
UNSTABLE MASKS

Whiteness and American Superhero Comics

Edited by Sean Guynes and Martin Lund



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INTRODUCTION

NOT TO INTERPRET, BUT TO ABOLISH

Whiteness Studies and American Superhero Comics

SEAN GUYNES AND MARTIN LUND

Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics was born in the summer of 2016 amid the imminent (but, for many liberals, seemingly impossible) election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States. Trump's election and his deeply xenophobic, individualist, "America first" rhetoric emboldened American white nationalists to unmask and take up a new name, the "alt-right," that allowed them to claim their racism and white pride as a simply stated alternative to conservative politics as usual. While Trump ran on a largely incoherent platform of "making America great again," many—especially those for whom the experience of living in the US either was not yet, had rarely been, or only recently had become even remotely "great"—saw the rhetoric as little more than populist claptrap barely veiling the truth of its underlying racism. Indeed, three weeks after the election, writer and literary critic Toni Morrison unpacked Trump's platform to show plainly what he and those for whom he spoke were doing: They were making America white again after so many years of giving minimal concessions to the marginalized and oppressed, in order "to keep alive the perception of white superiority." White men and women, poor and wealthy, who voted for Trump, Morrison claimed, would rather "abandon their humanity out of fear of black men and women" than face "the true horror of lost status."¹ Despite much commentary about and out-

1. Morrison, "Making America White Again."

rage at the election results, none of this was new or unexpected. As Morrison stated so boldly twenty-four years earlier: “American means white.”² Trump’s ascendancy grew out of and continued a history of white privilege, of backlash against movements for social justice, and of conservative opposition to the expansion of equality in the US, all of which attempted unironically to defend the very statement Morrison used to diagnose the still thriving problem of Du Bois’s color line.³

Let’s be clear from the outset what we talk about when we talk about whiteness: It is not a phenotypical characteristic, an observable and unchangeable biological fact, nor is it a scientific designation, as the racist term “Caucasian” would have us believe. Rather, whiteness is a set of malleable historically, culturally, and geographically situated values that join together various meanings of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other modes of being and belonging, and that establish a master category against which other hierarchies are developed. In the West, it is one of the key historical formations of power, surveillance, and control. Whiteness is not static, it is neither certain nor a given; it is made and remade and unmade as history and culture bend and shift and break. Throughout the long, winding history of whiteness, scientists and scholars (pseudo- and credible) have played an important role in the process through which it has been formed and lived under. So have governments and their agencies. And, crucially, so has popular culture.

As numerous critics and historians have demonstrated, from the Frankfurt School to the current renaissance in cultural studies, popular culture is an important field for the circulation of discourses of power. Popular culture has been crucial to the creation and structuring of hierarchies of race in the US, from the establishment and ordering of the color line to the whitening of once nonwhite or racially “in between” “white ethnics.” The topic of race and popular culture has mostly been discussed in terms of nonwhite people, but as the growing field of whiteness studies has begun to show, focusing exclusively on people of color creates a blind spot in cultural analyses of power that reinforces the hegemonic status of whiteness as the ostensibly deracialized norm. From the creation of the first American superhero, Superman, in 1938 and onward, superheroes have been deeply informed and structured by notions and ideals of whiteness. The prominence of the white superhero—and, most commonly, of the white male superhero—in

2. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 47.

3. For key discussions of backlash against strides for social justice, see Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*; Faludi, *Backlash and The Terror Dream*; Roediger, *How Race Survived*; Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too*.

American comic books and in the transmedial adaptation of their narratives throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has transformed the white male body, and the boundaries of morality and justice that it polices and upholds, into a widely circulated visual lexicon of white (male) superiority. It is no surprise that the vast majority of the chapters in this volume emphasize the constitutive discourses of whiteness and masculinity in the narratives of American superhero comics' overwhelmingly male roster.

