
UNSTABLE MASKS

Whiteness and American Superhero Comics

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WHITE PLASTICITY AND BLACK POSSIBILITY IN DARWYN COOKE'S *DC: THE NEW FRONTIER*

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DARWYN COOKE'S *DC: The New Frontier*, a six-issue miniseries published by DC Comics in 2004, is an unabashed, nostalgic paean to the vast history of DC's intellectual properties and narrative and artistic legacies. It is not, however, uncritical or unaware of the problems of representative inequality, bound up with real-world systemic oppression, that plague that history and those legacies. Cooke's *New Frontier* retells the origin story of DC's superhero team the Justice League of America (JLA), strategically bridging the historical gap between the WWII-era Golden Age heroes Superman, Batman, the Justice Society of America, and Wonder Woman and the Cold War's Silver Age versions of Green Lantern, the Flash, and others, while weaving a new story of how the JLA was founded and how it fits with lesser-known contemporaneous DC properties, such as Adam Strange, the Challengers of the Unknown, and the Losers. Cooke sets the bulk of his narrative of the JLA's founding between 1955 and 1960, ending with the historical JLA's first appearance in a battle against an alien starfish in *The Brave and the Bold* #28 (March 1960). Though populated by dozens of recognizable characters, *New Frontier* focuses on Hal Jordan, a white test pilot who becomes the Green Lantern, and Martian Manhunter, an alien accidentally brought to earth by a deep-space communications experiment and forced to keep himself secret

lest humans' "fear of the unknown" and "hatred of things they can't control or understand" prove his demise.¹

Cooke tells this story in the energetic, cartoony style he pioneered as a storyboard artist for DC's animated television shows in the 1990s and that brought him acclaim for freelance work at DC and Marvel in the early 2000s. *New Frontier* melds Cooke's signature style with the aesthetics of 1950s Populuxe design to render a nostalgic glimpse of early Cold War America and its superheroes. Cooke offers a reconsideration of our nostalgia-mediated collective memory of the early postwar era, unsettling sanitized memories of America's history and of the racial politics of DC's publication record, which excluded superheroes of color until the 1970s, when a series of black superheroes appeared in various titles, including John Stewart as the first black Green Lantern in 1971, and culminating with *Black Lightning* in 1977, the first solo title about a nonwhite superhero. Key to *New Frontier's* racial politics, Cooke retroactively inserts, or "retcons," the 1990s black superhero Steel into the JLA origin story, transforming him into the black folk hero John Henry, who originally inspired Steel's creation, and making the character a KKK-fighting vigilante in 1950s Tennessee.

In this chapter, I argue that Cooke's *New Frontier* responds to DC's racially unjust history and to the overwhelming whiteness of its superheroes through two narratives, one of Martian Manhunter, who represents a liberal-progressive fantasy of integration and the erasure of racial difference, and the other of John Henry. In the context of the mid-century American racial formation as understood in the pioneering work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, John Henry signifies what was understood then to be the historical impossibility of the black superhero, unable to be written into the comics of the 1950s, let alone to be thought of as possible by the white-dominated comics industry. But his presence in Cooke's revisionist comic also gestures to the possibility of the black superhero's emergence—its ability to be imagined, then created, sold, and consumed—within the racial formation of the "post-civil rights decades."² In telling his history of the JLA, Cooke does not retroactively include black superheroes; he does not sanitize

1. Cooke, *DC*, 191.

2. Omi and Winant eponymous conceptualization in *Racial Formation* outlines race as a both a fundamentally ideological formation—that is, a symbolic and historically situated discourse—as well as the set of real-world social, economic, and other effects of that discourse on black life. I refer to the period after the "classical" phase of civil rights struggle (1954–1965) as untenably "post-" in order to recognize—after Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1234—that the struggle for racial justice and inequality is not over and done.

DC's legacy, but reinscribes the company's decision (and, indeed, the genre's tendency) to exclude black superheroes until the chorus of civil rights had grown so loud as to demand greater social realism in comic book representation. Martian Manhunter and John Henry's narratives point to the plasticity of whiteness when it is posited as the sole racial category to which superheroes may belong, making the critique of superhero comics' racial history integral to Cooke's otherwise nostalgic vision of the JLA story.

