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NUBIANS OF PLUTONIA: BLACK WOMEN IN MODERN POST-APOCALYPTIC AND DYSTOPIAN GRAPHIC LITERATURE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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can offer: inspiration. So, when a person can rely on you for that, that empowers them in every realm of their life." You have inspired me through your words, works, thoughts and actions. You shared your wisdom and that made me a more courageous scholar. I will be forever indebted to you.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the deployment of race and gender in comic books and graphic novels, paying close attention to how Black womanhood and girlhood operates in the speculative future. This project suggests that the framing of black womanhood and girlhood in post-apocalyptic/dystopian spaces provide a counter to the normative notions of both while simultaneously using normative tropes of Black womanhood and girlhood to produce new ways of understanding Black femininity in the future. *Nubians of Plutonia* use Black feminist cultural criticisms, Black popular culture, and visual culture to ask: does graphic literature present new, more dynamic understandings of race and gender, or does it reinforce racialized and gendered ideologies?

Through an interdisciplinary focus, this project unpacks how Black women and girls in these literary texts shift how we come to know Black spaces, the African diaspora, and otherhood. Through the introduction and deployment of *subversive iconicity* and *hood heroinism*, this project engages identity markers and other forms of racial formations among all communities of color. This project ultimately finds that Black female content creators provide alternate ways of knowing Blackness and gender through the reworking of normative renderings of Black female bodies.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I was a child when I read my first comic. I would stand beside my mother at the grocery checkout and eye the copies of *Archie* that were on sale. Every once in a while, she would buy me one of the issues, and I would spend hours reading the 'bubbles' of dialogue and looking at the illustrations.[1] *Archie* was one of many comics I read growing up; most were comic strips from the newspaper or grocery store, including *Curtis*, *Josie & the Pussycats*, and *The Boondocks*. I stopped reading frequently but always went back to comics as they provided me with a breath of fresh air. The visual and textual elements of each story attracted me to comics.

Over time, my interests shifted, and I stopped reading comics regularly. It was not until AMC's *The Walking Dead* that I once again became immersed in comic books and graphic novels. I saw a few episodes of the television show, immediately stopped watching, and found the graphic novels written by Robert Kirkman. The graphic novel provided context to what I watched on TV; the show was different from the graphic novel. What I found with the graphic novel was a darker tale of the zombie apocalypse. The characters were different from the show. They were more developed and more battered as a result of the epidemic. They had suffered extreme loss and violence, both of which were written and illustrated in detail. The graphic novel is also where I met Michonne, a character who would force me to dig into the representation of Black women in comic books.[2]

Introduced in Issue #19, Michonne met the group of survivors, led by Rick Grimes, while they were living in an abandoned prison. Seeing Michonne walking with her zombie boyfriend

[1] Also called: speech balloons, speech bubbles, dialogue balloons.

[2] Her full name is Michonne Hawthorne, but she is referred to mononymously in the comics.

Figure 1.1: Michonne pictured with the zombified version of her boyfriend and his best friend.

and his best friend, I began to wonder how she came to acquire zombie pets and wield her katana with ease.[3] The imagery of her flippantly chopping heads and saving the lives of larger but less equipped men pushed me to explore more of the graphic novel and Michonne. I had never identified with a character in a graphic novel or comic book like I had with Michonne. Characters like Storm and others gained their superpowers as a result of genetic mutation, but I had never seen a black woman in comics possess human power until Michonne. After losing her entire family, Michonne takes on life after the apocalypse like that of a warrior.

[3] See Figure 1.1

Throughout the next few issues, Michonne attempts to blend in with the group but is held at arm's length. She eventually becomes friends with another survivor, Tyreese. Tyreese is a former professional football player who was dating another survivor, Carol, when Michonne arrived at the prison. Michonne seduces him, which leads to Carol committing 'suicide by zombie.'[4] In this scene, Michonne embodies the textbook archetype of the Jezebel. The Jezebel, which finds its origin in slavery and extends to today, focuses on the idea that Black women are naturally sexually promiscuous.[5] Kirkman can only create Michonne based on his experiences and speculations around the lives of Black women. If he lacks access and engagement with Black women, that will show through the treatment of his Black female characters. His lived experience informs the universes he imagines. Kirkman could construct new and alternate realities about Black womanhood through the role. His future could have drastically differed from the past or present. With all the multiple scenarios one could choose, Kirkman could have created a character that did not rely on antiquated tropes of Black womanhood, but Michonne is not that character. The lack of deviation from normative tropes surrounding Black women is what informed my project.

Nubians of Plutonia: Black Women in Modern Post-Apocalyptic and Dystopian Graphic Literature interrogates the role Black women play in the production of Black female characters

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[4] When Carol confronts the two, Tyreese blames Michonne for "tempting" him; temptations which 'made' him sleep with Michonne. Tyreese putting the onus on Michonne frames her as not only promiscuous but as a threat to white women. After hearing that Tyreese cheated on her, Carol attempted suicide as a result of Tyreese's cheating. She was saved from that attempt but eventually succeeded. Carol walked up to a chained zombie and allowed the zombie to bite and eat her neck. She eventually was killed by one of the survivors so that she would not turn into a zombie.

[5] Donald Bogle tackles this in his book, *Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* which traces the history of Black stereotypes within film and media. He looks at the influence stereotypes have on the perception of Blacks noting that Black stereotypes were established to instill fear into whites. Historically, white women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, modesty, and even sexual purity. Black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory. See "The Jezebel Stereotype," *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia Ferris State University*, www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/.

in comics and graphic novels. My project is an interdisciplinary exploration of race and gender in comic books and graphic novels. I argue that the centering of the Black imagination is integral to the framing of Black women and girls in the speculative future. I assume that Black authorship pushes against notions of Black representation through the inclusion of Black people in narratives that often ignore them. I further argue that Black female content creators provide alternate ways of knowing Blackness through the reworking of tropes places on Black female bodies. These ways of knowing are contigent upon the authors navigation of both the literary and 'real' world. In these instances, I argue that Black womanhood and girlhood shifts how we come to know Black spaces, the African diaspora, and notions of otherhood. Using comic book literature, images, and archival documents, I am interested in the role Black women play within post-apocalyptic and dystopian futures and how these roles not only shift the representation surrounding Black women but create new ones. *Nubians of Plutonia* revolves around a few questions: how are Blackness and gender negotiated in the imagined future? How do these futuristic imaginings reproduce/refute normative narratives surrounding Black womanhood and girlhood? And what do these images and stories say about the present positionality of Black girls and women?

Nubians of Plutonia uses both comic books and graphic novels to explore the tactics deployed by content creators in the production of Black womanhood and girlhood in the future. This production forces us to rethink tropes associated with Black femininity. Much of the content in my project would be considered comic book material. Comic books are where superheroes were born and where characters like Archie exist. Over the years, we have seen more serialized comic books come into the genre, with comic books like *The Walking Dead* and other comics that have hundreds of issues while not fitting within the graphic novel category. Graphic novels

are longer and often not serialized.[6] They are a singular text that usually begins and ends in the same book. Comics and graphic novels exist as a means of alternative storytelling which, I suggest, is a mode of resistance in regards to the framing of Black women and girls. I chose comics and graphic novels because of the connection between the literary and the visual. The use of illustration in tandem with the story provides a more complex rendering of the future. I start and finish this project, primarily focusing on graphic novels while also exploring the impact of comic books on the making and remaking of Black female bodies.

The 'Black future' acts as a site of critique. It looks at the way that Black womanhood functions in a Black future that is dependent on Black survival. Survival allows us to explore how Black bodies in the dystopian future frame race and gender, specifically women of color. This point of view is especially compelling as our world shifts and technological advances change the ways we move through society. My work provides another way of critiquing race. One that, in many ways, embodies characteristics that are familiar but also presents Black womanhood in ways that require further inquiry. Black women have held a significant position in the Black community. The unpaid and paid work that Black women perform, the types of communities in which they live, and the kinds of relationships they have with others suggest that African American women, as a group, experience a different world than those who are not Black and female.[7]

I utilize Black feminisms and queer of color critique as a reading practice to explore literature (comic books, graphic novels, and black science fiction), illustrations, interviews

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[6] Comic books are generally geared toward youth, whereas graphic novels are lengthier works with mature themes of violence and sexuality targeted towards adults. See Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence*, 14.

[7] Collins, Patricia Hill. "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1989, pp. 745–773, 747.

conducted about comic book/popular culture publications, and photographs and images from TV and film. This multimedia approach will provide multiple points of entry into the productions of black women in these narratives. Doing close readings of graphic novels allows me to analyze both the visual and literary aspects of graphic literature while exploring the contributions of both to Afrofuturism and post-Blackness. Using these frameworks to read the future allows us to critique the production of Black women and girls in this literary genre while also exploring the representation of both in the future.

Of course, these creations do not exist in a vacuum; content creators implement their prejudices in realities they create. These realities are what led me to this project; I am concerned with how authors construct Black women in the future. My goal with the exploration of Black female bodies in speculative futures is to interrogate the ways cultural producers represent Black female bodies, especially within an industry that has only marginally recognized them. Graphic novels can immerse us into unknown futures, to give us an alternate reality with which we can lose ourselves or discover ourselves. These texts create the future and, in doing so, dictates survivors, threats, and the social and ideological climate of the future.

The experiences of Black female bodies in the speculative future includes more than Black women; the representation of Black girls also evolves in speculative futures. I am particularly interested in how scholarship conflates Black girlhood with Black womanhood. Black girlhood studies exist as an essential site of critique, but Black girls are often subconsciously discussed as though they are Black women. I suggest that exploring Black girlhood through a lens of girlhood studies and Black feminist traditions provides depth to the potentials of Black girls in comics but also to how we discuss girlhood. The questions I seek to

explore are how Black girls push against broader understandings of girlhood, as informed by a Eurocentric ideology, and Black girlhood specifically.

Section 1.1: Afrofuturism, the Post-Apocalypse and a Post-Soul Aesthetic

Afrofuturism serves as a mode of understanding and framing the future. In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Mark Dery defines Afrofuturism as speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture, and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.[8] He frames Afrofuturism as something that can only exist when created and drawn by blacks. Black content creators fuel Afrofuturism, but not all Black content creators produce the future with Afrofuturism in mind. As such, not every Black imagined future can be understood using an Afrocentrist lens. Instead, I suggest that Afrofuturism allows for the centering of certain Black content creators and the futures they believe.[9] Afrofuturism contextualizes the Black female subject in the Black future, an act that locates Black bodies outside of the Western, Eurocentric point of view.[10]

[8] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* ed Mark Dery, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 180.

[9] While Afrofuturism exists as a reclamatory practice, Lisa Yasnek asserts that Afrofuturism focuses on the reclamation of the history of the past and the history of the future as well. See Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," *Socialism and Democracy* vol. 20, no. 3 (2006): 47.

[10] In "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," Stuart Hall explores the relationship between Black Popular Culture and broader mainstream culture, noting that shifts in culture has resulted in a move from a European high culture to an American popular culture. Hall states that cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination; it is never a sum-zero cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and configuration of cultural power, not getting out of it. See Stuart Hall, "What is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* vol. 20, no.1/2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 106.

In her text, *Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,* Lisa Yaszek explores the two primary reasons for racial silence in science fiction. First, the cultural status of science fiction in America was not an ideal forum for serious speculation into the future of race in America. The second revolves around the politics of early science fiction authors. They seemed incapable of writing stories about tomorrow that that did anything other than reflect the prejudices of the current day.[11] Much of the early writing and comics of the time would reveal the biases of the day and would work to 'fix' them in the future sense. Ytasha Womack positions Afrofuturism as the intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.[12] It uses elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism within Western beliefs, while shifting ideologies of race and gender. Afrofuturism acts as a site of inclusion as it provides those marginalized within the black community space. An Afrofuturistic Black space uses dominant notions of Blackness as a site of integration, as well as escape. It allows those within the margins to be visible.

My engagement with these speculative futures also considers the contributions of post-soul and post-blackness in the reimagining of Black bodies. In *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity after Civil Rights*, Derek C. Maus states that where soul culture insisted on the seriousness of authenticity and positive images, post-soul culture revels in the contingency and diversity of Blackness, and subjects the canon of positive images to subversion and parody—and appropriation.[13] Post-soul informs my usage of Afrofuturism, as I suggest that the Black content

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[11] Yaszek, Lisa. “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future.” *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2006, pp. 41–60*,* 45.

[12] Ibid., 9.

[13] Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue, *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity after Civil Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), xii.

creators in my project use Afrofuturism as a means of expanding notions of Blackness and what Blackness means.[14] Maus argues that the idea of an 'authentic Blackness' becomes irrelevant with regards to the post-soul ideologies, as one narrative of Blackness cannot exist. In many ways, the terms post-soul and post-Black complement each other concerning how Blackness and Black racial ideologies become framed. My engagement of post-soul is an attempt to move away from an analysis of dominant representations within visual and popular culture.

Dominant representations of Black women have evolved, and as they evolve, so do the ways we understand these representations. The shifts in political and cultural spaces influence how we come to know these evolving notions of race and gender. Herman Gray investigates the effects of Black struggles over identity, recognition, and representation.[15] He explores how culture matters politically and how politics matter culturally. Gray suggests that, ultimately, the commercial success of dominant renderings of Black cultural productions has opened up the space for critique by Black scholars. The dissemination of images from Black popular culture allows Black spaces that exist outside of the dominant to become significant sites of analysis.[16]

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[14] Mark Anthony Neal uses the term ‘post-soul to describe the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African American community since the end of the civil rights and Black power movements. Pos-soul ultimately renders many “traditional” tropes of Blackness dates and even meaningless. See Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

[15]Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

[16] Gray’s discussion of Black representation is particularly useful in its exploration of race within visual culture. He asserts that Black popular culture functions as a site of Black politics and culture, noting the ways institutions influence cultural production and shifting notions of Blackness. In doing so, Gray suggests that art and content produced by Black artists and musicians outside of these institutions, works to reconfigure Black life in America. See Gray, *Cultural Moves*.

Post-Blackness works as a means of rethinking the past and reframing the present.[17] In doing so, post blackness changes the future. The future has just as much, if not more, cultural currency than the past. Post-Blackness situates race in the US using slavery as a point of departure. Afrofuturism which posits Africa as a point of departure in reading the future. It also lends to a diasporic understanding of Blackness. As a result of location, we see that post-Blackness questions existing structures, where Afrofuturism creates a new, non-linear future. Taking the discussion of Blackness out of a linear structure works to destabilize Blackness even further, as it removes time-specific criticisms from the critique of Black women. Afrofuturism allows us to receive the speculative future and use it to critique current racial structures. Afrofuturism works to not only reimagine Blackness but to create a new 'undefinable' race, that goes beyond normative meanings of Blackness.

Afrofuturism, like post Blackness, destabilizes earlier critiques of Blackness and provides a space for black autonomy in the creation of black images. An Afrofuturist lens is not ignorant of history but is not bound by history either. Though Blackness exists as a tool and outcome of white supremacy, we see a reclamation of race that reflects ideologies of Blackness. There is a power in taking and claiming the 'original' framework then deploying it in new ways.[18] Afrofuturism shifts not only racial ideologies but also makes room for racially motivated gender norms to be broken. Changes in thinking become significant to the destabilization of both the representation of Black bodies but also Black female bodies. In Afrofuturism, women develop theories, characters, art, and beauty free of the pressures of meeting male approval, societal

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[17] Frantz Fanon states that the structure of present work is grounded in temporality. Every human problem cries out to be considered on the basis of time, the ideal being that the present always serves to build the future. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xvi.

[18] Alondra Nelson suggests that Afrofuturistic works represent new directions in the study of African diasporic culture that are grounded in the histories of Black communities. See Alondra Nelson, “Future Texts.” *Social Text 71* vol. 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 9.

standards, color-based taxonomies, or run-of-the-mill female expectations. The results are works that some would call uncategorizable.[19]

Afrofuturism provides space for a specific Black future as opposed to a broader view of the speculative future. Afrofuturists seek to unearth the missing history of people of African descent and their roles in science, technology, and science fiction.[20] In many ways, this relationship between Afrofuturism, race, and technology presupposes a speculative future that advances all three.[21] The engagement of technology and its role in the production of a futuristic Blackness is not the only interrogation of the future I make. I also explore the post-apocalypse and the plight of Black women in futures where technology does not exist in an innovative, more modern way.

I take up both dystopian and post-apocalyptic futures. Initially, I relied solely on post-apocalyptic comics. Post-apocalyptic graphic novels explore life at the end of the world. The post-apocalypse is more imbalanced, chaotic, and volatile as the 'rule of law' no longer exists. Post-apocalyptic graphic novels explore life after a catastrophic event. The event is not static and changes with the narrative, but the apocalypse brings about the destruction of the modern world. Black female content creators are not contributing to commercial comics that focus on this reality. For this reason, I also included dystopian texts. Dystopian comics and graphic novels focus on societies and cultures that appear to be stable but are often in the midst of social or political turmoil. Dystopian futures are those moments before the collapse of civilization, while post-apocalyptic futures are the moments during and after the collapse.

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[19] Womack, *Afrofuturism,* 101.

[20] Ibid., 17.

[21] Whaley suggests that Afrofuturism exists as an articulation of science-fiction narratives of dystopia and utopia with postmodern interpretations of Blackness. See Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence*, 25.

Comic book consumers often categorize the post-apocalypse as a dystopian reality, but I use them as separate existences in comics. Post-apocalyptic graphic novels focus on societies that area imbalanced and volatile while dystopias appear stable despite being completely unhinged. Dystopian futures are imagined states of society that are often dehumanizing and unpleasant.[22] For the sake of my project, I assume that Black female bodies exist in a constant state of dystopia. These speculative futures are precipitated by classism, racism, sexism, and other violence that works in totalitarian ways. These futures reflect the lived experiences of Black people in the current moment. Non-black people speculate on lives in the dystopia where Black creators operate with the knowledge that Black realities are dystopian. Black futures reflect a dystopian existence. For this reason, I engage with material that may not characteristically be seen as dystopian but fit within a broader discussion of art/literature reflecting the lived experiences of Black people.

The relationship between the visual and the racial is one that is important to my project, in that a significant portion of my work deals with how racial undertones impact the visual. The coding of 'Black' actions and performances is a reciprocal relationship, which is further complicated by how people define 'Blackness.' These definitions of Blackness illustrate non-Black people are unable to articulate nor understand what it means to be Black. I suggest that while Blackness is often performative when produced by Black cultural producers, it is also reflective. My use of performative indicates that Blackness exists as a response to Western normative structures.[23] These constructions consider Blackness as a pejorative basis of

[22] Dystopias oppose Utopias, which are “perfect” societies.

[23] Tavia Nyong’o defines performative as a restored of “twice behaved” behavior, which mediates between collective memory and the new, potential, and virtual. See Tavia Nyong’o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 13.

comparison. These tactics are ultimately harmful to critiques of Black popular culture as our engagement with them marks their ideas of racial difference as real, as opposed to created. The dependence on racial disparity in the making of and engagement with Black popular culture limits our ability to critique it thoroughly. I see this engagement as one of the strategies to counter the essentialism rendering of Black female bodies.

Performative Blackness refuses the white gaze and white epistemologies. These refusals depend on the subjugation of Black bodies. What I suggest is that Black content creators in comics and graphic novels create their worlds, not in response to whiteness, but an answer to their lived experiences. In doing so, Black characters act as reflective, reflecting the lived experiences of Black people as opposed to refuting archetypes enacted through a Eurocentric imagination. Creators have power over not only their narratives but over the representation of Black bodies visually and in literature. Visual analysis of graphic novels also allows me to explore the ways that black visual autonomy creates a different visual vocabulary about black lives. Graphic novels do double work; they exist and are deployed in a current moment while simultaneously reconstructing the future. In this sense, graphic novels have the potential to reinvent the ways we critique race as we can critique race within a current moment while also using graphic novels as a means of speculating the place that race holds in the future.

Section 1.2: Black Women, Black Girls, Black Cultural Producers

When we think about comics, we think of the sequential art that exists in newspapers and other types of print, but the relationship between Blackness and comics in America is rooted in slavery.[24] Fugitive slave ads and other posts serve as visual indexes to the treatment and

[24] Starting with the nineteenth-century introduction of comic strips in news media (1890), the Black image in comics has been one of grotesque caricature, often taking its cues from white fantasies of slavery and the minstrel

representation of Black bodies. Still, beyond that, we see the beginnings of the framing of Black bodies as different and divergent through the political cartoons and commentary of the time. In Figure 1.2, we get a glimpse into early political cartoons focused on the enslavement of Africans in America.

Black bodies in America were juxtaposed against white bodies in England. The image shows enslaved Africans in America dancing and rejoicing at being enslaved. They are pictured to be enjoying their condition, while white Northerners and Southerners look on, surprised by their glee. They discuss the national discord around the abolishment of slavery with the Northerners exclaiming, "Is it possible that we of the North have been so deceived by false reports? Why did we not visit the South before we caused this trouble between the North and South, and so much hard feelings amongst our friends at home?"[25] These images presume the social and emotional condition of Black bodies. The cartoon, used to argue for the continuation

stage. See Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime.* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 37.

[25] "Slavery as It Exists in America. Slavery as It Exists in England," The Library of Congress, Accessed 13 February 2020, www.loc.gov/resource/ds.12543/.

