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THE BLACK X-MEN: WHERE ARE THEY IN THE NARRATIVE

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TITLE: BLACK X-MEN: WHERE IN THE NARRATIVE DO THEY EXIST

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Derek Martin

The purpose of the paper is to perform an analysis on the Marvel Comic *Uncanny X-Men*. The goal of this analysis is to understand Black characters location in the narrative and their level of participation in the narrative. The result is that Black characters are underrepresented in the comic as main characters and show a lack of participation in the overall narrative.

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CHAPTER 1

THE UNCANNY COMIC BOOK

Fox Studio's new film, *X-Men: First Class*, opened last week to take the crown at the box office. The film, based on Marvel Comics' *Uncanny X-Men* series, is a continuation of the X-Men franchise that has been very successful for Fox for the last eleven years. The source materials the movies draw from are some of the most popular and respected in the comic world. The X-Men have been reinterpreted in several animated television series since 1992, live action television series, and video games. Each time keeping the essential story of mutants fighting for peaceful coexistence in a world that fears and hates them. In fact there is a whole generation of children and young adults, those who grew up watching the cartoon, who have the X-Men's mantra of "fighting for peaceful coexistence", embedded in their collective consciousness.

As a comic book, the X-Men fit a rather peculiar location in the media landscape. Comic books, particularly the superhero genre, rely on pictures, text, and the reader's imagination to fully tell a story. A reader's perceptional baggage, including personal experiences and cultural beliefs, shape how they interpret the words and pictures they consume in mass media, including comic books (Murphy 1998). Novels and short stories expect a reader to construct the world they envision in their own head. Television and movies on the other hand, uses actors

to visually convey the world they are trying create. Comic books blend those two

approaches to create a very different reading experience. Of the top 100 grossing

domestic films in U.S. history, comic book properties make up 10% of them, with

the third highest grossing being the comic book based movie *The Dark Knight*

(Box Office Mojo 2011). The growing popularity of comic book properties, this

summer alone the four comic book based films have grossed over 500 million

dollars, and the lack of research done on them in a sociological manner, they

serve as fertile ground to get a snap shot of society (Box Office Mojo 2011).

An equally important aspect of comic books is that they were for a long

time, and to some degree today, seen as a part of a stigmatized culture (Lopes

2009). Originally when they first appeared on the scene superhero comic books

were seen as something targeted at children or young adults, as a means of

entertaining them in a world before television took over. This was until Fredric

Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent (1954), which proposed that superhero

comic books were un-American and were mentally harming children. The book

created fervor in the country, rallying forces against comic books. It became such

an issue that there were actual hearings in front of the Senate in the form of the

Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (Time 1954). The fall out for this was the

formation of a censoring body for comics, the Comic Book Authority, and a

falling interest in comic books across the country (Hajdu 2009).

After the controversy in the 1950s, superhero comics took on a stigma of

corrupting that same youth, and it was not until the 1960s that they returned to become even more popular. The new stigma that came attached to superhero comics was one of antisocial behavior, reclusiveness, and immaturity (Lopes 2009). While the focus of the stigma has changed since the 1930s, there has always been this type of negative connotation attached to them (Lopes 2006). This creates a medium that is consumed by far fewer people than television or novels. To put it into perspective, in 2010 over 700 million books were purchased compared to fewer than 100 million comic books (McSweeney 2011; Miller 2011). In turn creating a stronger community, that finds strength in fanzines and conventions; even with this more insular community, comic books have still managed to affect the larger culture. They have at different periods become popular enough, with a large enough fan bases, to get cartoons on television, video games based on their characters, or even motion pictures. This has brought the themes and ideas that comic books have been constructing for years to be exposed to the larger society. This greater exposure has garnered comics some criticism from political pundits whenever they are perceived as violating cultural norms. The most recent examples include comics not being patriotic, with the "Death of Captain America", some political signage in comics, and Superman renouncing his United States citizenship (Higgins 2011; McGuirk 2010; Robinson 2007). Since it does not look like superhero comic books will be waning in their effects on television and film and that no other scholar has attempted to analysis

comic books in a similar fashion; they are an ideal place to examine how a media form transmits mainstream cultural beliefs.

Started in 1963, the X-Men were created for Marvel Comics by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (Lee et al. 1997). In the world the X-Men were created in, mutants are humans who are born with a special "x-factor" gene that gives them superhuman abilities. This makes mutants different than other super powered characters, their powers not the result of some science accident or alien physiology. Mutants were normal people who happened to be born with a gene that made them different. This was a dramatic shift in superheroes at the time. Their creation was still rooted in science, but the writers introduced a unique social element to their story. While any person could potentially be given powers by some type of scientific accident, although in comics it was stated that not everyone would survive those processes, becoming a mutant was something you had no control over and random. A person could not choose if they would be a mutant or what their mutation would be; it was all a random occurrence. In the Marvel Universe, normal people saw mutants as this secret enemy that could be them, their family or friends. Mutants are seen as the next step in human evolution, thus implying that humans were obsolete, adding to the fear and hatred (Lee et al 1997, Trushell 2004).

Not only that, but Stan Lee made sure that in this world mutants were feared for their power. The average person saw them as this unknown threat that

could be anywhere and affect anyone. This elevated the stakes in the book and really added a dramatic weight to the characters (Lee et al. 1997, Trushell 2004).

