable or interested in representing non-stereotypical characters of color is implicated in creators’ decisions not to work in mainstream comics or have their works adapted, narrowing the pool of representations available for live-action adaptation.

As a successful and relatively high-profile creator – Grillo-Marxuach suggested that the opportunity to make *The Middleman* into a television show stemmed from his success as a writer and supervising producer on ABC's popular *Lost* – Grillo-Marxuach was still wary of how executives' assumptions about diversity and racial representation might impact his ability to tell stories in the way he intended, and resisted having his independent comic *The Middleman* adapted for live-action television until he felt confident that what was being proposed to him was not the “usual” stereotypical representation of Latina woman. According to Grillo-Marxuach, ABC Family asked him if the main character, Wendy Watson, could be changed from white to Latina, as the network was looking to increase diversity in their casting. Grillo-Marxuach initially refused, fearing that the character would become stereotypical, “calling guys 'papi' and



stuff like that.”<sup>37</sup> As a Latino immigrant, Grillo-Marxuach did not want to contribute to stereotypical representations of Latinos on television, and felt that a Latina character would be constrained in terms of her representation in ways that a white character would not. Network representatives ensured Grillo-Marxuach that he would not have to change any dialogue or other features of the character that he did not want, and he eventually agreed to have Wendy played by a Latina actor. Grillo-Marxuach's experiences in television led him to initially “opt out” of live-action adaptation of his work; however, once he felt that the professionals working on the adaptation would not incorporate stereotypical representations into his story, he decided to “opt in.” His status as a television industry professional and the relatively low-profile approach proposed by ABC Family, who indicated a clear willingness to take the kinds of risks that creators assume studios will not, allowed Grillo-Marxuach to feel comfortable opting in to having his work adapted. However, Grillo-Marxuach indicated that he felt his experience was unique, and was enabled mainly by his profile within the television industry; he related a number of anecdotes illustrating his belief that “Hollywood” producers especially do not respect comics, including a story of an unnamed “major” producer who sent an assistant to San Diego Comic-Con to take pictures of comics cover that looked like they might be interesting for adaptation. Grillo-Marxuach interpreted this action as the producer being disinterested in the comics’ content or their creators’ work and more interested in hunting for intellectual property that could be both used to appeal to comics fans and could be changed into whatever story the studio wanted with little pushback from (or obligation to) the creator.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Javier Grillo-Marxuach, Interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 20, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Gene Luen Yang, whose graphic novel *American Born Chinese* won a number of awards and was praised for its exploration of Chinese American experience and identity, explained that he had had some interest in adapting *American Born Chinese* into live-action, but was not particularly invested or interested in having an adaptation done: “I guess I feel a little wary about Hollywood. There are so many horror stories among comics creators.”<sup>39</sup> Yang's invocation of “horror stories” again reiterates the perception that Hollywood live-action industries often disrespect creators and the work, and that having his graphic novel adapted would likely be a negative experience. Although Yang believes that another work of his, which is more historical in nature, could be a candidate for adaptation, he also discussed his frustration with Hollywood's treatment of race, citing the adaptation of *The Last Airbender* as a contemporary example of the film industry's continued reliance on caricature and “yellowface” when depicting Asian characters in particular.<sup>40</sup> Yang, as a relatively high-profile creator, entertained ideas of having his work adapted for live-action, but has thus far chosen to “opt out” due to suspicions about the intentions and execution of film or television producers. Creators’ perceptions of how their works, particularly those involving characters of color, will be treated tend to lead to opting out of live-action adaptation unless they are assured of some agency in the process and of thoughtfulness in how race will be presented.

Even those creators who were more enthusiastic about live-action film and television,

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<sup>39</sup> Gene Luen Yang, Interview by author, email, September 3, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> *The Last Airbender* was a source of controversy, as initially all four main characters were to be portrayed by white actors, while the series' creators had intended the characters to be inspired by East Asian, South Asian, and Alaska Native culture. One actor dropped out and was replaced with *Slumdog Millionaire* star Dev Patel, but fans pointed out that his character was the film's villain, so all the main heroes were still portrayed by white actors.

including several who work or have worked in areas like concept art and storyboarding, acknowledged that their involvement in the process was relatively limited, although they were more likely to articulate this as a necessary or understandable feature of the hierarchy between comics and live-action media industries. Their perspectives reinforced the industry lore about this hierarchy, as well as providing additional explanations for why comics creators do not choose to have their own series adapted for live-action. These creators viewed comics and live-action as essentially different media, and comics professionals as having different roles in each, with creators necessarily handing over the reins to their stories during the adaptation process or serving these industries in behind the scenes functions.

Keron Grant, whose concept artwork was used for the 2013 Superman film *Man of Steel* as well as the 2013 *Lone Ranger* film, explained that the designs he had created for the Lone Ranger were originally intended for a Lone Ranger television series that was not picked up, and when the film went into production his concepts were used without any additional compensation or input from him.<sup>41</sup> Much of the work comics professionals do in other media is similar to their mainstream comics work in that the rights to the images, stories, and dialogue they produce remains property of the company rather than the artist. Grant expressed satisfaction with this structure, as well as the feeling that he is appropriately compensated for his work. Grant's comments seemed to suggest that comics professionals not having creative input in the live-action adaptation process and having comics stories changed and reworked, even drastically, was to be expected.

The case of 2007's *The Dead One*, an adaptation of Javier Hernandez's independent

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<sup>41</sup>

Keron Grant, Interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 20, 2013.

comic *El Muerto: The Aztec Zombie*, illustrates some of the tensions experienced by creators when having their works adapted; although, unlike many other examples, Hernandez was involved with the adaptation and has expressed satisfaction with the film, his explanation of the adaptation process presents the involvement of creators as a courtesy or as special treatment afforded him by the producers of the film. Like Grant and others, Hernandez still articulates the live-action adaptation process as being

After giving an NPR interview on his comic *El Muerto*, Javier Hernandez was contacted by producer/director Brian Cox, who expressed interest in adapting the comic into a live-action film. According to Hernandez, he was excited by the idea, but the most important aspect of a live-action deal to him was making sure that he was able to be involved. He acted as associate producer for the film, which he explained allowed him to spend a great deal of time on set, as well as attending some of the casting. Although being able to be involved was important to Hernandez, he explained his role as associate producer and his presence at some casting sessions as a courtesy, rather than a necessary or normal part of the process.<sup>42</sup> Writer, artist, and graphic designer J. Gonzo explicitly articulated the perception that in order for a creator to have more input, it's likely that they would have to accept less money or a smaller-budget, smaller-profile adaptation; the higher-profile adaptations are necessarily less “respectful” of creators and their work, as well as of cultural nuances in the stories they adapt.<sup>43</sup> Gonzo worked for Todd McFarlane, whose comic *Spawn* was adapted into a live-action film, and had the impression that McFarlane thought he would have a large amount of creative control on the *Spawn* film, but

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<sup>42</sup>

Javier Hernandez, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013.

<sup>43</sup>

Jason “J. Gonzo” Gonzalez, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013.

ultimately was credited just as a consultant and was not allowed to be highly involved in the process. This experience, along with having stable income from his graphic design work, led Gonzo to say that he ultimately “[doesn’t] have a burning need to do a shitty version of [his] character”<sup>44</sup> by entrusting his work to producers who do not understand the cultural background of the characters. While his sense of how the film industry approaches live-action comic adaptations is pragmatic and largely accepting of the industry’s processes, J. Gonzo’s characterization of the adaptation process as likely destruction of one’s creative vision and work does echo the perceptions of other creators that “Hollywood” does not truly understand or respect comics in their own right. Although he stressed that he understands why the live-action film industry approaches comic adaptations in a certain way, J. Gonzo described the process as “[the executives] saying, ‘We’re going to kill your child for a certain amount of money, is that ok?’ They’re not going to say that, they’re going to say we’re going to take care of it, but....”<sup>45</sup> In conjunction with his articulation of publishers not understanding (or trying to understand) the cultural context of his series or why it might be relevant to an audience beyond Latina/os, these perceptions illustrate the industry lore that has influenced one creator’s rationale for “opting out” of live-action adaptations; both Gonzo’s rationale for “opting out” and Hernandez’s story of “opting in” similarly reaffirms the idea that comics professionals are lower than film professionals in hierarchy of the adaptation process, and that comics creators need to understand and accept this hierarchy and opt in or out accordingly. These creators’ comments also reinforce the film and television industry lore that movies or series meant to be appeal to a “mainstream”

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<sup>44</sup> Gonzalez, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

audience do not or cannot represent characters of color in a nuanced way.

### The perpetuation of industry lore

The way that comics sales figures are calculated and the kinds of statistics that are kept about comics sales are relatively opaque and have little detail in the way of demographics or other information that might reinforce or disprove industry logics about which titles are or are not “successful” and why. Comics are distributed from publishers to comics retailers through distributors; from 1997 onward, mainstream comics have had only one distributor, Diamond Comics, through whom the vast majority of comics are distributed. The way that sales figures for comics titles are calculated is through pre-orders or final orders for titles; unsold materials returned to the distributor or destroyed are not taken into account. The comics market also fluctuates a great deal, making it difficult for publishers to make strong claims about individual titles' sales at times. For instance, the highest orders for a monthly comic issue in a single month from 1997-2013 was 366,051 copies ordered for Image Comics' *The Walking Dead* #11 in July 2012; the lowest numbers of order for the best-selling monthly title in a single month was 71,517 copies for DC's *Green Lantern* #62 in February 2011.<sup>46</sup> Unlike television's Nielsen ratings or other data-gathering systems used to track demographics, comics publishers only have the number of comics ordered through Diamond by retailers; although the interviews and promotional materials examined in Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate that comics industry professionals and producers of live-action comic adaptations hold assumptions about the demographics of comics readers, there is no actual data about readers to back up or refute these

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“Comics Sales Records, 1997-Present,” accessed November 11, 2013, <http://www.comichron.com/vitalstatistics/diamondrecords.html>.

claims. Sales figures for title can provide some insight into how different characters or storylines are received, but in a market as relatively small and subject to fluctuation as comics, even these figures can be difficult to interpret or make strong claims about.