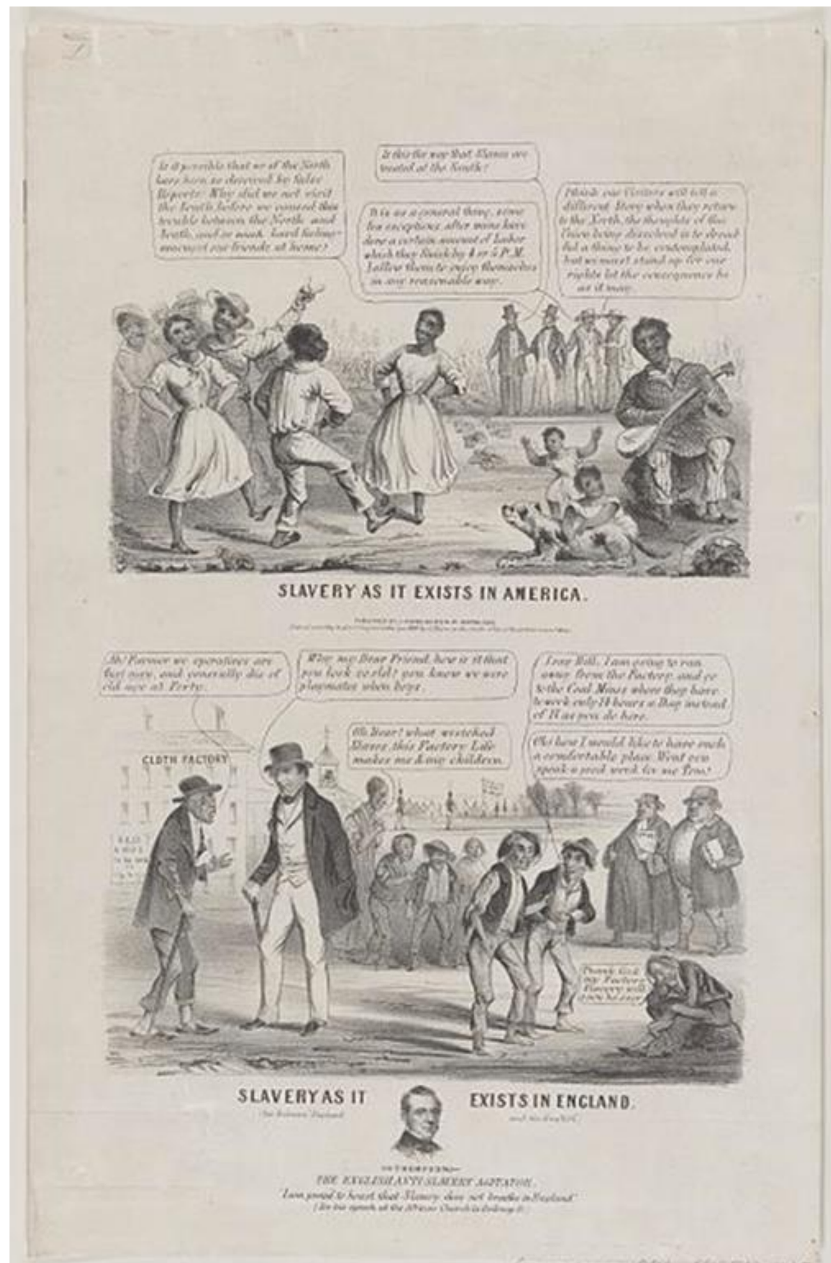

Figure 1.2: "Slavery as it Exists in America. Slavery as it Exists in England."
Political Cartoon from The Library of Congress

of slavery in America and abroad, begins the work of silencing the lived conditions of Black people through images. Images like Figure 1.2 framed enslaved Africans as willing and welcome participants in their own enslavement. They do not care about their condition. Imagery such as this was used to justify the enslavement and treatment of Black people. While these lithographs are not the same as comics, they highlight the use of imagery as a racist tactic.

Comics have had a presence in the US since the end of the 19th century. It was not until after the Depression that the popularity of newspaper cartoons expanded into a major industry.[26] The Depression and war also propelled the superhero genre, which includes Superman and Captain America, among others. They proved pivotal as comics existed as a mainstream art form with its own defined language and creative conventions.[27] During the time where these comics were in demand, we see that Black women were also producing comic strips that spoke to the experiences of Black girlhood and womanhood. Jackie Ormes, who is widely known as the first Black female cartoonist, created the comic strip *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem.* First appearing in 1937, the comic strip follows Torchy Brown, a young woman from Mississippi who finds fame and fortune as a dancer in the Cotton Club.[28] Through Torchy, Jackie Ormes was able to critique the racism and misogyny of the era. She illuminates the plight of Black women in America during the era. Torchy becomes a dancer in the Cotton Club after migrating to New York, which signified on the millions of Black people that migrated north during that period.[29] Ormes' characters shifted Black female representation in comics. Before characters like Torchy, Black women were depicted as buffoonish servants or porters.[30] Torchy was stylish, modern, and outspoken.[31]

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[26] "The Golden Age Of Comics," History Detectives, PBS, Accessed 6 February 2020 www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/the-golden-age-of-comics/.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Nancy Goldstein, "Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist," https://www.jackieormes.com/.

[29] Torchy was introduced during the end of the First Great Migration in the US. The Great Migration was the relocation of more than 6 million Blacks from the rural south to cities in the north, Midwest and west. The first and second migrations spanned from 1916 to 1970.

[30] Jasmin K. Williams, "Meet Jackie Ormes and Torchy Brown," *Amsterdam News*, August 1, 2012, http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2012/aug/01/meet-jackie-ormes-and-torchy-brown/.

[31] Torchy was so fashionable that the comic strip was often accompanied by Torchy paper dolls with additional themed outfits.

Jackie Ormes used comic strips to create Black femininity in a way that moved away from the way Black girls and women were portrayed.[32] With Torchy, we were able to see the evolution of Black womanhood as Torchy eventually finds success as a dancer and becomes engaged to a doctor. Ormes also created the comic *Patty-Jo'n'Ginger,* which focuses on the relationship between a big and little sister. Ormes created these characters after losing her child to a brain aneurism; the strip was Ormes' way of giving voice to her child.[33] Torchy, Patty-Jo, and Ginger all speak to Ormes's real-life experiences. She used her life and her personal experiences as a way to transform how we see Black women. Unlike the imagery we see in racist ads, there is no real proximity to whiteness, only a young woman living her life more significant historical moment.[34] She exists as extraordinary but not unrealistic.

Ormes comic strips provided a glimpse into the potential of Black women and girls during an era where both were largely ignored in mainstream comics. As possibly the first Black female cartoonist, Ormes's Torchy showed the complexities of growing up Black and female in America. Ormes provided her character with a platform to speak out against unfair and unjust systems. Her use of comic strips as a meant that Torchy's voice would reach the masses, which was relatively unheard of at the time. While Jackie Ormes was pivotal in the establishment of an alternate view of Black female characters, her work is foundational in a long journey regarding the representation of Black women.

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[32] Deborah Elizabeth Whaley states "three consistent themes constitute Ormes's cultural-front comics: class, gender, and race relations in regard to 1930s Black migration, the working-class consciousness and subversive sexuality of a Black domestic worker in the 1940s, and racial-ethnic rights in the 1950s. See Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence*, 38.

[33] Williams, "Meet Jackie Ormes."

[34] The comic is set during the Great Depression.

With the Comic Code Authority[35] in place – the comic book industry's self-regulating system from 1954-2011 – female characters of all nationalities and backgrounds were limited in their book appearances until the 1970s.[36] However, during this time, two of the most well-known Black female characters, Marvel's Storm and Misty Knight, were created, characters that were a reflection of the blaxploitation era. After the 1980s, we began to see an influx of characters, including DC's Vixen and Thunder and Marvel's Monica Rambeau. What we do not see are more Black women writing and creating comics. When looking at more mainstream comic book companies, Black female content creators have primarily been absent; in 2016, Roxanne Gay and Yona Harvey became the first Black women to write a reoccurring comic at Marvel. Many Black comic book writers are independent and self-published, having created webcomics, Patreon sites, or crowdfunding to bring their work to life.[37] The absence of Black female cultural producers in the mainstream industry results in a mostly white and male workforce. Excluding Black female cultural producers inversely limits the representation of Black female characters.

Black women in narratives add breath to Black life and what it means to be Black. Of course, Black women's presence in literature and print is not a new phenomenon. We see Black female characters often, but the lack of autonomy over how Black women and girls have represented clouds the image of these same bodies. Black women have been pushed to the

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[35] The Comic Code Authority (CCA) was formed in 1954 by the Comics Magazine Association of America as an alternative to government regulation. It allowed comic publishers to self regulate comic book content in America. The code was voluntary.

[36] Regine L. Sawyer, "The History of Black Female Superheroes Is More Complicated Than You Probably Think," *Time*, April 23, 2018, https://time.com/5244914/black-female -superheroes-comics-movies/.

[37] Latonya Pennington, "Comics Companies Need to Hire More Black Women," *Wear Your Voice.* November 16, 2017, https://wearyourvoicemag.com/comics-companies-need-hire-black-women/.

margins.[38] As women begin to create characters in their vision and use Black women and girls as focal points, there is a real-time reworking of what it means to be Black and what it means to be a woman. When Black men create narratives that include Black women, they often exclude the womanness of black womanhood. When non-Black women include Black women in their stories, they often overlook the inherent Blackness that informs Black women's identity. Black women are complex, which reveals itself in the study, or lack thereof, of Black women.

When thinking about Black womanhood, it is important to note how the Black female body and all things associated with it are rendered knowable. Hortense Spillers brings attention to this relationship in her work. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Spillers looks at the relationship between Black women, the Black body, and female autonomy. For Spillers, Black womanhood and the Black body complicated through slavery and the effects of slavery within the Black community. Spillers suggests that the rendering of Black masculinity and femininity works to transport us to a conventional historical grounding. She takes the position of race scholars like Franz Fanon and others who suggest that race is not real, but the effects of race and racism are tangible. One must deal with these ideologies as they are linked to the colonization and enslavement of Black and indigenous people, what Spillers calls captive body.[39] The captive body brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value.[40] The

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[38] In *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, Fleetwood suggests there is a heteronormative/heterogeneous narrative that is deployed through images in mainstream popular culture that work to further marginalize many within black culture. Racial binaries assume that whiteness functions as the source of identity making, but I suggest that the speculative future is not bound to this relationship. See Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[39] Spillers makes a distinction between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and imposes that the difference between the two is one of captivity and liberation. The ‘flesh’ exists as liberated while the body acts as a site of captivity.

[40] Hortense J. Spillers, “Mamas Baby, Papas Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* vol. 17, no. 2 (1987): 68.

liberation of the flesh does not erase the value places upon the body, thus resulting in the continued misnaming of Black bodies.

Nubians of Plutonia prominently center Black feminist cultural criticism, particularly the work of Nicole Fleetwood, Kara Keeling, and Katherine McKittrick. My project does not assume that an 'authentic' Black womanhood exists; in fact, it presumes that Blackness is not monolithic and varies. Instead, I explore how Black women in popular culture construct their identities in relationship to time and space, both of which exist within the imagination of comic book creators. I conceive of this project as doing a multitude of things. It works to decenter whiteness, which is a task that most of our work seeks to do. It also works as a critical engagement of Black girlhood and womanhood that reconfigures and broadens the way we imagine black girls and women.

There is only one mainstream comic written by a Black girl, and the author, Amandla Stenberg, is now 20 years old. The lack of Black girl content creators in the comic book industry is something I consider throughout my project. Black girls are necessary for the production of Black girlhood.[41] The absence of Black girl content creators is glaring but using a Black girlhood studies approach to the framing of Black girls by Black women also requires attention. Black girlhood exists as part of the life cycle of Black womanhood. The inclusion of Black girlhood in this project as necessary, as an exploration of Black girlhood, is an exploration of Black womanhood. I do not conflate the two, Black girlhood studies exists as an established field. I am

[41] Aimee Meredith Cox states "Black girls should not be objects of critique and/or worry but should be as the vanguard of a political movement capable of building and creating what neoliberalism dehumanizes and destroys. See Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 20.

suggesting that to critique Black female bodies in the speculative future; we must capture and explore all iterations of Black female bodies; past, present, and future.

To locate Black girls within the speculative future, one must, as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas suggests, "engage in creative maneuverings around texts with several analytics and ways of not only writing [Black girls] histories, but also reading *for* Black girls."[42] While my project does not interrogate the work of Black girl content creators, it does see Black girlhood as a critical site of knowledge production. My project primarily uses the works of Eve Ewing, Monique Morris, and Nazera Sadiq Wright to explore the formation of Black girlhood in the face of a society that insists on aging them. My work depends on the work of Black content creators, especially the comics and graphic novels written by Black women.

The imagined ownership of the Black body results in her misnaming, a wrong that Black content creators attempt to the right with each character they create. Black women in comics and graphic novels push against ideas of 'authentic Blackness' as they disrupt definitions of Blackness that center Black masculinity but also refuse the white gaze. I argue that Black women in these speculative futures force us to rethink or reimagine how both function in a futuristic society. The move is layered, complex, and forces us to rethink how race and gender are constructed in these futures.[43] Throughout this project, I pay close attention, not only to the way racist and sexist ideologies permeate the comics and graphic novels but also the strategies cultural producers use to reinforce these ideologies or reimagine Black female characters in the face of these strategies.

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[42] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 388.

[43] In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill-Collins asserts that black women's critique and knowledge call attention to oppressive structures of whiteness but also blackness. Hill-Collins defines oppression as the political intersection of race, class, and gender. See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 6.

Section 1.3: Overview of Chapters

My project focuses on both literary and visual aspects of comics and graphic novels. I spend a lot of time engaging the panels and plot. Things like thought bubbles and text boxes, while important to the visual layout of the panels, are not visual elements I am critiquing. Instead, I look at how the plot and the visual rendering of characters work to frame Black female identity within the text and the imagined futures. Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision* will also be pivotal to my work in its exploration of 'iconicity' through her use of non-iconic imagery. Fleetwood works against this notion of iconicity in a way that highlights the influence of film/media on racial understandings.

The scholarship on comics and graphic novels exist and gets taken up in a variety of ways. In *Black Women in Sequence*, Deborah Elizabeth Whaley looks at the "representation, production, and transnational circulation" of Black women in comics. Scholarship about the survival of Black women and girls in the post-apocalypse is a relatively unchartered field. However, there is a generative amount of work about race, the speculative future, and cartoons/comic strips, which may be extremely relevant to my project.[44] Other texts, like Adilifu Nama's *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, explore Black superheroes and Black racial identity in the future.

My project relies heavily on Isiah Lavender's discussion of otherhood in speculative futures. I used the works of Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick, and Zakiyyah Iman-Jackson to

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[44] See Isiah Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Adilifu Nama. *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Fredrik Strömberg, *Black Images in the Comics: a Visual History*, (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012); Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019)

explore notions of humanness and Blackness in my speculative future. In the exploration of Black girlhood, I use the work of Monique Morris as a way of exploring the age compression of Black girls, an occurrence that works to shape how we come to know Black girls and Black girlhood. While the broader focus of my project is to explore Black women in the post-apocalypse, my focus narrows within each chapter, as I pay close attention to the framing and deployment of Black womanhood within moments of the post-apocalyptic/dystopian future.

Chapter Two, "Totally Krossed Out: the Disappearing Black Woman in Garth Ennis's *Crossed,*" looks at how the white male comic book creator frames Black women within the post-apocalyptic future primarily focusing on Garth Ennis' *Crossed*. I begin with the white male imagination as a way of starting the work of decentering whiteness but also to explore the limits of the tropes created by the white male imagination. This decentering acts as a necessary and conscious act, which also works to illuminate the ways Black creators fill the gaps created by normative tropes. While I ultimately focus on the work of Black women and other marginalized communities, I begin with the critique of white male imagination because, frankly, they have dictated the narratives surround Black women.

My inclusion of Ennis' graphic novel is not a foregrounding of the white male imagination but an exploration of its limits. I found his work to be especially important because of the zombie he creates. This rendering speaks to early pulp renderings, interpretations that relied on the racialization of Black bodies. Through an exploration of zombies as an extension of Haitian voodoo, I interrogate how the white male imagination's rendering of Black womanhood acts as a site of erasure and death. Using the zombie apocalypse as the point of entry, I suggest that Ennis's use of infection marks Black women as existing solely to be killed or infected. By not offering counter representations of Black women as non-infected, Black women are rendered

disposable and deserving of violence in these future scapes. I use religious iconography, and the spectacle of lynching to suggest that violence against Black women in this text finds its origins in colonialism and the enslavement of Blacks in America. It also serves as grounds for one of the significant interventions of my project: Black content creators are pivotal to the imagining of race in the speculative future, as they have the first-hand experience of what it means to be Black.

Chapter Three, "Who's That Girl: Communal Resistance, Countersurveillance, and the Hood Heroine," explores Black girlhood and communal resistance in dystopian realities. I use this chapter to examine the ways Black girls negotiate their identities as leaders and liberators. Where chapter 1 explores the white male imagination, this chapter begins the exploration of Black girlhood in the imagined future. I use the comic *Genius*, written by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman and illustrated by Afua Richardson as well as Octavia Butler's science fiction, dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower* to explore Black girlhood as a site of resistance. I suggest that these girls embody what I call the 'hood heroine,' which exists as a means of rejecting tropes of Black girl victimhood, wherein unfavorable life circumstances batter Black girlls. Instead, I suggest that the ‘hood heroine’ acts as a means of Black girl survival, which ultimately becomes a communal survival. Using the characters Destiny and Lauren Olamina, I explore the surveillance of Black communities, calling attention to the ways that these girls use countersurveillance as a means of survival and refusal.

I found it essential to use Octavia Butler's character here as she is often discussed in relationship to Black womanhood, despite her being 17 years old. I hope that by exploring Lauren Olamina through a lens of girlhood studies, we can provide new ways of understanding her character and what her leadership means to Black girls. I conduct a literary analysis using

Black feminist cultural critique in this chapter, suggesting that Destiny embodies the 'hood heroine' as she is the protector of the community while acting in direct opposition to the law. 'The hood heroine,' which is a reconfiguration of Black female heroism, that relies on the reader's knowledge of stereotypical renderings of Blackness and gender as a means of reimagining archetypes. I suggest that the 'hood heroine' uses sousveillance as a liberatory practice. Sousveillance results in the reconfiguration of not only Black girlhood but also Black leadership. I pay close attention to the ways that Black girls navigate these spaces and how this negotiation calls attention to the evolving representations of Black girls assuming spaces that, in other narratives may not be spaces for Black girls and women to flourish.

Chapter Four, "Marvel's Young Marvels: Subversive Iconicity and Superheroines of Color," examines the makings of Black and Puerto Rican girlhood in the Marvel universe. Marvel becomes a critical site of critique because of the role Marvel plays within comic book culture, specifically, its global and multi-genre reach. I suggest that black girlhood, when imagined by Black women, push against iconic tropes surrounding black girls, specifically notions of age compression, black familial structures, and educational autonomy. This relationship is essential, as I argue that Black girls in Black imagined futures deploy what I call 'subversive iconicity.'

My creation and usage of ‘subversive iconicity’ merges Nicole Fleetwood’s exploration of both ‘iconicity’ and ‘non-iconicity,’to suggest that Black women comic book creators take single images and representations and, knowing the historical implications, subverts them to remake, rename, and trouble what we know as 'real' and 'true' Blackness. Riri Williams, the titular character in Marvel's *Ironheart,* embodies many of the experiences of Eve Ewing, the writer of the comic book. 'Marvel's Young Marvels' continues the work of exploring black

leadership and black girlhood through the narratives surrounding black girls. I further explore America Chavez from the *America* comic book series, taking note of her Puerto Rican identity is framed through an ethno-racial hierarchy that centers the African diaspora. I suggest that this rereading acts as a moment of subversive iconicity.

Chapter Five, "Black Reign: Black Geographies, the Alien Other and the Hierarchy of Humanness," works as a continuation into the representation of Black female bodies in relationship to space and place, focusing on the ways both reframe Black women and alien beings. I use this chapter to engage notions of humanity and how Black female authors trouble who and what is human through their deployment of the 'alien other' and 'human other.' The positionality of both results in the creation of multiple meanings of Blackness, aliens, womanhood, and what it means to embody all three. I draw attention to the ways that Black women in Black imagined futures engage with Katherine McKittrick's 'black geographies.'

I suggest that through the use of Black geographies, the existence of Black women and the alien other in the texts *Concrete Park* and *LaGuardia* work to render binaries around race and gender as non-existence. The illumination of coexisting multiple identities forces us to see various marginalized bodies and experiences simultaneously. Using the colonialization of space as a backdrop, I explore the relationship between the 'alien other' and the human other, in this case, Black women. My purpose is less of an exploration of how the other allows Black women to be visible and to demonstrate how the alien other draws attention to the complexities of Black womanhood. To achieve this, I pay close attention to how the other influences Black women's identity, sense of belonging, and engagement with time and place,

This chapter acts as a 'full circle moment' as I recapitulate on what it means to be human in these futures and how Black women and the work of Black women redefine how we see

humanity through the navigation of these futuristic narratives. I began with an exploration of the white male imagination and how humanity and non-humanity are framed in a way that automatically situates Black womanhood as non-human; through her interaction with 'human' bodies and with death. My final chapter also takes up notions of humanity, marking how the introduction of Blackness pushes against futuristic binaries like human/non-human, 'the other,' and others. In these disruptions, we also see normative identities surrounding Black women and girls become disrupted and reconfigured. It is these reconfigurations that become pivotal to the making of Black women and girls in the future.

Chapter Two: Totally Krossed Out: the Disappearing Black Woman in Garth Ennis's *Crossed*

Crossed is a comic written by Garth Ennis and illustrated by Jacen Burrows for Avatar Press.[45] Initially, the comic was to be a 10-issue release by Ennis. As the comic gained popularity, Avatar Press created volumes with guest authors. The characters from Ennis' volume only appear in his narrative as ensuing volumes contain none of the original characters.[46] For the sake of my project, I only grapple with Ennis's story, which follows a group of survivors as they navigate the pandemic. The outbreak causes the infected to carry out man's most evil thoughts. The infected, known as the 'crossed,' possess a large, cross rash that appears on their faces. The virus spreads through bodily fluids: saliva, semen, rape, and bites spread the disease. We also see bodily fluids applied to weapons as a means of spreading infection. The means of spreading disease and the ingenuity of the crossed, create a massive threat for the survivors.