As for the X-Men themselves, Lee not only made them a group of teenagers, to allow for teen drama, but he gave them a distinctive mission statement. While other heroes at the time fought villainy because of some moral reasoning, the X-Men had a much more political mission. They fought for a world that fears and hates them just to improve the relationship between humans and mutants. During which the comic series was created, the Civil Rights Era, you can see the parallels present (Lee et al. 1997). Professor Xavier, the leader and founder of the X-Men, was constructed as a man who had a "dream" of peaceful coexistence between human and mutants; this was intended to parallel the views of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The original five X-Men were a group of white males, and one white female, who were trained by Xavier to understand their powers and use them to benefit mankind and mutant-kind. In their quest for tolerance, they fought not only human ignorance but mutants who used their powers for personal gain or to hurt humans. The heroics are not what make the X-Men a unique case in comics; instead it is the theme of a marginalized group dealing with discrimination and oppression from a majority society. This theme, while originally seen as a parallel to race, can also be applied to symbolize the struggle of non-heterosexuals, women, and teenagers in general. Sociologist like Hall and Lucal (1999) point out that the X-Men's story of mutants dealing with

normal humans who want them either controlled or destroyed, is a nice

juxtaposition for similar oppression and discrimination faced by racial, ethnic, and

sexual minorities (Trushell 2004).

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

People of African descent have a very tumultuous relationship with media in the United States. From as soon as they arrived on the shores of the early colonies, they have had some type of presence in media. From being the subject of slave ads to locally know authors, early Black Americans had a presence in the United States' media (Andrew et al. 1997; Gates 2003). It was not until the 19th Century that Black people became a permanent feature in the burgeoning entertainment media. These early portrayals were oppressive in nature, and usually made fun of the supposed low intelligence and primal nature of Blacks. An entire type of media entertainment, minstrel shows, was dedicated to depicting Blacks as buffoonish, idiotic, superstitious, and sometimes even magical. As time progressed and technology evolved, Blacks continued to see themselves ridiculed in the media primarily for the entertainment of the dominant class (Hughes 2006; Hughey 2009). After the advent of film, one of the earliest and most successful films, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), based a majority of its plot around those same negative black stereotypes.

The history of Blacks in television is a storied one. MacDonald (2009) showed, in a historical analysis of Blacks on television, Blacks continued to be

the source of ridicule on television. Some of the most popular shows during the 1950s, like *Amos n' Andy* or *The Beulah Show*, embraced this notion of Black people as walking jokes. Blacks would either find themselves cast as musical talent or buffoons with little intelligence or complexity, which were always there to make the White characters seem more competent. This imagery would be the main depiction of Blacks on television and in film until the 1960s. As the United States was facing its own dark racist history with the Civil Rights Movement, television and film were attempting to change the way it constructed how Blacks would be seen. There was a rise in much more balanced portrayals, with shows like *Julia* and *I Spy*. These television shows would not only have Blacks as the stars of the cast, but also depict them as well-rounded characters who were more than caricatures. The diverse roles offered to Blacks would continue to be in a state of constant change over the next four decades. In the 1970s, there was a definite increase in television shows, like *Good Times*, that once again embraced those minstrel show themes of Black characters seen as one-dimensional jokes or fools that are laughed at not with. The diversity in depictions would increase in the mid-1980s and wax and wane throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Gray 1995; Gray 1997).

Nama (2003) points out that research shows us that television is an ever changing medium, whose dynamics have changed over the last 40 or so years. This is evident in the different roles Blacks have taken on television shows since

the 1950s. Starting out in very benign roles, many times as either subordinates or sidekicks; eventually they came to take starring positions as characters with more depth and who challenged popular conventions. Much of this can be traced to the changing social climate with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (Gray 1995; Gray 1997). Later during the 1970s, Blacks began to star in films that, while placing them in stereotypical roles, also managed to be subversive (Nama 2003). These Blaxploitation films inserted powerful anti-authority messages in between their imagery of misogyny, violence, and materialism. During this same time period, Blacks starred in television shows that continued the tradition of more pluralist roles that were introduced in the later 1960s. They also starred in shows that included not only more Black characters but also focused on issues facing Blacks like inner city poverty and racism.

From here Blacks filled a number of roles, each time redefining what Blacks in the media were like. Television shows in the 1980s endured another surge of simplification of Black roles, that is until the Cosby Show premiered; where a new dynamic for Blacks and the media was introduced. Instead of Black characters living in poverty, the Cosby Show featured a successful upper-middle class Black family (Bogle 2001; Gray 2004; Nama 2003). The dynamic introduced by the Cosby Show, one of positivity and success, would not be universally well received. Some Black scholars and writers felt the show was unrealistic and actually did more harm than good (Gates 1992). A succession of

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broadcast TV shows copied the Cosby Show's formula of comedic positivity and continued to present a more complex view of Black characters. Eventually, however, Black characters would once again find their characterization and presence taper off during the mid-1990s and the 2000s (Nama 2003).