While Leo Spitzer refers to nostalgia as "the selective emphasis on what was positive in the past," the 1950s were only "positive" in any real sense for the white middle-class heterosexuals most often designated "average Americans."³ Despite its seeming embrace of the past, Cooke's comic is hardly wedded to notions that the 1950s were a better time. Instead, Cooke places his nostalgic renderings of the past in tension with narratives about race, difference, and belonging. Nostalgia, he knows, acts as a powerful form for thinking about the history and present of racial and gender formations, deployable in ways both reifying and probing. Thus, *New Frontier* exemplifies what Sinead McDermott calls "critical nostalgia" and "uses the past to unsettle the present," thus rejecting notions that the text seeks to restore a better history.⁴ As a work of critical nostalgia, Cooke's comic plays form, narrative, and history off one another to reenvision the past and think through questions of racial justice in the history of superhero comics.

Through Manhunter and John Henry alike, the metaphors of alienness and superheroism Cooke deploys, and the real histories of blackness that he builds from, he reimagines DC Comics's racial legacy in *New Frontier*. In doing so, he points to the possibility of a more just racial history for the superhero, one that acknowledges the key role of whiteness while also foregrounding the possibilities for the emergence of the black superhero in later decades. At the same time, Cooke underscores the fundamental whiteness of the superhero and its continual erasure of racial difference from the superhero figure.

Martian Manhunter and the Plasticity of Whiteness on the New Frontier

The historical New Frontier from which Cooke's comic takes its name was an administrative policy as well as a cultural attitude. Articulated in John F.

3. Spitzer, *Hotel Bolivia*, 153.

4. McDermott, "Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender," 401–5.

Kennedy's speech accepting the 1960 democratic presidential nomination, it was the New Deal for a "new generation of [American] leadership." The New Frontier was defined by significant advances in technology, especially the development of the atomic bomb, but Kennedy assured that despite the threat of nuclear annihilation, "the changing face of the future is equally revolutionary." His political vision, furthermore, linked the techno-scientific with the social, stressing that "beyond [the New Frontier] are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus."⁵ Cooke's *New Frontier* lives in Kennedy's rhetoric. His reimagining of DC's superheroes corroborates liberalism's hope for a more equal, more just America driven by techno-scientific advancement and outraged at racist violence, while also demonstrating the fundamental failure of liberalism to achieve lasting justice through structural changes to systems like race. The shapeshifting alien superhero Martian Manhunter operates as the crux of this historical critique of who does and does not belong, who is and is not white, in mid-century America and in the superhero comic more generally.

Martian Manhunter was created by science fiction and comics writer Joseph Samachson, son of Russian Jewish émigrés to the US, and comics artist Joe Certa. The green-skinned alien first appeared in a backup story published in *Detective Comics* #225 in 1955. He was conceived as something of a cross between Batman and Superman, mixing the former's detective skills with the latter's alien origins, nigh invulnerability, and outlandish list of superpowers. Manhunter's original story saw him using his shapeshifting powers to spend life on Earth as the white police detective John Jones. Outside of this disguise, he looks strikingly like Superman in form, the only real difference being his sharp, heavy brows and green skin. A relatively popular backup character throughout the late 1950s, Manhunter became a founding member of the JLA when Gardner Fox dreamed the team up in 1960. After that, Manhunter appeared regularly in JLA comics and less often as his alter ego John Jones. *New Frontier* changes little of Samachson's story, but instead imagines how Manhunter is discovered by other superheroes, joins their cause, and becomes a central member of the JLA. In doing so, the comic stresses the tension between the human (white male) life he leads and the alien he is, turning the latter into a metaphor for race that is typical of

5. Kennedy, "1960 Democratic National Convention."

science fiction and that undermines the real damage wrought by race and a lack of representation in people of color's lives.⁶