While *Crossed* follows the guide of other post-apocalyptic outbreak narratives, its most considerable difference is that the crossed are not dead; the outbreak does not kill humans, it turns humans into homicidal maniacs.[47] The crossed are not 'dead' but are infected, an infection that ultimately results in death. We also see that groups of crossed also possess self-control and opt to torture and hunt survivors as opposed to killing them all at once. For these reasons, I will not use terms such as 'living' and 'dead'; instead, I use 'infected' and 'non-infected.'[48] The

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[45] Avatar Press is an independent American comic book publishing company founded in 1996.

[46] Rich Johnson, "Interview: Garth Ennis Talks about Crossed," *Bleeding Cool,* February 16, 2010. https://bleedingcool.com/comics/recent-updates/interview-garth-ennis-talks-about-crossed/.

[47] *Crossed* deviates from the other post-apocalyptic graphic novels because the infected population in his comic exist with varying levels of consciousness and can plot against the non-infected community. This relationship posits the outbreak as zombie vs. human or living vs. undead. The crossed in Ennis' world are more than 'undead' and are also not quite human, which speaks to the origin of the zombie.

[48] I also refer to the infected as 'crossed' and non-infected as 'non-crossed'.

outbreak is a global one with the crossed committing random acts of violence for fun. Within this world, we meet a group of survivors, including Stan, Cindy, Thomas, and Kittrick. The infected humans retain certain qualities; they are still able to operate weapons, motor vehicles, and can set traps for the infected and non-infected alike. By the time we meet the group of survivors, the world has been overrun, and the non-infected human has become an endangered species.[49] It has been ten months after the outbreak, and we see the group traveling north to Alaska. They believe that since the population of Alaska was so small before the outbreak, it may mean less crossed are there, giving the non-infected a higher chance of survival.

Admittedly, when I first read this graphic novel, I was so preoccupied with the survival of the group that I did not notice there were hardly any Black women in this graphic novel. Upon finishing the volumes, I realized that I had not seen any Black women in the entire graphic novel. After rereading the series, I discovered two Black women within the narrative. They are minor characters in the story with little dialogue. Often, we think about how Black women are affected by society, but what happens when they are absent from the narrative? When white content creators are given the power to speculate on the future, it is our job to critique their creations, especially if it continues the violence placed upon Black women. Exploring how the white imagination configures Blackness in the future, we can simultaneously critique perceived Blackness and argue for the need for more Black women content creators. The erasure of Black women in *Crossed* serves two principal functions. The erasure highlights how Black bodies are deployed concerning notions of humanness. They also illustrate how Black womanhood persists as a threat to white masculinity, resulting in the Black woman's erasure.

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[49] It has also been determined that there is no cure for the outbreak.

Black women's erasure informs this chapter as I am concerned with the role Black women play in a white male imagined post-apocalyptic space. I found it essential to explore the limits of white male imagination in the rendering of Black women as one of the more significant interventions of my project is the exploration of the production of Black futures by Black content creators. Highlighting the work of a white male comic book creator allows me to peel back the layers of Black representation by troubling the production of Black imagery by white men. Ennis' graphic novel is vital to this exploration because of the space he and the text assume within the comic book industry.

Crossed uses the pulp rendering of the zombie as the crossed possess a level of consciousness and autonomy that is was associated with early encounters with the Haitian zombie. Ennis uses these renderings because he maintains full ownership over the graphic novel. *Crossed* is that the graphic novel is a creator-owned series, which means that the creator retains full ownership of the comic regardless of who decides to publish the comic. This is relatively uncommon in the comic industry as publishers usually purchased the material that they sell. Ennis also has a unique relationship with the United States and his achievements within the global comic book industry. Ennis can write from an insider/outsider point of view; he possesses a duality as a result of his citizenship status.[50] One might suggest that differences in citizenship and white male autonomy may amount to little as white supremacist ideology is borderless, and citizenship does not affect the pervasiveness of global white supremacy. I suggest that the global ubiquity of white supremacy differs from its deployment on American soil. As he is writing about an outbreak in America, he can use his knowledge as an American and non-American to create his reality. Comic books like *The Walking Dead*, *28 Days Later*, and *Revival*, are comics

[50] He was born in Ireland but became a naturalized US citizen after some time. Most of his early comic book achievements occur abroad as he was writing in the European industry before moving to Marvel.

written by white men, but *Crossed* is the only of these where the creator has the complete freedom to write the future as he sees it.

The zombie is key to the exploration of the crossed and acts as a means of understanding Ennis' future. This chapter begins with the zombie, looking at the origin of the zombie and the ways it racializes and genders Black female bodies. I pay attention to pulp fiction's reliance on Black bodies in the making of zombies in pop culture and how these correlate to the presence and absence of Black women in Ennis' future. The creation of the zombie results from encounters with poor Blacks. These encounters ultimately reduce Blackness to uncivilized and expendable aspects of society through their representation. Next, I explore the religious iconography of the cross rash and how it leads to the reinforcement of the Black woman as a pejorative base of comparison. Ennis takes the image of the cross and the history associated with it and inverts it within this text. It becomes the symbol, not of religious ideology but infection and extreme deviance. Using the 'crossed Black woman' (CBW) as a point of entry, I suggest Black womanhood exists as a threat to humanity, which in this narrative, means white survival. Black women only being associated with this symbolism maintains the narrative of the Black woman as an expendable threat; as someone 'worthy' of harm.

This chapter focuses on the particular dynamic of the white male and black female to look at how black womanhood becomes disposable when written by white males. While there are subsequent volumes of this graphic novel, the text I use creates the world while also telling a complete tale of post-apocalyptic survival. Black women in graphic novels written by white men act as an example of the continued silencing of Black women by a predominantly white and male demographics. This erasure shows the need for a more autonomous representation for black

women in the graphic novel arena. While this argument is not necessarily new, it is essential to highlight the potential for Black women to control their image in this futurescape.

These narratives exist within a broader discussion of Black women's autonomy regarding the projection of their image and the disposability of Black female characters when written by white males. This notion of disposability links racial and gendered manipulations of Black bodies, in particular, the Black woman as part of a surplus population.[51] I suggest that the white male gaze makes it impossible for Black women to exist as human beings in this future. Using Adilifu Nama's structured absence, I look at how *Crossed* erases Black women while still deploying the idea of the Black woman in a negative way. These new understandings deal less with race/gender and more with the centering of infection as deviant behavior. I am specifically interested in how the Black body is depicted in sci-fi as connected with the grotesque or spectacle.[52] I suggest that Ennis's use of Black women marks them as only being capable of deviant behavior and, as a result, deserving of death.

Black women operate in three overlapping capacities in Ennis' graphic novel: as an infected non-human, as a tokenized body, and as physically removed. These three reiterations of Black womanhood illuminate the disposability of Black women through the eyes of a white male content creator. Ennis provides an unadulterated view of how white male content creators frame their worlds and how Black women fair in their realities. The structured absence of Black women in his narrative forces us to look at how we frame the future and how that framing allows us to

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[51] Kara Keeling explores blaxploitation and the film industry's practice of using black bodies for profit then disposing of them. The film industry used blaxploitation to draw out marginalized audiences. The industry then feeds into and exploits the shared knowledge of the marginalized as a means of profit. Once the film industry no longer needs the black bodies for economic survival, they are reabsorbed into the mass audience as surplus value, with the films that once catered to them being discontinued. See Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: the Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 104.

[52] Adilifu Nama, *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 6.

critique race, humanity, and gender in our current moment. This chapter is less an engagement of the production of Black women and more of an exploration of the ways that the unbound white male imagination conforms to tropes and conventions of Black womanhood in ways that prove diabolical to Black women.

Ennis' comic marks Black women for death. The murder of Kara, a Black woman, and her children act as a post-apocalyptic lynching, the spectacle of which calls attention to lynching archives and white ownership. I posit that both renderings of Black women work to erase Black women and, in essence, mark them for extinction. The goal of this chapter is to explore this erasure and all of its racial and gendered implications. I use this chapter to examine the following questions: how does this racialization shift cultural norms while simultaneously subjecting Black bodies to pre-apocalyptic notions of Blackness? How does humanity in the post-apocalypse and notions of 'otherness' work to further marginalize black women? We know that graphic novels have the potential to project alternate realities; what does the projected erasure of Black women in the future say about Black women in the present?

Section 2.1: Zombies, Survivors, and the Structured Absence of Black Women

In *Race in American Science Fiction*, Isiah Lavender III discusses 'otherhood' as a means of race reading. Lavender suggests that science fiction presents race by not discussing race. It posits aliens, zombies, etc. as an 'other' then use racial codes as a way of talking about them. For Lavender, race, and racism in science fiction operates according to fear of contagion.[53] The attitudes associated with racist people coming in contact with black bodies are often displayed as the actions humans exhibit when they come into contact with non-humans in the future. Who is

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[53] Isiah Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 201), 119.

human and who is not human, and what that means depends on these associations. Zombies have been present on film since the release of *White Zombie* in 1932, but early American pulp fiction writers not only wrote about zombies but claimed they had encountered them while in Haiti. The Haitian born, the white imagined zombie, has become a staple of American horror. Zombies are the ultimate threat to humankind in these futures. The English word 'zombie' comes from Haitian folklore, where a zombie is a dead body, reanimated through various methods, most commonly magic.[54] By positioning zombies akin to Black bodies, writers were able to push the believability of zombies as 'real.'

Zombies were described as plodding like brutes. They had 'the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring unfocused, unseeing, existing as empty versions of their former selves. Writer Zora Neale Hurston was one of the first anthropologists to have met and photographed a zombie in the 1930s.[55] In Figure 2.1, we see the zombie Hurston encountered, a Black woman by the name of Felicia Felix-Mentor. The woman is facing the camera and appears to be walking toward the photographer, Hurston. Her clothes are disheveled, and her hair is matted. Upon closer inspection, you see that her eyes are sunken and dark, her pupils are extremely dilated. The response to Hurston's exploration of the zombie versus the American Entertainment Company's exploration highlights the racialization of exploration and its effects on Black representation. In the instance of the white occupiers, their encounter was received as true and changed the trajectory of American pulp fiction and, subsequently, horror genre. Zora Neale

[54] There is some speculation that the word derives from West African languages – ndzumbi means 'corpse' in the Mitsongo language of Gambon, and nzambi means the 'spirit of a dead person' in the Kongo language.

[55]History.com Editors. "Zombies." *History.com*, September 13, 2017, www.history.com/topics/folklore/history-of-zombies.

Figure 2.1: photo of Felicia Felix-Mentor

Hurston's claims were mocked, and her book was considered an embarrassment.[56] Hurston's exploration of the zombie went further than most anthropologists of the time. Unlike her counterparts, she provided evidence to her 'zombie' encounter by providing visual proof that they existed.[57] Hurston's attempts at discussing her zombie encounter were shot down. History suggests that this could be indicative of a more significant issue regarding the work of Black women.[58] White creators were regarded as the gatekeepers to Haitian folklore while Black creators were dismissed, even as they provided more evidence of their claims.

[56] Her travel book *Tell my Horse* (1937) documented her travels through Haiti; a trip where she met Felix-Mentor.

[57] Many of the zombies the white Americans encountered were exhausted field laborers, while Felix-Mentor was a patient at a mental hospital.

[58] In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill-Collins asserts that black women's critique and knowledge call attention to oppressive structures of whiteness but also blackness. Hill-Collins defines oppression as the political

Her version of the zombie was dismissed in favor of the more generalized description of the zombie. These images did not include photographic evidence to support the pulp renderings; they used the mental recollections of their encounters. These recollections were informed by experiences observing the life and traditions of Black people. The zombies were fashioned after the Black bodies white anthropologists encountered, which places Blackness in relation to infection and death. In *Black Space: Imaging Race in Science Fiction Film*, Adilifu Nama examines Black representation and Black racial formation in sci-fi, paying close attention to how race is represented and coded within these mediums. Nama uses the term 'structured absence' as a means of exploring the deployment of Black bodies in the future. Using science fiction film, Nama suggests that Blackness and race are often present in science fiction as narrative subtext.[59]

We know Blackness through its entanglement with the narrative. Blackness renders itself, even when Black bodies are not present. The structured absence of Blackness does not mean that Blacks were not in the film, but they existed behind masks or other facades. Blackness is absent but simultaneously present as a signifier of danger.[60] I agree with the assertion, and further suggest that Black womanhood in *Crossed* is represented through the crossed, even when they are not physically present. Black women only exist as infected, a concept illustrated throughout

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intersection of race, class, and gender. One of the interdependent dimensions of black women's oppression that is particularly relevant to how this oppression permeates black popular culture is the controlling images applied to black women. Racist and sexist ideologies permeate social structures to the point that they become hegemonic. See Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (London: Routledge, 2000), 6.

[59] Nama, Black Space, 2.

[60] Ibid., 24.

the graphic novel. This embodiment feeds into white paranoia surrounding the Black body, with a focus on the black female body.[61]

In Ennis' novel, we continuously see the humans within the story discussing whether the infected are human or zombie. Though they never come to a consensus regarding who they are, they do come to a few conclusions regarding what happens to those who become infected.[62] We find out; one can become infected if they come in contact with any type of bodily fluid from the crossed. Saliva, semen, and blood can all change a human to a non-human.[63] The lives of the crossed are exceptionally short. Their ability to survive or preserve themselves is almost nonexistent in these conditions. However, the crossed are also able to infect humans at an alarmingly high rate. They get joy in watching the suffering of others and, as a result, find new ways to torture humans. The extremely violent nature of the crossed works in many ways to diminish the severity of violence that occurs within human relationships. The graphic novel describes itself as "ruthless, berserk, and evil beyond measure," saying "these cackling demons

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[61] In "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," Judith Butler suggests that whites understanding of race and racist experiences will always be seen through the lens of a white perception, one that is steeped in racist ideologies. Butler suggests that this perception structures what can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception. Butler frames her argument within the context of black masculinity, using the Rodney King beating and subsequent trial to show the pervasiveness of white paranoia. This paranoia allows white jurors to see the violence against blacks as justified. Butler states that this is not a simple seeing, as an act of direct perception but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to "see". See Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

[62] What happens to those that cross also varies. In the novel, we see a discussion between the characters Kelly, Geoff, and an unnamed group member. Their discussion focuses on the different ways of infection. They also discuss what happens post-infection and the relationship between the human self and the infected self. We see Kelly reflect on what happens to say "it's more like what our brains naturally prevent us from doing—for the sake of self-preservation, even for the survival of the species…it is primal."[62] When one becomes infected, they go back to their basic instincts but retain their human awareness and their ability to communicate. The non-humans in *Crossed* are self-aware, homicidal maniacs.

[63] Since there is no real definition of who the crossed are, I will be using the terms 'crossed' and 'non-human' interchangeably. While we know that the crossed are not human in a traditional sense, it would also be inaccurate to call them zombies.

spread their plague across the Earth – until [the] species teeters on the brink of final extinction."[64]

In an interview with *Bleeding Cool*, Ennis discusses the origins of *Crossed*, stating that the acts carried out in the novel were taken from history. Ennis says, "the torture chambers of the inquisition, or what the settlers and natives did to each other out on the Great Plains of North America…look at what people do to each other in prison or what many women have to fear on their way home from work in urban areas."[65] For Ennis, *Crossed* is an extreme reflection of the perversions of society.[66] One of the particularly interesting things about the crossed is that they possess varying levels of self-awareness. The self-awareness they possess means that the violence they enact if often calculated and premeditated. Some crossed only kill the non-infected, others kill non-infected and crossed, and others are influenced by their live pre-exposure, who become infected and torture those that they knew before exposure.[67]

With *Crossed,* there is a constant discussion around the ability to preserve one's humanity. A code of morality exists in this future that attempts to maintain pre-epidemic civilities. What happens throughout this novel is the acknowledgment that "the old world is

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[64] Garth Ennis. *Crossed*, *Vol. 1.* (Illinois: Avatar Press, 2010), back cover.

[65] Johnson, "Interview."

[66] Ennis notes that he is not talking about genocides, even as he alludes to settler/indigenous relationships of ethnic cleansings.

[67] We see this with regards to the character Cindy. Her son, Thomas, becomes infected and calls her 'mommy' to draw her closer to him so that he could attack her.

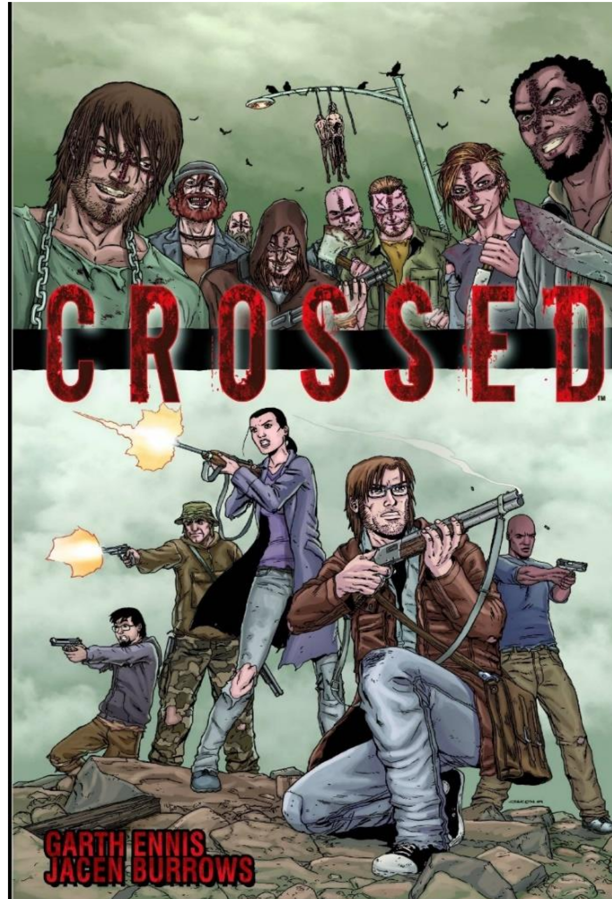

Figure 2.2: cover *Crossed Vol. 1*

never coming back."[68] The front cover of volume 1 shows a great depiction of the relationship between the crossed versus the non-crossed. The image is simple; the cover split horizontally. The survivors, located at the bottom of the frame, take up a defensive stance. There are five survivors pictured, and all of them carry some type of firearm. The survivors on the cover are Stan, Kitrick, Cindy, Joel, and Thomas. They almost assume a military formation as the fight off an unseen enemy, who may or may not be crossed. The racial and gender makeup of the group is one woman and four men; one of the men is African American, but there are a few racially ambiguous characters.

[68] This is the phrase that Stan uses after killing the children and it is assumed that this phrase may serve as a sort of justification for killing the children.

The survivors, while flanked in close formation, are also elevated. They are standing on rocks or debris and are shooting and looking down on whomever they are fighting. Directly over the survivors is a thick black line with the word "CROSSED" in bold red letters. Other than the author and illustrator's name, 'Crossed' is the only other word on the page. We see above this line an image of the crossed. When looking at the cross, they seem physically similar. All of the crossed are smiling; smiles that are less inviting and more a mix of sinister and excitement. The crossed on the cover still possess all of their limbs and are not physically deformed in any way. The only reason we can identify them as crossed is because of the rash they all possess.[69]

The crossed in Figure 2.2 takes up less space on the page but relays the most information. They carry weapons like the survivors, but they are rudimentary. The non-infected carry guns, but only one of the crossed is carrying a gun, and the rest carry knives, chains, and other sharp objects. The non-infected is also in the act of shooting an unseen threat, but the crossed have a more aggressive appearance. The crossed are visually aligned with death on the cover in three distinct ways. First, we see in the background that two dead bodies are hanging from a light post. The bodies appear mutilated. Secondly, the weapons the crossed carry are covered in blood, which one could assume came from the hanging bodies. Lastly, we see crows. There are eleven crows total, all swarming above the crossed and around the hanging bodies. Groups of crows, known as a murder, are foragers, known to clean up dead animals and garbage. As omnivores, crows will eat almost anything, which is why they are shown as companions to the crossed. Their presence works to illustrate that this group of crossed is the gateway to consistent food via the bodies they leave in their wake.

[69] The crossed have a vertical rash that begins at their hairlines and extends to the chin. A horizontal like run across their faces, slightly below their eyes, and across their cheeks.

Section 2.2: Religious Iconography and the Crossed Black Woman

The structured absence of Blackness has historically been a signature feature of the genre, as Black people are missing or extremely marginalized within sci-fi stories.[70] In *Crossed*, Ennis relies on early pulp renderings of the zombie in a way that racializes and genders the crossed in his graphic novel. Black women exist in his narrative but exist behind the masks; they exist behind the outbreak. Black women are not present on the cover of this graphic novel, but their positionality within the story frames them as infected. They are never positioned as living, as capable of surviving exposure. This violence finds its origins in colonialism and the enslavement of Blacks in America. It acts as a means of imagining a future that has devolved.

Ennis deploys 'structural absence' through his representation of Black women. His erasure of Black women draws attention to the ways that particular groups destabilize racial constructs by existing. Adilifu Nama states that structured Black absence happens when Blackness is absent but simultaneously present as a signifier of danger.[71] Whiteness maintains its 'superior' status through the adverse visibility of Blackness.[72] Any shift in the ideologies of Blackness has the potential to shift racial rhetoric and how we see both whiteness and Blackness. This shift would arguably result in whiteness becoming problematic, which is something whiteness attempts to avoid through the dissemination of controlled and derogatory images of Black bodies.

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[70] Nama, *Black Space*, 10.

[71] Ibid., 31.

[72] In *The Witch's Flight*, Kara Keeling pays close attention to the film's role in the circulation of images, intervening on the ways that questions of representation, race, and the economic functions of media are framed. Keeling suggests that Blackness exists as a pejorative base of comparison so that whiteness may appear as unproblematic. See Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 4.

The crossed represent an extrusive mode of social death as they were once members of society but through contagion have been refused a place within the community.[73] That they still are human in many aspects, furthers this as they are technically still part of human society, while also being a non-participatory member of human society. For slaves, this meant servitude. For the crossed, this means the refusal to follow the rules and order of society, pre-infection.[74] The refusal to abide by the regulations and standards of the community marks the crossed as the enemy; they are making their disposal necessary.