Social scientists have performed content analysis on various forms of media to more clearly understand the relationship between race and media. These analyses have generally focused on understanding or identifying the relationship of how the media constructs or influences racial perceptions. Some of the studies have focused on different television programs and how they construct and portray racial identities and relations (Atkins 1992; Banks 1977; Berry 1992; Gray 2004; Harris 1992; Hudson 1998; Lichter, Lichter and Rothman, 1994; Merrit and Stroman 1993; Oliver 2003; Page 1997). Some even focused on particular genres of television programs like children's shows or reality shows (Dennis 2004; Orbe 1998; Roberts 2004). While others have instead took a magnifying lenses to the news media. In those studies the researchers not only looked at how Black people, particularly African Americans, were portrayed in the news but what effects it had on the general population and African American's perceptions of other African Americans (Bjornstrom et. al 2010; Chiricos and Eschholz 2002; Dixon 2002; Dixon 2006; Ford 1997; Johnson and Dixon 2008; Oliver 2003). There have even been studies into film, advertisements, children's books and the theatre (Beeman 2007; Coltrane and Messino 2000; Darden and Bayton 1977; Grady 2007; Kenaan

1996; Molette 1985; Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie 1997).

These studies all indicated that there does seem to be a type of pervasive and negative portrayal of Blacks in the media. Much of this negative imagery takes the form of stereotypes. Stereotyping, as defined by Carter (1962), is seen as the process of creating polarizing and homogeneous attributes for a particular group. Nama (2003), in particular, saw the function of stereotyping of Blacks as: "…images [that] communicate the inferiority and devaluation of Black people and Black life and reinforce negative ideas, behaviors, attitudes and opinions about racial minorities" (p. 23). He points out that most research has focused on the seemingly constant casting of Blacks in comedic or criminal roles in entertainment media. Other researchers have showed similar findings in the news media (Oliver 2003).

In the world of superhero comic books diversification of the characters were moving at a much slower pace. Prior to the 1960s, there were no Black superheroes in American comics. It was not until Stan Lee's introduction of the Black Panther in Marvel Comics' Fantastic Four vol.1 (1966), that readers were given a superhero that was not white. The Black Panther's first appearance was a watershed moment in comic history. With the rise of Blaxploitation, more Black characters were soon created at Marvel Comics and DC Comics. Storm, one of the most popular Black characters, became Marvel's first starring Black female character in 1975 and is one of the characters counted in this study. Her role as a

team member, and eventually leader, of the Uncanny X-Men signified a shift in the type of characters that starred in Marvel Comics.

In the 1980s, the Cosby Show, with its portrayal of an African American family of upper-middle class standing, added more nuance to the view that Whites had of Blacks. It occurred during a time period where a wave of conservatism was hitting the United States' cultural consciousness. This same time period saw a shift on social definition and legal rulings involving racial discrimination and inequality (Gray 1995). The combination of how the show was portrayed and the cultural climate shaped the way that non-Blacks viewed this television show and African Americans in the larger society. Jhalley and Lewis (1992) point out that the Cosby Show, while having good intentions, could have supported the belief that Blacks in America had finally achieved equality. They believed the show did show another side of the Black experience, but also reinforced that anyone who had not made this level of success was to blame for it. Gray (1995) indicates that this conflicting imagery created a false reality for White viewers, hindering any understanding of the true circumstances of many lower class Blacks at the time. After the initial success of the show, there was a growing number of television shows attempting to recreate the Cosby Show's success in the 1990s. In the same time period, Blacks starred in more blockbuster films and had an increasing presence behind the camera. As the millennium approached, however, many of those same Black shows started to disappear from the television landscape. Today

it is possible for Black characters to fill any number of roles and sometimes can portray competent, intelligent, and complex characters. Even still, there exists a question over whether or not those early stereotypical tropes are still the norm or if Black characters are given fair representation.

There were efforts to create a more diverse collection of characters in modern comics. In 1993 a comic company emerged on the scene that actually was run by men of color that focused on creating a diverse racial and ethnic pantheon of characters. This company, Milestone Comics, was published through DC Comics but kept their continuity and characters separate from that of the mainstream DC Comics and their other subsidiaries. Milestone Comics stood out among the other comic companies by treating characters of color not as tokens, but as the stars of their line. The line featured Latino, Black American, and Asian American characters as the leads in their titles until financial reasons caused them to close down in 1997 (Brown 2000). Thanks to one of their creators, the late Dwayne McDuffie, they would continue to see some success with the animated series popular and critically acclaimed Static Shock. The cartoon would continue to air from 2000 to 2004, and even interact with the animated universe created by DC Comics. More recently the characters have appeared within the main DC Comics universe and are supposed to be receiving bigger roles in the comic months. Outside of the Milestone Comics situation, however, there has not been another diversity driven comic initiatives in mainstream comics.

During this same time period of the 1990s, comic books found themselves more popular than ever, in light of their continued stigma. One of the most popular franchises during this time was the X-Men, with the first issue of their second volume of X-Men selling more than seven million copies (Johnston 2010). Their popularity became such that they spawned a number of auxiliary and peripheral titles. Their share of the market became large enough to warrant a new and very popular animated series on the Fox Network. On the television series, Storm had a starring role, with appearances by other characters of color including Bishop, Sunfire, Psylocke, and Shard. This combination of events saw the characters pervading throughout the pop culture landscape and becoming household names. The X-Men became even larger cultural icons with the premiere of their first live action motion picture in August of 2000. This signified a sustained interest, by Hollywood and the viewing public, in superhero genre films. Previously there had been isolated instances of interest by Hollywood in superhero comic properties, from the 1960s Batman film up until the Batman films of the 1990s. Marvel Comics' Blade and the X-Men films saw the start of an era of superhero films becoming a more legitimate option for filmmakers. The X-Men went on to star in some of the most popular films of this genre, garnering more than $1 billion dollars combined. Storm, played by Halle Berry, was a character whose importance in the films grew with each movie, placing her as a character front and center of the X-Men film world.