While it would seem self-evident, given the predominance of physically (and often mentally) superior white bodies in superhero narratives, that these stories are fantasies of white power, the relationship between whiteness and the American superhero has remained almost entirely unexplored. This is not to criticize comics scholars who have addressed issues of race (as opposed to the unmarked, and thus hegemonically nonracialized identity of whiteness), but simply to point out that while studies of representation and calls for greater diversity in superhero comics among scholars, critics, and fans are necessary, they largely address the symptoms, not the root causes from which the need for diverse superheroes (and creators) stems. The source of racial injustice in the field of superhero comics lies in the very fact that the superhero, as a generic figure and in many, if not most, of its specific manifestations, is a white male ideological formation nested in and supporting the discourses of power on which American society trades.

The aim of this book, then, is to address what we perceive as a critical lacuna in the fields of whiteness studies, comics studies, and superhero studies, building on earlier work on race in superhero comics but with the express intention of understanding the interstitial relationship among whiteness, American culture, and comic book superheroes. This book places the superhero at the center of a range of conversations about the history of whiteness in America, attending to key moments and movements in the development of the superhero genre, ranging from the relationship between white masculinity and the performance of Indianness (redfacing) in superhero and superhero-adjacent comics from the Golden Age to the present, to the phenomenon of white martial artist superheroes in the 1970s, and on to current debates about the configuration of whiteness, racial "inferiority," interracial relationships, and violence in comics like *Captain America*, *Wolverine*, *Cloak and Dagger*, and *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*.

The chapters in this book bring together a range of scholars who demonstrate, historicize, and challenge the operations of whiteness in superhero comics. The authors look at superhero narratives as well as at the production, distribution, and audience and reception contexts of those narratives, highlighting the imbrication of forces that have helped to create, normal-

ize, question, and even subvert American beliefs about whiteness and race. *Unstable Masks* considers the co-constitutive nature of identity, representation, narrative, production and consumption, and historical and cultural contexts in forging ideas about who gets to be American and who gets to be a superhero in the pages of comic books.

Whiteness Studies and American Culture

The superhero champions a master narrative of whiteness. This narrative foregrounds the dialectical function of whiteness as simultaneously assimilationist and separationist. Since the beginning of the colonial age, and especially in the territories that became the US, whiteness has been used to strategically assimilate or separate, to incorporate, for example, formerly nonwhite Europeans (Jews, Slavs, Irish) into whiteness in order to arrange them against other not-as-yet or nonwhites, for example, Africans, Native Americans, Asians, mixed-race peoples, and so on. Historian Ronald Takaki gives an account of this process in his discussion of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, when poor blacks and whites, indentured servants and slaves alike, joined together in rebellion against propertied white elites in Virginia. Takaki shows how, in the aftermath of the suppressed revolt, colonial authorities and wealthy landowners "reorganize[d] society on the basis of class *and* race" by turning to "Africa as their primary source of labor and to slavery as their main system of labor," in the process playing the grievances of poor whites against black slaves instead of against the landed elite.⁴ As lawyer and legal scholar Michelle Alexander describes this pivotal moment in racial history, "deliberately and strategically, the planter class extended privileges to poor whites in an effort to drive a wedge between them and black slaves."⁵ This strategy of division—this "racial bribe"—obscured potential ties of class solidarity between whites and nonwhites, co-opted and racialized long-held distinctions between civilization and barbarism, and laid the groundwork for what would, in decades and centuries to come, develop into a deeply ingrained conception of whiteness as "superior" and of any color as "inferior."⁶ Under these conditions, whiteness has historically solicited assimilation from some while separating out and designating others as non-

4. Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, 60.

5. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 25.

6. See, for example, Jackson, *Scandinavians in Chicago*; Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color and Roots Too*; Painter, *History of White People*; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness, Working Toward Whiteness, and How Race Survived*.

white, in the process establishing a racialized regime of power that extends social control over those deemed both white and those marked as nonwhite.