In the narrative world of *New Frontier*, superheroes have been outlawed as un-American vigilantes by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The only legally sanctioned superheroes are Wonder Woman and Superman, the two superheroes with the greatest powers and thus the most to offer in helping assert US policy abroad in the fight against communism; Cooke presents the former as an adamant feminist disenchanted with US foreign policy, and the latter as a naive, consensus-bound patriot. Other superheroes, all white, keep their former identities hidden or are hunted down by law enforcement. A mock-up newspaper article inserted into the comic details one superhero's death during a police chase as "the latest and most tragic chapter in the Eisenhower Administration's efforts to register and reveal the identities of the nation's" superheroes.⁷ But as the story unfolds, a massive, chthonic enemy predating all life on Earth, known as the Centre, enters US territory and attacks. With the military unable to defend against the threat, superheroes become a national defense necessity after the Centre seemingly kills Superman (he is later discovered alive); once they band together to defeat the enemy, they are deemed integral to the nation-state and incorporated via the JLA into the military-industrial complex. This narrative metaphorizes the superhero as a minority political group, like the alien-as-race metaphor, and plays out a key liberal fantasy that imagines this group, formerly the target of discriminatory legislation, integrated into American political culture and now working for rather than (supposedly) against the state.

In this context, Martian Manhunter serves as the only image of color in a landscape of white superbodies: His is a hypervisible green body on display, barely covered by the blue underwear and boots, yellow belt, and thin, chest-crossing red straps that constitute his costume. Manhunter's story follows the same trajectory from exclusion to integration into the white, liberal body of American democracy that the comic's plot traces for the superhero figure, but at the same time his narrative generates anxieties about what it means to belong in America when one is (as a metaphor) racially marked. Cooke signals these anxieties about belonging and, ultimately, about the adaptability of whiteness as a racial category both visually and through Manhunter's dialogue. When Manhunter first appears on Earth, the victim of a telecommunications experiment conducted by the scientist Dr. Erdel, he

6. On this generic trope, see Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*; James, "Yellow, Black, Metal, and Tentacled"; and Kilgore, "Difference Engine."

7. Cooke, *DC*, 52.

is a monstrous figure, a tall, lanky, vegetal green humanoid with a conical head and demonic red eyes. His visage gives Dr. Erdel a heart attack, though the scientist does not blame Manhunter. He warns Manhunter before dying: “You *must* be *very careful*. This world isn’t ready for . . . you. Mankind is a suspicious, violent creature. You *must not* reveal yourself.”⁸ Heeding this warning, and discovering that he cannot return to Mars, Manhunter hides himself away to study humanity so that he can assimilate and live among them—so that he can “pass” as human.

Manhunter spends weeks “studying life on earth with the help of this charming device they call the television. It is giving me all the information I need to act like a typical citizen of this nation called America.”⁹ Cooke demonstrates the plasticity of the Martian’s identity and physical form alike, as Manhunter utilizes his shapeshifting ability to emulate realistic and animated images from television—first Groucho Marx, then Bugs Bunny and the Indian-head test pattern that followed television station sign-offs at the end of the broadcasting day, and finally the identity he settles on—the key image of the “typical citizen of this nation called America”: “police detective John Jones. . . . [O]ne of the good guys.”¹⁰ Manhunter effortlessly assumes the visual identity of a white man and proves a formidable detective as John Jones, but not until after demonstrating the limitless extent of his body’s plasticity to mimic form, shape, and aesthetic. And yet, though his ability to perform identity is seemingly boundless, whiteness—like the plastic so evocative of the period—cannot exceed certain tolerances. Although passing easily for white as Jones, Manhunter is nonetheless estranged from his human colleagues, who think that Jones talks strangely, as though a character in a film noir, and that he violates the behavioral norms of mid-century white folks on account of his dual obsession with civil rights and aliens.

