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Milestone Comics, Black Nationalism, and the Cosmopolitics of *Static*

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Milestone Media’s *Static* (1993–1997) was an unprecedented dramatization of the complexity of black youth subjectivity in comics. *Static* addressed major youth concerns, such as drugs, sex, sexuality, violence, and physical and mental health. Attaching itself to Milestone’s multicultural sensibility and reflecting the company’s goal to bring black experiences to mainstream comics, *Static* made black youth central to confronting issues facing American youth and black communities in the 1990s. In the pages of *Static*, black youth didn’t generate the problems but rather, in the form of the black superteen Static and through his friendships with black and white men and women, black youth and their cross-racial relationships became the locus for confronting social problems. Despite being a comic steeped in the multicultural ethos of the 1990s and of Milestone’s particular multicultural mission, the specific role of blackness and of Static’s relationship to black politics was never far from the comic’s narrative. In fact, although Eric Griffin, the founder of the Afrocentric comics publisher Ania, declaimed that, “Basically what Milestone does is create white characters painted Black. They’re not culturally aware” (qtd. in Brown 49), it would not be hyperbolic to say that *Static* was all about grappling with what it meant to be black in urban America.

Following the example of several recent works of comics scholarship by Jose Alaniz, André M. Carrington, and Ramzi Fawaz that have quite usefully problematized the representation and political potential of “difference,” or what Fawaz (quoting intellectual historian David Hollinger) dubs “negotiating the experience of otherness” in superhero comics (16), I argue that the series *Static* unfolded a cosmopolitan project that staged transformative encounters between characters of different colors, creeds, genders, and sexualities. Far from being a cosmopolitan project that sought to narratively erase political tensions by merely suggesting that knowledge of, say, racism faced by blacks was enough to end that racism without implementing systemic change, *Static* made social tensions the

focus of the series. Throughout its 45 issues, the creators emphasized the role of Static as a figure around whom discourses of racial, gender, class, religious, and sexual difference coalesced—not always neatly and never without personal struggle.

In order to mitigate the burden of summarizing four years’ worth of complex plots and to demonstrate and engage with the complexity of individual story arcs created by Milestone’s skilled stable of writers, thereby claiming the comic within the larger scope of black or African American literature, I focus this essay on Robert L. Washington’s “Louder than a Bomb” (LtaB) storyline, which appeared in *Static* #5–7 (October–December 1993).¹ LtaB is concerned foremost with the question of black politics and its place in multicultural America. In particular, LtaB pits Static against a black nationalist supervillain named Commando X, whose agenda is driven by anti-Semitic beliefs that Jews are the enemies and oppressors of blacks. On the surface, LtaB appears to condemn black nationalism as a ridiculous, even terroristic, political orientation—a joke to be caricatured for a mainstream comics-reading audience. But considered in the context of Fawaz’s conception of a “comic book cosmopolitics” that values differences working together, rather than separating people irrevocably (and violently), as Commando’s black nationalism would have, LtaB becomes a more politically complex artifact of Milestone’s multicultural project and indeed of the racial landscape of mainstream American comics.

I pay close attention to the connections writer Robert L. Washington and artist John Paul Leon draw between the characters and events in *Static* #5–7, on the one hand, and the history of black nationalism, in particular of the Nation of Islam (NOI) under Louis Farrakhan, anti-Semitic controversies sparked by NOI sympathizers, and the broader racial tensions among blacks, whites, and Jews in the early 1990s, on the other. By focusing closely on LtaB and its political work, I demonstrate that *Static* argued for a black politics based on a cosmopolitical worldview that saw black youth as central to confronting racial—and, in other storylines, gender, sexual, and class—tensions. This was in part because the black superteen operated as a space of identification for potential readers, who could learn with Static as he confronted a black nationalist supervillain just what such a political ideology meant in the moment the comic was being published. With its emphasis on Static working through the question of black politics and the meaning of black oppression in a world where white-passing Jews can also be oppressed, and by black people no less, LtaB suggests that politics is a continual search for an answer, as Static’s mother puts it, to the question “Am I doing the right thing?” Attending carefully to LtaB and reading it as synecdoche of the rest of the series and of Milestone’s wider oeuvre, I point to a political richness in *Static* that beckons a reconsideration of Milestone’s place in the history of comics.

Milestone Media and *Static*

In the field of superhero comics, Milestone Media was a revolution, even if short-lived. An independent comics company founded in 1992 and owned by black comics professionals Derek T. Dingle, Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, and Michael Davis, it was known for its groundbreaking line of comics that placed characters of color at the center of superhero stories that dealt unabashedly with intersectional issues of race and class inequality, urban violence, (hyper)masculinity, sexualization of women, teen pregnancy, and gay youth, among others. Beyond the pages of its monthlies—of which there were six ongoing series between 1993 and 1997 ranging in length from 6 to 50 issues, and several miniseries—Milestone employed a record number of creators of color, and by 2000 it had launched a popular animated television series that lasted four seasons and featured the black teenage superhero *Static*. Milestone offered an alternative to the largely white male casts of DC and Marvel superhero titles, populating its fictional Dakotaverse with superheroes like *Icon* and *Hardware*, and teams like *Blood Syndicate*. Although independently founded, Milestone allied itself with the mainstream of the comics industry early on by signing a distribution, advertising, and merchandising deal with DC that ensured its books reached a wider audience than independent black publishers such as Alonzo Washington's *Omega 7 Comics*, Jason Sims's *Big City Comics*, and the Afrocentric publisher *Ania*.²