As the millennium approached and Black characters were increasingly less visible on television networks, the NAACP, along with other racial and ethnic based advocacy groups, spearheaded a campaign to demand that television executives diversify their lineups (Johnson 2008). This saw the start of a new racial stereotyping for Black characters. Instead of being only cast as criminals or malcontents, Blacks found themselves cast in more and more professional occupational roles as characters who had overcome to make it. This utopian reversal transmitted the idea that Blacks, particularly African Americans, had finally done well for themselves (Entman and Rojecki 2000). Conversely, it perpetuated the idea that any Blacks, who had not made it, were totally to blame for their position (Nama 2003). Concurrently, there was a different stereotype developing on children's shows. Downplaying malicious characteristics, Blacks in children's shows found themselves portrayed as much less threatening but very ineffectual and passive sidekick characters to the main White male characters. These Black character types are neutered and asexual, typically portrayed as nerds or geeks (Dennis 2009). Unsurprisingly, they are characters that are not only unattractive to any another character, but also only serve the purpose of being the there for jokes and very little actual characterization (Dennis 2009).

Nama (2003) brings up the notion that even with new characteristics attributed to Black characters, it is their location and participation in the narrative that is worth further examination. He further goes on to state that a much better

understanding can be gained if one is to focus within one particular genre of television. His belief is that by focusing in on the racial representation within one genre, a much clearer understanding of the relationship between historical trends of racial representation and racial meanings that Black, particularly African Americans, construct on television (p. 24). While Nama's work focused on crime dramas as a genre within the media form of television, this study focuses specifically on the genre of superhero comics, a much understudied genre. When comic books are analyzed it is usually for discussions on morality or pop culture, race and ethnicity are left out of most of the equations (Lopes 2006; Martin 2007). When racial analysis does occur it typically examines the manner in which Black characters are portrayed, either looking to understand how Black characters are constructed or how comic books deal with race (Brown 1999; Singer 2002). Very few of past analysis have taken a look at this genre in a systematic way that intends to give a clearer picture of racial symbolism in the books. This genre and medium are not expected to be congruent with real life. Instead superheroes are more accurately described as a modern day mythology that relates to people on a conscious and unconscious level (Reynolds 1994).

Mythologies represent models for how we should and should not live our lives. Essentially, they tell stories that are meant to guide our lives (Eliade 1998). Superhero comics are not to be taken as approximation of reality but as a representation of it. Campbell (1988) stated that there are four types of functions

served by myths. They are the metaphysical function, psychological function, cosmological function, and sociological function. The metaphysical function of myth, according to Campbell (1988), is the idea that myths represent concepts about life that cannot be easily turned into words. According to Campbell, myths serve to represent these concepts through the process of participating in the rituals of myth constructing and reconstructing. Myths that serve to explain what manhood is or what it means to be a mother are examples of myths working in this function. The pedagogical or psychological function of myth is when myths serve as guides to help people understand the various stages of life and existence. A classic example is the idea of a person being judged before passing into the afterlife. This myth illustrates a rite of passage, or journey through a stage of life, from this life to the next. Myths also function to explain the importance of the existing social order. This sociological function of myths is illustrated in many Christian myths about rules and regulations, like the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Campbell's final function, the cosmological function, serves to connect people's understandings of the physical world and how they understand it by explaining how things work in the physical world. This includes creation myths and myths that explain what particular animals operate the way they do (Campbell 1988).

In our modern era, superheroes serve most in the pedagogical, by teaching life lessons, and sociological functions, by reinforcing the notion of good will

triumph over evil. These functions are why studying superhero comics can become beneficial. By examining the representation and position of Black characters in superhero comics, we can get a snapshot of how they are viewed in the larger social order.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Borrowing from Nama's study of dramatic series on television, this study will take the strengths of content analysis and an interpretative approach, while avoiding some of the weaknesses present, to give us a deeper understanding of the perception of African Americans in the United States (Nama 2003). Content analysis is a very useful method of analysis because it does give you a systematic method upon which to study any type of media. It provides structure to gather information inherit in a variety of types of media. The weakness in the method, however, comes from the fact that content categories can miss the nuance and complexity of the meanings encoded within narratives. To compensate for this, an interpretative approach can be used to understand the context of the media and to look at the deeper meanings within. Nama (2003) proposed that to gain a proper understanding of the interplay between Black representation and a particular form of mass media, one has to use a genre analysis.