The history and local dimensions of whiteness as a racialized regime of control mediating other forms of power, exploitation, and (imposed) difference has been the subject of an increasing body of scholarship known unsurprisingly as whiteness studies. One genealogy of whiteness studies sees its origin in the long history of intellectuals of color, from W. E. B. Du Bois to James Baldwin, addressing whiteness as the key problem structuring racial inequality and the color line. Particularly compelling in this tradition is African American novelist Richard Wright's *White Man, Listen!*, released in 1957 and later reissued as a mass market paperback in 1964, which challenged white readers to face the psychological effects of white supremacy on people of color the world over.⁷ Analyses of race that attended to the place of whiteness in American culture and history appeared, in fits and starts, alongside the politically accented, radical work of black and ethnic studies scholars who found a place in the postwar and especially post-1960s US academy. Particularly notable is activist-writer Theodore W. Allen, whose work in the 1960s and 1970s pioneered the concept of whiteness or the "white race" as a formation for social control;⁸ and in the 1980s, women's studies scholar Peggy McIntosh developed the now ubiquitous concept of "white privilege" in her working paper "White Privilege and Male Privilege" (1988). It was not until the early 1990s, in the midst of the "canon wars" and the push for a more diverse humanities, that whiteness studies emerged as an institutional force with the publication, in rapid succession, of historian David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992), sociologist Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters*, historian Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995), cultural theorist Mike Hill's critical reader *Whiteness* (1997), and film theorist Richard Dyer's *White* (1997), as well as the foundation of the controversial journal *Race Traitor* (1993–2005), edited by Ignatiev and legal scholar John Garvey, and featuring the slogan "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity."

From the mid-1990s onward studies of whiteness proliferated at a steady pace. The constructedness of race and of whiteness in particular, and the decisively ideological and material bases of the (constantly shifting) color line, have been definitively established. Each passing year sees the recovery

7. Wright, *White Man, Listen!* See also Roediger, *Black on White* for a collection of black intellectuals writing on whiteness.

8. Allen began publishing his historical research on the invention of whiteness in the 1960s, but it culminated in his meticulous, two-volume *The Invention of the White Race* (published in 1994 and 1997).

of yet more lost histories of race-making that deepen our understanding of the contours of racial domination and oppression, as well as of resistance against the hegemony of whiteness. Take, for example, recent work by legal historian James Q. Whitman, which shows how the “American model” of race law, from Jim Crow to the 1930s, formed the basis of Hitler’s white supremacist legal system and by extension race laws worldwide.⁹ Scholars of whiteness even, in some ways, predicted the “post-racial” moment that was supposedly signaled by Barack Obama’s election in 2008, while also reining in the excesses of “post-racial” thought by vigorously questioning the public investment in the idea that race had lost its importance.¹⁰ That race survived the “post-racial” and bore forth a new urgency for whiteness and critical race studies is self-evident from the vantage point of 2019. On the one hand, recent years have seen the formation of a resurgent, intersectional civil rights movement galvanized in the wake of George Zimmerman’s 2013 acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin and coalescing following Michael Brown’s 2014 murder in Ferguson, Missouri, as well as countless other instances of police brutality, inspiring the #BlackLivesMatter movement for black liberation and racial justice.¹¹ On the other hand, as already noted, the so-called alt-right has emerged from the fringes to become an influential public and political force, not least in the guise of movement figurehead Richard Spencer or former White House chief strategist and Breitbart News executive chairman Steve Bannon, or in the increasingly bold use of a racialized, white nationalist language by Donald Trump on social media and in speeches, where previously radical public statements of white pride and superiority were disassociated from the mainstream—even as liberals and conservatives, leftists and reactionaries alike maintain racially unjust policies that disproportionately benefit whites.

Thus, despite rumors of its demise, race-as-color retains its salience in the US to this day, although race-as-whiteness is becoming ever more talked

9. Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model*; Kühl, *The Nazi Connection*.

10. Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists* pioneered the study of the insipid racism of “post-racial” America; Roediger’s *How Race Survived US History* offers a look at the many ways in which race as a social control mechanism mutated in key periods of social unrest, almost always to the benefit of whites and the detriment of blacks and other peoples of color.

11. Taylor’s *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* and Lebron’s *The Making of Black Lives Matter* offer important historical and theoretical approaches to #BlackLivesMatter. Also of import to the larger colonial context of whiteness and its oppressive history was the #NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock in 2016–2017. Both movements are aspects of a larger, multipronged social justice movement against capitalism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism climaxing in the wake of Trump’s presidential coup.

about, thanks no doubt to the pioneering work of the scholars mentioned here, and many others still. In fact, a growing number of people are becoming savvy readers of whiteness, able to identify and criticize the workings of “white privilege,” for example, in their own lives (and those of friends and family), in the actions of public figures, especially politicians and celebrities, and in the media they consume. Literary critic Eleanor Courtemanche labels this new situation of engaged media criticism by educated youth—and particularly of the osmotic spread of once hefty concepts from feminist, queer, and cultural theory—“Cultural Studies 2.0.”¹² In the era of Cultural Studies 2.0, *white privilege* is a widely understood term, and has become the basis for the proliferation of widespread, digitally mediated discussions about race and white people’s complicity with racism *as a system of oppression* rather than as discrete instances, actions, or persons.

In an era that is alternatively criticized or praised as color-blind and post-racial, Americans are increasingly adept at seeing whiteness. Yet, in the academy, the influence of whiteness in many corners of American life and culture remains unstudied, even as the popular press and social media users write daily about issues of whiteness, race, and diversity in various popular culture texts. This is evident in popular criticism of the comics industry and especially in the fandoms surrounding mainstream superhero comics. But much of this popular criticism, while genuine and important, remains firmly rooted in the present racial formation of American superhero comics. With this book, we want not only to join that ongoing conversation but to supplement it with a longer historical view that recalls and reveals how the superhero got to where it is today.

The Whiteness of the Superhero

Picture a superhero.

What comes immediately to mind?

Odds are that you are imagining a white man, perhaps even a specific white man with a name and origin story you’ve memorized or otherwise soaked up through your awareness of American popular culture tropes. This is only to be expected: The superhero is a white—and overwhelmingly cisgender, male, straight, and middle-class—ideological formation and has been so since its inception.

12. Courtemanche, “The Peculiar Success of Cultural Studies 2.0.”

DC Comics's Superman is widely acknowledged as the prototypical American superhero. Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two young Jewish American men in Cleveland, Ohio, sometime in the early to mid-1930s and premiering in 1938, Superman is the product of a tense era in the history of whiteness. In the early twentieth century, Jewish Americans were feeling the simultaneous push and pull of Americanization: On the one hand, anti-Semitism in the US was at a historical fever pitch; on the other hand, Jewish Americans of (mostly) European descent, along with other groups now considered "white ethnics," such as Italians, Greeks, and Slavs, were in the process of whitening. In early Superman comics, these tensions were dealt with in two ways, one "positive" and one "negative": While the vaguely ethnic Superman was a paragon of New Dealer ideology and of hyper-patriotism, his stories were larded with denigration and marginalization of women and people of color. Combined, this amounted to an argument for the Americanness of Jewish Americans and other white ethnic men.¹³ As the model for countless imitators, Superman laid the groundwork for what would become the genre and field of the superhero in which, to this day, the implicit answer to the question of who gets to be a superhero remains: "the white heterosexual man."¹⁴

This is not to say that there are no, nor never were, superheroines of color, or female, queer, poor, or even disabled superheroines, for that matter. But it cannot be denied that, collectively, such superheroines are few and far between. As historian Mercedes Yanora points out, because black superheroines are inescapably expected to live up to the hypermasculine white ideal of the superhero, they are implicitly linked to "crime and therefore incapable of representing an altruistic crime-fighting" identity (while female superheroines are in a similar double bind because "acting too much like a man or woman would effectively undermine her credibility as both a desirable woman and legitimate superhero").¹⁵