It is somewhat surprising, then, that scholarship on race in American comics³ often fails to give due attention to Milestone. It is possible that earlier claims by black comics creators, who accused Milestone of, among other things, simply doing “Superman in blackface” (Brown 49), have resonated with scholars looking for comics that take up the politics of black liberation with seemingly more conviction. In his monograph on black superheroes, Adilifu Nama glosses over Milestone's comics, giving less than three pages to discussion of the character *Icon*. For Nama, *Icon* “appeared and felt like a plagiarized figure” (96). Nama argues that *Icon* ultimately

symbolizes how racial justice is an ambivalent and ambiguous topic best used as a point of departure in superhero comics rather than a real-time battleground to make definitive declarations concerning black liberation as an integral aspect of American democracy, freedom, and societal improvement.

(98)

Nama's reading of *Icon* extends to the Milestone project more generally and is contraposed to interpretations of Milestone and its comics by

Jeffrey A. Brown and Carrington, who both view Milestone as having offered unparalleled access to images of, and stories about, people of color in comics. For Carrington, Milestone “augment[ed] the allegorical quality of superhero comics by bringing the critical insights of Black readers who grew up with varying degrees of alienation from [comics] to bear on the conventions that have shaped the medium over the years” (121). Carrington suggests, much as Brown does in his early monograph on Milestone, that although the company worked within the mainstream and did not often court Afrocentric politics in its comics, it was nonetheless a revolution in the sense that it published multicultural comics (by a diverse creative staff of black, Latinx, Asian American, white, gay, and heterosexual men and women) and offered a range of representations of blackness—including those that challenged stereotypical expressions of black masculinity characterizing other companies’ black superheroes—to a broad readership.

At the same time, the small body of work on Milestone either overlooks or downplays the significance of *Static*, the company’s second-longest-running series. This lacuna is significant, considering that the black superteen with electrostatic superpowers, battling villains and the hardships of a cash-strapped family in the gang-infested Dakota City at the center of Milestone’s storyworld, has proved the company’s most popular (and lucrative) creation. Where other Milestone creations faded into relative obscurity after the company ceased publishing its original comics line in April 1997, *Static* persisted, appearing in his own animated show (2000–2004), in two comics reboots—*Static Shock: Rebirth of the Cool* (4 issues, 2001) and *Static Shock* (8 issues, 2011–2012)—and as an occasional member of the Teen Titans and other DC superhero teams (both in comics and animated features).

Static told the story of Virgil Ovid Hawkins, a die-hard nerd, who gained electrostatic superpowers during the Big Bang, a gang war in the notoriously rough Paris Island district of Dakota that ended when police deployed mutagenic gas to quell the gangs, resulting in widespread casualties and more than a few superpowered beings. Like Marvel’s Spider-Man, Virgil uses his mutation to become a teenage superhero. Throughout the course of the comic Virgil has to balance his newfound superhero status with home and family life, high school, friends, romances, work, and, of course, leisure time at the arcade. And, like Spider-Man, he does it all with a fast-talking sense of humor and occasional teen angst. *Static*’s obvious homage of Spider-Man (his first crush, for example, is a redhead), while superficial, is crucial to understanding *Static*’s resonance with potential black audiences, young and old. As a quick-with-a-joke superpowered teenage nerd from a blue-collar family, albeit white, Spider-Man offered more than just a convenient figure of identification, cemented in comic-book culture as the character is,

for hooking Milestone readers' attention early on. Walter Mosley claims that black readers in the early 1960s identified with Spider-Man and read him partly as a black superhero. As he puts it,

The first black superhero is Spider-Man. He lives in a one-parent house [...] He has all of this power, but every time he uses it, it turns against him. People are afraid of him; the police are after him. [...] That's a black hero right there. Of course, he's actually a white guy. But black people reading Spider-Man are like, *Yeah, I get that. I identify with this character here.*

(Riesman, emphasis in original)

Not for nothing, *Static* outlasted the Superman-inspired *Icon*. That *Static* was identifiable yet refreshingly new allowed the character to gain popularity and to develop a series identity more fully its own, opening up the possibility for sustained, and occasionally overt, discussion of politics in the lives of the series's protagonist and his friends.

***Static* and Cosmopolitics**

Fawaz argues that in the postwar era superheroes enacted a version of cosmopolitanism, as creators of superhero comics turned away from crime-busting stories in favor of penning “unpredictable encounters between an expanding cohort of superhumans, aliens, cosmic beings, and an array of fantastical objects and technologies” (17). Fawaz demonstrates a trend of “cross-cultural *encounter* rather than assimilation” (17, emphasis in original) across postwar superhero comics through readings of major series like the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby era of *Fantastic Four* and Chris Claremont's *X-Men*. Superhero comics, Fawaz argues, were invested “in the liberal values of antiracism and antifascism alongside its absorption of the more radical politics of New Left social movements” (19). Such investments resulted in what Alaniz describes as the “‘relevance’ movement” (138) in comics of the 1960s and 1970s, which resulted in nominal pushes to create diverse characters.