These features of the industry allow and encourage the proliferation of lore and logics about what kinds of representations are most viable. Chapter 4 examines contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations and their representations of race through casting and the lens of “race-bending,” or colorblind casting that changes the race of a character from their comics incarnation to the live-action portrayal; this examination unpacks the industry lore that leads to the second “gap” between comics and live-action, wherein assumptions about what contemporary audiences want to see, expectations of financial performance, and broader racial formations that encourage the opening up of “ethnic” roles for white actors while foreclosing many opportunities for non-passing actors of color lead to a genre of comic-to-live-action adaptation that is visually diverse and draws on diverse source material, but primarily presents white images.

#### **Chapter 4: Racial formations, “racebending,” and live-action comic adaptations**

This chapter examines representations of Latina/os and Asian Americans in contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations through the lens of “racebending,” a term coined during protests of the casting of *The Last Airbender* (2009) and used pejoratively to describe instances of casting in which white actors are cast in roles originally intended to be characters of color. Textual analysis of the representations themselves as well as analysis of popular discourse surrounding these representations are examined in order to present a multi-faceted picture of how these representations work in the contemporary media landscape. These representations are not simply stereotypes or misrepresentations resulting from racist industry logics. Rather, they are a site where the layers of conventions and practices – generic conventions and historical genre roots, comic industry structures and expectations, creator perspectives and decisions – discussed in Chapters 1 through 3 become manifest.

The cases presented in this chapter also illustrate the roles that Latina/o and Asian American characters in the dominant “color-mute” racial discourse of contemporary popular media. These “brown” characters not only serve as mediators between blackness and whiteness on screen, but also function as exemplars of malleable racial/ethnic identification and cooperative transnational production relationships. The late-1990s boom of comic-book movies as a site for testing new special effects and attracting urban audiences to the theater has given way to an era in which comic-to-live-action adaptations are high-budget, carefully marketed and franchised, and expected to generate enormous profits both domestically and abroad. The result



is a contemporary corpus of comic book movies and television shows that incorporate surface-level multiculturalism in the ways that adaptations of the 1960s-1970s and late 1990s did, but with even less attention to historical or cultural specificity. There has also not been a noticeable increase starring roles for actors/characters of color, even while there are more diverse supporting casts.<sup>47</sup> Multicultural/multiracial characters are also increasingly “whitened” as the desirable aspects of diverse casts and characters conflict with industry assumptions about audiences.

#### “Racebending” in *The Last Airbender*: activism, essentialism, and new racial formations

In early 2009, Paramount Pictures announced that the studio would be producing a major motion picture adaptation of the popular Nickelodeon cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, with director M. Night Shyamalan at the helm. Soon after the announcement, casting memos and rumors about which actors might be cast as the lead characters created a controversy among fans of the series, as well as Asian American activist and scholarly groups, who were concerned that the casting call and announced cast seemed to favor white actors, whereas the cartoon suggested that they were Asian (East and South Asian) and Alaska Native.<sup>48</sup> A group of fans and activists campaigning against the casting of the film began referring to the potential casting of white actors in role understood to be Asian and Alaska Native as “racebending;” the name was applied

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For example, only three Asian Pacific American actors (all men) appear as lead characters in the top 300 grossing films, and none have appeared in comic-to-live-action films (Keith Chow, “Asian Americans Should Be Movie Stars: An Update,” *Thenerdsofcolor*, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://thenerdsofcolor.org/2014/12/18/asian-americans-should-be-movie-stars-an-update/>). The same list reveals minimal numbers of black actors portraying major characters in high-grossing comic book films, and no Latina/o or Native actors.

<sup>48</sup>

Ricardo Delgado, Interview with author, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013. Delgado was an animator and animation director on the series; Chapter 3 details his frustration regarding the casting of the film.

both to the practice and to the campaign to get viewers to boycott the film.<sup>49</sup> Since the coining of the term in relation to *The Last Airbender* controversy, it has been used in both scholarly and popular media in place of previously used terms such as “cross-racial casting” or “colorblind casting,” and carries a negative connotation that these two previous terms do not. Despite the attachment of a negative association to the term, the racial formations promoted and solidified in the “racebending” of *The Last Airbender* have continued to circulate in comic-to-live-action adaptations, to varying degrees of fan and media outcry. This chapter examines the racial formations promoted by the *Airbender* example, and analyzes contemporary representations of Latina/os and Asian Americans through the lens of “racebending.”

Fan-activists associated with the anti-*Last Airbender* campaign publicized comments perceived to be racist or discriminatory made by professionals associated with the film, included a casting call that requested actors of “Caucasian or any other ethnicity” for the lead roles; those publicizing the memo argued that the wording suggest white actors were preferred for these non-white characters, but non-white actors could be considered.<sup>50</sup> The Racebending.com group and other fan-activists also created memes and other images highlighting the physical dissimilarities between the cast members and the cartoon’s characters, and also pointing out that the only major cast as an actor of color in the film was the villain.

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“About Us,” *Racebending.com*, accessed May 1, 2015, <http://www.racebending.com/v4/about/>.

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“Caucasian or Any Other Ethnicity,” *Racebending.com*, accessed May 1, 2015, <http://www.racebending.com/v4/campaigns/airbender/caucasian-or-any-other-ethnicity/>.



Fig. 4.1. A fanmade image for the campaign against “racebending” in *The Last Airbender*.<sup>51</sup>

These materials circulated widely on activist and mainstream “geek media” blogs such as *io9* and *Comic Book Resources*, as well as at comic conventions, and were often presented without commentary as self-evident critiques of “racebending”.<sup>52</sup> For example, at WonderCon 2012, a smaller convention associated with San Diego Comic-Con International, Racebending.com had a booth featuring a trivia game where attendees could try to match Asian and Asian American comics and cartoon characters to the white actors who played or were rumored to play them in live-action adaptations.

<sup>51</sup> Image from Racebending.org/8asians.com (Nickelodeon/Paramount Pictures)

<sup>52</sup> “Racebending Releases Report on the True Diversity in Paramount Pictures’ Films,” accessed May 1, 2015, <http://www.8asians.com/2010/06/25/racebending-releases-report-on-the-true-diversity-in-paramount-pictures-films/>.

Although the activists and many other fans and scholars who followed the controversy viewed their actions as progressive, Lori Kido Lopez, whose in-depth study of the anti-racebending activism focuses on fans and their articulations of their action, points out that this approach can also be interpreted as essentialist, as activists must assert a specific and bounded vision of what can be considered “Asian.”<sup>53</sup> Lopez points out the while the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* cartoon series was intended to pay homage to Japanese anime and to present culturally-specific characters of color, the series was created by two white men, and often relied on “visual artifacts” of Asianness and Nativeness, such as “Japanese clothing, Inuit housing, [and] Chinese calligraphy;” the call for actors of certain background to portray the characters in live action also “assumes that identity and representation can be collapsed within an actor’s body.”<sup>54</sup> Lopez provides a succinct and provocative quote from a LiveJournal user that sums up the perils of the activist position: “...To him, the world [of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*] and its cultures do not code as Asian, but as more in the vein of white Orientalism. It’s characters putting on Asian costumes in an exotic Asian world, for white people. Essentially, to cast the characters as white is only fitting.”<sup>55</sup>

On the other side of the controversy, director M. Night Shyamalan and other members of the film's production staff gave a number of interviews addressing the casting, in which they promoted the idea that activists were being rigid and essentialist in their views on race, emphasizing that their critics were actually being less open to diversity than the film's staff by

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Lori Kido Lopez, “Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 434–435.

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*Ibid.*, 435.

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*Ibid.*, 436.

insisting that actors cast should be from a particular background. Shyamalan's longest interview, with media website io9.com in March 2009, promoted this narrative of diversity and openness, insisting that remaining open to casting actors of any race allowed him to build a multiethnic and "mixed race" world in the film, and also allowed him to cast the actors who best embodied the roles and produced the highest quality performances. Shyamalan explained that he "was without an agenda and just letting it come to the table," and that he had tried out and temporarily cast actors of all different racial backgrounds before settling on three white actors for the main heroes. He argued in the same interview that the actor cast in the lead role "had a slightly mixed quality to him."<sup>56</sup> Casting director Dee Dee Ricketts also promoted a commitment to diversity in an interview regarding a casting call for extras: "We want you to dress in traditional cultural ethnic attire," she said. "If you're Korean, wear a kimono. If you're from Belgium, wear lederhosen."<sup>57</sup> Ricketts' narrative, similarly to Shyamalan's, suggests that race, ethnicity, and culture can be expressed visually or through the use of cultural accessories, and that embodied experience as a member of a particular group should be less emphasized than these other factors.

Shyamalan and Ricketts' comments provide an example of racial formation in action – through their power to assign actors to roles, the director and casting director promote the discourse of multiracial identity as transcending, rather than crossing, racial/ethnic and cultural lines; they also open up the possibility for "mixed" identification to extend to white subjects via their physical appearance and wardrobe. These surface-level, generic distinctions between

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"Shyamalan Addresses Airbender's Race Controversy And Answers Your Questions," *io9*, accessed January 14, 2014, <http://io9.com/5504967/shyamalan-addresses-airbenders-race-controversy-and-answers-your-questions>.