In a pivotal scene, Jones stands in his office staring at his wall covered in newspaper articles. On the one side are articles about the recent lynching of John Henry (a *Time* cover article titled “Black America Today”), about Rosa Parks, KKK attacks and black retaliations, and even an anachronistic article about Malcolm X; on the other wall are clippings about life on Mars, alien abductions, UFO sightings, and Area 51. As Manhunter narrates it: “My interest in subjects like racism and UFO sightings has made me something of an eccentric to my fellow officers.”¹¹ But as a result of his expertise, he is asked to take a statement from Harry, a “nutty” “fruitcake,” as Jones’s

8. Cooke, *DC*, 78.

9. Cooke, *DC*, 89.

10. Cooke, *DC*, 90.

11. Cooke, *DC*, 221.

colleagues mockingly describe him, who sees “little green men.” Harry turns out to be a technician on the space flight project led by federal agent King Faraday, with Hal Jordan (Green Lantern) as test pilot.¹² He tells Jones of a government conspiracy to hide knowledge of alien life from the public and that “the last five years have been spent developing a rocket to reach Mars” in order to eradicate Martian life before it attacks Earth.¹³

When Faraday steps in to remove Harry, Manhunter reads Faraday’s mind and discovers that the seeming ravings are true and, moreover, that Dr. Erdel’s experiment that brought Manhunter to earth tipped off the US military to the existence of alien life on Mars and to Manhunter’s terrestrial presence. To Faraday, who leads the space flight project and seeks to drop nuclear bombs on Mars, and by extension to the military-industrial complex that Faraday stands in for, the alien Other represents the antithesis of the human and a grave threat to national security. But framed against Manhunter’s insistence that racial and alien difference are alike in kind, the white G-man Faraday’s insistence on American dominance over and destruction of an entire alien species takes on overtones of a war for racial supremacy—a war in which Manhunter sees both himself and the black folk hero vigilante John Henry fighting on the same side.

Manhunter’s realization that he is being hunted by Faraday leads him to try to escape Earth, which he does by sneaking into the interstellar test flight base, but he misses his chance to escape in order to save Faraday’s life after the G-man attempted to kill Manhunter. But this wins him no favors; Faraday instead imprisons Manhunter at the rocket test site on Nellis Air Force Base, a privately owned enterprise contracted to the US Air Force. Through a series of interrogations, however, Manhunter and Faraday become friends, they play chess, and Manhunter gives Faraday insight into the growing threat posed by the Centre, to which Manhunter is unwillingly connected via telepathy. With Faraday, Manhunter sits revealed in his true Martian form, not as Jones or as the sleek Superman-esque visage he later adopts, suggesting a level of trust and camaraderie that bridges (metaphorically) racial and specific differences.

In the end, the alien whose species Faraday had intended to eradicate as a measure of interplanetary Cold War containment works for the G-man, at first as a G-man himself and then as a superhero fighting the Centre with other future JLA heroes. Manhunter’s ability to shapeshift once again signals his plasticity of identity and his ability to pass, racially and otherwise. As

12. Cooke, *DC*, 222.

13. Cooke, *DC*, 224.

he and Faraday leave for the battle against the Centre, Manhunter presents himself to Faraday as the bright-green, bald-headed superhero familiar to DC readers in the late 1950s. Manhunter calls this a “*friendlier appearance*,” “more like the hero Superman.”¹⁴ But Faraday disagrees, suggesting a more normative, all-American appearance: “Real men wear pants.”¹⁵ Manhunter immediately morphs his attire into a blue suit with a tie and dons black glasses, the clichéd image of the G-man, now the assimilated alien standing side by side with his former enemy.

Manhunter’s story of anxiously passing, of keeping tabs on the race (and the alien) question, of being hunted and persecuted by the government, and of eventually becoming the G-man himself is not a novel narrative trajectory for stories about race in the US. Indeed, as countless works of American ethnic literature have demonstrated and as scholarship about the Irish or Jews or Italians becoming white has strived to chart,¹⁶ whiteness, like Manhunter’s fantastical Martian body, is plastic. Although a formidable structure in American social, cultural, political, and economic life, race and its attendant meanings are contingent. Whiteness in particular can be fashioned anew in order to consolidate greater amounts of power over those excluded from the category, a process of racial alchemy that has been called the “racial bribe.”¹⁷

As cultural historian Colin Salter argues of the Australian and Canadian contexts of whiteness, though equally germane to the US,

the malleability of whiteness, its variability and changing contours, is located in its ability to adapt. The normativity of whiteness, the apparent universality, is rooted in an ability to absorb (co-opt) difference, in adapting to changes and societal variations [over time and space]. These abilities expose the hegemonic nature of whiteness, what we might describe as a dynamic equilibrium. An ability to absorb any potentially destabilising challenges.¹⁸