At the same time, mainstream comics creators disrupted what Alaniz describes as the superhero genre's prewar and wartime idealization of the “fantastic, quasi-eugenicist apotheosis of the perfected [male] body” (35), and in doing so demonstrated that the visibility of the (super)body was inseparable from its political dimensions. As a visual medium and as a genre concerned with the body and its relation to (super)normalcy, difference was and remains a key analytic in the study of superhero comics. Difference and its significance in discourses of cosmopolitanism are all the more important, then, when dealing with comics explicitly about boundaries of identity and belonging. Considering the influence

of various social justice movements in the second half of the twentieth century, Fawaz claims that for comics creators and readers,

differences [...] were not only sites of political oppression but potent cultural resources for articulating new forms of social and political affiliation, questioning the limits of democratic inclusion, and developing new knowledge about the world from the position of the outcast and the marginalized.

(21, emphasis in original)

Fawaz’s argument that “the introduction of previously unrepresented differences [...] demanded a substantive recalibration of the social relations between characters, the visual depiction of new distinctions, and a language with which to discuss such differences” (21) is a powerful critical intervention. This notion of a “comic book cosmopolitics” recognizes the possibilities for the production of a cosmopolitan ethic in superhero comics that values encounters with diverse peoples and that embraces the tension and uncertainty of encounters with difference, abandoning individualism “in exchange for diverse group affiliations” (16).

Emerging out of feminist and queer theory as well as revising older models of cosmopolitanism,⁴ and therefore deeply interested in preserving difference across identity boundaries through the production of new modes of community, Fawaz’s vision of comic-book cosmopolitics is a particularly apt lens through which to read the Milestone project. *Static* valued not diversity (the mere presence of difference) so much as the creation of a multicultural epistemology. As my reading of *LtaB* shows, *Static* negotiated the meaning of individual and group differences in order to produce friendship, camaraderie, love, and understanding. This cosmopolitics also served a didactic purpose, to educate the reader about such differences and confront prejudice in ways that balanced *Static*’s superheroics with his tribulations as a black teenager trying to understand his place in the world. Readers attentive to a story grappling with questions of black politics, the black community, and anti-Semitism became witnesses to—and through letter columns and other fan forums could participate in—a dynamic conversation, rather than a one-sided lecture about right and wrong. *Static* dealt with questions of political and cultural significance to black communities as they related to the increasingly recognized multicultural ethnoscape of the US. Perhaps the most pressing question was what forms black politics and resistance could (and should) take.

Cosmopolitical Superteen vs. Black Nationalist Militant

What black politics might be(come), especially in the face of heightened racial tension, and how discussion of black politics relates to personal,

familial, and community relations, occupies the central premise of *LtaB*. The three-part story was scripted by Robert L. Washington and penciled by John Paul Leon. Evidencing the tension between black radicalism and a multiculturalist vision of black politics as cosmopolitics, the story is a useful case study for understanding the series's and Milestone's political vision for black America in the 1990s. Like every decade prior, America in the 1990s was a difficult place to be black. Major race-related events such as the police beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the subsequent 1992 Los Angeles riots, the 1995 O.J. Simpson murder trial, and the emergence of gangsta rap and its lyrical and media-exaggerated relation to street crime fueled white fears of black Americans. At the same time, Americans witnessed high-profile public controversies such as the discovery of Clarence Thomas's sexual harassment of Anita Hill upon his nomination to the US Supreme Court in 1991 and the legal battles over the firing of Leonard Jeffries, professor of Black Studies at City College of New York, for his statements regarding Jewish financial backing of the slave trade and Jewish control over negative stereotypes of blacks in the media. But also, on account of rap and hip hop, growing Internet culture, and expanded televisual and filmic opportunities, black Americans were more present in American popular culture than ever before.

As Orlando Patterson and Ethan Fosse describe this "paradoxical situation": "Blacks have a disproportionate impact on the nation's culture—both popular and elite—yet continue to struggle in the educational system and are severely underrepresented in its boom of scientific and high-end technology" (1). Not surprisingly, Milestone created a world in which peoples of color acted as superheroes while in costume but still had to confront racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice whenever civilian life resumed. The struggle against which Patterson and Fosse juxtapose black youth's visibility and cultural impact extended in the 1990s, just as today, to fights against racial profiling, police brutality, criminalization, poor working conditions and opportunities, and ultimately entrapment in a cycle of poverty. *LtaB* dramatizes multiple responses to these problems and gestures to their importance to the series as a whole by telling a story about a black nationalist terrorist who bombs public institutions—a Civil War monument, a Jewish synagogue, a school, a police precinct, a peace rally—that he argues represent oppression by "race traitors" ("War at 30 Frames") and the "Amerikkkan government" ("You're Gonna Get Yours").⁵ The storyline pits Static, in his superhero identity, against Commando, and in his daily life as Virgil, against Commando's political ideology as it causes conflict among friends and pushes him to reflect on his own conception of racial justice.