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Naomi Tarlow, "Try out for a Role - for M. Night Shyamalan," accessed January 14, 2014, [http://www.thedp.com/article/2009/01/try\\_out\\_for\\_a\\_role\\_for\\_m\\_night\\_shyamalan](http://www.thedp.com/article/2009/01/try_out_for_a_role_for_m_night_shyamalan). Kimonos, of course, are traditional attire from Japan rather than Korea, and lederhosen are German rather than Belgian.

different racial and ethnic groups are, in ways more and less (as in the *Airbender* examples) subtle, pervasive features of contemporary discourses on race and racial difference in the United States. Live-action comic adaptations, which generally attempt to transform a niche media text into a widely-appealing franchise, are frequent sites of “racebending” of characters.

In the contemporary sociopolitical landscape, visual representations of racial difference (as well as, to a lesser extent, sexual difference) have become increasingly normalized. However, the histories or potential issues associated with these differences are rarely discussed or mentioned. In contrast with the relegation of characters of color to “very special episodes” of television focused on racism often seen in the past, today's television series are more likely to have a recurring character of color, but not engage with issues of discrimination or prejudice. These representations then are not strictly post-racial or “colorblind,” as difference can be seen, but rather can be described as “color-mute.”<sup>58</sup> Linda Williams coins this term in an essay on interracial pornography. In the pornographic films and videos Williams describes, difference is seen in the racialized bodies and the “taboo” of interracial sexual encounters are discussed explicitly, in contrast to mainstream media that have historically refused to consider miscengenation. As Williams argues, the pleasure generated from the taboo of interracial sex is based in racism, but is not necessarily experienced as racist; Williams suggests that “...there is a kind of knowing flirtation with the archaic beliefs of racial stereotypes” and that in these videos, “racialized sexuality is not always silent” as other scholars have theorized.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to the pleasures and provocations generated from the presentation of raced and

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Linda Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust,” in *Porn Studies* (Duke University Press, 2004), 276.

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Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border,” 302.

gendered stereotypes in these videos, mainstream popular media trends away from stereotypical representation. Following on from Susan Courtney's work on representations of miscegenation (the inspiration for Williams' phrase) and Herman Gray's categorization of how television sitcoms have dealt with racism and racial difference, I argue that the "color-mute" representations contemporary media avoid being offensive by dealing with racial difference and social attitudes toward different groups as little as possible. These texts do not engage with stereotypes so as to avoid charges of racism, but in doing so also do not subvert or expand stereotypical categories. Difference can be seen and is perhaps even acknowledged in general terms (such as explaining that a character is specifically Indian or Mexican, having an accent, or celebrating a cultural holiday), but the complex historical and experiential meanings of these distinctions are evacuated. Within this framework, race/ethnicity functions as a commodity or accessory – something that makes a group interesting or distinguishable and can be mobilized when useful, but that otherwise is not particularly important, is not tied meaningfully to particular histories, and can be changed, blurred, or obscured with little effort.

In the contemporary era, the financial – if not critical – success of films and television series with largely black casts have demonstrated the value of "black movies" and "black television" to film producers and studios.<sup>60</sup> The same cannot be said of media with majority Latina/o or Asian American casts; live-action television series revolving around Asian American or Latina/o main characters are very infrequent,<sup>61</sup> and no Asian American or American Latina/o

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"Why White People Won't See 'Black Movies,'" *PolicyMic*, accessed February 11, 2014, <http://www.policymic.com/articles/74291/why-white-people-won-t-see-black-movies>.

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*Cristela* and *Fresh Off the Boat*, two sitcoms about a Latina/o and Asian American family respectively, received a large amount of attention during the lead up to the 2014-2015 television seasons for featuring majority-minority casts, as did comedy-drama *Jane the Virgin*. While *Jane* was renewed for a second season, low ratings

filmmakers have been able to transform their names into lucrative brands associated with minority-centered media as Tyler Perry or Spike Lee have. Comedian George Lopez and singer/actor Jennifer Lopez have both produced and starred in a variety of creative projects, but have not produced consistently successful media franchises.

The tenuous positioning of Asian Americans and Latina/os is particularly evident in a variety of recently released, upcoming, and proposed comic/animation-to-live-action projects and has been central to a number of controversies over casting calls, actual casting of actors, and marketing of adaptations in recent years. Both outright “racebending” – casting white actors as characters of color – and localization that replaces Latina/o and Asian characters with white characters in U.S. adaptations of foreign titles (under the implicit assumption that U.S. audiences will not respond to nonwhite characters) have been utilized in these adaptations. The need to market comic-to-live-action properties in countries outside the U.S. has also been used as a reason for not casting lead characters of color (as discussed in Chapter 3). The fan group Racebending.com and other Asian American entertainment and civic organizations have decried the casting of white actors as Asian/Asian American characters in adaptations of *The Weapon*, *Oldboy*, and *All You Need is Kill/Edge of Tomorrow*, as well as stereotypical representations in other adaptations, but less overt controversy been stirred by casting decisions and representations in *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and other recent projects.

As this chapter argues, these depictions function to present a “color-mute” formation of race and approach to racial diversity, which invites sufficiently light-skinned subjects, including whites, to adopt “multiracial” trappings or characteristics, and to facilitate transnational

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for *Cristela* as of the time of this writing suggest it may not last beyond one season. At the time of writing, the fate of *Fresh Off the Boat* is not yet known.

<sup>62</sup>

“Our Campaigns,” *Racebending.com*, accessed January 12, 2014, <http://www.racebending.com/v4/campaigns/>.



distribution and financing of comic-to-live-action adaptations in accordance with racialized logics of foreign audiences' racial attitudes and viewing preferences. The critique of calls for casting actors of a particular racial/ethnic background or for presenting characters of color in culturally-specific ways as potentially essentialist is valid. However, an examination of casting and representation in contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations suggest that “racebending,” preferences for racially “passing” mixed-race actors over “non-passing” actors of color, and the whitening of ambiguously Latina/o and Asian American characters suggest that the racial formations promoted by Shyamalan and other media professionals are foreclosing possibilities. Actors of color infrequently secure complex leading (and well-compensated) roles, and despite more nonwhite characters in live action, comics scholar Ramzi Fawaz argues that viewers of color may increasingly cease to find the kinds of potential for identification (or disidentification) that have been possible in comics and comic-related media, even in the less diverse adaptations of previous eras.<sup>63</sup>

### Comics: subversion and stereotype?

Popular critical attitudes toward comics and their depictions of race have tended to generalize comics as either the power fantasies of white men, and thus not an appropriate or expected site for nuanced representations of non-white characters, or have lauded comics for their subversive potential and willingness to explore areas of race and identity that other media

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Ramzi Fawaz, ““Flame On!”: Nuclear Families, Unstable Molecules, and the Queer History of The Fantastic Four” (Lesbian-Gay-Queer Research Initiative, University of Michigan Institute for Women and Gender Studies, February 26, 2015).

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have not or cannot. Although scholarly discussions of the potential of comics as a subversive medium have been more measured, there is still a great deal of literature examining the ways in which comics, including mainstream superhero characters and stories, can be a site for complex explorations of race and racism. The formal structures and aesthetic elements of comics in particular have been noted as well-suited to depicting race in non-essentializing or

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counterstereotypical ways.

Although these analyses focus mainly on independent comics, others have made compelling arguments for how even the most mainstream of comics can incorporate or encourage identification with racial, gender, and sexual Others – for instance, Ramzi Fawaz argues that comics such as *Fantastic Four* and *X-Men* encourage queer and racialized readings that invite readers to engage with and understand characters who are “not like them.” Fawaz’ readings are supported by his analysis of fan letters, many of which make explicit mention of

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how readers interpreted the seemingly white and/or straight characters as Others. As the next section demonstrates, the history of mainstream comics is uneven at best when it comes to

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Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (University of Texas Press, 2011).

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Jessica Jones, “Spatializing Sexuality in Jaime Hernandez’s *Locas*,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34, no. 1 (April 1, 2009): 35–64; Melinda L. de Jesús, “Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry’s ‘One Hundred Demons,’” *MELUS* 29, no. 1 (2004): 219, doi:10.2307/4141803; Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Frederick L. Aldama, “Spandexed Latinos: Geometric Storytelling in Superhero Comics” (Latino Comics Expo Los Angeles, Long Beach, CA, August 17, 2013); Angela M. Nelson, “Studying Black Comic Strips: Popular Art and Discourses of Race,” in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, ed. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

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Fawaz, “‘Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!’ Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America,” *American Literature* 83, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 355–88, doi:10.1215/00029831-1266090; Fawaz, “Space, That Bottomless Pit: Planetary Exile and Metaphors of Belonging in American Afrofuturist Cinema,” *Callaloo* 35, no. 4 (2012): 1103–22, doi:10.1353/cal.2013.0025; Fawaz, “‘Flame On!’” (February 26, 2015).

depictions of racial minorities.

However, comics can represent race in ways that are difficult if not impossible in other media. It is difficult to read racial/gender/sexual allegories on to the physical bodies of actors the same way that readers can with drawn figures. The anecdote provided by Marvel illustrator Ronald Wimberly regarding his debate with an editor over a mixed-race character's background would be unlikely to occur when discussing a live-action character; the actor's background and physical appearance produce racial knowledges that are presented as unambiguous.<sup>67</sup> Lacking the genealogical or "biological" components of a physical body, illustrated fictional characters are allowed to be ambiguous or shifting in terms of their racial/ethnic identities in ways that live-action characters are not. For example, the comic character Judge Dredd, who wears a mask that covers most of his face, has been intended at times as black or Latino, and at times understood as white by the artists and writers of the comic; in contrast, both live-action versions of the character, portrayed by Sylvester Stallone and Karl Urban, are presented (and presumably understood, in the absence of evidence to the contrary) as white.<sup>68</sup> Attempts to preserve the racial/ethnic ambiguity of characters played by white actors in live-action adaptation has proved fraught, as the analyses of *Iron Man 3* and *The Dark Knight Rises* later in this chapter will demonstrate. On the other hand, multiracial characters played by multiracial or non-white actors are largely presented as foreign, menacing, or inhuman.<sup>69</sup>

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David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*, 1 edition (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001).