14. Cooke, *DC*, 327.

15. Cooke, *DC*, 327.

16. See, for example, Brodtkin, *How the Jews Became White Folks*; Guglielmo, *White on Arrival*; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

17. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 234, uses the term “racial bribe” to describe attempts to expand the social-control powers of whiteness over blackness (and other nonwhite racial formations) by granting whiteness to formerly non- or not-entirely-white groups, promising ultimately that the former status quo of what she terms the “racial caste system” will “reemerge in a new form.”

18. Salter, *Whiteness and Social Change*, 47–48.

Manhunter's physical form shifts in step with the social form of whiteness, and in so doing he becomes an assimilated American, a G-man, a superman. By the end of *New Frontier*, gone is the Manhunter who, in a moment of fear after having his life threatened in his Jones persona by Batman, anxiously reverts to his original Martian form while still in his work clothes. This scene occurs roughly in the middle of the miniseries, after Manhunter has just seen a sensational science fiction film, *Invasion from Mars*. Watching the film, he laughs at what he deems its ridiculous imagination of a human-alien encounter while the all-white audience screams. Manhunter takes this experience as evidence that Americans fear the unknown and hate "things they can't control or understand," proof that he will never be accepted.¹⁹ He repeats this line to himself in his half-alien, half-white man state after Batman's threat, revealing his ultimate fear that the differences between alien Others and humans, like those between the KKK and John Henry, are irreconcilable. But with time, Kennedy's vision of an America able to put difference aside for the cause of global good proves the fulfillment of Manhunter's wish for acceptance.

Martian Manhunter gets to become, like the Superman he sees perform in animated shorts before the science fiction film, a superhero admired by and serving the nation. Yet, even so, in the end he takes a form designed to be friendly to that "typical citizen of this nation called America" that he worked so long to pass with. Manhunter's is a story of liberalism's efforts to integrate in the Kennedy era and its mild successes, but at the same time, to borrow historian David Roediger's phrasing, race survives integration, and its meanings migrate and its signs proliferate in new ways.²⁰ This is the result of liberalism's failure in the New Frontier era to fundamentally alter the systemic bases that make race so oppressive for people of color in the US, in the process maintaining what Toni Morrison calls the "habit of ignoring race" throughout American history, which she notes as "a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture" premised on the idea that race is, especially in the postwar and "post-civil rights era, "an already discredited difference."²¹ While Manhunter demonstrates the possibilities for passing and the hope for integration and inclusion, Cooke is not as shortsighted as Manhunter, and offers his character John Henry as a reminder that the superhero figure is enmeshed with a racial politics that champions whiteness and that marks out and excises blackness.

19. Cooke, *DC*, 194.

20. Roediger, *How Race Survived*.

21. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 9–10.

John Henry and the Possibility of the Black Superhero

Martian Manhunter's narrative arc destabilizes whiteness, if only briefly before seeing him incorporated into the power structure of whiteness as one of its central beneficiaries via the JLA. At the same time, his demonstration of the plasticity of whiteness, insofar as it is the primary racial identity of the superhero, opens up space for the nonhegemonic superhero to emerge. And while, as Cooke knows, DC's history does not see a nonwhite superhero appear for nearly two decades after the JLA's initial publication, his reimagining of the company's history brings to life Cold War America's domestic struggles with race, carving out room for thinking the possibility of the black superhero while at the same time making clear the black superhero's latent presence in the narratives of so many comic book superheroes like Manhunter, Superman, and others written as alien outsiders passing in a normative world of whiteness in the comics of the 1950s and 1960s.