LtaB starts in the middle of a race riot, as black, brown, and white folks clash on the street before a synagogue. An immediate flashback shows Virgil at a local comics shop, where they overhear a radio announcement about a "Sabbath bombing attack at this hour on historic

Beth Adonai temple” with “Reports of racial clashes” (*Static* #5, “Megablast,” October 1993). Hearing this, and remembering that his friend Frieda attends Beth Adonai, Virgil dons his costume and rushes off. But his attempts to end the riot fall flat and the fighting is instead quelled when a rabbi and a black minister join hands in the street to call for peace, order, and tolerance.

Static’s abilities as a superteen are outpaced by the peacework of local religious leaders, a narrative move that demonstrates Static’s lack of social capital as a new, relatively unknown superhero in Dakota, and also gestures to a possible incompatibility of superheroics and direct social action. After dispersing the crowd of rioters and stopping a group of Jews from accosting a black man whom they allege has information about the synagogue bomber, the rabbi and minister confront Static, telling him that racial unrest “can’t be fought with your powers” but that he might use the symbolic power of his being a local black superhero by making an appearance at an upcoming peace rally. Static agrees, but also decides that he needs to find out more about this bomber, Commando X, who has orchestrated multiple violent attacks across the city, each prefaced by media announcements “about the ‘black man’s struggle’.”

Commando’s rhetoric is expounded later when he attacks Virgil’s high school: “Attention! Attention! This white man’s propaganda hall— / — will be destroyed in five minutes. [...] Rejoice in the freedom to educate yourselves, my Nubian siblings” (“Megablast”).⁵ The bombing destroys Virgil’s school, transforming a children’s educational institution at once into a war zone. Like the synagogue, the school is a political target made to stand in for the racist system of oppression that Commando wishes to tear down. By the end of the arc’s first issue, Commando has even made the peace rally organized by the rabbi and the minister into another bombing target.

As his message from the high school attack indicates, Commando is in many ways a caricature of the most radical corner of black politics in America. As the story-arc makes clear, Commando elides the distinctions between groups as varied as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam (NOI), figures as disparate as Louis Farrakhan and Thomas Sankara, and joins them in a clash of symbols and references bound together under the banner of a flattened black nationalism. Commando’s language is infused with a dated black radical’s lexicon, with phrases such as “Nubian siblings” and “Amerikkkan”⁶ calling to mind a politics of difference that sought to demonize whites as wholly as many black Americans felt demonized by white society. Perhaps most obviously, Commando styles his name with an “X” after Malcolm X and Louis X (Farrakhan’s early NOI name). Static also discovers that Commando runs a public-access television show called *Malcolm’s 10: Blackman’s Greatest Threats*, and in the arc’s final issue Virgil’s father reveals that Commando is indeed a black Muslim. Additionally, he dons military

fatigues and a red beret, not unlike the Burkinabe Marxist revolutionary Sankara. The outfit signifies in other ways, too. The excess of medals on Commando's beret, for example, suggests the self-aggrandizement of a dictator like Idi Amin. The beret, when paired with Commando's dark sunglasses, black turtleneck, and his toting of a large semiautomatic rifle, also points to the stereotypical uniform of the Black Panthers. From this multiplicity of cues, a general signification: Commando is a beleaguered stereotype of an uncompromising black revolutionary with a will to violence no matter the casualties.

Viewed from the perspective of *Static's* cosmopolitan vision, which values coalitions across diverse groups working together to end oppression and violence—a position modeled by the rabbi and minister—the comic's treatment of Commando appears as a figural condemnation of militant black radicalism *tout court* and the NOI specifically. Commando's religious affiliation is crucial to parsing the comic's (or at least writer Washington's) understanding of black radical politics in the first half of the 1990s, since the character's symbolic affiliation with the NOI ties him to the tenuous relationship in black radical politics between blacks and Jews. This relationship animates the LtaB story arc; it is a tension signaled in the opening scene of the race riot, sparked by Commando's anti-Semitic attack on the synagogue and recapitulated throughout the story as Virgil and his black friends spar with Frieda Goren, their white Jewish friend, over the relative oppressions faced by each group. This tension takes on heightened significance in the context of black-Jewish relations in the early 1990s, which brought media attention to Farrakhan's NOI and several prominent black radicals for their anti-Semitic views.

The first issue of LtaB deals with the question of anti-Semitism in largely veiled terms. One conversation is particularly telling. Virgil and his friends, including Frieda, are hanging out after the school bombing when Felix tells the group, "I don't agree with [Commando's] methods, but he's just calling attention to white society's everyday assault on the blackman" ("Megablast"). Since Commando's "methods" began the story arc with an attack on a synagogue and sparked the need for a peace rally to quell the racial unrest between blacks and Jews, Frieda asks what the Jews ever did to black people, to which Felix retorts, "If you have a problem with media portrayals of blacks, you go to the ones who control the media." Virgil suggests that Jews have, "Well—connections. Power. In media, banking, law, um..." before Frieda storms off. This scene addresses a widespread anti-Semitic belief in a Jewish world conspiracy, which dates back at least to the early twentieth century and the Russian forgery of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁷ While Virgil is distraught about hurting Frieda's feelings, he nevertheless is drawn to Commando's rhetoric of black subjugation—though, like Felix, he does not agree with his methods and is uncomfortable with the implications of his anti-Semitism.