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Colin M. Jarman and Peter Acton, *Judge Dredd: The Mega-History* (London: Lennard Publishing, 1995).

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In the case of *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, the lead character, who has a white father and Chinese mother, is literally an Inhuman, a race of genetically-altered humans. Her mother is an Inhuman as well, while her father is mortal.

Comics may provide a site for subversive representations or stereotypes so outlandish that disidentificatory queer readings become possible.<sup>70</sup> However, as illustrated in Chapter 3, comics creators, especially creators of color, are hesitant to have their work adapted into live action by an industry they view as highly hierarchical and disconnected from “artistic” or “cultural” concerns. This narrows the pool of works that are available for comic-to-live-action adaptations. What is currently available, in nearly endless supply, are not the subversive or experimental comics often referenced by critical ethnic studies scholars, but rather the mainstream superhero stories produced by Marvel and DC. Disney/Marvel and Warner/DC have vast universes of characters and stories to pull from, and their collective commitment to comic-to-live-action adaptations as big-budget blockbusters present a major obstacle for the adaptation of independent comics or lesser-known characters even within these large conglomerates’ output. For independent comics, the rights to adapt a particular title must be purchased by a studio; for lesser-known characters, they are likely to appear as minor roles in a larger production since the rights to these stories are owned (and are unlikely to be sold) by Disney and Warner. Critically-acclaimed comics that have been praised for presenting nuanced portrayals of characters of color, such as Los Bros Hernandez’s *Love and Rockets* series or Lynda Barry’s semi-autobiographical works, use the comic book form to subvert stereotypes and expectations in ways that are difficult (if not outright impossible) to translate into live-action, such as using multiple art styles or temporal shifts. They also tend to be long-running and/or not within the superhero genre but still utilizing fantastical sci-fi or magic realism elements, which makes adaptation less likely – independent comics pursued for adaptation in recent years have tended to be more

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José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota Press, 1999), 39–43.

straightforwardly in the drama or horror genres.

Latina/o and Asian American characters that have been praised for their complexity within mainstream superhero comics [such as Ultimate Spider-Man/Miles Morales, Spider-Man 2099/Miguel O’Hara, Araña/Any Corazon, Batgirl/Cassandra Cain, The Question/Renee Montoya, Nico Minoru, Miss America/America Chavez, and others] often have origin stories that are intricately tied to other ongoing stories and to a white superhero – for instance, Ultimate Spider-Man, Spider-Man 2099, and Araña, whose powers all derive from original Spider-Man Peter Parker. Given the popularity of superhero “origin stories” in contemporary adaptation, it is unlikely that any of these characters would be featured in their own films or television series without having their white predecessor as the main character. The huge number of adaptations currently being produced, all with large casts, also requires a large pool of characters to use as minor players; these characters are much more likely to be used as supporting characters rather than carrying their own adaptations.

#### A brief history of Asian Americans and Latina/os in comics

Until around the 1960s, Asian American characters typically appeared as Japanese villains in World War II-themed comics, or as sadistic Chinese mystics in the vein of Fu Manchu. One “heroic” Chinese American character, Chop-Chop from *Blackhawks*, was a very stereotypical “coolie” caricature with oversized teeth and a queue braid. As comics writer Larry

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Examples include *Ghost World* (2001), *Road to Perdition* (2002), *A History of Violence* (2005), *Whiteout* (2009), and *The Walking Dead* (2010 -).

Hama notes, up through the 1960s “many companies were still coloring Asians bright yellow.”<sup>72</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, both Asian American and Latina/o heroes at Marvel and DC increased in number, although their powers were often still based in stereotype: the Asian and Asian

American characters were usually martial arts masters, while the Latina/o characters often had

powers related to fire or to exotic jungle animals.<sup>73</sup> These attempts at diversifying superheroes

and villains were generally earnest efforts at multiculturalism; although they have since been derided as lacking in quality and trading in stereotypes, these characters' backgrounds did at

times engage different cultural issues or experiences of racism.<sup>74</sup>

During the 1990s, more and more leading characters of color were featured in comics; Chapter 1 discusses some of the impact that black superheroes made during this period. One particular company, Milestone Media, went even further into portraying leading characters of color, including Latina/o and Asian American characters. The creators of Milestone Media founded the company in 1993 because they felt that diverse characters were not being represented enough or represented well at the large mainstream publishers. While the founders were all black men, they also specifically recruited creators who wanted to work on Latina/o, Native American, Asian American, female, and queer characters, and whose backgrounds

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<sup>72</sup> Jeff Yang, Special to SF Gate, “ASIAN POP / Look ... Up in the Sky! It’s Asian Man!,” *SFGate*, June 1, 2006, <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/ASIAN-POP-Look-Up-in-the-sky-It-s-Asian-3235453.php#src=fb>.

<sup>73</sup> Examples include I Ching, Shang-Chi, Lady Shiva, Shen Kuei, Fire, El Papagayo, Wildcat, Xiuhtecutli, Firebird, El Aguila, Cheetah, Tarantula, El Jaguar, and numerous others. White Tiger is an unusual exception – although his name suggests jungle powers, he is actually a Latino martial arts master.

<sup>74</sup> Aldama, *Multicultural Comics*.

contributed to the diversity of the company.<sup>75</sup> Milestone was backed by DC in this endeavor, and when the creators eventually decided to move on from Milestone, the Milestone universe was incorporated into DC's main universe. The majority of Milestone's lineup has rarely been seen since being fully merged with DC, and many of Milestone's series have not been collected into trade paperback format, making it difficult for those who do not own the original monthly comic issues to access these stories. One of the series not collected in bound volumes is *Blood Syndicate*, which featured several Latina/o heroes, including a closeted gay man, as well as an Asian American woman.<sup>76</sup> Static, a teenager who suddenly finds himself with electric powers, briefly had his own title in DC's New 52 relaunch, but it was among the first canceled, despite the character's television recognition and more “traditional” superhero origin story. These characters still have numerous fans and are often referenced by comic scholars and readers as examples of the potential of comics to tell challenging and complex stories about characters of color; however, due to the difficulty of accessing these titles now, many of the Milestone universe's Latina/o and Asian American characters are not well-known or often referenced.<sup>77</sup>

Contemporary comics' relative visual diversity – heroes of many different skin colors and backgrounds can be seen – belies a general reluctance or disinterest in engagement with issues of racism and cultural difference. This trend again demonstrates the pervasiveness of the “color-mute” racial formations that dominate contemporary popular media. These representations are at

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<sup>75</sup> Denys Cowan et al., “Milestone: The 20th Anniversary Panel” (presented at the San Diego Comic-Con International 2013, San Diego, CA, July 19, 2013).

<sup>76</sup> *Blood Syndicate* also featured among its superhero team a transgender man and a Black Muslim man, and all of the characters were former gang members.

<sup>77</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

times compensatory, and at times over-the-top stereotypical in the style of enlightened racism; both poles of representation suggest that racism and discrimination based on race are generally known to the audience to be “over” and not worth serious discussion.<sup>78</sup> This is not to paint all mainstream comics with a broad brush when it comes to representation and suggest that independent comics are somehow “better” in terms of racial representation, but rather to acknowledge that mainstream comics are generally consistent with other popular media when it comes to trends in racial formation.

In contrast to the diversity of representations of Latina/os and Asian Americans found in alternative comics from the 1980s to the present, or to the presence – however negative, stereotypical, or inconsistent – of these characters in mainstream comics from the 1940s, very few Asian American or Latina/o characters have been portrayed in live-action comic adaptations.<sup>79</sup> Chapter 1 discussed the portrayal of Latina/o and Asian characters in comic-based film serials as shifty, superstitious, and largely untrustworthy; these characters were also mainly portrayed by white actors in brownface or yellowface, adding another layer of racist caricature to the portrayals. During the television-centric period of live-action adaptations from the 1960s through the 1980s, some well-known comics characters – most notably *Batman's* Joker – were portrayed by actors of Latina/o or Asian American descent. However, these characters were not necessarily meant to be understood as characters of color, and no major characters of color from comics were brought to the screen in live-action adaptations. During the beginning and heyday

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Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*; Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

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Jessica Jones, “Spatializing Sexuality in Jaime Hernandez’s *Locas*,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34, no. 1 (April 1, 2009): 35–64; Sandra Oh, “Sight Unseen: Adrian Tomine’s Optic Nerve and the Politics of Recognition,” *MELUS* 32, no. 3 (October 1, 2007): 129–151; Hye Su Park, “Lost in the Gutters: Ethnic Imaginings in Adrian Tomine’s Shortcomings,” *Image & Narrative* 11, no. 2 (2010): 100–110.



of live-action comic films – from the late 1990s to the present – a few black superheroes were adapted for live-action film, but these films were largely used to “test” advances in special effects and to see if comic-based adaptations would appeal to mainstream audiences. On television, Dean Cain played Superman in *The New Adventures of Lois and Clark*, Blue Beetle/Jaime Reyes appeared on one episode of *Smallville*, and regular *Smallville* character Lana Lang was portrayed by Kristin Kreuk;<sup>80</sup> more recently, a few recurring Asian and Latino characters have appeared on *Arrow*. The character of Wendy Watson was also reinterpreted to be Latina for the live-action television adaptation of *The Middleman*. Although the number of Asian American and Latina/o characters in live-action adaptation has been increasing in recent years, these portrayals still lag behind the number of Latina/o and Asian American heroes in comics, as well as the overall number of Latina/os and Asian Americans in other popular media.