The crossed assume the space of socially dead in the imagination of Ennis via a few markers like the style of dress and the cross rash.[75] These markers force the reader to negotiate notions of social death that have become normalized. When looking at the crossed, we see that they are the dominant group in a chaotic existence, but I am more concerned with how Ennis frames these bodies. The crossed embody the marginalized who, according to Orlando Patterson, exist as a threat to moral and social order while also essential to the survival of the order it threatens.[76] They are a litmus to the worst part of society; they non-infected base their morality on the deviance of the crossed.

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[73] In *The Internal Relations of Slavery*, Orlando Patterson takes a comparative approach to slavery, paying attention to the role slaves play in society. Patterson asserts that slaves exist as socially dead but still an important element of society. He summarizes the two modes of social death in slavery as intrusive and extrusive; the intrusive mode conceives the slave as someone who did not belong in society because they were and outside, while the extrusive mode marks the slave as an outsider because he was a part of the community but no longer belongs. See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death,* 44.

[74] This means that the crossed ignore laws and norms that say murder, rape, and torture are illegal.

[75] For other work on 'social death' see Cacho, Lisa Marie, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

[76] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 44.

What is important to note about Patterson's discussion of social death, is that while the slave is socially a nonperson and exists in a marginal state of social death, he is not an outcast.[77] As a means of maintaining social status, slaves possessed marks and markers that render them visible as deserving of their social death. These markers include skin color, clothing, and tattoos/brands. Those marked as socially dead possess one of the three; for enslaved Blacks, they often possessed all of the markers. What we see in Ennis's imagination is that the crossed possess most of these, but the crossed Black woman has all of these markers. By not having a visual counter to this rendering, the CBW reinforces the idea that Black women are marked for social death in the future.

The usage of the term crossed is important in this text as it signals a point of no return. Those that have crossed are already too far gone; the only outcome is death. A cross rash across their faces make the crossed recognizable. While the cross mark on their face signifies infection, the crossed self mutilators, so they wear visible scars. They are also very unpredictable, and their actions are wild and brutal. While all of the crossed possess human qualities, there are varying levels of those that are infected. All can consume food; however, many of the crossed chose to devour humans. In the moments before consumption, many of the crossed perform violent sex acts on the humans or their severed body parts. In many instances, the crossed castrate their victims and wear their appendages as trophies. The crossed serve as a measure of acceptable violence. In a world without a structured government, we see that humans and their relationship to the crossed force us to look at humanity and what we see as human versus non-human.

[77] Ibid., 48.

The inversion of religious symbolism forces us to continually question and negotiate the morality of all the main characters in the comic. The mark of exposure is a literal cross., which religiously serves as a reminder of Christ's ultimate sacrifice. Through *Crossed,* we see the meaning of the cross shift as society shifts.[78] The cross, a marker of religion, becomes a mark of infection and the violence that results from infection. We have come to associate civility to particular faiths. The inversion of the cross forces us to critique the actions of those that reproduce this image. There is a constant question of at what point human violence mirrors the un-human and what that violence means when enacted by humans.[79] We see 'otherness' marked in a variety of ways in this text: worthy of life versus worthy or death, human versus non-human, infected versus non-infected, and moral versus immoral. The assumed moral hierarchy means that some that are considered not worthy of ascension will remain on Earth. What happens on Earth, as told through graphic novels, are the points after this ascension, but what happens on Earth is another site of this notion of good/evil. We see with the post-apocalypse that those that are left behind are automatically posited as good and worthy of being saved. As this society devolves, the survivors 'humanity' shifts. The shift occurs as a result of encounters between infected and non-infected beings. If not for the infected, the post-apocalypse may not exist as an utterly hellish space.

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[78] In *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* Nicole Fleetwood explores the public icon, noting that there are varying levels of iconic imagery, and these images are influenced by type (political vs celebrity vs religious). These images are meant for broad consumption and the promotion of particular agendas, which evolve. See Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 2.

[79] In the text, we encounter one member of the group who was a serial killer before the outbreak. Within the group he is framed as an old, grandfather type of character until he confesses his crimes to those in the group. At this point the group decides to kill him as opposed to have him continue with them. In doing so, we see the group weigh humanity to pre-outbreak and the behaviors of the crossed. When the serials killer's actions cannot be justified regarding basic notions of humanity, we see that he is disposed of.

Figure 2.3: Crossed Black Woman

When looking at Figure 2.3, there are a few themes that carry over from the cover: there are hanging corpses that are on display, and there are crows perched throughout the panel watching the scene unfold. The panel takes up much of the page and details the capture of two non-infected by a group of crossed. There are three non-infected in the panel, but the third, a young boy, is shown fleeing the scene. The two non-infected trapped by the crossed are a white man and woman. Reading the panel from left to right, we see three crossed men standing over the non-infected. All three of the crossed men are shirtless. They have a cross rash. Two of the crossed men are missing a hand. One of the crossed is carrying a bloody machete. The other is holding a fork in a stabbing motion. They are standing over the white non-infected man, who is lying on his back. He holds his left hand up as if to shield himself from the crossed that are standing over him.

At the same time, we see the white woman being drug down the street. She is completely nude except for one show on her right foot. A Black crossed woman is dragging the non-infected woman down the road by her hair. The Black woman is also completely nude and has

her hair in locs.[80] Unlike the other crossed, part of her rash is hidden by her hair, which has fallen across her face. Beside her, another crossed man is dragging the same non-infected woman by her hand. He is carrying a gas can and has a pair of pliers in his belt. The third crossed man is partially in the panel; we do not see his full body. He is carrying a hammer. However, he does not have any physical interaction with the woman.

The thing about this panel is that it is one of two times we see a Black woman in this graphic novel, and it frames Black women in a few distinct ways. When looking at how the crossed Black woman (CBW) is represented in relation to others in the same panel, we can make a few deductions based on a superficial read of the images. We can see that Black women are, by proxy of the woman in these pages, associated with inhumanness and of not having a 'normal' moral compass. When looking at Figure 2.3, we see that the woman is nude. Nudity is not abnormal within the context of the graphic novel, but within the panel, we see that only women are naked.[81] All the men, white men, are clothed, and most also are spectators. White men as spectators become relevant when considering the relationship between Black women and white women within this frame.

The CBW is physically equal to her crossed counterparts, as I previously stated that she is an active participant in this scene of torture. She is towering over her victim, a nude white woman. The panel shows us a possessed, infected Black woman, as she drags a white woman down the city road. The first noticeable thing about the white woman is that she is also nude. The white woman's nudity seems to place she and the CBW, the only other naked woman, on similar playing fields. Their nudity operates as a base understanding of women. This is where

[80] Dreadlocks.

[81] One many 'appears' to be nude but the way that the comic is framed, he is partially nude. Both the black and white women in the frame exist as completely nude.

the similarities end. When we think about the markers of the socially dead during slavery, dress acts as a critical marker. The nudity of the women in this panel serves two different purposes. For the CBW, her nudity in relationship to her place in society reads as animalistic or primal, where the white woman's nudity and positioning within the panel position her as prey. The Black woman's nudity is a choice; the white woman is not.

We see the white woman crying out as the crossed Black woman pulls the white woman her by her hair. There is a crossed white man who also helps the crossed Black woman by grabbing the white woman by the arm, but he is facing away from the reader, so we do not see his face. What we do see is the face of the crossed Black woman, and the expression she gives is one of glee and anticipation. The fact that this crossed Black woman has such an active role in the subsequent torture of this white woman is key to my exploration of this scene.

Another point that is particularly striking in how hair works as a biological marker for the Black crossed woman. When talking about the crossed, we have to acknowledge the ways that the cross, the religious inscription, becomes the biological marker for deviance. However, in this panel, the cross does not serve as this biological marker for the crossed Black woman; her hair does. We know that this Black woman is crossed because of her physical relationship to other crossed and while her rash is partially visible, it is her dreadlocks that serves as a marker of deviance.[82]

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[82] Ropelike strands of hair formed by matting or braiding hair. Before the introduction of locs by Bob Marley, reggae, and the Rastafarian religion, we see black liberation groups like MOVE (not an acronym) wearing dreadlocks as a symbol of their commitment to living a natural life. At the inception of MOVE, there were not many alternate images of dreadlocks and as a result of the national attention the MOVE bombings received, dreadlocks gained negative connotations. Those with dreadlocks were subsequently marked as aggressive, violent, being unclean, and uncivilized. See Ayana D. Byrd and Lori D. Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York City: St. Martins Griffin, 2014), 122.

Black women's hair is often the site of policing. We see Black women and girls ridiculed for wearing their hair naturally, with Black hair often called unkempt and dirty regardless of cleanliness and style.[83] The post-apocalyptic biological marker of the cross is nonexistent for the crossed Black woman and is instead replaces with a very current biological tag for Black women. This projection of the future uses past racial ideologies as pejoratives. The CBW is less associated with her exposure and more with her relationship to whiteness, regardless of infection. Her attack on this non-infected white woman is already violent but also alludes to the complicated relationship between black women and white women.

That the CBW is dragging the woman by her blonde hair is telling, especially considering that the crossed maintain some of their consciousness and can maintain animosity that existed pre-infection. When considering this panel, one must also consider the relationship between black women and white women in the current moment. It is a relationship that often frames black women and black womanhood as not only a threat to whiteness in general but white femininity specifically. The CBW transcends assumed tropes of Black women a position herself within a trope often associated with black masculinity. Ennis frames the CBW as the Black buck, a caricature used to justify the violence enacted on Black men. Black bucks are frames as animalistic and unable to control themselves. While the CBW in the panel is not being sexual with the white woman, an element that is often associated with the buck, the excessive violence, anger, and the targeting of white women ultimately marks the CBW as a threat to an orderly society. The danger and refusal to comply with societal rules also marks the CBW as disposable.

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[83] This was a particularly common experience in the 1980s and '90s. In 1981 a black woman was fired from American Airlines for wearing cornrows. The Hyatt and Marriott Hotels fired multiple black women for wearing natural hairstyles. More recently, Tiana Parker, 7, was forced to switch elementary schools after her school disciplined her for having locs. The school said her hair did not look 'presentable.'

The reduction of Black women to a trope often associated with Black men suggests that Ennis is unable to see Black womanhood, or the humanity Black women possess. His framing of the CBW strips Black women of their identity while ignoring the complicated relationship Black women and white women have with each other, a relationship that relies on a history of violence, racism, colonialism, and the revocation of Black female autonomy.[84] The invocation of Black masculinist tropes on the Black female body marks the Black female body as deserving of violence while also destabilizing normative categories of Black femininity. In many ways, Ennis' panel reinforces this dynamic as white women and whiteness as we know it is under siege.

Ennis taps into a white paranoia that suggests that Black women are an essential threat to the survival of humans and the human race. This threat posits Black women as existing outside of the human race through their positionality to the crossed. The CBW in Ennis's future persists as a harmful representation of Black women. The CBW is presented as devolved while persisting as a threat to all she encounters. She is barbaric, hostile, and void of any notion of civility that we have come to know. She is juxtaposed against a weaker, frail, and exposed white woman. A white woman whom we know has been fighting for her survival. She is at the mercy of the Black woman who will show no mercy as a result of her infection. As a reader, we want the white woman to survive even if that means the Black woman must die.

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[84] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson explores Black masculinity, queerness, and the ontology of Blackness. Iman Jackson suggests that Black men are seen as exclusively male and insufficiently masculine. When Ennis frames Black women as examples of masculinist tropes he also marks Black women as excessively male and not quite female. The rejection of Blackness is also a rejection of Black femininity which Iman Jackson states are the negation of Blackness, a blacklist that acts as the foundation of ethics in politics. Both of these works to overdetermine Black practices as criminal queer nationally polluting and pathological. See Zakiyyah Iman-Jackson. "Waking Nightmares-on David Marriott." *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* vol. 17, issue 2-3 (June 1, 2011): 361.

Section 2.3: Post-Apocalyptic Lynching and the Death of Kara

Versions of whiteness and idealized whiteness find their way into many of the core representations.[85] In this instance, whiteness defines itself by Blackness and 'white otherness.' We see through this text that when Black women are present, they do not exist as humans. However, there are non-infected Black women in this future. The character, Kara, serves as a plot device for a survivor named Kitrick. This woman is one that only lives to serve the needs of a more critical character. She is pivotal to the storyline but usually in memory only; she exists so that we may understand another character better. Her presence serves as a plot device, but I suggest that her presence and storyline also draw attention to racial and gender dynamics. In this section, I explore the death of Kara and her two sons, suggesting that their death within this graphic novel also subconsciously invokes lynching narratives.

Kara is the wife of one of the main characters named Kitrick. Kitrick is a black man who is part of a group of survivors.[86] He comes to the group alone and barely speaks. We see him in the panels and know that he can fight and protect the group, but we do not know much more than that until his story is told. We see that he lost his wife, Kara, and his two sons early in the epidemic. She was beheaded, and his two sons were beaten to death while they were at the beach. Kitrick watches their murders from the ocean. His life was in danger, as he was shot at while attempting to swim towards his family.

We meet Kara through a flashback. This woman only exists as a memory and a moment of extreme pain for Kitrick. In Figure 2.4, we see that Kitrick and his family are at the beach. Kitrick is swimming while his wife and sons are on the beach when his wife alerts him to a radio

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[85] Daniel Bernardi, *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. (London: Routledge, 2008), 95.

[86] He dies.

Figure 2.4: the death of Kara

broadcast about the outbreak. As she warns him, one of the crossed walks up behind her and beheads her. Kitrick, who is still in the water, is unable to protect his wife and sons, who are ultimately killed and mutilated while he attempts to reach the shore. Kitrick watches his family's murder from the ocean. However, Ennis and illustrator Jacen Burrows, take this visual further through its introduction of the crossed police officer. Kitrick's family is dead, but in his attempt to reach the shore, a crossed police officer shoots him. Figure 2.4 shows the officer laughing after having shot Kitrick. While this is happening, we see other crossed chopping Kitrick's sons' bodies up; Kara, Kitrick's wife, lays beheaded and untouched on the shore.

The death of Kara, invoked lynching, as a means of marking Black women knowable. In *Unmarked: the Politics of Pleasure*, Peggy Phelan states that the pleasure of resemblance and repetition produces both psychic assurance and political fetishization. Seeing a knowable image provides mental assurance to those consuming the imagery. There is comfort in seeing familiar

images, regardless of whether the representation is problematic or not.[87] At the same time, this scene continues the practice of policing Black bodies through the controlling production and consumption of these images. Kara's murder is a spectacle.

The panel makes Kara's killers unidentifiable as crossed or human. The assumption is that they are infected. The premise is made based on the violence they enact on her Kara, but the visual markers of difference are not visible. The group we see in the panel is a lynch mob, taking glee in the murder of Kara and her sons. The optics of the scene call attention to a violent past and a violent present, with Black women being on the receiving end of the violence. Black women experience while also acknowledging the familiarity of violence enacted on Black bodies. A police officer participates in the murder of Kara and calls attention to current police violence against Black bodies where officers attack and murder Black men and women on camera. In this instance, Ennis has captured a moment of extreme violence against Black women, and the readers consume it, just like they consume film and photos of violent encounters.[88] There is extra violence enacted on their bodies as the group mutilates their body.

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[87] Nicholas Mirzoeff explores phenotype as racialized indexes, which assume that all citizens of the United States are skilled readers of racial difference. See Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis. *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, (New York: International Center of Photography in Association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 2003), 111.

[88] Nicholas Mirzoeff explores the way that photography marks race and the social/cultural manifestations real. The first is that it uses slavery as a backdrop through which he explores how race becomes convoluted via photography. Through these complicated images, we can see how photography becomes a tool of racial ideology, especially regarding phenotype. The second thing that Mirzoeff's text does is illustrate how photography represents white supremacy and power within lynching mobs. With the selling of lynching postcards, there is also a reinforcement of race. With the 'lynching archive' we see The Crisis using lynching photos to fuel anti-lynching campaigns while many whites used the images like trading cards. One image can serve dual purposes, if not more. These multiple purposes are key to Mirzoeff in that once you come to 'know' the archive, one can use these images to counter the archive. For Mirzoeff, there is value in establishing the archive so that you can then counter it.Their distribution perversely fulfilled the desire of the mob; that their violence is seen. See Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography in Association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 2003), 122.

Her husband watched helplessly as his family slaughtered. The unpredictability and spectacle surrounding Kara's murder allude to lynch mobs that we see in American lynching photos.

The death of Kara furthered the trope of the Black woman as disposable in the post-apocalypse. In this case, her death propelled the plot. However, it also showed that the only other Black woman in this narrative is expendable as well. This illuminates the usage of racial and gendered stereotypes in the treatment of Black women. In "Lynching Photographs," Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith suggest that taking photos and documenting lynching act as part of the ritual of lynching.[89] In creating this scene, Ennis unconsciously invites the reader to become a witness to the post-apocalyptic lynching. The imagery speaks to a long history of white violence enacted against Black women. With *Crossed,* we see that the infected are devalued and linked to deviance. We also understand that Black women are devalued and related to deviance via their proximity to the infected. This does not provide a counter-narrative to the trope, and as a result, the Black woman becomes viewed as irredeemable. This relationship to whiteness posits the CBW as especially unredeemable in a way that does not always happen with infected populations.

Section 2.4: Conclusion

I aimed to look at the margins to extrapolate what that means for not only Black women's survival but also their role in future narratives. We see with the that CBW that Black women exist as a shell of her former self and is the biggest threat to humankind, the other exists as a memory and technically does not exist at the time of this telling. The dehumanization of the Black woman works as a counter to being civilized, moral, and just but more importantly, Black

[89] Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photographs*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 16.

women operate in opposition to a perceived whiteness. My claim here is not that Ennis is malicious with his erasure of Black women. Instead, I suggest that the absence of Black women in the narrative operates as an offshoot of white paranoia. The future serves as a point of departure into the erasure of Black women and our attempts at reclamation via comic books and graphic novels. What does the erasure of Black women say about how Blackness is performed in the future? Also, what does this erasure say about white male's perception of Black women?

Ultimately, Ennis's treatment and subsequent erasure of Black women lends to the ideals of Black feminist ideology and furthers the argument that Black female content creators are necessary for the deployment of Black women in the future. Black popular culture becomes essential not only in political spaces but in how these popular images and actors influence notions of race. What is often not explicitly stated is how this popular reconfiguration also acts as political. While looking at Black popular culture as a site of resistance, through the resisting of normative performances of Blackness, we must also look at how Black performers, through their response to oppressive structures, are also forcing a political and racial shift.

This graphic novel ultimately illuminates the fact that white content creators are unable to represent the Black woman in the post-apocalyptic future fully. This inability, which is inherently anti-Black and anti-woman, also uses negative rendering to blur the lines in the way we discuss Black normative tropes. His work suggests that white male anxieties over Black women's existences are rooted in fear of a masculine centered Blackness, which gets prioritized over actually taking up Black women. Black women are present in these narratives but exist as shadows of themselves.

We see in works by Angela Davis, Kara Keeling, and others that attacking Black women also works to weaken Black people.[90] Killing black women or erasing Black women from the future also erases Black people regardless of gender.[91] To erase Black women from this future is a strategy that reflects the complicated relationship between Black women and white men. Both Davis and Keeling suggest that Black womanhood becomes complicated as a result of a white perversion of Blackness. I suggest that Black women in the white imagined future cannot exist in these futures, as the 'crossed' assume a space that had previously been occupied by Black women. When the pejorative Black woman trope is not necessary, the presence of Black women becomes a non-factor. The result is her erasure. While this relationship plays out in the pages of a graphic novel, it is still important to explore it as these imaginings reflect current ideologies. Popular culture works in response to the shifts in politics. Yet, concerning other texts, popular culture also creates a change in identity that forces political spaces to reimagine Black spaces within the US. This relationship is cyclical, with both parts depending on each other. Black popular culture and post-Blackness depend on dominant spaces marginalizing them, and these dominant spaces cannot change if not for Black popular culture forcing the boundaries of race and the politics of race and recognition.

The goal of this chapter was to look at controlling images within post-apocalyptic spaces, paying close attention to how white masculinity frames and, often, erase Black women in these spaces. I came to this chapter, knowing that Ennis' intention was not to reinvent the racial wheel. Still, his work is vital to the discussion regarding the representation of Black women in

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[90] Davis in particular suggests that black enslaved women performed the only labor of the slave community that could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor and as a result, black women maintained a small bit of power that made them both dangerous to whites and powerful to the black community.

[91] This does not diminish black men's contribution to the black family or lineage but suggests that black women's contributions are also dominant regarding the survival of black people.

popular culture. The future he imagined is one that is majority white, 100% void of morality, and missing real contributions from Black women and other people of color. Some may suggest that we dodged a bullet. The absence reveals a more profound issue regarding the relationship between oppressor/oppressed and how that relationship is reflected in this text.

What we see with *Crossed* is the circulation of a few familiar tropes associated with Black women and girls. There are multiple ways of imagining Black bodies, and I suggest that these women and girls assume very shallow and damaging renderings. Black women in these futures are marked as an inherently deviant 'other' who is disposable as they possess no 'real' value to the narratives. They are also only given value or imagined as having redeemable qualities by their proximity to whiteness. These representations are damaging. They become attached to Black bodies and dictate the treatment of Black women outside of written narratives. The disposable Black women in Ennis's text lend to the idea that Black women are disposable in life.[92] Images of infected Black women are hypervisible representations of Black womanhood. A negative representation that aligns with ideologies that suggest that Blackness is a tangible thing.[93] This treatment of Black women calls attention to the authority cultural producers have over the images they create and how these images make bodies' knowable'. They also draw attention to the absence of voices that would provide other 'knowable' renderings of Black women.

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[92] In *Troubling Vision,* Nicole Fleetwood suggests that visual representations of blacks are meant to substitutes for the real experiences of black subjects. See Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 13.