Static #5 concludes when Static makes his promised appearance at the peace rally, which Commando attacks. In the midst of the battle, Commando reveals the stakes and purpose of his bombings. Interrupting a speech in which the rabbi claims Commando is an enemy to the entire community, the Commando accuses the rabbi: “Your crimes against us *cannot* be forgiven! *We should* dwell apart!” Commando’s phrasing identifies black oppression as unforgivable crimes perpetrated by Jews. His is a separatist message: blacks and Jews cannot, should not, gather in peace, let alone live in community together.

In the context of a peace rally that aims to bring together blacks and Jews to reconcile both the anti-Semitism and the misunderstanding in Dakota City’s black community, fostered by Commando, that Jews are responsible for black oppression, the villain’s words invoke a set of controversies sparked in 1991 by the NOI’s publication of *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews, Volume 1* and by Leonard Jeffries’s “Our Sacred Mission” speech in July of that year. *Secret Relationship* argued that the Jews had been heavily involved, if not central to, the early American slave trade and thus had, as Commando argues, committed unforgivable crimes against blacks. The NOI’s anti-Semitic pseudo-scholarship codified Farrakhan’s long-held belief in a Jewish world conspiracy that implicated Jews as deeply invested in the white oppression of people of color—a position that has led to the NOI under Farrakhan being labeled a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (“Nation of Islam”). Jeffries’s speech recapitulated the major thrust of *Secret Relationship*, leading to his dismissal from his professorship at City College and a series of legal disputes about academic freedom and freedom of speech.⁸

As if the connection between anti-Semitic black nationalism and Commando were not clear enough by the end of *Static #5*, the attack on the peace rally crosses over into the second issue of the arc, *Static #6*, which begins with Commando crying out for an end to the “Zionist slander!” that he believes the peace rally represents. As he and Static battle it out, Commando volleys off angry claims of his experiences of oppression at the hands of various public and private institution, yelling, among other things, that public access television and the newspapers—both run by “race traitors”—froze out his message (*Static #6*, “War at 30 Frames,” November 1993).

Before breaking off his figural attack on black-Jewish relations, literalized in the form of the peace rally, Commando exclaims, “Howell Rice is a slave *no more!* Commando X rides free!” (“War at 30 Frames”). With this, Commando connects the racial slavery system of antebellum America with the psychological/social situation of blacks living under postbellum white supremacy. The proclamation also tightens the symbolic ties between himself and the real-world NOI. In his landmark *Message to the Blackman in America*, Elijah Muhammad—leader of the

NOI from 1934 until 1975—argued that “as long as [blacks] are in the white man’s name, they are his slaves” (47). The taking of a new name was the inaugural action in the NOI’s 12-point platform for black liberation: “Separate ourselves from the slave-master” (180).⁹ As Dawn-Marie Gibson notes in her history of the NOI, its founder’s “attempt to convince his followers that carrying their former slave masters’ surnames symbolized their continued enslavement played to the estrangement and isolation that they had experienced” as blacks in a racially oppressive society (18). We learn throughout *Static #6* that Commando is motivated by similar experiences of estrangement and isolation. He thus stands in for victims of the forces of American racism generally speaking, while his being shut out of the media motivates his belief in a specifically Jewish conspiracy against black Americans.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his calls for racial justice for black people in the US, like too many other comic-book (super)villains with radical political agendas, Commando is not a figure for reader sympathy. He is presented as a terrorist, and his deep intertextuality with the signs of black nationalism provokes consideration of the issues of racial injustice that he violently confronts only after it has invoked derision from Static, who, in the final moments of his combat against the Commando at the peace rally, adopts a black vernacular dialect reminiscent of blackface minstrelsy to mock Commando. His mocking serves to distance Commando’s political rhetoric from politics as usual, equating radicality with the lack of education that African American vernacular English (AAVE) has long been used to indicate. Static is fittingly punished with a barrage of explosions that put an end to the peace-rally battle and allow Commando the chance to escape. The defeat galvanizes Static into learning more about who Commando really is and what his politics mean.

Static discovers, easily enough, what Commando is all about. He tracks Commando’s public presence in the newspapers using the Commando’s slave name and then by checking a TV guide for the name and air dates of his public access show, *Malcolm’s 10*.¹⁰ Virgil learns that before taking the militaristic moniker “Commando,” he went by Howell X and that he often wrote to a local newspaper, *The Northstar*,¹¹ in order to lambast “Zionist mediamasters” (“War at 30 Frames”). Virgil spends all night studying VHS tapes of Commando’s show, taking notes on his major beefs (e.g. with “pigs,” “American government,” and “race pollution”) and searching for potential future targets for the Commando’s bombings. After watching the show for hours, Virgil surmises the next target: the police precinct that houses Dakota City’s elite tactical police and anti-gang units. Virgil puts a quick end to the attempted bombing, but still makes no headway in stopping Commando himself, until he tracks the Commando down to the Rockdale Projects, where he meets the Commando and pretends to be a fan of *Malcolm’s 10*. Commando

takes Virgil into his confidence and gives him “the deep scoop” on the Zionist mediamaster conspiracy:

Funny how [Jews say] there ain’t no “conspiracy,” but we on the *bottom*. / And they just “wound up” in all these power-intensive positions. “It just so happened.” / And all that mess about how they got beat down in Europe? / If so many of ‘em came over with nothing, how’d they get so far so *fast*?