The use of a genre analysis allows the study to avoid the shortcomings of a content and textual analysis, while still being able to utilize their strengths. The structured and systematic perimeters of the content analysis are kept. While an interpretative approach is added, as Nama pointed out, to fully illustrate what a

particular racial groups symbolizes in the context of a particular media format and the ideological significance it has in the broader society (2003). Barthes (1972) points out that using an interpretative approach, which in this case would be a textual analysis, allow you to understand the internal racial reality of the media format and the external racial reality of the larger society. All of this allows the study to look beyond the surface indications and point out how these comic books may actually be a place of cultural significance (Larsen 1991). This creates a connection between the empirical evidence and the interpretative aspects of the representation of black characters in the comic books. More accurately put, "In other words, the empirical results reflect a deeper cultural code of the place, status, and perception" of the group being studied (Nama 2003). The goal here is to demonstrate that the Black characters in the comic books are not just examples of how this particular group is portrayed in the comics or how much narrative participation they receive, but also that they have cultural significance and can be seen as having ideological meaning (Larsen 1991; Nama 2003).

It should be noted that while Nama's study looked only at the depiction of African Americans, this study will expand its parameters to include all characters that fit into the racial category of black. This expansion of the parameters is done for two reasons. Since the characters in comics are drawn and not actual actors, their identity can only be recognized by what is shown. The focus is on race, which is indicated by their appearance and skin color. Secondly, this method

allows for a much more thorough examination of the perceptions of characters of color. By not restricting it to a particular ethnicity, the study gains a wider scope. The idea here is not to say that all Black ethnics are the same. Instead the purpose is to see how Black identity in general is regarded in the U.S. perspective.

There have been a number of African American and Black centered comic books. Some of them have been relatively successful. During the 1990s, there was a company, Milestone Comics, whose goal was to showcase characters of varying racial and ethnicity in comic books. This was done as a way to outset the mainly White landscape of mainstream comics. Eventually, Milestone was bought out by DC Comics, and they no longer exist. In Marvel comics, there have been several very long running Black centered books. *Black Panther*, the first mainstream Black superhero, appeared in several titles and a mini-series before several solo series. One of those series ran for 62 issues from 1998 to 2003. However, compared to some of the other long standing comic book titles' runs, Black Panther's comic run was far shorter.

There have been Black centered superhero ensemble books as well, but they too are typically short lived and not very popular. This leads me to move towards looking at some of the more long-standing predominately White centered comic books. Nama (2003) points out with the dramatic series on television, the best place to study the presence of Black characters is in series that have ensemble cast that are racially mixed, albeit predominately white. Comic book series in this

category typically have multiple protagonist and several concurrently running storylines. This type of story structure allows for much more likelihood of a Black character being in the starring position. Thus, the focus of this study will be on Marvel Comic's *Uncanny X-Men* (Vol.1). Lasting for more than 40 years, *Uncanny X-Men* has been one of the most popular comic titles in Marvel Comic's history for the majority of its run. Only the regular issues of the series were chosen, starting from issue 1 in 1963 all the way to issue 432 in 2003. To make sure this analysis covers what the comic does on a usual basis, any anniversary or annual issues were not included in the parameters for this study.

This particular comic book title was also chosen for its unique place in comic book history. First published in the 1963 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the X-Men were created as a team of teenager heroes who, unlike most of the superheroes at the time, gained their powers from their genes and were regarded as "freaks" or "deviants". Unlike others who were either aliens or given powers from outside means, the X-Men were "mutants"; in the context of the Marvel Universe, mutants are humans born with the "X-gene", manifesting at puberty (Lee 1963). Not only were their abilities different, but so was their mission statement. While most heroes were received as saviors, celebrities, or protectors of humanity, the X-Men were seen as an actual menace. In the Marvel Universe, because anyone could potentially be born a mutant, mutants were seen as threats to humanity and so the X-Men not only had to combat super villains but ideas of

prejudice and discrimination. This placed them in a unique situation of not only being defenders of humanity but also champions of an oppressed group who were fighting for equality. The creators and subsequent writers periodically drive home this point that the X-Men serve as an analogy for all types of minority groups. This places them in a unique situation as not only entertainment but as possible allegorical literature (Lee et al. 2005).

Continuing with the structure set up by Nama, the interpretative analysis used is not aimed at pointing out any stereotypes or atypical portrayals of characters. This is a very useful tool when there is no intention to place some type of indication of "positive" or "negative" role portrayals. The study is looking less to see how a character is portrayed, and more about how their participation and presence in the narrative relates to the ideology surrounding the racial identity of Black people in the larger U.S. context. It has the goal of understanding "encoded symbolic meaning of African American characters in terms of presence and participation" (Nama 2003). In other words, the purpose of this analysis is to look at character's presence, participation in the storyline(s), and how they are participating in the storyline(s). This leads into several research questions that are attempted to be answered by this study: To what degree are Black characters present in the Uncanny X-Men comic?; how are Black characters present in the Uncanny X-Men?; and to what degree are Black characters participating in Uncanny X-Men?

Sample

The first issue of Uncanny X-Men was released in 1963, so the data set for this study begins there and goes to 2003. 2003 is used as an end point, because it marks 40 years since the comic began publication and it is the most recent year available to access freely through a database. The textual analysis performed follows several methodology rules to ensure a systematic study. For every year that the comic book was released, the first and fifth issues were collected. The cover and any advertisements or non-story related pages were not counted. In years where less than five issues were released, only the first was collected. Since not many years fall into this category it shouldn't throw off the final tallies. As the researcher, I only want to look at new issues and not reprints of previous stories; therefore a gap in the data will be present from 1970 to 1975. The title was cancelled after issue 67 and was only reprints of previous stories until the comic was restarted with Giant Size X-Men #1. This is the one exception to the exclusive of the anniversary or annual rule. At the time of its release it was treated as a normal issue and not like anything outside the regular publishing schedule of the series. The total population was 432 issues from #1 to issue #432. The study looked at 71 issues of Uncanny X-Men covering a range of time from 1963 to 2003. 359 character appearances were analyzed, with a total of 5845 page count.