[93] Fleetwood defines 'hypervisibility' as the process that produces the over-representation of certain images of blacks and the visual currency of these images in popular culture.

The Black body is the quintessential sign for subjection. It serves as a site of knowledge production, and through the Black body, we come to see many articulations of Blackness.[94] The body relays codes as defined by the white body and by white supremacy, which seeks to maintain power and status through the intimidation and subjugation of those they seek to oppress.[95] In the case of *Crossed*, this interaction reinforces a trope of the Black woman as 'other' by way of her engagement with white women. Ennis frames the human as a damsel in distress, while the Black woman, crossed or not, is the biggest threat to white womanhood and humanity.

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[94] In her text, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon P. Holland argues that when we see and say 'race,' regardless of if we see race as being had by all people, the examples of race we base our ideologies upon are often steeped in blackness. For Holland we come to see all racial underpinnings through a lens of blackness and a 'black experience.

[95] Coco Fusco links scientific racism, the black body, and race arguing that photography has not only been deployed in scientific discussions of race but has also played a fundamental role in the construction of racialized viewing as a positive, pleasurable, and desirable experience. In this way, we begin to see the links between the body, images, and the codes that are deployed in the body.

Chapter Three: Who's That Girl?: Communal Resistance, Countersurveillance and the 'Hood Heroine'

In *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century,* Nazera Wright explores the way literature written in the late 19th century and early 20th century portrayed Black girlhood. In this text, she argues that Black writers used Black girls as tools to put forward their social and political agendas.[96] These girls touch upon issues affecting the broader Black community, questions regarding citizenship, education, and the abolition of slavery. The girls also acted as a means of conveying stories of warning and hope, concern and optimism, and struggle and success.[97] Wright looks at the patterns in the literature surrounding the representation of Black girlhood to find trends in the representations of girls by Black male and female authors. She presupposes that an exploration of Black girlhood would allow Black girls in early literature to receive the recognition she felt they deserved. Wright ultimately finds that there were differences between the way Black men and Black women wrote Black girlhood. She suggests that Black men tended to write Black girls as *their* ideal, while Black women tended to focus on the interiority of Black girls; their thoughts, dreams, and aspirations.[98] Both are problematic in specific ways; either through ignoring the complexities of Black girlhood or through the privileging of particular moments of Black girlhood. In all these instances, there is a romanticizing of Black girls' realities and the impact Black girls have on Black life. Wright's exploration of Black girlhood informs much of this chapter, as I am concerned with how Black male and Black female authors imagine Black girlhood in the dystopian future.

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[96] Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 2.

[97] Ibid., 2.

[98] Ibid., 3.

Black girls are an exciting point of exploration as a lot of literature the includes Black bodies focuses on Black men, and to a lesser extent, Black women. Black girls' exist within a liminal space within popular culture. They are not entirely bound by the same societal norms as adult Black people. Age exists as an inherently transitional element of Black girlhood, unlike race, which marks Black girls as a point of entry due to the way age complicates an already complex body. Understanding how age provides an additional identity marker also adds layers to how we come to know Blackness. Looking at Black girls in these dystopian futures, not only helps us explore the way Black girls reproduce Blackness, it becomes pivotal when considering Black girls become Black women. Establishing representations among Black girls can begin the work of exploring the evolution of Black girlhood to Black womanhood in popular culture, specifically comics.

Black dystopian authors framing of Black girls in literature allows Black girls to negotiate their identities within narratives. Using the comic *Genius*, written by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman and illustrated by Afua Richardson and the science fiction novel *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, I explore what happens when Black girls assume leadership roles within their community. Paying close attention to the ways that Black girls navigate their girlhood, I explore how modes of resistance in a more contemporary lens speaks to the evolving role of Black girls in the liberation of Black people. Black dystopian writers have the ability to frame Black girls in the future in ways that resemble current moments. I suggest that when Black girls assume these liberatory spaces, they also challenge normative Black leadership.

My work in this chapter is interdisciplinary; I am using Black visual culture, literary analysis, and a Black feminist theoretical approach to explore women in these futures. I pay close attention to the way girls navigate power in their communities. Black girls establish,

navigate, and maintain their leadership in the face of structures designed to keep them powerless. I argue that Black girls in the future exist in direct contradiction to 'order.'[99] *Genius* refuses government-sanctioned surveillance in the deployment of sousveillance.[100] These refusals, presented by both Black male and female cultural producers, in particular, create what I call the 'hood heroine.' Black girlhood and Black girls remain relatively untapped as an area of focus in comics because of the functions of Black girlhood. In 'Towards an Interdisciplinary Field of Black Girlhood Studies," Tammi C. Owens asserts that as a group, Black girls are largely presumed to be illegible at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and age.[101] Black content creators understand the relationship and use this oversight as a means of making the 'hood heroine.' These girls exist in the margins within these speculative futures and use their marginalization as a tactical advantage. There is an awareness of positionality that makes these girls, especially influential leaders.[102]

The hood heroine does not link herself to the land or neighborhood; you do not have to be from the 'hood' to embody the hood heroine. There is a common theme of resistance that flows throughout all of these leaders. The hood heroine rejects tropes of Black girl victimhood where

[99] I put the order in quotes to suggest that order is linked to a power structure that exists in relationship to imperialism, colonialism, silencing of marginalized people, and generational trauma. At its core, 'order' as maintained by rule of law is less about keeping order and more about maintaining norms associated with the exploitation of oppressed people which includes, but is not limited to, black women.

[100] Sousveillance is a term coined by Charles Mann which focuses on the power citizens have concerning the systems that surveil them. Sousveillance is a tactic used in opposition to the surveillance of Black bodies' experience.

[101] Tammy C. Owens, Durell M. Callier, Jessica L. Robinson, and Porshé R. Garner, "Towards and Interdisciplinary Field of Black Girlhood Studies." *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research,* vol. 6, issue 3 (Fall 2017): 118.

[102] Aimee Meredith Cox states that young Black women living in the US engage with, confront, challenge, invert, unsettle and expose the material impact of systemic oppression. See Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 17.

unfavorable life circumstances batter black girls. Instead, the hood heroine is a means of Black survival, which in turn becomes a communal survival. The heroine is a natural leader; having a 'calling' is one of the primary aspects of the hood heroine. The heroines do not act out of duty or feeling indebted to their communities. There is an urgency with their leadership that does not have time for these types of thoughts and self-doubt. For the hood heroine, their survival is dependent upon the endurance of those around them. The hood heroine shows that it is possible to produce multiple renderings of Black heroes. This chapter is more of a discussion of how male and female content creators push the boundaries of Black girlhood through the acknowledgment of alternate forms of Black girls and Black leadership.

I begin this chapter with an exploration of Destiny's use of sousveillance and guerrilla tactics to defend her Los Angeles neighborhood and how this lends to the idea that black girls, when imagined by Black men, are more likely to carry out the aspiration and promises of racial progress.[103] I suggest that Destiny, the leader of the revolt, uses sousveillance as a counter to the surveillance of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), conducts on the Black community. Destiny uses sousveillance and guerrilla military tactics in her fight against the LAPD, which marks her as a young, brilliant leader. It also shows how Destiny can take the policing of her community and use the same tactics, not only to take a stand against the LAPD but to make them stand down. She uses the police force's tactics against them and, in doing so, pushes against the limits of what black female empowerment looks like while creating new definitions of black resistance. While using force against the police is not a new plot, the outcome forces a rethinking of resistance and who is capable of resistance. Black girls as tactical leaders are nor a representation of Black girlhood we see in popular culture.

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[103] Wright, *Black Girlhood,* 3.

My exploration of Destiny and the hood heroine begins with a brief exploration of surveillance and policing in Los Angeles. I look at the ways that Black girls navigate life in Los Angeles, focusing on the surveillance of Black girls. Monitoring these 'invisible' Black girls marks a complicated relationship between the intersections of Black girlhood. Black girls are approached from a deviant perspective, which is frequently used to examine aspects of Black communities.[104] Black girls' race marks them as deviant where their age, and to a lesser extent, gender marks them as invisible.[105] I then explore the notion of sousveillance and how 'returning the gaze' works as a liberatory practice in this comic. I begin my analysis with Destiny and focus on her engagement with her community. Destiny maintains a space of hero and villain as she is the protector of the community while acting in direct opposition to the law.

I then explore the 'hood heroine' and how Destiny reconfigures Black female heroism, paying close attention to the ways that she uses normative notions of womanhood to her tactical advantage. With the exploration of the hood heroine, I also explore how Black female writers expand upon the hood heroine by looking at the work of Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Sower* is a dystopian novel set in the 2020s which follows Lauren Olamina, a young girl living in a collapsed American society. This collapse is due to climate change, growing wealth inequality, and corporate greed. As a result, society has dissolved into chaos. We follow Lauren through these chaotic moments as she begins to develop her belief system called Earthseed. The novel follows Lauren on her journey from Los Angeles to Northern California as she attempts to establish her new religion and community. Lauren also suffers from a disorder called

[104] Owens, "Towards and Interdisciplinary Field of Black Girlhood Studies," 120.

[105] Wright suggests that Black authors highlighted stages of girlhood as a way of challenging prevailing attitudes that Black girls were valued solely for their future sexual roles, their economic potential, and their contributions to the slave populations on southern plantations. See Wright, *Black Girlhood*, 11.

hyperempathy, which I suggest allows us to see more subjective aspects of Black female leadership. This investigation into the many ways the black imagination sees Black girls shows the complexities of Black girlhood. Paying closer attention to the ways Black girls' representation ultimately shifts how we talk about Black girls and women in popular culture.

While *Parable of the Sower* is a science fiction novel and not a comic or graphic novel, I place *Parable* and *Genius* in conversation with each other for a few reasons. Both girls are relatively the same age, both experience a dystopian future in Los Angeles, and both are committed to the liberation of their communities. My goal is to look at how these narratives make space for Black girl leadership. Using both a post-black and Afrofuturistic lens, I situate Butler's work as pivotal in the making of how we come to know the 'hood heroine' and how she serves as foundational to Black science fiction but also to writing Black girls in science fiction.[106] Butler's deployment of Black girlhood works as a counter to normative tropes surrounding race and gender, which often ignore the plight of Black girls, especially the futures represented in comics and graphic novels.[107] Reading Butler's *Parable* through an Afrofuturist lens, I explore how Lauren forces us to evolve how we see Black leadership and Black leaders.

The centering of Black girls' experiences makes Butler's text important. Black girls as leaders of revolution move against the framing of liberation and leadership as primarily Black and male. Looking at how Black girls maintain positions within revolutionary spaces is essential not only to the comic book world but to the ways we think of Black leadership and how it

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[106] Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany are often posited as a premier figure within black science fiction writing. Both of their work with Afrofuturistic ideology falls in line with that of black cultural criticism. Other black science fiction writers include Nalo Hopkinson, Minister Faust, Nnedi Okorafor, and N.K. Jemisin. All but Jemisin reside outside of the US. Acknowledging the works of other black science fiction writers.

[107] This is seen through Butler's characters Lauren Olamina and her daughter Larkin, who tell the story of the formation of Earthseed, a religion created by Olamina. Butler uses black women as a source of religious creation as well as people who assume primary roles in the creation of community.

functions within Black communities. Lauren is not only the lead character but the hero of the story. In any other series, Lauren would be the antagonist, wherein Butler's future, she is the protagonist. She works in direct opposition to white supremacy and in direct opposition to the government, whom we know is responsible for the destruction of 'modern' society.

Marc Bernardin's construction of Destiny is similar to Butler's deployment of Lauren in that they both use Black girls to push against the visual representations of Black militancy and liberation, thus forcing readers to rethink the possibilities of Black girlhood and Black resistance. I question how supremacy and patriarchy get taken up in these spaces and how these girls negotiate both. How does the 'hood heroine' reinforce notions of deviant Blackness? How do they push against it? How does the PIC in the future lend to the reconfiguration of Black womanhood? I do not suggest that one way of representing Black girls is better than the other, but I do address the need for both in the shaping of Black girlhood. If we presume, as Owens suggests, that Black girls are illegible and remain untapped as a field, then these characters act as foundational. There is space for Black girlhood in popular culture to be constructed, not reconstructed, which helps to create more representations of Black girls.

Section 3.1: Rethinking the Gaze: the Tactical Manipulation of Common-Sense Memory

To understand the importance of *sousveillance* to the 'South Central Siege,' one must unpack what it means to be surveilled.[108] Surveillance, at its core, consists of organizations' observing' people. In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne states that 'veillance' is a neutral form of watching, while surveillance is about power. Browne links surveillance and surveillance studies to Black life, asserting that runaway slave ads and other

[108] In Vol. 2 of *Genius*, we learn that the LAPD has named Destiny's rebellion the "South Central Siege."

literature worked as surveillance. They serve as a means of studying Black flight.[109] Flight acts as a means of resistance and requires a knowledge of the ways surveillance functions and is deployed. This knowledge serves as a counter to the surveillance they experience. The 'fugitive' knew the systems they were escaping. While they were unable to escape racism completely, they were often able to avoid capture. The ads and literature served as technology, as knowledge of slave labor and enslaved people were able to be transmitted via the dissemination of these ads. These ads were able to convey and normalize particular language surrounding slavery and Black bodies, further marking surveillance as an undercurrent to Black life. In other words, surveillance creates and manipulates coded systems, which is then used in the oppression of Black bodies. For Browne, Blackness exists as a site through which surveillance practices, narrated, and enacted. Surveillance is an act of anti-Blackness.[110]

Where public spaces are shaped for and by whiteness, some acts in public are abnormalized by way of racializing surveillance and are then coded for disciplinary measures that are punitive in their effects.[111] Browne gives the example of a white man standing on the street. He could be on the phone or merely standing, and that behavior is coded as normal. He garners little to no attention. A Black man could perform the same activity and be coded as existing beyond the boundaries of normal, thus making the Black man subject to disciplinary action. These forms of surveillance work to stereotype Black people but also to police their activities. The conceptualizing of Black people's movements also leads to the disproportionate

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[109] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 53.

[110] Ibid., 10.

[111] Ibid., 17.

disciplining of Black people. There is no more significant example of this than the murder of Black men and women killed for holding inanimate objects or moving.[112]

When thinking about how surveillance influences the lives of black girls om Los Angeles, the murder of Latasha Harlins surfaces as an example of the power of using surveillance against those that use it against Black communities. Harlins, a 15-year-old black girl, was murdered by Soon Ja Du, a Korean woman who owned the convenience store which was located in Los Angeles. Du stated that Harlins was attempting to steal a bottle of orange juice from her store, claim witnesses disputed. Du further noted that she was justified in the killing of Harlins as a result of the attempted theft. Du said she was acting in self-defense when she murdered the 15-year-old. However, it was a videotape recording of the incident that ultimately showed that Du killed Latasha Harlins. The tape showed that Harlins had intended to pay for the juice, and Du assaulted the girl first. It was also the videotape that captured Du shooting Harlins in the back of the head.[113] This tape would subsequently lead to Du's conviction.

The trial of Soon Ja Du showed that the surveillance of Black people could be used against those who surveil Black bodies. The Du family had cameras up as a means up watching the movements of their predominantly Black customers, customers whom they assumed would rob them. The assumption of robbery, and violence, from Black people, is what led to listen to

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[112] On Sept. 16, 2016, Officer Betty Shelby murdered Terence Crutcher as he was turning to put his hands on his car. Tamir Rice, Keith L Scott, Akai Gurley, and Philando Castile were also murdered by police who stated that they made sudden moves or 'had something in their hands.' Sandra Bland died in police custody after being arrested for a traffic violation. Former state trooper Brian Encinia was later indicted for making false claims about the circumstances of Bland's death. The state trooper was indicted after the courts looked at the police dashcam, as well as, bystander's footage.

[113] "A senseless and Tragic Killing: New Tensions for Korean American and African American communities," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1991.

the death of Harlins. The distrust of Black bodies in the Black community led to these business owners recording their store. While many may argue that Du received an unfair sentence for the crime of voluntary manslaughter, we began to see the effectiveness of surveillance in getting justice for black lives.[114] The verdict may not fit the crime, but one could speculate that the outcome may have been drastically different had a videotape not existed.

Rodney King and the subsequent arrest of the officers involved in his beating was one of the most memorable instances of sousveillance at work but Harlins' murder, thirteen days after his beating, was also a moment of sousveillance. Her death is often cited as one of the causes of the 1992 LA Riots. Though tragic, her death becomes a marker in how the surveillance of Black bodies can be used against those that surveil. This counter, sousveillance, opposes the work of surveillance and is linked to regimes of control.[115] Sousveillance, a term coined by Steve Mann in 1998, is a form of reflectionism, which uses technology to confront bureaucratic organizations.[116]

The New York Times defines sousveillance as the monitoring of authorities by informal networks of regular people, equipped with little more than cellphones, video blogs, and the desire to remain vigilant against the excesses of the powers that be. If surveillance is the observation of people by organizations, sousveillance is the observation of organizations by

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[114] Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter and the jury recommended the maximum sentence of 16 years. the trial judge, Joyce Karlin, did not accept the jury's recommendation and sentence due to five years' probation, 400 hours of community service and a $500 fine. judge Karlin stated that she felt du had suffered enough.

[115] Steve Mann, "Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments," *Surveillance & Society* vol. 1, no. 3 (Jan. 2002): 331.

[116] In "Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments,' Steve Mann asserts that reflectionism related to 'detournement' which is the tactic of appropriating tools of social controllers and situating these tools in a disorienting manner. Reflection becomes sousveillance when applied to individuals using tools to observe the organizational observer See Mann, "Sousveillance," 333.

people. Sousveillance exists to resist surveillance, which means it operates in direct opposition to the law.[117] As such, we have to acknowledge that sousveillance does not necessarily lead to any accountability or discipline to the organizations being sousveilled. We see this with the subsequent acquittal of the officers in the Rodney King beating, with the reduced sentence of Latasha Harlin's murderer, as well as with the officers and civilians who have been acquitted or not indicted in the murders of countless black men and women. What is interesting here is the way sousveillance creates an alternative archive, a different kind of archive, and the way it redirects the white gaze. This archive explores the violence the white gaze enacts, and the ways Black bodies are subject to the consequences of the white imagination. Sousveillance does not redirect the white gaze but uses the white gaze to render its victims legible.

Genius explores what could happen if the most significant military mind was born to a people who are already supremely conditioned to wage war.[118] Initially, every publisher refused to publish the comic as the story had a Black female lead, a Black female lead who kills cops. Top Cow, a division of Image Comics[119] , eventually released a one-shot, which got an overwhelming response.[120] The response led to the five-issue miniseries, which was written by Bernardin and Freeman and illustrated by American illustrator, Afua Richardson. This five-issue comic explores the story of Destiny, a 17-year-old Blood that unites the gangs in South Central,

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[117] Even though surveillance exists in private industry, I am focused on the ways that surveillance operates within the police force and in government institutions. As such, sousveillance that works in opposition to the law is often marked as unlawful or rebellious.

[118] Marc Bernardin, Afua Richardson, and Adam Freeman. *Genius.* (Portland: Image Comics, 2015).

[119] Image Comics is a comic and graphic novel publishing company formed in 1992. It is the 3rd largest comics publisher in the United States.

[120] A one-shot is a comic book that is published as a single, standalone issue, with a self-contained story, and not as part of an ongoing series or miniseries.

Los Angeles, and wages war on the LAPD in an attempt to protect the residents of her neighborhood. Destiny assumes power after becoming the girlfriend of a gang leader, watching the ins and outs of gang life, then murdering all the gang leaders in South Central. After their murders, she calls for a truce among the gang factions and unites them against who she thinks is their biggest enemy, the LAPD. We see that she finds fault with the LAPD as a result of her childhood and witnessing the systemic violence enacted on her neighbors and neighborhood at the hands of the police force. Destiny shows us that her experiences act as ammunition against a police force that has terrorized her life. The police are the undercurrent to most of her pain.[121]

Destiny uses tactical warfare to keep the police out of the neighborhood, setting up borders, creating diversions, and killing any officers that attempt to cross into South Central. Destiny does not act alone; she has the support of the entire neighborhood, who also works to conceal her identity. Destiny manages to not only unite the gangs against the police; she also unites all the residents of South Central. She, in effect, is the general of South Central. Destiny is our entry into this revolt, but there are a few other characters that are important to the making of Destiny as a leader. While Destiny's role is important, it is her engagement with those around her that help us see how she engages her leadership as a Black girl.[122]

Bernardin's character, Destiny, is also a victim and a survivor of surveillance. Growing up in Los Angeles, she is shown to have grown up an orphan. The 17-year-old had a rough childhood as a result of being an orphan. She became a gang member and the girlfriend of the gang leader. Her gang activity means that she often encounters the police, who seek to eradicate

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[121] Destiny's interactions with the police as a younger child were illustrated as only happening during or after violent moments.

[122] There are 5 other characters I will discuss in this chapter, not at length but in conjunction with my discussion of Destiny. They are Agent Grey, Izzy, Gerald, Chavonne, and Alonzo.

the gangs in her South-Central neighborhood. Over the span of a few panels, we witness Destiny assume total power over her gang. She murders her boyfriend then assumes his spot as leader. It is through this takeover, that Destiny begins sousveilling the LAPD.[123] She does so through the unification of all the gangs in South Central. She shifts the focus of violence from each other to the police force that they encounter daily.

The critical thing to note about Destiny is that initially, all the information we initially learn about her is a result of surveillance. When we are introduced to the "South Central Siege," it is through a police file compiles by Agent Grey.[124] The record tells us a few things about the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), Destiny, and the Crossroads.[125] Gang warfare has reached an all-time low in South Central when a police officer is murdered within the six-block radius of the Crossroads. We see that Agent Grey thinks this is a calculated attack, meant to send a message to the police department. However, his attempts at warning his colleagues to fall on deaf ears. No one is convinced that Agent Grey is right when he suggests that this police murder is a tactical move to provoke the LAPD. Instead, the LAPD assumes this is the act of a careless community member and proceed to send in the SWAT team to extract the murderer.