### Asian Americans, Latina/os, and racial malleability in contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptations

As Chapter 1 discusses, the general racial ideologies of comic-to-live-action adaptations range from exclusionary (white characters only) and overtly racist to multicultural and inclusive (but largely ignoring structural racism or cultural histories). As the following cases will illustrate, “inclusive” includes ethnic ambiguity and different forms of racial “passing” that serve to reinforce the idea of a post-racial, post-racist society. These representations also encourage viewers to use their racial knowledge to interpret characters – a character whose family is presented as white is read as white, while a character who is presented in a foreign setting or

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<sup>80</sup>

Both Cain and Kreuk have mixed Asian and European backgrounds.

with “brown” relatives is read as non-white; the “color-muteness” and reticence of these adaptations to discuss race or racial discrimination encourages immediate interpretation of physical markers of race.<sup>81</sup> While Latina/o and Asian American characters are still largely marked as threatening, or at least foreign Others,<sup>82</sup> particularly through associations with terrorism, these characters have a certain degree of ambiguity and flexibility that black characters (and consequently, actors who are read as black)<sup>83</sup> are rarely afforded.

2013's *Iron Man 3* presents one strategy of using ambiguity to engage with comics' troubled past in representing Asian/Asian American characters and with contemporary discourses around Asianness and representations of Asian characters. Many critics and fans were surprised when it was announced that one of the main villains in the third installment of the *Iron Man* live-action series would be The Mandarin, Iron Man's most feared foe from the comics. The Mandarin as portrayed in the comics is a clear-cut Fu Manchu stereotype, the son of a wealthy Chinese scion and a British noblewoman; he has most frequently been depicted with a mustache and goatee, long pointed fingernails, and flowing ceremonial robes. The Mandarin is intelligent and powerful, but fundamentally jealous, petty, and scheming as well, as is the standard with Fu

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Irene Tucker, *The Moment of Racial Sight: A History* (Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2013); Sandra Oh, “Sight Unseen: Adrian Tomine’s Optic Nerve and the Politics of Recognition,” *MELUS* 32, no. 3 (October 1, 2007): 129–51.

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Camilla Fojas, “New Frontiers of Asian and Latino America in Popular Culture: &lt;i>Mixed-Race Intimacies and the Global Police State In&lt;/i> Miami Vice &lt;i>and&lt;/i> Rush Hour 2,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 14, no. 3 (2011): 420, doi:10.1353/jaas.2011.0031.

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For instance, Leilani Nishime notes that while Tiger Woods vociferously identifies as multiracial, “visual images of Woods emphasized his embodiment as African American,” and discourses of Woods “really” being black proliferated (Leilani Nishime, *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 60. Mary Beltrán’s work on *The Fast and the Furious* franchise “multicultural action film,” noting the marketability of its “diverse cast of light-tan hue” (Mary Beltrán, “Fast and Bilingual: Fast & Furious and the Latinization of Racelessness,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 2, doi:10.1353/cj.2013.0070.)

Manchu-inspired characters; his essential Asianness corrupts both his intelligence and mastery of (alien) technology, as well as his English heritage.<sup>84</sup> A number of writers and artists have attempted to reimagine The Mandarin in a way less overtly reminiscent of “yellow peril” stereotypes – including coloring him green and changing his original identity to a white archaeologist in the television cartoon adaptation – but the image of The Mandarin as a mysterious Asian overlord has persisted.

For the 2013 live-action film *Iron Man 3*, The Mandarin is portrayed by Ben Kingsley, an actor of British-Indian descent who is best known for his Oscar-winning turn as Gandhi in the film of the same name. Kingsley's character is presented as a mysterious, ethnically-ambiguous terrorist – according to director Shane Black, “...we would rather have the Mandarin be of indeterminate ethnicity than the Fu Manchu stereotype that the comic books portrayed...”<sup>85</sup> In Black's estimation, presenting an indeterminately “brown” menace is more acceptable than an overtly anti-Asian “yellow peril,” as it avoids singling out one particular group; however, as I will argue, the ambiguous brownness of The Mandarin and the “surprise” regarding his actual background reinforce negative perceptions of multiple non-white Others.

In *Iron Man 3*, The Mandarin's threatening television broadcasts are aesthetically reminiscent of videos produced by terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, but his appearance is strange and anachronistic, as he wears a long ponytail hairstyle, ornate robes, and jewelry.

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Urmila Seshagiri, “Modernity's (Yellow) Perils: Dr. Fu-Manchu and English Race Paranoia,” *Cultural Critique* 62, no. 1 (2006): 162–194.

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“‘Iron Man 3’ Does WHAT to The Mandarin? — SPOILER ANALYSIS,” *EW.com*, accessed February 16, 2014, <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2013/05/04/iron-man-3-mandarin-spoiler/>.



Fig. 4.2. Ben Kingsley as “The Mandarin”/Trevor Slattery and Guy Pearce as The  
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Mandarin/Aldrich Killian in *Iron Man 3* (2013).



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Image from Wikimedia (Walt Disney Pictures)

Fig. 4.3. Close-up of “The Mandarin” in one of his videos.

The Mandarin's broadcasts take credit for various bombings and promise more violence. However, when Iron Man goes after the mysterious Mandarin, he discovers that the man from the broadcasts is not a terrorist mastermind, but rather a struggling, alcoholic actor named Trevor Slattery. Slattery has been hired to produce “Mandarin” segments, and is completely unaware that actual violence has been following the broadcasts. When confronted by Iron Man, Slattery is cowardly and buffoonish, and although he eventually goes to prison for his role in the “Mandarin” scheme, his only concern is that he is now being recognized for his acting talent. The real mastermind behind the segments and the violence is a white American scientist named Aldrich Killian, who uses the threat of terrorism to cover up that the “bombings” are actually human super-soldier experiments gone wrong.

According to Marvel Studios President of Production Kevin Feige, the Mandarin's eclectic appearance and the eventual bait-and-switch are meant as a commentary on American assumptions about terrorism and about divorcing terrorism from association with particular racial/ethnic groups: “...Feige says they wanted to blur the background of this version of The Mandarin. ‘It’s less about his specific ethnicity than the symbolism of various cultures and iconography that he perverts for his own end,’ Feige says. From his samurai hair, to his royal robe, to his bin Laden-esque beard, and the AK-47 he keeps at his side, Kingsley’s interpretation is a hodgepodge of various warrior motifs.”<sup>88</sup> In Feige’s interpretation, The Mandarin/Slattery

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Image from [moviepilot.com](http://moviepilot.com) (Walt Disney Pictures)

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“‘Iron Man 3’ Does WHAT to The Mandarin?” <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2013/05/04/iron-man-3-mandarin-spoiler/>.

serves to illuminate the characters' – and the audience's – willingness to take seriously such a bizarre amalgamation of Asian and Arab stereotypes. Although this explanation is one possible reading, the reveal of The Mandarin's true origins in the film are largely played for comedy, and the laughter is directed at Trevor Slattery, not at the news media or the people who believed such over-the-top portrayals.

One effect of the reveal that Kingsley's character is not a real threat is to subvert stereotypes and point out their pervasiveness; however, this change to the story also reinforces other contemporary stereotypes. In contrast to the powerful and sinister Fu Manchu stereotype, another persistent Asian American stereotype, particularly for men, has been that of the childlike buffoon. These characters are humorous because they are foreign and strange, and are not able to mobilize any kind of power or mastery over technology. They are non-threatening because they are incompetent; although Fu Manchu is typically foiled in his schemes by white heroes, these buffoon characters present no threat at all. Like these characters, Trevor Slattery is bumbling and unsuccessful. Slattery clearly has some amount of talent, but allows himself to be manipulated in order to gain fame and money.

By subverting the over-the-top yellow peril stereotype that the original concept of The Mandarin engaged, *Iron Man 3* challenged the perception of Asians as dangerous and menacing; however, in the process of critiquing one form of anti-Asian stereotype, the film reinforces and recirculates a more subtle, and thus perhaps less easily critiqued or subverted, discourse about Asianness and the position of Asians in Western society. The film also utilizes “racebent” depictions in two ways: both in casting a white actor as a character of color (Guy Pearce as the “real” Mandarin) and in substituting one nonwhite ethnicity with another. Various Asian and Arab cultures are interchangeable with one another, and are able to be embodied and performed

successfully by a British character of indeterminate racial origin. Although the character Slattery may be able to mobilize his ethnic ambiguity to score the “role” of The Mandarin, he is too brown to be successful in traditional theater roles and must use his appearance in talent in the service of furthering negative perceptions of a number of non-white groups. He is also not intelligent enough to be a real criminal mastermind; only the white villain, the “real” Mandarin Aldrich Killian, can successfully execute his schemes through the strategic deployment of racial stereotypes.

Although *Iron Man 3* critiques and recirculates discourses about the threatening Otherness of ethnically-ambiguous Asians, and subverts one stereotype by engaging with another less overtly racist discourse, *The Dark Knight Rises* uses dominant generic distinctions and the potential interchangeability of non-white and non-black racial identity in order to create a mysterious villain. This ambiguity is also used in order to defend the casting of a white British actor as a character who is Latin American in the comics. As discussed in Chapter 1, the character of Bane, a genius supervillain who is one of Batman's most feared adversaries, first made his live-action appearance in 1997's *Batman and Robin*. In *Batman and Robin*, Bane does not speak, and no mention is made of his genius intellect or his Latino background; he appears only as a henchman for Poison Ivy. 2012's *The Dark Knight Rises* again adapts Bane for live-action, this time as the film's central antagonist, and restores some of his intellectual prowess and scientific ability. When it was announced that white British actor Tom Hardy would be playing Bane, a small amount of controversy arose that the character would not be portrayed by a Latino

<sup>89</sup>  
actor.