Characters were coded based on their physical appearances. They were placed into one of five racial categories: Black, White, Asian, Native American,

and Non-Human White. Non-Human Whites were characters who were shown as not being human but still were depicted with white skin. They composed the majority of the non-human, or alien, characters in the comic. The others all had skin colors that do not fit into our racial categories like blue or green. When appropriate, Black characters were also divided up into African American, African, Latino, or West Indian. This was only done in instances where a character's ethnicity was stated. Characters also had their sex coded, female or male, depending on physical characteristics as well. Characters who exhibited skin color outside the parameters indicated, such as those with blue or purple skin, were not counted. The only exceptions were characters whose race fit the parameters at one point but may have changed during the collection of data. Non-humanoids, such as characters that were far more animal than human in appearance, were also not counted, since they fell outside the realm of our constructions of race.

Operationalization

There will be four categories of representation of Black characters that are measured: (1) the number of Black characters that appear in the sample, labeled as character counts; (2) the functions of the characters in the narrative stories (hero/protagonist, villain/antagonist, ally, or "innocent"); (3) the prominence of Black characters in the overall series; (4) the number of times Black characters actually have dialogue in the story. To properly analyze the presence of characters

in the stories, they were analyzed through two different classification types: starring position and narrative position. Character's starring position was categorized as either being "series star", "series regular", or "guest star". "Series stars" are those characters that are listed as being characters that are the stars of this book at that particular point Uncanny X-Men has a roster that does change over time, so some characters will go from being a series star to being a guest star. "Series regulars" are those characters who appear in the book on a regular basis but are not members of the particular X-Men team in this series. "Guest stars" are characters who did not fit the definition of "series star" or "series regular"; information on whether a character was a member of the team or not was gathered on Marvel.com and from each issue of the series. This was restricted to only include characters that were given a name; any character without a name was excluded from this count.

Since many of the comic books contained multiple storylines, Black characters were also grouped into their relative narrative location depending on where they were situated in these stories. This was designated depending on which storyline they were most active in. If there was more than one background story, they were designated with an "a", "b", "c", etc. (Nama, 2003). Back-up stories, separate stories that are not necessarily connected to the main story at all, were automatically marked as "background". Some of the comic books had stories in them that were used as previews of another book or as marketing tools to sell a

product. These types of surplus stories were treated as advertisements, and not counted at all in this analysis. The level of black character participation was measured by looking at their page count and their amount of dialogue. Page count was measured by the amount of pages the character could be identified on. In the occurrence where a character could not be identified, they were not counted for that page. On pages where there was a wide-spread shot of a particular character(s), the section that had their head on it was used to identify their page count (Nama 2003).

Finally, since dialogue is one of the primary components of a comic book, a part of a character's participation will be measured by counting the instances they have dialogue. The dialogue count looks to identify and count every time, per page, a character has either a speech or thought bubble. Since comic books allow the reader to see what the character is thinking, a character's thought bubble will be treated the same way as their speech bubbles. Both will be used to contribute to the data on their dialogue participation. Another common trope of comic books is to allow a character to be the narrator for the issue. While narrating, they not only have their normal speech bubbles, but they also may speak in the narration boxes. While narration boxes are not counted because they do not belong to a particular character whose race can be distinguished. In the instance that an identifiable character is the narrator, those boxes also count as

pieces of dialogue. On pages where the character who was speaking could not be

identified, there was no count recorded.

CHAPTER 4

THE COUNTS AND POSITIONS

Of the total character appearances, 78.8% (283) were White characters. Another 3.8% (14) were non-human White characters, which are counted as a separate group to differentiate them from human White characters. Of their total page appearance, White characters had a total of 82.0% (4819) of the total page appearances. The non-human White characters had a 1.0% (115) of the page appearances. This gave White characters, of all origins, 83.0% of all the page appearances from the sampled comic books. In contrast, Black characters were 6.7% (24) of the total character appearances, covering 9.0% (538) of the identified page counts. Native Americans and Asians were even less present in the comics, with 3.0% (160) and 5.0% (293), respectively, of the total page counts. There was some variation over time present in the data. The 1960s was the most "White" of any decade, with no appearances by Black or Native American characters, and only a small number of appearances by Asian and Non-human White characters. The number of non-White characters saw a spike in the 1970s and peaked in the 1990s. Black characters had 16.0% of the page counts and Asian characters had 10% of the page counts. Overall, non-White characters encompassed 29.0% of the page counts for the 1990s, the highest of any decade.

What this does show us is that a significant portion of the total page counts are

held by White characters, with only 17% held by people of color overall.