(“War at 30 Frames,” emphases in original)

Virgil pretends to praise Commando’s theory, saying among other things that his “protests” are medal-worthy, and he ultimately gets himself invited, by the issue’s end, to help Commando with the next bombing—an invitation that gives Virgil all the information he needs to stop Commando.

In the LtaB conclusion in *Static #7*, Static prevents Commando’s City Hall bombing attempt and confronts him before he bombs his final target: a news station with a biracial couple as anchors. Static makes swift work of the bomb-making supervillain by sealing the Commando’s hands in cement blocks—in a further nod to Marvel’s Spider-Man, Static also sets up a camera before the battle to videotape the confrontation, during which Static gets Commando to confess to multiple bombings. With Commando dispatched, Virgil returns home and the next day finds himself on the news as a local celebrity. But as with the earlier issues in the story arc, sandwiched between the scenes of fast-paced, quip-filled superheroic action are scenes between Virgil, friends, and family that break down Commando’s black nationalist message and that wrestle with what his NOI-inspired, anti-Semitic black nationalism means in multiracial communities like Dakota City.

Black Politics as Cosmopolitics

That anti-Semitism defines Commando’s response to black oppression is central to understanding the *Static*’s investment in cosmopolitics. As I noted, *Static #5* sparked a conflict between Virgil and his black friend Felix, on the one hand, and Frieda, a Jew, on the other, over whether or not Jews in the US had more power than blacks—or even whether they had power over black America, a particular contention of Farrakhan’s NOI. *Static #6* complicated that conflict in a scene wherein Frieda and Rick (Virgil’s gay white friend) point out the absurdity of a Jewish world media conspiracy by pretending to have a frank conversation about a black conspiracy to control entertainment media. “Blacks are monopolizing music and professional sports,” Frieda begins, clarifying, “I know you’re not *part* of it, but you *know* it exists. You people completely dominate in both.” Rick gives evidence, in sentence fragments mirroring

Virgil's own explanation of Jewish media control in *Static* #5, that black musicians and sports stars have the "Highest salaries. Biggest advertising deals. Best media exposure" ("War at 30 Frames"). Virgil protests, of course, but quickly realizes that Frieda and Rick are tricking him into making an argument that works equally well to explain how the success of individual Jews does not discount anti-Semitism as a systemic force. As Frieda concludes, "Everything you said about how hard people work and how unfair things have been is just as true for Jews as blacks" ("War at 30 Frames").

This scene laid the groundwork for Virgil to embrace an understanding of anti-Semitism and racism as two unique, but similarly destructive, forms of oppression that disenfranchise Jewish and black Americans. Moreover, the scene makes clear for Virgil the stakes of Commando's insistence that Jews are partly responsible for the problems facing the "blackman" and that they are necessarily the enemy of black liberation, by establishing Frieda as both a counter to the very idea that Jews are in fact black people's enemies and as a victim of the Commando's ideology (it was her synagogue, after all, that was attacked in *Static* #5). While Virgil is convinced by Frieda that Jews are not all Commando's "Zionist mediamasters," *Static* #7 shows that Virgil's meeting with Commando at the Rockdale Projects was nonetheless confusing for the superteen, since the Commando's demand to end the struggle of the blackman begged the question for Virgil of who, if not Jews, was really responsible for the problems facing black America.

Virgil gets a chance to talk black politics with his family shortly after stopping the City Hall bombing. Returning home, Virgil finds his mother and father waiting for him on the couch, poised to have a serious conversation about the *Malcolm's 10* VHS tapes Virgil watched. When Virgil jokes defensively, "it's not as if it's pornography," his father retorts that "The *lies* in here are *worse* than pornography" (*Static* #7, "You're Gonna Get Yours," December 1993, emphases in original). He then links the illicit nature of pornography with what he assumes might be his son's defensiveness over the Islamic-tinged message of black nationalism contained on the tapes. But he assures his son, "This is *not* about Islam" and he clarifies, further, that "Islam is about 3 dozen religions, each as distinct as the many forms of Christianity." Virgil's father proffers an important clarification for Virgil and the reader: it is the first time Commando's message is labeled Islamic and, since it occurs in the final issue of *LtaB*, it makes the last symbolic connection between Commando and the NOI. While the allusions are certainly clear early in the comic, this final reveal in the domestic scene of a parent-child heart-to-heart, where a father and mother are instructing their son on moral action, allows Virgil to safely confront the complications of Commando's political position in the black community and in the landscape of American multiculturalism.