When looking at Figure 3.1, we see that Agent Grey has a file on 'Suspect Zero,' but there is no picture to go with the title. The reader sees a series of people on the page, and while we ultimately know the identity of 'Suspect Zero' to be Destiny, the presence of multiple identities could represent the assumptions and truths Agent Grey experiences. In the pictures, we see a

[123] Destiny's boyfriend, Lamont, was the leader of the Crip gang. To unify the gangs, she murders him in front of the other faction leaders and their gang members. She then murders the leaders of the factions and calls for a new start.

[124] Agent Grey is the officer primarily focused on Destiny and those in South Central.

[125] The Crossroads is the nickname for the neighborhood that Destiny united and the site of the 'South Central Siege.'

Figure 3.1: from Issue #1 of *Genius;* the file of 'Suspect Zero'

murdered black male police officer with a cutthroat. We also see a woman's mugshot. We later learn that this woman in Chavonne, Destiny's lieutenant, who then helps the remainder of the neighborhood escape arrest. The third image is the mugshot of a black man who is not identified. Lastly, we have a picture of Destiny. While we are looking at Destiny, Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman make sure to note that the description of 'Suspect Zero' is faceless and sexless while also referring to 'Suspect Zero' as 'he.' The misgendering of 'Suspect Zero' is a common theme for the first issue of *Genius* and is often used as a distraction for Destiny. She moves throughout much of the earlier moments of the rebellion unnoticed by police, as they

think they are looking for a male. Destiny uses the normative rendering of revolt and heroism as a weapon against the LAPD. The police automatically assumed that Suspect Zero is a male because of the ways that Blackness and violence become gendered in police spaces. The pathology of Black males as the primary actors in violent crimes like the murder Destiny committed is an ideology that has been passed down over time.

In Kara Keeling's *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, she discusses how the Black Panther Party disrupted the hegemonic common sense at the time with the image of Blacks with guns.[126] The presentation of Blacks with guns challenged notions of 'the Black' and the struggle for equal rights at the time. [127] As Keeling describes, whites assumed that the quest for equal rights had been won, but being forced to see Blacks with guns made them realize that there was still a fight for equality. This 'seeing' was a coded moment as the link between liberation and the Black Panther Party was relayed through a series of coded items; the leather coats, the all-Black, and the guns. Whites were confronted with the appearance of Blacks that confounded their ability to recognize them. The inability to process the image of Blacks with guns into common memory-images led to questions of the effects of the civil rights movement. This assumption that Destiny would be a man works in similar ways.

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[126] In *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, Jane Rhodes explores how the Black Panthers articulated their ideologies and political demands through cultural symbols that have since become ambiquitious. The Panthers became visually associated with black berets, afros, black skin, and rifles. See Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon,* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), xvi.

[127] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: the Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 74.

There is also a gendered association where Black women are present and involved, but Black leadership is assumed by Black men.[128] Agent Grey and the LAPD are unable to process the potential that 'Suspect Zero' is anything other than a Black man. Destiny uses this hegemonic common sense associated with not only liberation but also the enactors of Black violence to her advantage. The racialized surveillance that the LAPD deploys erases Black women from the narrative. Simone Browne defines racialized surveillance as a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms of race and exercise a 'power to define what is in or out of place.'[129]

Bernardin's exploration works to critique Black movements and the gendered implications of its leaders. Though Black girls were not even considered to be 'Suspect Zero' also alludes to the treatment described in the first pages of the comic. The police ignoring her is an extension of all the other systems that ignored her throughout her childhood. Once Agent Grey realizes that Destiny is a girl, he still places gender norms on Destiny. Destiny uses this to infiltrate the LAPD to gain intel on the siege. One could speculate that Agent Grey expected men and women from South Central to look and dress in particular ways. As Destiny did not appear in the ways Agent Grey associated people from South Central to perform, he unknowingly has a complete conversation with her.

We do not know what Agent Grey thinks Destiny would look like, but through the images, we see what he does not expect of her. He does not expect that she would wear a suit,

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[128] Black women's acceptance of subordinate roles in Black organizations does not mean that Black women wield no power or experience the patriarchy in the same way as do white women in white orgs. With the exception of Black women's organizations, male run organizations have historically either not stressed Black women's issues or have done so under duress. In the instance of *Genius*, Destiny's deployment of Black girlhood ignores existing dichotomies around Black leadership and rebellion. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 9.

[129] Browne, *Dark Matters*, 16.

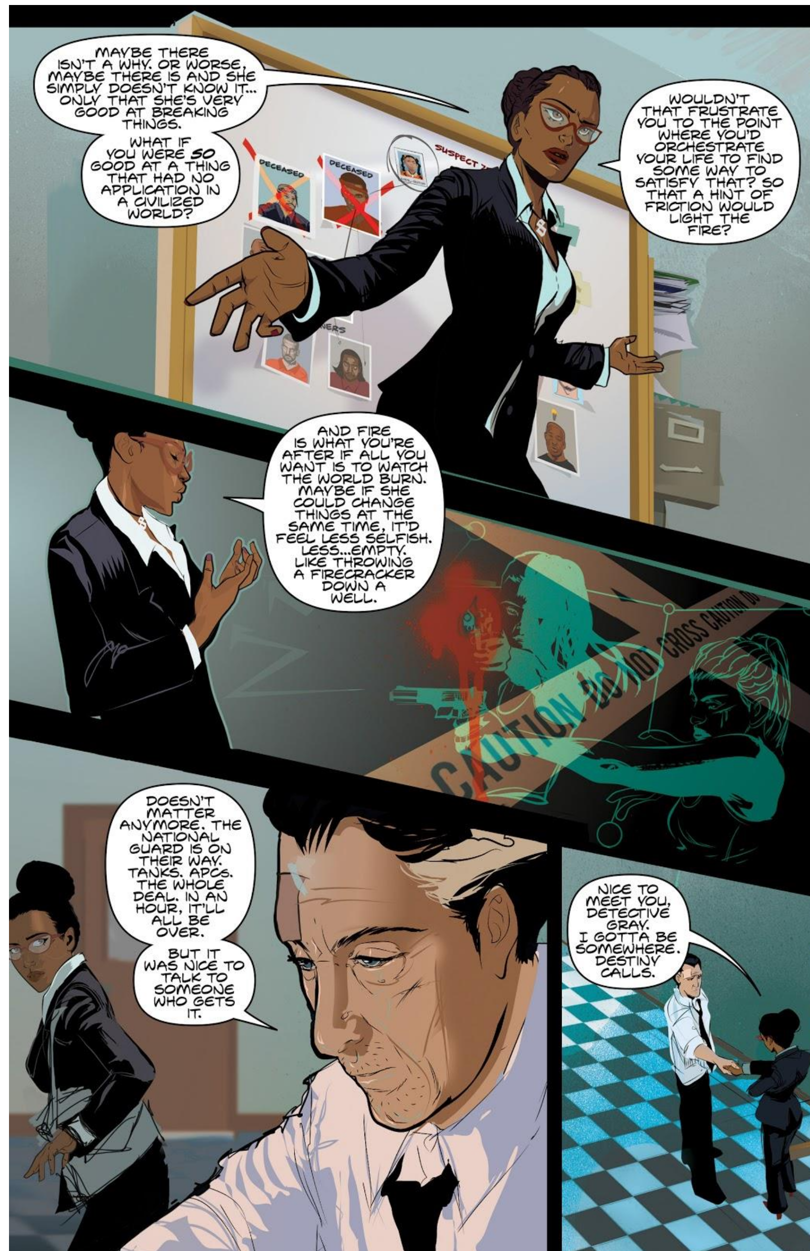

Figure 3.2: Panel from Issue #4 of *Genius*

heels, and have her hair neatly coiffed. We see in Figure 3.2 that Destiny is immediately welcomed when she dons this attire, disguised as an IAD agent. From previous panels in this series, we know that she is completely uncomfortable in her new attire. However, she knows that this outfit is what will gain her access to the world she wants to exploit. The only way that Agent Grey was able to identify Destiny as herself was by her hands. Agent Grey begins to

doubt her being an IAD agent after shaking her hands and noticing that they were rough. Signs of labor were enough to make Grey second guess Destiny's presence, which quickly leads to the dissolution of her cover. By this time, it is too late, and Destiny has already collected her intel and left.

Destiny's interactions with Agent Grey highlights the potential boundaries for Black women operating within oppressive structures. Bernardin highlights the potentials by using them as tactics. Destiny was able to infiltrate these spaces under the guise of positions of power that Black girls have not always been able to access. The catch, which Destiny highlights, is that Black girls can only enter and maneuver in these spaces if they reproduce what has become a respectable representation of Black womanhood.

While she does not have autonomy over how Black women are rendered visible in society, she can manipulate the gaze. She can control when and under what circumstances she visible, which we see is a valuable weapon in war. She can play herself up or down to benefit her agenda. She does not always need to embody what Keeling would call masculinist tropes (i.e., guns, bombs, and other weapons) to be a threat. A huge reason as to why her brand of tactics works so well is because she is not always threatening. This non-threatening aspect solidifies her place within the Black community and lends to the ways that she also gains and maintains power within the Black community.

I suggest that racialized surveillance erases Black girls to simplify how one would respond to and define Black violence. When deploying racialized violence through the lens of the LAPD, black men fill the norm of Black resistance. This is, in part, due to the roles Black men played in dictating the standards of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s. What Black feminist cultural critics posit is that Black women were and are pivotal to Black liberation, a fact

that Bernardin also takes up. Destiny disrupts this racialized surveillance and draws attention to the limits of surveillance, as it is rooted in patriarchy and does not consider the contributions of black women to the Black community. Destiny uses this underestimation as a tactical advantage. We see this with her engagement with the LAPD but also with the Black men in her neighborhood.

Section 3.2: Afrofuturism, Hyperempathy and the Hood Heroine

Afrofuturism is defined as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture, and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."[130] Dery also posits that Afrofuturism exists as a Black controlled space; only Black cultural producers make afrofuturistic content, as Afrofuturism is rooted in the reclamation of science fiction written by Black authors. When thinking about where works by authors like Octavia Butler, whose books predate Afrofuturism as a reading practice, we must consider them as Black science fiction writers whose work becomes enveloped in Afrofuturism as a result of content and authorship. There is a way that Dery acknowledges the need for the science fiction element of Afrofuturism, but he stresses that science fiction provides the vocabulary for understanding a particular Black aesthetic. This aesthetic encompasses different genres that have the same goal to project the Black future. For Dery, race becomes a distinguishing factor in how the future is projected.

I suggest that though race serves as a distinguishing factor in imagining Black futures, gender and age also need to be taken up. Afrofuturism explores speculative fictions treatment of

[130] Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* ed Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 180.

Black bodies by Black cultural producers, but there is an urgency to expand the way Black bodies in the margins of Blackness function in science fiction. With Octavia Butler's character Lauren Olamina, we can see the ways that age and perceived ability frame her character and how she survives the dystopia.

When we begin *Parable of the Sowe*r, we are introduced to the character Lauren through her family, and in many ways, she resembles many of the narratives that Spillers calls into question. Lauren is posited as weak and emotional as a result of her condition. She is treated as if she is the weakest link in her family, even as her brothers show that they are the weaker siblings. In many ways, Butler takes up this antiquated racial and gendered ideology regarding how Lauren is seen while protected behind the walls of her neighborhood. Lauren is trapped both physically and mentally. Physically she should remain mostly in the protected space allotted to her family. She is expected to follow the rules and religion of her father, even as she disagrees with much of what he says. However, in certain moments, we can get a glimpse of what is to come regarding Lauren's evolution. She silently rebels within these walls. She educates children. She protects her brothers. She allows herself to experience her hyperempathy, even as her father and others force her to silence her abilities.

Hortense Spillers extrapolates the ways that the treatment of Black women in America is rooted in the 'New World.' Her text attempts to undo aspects of "the African-American female's misnaming" calling attention to how documents like "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" work to weaken the relationship between Black males and females.[131] Spillers present the idea that globally, women determine the familial identity and, as a result, often control how society is established and run. She juxtaposes this against the United States, which she suggests

[131] "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" is also often referred to as the Moynihan Report.

is heavily impacted by notions of white supremacy.[132] White supremacy, according to Spillers's critique, created a system that vilifies what the world has come to see as normal in regards to race and gender, which is why the writers of "The Negro Family" place the breakdown of the Black family on the Black woman. The Black woman is white supremacies scapegoat in the failings of the Black community. Spillers' critique of the Black family and the role of the Black woman in the Black family is an essential point of departure.

Within the confines of their neighborhood, Lauren clearly exhibits notions of race and gender that Spillers suggests has become normalized, but she also works against them in distinct ways. With this text, we see that men personify the connection to the old ways of life. Her father, a Baptist preacher, forces his children to abide by religious texts and to embody the Baptist tradition, even though we know that Lauren no longer believes in Christianity. Her separation from Christianity becomes a crucial moment, as she later establishes herself as a religious prophet. The idea of Lauren as a prophet is important because of her age and gender. At 15, she is a child. Her adolescence affects her leadership and more as a person that needs to be taken care of and nurtured. Other than Lauren, we do not see female prophets or female religious leaders, let alone black female prophets. Her position as a spiritual leader also counters dominant notions of gendered leadership as all of the leaders in this future space are white males.

Lauren, as a religious leader, highlights a complicated relationship between women and their place within religious structures. Religion in this future exists as male and adult. Religion either functions as an extension of the state, as we see with the government's use of faith as propaganda. Lauren's father also deploys religion as a response to the state. Religion provides guidelines on how to survive this future. Lauren is an independent girl who thinks for herself in a

[132] White supremacy in this instance is associated with white, cisgender men.

time where that is not the norm. Most are looking for ways to be protected. Also, the fact that we have a woman at the helm of religions when all of the dominant religious figures are white males is key to the way that black womanhood is reimagined. It is also important to note that much of her leadership skills lie in the fact that she's empathic AND smart.

Lauren's hyperempathy is initially framed as a weakness and evolves into a site of strength and clairvoyance. Lauren is unable to look at people who are in pain, whether it is me physical or emotional, without feeling their emotions. Her father shields her from the world because of her hyperempathy. When thrust out of her home and into this dystopian reality, Lauren's disability becomes a site of power. In *Bodyminds Reimagines: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, Samantha Dawn Schalk states that contemporary Black women's speculative fiction changes the rules to reality to create new worlds. As a result, (dis)ability in these futures do not necessarily comply with realist understandings of ability or disability.[133] In each imagined future, ability and (dis)ability function in different ways and, as such, must be defined for each world. Her ability to feel other's pain gives her enough pause that she can make more rational decisions. Her 'disability' in many ways is her superpower. In doing this, Butler turns the idea of women as 'weak and emotional' on its head. Earthseed, the name of her religion, and hyperempathy become the things that establish Lauren as a leader. We know that Lauren's hyperempathy is a delusion, she states this as fact, but it is a significant part of her identity and informs every decision she makes.

Lauren discusses the origin of her hyperempathy, which she inherited from her mother, a drug addict. The drug, Paraceto, ultimately kills Lauren's mother, leaving her to be raised by her

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[133] Samantha Dawn *Schalk, Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), Introduction, Kindle.

father, who is a professor and preacher. Lauren says that her father sees her hyperempathy and the way she got it as "shameful."[134] He also encourages Lauren not to reveal her hyperempathy as it is "family business." Lauren also agrees with him as "being the most vulnerable person [she] knows is damned, sure not something [she] wants to boast about." The vulnerability that Lauren acknowledges is important as she knows her hyperempathy exposes her to harm and death in this moment of extreme violence. While she knows this, she does not see her hyperempathy as a weakness in the way that her father does. He sees it as a mark of addiction and death, a reminder that Lauren is linked to life beyond their neighborhood. She is part of the thing that he tries to protect his family from; she is not a harm to them, but an example of the effects of the new world.

Hyperempathy is not a weakness. It is something that exists within her, it is part of her identity. She understands the impact it would have on the community within the walls but does not see it as a failing. Her hyperempathy makes her a better leader as she is physically unable to inflict violence unless necessary. As a result of her hyperempathy, harming others also inflicts pain on her body. She becomes a thoughtful, more resourceful leader. Throughout the text, we see that the people around Lauren accept her and her hyperempathy in ways that her father never could. She took her vulnerabilities and used this as a means of liberating herself and establishing her religion.

Octavia Butler uses the idea that girls are weak to frame Lauren's experience within the walls then literally. She figuratively removes the barriers to show us that Lauren's strength is bound up with her initially perceived weakness. She forces the reader to reframe her weakness as strength amid the story. Something similar happens with Destiny. In *Genius*, we see her story;

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[134] Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, (New York City: Grand Central Publishing, 2000).

she loses both of her parents violently, which forces her into an abusive foster care system.[135] Destiny joins a gang out of necessity. She is a product of her environment, which leads her to a life of deviant behavior. However, this behavior is turned on its head by her actual genius. Bernardin takes a trope of black girlhood that is unfavorable and makes it empowering. Destiny is a statistic that ends up being an anomaly in that she acts as a source of strength as opposed to a liability.

Destiny is calculating, which often translates as cold. This coldness is explained as a result of childhood trauma but also a side effect of being focused on succession. For Destiny, emotions are not seen as a weakness but more as a tactical disadvantage; it could slow her down. The feeling she expresses is rarely personal; instead, her compassion is linked to liberation. When the police kill her childhood friend, Gerard, we see Destiny overcome with emotion, but even that emotion does not last long. It is problematic that Destiny is shown as emotionally stifled, as Black girls are often imagined as needing to be strong consistently. How does this non-emoting affect how we see black girls? First, it limits their ability to be seen as 'real.' Destiny's leadership, though heroic, speaks to the labor Black female bodies endure, often to their detriment. The lack of introspection on the part of Destiny is one of the primary differences between her and Lauren. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill-Collins states that according to many Black female writers, no matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self.[136]

Black women are responsible for determining their worth, which is recapitulated through their work. Destiny, for all her success, appears emotionally stunted, as Black girls' emotional

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[135] Lauren's mother dies during childbirth and it is assumed that her father was killed after he went to work and never returned. In this future, leaving home and being murdered on the way back is not uncommon.

[136] Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 130.

turmoil is often relegated to the shadows. No matter how brilliant and skilled Destiny is, her perceived lack of empathy and emotion limits her. However, Black women understand Black female pain. Lauren's hyperempathy allows for alternate readings of Black girlhood. Black girls' emotional agency is nonexistent in most narratives. It does not make Black girls' characters weaker, but the lack of emotional agency results in a reliance on Black girl's labor without critiquing its need or impact.

Section 3.3: Girls in the Hood

Both Destiny and Lauren begin life with significant setbacks. Lauren's loss of her mother is bound to her California neighborhood, and the treatment she received because of her hyperempathy all impacted her initial development. We see similarities in Destiny through her becoming an orphan who was abandoned by 'the system.' In both of these futures, these Black girls are "motherless children." They also both live in violent worlds that should be unsafe for Black girls. However, these Black girls redirect the negative imagery associated with their Black existence and reframe it. The reframing of Black girls works to destabilize what we see as negative or positive behaviors. This reframing is why Black girls combatting a police state can be seen as a savior of the Black community, as opposed to being framed as a menace. Hortense Spillers suggests that the rendering of Black masculinity and femininity works to transport us to a conventional historical grounding. Spillers' assertion that Black femininity/masculinity exists as a basis for understanding suggests that gender as a construct if flawed and false from inception. However, one must deal with these ideologies as they are linked to the colonization and enslavement of Black and indigenous people and attribute to what Spillers calls the theft of

the body. These assertions bring attention to a reality of many Black women; the Black woman serves as white supremacies scapegoat in the discussion of the failings of the Black community.

While Spillers asserts that Black femininity, by the vilification of the intersections of race and gender frames Black women as the burden to Black men and society as a whole, scholars like Nazera Wright explore how Black girls push against notions of Black femininity. Black girls are an unprotected class as whites ignore [Black girls] innocence, and those within the Black community are unable to protect them. Bernardin and Butler take up this lack of protection, showing how Destiny and Lauren are ignored by society while also being forced to navigate the dystopian landscape without the security of their parents.[137]

Black girls are often relegated to spaces of Black women, as age markers among Black girls often correlate with adult actions. I suggest that Black girls, as a result of their treatment in literature, hold special value in the speculative future. This value is linked to Black girls shedding the characteristics of Black women and creating new understandings of Black girlhood. Black girls are thrust into adulthood before their other female counterparts. I suggest that the hood heroine challenges this thrust through a renegotiation of what it means to prematurely "know" themselves, their engagement with empathy and emotions, and their relationship with those in the communities they lead.

In both texts, the girls are between the ages of 15 and 16, an age which Harriet Jacob's calls "prematurely knowing girlhood," which she identified as a common stage of transition when black girls were forced to become aware of adult concerns about their own lives.[138] Prematurely knowing girlhood forces Black girls to grow up and assume adult roles often before

[137] Lauren Olamina's father is assumed dead by the end of *Parable of the Sower*.

[138] Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, 10.

they are ready. In both novels, these girls are forced into violent and jarring adulthood at these ages, thus assuming the role of the prematurely knowing girl. There are two striking differences in the framing of these girls. Bernardin's Destiny is a 16-year-old general, waging war on corrupt police departments and deploying tactical warfare. Regardless of her age, Destiny is framed as an adult. When we meet Lauren, she still assumes a space of youth. She is confined to her neighborhood, and as a result, most of her activities include school, tactical practice, taking care of her brothers, and focusing on those within her community. When Lauren experiences life in the outside world, she embodies this premature adulthood.[139]

Octavia Butler's hood heroine is allowed to cultivate her leadership qualities, often serving as an apprentice to her father and stepmother. She knows how to read and write, which is not common in this future. Butler showing the process of Lauren's maturation is crucial as it grounds us in Lauren's psyche, as well as her thinking process. By the time Lauren assumes a position of leadership, we know why she responds to situations the way she does as we have seen closely into her mind and know-how she rationalizes her decisions. Her murders make sense, her compassion makes sense, and the reader trusts her. Butler makes the reader understand how and why Lauren makes the decisions she does, which works to frame Black girlhood as complicated and challenging. At the same time, she frames Black girlhood as being able to withstand the hardness while remaining focused, compassionate, and visionary.