Comparing this to the racial composition of the United States, we see that Whites

make up 78.4% of the total population, with Blacks comprising 12.6% compared

to their 6.7% in the comics (Census Bureau 2007). Taking these numbers and

comparing them with the data gathered, we do find that White characters appear

to have a similar representation as they do in the larger society. Black characters,

on the other hand, are underrepresented in total character appearances, character

counts, and page counts. Unlike with Nama's work (2003), where Black males

were observed to have the majority of appearances, roughly 53% of the Black

characters were female and they comprised 62.5% of the actual Black character

appearances. They also outpaced Black males in page appearances (445) and

dialogue counts (323). Out of all the groups looked at, Native Americans held the

largest percentage of their total character count being male, at 87%.

Character's Significance

In regards to most forms of media, a character's notability is typically a

measure of their significance to the overall story and series (Hunt 1999). The

characters in this sample were separated by their prominence in the Uncanny X-

Men comics, grouped into series star, series regular, or guest star. Of the total

Black characters only 4 of them were actually featured as series stars; in contrast

to 25 (78%) White characters as series stars. The majority of the characters that

did appear in the comics (10) were guest stars, with only one of them being a series regular. It should be noted that only one of the observed Black guest stars was a villain, the rest were either allies or just pedestrian characters. The one villain also appears as an ally, albeit mind controlled. The one Black series regular was a pedestrian and really only had peripheral activity in any battles.

Within a substantial number of issues there were multiple storylines at play. These storylines were placed in a hierarchical manner, thus giving more importance to some over others (Nama 2003). The storyline at the forefront of the comic, the one that received the most page time, is considered "story a". The sub-plots, the stories that are separate from the main story and typically do not include the characters in the main storyline, that were present were labeled as "story b." Comics with multiple sub-plots were simply labeled "story b", since in theory all the sub-plots were treated equally by the writers. Back-up stories are those stories that are completely separate from the main comic book and can feature re-prints of older stories, biographies of characters, or some totally unconnected story. Of the total comics analyzed 30 of them had sub-plots and 11 had back-up stories. Every issue that had a starring Black character had that character(s) in the main plot, or "story a", with very few of overall sub-plots having them involved and none of the back-up stories having Black characters.

DIALOGUE COUNTS

Page count and character count are good indicators of a character's

prevalence in a comic book, but one more indicator that can help to further clarify

a character's position in the story, is a look at a their dialogue count. Just having a

character appear does not hold the same amount of significance as actually giving

a character dialogue. Dialogue means a character participates more thoroughly

with the story, and can also mean that a story is told through their perspective, if

they are the narrator of the story. Black characters had a dialogue count of 386

(9%) compared to 214 (5%) and 53 (1%) for Asian and Native American

characters, respectively. This was all miniscule compared to that of the White

Characters, who comprised 83% (3531) of the total 4184 dialogue counts.

Similarly with page counts, there is some slight variation over time for dialogue

counts. The 1960s saw zero appearances of Black and Native American

characters, with White characters comprising nearly all of the dialogue counts.

Greater diversity in dialogue counts started in the 1970s and peaked in the 1990s,

with Black characters covering 17% (193) of the total dialogue counts that year,

the highest of any non-White group of characters. So even with a growth in story

participation, there still is a strong lack in the presence of Black characters in this

book.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Of the four Black starring characters, only one, Storm, starred in the book

for any significant amount of time. She was a main character of the book from her

introduction in the mid-1970s up until the late 1990s and once again in the 2000s.

Other Black characters, like Bishop and Cecilia Reyes, did have short stints as stars or series regulars. However, Storm was the only character to have an extended time in that position, as well as having any significant number of page and dialogue count. This was even true for Asian and Native American characters, which saw an even smaller amount of participation in the book.

The lack of characters of color in page counts, appearances, and as stars of the title follows a point Nama presented in his study (2003), which the lack of characters of color points towards the idea that White readers cannot relate to characters of color. To quote Nama (2003), "Thus, the lack of African American series regulars in network dramatic television suggests a certain degree of ambivalence and uncertainty toward African American characters as source material that a primarily White viewing audience can relate to in dramatic television" (p. 33). Translated over to superhero comics, this could suggest insecurity in the ability of Black characters to attract White readers. This possibility is supported by not just the low number of page counts and appearances, but by the significantly low number of Black starring characters and guest stars.

The real importance here is not just that Black characters need to appear on more pages. More importantly their lack of dialogue and casting as series regulars or stars, keeps them out the narrative. Not being including in the narrative shows us that Black characters are being marginalized. With comic

being a snapshot of the larger society, like most forms of media, the notion of

Black people being marginalized seems to be reinforced. Out of all the X-Men

over the 40 year period that the sample is taken from, only 3 out of 46 X-Men

were Black characters (Marvel 2011). The Black characters that do appear,

outside this small number of series stars, become the subjects of what Nama

(2003) calls "narrative objectification" (p. 33). This means that they do not have

an official capacity as participants in the narrative. They are instead used as fillers

in the background to give the illusion of diversity. Unlike the television programs

Nama studied, in Uncanny X-Men we see that even in this capacity Black

characters are being used to a minimum.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION POINTS

Uncanny X-Men is a superhero comic book that is as ideology as it is high impact fun. Other Marvel Comic's superhero titles like the Avengers, Captain America, Amazing Spider-Man, or Fantastic Four all centered their stories on the general idea of heroes fighting the good fight. They told tales of extraordinary men and women battling villains out for money, conquest, or destruction. The Uncanny X-Men faced similar threats. The fundamental difference between the X-Men and the other superhero titles was the inclusion of a political element. The X-Men, as a franchise, is centered on the theme of fighting for equality. The mutant is an allegory for any group of people that have been the victims of oppression or discrimination. So the fight that mutants of the X-Men are participating in is a fight for equal rights. Different real world analogies to threats the X-Men, and mutants in general, faced were designed to give people of various minority statuses something to relate to. From the AIDS and Legacy Virus comparison to Genosha's similarities to South Africa's apartheid, the Uncanny X-Men have stood for a connection between the experience of the minority and their mutant characters. So it stands to reason, that the actual characters in the book should reflect diversity relating to the notion of minority status.