When any character that deviates from the implicit white male norm is announced as the star of a forthcoming comic, especially one published by the "Big Two" of superhero comics, Marvel and DC, they are hailed as representatives of that entire demographic. On the flip side, when—almost invariably—they are cancelled on account of poor sales (or company reboots), or when their usefulness to the company's public image wears off and they are unceremoniously faded into the background, the demographic loses that tokenistic representation. As a result, characters of color are often assim-

13. Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*.

14. Yanora, "Marked by Foreign Policy," 117.

15. Yanora, "Marked by Foreign Policy," 116–17.

lated into the genre through submersion into the superhero “Melting Pot.”¹⁶ Long-running solo titles starring a nonwhite superhero—such as *Black Lightning* (1977–1978, 1995–1996), *Black Panther* (1977–1979, 1988, 1998–2003, 2005–2008, 2009–2010, 2016–), or the title characters of any Milestone Media comic (1993–1997)—are rare, and still rarer are those superheroes of color who have appeared regularly for decades; in most cases, though, the latter are sidekicks (Captain America’s Falcon), members of a large superhero team (Storm, Sunfire, and Moonstar of the X-Men, Cyborg of the Teen Titans, Katana of the Outsiders), or new iterations of old characters (John Stewart, Simon Baz, and Jessica Cruz as Green Lanterns, Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, Ryan Choi as Atom, Jaime Reyes as Blue Beetle). In virtually every instance, they are written by white men. All of this has had the effect, over so many decades, of emphasizing that the superhero is, *de facto*, white. All else is an exception.

Still, in the academic study of superheroes, which has flowered since its meager beginnings in the 1990s, whiteness has remained nigh invisible. When the superhero has been analyzed as an entity, it has been through the lenses of mythology or form.¹⁷ As race and ethnicity have come under the comics scholar’s gaze, it has often been in the guise of marked differences from whiteness, for example through studies of representations of people of color and white ethnics. Cultural studies scholar Jeffrey A. Brown pioneered such critical scholarship with his book *Black Superheroes, Milestone Media, and Their Fans* (2000), which looked at the independent, black-owned superhero comics publisher that distributed through DC Comics between 1993 and 1997. Brown’s study historicized the representation of blackness in superhero comics and popular culture, offering Milestone as an unprecedented case study. Since Brown’s monograph, several books and edited collections have appeared on blackness in superhero comics, as well as on Latinxs, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Arab and Muslim Americans, and multiculturalism more generally—not to mention dozens of articles and book chapters.¹⁸ In addition, there are many studies that read race as

16. See Lund and Lewis, “Whence the Muslim Superhero?,” 6.

17. In this regard, perhaps the most influential and widely cited are Reynolds, *Super Heroes*; Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics*; and Coogan, *Superhero*.

18. See, for example, Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*; Aldama, *Latinx Comic Book Storytelling, Latinx Superheroes, Multicultural Comics, and Your Brain on Latino Comics*; Aldama and González, *Graphic Borders*; Brown, *Black Superheroes*; carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, chaps. 3–4; Cocca, *Superwomen*; Fawaz, *The New Mutants*; Gateward and Jennings, eds., *The Blacker the Ink*; Howard and Jackson, *Black Comics*; Lewis and Lund, *Muslim Superheroes*; Nama, *Super Black*; Sheyhahshe, *Native Americans in Comic Books*; Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence*.