New Frontier trades in two metaphors that have been central to narratives of race in American popular culture. The more recent of these sees the superhero as a surrogate for racial differences, a clichéd tokenism that, as comics scholar Marc Singer has pointed out, can be used to powerful, socially critical effect, but often instead offers "deceptively soothing stereotypes" that "obscure minority groups even as the writers pay lip service to diversity."²² Such are the superheroes in *New Frontier*, who are shunned by US society and hunted by the government, though they lead otherwise successful lives as white Americans. Much older, and occasionally overlapping with the superhero-as-race metaphor—as evidenced by Superman and Manhunter; in Singer's reading, by the Legion of Superheroes; and in numerous, often muddled analyses of the X-Men²³—is the use of the alien as an allegorical figuration of racial (and, at the turn of the century, colonial) Otherness. These metaphorical renderings of race, both of which are present in Cooke's comic, efface more nuanced considerations of the very formation of power they purport to represent, and thus do damage to the painful histories of race while obscuring or downplaying the dangers of whiteness.

Cooke is aware of the implications of these metaphors, as Manhunter's fascination with the relationship between alienness and blackness, and his ultimate rejection of that relationship in order to become white and a member of the superhero elite, underscores. Cooke's assertion of John Henry's story of real racial struggles in the midst of these metaphors also challenges

22. Singer, "'Black Skins' and White Masks," 107, 118.

23. On the problematic, multiple, shifting interpretations of the X-Men's Otherness, see Shyminsky, "Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants"; Lund, "The Mutant Problem."

any reading that would dismiss Cooke's understanding of their ability to erase history in superheroic and science fiction narratives. Rarely do superhero comics both assert the alien- or superhero-as-race metaphor and also undermine it through the actual presentation of race. Even rarer are uses of that presentation to critique the failures of the metaphors. Cooke allows histories of political uses of the superhero to collide and chafe at the generic figure's constitutive whiteness. Indeed, Cooke's critique comes through clearly in the comparison of Manhunter's and John Henry's narratives: Where Manhunter insists on the links between blackness and alienness as two comparable things Americans fear, as a shapeshifting alien superhero he is able to assimilate, but as a black man in 1950s Tennessee, John Henry meets with fatal violence.

As a result of editorial and creator prejudices or fears that black superheroes would hurt comics sales in the early decades of superhero comics, black superheroes didn't exist, so they certainly were not eligible for membership when the JLA debuted in 1960 with all its metaphorical diversity, featuring a white Amazon princess, a white scientist-athlete, a white space ranger, a white Atlantean king, and a green Martian. As Cooke put it in his annotations of *New Frontier*: "The problem [with retroactively writing about a black superhero in the 1950s] was DC catered to white culture."²⁴ Given the racial legacy of the genre at mid-century, then, Cooke's John Henry appears briefly, albeit in key moments, throughout the comic—and when he does appear, it is not as a superhero, but rather as a manifestation of the black folk hero of the same name.

John Henry is perhaps the most famous black folk hero, and certainly the one about whom the most has been said; he was also, as historian Scott Reynolds Nelson discovered, a real railroad worker in Reconstructionist West Virginia.²⁵ The legend is easily told but signifies powerfully onto the history of blackness: John Henry, a masterful steeldriver, challenged his foreman that he could drive more steel in one day than the foreman's new steam-powered engine; he did, but the effort cost him his life. These exploits were immortalized in dozens of songs about John Henry, reflecting a complex relationship in America between blackness and labor; the songs were "fantasies of escape" from a labor situation haunted by "the almost constant specter of death."²⁶ The subject of "the most researched folk song in the United States, and perhaps the world," John Henry was "appropriated to tell the story about the position of black men during Jim Crow, . . . about

24. Cooke, *DC*, n.p.

25. Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man*, chap. 2.

26. Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man*, 32, 36.

the coming of the machine age, about nostalgia for the past, . . . about capitalism, and about the Black Power movement."²⁷ Foremost, the song was a warning against overwork and the dangers of racial capitalism to the black body. The folk hero became the inspiration for DC superhero Steel (John Henry Irons), a black construction worker-become-superhero, co-created by white writer Louise Simonson and white artist Jon Bogdanove in 1993 as one of four replacements for Superman after his "death"; the character proved mildly popular, landing his own series (1994–1998) and a film starring Shaquille O'Neal (1997).