Here, at home and supported by family, Virgil recognizes the multiplicity of available political positions for black people. Until now, Commando has been treated as an eccentric, perhaps eccentric only because his politically radical views are backed by violent action—recall Felix's claim after the school bombing that Commando is "just calling attention to white society's everyday assault on the blackman" ("Megablast"). Even Virgil's internal monologue during his meeting with Commando in *Static #6* betrays less sincere political disagreement and more a belief that he is merely simpleminded. But faced with his parents' worry that he might buy into Commando's "racist nonsense," as his father labels Commando's politics, Virgil recognizes his own relative ignorance. Frustrated, he concedes, "I just thought I had it all correct" ("You're Gonna Get Yours").

As a poor black teen in a family that he has to help support with an after-school fast food job, Virgil finds it hard to understand how he has the power to oppress anyone—let alone people who pass as white. Looking for an example of Jewish racism against blacks, Virgil points out that an old Jewish woman who did not seem to like black children left the neighborhood the second she could. But Virgil's mother complicates the situation: "she moved out *fast* the day someone sprayed 'Get out Jew bitch' on her front door" ("You're Gonna Get Yours"). This scene, with its invocation of Commando's "racist nonsense," or anti-Semitism, as the backbone of his politics addresses the tension created by Commando between the black and Jewish communities in the opening scene of *LtaB*. Rather than separate out racism and anti-Semitism, *Static #7* argues that they are one in the same. Indeed, this is the point that Virgil's father makes when he upends Virgil's argument that blacks cannot be racist because they cannot oppress others: "—anybody who chooses to use terror and violence has the 'power to oppress.'" He concludes, "My *hurt* is bigger than somebody else's rights' is what made the Nazis," drawing a provocative through line from Nazism to Commando. Given that *LtaB* is deeply preoccupied with the place of anti-Semitism in black nationalist politics and given the depth of intertextual references drawing Commando and the NOI together, it would not be a stretch to suggest that *Static* writer Robert L. Washington is also implicating any politics that is simultaneously a black politics and an anti-Semitic one in this metaphorical genealogy of blacks oppressing Jews.

However contentious the claim that anti-Semitism and anti-black racism are the same thing, the family scene in *Static #7* demonstrates that Commando's black nationalism is, for Virgil's parents and, finally, for Virgil, an untenable position precisely because it allies itself with anti-Semitism and founds its movement for racial uplift on the oppression of another historically disenfranchised group (Figure 20.1).

The scene, moreover, nicely juxtaposes Virgil's conversation with his parents against Frieda's conversation with her own, which is presented



Figure 20.1 Juxtaposed family discussion of difference in *Static #7* (December 1993).

simultaneously as panels take turns showing us the spaces of domestic racial dialogue: Virgil's living room and Frieda's dining room. Frieda and her parents discuss why it might indeed be difficult for some black people to accept that Jews face oppression (or at least discrimination), since as her father points out, Jews benefit from their ability to assimilate visually into the white mainstream of America. But he warns her against thinking that assimilation means acceptance: "Blacks, by virtue of their skin color, are never allowed to forget their culture. They *can't* delude themselves-- / --into believing that they are fully accepted" as Jews can ("You're Gonna Get Yours"). After their parallel conversations, Virgil and Frieda telephone one another and the two reconcile. Unfortunately, writer Washington glosses over what might otherwise be a touching discussion of mutual understanding across racialized lines and instead moves straight to Virgil and Frieda trying to figure out Commando's final target. Despite the gloss—"one major cultural exchange later"—it is clear from the fact that Washington devotes four and a half pages to the discussion of racial oppression and anti-Semitism in black politics that the two friends have embraced a valuing of one another's difference as foundational to their relationship. Their "cultural exchange" stands in for the larger process of the production of knowledge about difference that undergirds what Fawaz argues is key to the cosmopolitics of superhero comics.

Virgil and Frieda refuse mere diversity, with its combatting notions of the relationship between the systemic structures of race, oppression, and Jewish and black identity unresolved, and instead come to understand the differences structuring the life of the other—an understanding cemented across generational and racial lines. Moreover, because the scene so wholly encapsulates the idea that Commando's anti-Semitic black nationalism is antithetical to a multicultural life lived in community with

people who embody a range of differences, the scene operates as the crux of LtaB’s political message. While we glimpse Frieda’s own maturation in regard to racial politics, the scene emphasizes the damage anti-Semitism does to black politics. It challenges the overwhelming presence of Commando’s violent black nationalism throughout the story and in doing so lambasts those very real-world politics that writer Washington so thoroughly connected to Commando. Although LtaB begins with the suggestion that black politics is Commando’s politics, since there is no alternative politics interested in combatting black oppression present in earlier issues of *Static*, by the story arc’s end Virgil discovers a black way of politics that values difference. Virgil and, by extension, *Static* figure *black politics as cosmopolitics*. In the context of the anti-Semitic controversies hounding the NOI and black nationalists in the 1990s, it is significant that Virgil discovers a way of being resistant to black oppression while also embracing Judaism, rather than seeing all differences as signaling potential spaces from which black oppression might emerge.

“Am I Doing the Right Thing?”