Lauren's hyperempathy rejects the hardness of the world around her. The reader also trusts Bernardin's Destiny but for different reasons. We believe Lauren because we see the

[139] In this futuristic scape, the United States is in turmoil. Government greed and poor elections have resulted in extreme class division. While Lauren is poor, her life in this walled community shows that she still has a bit of access to the extinct middle class. Those outside of the community's experience extreme poverty, random acts of violence, and drug abuse. These drugs are far more widespread and those on them have violent and destructive tendencies.

preparation, but we trust Destiny because we recognize how her conditions created her brilliance. We do not know the reasons behind every decision Destiny makes, but we do know that they are informed, calculated, and come from a brilliant mind. In *Genius*, Bernardin gives us a glimpse into Destiny's childhood, but that quickly dissolves at age 16 when she murders at least five men to assume power. With Lauren, we get to process decisions with her, but with Destiny, we are not privy to the same insight. Instead, we get enough backstory that our usual villain becomes a hero.

Both girls seek a liberation that is not necessarily tied to race, as much as location and ideology. They are leaders of mixed-race groups, and while being Black and being a woman are critical factors of their quest, they do not place their identities on those they lead. Destiny and Lauren are part of the marginalized, and through their journeys, we see that they do not seek to change their status within society. They both know that within the systems they currently exist in, they will always be oppressed, which gives them different goals. These girls are working, not to return the gaze to white people, but to hold the mirror up to other oppressed people. Destiny is working to make those in South Central understand the need for succession while Lauren is establishing not only a religion but a new way for people to understand themselves and nature.

When we meet Lauren in the *Parable* series, she exists in a world similar to Destiny. Lauren is surrounded by danger and violence, but it is a controlled danger. She lives within physical boundaries, whereas Destiny exists within imagined boundaries.[140] Lauren describes her neighborhood as "an island surrounded by sharks who don't bother you unless you go into the

[140] Destiny's boundaries are imagines as there is nothing physically keeping her in her neighborhood. She is bound to her neighborhood as a result of gang violence and notions of territory. Lauren has real boundaries as her neighborhood has fences with barbed wire and other materials. They are erected in an attempt to keep drug addicts and others out.

water."[141] These boundaries affect levels of engagement, which, in turn, affect both girls' ability to emote. These relationships with emotion ultimately affect their ability to lead. Lauren's empathy is an important part of her character development as it is attached to her hyperempathy syndrome.[142] While the effects of the syndrome are not real, Lauren's encounters are genuine and are a conscious part of her decision-making process. Lauren also tells no one of her syndromes while she's in her neighborhood. It is after she flees that she confides in others about her hyperempathy.[143]

For these two girls, emotional and empathy exist in two very distinct ways. Destiny exists as something under the surface. For Lauren, her emotions are extreme and inescapable. The common thread among both of these girls is their ability to control their emotions. Bernardin's depiction could be considered as the most damaging to Black girlhood as it suggests that Black girls who are as violent and calculating as Destiny are incapable of showing empathy or emotion. Butler's depiction of Lauren shows that while society views hyperempathy as a weakness, it inherently makes Lauren a better leader. Lauren's illness leads her choices and, in doing so, makes her a concise and fair leader. This is not to say that Destiny is not complicated; she appears less complex in how she negotiates her leadership. Butler's rendering of Lauren's hyperempathy also works to reimagine a trope of female fragility, a fragility linked to being over-emotional. In this instance, Butler takes an established trope and shows how black girls can hold positions of power while being empathetic beings.

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[141] Butler, *Parable of the Sower.*

[142] Hyperempathy Syndrome is also referred to as an ‘organic delusion syndrome.’

[143] This occurs only after she murders a man and is forced to explain her actions.

In *Genius'* Destiny acts as both protagonist and antagonist; she is championed by their people while simultaneously marked as adversarial by those in power. Her defiance of those in power, with the support of her community, speaks to an evolving notion of girlhood. This girlhood allows for the inclusion of communal support, a support that counters a perceived deviant behavior. Destiny's tactical maneuvering causes the LAPD to retreat. When thinking of movements where Black neighborhoods fought back against police forces, the resistance was met with extreme violence from police departments. Thinking about organizations like MOVE, we see police forces enacting violence on Black communities that we do not see with Bernardin's account.[144] Though the police attempt to infiltrate the neighborhood and its inhabitants, we know the area unify behind a young girl and fight back. Destiny produces Black leadership as not only attainable for Black girls but necessary for the success of Black resistances. What Destiny and Lauren do is force a discussion into the functions of Black girls within Black leadership.

Section 3.4: Conclusion:

Lauren's mission is to spread the word of Earthseed. For Destiny, she wants to use police tactics as a means of liberating her community. She challenges the existing understandings of boundaries for these girls. We see that Destiny becomes trapped in a way that Lauren once was, and Lauren is free to spread the word through her travels. Despite the shifts in boundaries, it is the way that these girls move that establishes them as modern-day prophets and 'hood heroines.' For most of Vol. 1 of *Genius*, Destiny does reveal herself to be the leader of the South-Central

[144] MOVE is a black liberation group founded by John Africa in 1972. In 1985, MOVE engaged in a confrontation with the Philadelphia police that ended when a police helicopter dropped a bomb on the MOVE compound. The bombing resulted in a fire that killed eleven MOVE members and destroyed 65 houses in the West Philadelphia neighborhood.

rebellion. She is known and revered in the neighborhood, but unknown to those outside of her community. The use of sousveillance mixed with her remaining relatively anonymous makes Destiny an omnipresent figure, which subsequently makes the LAPD fear her. This also speaks to the ways that black girls maneuver their invisibility. Destiny uses her invisibility to make herself a mythical being that watches and protects South Central. She moves beyond being a leader and becomes a figure of perseverance and liberation. She becomes an ideology.

Parable of the Sower illustrates the process through which Lauren crafts her ideology. This is reflected through Earthseed. Her religion still possesses notions of god and nature, which is why people do not ignore what she has to say. Still, she believes god and nature exist in ways that differ from the dominant representations of religion. She and Destiny both use established ideologies, of god and war, to create spaces for themselves. These black girls can create spaces for their resistance as they do not embody hegemonic conceptualizations of womanhood or girlhood. However, their knowledge of these conceptualizations allows them to use it as tactical resources to move through the works. Knowing that these hegemonies do not bind them will enable them to manipulate them and those that deploy them. The girls are elevated to a status that is greater than a liberator.

Chapter Four: Marvel's Young Marvels: Subversive Iconicity and Superheroines of Color

In "Black Girl Ordinary: Flesh, Carcerality, and the Refusal of Ethnography," Savannah Shange explores Black girlhood as a site of freedom. This freedom allows Black girls to push against normative tropes, which attempt to limit the scope and trajectory of what it means to be a Black girl. Her work is inspired by Aimee Cox's assertion that Black girls can disrupt and disorient normative reading practices that assess young Black women's bodies as undesirable, dangerous, captive, or out of place.[145] Black girls' assertive use of their voice is often interpreted as unladylike and deviant, indexing the enduring incompatibility of Blackness and white bourgeois norms of femininity.[146] When thinking of racial coding and how we come to know Black bodies, it is essential to look at the ways that those producing these images influence how we come to know race and gender; thus, the aim of this chapter. In the previous chapter, I explored the linkage between Blackness and the projection of Black girlhood, paying close attention to the ways that Black girls assume leadership roles in the Black community.

The purpose of this chapter is to center Black female content creators, narrowing on how their work elevates Black girls and other girls of color. I take a more in-depth look into Black comics and Black content creators and their contribution to the speculative future. Exploring this is vital, especially considering that content creators and the futures they create are influential in the ways that we come to know ourselves and each other. This chapter seeks to do a few things: look at the framing of Black girlhood in the Marvel Universe and how Black female content creators use Black girl superheroes as a means of reimaging normative tropes around race, age, and girlhood. I use the characters, Riri Williams, from Eve Ewing's *Ironheart* series and

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[145] Savannah Shange, "Black Girl Ordinary: Flesh, Carcerality, and the Refusal of Ethnography," *Transforming Anthropology.* vol. 27, no. 1 (2019): 4.

[146] Ibid., 6.

America Chavez from Gabby Rivera's *America* series to interrogate the construction of girlhood among girls of color in the Marvel Universe.

I include the Marvel universe in my project because of their positionality within the comic book industry. Marvel Comics is one of the leaders of the comic book industry and arguably has the most extended reach in terms of popular culture. They have a significant presence in the T.V./film industry as well, so their comics are part of the larger pop culture lexicon. Marvel's positionality within superhero lore and their role in the dissemination of superhero stereotypes make them essential to the discussion of black women in these texts. During the Bronze Age of Comics (1970-1984), we see a massive influx of Black and non-white superheroes like Luke Cage, Blade, Shang-Chi, and Falcon. We are also introduced to the characters Ororo Munroe, Misty Knight, and Monica Rambeau.[147] Ororo Munroe, also known as Storm, was launched in May 1975 in the *X-Men* comic, which follows a team of fictional mutant superheroes. Storm is the first major female character of African descent in comics, but she was not the first Black heroine. It is rare to see Black female comic book writers in the larger comic book companies; most exist in the small comic book sector.[148] To have Black women writing Black girl characters deserves exploration but also critique, in ways I elucidate within this chapter.

I begin by exploring Eve Ewing's renderings of Riri Williams. I am interested in how Ewing pushes the boundaries of Black female identity through the exploration of Black girlhood, noting how her rendering of Riri Williams refuses antiquated ideologies as a means of subverting

[147] Alex Grand, "The 8 Ages of Comic Books," *Comic Book Historians*, October 6, 2016, https://comicbookhistorians.com/the-8-ages-of-comic-books/.

[148] In 2015, Nilah Magruder became the first black woman to write for Marvel Comics. She was closely followed by Roxanne Gay and Yona Harvey, who in 2016 became the first black women to write an ongoing series that appeared in print and digitally.

iconic images. The act I call *subversive iconicity* refers to the process of taking a single image, knowing the historical implications, and subverting these images to remake, rename, and trouble what we know as real and true via representations in popular culture. I argue that Riri embodies certain normative tropes while simultaneously pushing against them. In doing so, she can maintain her girlhood as opposed to more normative renderings of Black girlhood. She pushes against iconic and ultimately problematic tropes of Black girlhood, such as age compression, which includes ideas of nurturing, assuming parental spaces, and Black girl's engagement with education and institutions of higher learning. My goal is to explore how these superheroes are imagined, how they interact with others within these alternate universes. I look at how their superhero identities, race, gender, and age inform their decisions (or not), and how these identity formations shift what we have come to see as the Black girl iconicity.

Ewing and Riri Williams are essential to how we read Black female superheroes, and other female superheroes of color, as Riri provides a nuanced representation of Black girlhood, one that avoids rigid tropes. When thinking of the limits of Black female characters, the most significant contributing factor is the absence of Black women and girls as content creators, which often results in the misnaming of Black experiences. It calls into question not only the validity of these representations but also the intended audience. Are Black girls being written for Black girls or for people who want to see how Black girls live? I suggest that, through subversive iconicity, Riri acts as an example of Black girls being written for Black girls by a former Black girl. The act of Black women writing Black girls serves as an act of remembering, and thus, Black women can use these girl superheroes as a means of not only reimaging girlhood but also as a process of reclaiming Black girlhood.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison explores the misreading and misrepresentation of Blackness in literature, arguing that American literature could not help but be shaped by encounters with racial ideologies.[149] For Morrison, the positioning of readers of fiction as solely white is a result of this shaping and influences how Blackness is framed and imagined. The assumption of whiteness leads to the strategic use of Black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters.[150] Blackness is built into the very fiber of America as a result of America's engagement, or not, with race. This relationship necessitates the presence of Blackness. Blackness, while "American an apple pie," serves as the antithesis of what it means to be American. This is a device for Ewing as she uses this relationship to push the boundaries of Black female superheroes, which serves as an intervention in both the Marvel universe and broader society.

In *Pushout*, Morris defines the pushout of black girls as the collection of policies, practices, and consciousness that fosters their invisibility, marginalized their pain and opportunity, and facilitates their criminalization.[151] Black women gaining agency over their image is a crucial part of Black iconicity but also a counter to the pushout Morris discusses.[152] I suggest that Ewing's comic serves as an example as she does not counter-public memory. It centers marginalized voices and experiences in a way that forces the reader to expand their

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[149] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: First Vintage Books, 1993), 16.

[150] Ibid., 53.

[151] Monique W. Morris, *Pushout: the Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools.* (New York: The New Press, 2018), 24.

[152] Black iconicity serves as a site for Black audiences and the nation to gather around the 'seeing' of Blackness. In focusing on the singularity of the image, the complexity of Black lived experience and discourses of race are effaced. See Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 10.

memory. In other words, when black creators are allowed to control the Black gaze and experiences that reflect their own lives, we slowly chip away at notions of Blackness as existing outside or on the margins. This execution of Black autonomy results in Black characters that reflect black people as opposed to the projection of white insecurity onto Black characters. Black cultural producers' power over their image begins to place the autonomy and power of Black representation back into the hands of Black people.[153] This autonomy also provides space for Black girlhood to exist inside and outside of the comic book industry. Black girls can become major characters and superheroes without reproducing harmful tropes. I suggest that Ewing's deployment of Riri Williams acts as a moment of reclamation. It makes space for Black girls, while also working as a rubric for moving other marginalized people to the center. Negative representations have come to marginalize the success of Black girls, even as they succeed.

In addition to Williams, I focus on Gabbi Rivera's character America Chavez as a way to explore how female content creators of color uses race and gender as relational constructs. I suggest that this reframing acts as an example of subversive iconicity as it places non-whiteness and women as central to the survival of America. More specifically, I look at the duality of Puerto Rican identity and how Puerto Ricans in the U.S. assume an insider-outsider status, even though they are full participants in American society. While Rivera does not rely on Black tropes in her storytelling, the complex history and identity of Puerto Rican people in America are informed by the treatment and subsequent marginalization of Black girls in America. In this way, Rivera's deployment of Puerto Rican identity furthers dialogue surrounding not only Latinx girls but Black girls and girlhood in general.

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[153] Ibid., 10.

In exploring the character of America, I focus on how Puerto Rican identity reflects an ethno-national identity. Frances Negrón-Muntanér defines ethno-nation as a "cultural subject" in which Puerto Ricans are hailed and imagine themselves as a "people," understood alternatively as an "ethnicity" (defined by a specific culture across national state boundaries) and a "nationality" (defined in relationship to a specific territory, with full or partial claim to independent sovereignty).[154] There is a close focus on ethnic makeup and the relationship Puerto Ricans have to the island. I explore America not solely through a lens of an alien form living a Latinx experience, which is how the U.S. categorizes Puerto Rican people. I explore how diasporic traditions inform her experiences.

We understand Blackness in America as being an experience of Black Americans, which ignores how Puerto Rican culture exists as part of the African diaspora. Looking at America as solely Latinx erases the impact and influence of Africanness and the diaspora on Puerto Rican culture. I aim to explore how America's portrayal in *America* calls attention and signifies on a diasporic experience, while simultaneously deploying an ethno-national identity. This signification uses subversive tactics through its engagement with Blackness but also gender. I suggest that Gabby Rivera's framing of America assumes proximity to Blackness, and through this proximity, we are allowed to see Puerto Rican identity through an African diasporic lens.

I chose the character America Chavez as there are many similarities between America and Riri Williams. They are of similar age, possess identical responsibility, and have similar powers. Both characters mirror the lives of their creators; both Rivera and Ewing draw on personal experience in the portrayal of these superheroines. However, America's assumed Puerto Rican identity makes her an important site of comparison regarding girls of color and notions of

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[154] Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 6.

iconicity. My discussion of both characters is not a direct comparison but more an exploration of how girls of color and female content creators of color deploy subversive iconicity as a means of negotiating multiple, sometimes overlapping, identities.

Ultimately, I am interested in how the centering of Black female content creator's usage of Black female superheroes shifts normative iterations of Black girlhood and, subsequently, the experiences of other superheroines of color. I will explore similar moments between both girls, marking how Riri and America push against narratives of girlhood in similar ways. Through their resistance to age compression and their presence in higher education. While doing this, I also explore the relationship between the characters and their content creators. In effect, we can see relational constructs among women of color content creators through their imagining of girls of color.

Section 4.1: Eve Ewing, RiRi Williams, and the Making of a Black Girl Superhero

Riri Williams is a character created by Brian Michael Bendis and Mike Deodato in 2015. She made her first full appearance in *Invincible Ironman Vol. 2 #9* in July 2016 as the eventual predecessor of Tony Stark's Ironman. She is from Chicago in the Earth-616 universe.[155] She first appears in the *Invincible Ironman* series and later becomes Ironheart after Tony Stark falls into a coma.[156] Before falling into the coma, Stark gives Riri his A.I. duplicate, which she used to create a better suit of armor for herself.[157] The suit makes her physically strong, but her actual ability lies in her super-genius intelligence and skill as an inventor and engineer.

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[155] There are multiple universes within the Marvel universe.

[156] Tony Stark is Ironman.

[157] The AI duplicate served as a backdrop to Tony Stark, in case his body stopped working. When the device was given to Riri, it served as her mentor and assisted her in the creation of her second suit of armor.

Figure 4.1: J. Scott Campbell's first cover for the Variant Edition of *Invincible Ironman*

In the first issue of the comic, the illustrator, J. Scott Campbell received significant backlash for his rendering of Riri in a pose that unnecessarily sexualized the 15-year-old character. In Figure 4.1, we see Williams facing front and holding the Iron Man mask, insinuating that she now possesses the ability of Iron Man. We also see that she has much of her midriff exposed, via an elongated torso. We see much of her midsection is exposed, well below her navel. She is also gesturing forward in a way that suggests coming towards her. She is a seductress with her gestures and dress aging the character beyond her years. Campbell responded to the backlash by calling it a 'whine-fest' but subsequently was forced to change the image after Marvel decided to combat the long-held position that female teen superheroes in the

Marvel universe were being hyper-sexualized.[158] What this does is age and hypersexualizes Black girls. This hypersexualization is part of what ages Black girls but also marks Black girls as deserving of the same treatment as Black women in popular culture.[159] The backlash Campbell received calls attention to the false characterization of Black girls while also highlighting Black readers' refusal of this characterization. In doing this, Black readers challenged a Western racial hierarchy that marks the negative portrayals of Black girls as usual.

The critiques of Marvel and Campbell's Riri Williams reflect the idea that white content creators do not possess the cultural and racial knowledge to reproduce Black female characters accurately. When I say 'accurately,' I do not mean that there is an exact definition of Blackness, as Blackness is not monolithic, but I suggest that whiteness uses rubrics to create Blackness in a way that marks deviance from those rules as 'wrong.' Whiteness fuels the need for an 'accurate' representation of Blackness, one that makes Blackness 'right.' The images of Campbell's Riri Williams only exacerbated this by hyper sexualizing Williams within the comic.

In Kara Keeling's *The Witch's Flight*, Keeling explores Black images, suggesting that Blackness exists as a pejorative base of comparison that may appear as unproblematic.[160] Blackness is reduced to negative images so that whiteness maintains its status. Any shift to notions of Blackness has the potential to shift racial rhetoric, and assumptions of whiteness, which is something whiteness attempts to avoid through the dissemination of controlled images of the Black body. We see this with Campbell's discussion of Riri and her representation. He is

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[158] Matt Kim, "J. Scott Campbell Earns Second Chance on Riri Williams Iron Man Cover," *Inverse*, November 11, 2016, www.inverse.com/article/23489-riri-williams-j-scott-campbell-iron-man-variant-cover-take-2.

[159] Constructions of race in the US rely on simplistic cultural stereotypes applied to different ethnic groups; groups who are then lumped together based largely on geography. See Faye Caronan, *Legitimizing Empire: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Cultural Critique* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 3.

[160] Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 27.

unable to see his rendering of the character as problematic because her image maintains established rhetoric around girls and Blackness in the Marvel universe. His goal is not to disrupt normative understandings of Black female identity but to maintain them so that he can keep his whiteness and maleness intact. The problem with this is that whiteness and Blackness both exist as problematic concepts, with whiteness projecting onto images and narratives of Blackness as an attempt to protect themselves critique. Black women controlling their characters lift the veil of protection and force non-Black content creators to engage with these critiques, as they provide a counterpoint to normative understandings.

S Craig Watkins explores how popular culture dramatizes the constantly shifting formations of race relations.[161] Watkins suggests that popular culture exists because it draws from and resonates with people's lived experiences. The original *Ironheart* cover received such a resoundingly negative response because, while it resonated with white male cultural producers, it did not resonate with Black people. The rendering of a hypersexualized 15-year-old Black girl was not a tangible experience for Black people, especially Black women. In this way, Black women channeled their girlhood as a means of championing for a new cover and a new representation of Williams. We subsequently end up with Figure 4.2, which shows Williams in a less hypersexualized way. She still has the Iron Man mask but also has tools which move her away from sexualization, towards innovation and works to solidify the character as an inventor and genius.