Cooke's John Henry recasts Steel for an era when he could not have existed. In 1950s America, he is a vigilante driven by a classically generic origin story magnified by the horrors of Jim Crow: John Wilson and his family are hung by the KKK, but Wilson's rope breaks and he survives; Wilson dons an executioner's hood, cinched with the broken noose from his hanging, forges two massive hammers, and attacks KKK members to protect Southern blacks. Media brand him the "Modern Day John Henry."²⁸ His story numbers a mere eleven of the comic's four hundred pages, making him one of *New Frontier's* minor characters; he appears in three short vignettes in issue #3 and dies in issue #4. As Cooke put it in his annotations, "I wanted the reader to know that there was no hope for him, and America was still years away from a time when there would be that hope."²⁹

Bringing a more sincere connection to the source material, Cooke uses lyrics from several John Henry songs, plus his own lyrics, to tell Wilson's story. The lyrics overlay and lend a mythic significance to Wilson's few scenes, and Cooke wields the lyrics' meaning to fine effect, as for example during Wilson's first confrontation with the KKK as John Henry, which Cooke narrates using portions of the John Henry songs about his pledge to defeat the machine. In the final image of the scene, a single-page splash, Wilson/John Henry is shown from low-angle perspective, his massive size spread out before a blazing black church set alight by the KKK, his hammers at rest after the confrontation: "*John Henry told the captain that a man is just a man, and I swear by all that's right and wrong I'll kill you where you stand.*"³⁰ This threat is likely Cooke's own lyric, since it promises a violent confrontation with the foreman rather than just the contest with the steam-engine steeldriver. Cooke juxtaposes the machine and its ties with racial capitalism, acknowledging their survival of Reconstruction, *de jure* through Jim Crow

27. Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man*, 2, 40.

28. Cooke, *DC*, 221.

29. Cooke, *DC*, n.p.

30. Cooke, *DC*, 184.

and *de facto* through racist violence perpetrated by the KKK and unchecked by local, state, or federal officials.

While *New Frontier* is a love letter to DC superheroes on the cusp of the Silver Age, John Henry's narrative is the crux of Cooke's critical nostalgia. John Henry exists in a period when the superhero has been outlawed, and though isolated from other characters except through news reports read and overheard by Manhunter, he has all the trappings of the superhero: a (tragic) original story, a secret identity, an iconic costume, and a pro-social mission.³¹ But whereas the superheroes of *New Frontier* prevail through their HUAC-led persecution to become integral members of the US nation-state and the Cold War military-industrial complex, the black superhero goes unrecognized as a superheroic figure, remaining instead a "Modern Day" folk hero.³² The denial of *New Frontier's* black superhero is triple: It occurs within the storyworld, in the history that Cooke draws on, and in part in Cooke's own rhetoric for including a proto-version of Steel. For Cooke, "any effort to insinuate the DCU[niverse] into the real world of the 1950s wouldn't have been complete without looking at the civil rights issues of the day."³³ While John Henry is a serious vector for telling the story of blackness and race in America, his presence is mandated by a more just telling of history, one inclusive of race, rather than any inclination toward giving a black superhero his own story alongside the JLA greats. This is not to say that Cooke's motivation is wrongheaded, but rather to point out that the black superhero emerges only in the context of race issues, is always a means to talk about race or to satisfy a need for diversity. After all, the superhero, unmarked, is white, even when metaphorizing Otherness. The black superhero is only possible, John Henry suggests, through a narrative process of marking that makes him something other than the superhero.

John Henry's death is therefore necessary, since he will remain forever marked, first as black in a world where race matters, then—and only then—like the others, as a superhero in a world where superheroism is briefly outlawed. While John Henry's role is thematically and politically significant to *New Frontier*, Cooke uses John Henry, his story, and his death to emphasize Manhunter's identity quest. When, for example, John Henry is killed—betrayed by a white girl³⁴ whom he asks for help, then burned to death by KKK—and news of his death is broadcast nationwide, it deals a devastating