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“The Dark Knight Rises: Bane’s Not Latino,” *Examiner.com*, November 21, 2011,



Fig. 4.4. Tom Hardy as Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> <http://www.examiner.com/article/the-dark-knight-rises-bane-s-not-latino>.  
Image from thesun.co.uk (Warner Bros Pictures/DC Entertainment)





Fig. 4.5. Bane breaks Batman's back in *Knightfall* (1993).<sup>91</sup>

Part of the response to the casting decision and defense of having Hardy play the character rested on Bane's origin in the comics as the son of a British father who served as a guerrilla fighter in Latin America.<sup>92</sup> This logic suggests that if a character is meant to have a multiethnic or mixed-race background, any actor whose background fits a part of the character's

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"Bane breaks Batman" by Apparent scan made by the original uploader User:ChrisGriswold.. Licensed under Fair use via Wikipedia - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bane\\_breaks\\_Batman.png#/media/File:Bane\\_breaks\\_Batman.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bane_breaks_Batman.png#/media/File:Bane_breaks_Batman.png) (DC Comics)

<sup>92</sup> "Why Chris Nolan's BATMAN Isn't Racist," *WhatCulture!*, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://whatculture.com/film/why-the-controversy-over-banes-casting-is-misplaced.php>.

can be an appropriate choice.<sup>93</sup> This argument recalls the defense of *The Last Airbender's* casting by M. Night Shyamalan, where he argued that he wanted actors who had a “mixed race” quality to their physical appearance. What this logic ignores, however, is that in both of these cases “mixed race” qualities are seen as embodied best by white actors, rather than by actors who are actually multiethnic/mixed race or whose background represents the non-white portion of the character's ancestry. As Molina-Gúzman explores in her examination of Jennifer Lopez's career, Latina/o actors who are sufficiently light-skinned and speak unaccented English can occasionally portray white or ethnically-ambiguous characters;<sup>94</sup> however, the cases of *The Last Airbender* and *The Dark Knights Rises* suggest that the reverse does not hold true. Given that comics are particularly notorious for changing characters' backgrounds and origins, and may have entirely different characters inhabiting one superhero or supervillain identity, the impetus to “default” to white characters and/or actors might be seen as a way to reduce confusion for audiences not immersed in comics continuity, but also reinforces the whitening of mixed/multiracial identity in popular media.

*The Dark Knight Rises* also changes Bane's origin completely to set up a central mystery of the film; instead of the prison he grew up in being located in Latin America, its location is shifted to an unnamed Middle Eastern locale. As the end of the film reveals, the child seen growing up in the prison was not Bane, who was actually imprisoned there as an adult convict, but rather Talia al Ghul, daughter of *Batman Begins* foe Ra's al Ghul. Talia, who is portrayed by Marion Cotillard, is presumably Ra's' daughter with a Middle Eastern woman, but she is very

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<sup>93</sup> Jamelle Bouie, “In Defense of the Nolan ‘Bane,’” *The American Prospect*, January 21, 2011, <http://prospect.org/article/defense-nolan-bane>.

<sup>94</sup> Isabel Molina-Guzmán, *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

light-skinned. Since the same child actor plays the child who is first presumed to be Bane and then revealed to be Talia, both actors playing the adult characters logically need to have at least reasonably similar complexions. Having both Bane and Talia played by white Europeans is how the film preserves the mystery; however, given that both characters are multiethnic, having both adult characters played by Latino or Arab actors (or, given the film's ambiguity about the characters' backgrounds, any other race) would have been equally logical. However, as I argue above, when complicated scenarios involving mixed-race or multiethnic characters are required in live-action comic adaptations, the default writing and casting for these characters is to render them white, in accordance with the logic of “racebending”. The tenuous positioning of Asian American and Latina/o between white and black in the American context could provide opportunities for more diversity in representation or more diverse casting, especially given comics' penchant for multiethnic characters, but this ambiguity is instead used recirculate colorblind casting rhetoric and generic features.<sup>95</sup> Drawing on Nakamura's observations that racial diversity in fictional characters does not necessarily correlate with increased opportunities for media professionals of color, and that the diversity characters of color represent is often more important than actually exploring diverse racial histories or discourses, *The Dark Knight Rises* exemplifies a particular racial formation that perpetuates the “whitening” of media representations while still claiming to be representing diversity.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Dark hair, exotic-looking clothing, and, oddly enough, British accents are used in both *The Dark Knight Rises* and *Iron Man 3* to signify mixed-race or multiethnic backgrounds.

<sup>96</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 26; *Ibid.*, 71.



Fig. 4.6. Marion Cotillard as Talia al Ghul in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).<sup>97</sup>

Comic-to-live-action television adaptations have provided a slightly larger diversity of multiracial characters than seen in film, including a number portrayed by multiracial actors. On the television series *Arrow* (2012 - ), the characters of Nyssa al Ghul and Sebastian Blood are portrayed by multiracial actors, and the characters are suggested to have mixed backgrounds. Blood, played by Latino/white actor Kevin Alejandro, is seen to have a Spanish-speaking Latina mother, while al Ghul, played by Asian/white actor Katrina Law has an ambiguously Arab/white

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<sup>97</sup>

Image from comicbookmovie.com (Warner Bros Pictures/DC Entertainment)

father in R'as al Ghul and an unseen but presumably Asian mother. These roles, while presenting visual diversity, do not engage with any specific cultural histories (even fictional ones). As actors, Alejandro and Law are frequently cast in both white and mixed or non-white roles; both are light-skinned and able to “pass” relatively easily; the acknowledgement of the characters and actors as multiracial is progressive, yet still within the boundaries of desirably light “mixedness.”<sup>99</sup> In contrast, while *Arrow* and its spinoff *The Flash* portray a number of black characters, the only black character presented as multiracial is a newborn baby. Multiracial actor Wentworth Miller, whose black heritage and casting in Philip Roth’s passing drama *The Human Stain* made him the subject of many critiques of multiracial identification, appears on *The Flash*, but thus far in the show’s story line has not been presented as multiracial.

Dean Cain’s portrayal of Superman in *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* and Kristin Kreuk’s role as Lana Lang on *Smallville* saw multiracial actors featured in leading roles as characters traditionally portrayed as white in the comics. However, both characters were presented as white on their respective television shows – both characters are raised by white adoptive families, and what little the audiences sees of their biological relatives does not suggest any mixed background. While the compositions of multiracial families are varied and can certainly include the family compositions seen in these shows, these shows again provide

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In *Arrow*, R'as al Ghul lives in a fictionalized Tibet, and is seen to have numerous East Asian associates and confidantes; oblique references made to Nyssa al Ghul’s parentage suggest her mother may have been an Asian woman.

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Catherine R. Squires and Daniel C. Brouwer, “In/Discernible Bodies: The Politics of Passing in Dominant and Marginal Media,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 3 (September 2002): 283; Isabel Molina-Guzmán, *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Isabel Molina Guzmán and Angharad N. Valdivia, “Brain, Brow, and Booty: Latina Iconicity in U.S. Popular Culture,” *The Communication Review* 7, no. 2 (April 2004): 205–21, doi:10.1080/10714420490448723.

opportunities for sufficiently light-skinned, “passing” actors to be cast in white roles, but not to engage with multiracial identity. Rather than potentially complicating understandings of race as essential or immutable, or providing increased opportunity for actors of color via colorblind or cross-racial casting, these representations foreclose a number of possibilities of multi- or cross-racial identification.<sup>100</sup> The comparative lack of opportunities for “brown” actors or multiracial actors who are not light-skinned to portray mixed characters, while in some cases white actors are cast, illustrates the narrow formations of “mixed race” Asian Americans and Latina/os presented and circulated by these representations, as well as the limitations of the supposedly inclusive “multiracial” racial formation promoted by M. Night Shyamalan in *The Last Airbender* controversy.

Another feature of the contemporary comic-to-live-action adaptation genre is the focus on distributing adaptations, particularly films, internationally. Trade and popular media have reproduced a specific “common knowledge” logic about international distribution: international audiences are racist, and especially will not spend money to see a film with a black lead character. One unnamed executive, whose email regarding the Denzel Washington vehicle *The Equalizer* was leaked as part of the 2014 hack of Sony Entertainment, wrote that casting Washington “saying we’re ok with a double [rather than a home run] if the picture works,” and alleged that “...the international motion picture audience is racist – in general pictures with an

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Luminita M. Dragulescu, “Race Trauma at the End of the Millennium: (Narrative) Passing in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” *Philip Roth Studies* 10, no. 1 (2014): 91–108; Michele Elam, “Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, and Colson Whitehead,” *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 749–68, doi:10.2307/25426988; Catherine Rottenberg, “Passing : Race, Identification, and Desire,” *Criticism* 45, no. 4 (2003): 435–52, doi:10.1353/crt.2004.0025; Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Duke University Press Books, 2000); Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Recasting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Angela C. Pao, “Recasting Race: Casting Practices and Racial Formations,” *Theatre Survey* 41, no. 02 (November 2000): 1–22, doi:10.1017/S004055740000380X.