I have dwelt extensively on a single storyline of *Static* and the ways in which it draws clear connections between the NOI’s brand of anti-Semitic black nationalism and Commando X’s political ideology. As Washington and his fellow Milestone comics creators were well aware, given Ania and other black publishers’ frustrations with their company, representations of black politics in popular art forms matter. Such representations were especially significant in the work of an independent black comics company that paired itself with a mainstream comics company in order to distribute multicultural comics to a multicultural audience in an era of heightened racial tension—those tensions driven in part by national discussion over the politics of black popular cultural forms such as gangsta rap. But *Static*’s cosmopolitics did not end with LtaB. As one of Milestone’s most popular comics, and one that focused to an almost ethnographic extent on the lives of black Americans as much as on superheroics, *Static* regularly discusses issues of identity and oppression. In the story arc “What Are Little Boys Made Of?” (*Static* #16–20), for example, Virgil confronted his own homophobia when he discovered his best friend Rick is gay and the victim of a gay bashing, leading to several issues about homophobia among teens and in black communities. And *Static* #25 took on (safe, consensual) teen sex. Through stories such as these, *Static* grappled with the political and personal stakes of what it meant to be black in America in the 1990s. LtaB, in particular, placed black political issues at the vanguard of the series’s search for solutions to problems that implicate a variety of complex identity relations—both for black youth, like Virgil himself, and for others, like Frieda and Rick. *Static* resists a singular vision of what black politics is or should be, and

instead neatly frames it in the conclusion to LtaB as a constant seeking of right action in relation to others. As Virgil's parents put it in *Static* #7, he will (and should) always ask himself, "Am I Doing the Right Thing?" If, as a young black man, he is oppressing other disenfranchised people in his fight for racial justice, then the answer is no.

Notes

- 1 For in-text citation of comics I refer to the title of each issue, which can be found alphabetically in the works cited. For reader clarity, the first time I discuss a comic in-depth I include the issue number, title, and cover date.
- 2 See Jeffrey A. Brown's discussion of these publishers' disagreements with Milestone Media over the latter's mainstream status and purportedly assimilationist approach to telling stories about black characters (46–49).
- 3 A major thrust of contemporary comics studies research concerns representation; there are now small but growing bodies of literature on race, gender, sexuality, and disability in comics, among other studies of identity position in the medium. Key works in the study of black comics, characters, and creators include the books by Brown, Carrington, and Nama cited earlier, as well as William H. Foster III's *Looking for a Face like Mine* and *Dreaming of a Face like Ours*, Nancy Goldstein's *Jackie Ormes*, Tim Jackson's *Pioneering Cartoonists of Color*, Fredrik Stromberg's *Black Images in the Comics*, and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence*, in addition to edited essay collections such as Frances Gateward and John Jennings's *The Blacker the Ink* and Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II's *Black Comics*.
- 4 Fawaz argues for a "revamped cosmopolitanism" that, "rather than seeking the comforts of a utopian category of affiliation somehow free of the violent history of colonial encounters," instead "demands that we remember the precariousness of our engagements, remaining vigilant against the stance of imperial privilege even as we seek out new egalitarian modes of affiliation" (284n21). It is this sort of cosmopolitanism engaged in the uneasiness of, but nonetheless productive capacities of encounters with, difference that I invoke in my reading of *Static*, with the hopes of recuperating this comic for those put off it by critics in academe, like Nama, or in the public sphere, like Noah Berlatsky.
- 5 I use forward slashes to denote word balloon and panel breaks, following the convention for representing line breaks in quoted poetry. All quotations, including emphases and unusual punctuation, appear as in the original unless otherwise specified. This quote appears in italics in the original text, a typographic choice that denotes that the sound is mediated by a PA system, rather than spoken between persons, a convention typical to mainstream comics.
- 6 The substitution of the *c* with *kkk* in "American" was common in late 1960s and 1970s radical anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements and was not unknown to Black Panther Party members. When the party newspaper reported the death of Fred Hampton in December 1969, for example, Hampton was described as a leader who had truly experienced "the Amerikkkan way of life" ("Fred Hampton MURDERED").
- 7 The *Protocols* was a Russian forgery of documents that were purported to provide evidence of "an international Jewish conspiracy to enslave mankind" (Landes and Katz 1) and which was translated into dozens of languages and republished extensively in the early twentieth century.

- 8 In addition to the Jeffries incident, August 19–21, 1991 saw a riot between the black and Hasidic Jewish communities in Crown Heights after a Hasidic driver struck and killed a black boy. The riots were heavily reported on television and in the New York City dailies and influenced the 1993 mayoral election of Rudy Giuliani.
- 9 Booker T. Washington, for example, claimed the liberatory power of name choice in *Up from Slavery* (1901), where he recounted that for many manumitted or emancipated slaves, the taking of a self-chosen surname “was one of the first signs of freedom” (11–12).
- 10 As Devorah Heitner shows, local and national public television programming was utilized by black radicals from 1968 onward to cultivate a black viewing public and in order to offer black critiques of mainstream American culture.
- 11 Dakota City’s *The Northstar* is no doubt a reference to Frederick Douglass’s antebellum abolitionist newspaper *The North Star*. This reference is significant, since the comic suggests that Commando’s op-eds to the newspaper were eccentric for the publication, thus juxtaposing a historically significant black liberationist artifact of black print culture against the Commando’s black nationalist extremism.

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