31. Coogan, *Superhero*, 30.

32. Cooke, *DC*, 221.

33. Cooke, *DC*, n.p. (annotations).

34. Cooke, writing on the blond white girl in his annotations: "the most innocent creature I could imagine." *DC*, n.p.

blow to Manhunter's faith in humanity (and by proxy, Americans) to deal with difference. Learning the news while in John Jones disguise at a bar with his detective partner, Manhunter remarks, "That man was a hero . . . A *freedom fighter!* A symbol of hope and resistance," or all that is definitive of a patriotic American. His partner explains, "This is America, not some sugar-coated utopia," prompting Manhunter to ask: "What do you think they'd do if they ever found one of those aliens they always talk about?"³⁵ Manhunter conflates alienness and race, and draws the conclusion that he, too, could be lynched. But not unsurprisingly, the metaphorical connections between alienness and blackness break down. It is not John Henry's death, in the end, that prompts Manhunter's attempt to leave Earth; no, he makes this decision later when the Flash takes over a news broadcast to announce he is giving up being a superhero because of government persecution.³⁶ Manhunter chooses the meaning of his alienness, between race and the superhero, between blackness and whiteness, and aligns himself ultimately with the group more easily integrated into DC's postwar America. As one able to be and become white, he does what John Henry cannot; he chooses his identity, he lives, and he becomes a superhero.

Coda

One of the final images Cooke gives us of Manhunter appears in the epilogue, after Manhunter and the future JLA have defeated the Centre. The epilogue includes scenes from the lives of the various characters featured throughout *New Frontier*, each paired with a consecutive portion of Kennedy's "New Frontier" speech, the pairing often highlighting the relationship between the comic's narrative and the historical circumstances of the dawning Kennedy era. Cooke gives us, for example, an image of a young black boy with the name "Irons" on his jersey (and thus, ostensibly, the future 1990s Steel) reading next to the mossy gravestone of "John Wilson AKA John Henry," paired with the text of Kennedy's speech that stresses "a peaceful revolution for human rights—demanding an end to racial discrimination in all parts of our community life."³⁷ And a panel showing a black boy passing

35. Cooke, *DC*, 239. In an expert formal juxtaposition, following the partner's comment that America is not a utopia, Cooke's next page offers a sensuous glimpse at utopian life on Wonder Woman's Paradise Island, beginning a scene in which Wonder Woman rejects American political self-righteousness.

36. Cooke, *DC*, 247.

37. Cooke, *DC*, 399.

a “WHITE ONLY” water fountain tops a later page, paired with Kennedy claiming, “Today some would say that those struggles are all over—that all the horizons have been explored—that all the battles have been won—that there is no longer an American frontier.”³⁸ The suggestion from Cooke’s inventive juxtaposition is that, just as W. E. B. Du Bois called “the problem of the Twentieth Century . . . the color-line,” that problem remained as Kennedy’s very own American frontier, even as Kennedy meant something wholly different: the frontier of America’s techno-scientific, social, economic, and geopolitical global dominance.³⁹

Sandwiched between the pages bearing these two images of the new American frontier that Cooke articulates as race is a full-page splash that features Superman and Manhunter, side by side as friends, turning away from the reader, looking out across a rich field of wheat, both heroes bathed in the golden light of a storm breaking and casting sunlight onto the field. Paired to this image is a lengthy selection from Kennedy’s speech about the pioneering spirit of those who first set out across the old American frontier, “determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from without and within.”⁴⁰ Martian Manhunter, now a JLA superhero alongside his equal and idol Superman, an icon of assimilated difference, has become not just a G-man but a triumphal pioneer of the new American frontier. Yet the images of the black boys circling Manhunter’s triumph of belonging throw their shade, casting doubt on the possibility of integration, signaling the limits of whiteness’s plasticity in an age of heightened racial tensions. Though a wide-ranging and nostalgic love letter to DC Comics’s history, *New Frontier* is at the same time a racial critique of the superhero comic. Cooke utilizes the destabilized, plastic, and racially ambiguous body of Martian Manhunter—who by all rights, as an alien, should sit beyond the discourses of race in America—to complicate and point to the power of racial structures, and in particular whiteness, to incorporate differences, while at the same time demonstrating the ultimate contingency of whiteness in the field of racial formation.

38. Cooke, *DC*, 401.

39. Du Bois, *Souls*, 20.

40. Cooke, *DC*, 400.

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