an underlying structure for the genre, and while this is indisputably the case, as contributors argue in this book, these readings invariably trace an often tenuous metaphorical relationship between (white) superheroes and minority groups. This is especially the case with the so-called Jewish comics connection, or the idea that, as two scholars phrase it, “there is a tightly woven and indelible relation between Jewish identity and the genesis of the superhero.”¹⁹ Such scholarship attempts in large part to disavow superheroes’ foundational whiteness by ascribing their Otherness, in relation to non-superpowered humans, to a supposed hidden Jewish identity or to an easily portable minority metaphor—in the case of the X-Men, for example, scholars have read mutants in the 1960s as black Americans and in the 1990s as victims of HIV/AIDS.²⁰

Only a handful of studies have considered the underlying issue of the superhero’s whiteness. Marc Singer has illustrated that most often the superhero genre’s play with identity tends to uphold whiteness, even when paying “lip service” to diversity, although exceptions exist in which the same tropes are used to subvert hegemonic ideas of whiteness and race.²¹ Film scholar Matthew Yockey has discussed the constitutive whiteness of Marvel’s Fantastic Four.²² Historian Neil Shyminsky has noted that, while using a language of difference and oppression to speak about “mutants,” *X-Men* privileges white readers and invites them to appropriate discourses of marginalization, and thus, despite their often stated purpose of redressing inequality, they reinforce it.²³ Fellow historians Julian Chambliss and William Svitavsky have identified how the intersection of anxiety, identity, and culture informed the creation of the comic book superhero, in part by tracing the figure’s genealogy to pulp fiction heroes with an emphasis on whiteness.²⁴ Sociologist Albert S. Fu has written about how fans policed white normativity and the color line when the idea of a black Spider-Man was first hypothetically raised and then realized in the early 2010s.²⁵ I (Martin)

19. Baskin and Omer-Sherman, introduction, xxiii. For similar claims, see Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*; Fingerioth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*; Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*; Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!*

20. Minority metaphor readings are occasionally productive. Useful criticism of the X-Men’s metaphorical meanings include Darius, “X-Men Is Not an Allegory for Race”; Shyminsky, “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants”; Lund, “The Mutant Problem”; and Guynes, “Fatal Attractions.”

21. Singer, “‘Black Skins’ and White Masks,” 118.

22. Yockey, “This Island Manhattan.”

23. Shyminsky, “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants.”

24. Chambliss and Svitavsky, “From Pulp Hero to Superhero.”

25. Fu, “Fear of a Black Spider-Man.”

have, for example, addressed whiteness in relation to Superman's creation, as outlined above; in relation to the figuration of Marvel's New York City; and in relation to the Cold War imagination of US relations with Africa.²⁶ And through his popular criticism website *The Middle Spaces*, Osvaldo Oyola has deeply engaged the racial contours of superhero comics, especially the problems facing "diversity" in comics on account of the racist basis of the genre's ingrained whiteness.

This small body of work offers important case studies in the meanings and uses (by creators and readers) of whiteness in American superhero comics, largely tackling the major Marvel superheroes. But more is needed to address the range of issues, the many intersections of whiteness, its manifestations, and its implications for superhero comics, in order to further our account of the superhero—and, in doing so, to examine the racial dimensions exemplified by a genre often derided as mere power fantasy. While the rich archive of scholarship on superhero comics and the superhero figure across media demonstrates that there is certainly more to stories of super-beings than power fantasy, it cannot be doubted that power, especially the power wielded by white men, is fundamental to the genre's tropes and deeply intertwined with its eighty-year history.

Following the above discussion, it should be clear that when we speak of the "whiteness of the superhero," as every chapter in this book does, we are making a rhetorical claim similar to the one made by literary and black cultural studies scholar andré m. carrington about "the Whiteness of speculative fiction" (versus "the speculative fiction of Blackness").²⁷ Our claim that whiteness and the superhero are inextricably linked is not, as we have said, to deny the possibility and, indeed, the historical reality of the cultural figure's usage by people of color to create reflections of themselves in superhero comics. It is, rather, to recognize the historical imbrication of the superhero with the multiple discourses of whiteness circulating throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the US. Like the other genres constituting what science fiction scholar John Rieder calls the "mass cultural genre system"²⁸—the sum of the relations between the uses of different genres by culture workers and media consumers within the material, economic, and political formations of late-stage capitalism—the superhero genre has historically been bound up with the logic of mass-market appeal that sees the majority of its audience as racially unmarked, and therefore white. In other

26. Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*, "Introducing the Sensational Black Panther," and "X Marks the Spot."

27. carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 16–28.

28. Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*.

words, superhero comics creators overwhelmingly, even if not consciously, assume white faces, bodies, and experiences to be the universal standards of American life.

Thus, when we and our contributors speak of the whiteness of the superhero and of superhero comics, we follow carrington in referring simultaneously to the “overrepresentation of White people among the ranks of” the genre’s creators (writers, artists, and editors) and the “overrepresentation of White people’s experiences within” superhero comics.²⁹ Moreover, just as carrington gestures to the “speculative fiction of blackness,” reversing the semantic poles of the “whiteness of speculative fiction” and arguing compellingly that discourses of race and of blackness in particular operate much in the same way as the genre he discusses, so do we argue in the chiasmic and claim that superhero comics assay whiteness as a superheroic power itself, as one of the constituent elements of identity and power that constitute the historical, narrative, material, and political dimensions of superhero comics and their generic extensions across other media via the mediating cultural figure of the superhero.

Outlining Instability

As the above discussion of whiteness and its constituent place in American superhero comics makes clear, whiteness is only stable where its ability for social control is concerned. But the *look* of whiteness, of what and who counts as white, and of how whiteness makes its social, political, and even economic meanings known—these aspects of whiteness are far from static. The title of our book riffs on Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, taking literally Fanon’s conception of whiteness as a mask to be worn, an identity nonwhite people must perform in order to succeed in a white-dominated society, and equating it with the masks that are overwhelmingly associated with the sartorial design of the American comic book superhero, the mask that by and large abets the superhero’s maintenance of the status quo. But the mask of whiteness, Fanon was aware, is unstable; its very presence is a violence, and a history of oppression roils beneath its surface. The mask changes and mutates to suit prevailing social niceties and market demands, yes, but it still pinches and squeezes in places: It hasn’t always fit right on the ethnic white superhero; it fits uncomfortably on those deemed racially, sexually, or ably unfit to wear it; and sometimes it refuses to fit at all, acci-

29. carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 16.

dentally, sometimes even apologetically, revealing its true color, the shifting hue and undulating face of its racial-power ideology.

The fourteen chapters in this collection parse the superhero genre's complex history and theorize its relation to American discourses of race, difference, and belonging in the context of the critical advancements made by whiteness studies. *Unstable Masks* is organized into three sections that group chapters thematically according to the ways in which they read or historicize the relationship of whiteness to the history or generic identity of the American superhero comics they take as case studies. Part I, "Outlining Superheroic Whiteness," establishes a baseline for thinking about whiteness as a problematic for the analysis and critique of American superhero comics. Next, part II, "Reaching toward Whiteness" looks at the instability and contingency of whiteness through investigations of how comics have framed or embodied negotiations about who gets to be white and what whiteness is in relation to other articulations of race and ethnicity. The chapters in the third and final part, "Whiteness by a Different Color," discuss issues of secret or secondary superheroic identity in terms of the fluidity and invisibility of whiteness and the privileges it affords.

Combined, these sections offer a challenge to the saying—most commonly articulated in Spider-Man comics, but common to many other figures as well—that with great power comes great responsibility, a claim that does not, and cannot, mean anything substantive so long as the superhero genre rests on white supremacy and white privilege. On the page, superheroes may be larger than life, but in reality they are often all too closely tied to the foundations of inequality and oppression in American life. Unlike in a superhero comic, then, the challenge offered here cannot be resolved neatly by the final page and it is not an undertaking that can be resolved by unilateral action; abolishing whiteness is a long-term project that can only be completed by ordinary people coming together to unmask those who claim to be their betters.

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