African American lead don't play well overseas.”<sup>101</sup> While this logic of international audience racism is promoted as known fact and underscores casting decisions and decisions about which characters to adapt, studios at the same time are treading more carefully at times representations of East Asians, particularly Chinese, as they pursue financial co-production relationships with China. While assumptions about how international audiences (presumably Asian audiences, given the co-production relationships pursued by Disney/Marvel and Warner/DC) react to Latina/os have not been explicitly articulated in popular or trade press, there does not seem to be the same level of “concern” about these viewers’ racism impacting box offices; however, there are also even fewer Latina/o characters in current live-action comic adaptations than black characters, and where they are present tends to be on television, which is not distributed as widely in Asia. There are also not the same kinds of transnational flows of media money with Latin America as there are with Asia in the comic-to-live-action adaptation genre. These flows of money and expectations of profit demonstrate the responsiveness of film and television professionals to transnational relationships, while relationships with non-white groups within the United States are not valued.

*Iron Man 3*, *The Dark Knight*, and the upcoming *Avengers: Age of Ultron* all involve various degrees of financial relationships with Asian countries’ film boards and/or tourism promotions. In describing filming in Seoul, South Korea, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige gushed: “South Korea is the perfect location for a movie of this magnitude because it features cutting-edge technology, beautiful landscapes and spectacular architecture. We would especially like to thank the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST) for making it possible for

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Al Simmons, “Sony Leaked Emails Reveal Hollywood Racism, Sexism: Denzel Washington Blacklisted, Amy Adams Abused,” *The Inquisitr News*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.inquisitr.com/1689519/sony-leaked-emails-reveal-hollywood-racism-sexism-denzel-washington-blacklisted-amy-adams-abused/>.

'Avengers: Age of Ultron' to come to Korea;" minister of Culture, Sports, and Tourism Yoo Jinryong responded by saying, "We're very excited to have the production in Korea, and also expect this to serve as the footstep of many more opportunities yet to come." Not articulated in this press coverage is the casting of South Korean actor Claudia Kim Soo Hyun in a supporting role. *The Dark Knight* similarly filmed in Hong Kong, and added several supporting characters portrayed by Hong Kong actors.<sup>102</sup>

The fact that *Iron Man 3* is a Chinese co-production, requiring the approval of the Chinese government's film board, also undoubtedly contributed to the decision not to portray The Mandarin as a Chinese threat; the Chinese version of the film also includes several scenes featuring Chinese actors that do not appear in the international version, including a doctor character who helps remove the shrapnel from Tony Stark's heart that necessitates his use of the arc reactor technology. Again, I am not decrying the increase in representation, however minimal, of Asian characters and actors in these adaptations, but rather pointing to which kinds of representations are allowable and desirable, and which kinds of relationships lead to changes in representation. It is not coincidental that The Mandarin was changed from a "yellow peril" stereotype to a more ambiguously brown terroristic threat; outside the realm of comic adaptations, the invading army in the remake of *Red Dawn* was changed from Chinese to North Korean after protests from Chinese corporations, and the satirical film *The Interview* was pulled from theaters after hackers presumed to be North Korean threatened to attack theaters. Pressure, even threats, from Asia are taken seriously and changes are made, even when the threats are financial rather than violent. In contrast, protests by Asian American advocacy groups have been

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"'Avengers: Age of Ultron' Adds South Korea as Shooting Location," *Variety*, accessed March 26, 2015, <http://variety.com/2014/film/news/avengers-age-of-ultron-adds-south-korea-as-shooting-location-1201110790/>.



characterized by film industry professionals as the inconsequential murmurs of disgruntled fans, and planned “racebent” localizations that change Asian characters to white such as *The Last Airbender* or *Edge of Tomorrow* have gone forward with minimal changes, as though Asian heroes could not be legible to an American audience.

The strong economic incentive for major Hollywood studios not to “rock the boat” by departing radically from color-mute representations is real and not to be underestimated; it is also not reasonable to expect that mainstream comics, film, or television will be able to represent complex characters of color to the degree that independent media, which have fewer financial stakes, can. However, even with an increase in supporting characters of color and moves away from stereotypical representation of nonwhite characters, the practice of “racebending” in the casting and promotion of comic-to-live-action adaptations forecloses possibilities for representation in ways that are not solely due to economic concerns. The huge box-office success, both domestically and abroad, of *Fast & Furious* demonstrates that having nonwhite stars is not a death sentence for a film; although, as Beltrán points out, the film’s cast is largely “light tan” mixed-race actors who often pass for white, the characters are presented explicitly as Latina/o, and navigate a variety of both white and nonwhite global spaces.<sup>103</sup> Network television series such as *Arrow* and *The Flash* have presented mixed-race Latina/o and Asian American characters as well as Latina/os and Asian Americans who are not mixed from a variety of geographic, ethnic, and national backgrounds. These characters have yet to lead a series, but their recurring presence in otherwise standard white-hero narratives suggests that having a complex nonwhite hero is possible. While the proliferation of big-budget comic-to-live-action adaptation

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Mary Beltrán, “Fast and Bilingual: Fast & Furious and the Latinization of Racelessness,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 75–96, doi:10.1353/cj.2013.0070.

has involved “racebending” and the exclusion of non-passing black and brown actors to a significant degree, this logic is neither necessary nor inevitable.

## Conclusion: Destined to Do This Forever?

In the few short years that I have been conducting research on comic-to-live-action adaptations and racial representation, the number of these adaptations being proposed, produced, and released has exploded even further than I might have predicted. Building on the success of *The Avengers*, Marvel/Disney announced plans for new comic book movies through 2019; DC/Warner, not to be outdone, proposed a slate of films building off of *Man of Steel* with titles announced through 2020. DC/Warner and Marvel both currently have live-action television programs on the air, with both companies announcing more series to premiere in the near future (both on television and on Netflix). Women of color in particular have seen a huge increase in representation, with *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* featuring two Asian American female leads, *The Flash* changing the protagonist's love interest (and her father) from white to black, and *Guardians of the Galaxy* featuring a black Latina actor.<sup>2</sup> Scholars of genre fiction, particularly science fiction, have noted that sci-fi series, films, and television have provided some of the most significant opportunities for women and actors of color to portray complex characters. Zoe Saldaña, who portrays Gamora in *Guardians*, has given interviews explaining that there are better roles for women “in space” (sci-fi and comic book genre films) than in reality-based films; Saldaña’s interviews have not addressed that her character in *Guardians of the Galaxy* is a green

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<sup>1</sup>

“I think you and I are destined to do this forever.” The Joker to Batman, *The Dark Knight* (2008).

<sup>2</sup>

*Guardians* also features Filipino actor and pro wrestler Dave Bautista as a main character, also made up to appear alien; Vin Diesel, whose racial background and self-presentation has been a subject of interest in both scholarly and popular media, provides the voice of another main character, an anthropomorphic tree. *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* features a recurring villain portrayed by mixed black actor Ruth Negga, whose character undergoes a physical transformation that makes her into a spiky blue Inhuman.

non-human alien rather than a woman of color. Scholars such as Leilani Nishime and Thomas Foster have noted that in these fictional worlds, characters/actors of color are often presented as only partially human, or altogether alien, mixed race actors and characters are often preferred to characters of color who are not mixed (especially white-nonwhite mixed), and the physical characteristics that would encourage audiences to read them as people of color are disguised with makeup and cybernetic costuming.<sup>4</sup> These conventions again limit the possibilities of portraying complex characters of color in mainstream popular media texts, even when actors of color have starring roles.

Conflict between fans who view diversity in comics and comic adaptations as unnecessary or overly “PC” and those who want increased inclusion and diversity has also become more visible. A popular Tumblr project entitled “We Are Comics,” which features comics fans and professionals describing and sending in pictures of themselves to demonstrate the diversity of comics fandom, was launched and popularized through blogs and other online news; this project was started as a response to a woman receiving rape threats for critiquing an anatomically-questionable comic book depiction of a female character.<sup>5</sup> Although the project attracted a large number of submissions, including messages of support from comics creators and publishers, harassment of women and/or people of color in “geek” spaces such as comics and

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Eliana Dockterman, “Outer Space Is the Best Place to Be For Young Actresses,” *Time*, July 31, 2014, <http://time.com/3051693/zoe-saldana-guardians-of-the-galaxy-space/>.

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Leilani Nishime, *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Thomas Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

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“We Are Comics,” accessed December 19, 2014, <http://wearecomics.tumblr.com/?og=1>; “#WeAreComics: Celebrating The Comics Medium And Community,” *Comics Alliance*, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://comicsalliance.com/we-are-comics-tumblr-community-diversity-i-am-comics/>.

video gaming has not appeared to decrease. In its most explicit form, this backlash against perceived progressive intentions in geek media has resulted in threats and harassment by users under the “Gamergate” banner toward women and people of color both online and in person for supposedly colluding to deprive white and/or male fans and creators of their freedom of expression.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, parents and other fans of *Guardians of the Galaxy* wrote letters of protest to children's clothing retailer and started the hashtag #wheresgamora to draw attention to the fact that Gamora, the main female character of the film, was not featured on merchandise to the same degree as the male characters (including a talking raccoon and sentient tree).<sup>7</sup> This campaign and a similar push for merchandise featured Marvel super-spy Black Widow received few responses from licensor Disney/Marvel or from the licensees producing merchandise. One of the few responses, from children's clothing retailer The Children's Place, provided the tone-deaf explanations that the character did not appear on certain merchandise because the products in question were “boy's shirts,” with the implicit assumption that boys, of course, would not want a female character on their clothing. The retailer also shifted responsibility for the decision to Disney/Marvel, suggesting that they rely on the expertise of the licensor to decide which characters to represent on different types of merchandise. A former Marvel employee<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nina Huntemann, “No More Excuses: Using Twitter to Challenge The Symbolic Annihilation of Women in Games,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 164–67, doi:10.1080/14680777.2015.987432; Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “A Conspiracy of Fishes, Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 208–20, doi:10.1080/08838151.2014.999917.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Pahle, “GotG Fans With Money to Spend Ask #WheresGamora In The Official Merchandise,” accessed December 19, 2014, <http://www.themarysue.com/wheres-gamora-merchandise-gotg/>.