Sadly, even in a superhero comic book that constructs itself as being the book about people in marginalized groups, Uncanny X-Men comes up short at presenting a depiction of diverse racial characters that goes beyond superficial (Trushell 2004). There is a Black presence in the title but there is definitely room for improvement in featuring a more diverse cast of characters. Uncanny X-Men also failed at using any significant number of Black characters in starring roles.

As a source of allegory, the mutant can be translated to represent any racial or ethnic group, along with any number of marginalized identities. That was the point writers Stan Lee and Jack Kirby were trying to get across when they created them (Lee et al. 1997). The mutants, as a whole, are supposed to represent the experience of any person from a marginalized group; this includes racial minorities (Trushell 2004). However, as Nama (2003) points out the lack of significant Black characters in a genre can construct the type of imagery that "teeter(s) perilously close to articulating a representational politics of symbolic placation rather than meaningful participation" (p 350).

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

There are two big limitations to this study that would need to be addressed before any noteworthy conclusions can be established about superhero comics and race. First, this study only looked at one particular mainstream superhero comic. Although the choice of picking the X-Men is because of their relatively unique mission statement, that does not mean that other popular, and not as popular, superhero comics should not be analyzed in a similar fashion. Since the Uncanny X-Men, a title about superheroes battling for equality, seem to find having proper racial representation problematic, I hypothesize that other team superhero titles would also come up short. Fighting for market space, one can postulate that the titles would mimic each other in some aspects, as far as their cast of characters goes, and so I believe that a study of their representation would be similar. Of course only through further genre analysis of superhero team titles from Marvel Comics and their other competitors, would any type of hard data be collected. As the superhero comics impact more mainstream, through big budget films, video games, and television shows, their impact will become more widespread. So taking the time to look at variety of superhero titles can give us a more comprehensive look at how the genre handles racial minorities. An even bigger limitation of this study was that it does not take into consideration things that

occur behind the scenes. The study focused on character appearance and participation but ignored the fact that perhaps the race or ethnicity of the writers, artist, creators, and editors could have an effect on what goes on in the titles. Data on who composes comic book readership, which has never been done, would also be of significance here. Perhaps there is a correlation between who works in comics and their audience. Understanding this relationship could actually start to work out the mechanics of what causes the differing levels of racial minority participation in the comic universes. This is an issue that can be further assessed to connect depiction in comics with the real world's racial dynamics.

The importance of understanding the symbolism created by superhero comics continues to grow as more and more superhero comic books enter into the popular media through film and television. As Murphy (1998) and Nama (2003) explain, images in the media of Black people have an effect on how a person will perceive this same group in the real world. A marginalization of this group, and others, can prime or indicate to a viewer that this is how a particular group is or should be treated. Comic books growing impact on mass media mean that what is presented in the comics could have an impact on what the larger audience sees. The growing influence of comic book superheroes can be seen by just looking at what's popular in the media. Growing from eight in the 1990s to 44 live action films from the big two comic companies in the last ten years, there definitely does seem to be growing popular with the comic book films. In 2012, there are already

plans for four very big live action comic book based movies. Marvel Studios hopes to capitalize on the popularity they have created with their *Iron Man*, *Thor*, *Incredible Hulk*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger* films, with a tent pole *The Avengers* movie starring all the heroes (Marvel 2011). Meanwhile, Sony Pictures will be releasing a reboot of the billion dollar Spider-Man franchise with *Amazing Spider-Man* (Finke and Fleming 2010). And Columbia has a sequel to *Ghost Rider* and *Men in Black* in the works for the same year (Chitwood 2010; Superherohype 2010). While Marvel's competitor DC Comics, will be releasing the final part in their Batman trilogy, including one of the highest grossing movies of all time, *The Dark Knight Rises* (Jensen 2010). Besides those in theaters, Marvel Comics and DC Comics also release direct to DVD animated movies. These movies are much more faithful to the source material than the live-action films and are highly popular (The Numbers 2010).

Furthermore, in 2010 Marvel Animation Studios premiered their new cartoon The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes. Later on in 2011 they will be releasing season 2 of Iron Man: Armored Adventures and a new Spider-Man cartoon in 2012. DC Comics has a Green Lantern animated series on the horizon and more episodes of their Young Justice animated series. To understand how the media affects the perceptions of people, we have to understand the racial dynamics in the source material (Murphy 1998). Superheroes comics have been around for nearly a century and only look to be getting stronger. So if we want to

understand minority group's role and importance in this genre, we have to take

the time to study it sociologically.

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