<sup>8</sup> Victoria McNally, “Children's Place Responds Terribly To Complaints Of Gamora-Less Guardians Shirt,” accessed

corroborated the account that Disney/Marvel views superhero merchandise, even from films and television involving female heroes, as a market for boys, and assumes that boys will not want to purchase merchandise depicting female characters.<sup>9</sup>

It remains to be seen, however, whether or not the increased attention to the diversity of fans or the increase in characters of color will translate into more licensing and merchandising of characters of color, sustained broadening of opportunities for actors of color, or more depictions of protagonists of color on either the live-action big or small screens. A number of the proposed comic-to-live-action films – *Black Panther*, *Wonder Woman*, *Aquaman*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Cyborg* have characters of color and female characters as the primary protagonists and title characters for the first time in almost two decades. The ensemble films in development also have an unusual number of characters of color and female characters, including changing the racial background of relatively well-known characters such as *The Fantastic Four's* Human Torch, *Shazam* antagonist Black Adam, and *Suicide Squad's* Deadshot. Despite this increase in casting of actors of color, the trend toward visually diverse yet “color-mute” portrayals and the persistence of colorblind ideology in various configurations, as well as the trend toward higher budgets and less risk in film and television, make any predictions for the comic-to-live-action adaptation genre difficult at best. Media outlets have also begun sounding the alarm for the comic adaptation “bubble” to burst; given the swift and dramatic decline of the comics collecting market in the late 1990s and the relatively short life-cycle of most media trends, an implosion of

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May 1, 2015, <http://www.themarysue.com/gamora-not-on-shirt/>.

<sup>9</sup>

Annie N. Mouse [Anonymous], “Invisible Women: Why Marvel’s Gamora & Black Widow Were Missing From Merchandise, And What We Can Do About It,” accessed May 1, 2015, <http://www.themarysue.com/invisible-women/>.

the comic adaptation trend in the near future is certainly a possibility.<sup>10</sup> Big-budget live-action comic adaptations will, at some point, likely go the way of the epic Western; however, like the continuing influence of the Western on how race, gender, and citizenship are presented in media, their influence on popular media and on popular culture more generally is undeniable.

This dissertation attempts to trace and draw out the complex factors that have led to the state of comic-to-live-action adaptations and their representations and (re)mediations of race. In focusing on Marvel and DC's most prominent superhero comics and examining the possibilities of racial representation in these mainstream texts, I have of course left out a rich history of independent comics, as well as the contemporary independent comics scene, which many of the creators I spoke to identified as a space of creativity and opportunity. Online fan-made films, including live-action *Static Shock* and *Spawn* films, have featured actors, directors, writers, and stuntpeople of color in major roles and in at least one case, resulted in a licensed webseries featuring a majority-minority cast.<sup>11</sup>

This project presents only one segment of the wide range of comic-to-live-action adaptations. Future research could more closely examine how the trajectories of independent comics and their adaptations differ or are similar to those that come out of Marvel or DC in order to compare their representations. Feminist and queer analyses of both content and production could also provide more insight into the impacts of various elements of industry structure and

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<sup>10</sup> "Are We at Peak Superhero?," *Grantland*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://grantland.com/features/comicbook-movies-marvel-x-men-batman-dc-comics/>; Stephanie Merry, "The Superhero Bubble Is Destined to Burst. Is Warner Bros. Making a Mistake?," *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/style-blog/wp/2014/10/21/the-superhero-bubble-is-destined-to-burst-is-warner-brothers-making-a-mistake/>.

<sup>11</sup> *Mortal Kombat: Legacy* developed out of Asian American film and music video director Kevin Tancharoen's fan film *Mortal Kombat: Rebirth*.

logics on what kinds of stories get adapted or become successful; while my research focused largely on race, it was clear from my interviews with creators that their experiences were also informed by gendered expectations that they experienced or perceived.

The impact of digital production, and particularly digital distribution also needs analysis – the aforementioned fan films and fan interactions online may represent fans pushing back against what the industry has imagined fans want to see, but the comic book industry and digital streaming services are also seeking to capitalize on fan labor and on the comic-to-live-action adaptation trend. Some streaming services are styling themselves after fan forums and blogs, emphasizing the use of forums, chat rooms, and “liking” or “upvoting” favorite shows.<sup>12</sup> Larger streaming services like Netflix are producing their own adaptations<sup>13</sup> in hopes of drawing larger audiences to their original content.

While the first of these efforts, Marvel’s *Daredevil* series with Netflix, has received critical praise, including for its complex portrayal of urban gentrification, performance scholar Takeo Rivera points out that the series has a significant anti-Asian “problem,” including its use of the themes and style of East Asian martial arts films while still portraying its Asian characters as one-dimensional villains or victims. According to Rivera, “there’s a frustrating and racist irony of white men appropriating Asian martial arts while not providing any depth to its Asian

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<sup>12</sup> “Where Your Crunchyroll Dollars Really Go: An Interview with the CEO | Otaku Journalist,” accessed December 20, 2014, <http://otakujournalist.com/where-your-crunchyroll-dollars-really-go-an-interview-with-the-ceo/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Marvel Netflix Series Will Be ‘Gritty Crime Stories’; ‘Jessica Jones’ Casting,” *Screen Rant*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://screenrant.com/marvel-netflix-daredevil-jessica-jones-casting/>; “Krysten Ritter Will Play Marvel’s Superpowered Detective Jessica Jones,” *io9*, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://io9.com/krysten-ritter-will-play-marvels-superpowered-detective-1666926783>; “Marvel’s Daredevil | Netflix,” accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/80018294?locale=en-US>.



characters.”<sup>14</sup> Although two of Netflix’s upcoming series star a female hero and a black hero in Jessica Jones and Luke Cage, fans have expressed concern about the continuing appropriation of martial arts as the domain of white heroes in Netflix’s proposed *Iron Fist* series as well as the potential whitewashing of the Asian character White Canary in DC/Warner’s *The Flash* and

*Arrow* spinoff.<sup>15</sup> It seems that, for the time being, each announcement of a project that presents potentially nuanced portrayals of race and gender, and provides starring opportunities for actors of color is accompanied by additional series and films that continue the trend of presenting minority characters only in supporting roles (and largely as villains) or casting white actors to portray characters of color.

Critics and news media have also demonstrated a backlash toward the perceived increased in “diversity” and films and television series that foreground characters of color; in one particularly controversial piece, Nellie Andreeva, a prolific critic for *Deadline*, wondered if there was too much diversity on television in an article originally titled “Pilots 2015: The Year of

Ethnic Castings – About Time or Too Much of Good Thing?”<sup>16</sup> Following responses critiquing

the piece’s racist tone,<sup>17</sup> the title of the article was changed to “Pilots 2015: The Year Of Ethnic

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<sup>14</sup> Takeo Rivera, “Black Mask, Yellow Peril: Anti-Asianism in Netflix’s Otherwise Brilliant Daredevil,” *Thenerdsofcolor*, accessed May 1, 2015, <http://thenerdsofcolor.org/2015/04/30/black-mask-yellow-peril-anti-asianism-in-netflixs-otherwise-brilliant-daredevil/>.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Chow, “White Canary and Arrow’s Habit of Whitewashing,” *Thenerdsofcolor*, accessed April 13, 2015, <http://thenerdsofcolor.org/2015/04/10/white-canary-and-arrows-habit-of-whitewashing/>.

<sup>16</sup> Nellie Andreeva, “Pilots 2015: The Year Of Ethnic Castings,” *Deadline*, accessed April 13, 2015, <http://deadline.com/2015/03/tv-pilots-ethnic-casting-trend-backlash-1201386511/>.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Fallon, “Hollywood’s Still Racist: Why the Deadline ‘Ethnic Casting’ Piece Is Dangerous,” *The Daily Beast*, March 25, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/25/hollywood-s-still-racist-why-the-deadline-ethnic-casting-piece-is-dangerous.html>; “The 13 Most Ignorant Quotes From That Awful Deadline Article,” *Vulture*, accessed May 1, 2015, <http://www.vulture.com/2015/03/13-worst-quotes-in-deadlines-awful->

Castings,” but the piece still pontificated on the possibility that there may be too much racial/ethnic diversity in television, and that featuring characters of color in television series could hurt white actors’ careers.<sup>18</sup>

As with any kind of popular media text, the comic-to-live-action adaptation is constantly changing, evolving, and shifting not only in profile, but also in relation to wider questions of social context - in this case, racial representation. This purpose of this dissertation is not to argue that these adaptations are either becoming more or less racist, or to point out which adaptations are “good” or “bad” representations of particular minority racial groups. Rather, I hope to illuminate how these adaptations come into being, from a creator or creators' original ideas through editorial, collaborative, licensing, distribution, marketing, and countless other processes, and how the negotiations that take place at each step of this process influence the final product that audiences experience. Demonstrating the historical evolution of the comic-to-live-action adaptation genre also serves to show that “progress” in representation does not simply mean more characters of a certain race, or more directors or creators of color. Rather, the expectations and internalized logics of various industries, both about themselves and about their audiences, must be questioned, and someone with influence and capital must be willing to take a risk on defying these expectations. It is, of course, important to continue to identify problematic or offensive aspects of media representations, but in order to change them, we must understand how these images are created and disseminated, and given the economic constraints of the genre, what the possibilities for representation may be.

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