Her initial reception by Black comic book fans was poor. They were critical of her appearance, noting that her image was highly sexual, especially considering that Riri is 15. They

[161] S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

Figure 4.2: J. Scott Campbell's "redo" of the Variant Edition of *Invincible Ironman*

were also critical of the fact that Riri Williams was a black girl written by white men. Twitter user Carly Lane states, "you can't call these diverse stories without diverse voices."[162] In 2018, it was announced that Riri Williams was being reimagined and redesigned by Eve Ewing. This followed the announcement that Bendis, the creator of *Ironheart,* was leaving Marvel. Ewing was a departure for Marvel who, before Ewing, had only had three Black women write for them

[162]Abraham Riesman, "Geeks Are Angry About Iron Man Becoming a Black Girl - But Not for the Reason You'd Think," *Vulture*. July 7, 2016, web.archive.org/web/20190403071258/www.vulture.com/2016/07/iron-man-riri-williams-controversy.html.

in their 77-year history. Eve Ewing wrote Riri's solo series by popular demand, following several Twitter exchanges, a fan petition, and with the support of creators like fellow writers Ta-Nehisi Coates, Gail Simone, and others.[163] It is important to acknowledge the role the internet and social media played in holding Campbell and Marvel accountable. The arguments made surrounding RiRi's image were not new, but the tactic; the use of Twitter and other public platforms proved useful in challenging and ultimately changing a harmful image.

Sections 4.2: Subversive Iconicity, Age Compression and the Reclamation of Black Girlhood

Riri's story begins at Massachusetts international technological University M.I.T., where she arrived to work only to meet Dean Bryant, an imposing white male Dean. The latter brought global delegates to Riri's lab to show her and the lab off. She presents multiple inventions from a microscopic visor to a breastplate that allows you to travel to the center of the ocean without having your webpage collapsed. At each point, Dean Bryant asks if there is more for her to share. His inquiry is ignored, especially after a glow-in-the-dark arm cannon and 3D printer Riri developed, accidentally fires. Dean Bryant then attempts to discipline her publicly, to which Riri replies, "well maybe if you didn't treat this workplace like the zoo where you can drop by whenever you want with a little field trip, there wouldn't be any safety concern."[164]

Riri Williams is a complex character. In one instance, she is the hero that everyone loves; as the successor of Tony Stark, she inherited his fans and enemies. She is a genius whose

[163] Rebecca Childs, "Eve Ewing Reintroduces Riri Williams in Ironheart #1," *Marvel Entertainment*, November 27, 2018, www.marvel.com/articles/comics/eve-ewing-reintroduces-riri-williams-in-ironheart-1.

[164] Ewing, Eve. *Ironheart Vol. 1: Those With Courage.* Marvel Worldwide, Incorporated. 2019.

intelligence got her into M.I.T. by the age of 15.[165] On the other hand, she is a young girl from a violent city who is surrounded by death. By the time the reader meets Riri, we find out that not only has she lost her biological father to gun violence, but she has lost her step-father and her best friend to gun violence as well. Her father was murdered before she was born; her step-father and best friend were killed in a drive-by in front of Riri. Ewing uses these deaths as a means of reframing and redefining what it means to be Black and a girl. She deploys what I call *subversive iconicity* to force us to rethink Black girlhood.

In *Troubling Vision*, Nicole Fleetwood defines iconicity as to how singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of occurrences and processes.[166] Fleetwood finds iconicity flawed and limited to Black representation. Instead, she uses the term non-iconicity, which she defines as an aesthetic and theoretical position that lessens the weight placed on the Black visual. Non-iconicity acts as a movement away from the singularity and significance placed on the instrumentation of Blackness to resolve that which cannot be resolved.[167] Non-iconicity moves away from normative tropes associated with Blackness and shifts how we talk about not only Black productions but Black producers. Non-iconicity seeks to move away from the singular and destabilize the influence of a singular image on the way we discuss Blackness. I suggest that we can use iconicity and non-iconicity to look at the ways that Black girls take these iconic images and use them as foundational in the establishment of these characters, taking these characteristics and turning them on their heads in an attempt to reimagine Black girlhood. White cultural producers act as cultural gatekeepers, which has led to the exclusion of several images of

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[165] Massachusetts Institute of Technology

[166] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision,* 2.

[167] Ibid., 9.

Blackness and Black bodies. More concisely, framing Black visuality as masculine, inadvertently positions the black female as its excess.[168]

We know that iconic images are often put in place by oppressive structures dedicated to keeping marginalized people in the margins. I suggest that when marginalized people take control of their imagery, a few things happen. First, the iconic becomes unintelligible as it resists coded language meant to continue harmful representations of Black.[169] Second, it allows Black feminine cultural producers to turn a mirror to the cultural producers who use their images to marginalize them further. Most importantly, subversive iconicity merges notions of the iconic and non-iconic by taking the images that have come to represent the whole, fixing them, then using the same images as a means of localizing Blackness. It takes the images that have come to represent the whole and ties them to the actual lived experiences in a way that shifts from iconic too personal. It subverts the representation we have come to see as static and limiting.

The subversion of iconic images makes the universal personal. Subversion is the tending or intending to subvert or overthrow, destroy, or undermine an established or existing system, especially a legally constituted government or a set of beliefs.[170] Subversive iconicity acts as a means of resistance, as it uses normative tropes of Blackness as a means of decentering whiteness and pushing against the tropes it uses. It functions as a way of identifying new markers

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[168] Fleetwood uses excess as a way of expounding on notions of Black female visuality. She further suggests that 'excess flesh' is the enactment that doubles the visibility of Black women. It does not destroy the gaze but refracts the gaze upon itself. See Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 112. See also W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mamas Baby, Papas Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritic* vol. 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81.

[169] The term 'coded' is important, as the codes work to mark the black body as intelligible or unintelligible. When the coded experiences of Blackness come to represent Black reality, the shortcomings of black visuality are put on display. In essence, the few come to represent the many and the outcome is that the many are silenced in favor of a limited, more palatable representation of Blackness. The lack of autonomy regarding the power black cultural producers have over their image becomes noticeable.

[170] Dictionary.com Accessed September 9, 19.

of race and gender that are not monolithic. It pushes against representational and iconic Blackness in real ways; it counters definitions of Blackness and womanhood that often misrepresent Black women.[171]

Fleetwood's text focuses on the representation of Black women in popular and visual culture. While Fleetwood's work concentrates on Black women, I find it useful to the discussion of Black girlhood. In particular, I explore the language she uses regarding the representation of Black bodies as non-iconic. Fleetwood's response to this is to move away from iconic representations that are often masculinist in approach and use visual representation of Blackness as "a substitute for the real experiences of Black subjects."[172] Fleetwood suggests that the icon is a fixed image, so fixed that the only way to engage it is not to engage it but to refuse it, as it is harmful to the production and representation of everyday Blackness. I agree to an extent; iconic renderings of Blackness do have the potential to be dangerous and often are when deployed by those that are not part of the community. Black visuality can be harmful when implemented by non-Black people. Black queer visuality can be detrimental when used by non-Black and non-queer people. Black female visuality can be harmful when deployed by non-Black, non-female people. I suggest that when marginalized people gain access and control over their icon and iconic imagery, subversive iconicity occurs. Not all marginalized people deploy subversive iconicity, but they are capable of enacting subversive tactics. Many may rely on established tropes for a variety of reasons, comfort, or safety, but I would suggest that creating from an assumed marginalized space allows subversive iconicity to exist.

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[171] My usage of 'subversive iconicity' is informed by Jose Muñoz's 'disidentification,' which is a mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within a structure nor does it oppose it. Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. See Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

[172] Ibid., 13

The violence Riri experiences often influence the decisions she makes but also, who she answers to and helps. Iconic renderings may have used the same moments as a means of framing Riri as emotionally unavailable or unsuccessful as a result of personal trauma. Ewing uses the violence against Riri to propel the violence, propels her to become Ironheart. Tragedy exists as an origin story for many superheroes in the Marvel universe, so the violence enacted on Riri is not jarring. However, the same superheroes do not become superheroes until they are much older. The violence that occurs in their youth stifles them and sends them into harmful spaces. They recover from their trauma as adults.[173]

Black bodies are rendered visible through this engagement. This visibility does double work as it makes Black bodies intelligible through the decentering of whiteness. Subversive iconicity is a tactic that is deployed by members of an oppressed/marginalized community who seeks to reclaim potentially damaging tropes through the inclusion, and eventual disruption, of iconic imagery. For Black girls and women, iconic displays of subversive iconicity work to disrupt normative renderings of Blackness. Subversive iconicity, in this instance, depends on Black content creators' understanding that iconic images are a result of misplaced power, which has given authority to those that are not a part of oppressed communities. In other words, subversive iconicity presumes that Black women recognize that those who engage in these normative displays are often not women, not Black, or both.

Monique Morris states that Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of Black women -- sexual involvement, parenting or primary caregiving, workforce participation, and other adult

[173] There are many examples of superheroes who experienced violence and trauma as children. One example is Storm, or Ororo Munroe, who lost both her parents in a plane crash and join a street gang after being made an orphan. She later becomes Storm after Professor X finds her and makes her part of the X men.

behaviors and responsibility.[174] We see Riri experiencing what Morris calls age compression. In *Pushout*, Monique Morris defines age compression as moments when Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behavior—sexual involvement, parenting or primary caregiving, workforce participation, and other adult behaviors and responsibilities.[175] This is prevalent in William's engagement with M.I.T. officials. When Williams meets Dean Bryant and a group of world leaders, we see an exchange between her and one of the leaders. One of the leaders asks how long Riri has been interested in engineering. He then asked if she enjoyed "tinkering in the garage" as a child. At this moment, he completely ignores that Riri is fifteen and, despite her intelligence, is still a child. Instead, he questions her as if she is much older than her age.

Black identity in America has been a function of many things: a pseudo-scientific racial hierarchy that rendered Black people in human, violent political forces that enslaved in further dehumanized people of African descent, or the sociocultural order that enabled an economic and intellectual hierarchy to take root.[176] The restraints placed on Black identity trickled down to the lives of Black girls; they are often victims of age compression, whether through the assumption of adult behaviors like raising siblings or acting as head of household or through the hypersexualization of their image.

Age compression takes away Black girls' ability to be children and forces them to grow up earlier than other children their age. In "Missing in action: Gifted Black Girls in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics," Kristina Henry Collins explores Black girls access

[174] Morris, *Pushout,* 34.

[175] Ibid., 34.

[176] Ibid., 30.

to STEM-based education, noting that lack of aptitude is not the reason Black girls are underrepresented in STEM, but the lack of representation is a result of Black girls having different previous experiences, cultural values, and social interactions than their counterparts.[177] Age compression exists as a part of this lack of representation, as it complicates the ways that Black girls navigate social spaces. Age compression, mixed with inadequate learning spaces, often limit Black girls' ability to explore specific disciplines. The 2013-2014 Office for Civil Rights data reported that 10.8% of public-school Black girls were enrolled in gifted and talented programs, as compared with 57.3% of white girls.[178] Socioeconomics, access to education, and other experiences, mixed with assuming adult roles in the home or community stifle the success of Black girls before they even get started. The effect of this is the absence of Black girls in particular fields. The absence is not because of a lack of desire but because of the other factors at play.

In an interview with *Marvel Entertainment*, Ewing discusses her thoughts on Riri and M.I.T. She states:

> "One thing I've had to wrestle with is that if you're a black women at a place like M.I.T., where Riri goes to school, or down the street at Harvard, where I went to graduate school, the social environment was kind of constructed without you in mind, and these institutions ask you to make a lot of compromises that you have to navigate. That's definitely something Riri will be dealing with."[179]

The way Riri chooses to deal with M.I.T. faculty acts as a subversive moment. Subsequently, we see Dean Bryant show up to Riri's lab unannounced a third time. This time, Riri is not there. She

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[177] Kristina Henry Collins et al, "Missing in Action: Gifted Black Girls in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics," *Gifted Child Today* 43, no. 1 (2019): 58.

[178] Ibid., 57.

[179] Jamie Frevele, "Writer Eve L. Ewing Is Bringing Ironheart into the Spotlight." *Marvel Entertainment*, August 20, 2018, www.marvel.com/articles/comics/writer-eve-ewing-is-bringing-ironheart-into-the-spotlight.

never goes back. She leaves M.I.T., opting to open her lab, with money made from other jobs. The lab also doubles as a Community Center, where kids from her neighborhood can play while she works. Riri becomes an extension of Ewing, in that her interaction with university officials and their expectations resemble that of Ewing's need to compromise within these spaces. That Dean Bryant continues asking more and more of Riri while attempting to chastise her publicly reflects the relationship that Black girls and Black women have with those in power. Regardless of aptitude and ability to deliver intellectually, she is questioned publicly. He even disregards her wishes and shows up with corporate visitors looking to 'sponsor' her work. When she presses his presence, he says, "as long as you work under this institution, you play by our rules."[180] Throughout volume one, we see Riri grapple with her responsibilities at M.I.T. and her ultimate dismissal of the University feels like a perfect end to an exhausting relationship.

Section 4.3: America Chavez and the Ethno-national Hierarchy

America Chavez also experiences age compression as a result of personal loss. America was born into a matriarchal society, and her mother Elena and Amalia sacrificed their lives to protect their planet. She is orphaned on earth. She is taken in by a woman who gives her shelter, which allows her to become acclimated to earth. America's identity on earth is assumed to be Puerto Rican, as racial markers do not exist on her planet of origin. The interactions America has upon arriving in America work to dictate her identity while also providing her with anonymity. Both girls are assuming in the space of insider/outsider in varying ways. For America, she exists as an alien on earth, a Puerto Rican in America, and as a queer girl in a primarily heterosexual world.

[180] Ewing, *Ironheart Vol. 1*.

Figure 4.3: Panel from *America Vol. 1*

Figure 4.3 is a panel that explores the making of America's Puerto Rican identity. Her mothers sacrificed themselves to form a permanent seal to protect the utopian parallel. They were the only two that had enough power to seal it, thus keeping it a secret and protecting it from outsiders. As a result, America becomes an orphan, and the parallel becomes uninhabitable. She had to flee, which resulted in her coming to earth, specifically the Bronx. The Bronx as a point of arrival and America being identified as Puerto Rican act as points of reference in the deployment of ethno-national identities in this universe. In *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization*

of American Culture, Frances Negrón-Mutanér states that upon arriving in New York, all Boricuas[181] were collectively racialized as "non-white" and assigned a low rank within the city's entho-racial hierarchy.[182] Puerto Rican bodies are assigned a name and meaning upon arrival to the United States. America experiences a similar fate, but she also highlights the complexities that exist with Puerto Rican people and their racial makeup in the U.S. If we consider the relationships between Black and white bodies, through a Western lens, we see whiteness as a base for comparison. This relationship posits Blackness as the greatest oppositional to 'normal' behavior. Negrón-Mutanér's locates Puerto Rican identity as closer in proximity to Blackness than whiteness. Though we know that Puerto Ricans are part of the African diaspora, the specific location of Puerto Ricans with Blackness, calls attention to the complex positionality Puerto Ricans assume in the U.S.

America's identity formation is informed not only by skin color but kinship. People welcomed her into their homes and communities. America admits that she did not know what Puerto Rican was, but "these folks look like [her] and let [her] in." Orphaned children are 'taken in' by relatives, family friends, and sometimes strangers. America became Puerto Rican out of the need to survive. She also continued to be Puerto Rican because she had multiple loyalties as a result of survival period one to her mom and home planet. She was loyal to the people who raised her after she lost everything and everyone.

In an interview with Syfy Wire, Gabby Rivera states "I think we don't get to see women learn a lot from each other […] there's also room for like women to appreciate each other and

[181] Boricuas Is the indigenous name many Puerto Ricans call themselves and a nativist gesture to indicate the end of colonial subordination and the beginning of an undefined new era.

[182] Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 20.

share knowledge and teach each other how to fight and kick ass in the city."[183] The centering of women in Rivera's world is similar to America's assumed ethno-racial identity. She defines herself through her encounters. Each character teaches America something new about herself. America's exchanges with many of the Marvel female superheroes provide us with a window into how women inform America's identity as a girl and superhero. Lunella Lafayette teaches America that it is necessary to question systems of power, Storm teaches America how to use meditation and her emotions to access more of her powers, and Captain Marvel teaches America how to tap into her tactical skills. In each moment, we see that America already possessed the skills she 'discovers' but they are only amplified after she engages with these women and this girl. Lunella's presence is especially significant in that she is a child, a girl.[184] Through her, we see that America's identity is informed not only through an ethno-racial relationship but a generation relationship with women and women of color.

Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? Beverly Tatum states that there was a pattern found among Black high school students. These students felt anger and resentment in response to their growing awareness of the systemic exclusion of Black people from full participation in U.S. society.[185] America also has a similar experience, having been left exposed as an orphan in America. Still, her alien identity and the fact that she is not part of any

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[183]YouTube, "Interview: Marvel's America Chavez Writer Gabby Rivera," accessed March 13, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WtoxFBzTFA

[184] Black girlhood and Black girlhood studies functions as a political relationship, a relationship that depends on Black girls being in community with and for each other. When thinking of diasporic relationships, Lunella and America are recreating this relationship. Lunella acts as an active participant in the making of America and vice versa. Centering their experiences and exchanges highlights the ways that Black and Puerto Rican girls act as co-creators in their identity making.

[185] Beverly Daniel Tatum *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: and Other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 60.

part of earth's systemic issues, allows her to push against boundaries and notions of extreme nationalism and patriotism, to critique the systemic issues subtly. America's alienness and feeling of not entirely belonging to her community reflect a broader, more complex relationship between identity and location. Puerto Ricans exist in constant flux. As a result of colonialism, Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens with the ability to access some of the U.S. resources, but not all. Their existence largely depends on the whims of the U.S. government. The Puerto Ricans who physically live in America, AmeRícans, are viewed by those on the island as not being a "real Puerto Rican" but a subculture of the U.S.[186]

Boricua cultural production is largely made up of the desire to purge, flaunt, deny, destroy, resignify, and transfigure the constitutive shame of being Puerto Rican from [their] bodies and public selves.[187] Negrón-Mutanér further suggests that this shame exists as a result of the relationship between America and Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans, as a result of colonization, assume a similar social space in America to those of Black Americans. In popular culture, Black Americans exist in response to whiteness in America, thus marking behaviors from Blacks as oppositional to the functioning of whiteness in America. Puerto Rican identity exists in opposition to American identity; the Puerto Rican body when placed in conversation with American bodies are deemed as 'not quite' American in a way that calls to the history of the island.[188] However, with America, Puerto Rican identity is marked in opposition to whiteness through its proximity to Blackness. This becomes more complex when considering the ways that race works in America but also refers to nationality and who is deemed "American."

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[186] Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 24.

[187] Ibid., xiv.

[188] White American.

In *Ricaness: Enduring Time in Anticolonial Performance*, Sandra Ruiz says to be Rican means to ride out the inexhaustible constraint of one's life under limited self-control in a nonstop state of economic and political impotence.[189] One could suggest that Black Americans and Puerto Rican both embody not quite American identities, even as they possess American citizenship. Raquel Rivera suggests the need to look at the diasporic relationship that exists between Puerto Rican and Black people. She suggests that Puerto Rican artistic expression exists as indistinguishable from blacks, not because of assimilation but the reconfiguration of cultural practices and identity so that Puerto Rican and African Americans share common terrain.[190] This familiar terrain is steeped in the relationship between the displacement of both groups, whether physically or culturally. Puerto Rican's are imagined as "territorial citizens" whose citizenship standing and national worth significantly shifts according to location.[191] That identity shifts with the site are important to understand Puerto Rican identity but also can be used to look at how Black bodies negotiate their identity in spaces they assume that are not marked as typically Black.

The discourse surrounding Blackness depends on an already formed knowledge of Blackness. The same is true for other communities of color. These bits of knowledge do not disrupt discussion yet compliments it. However, Nicole Fleetwood asserts that Blackness and Black bodies by the pure nature of being Black already trouble the dominant visual field, which is rooted in white aesthetics of beauty, politics, and the like. Being black is not one, or a few, set of actions; it is not a singular way of existence. For Fleetwood, there is a heteronormative

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[189] Sandra Ruiz, *Ricanness: Enduring Time in Anticolonial Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 9.

[190] Raquel Z. Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

[191] Ruiz, *Ricanness*, 9.

narrative that is deployed through images and in mainstream popular culture that works to marginalize many within Black culture further. America acts as a further exploration of this, as she is not a part of American or Earth culture and thus has the freedom to engage with both; however, she sees fit. She draws attention to the limits then crashes through them, destabilizing historical borders and forcing us to rethink citizenship and belonging.

Section 4.4: Conclusion

The subversion of the iconic images associated with Black girl superheroes works to shift the narrative surrounding Black girls from monolithic to varied and complex. They change the narrative from that which frames Black girls as adults that can and will assume adult roles and responsibilities to Black girls who maintain their girlhood and personal identity despite hardships. Superheroes take on the stress and weight of the community while keeping relationships and experiences that are common for those their age.[192] We also must explore their relationships outside of their abilities. An exploration that provides context into how these relationships influence their decision as a superhero. While these girls are tough, we see that in their universes, their physical ability does not elevate their social status.[193] Their superhero status raises them, but when not assuming that role, they are dismissed in ways that are reflective of tropes around Blackness and gender. What we see with Riri is that she shifts the dialogue surrounding Black girlhood by refusing to engage in systems that seek to stifle her; she resists the tropes. This resistance ultimately leads her to self-reliance, self-employment, and autonomy.

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[192] We see Riri engage in conversations with friends, maintain relationships outside of academic spaces, and eventually refuse the structures that age her. With America, we see her interact with her best friend while on a vacation and have romantic and platonic partnerships. She is even heavily recruited to join a sorority and though she declines, she maintains close relationships with the members.

[193] Figure out which universe Lunella Lafayette, America Chavez & Riri are from

What we see with subversive iconicity is not a refusal of the iconic but a reckoning with the iconic. Ewing's Riri Williams/Ironheart plays to tropes of age compression, violence, grief, and being forced to grow up as a result of the environment. However, Ewing uses these tropes and provides context and layers that are often missing from narratives surrounding Black girls and women. Seeing Riri process her trauma acts as a subversion of the iconic as it makes the plight of Black girls less about the amount of abuse they can take. This pushed against normative narratives as it provides depth to the limited imaginings of Black life. Female content creators cannot understand every aspect of girlhood, but they can subvert iconic narratives through the characters she develops. By juxtaposing the characters, we see that there are limits to see how Black and Brown female content creators rendering of Black girlhood pushes against normative tropes that seek to interpret Black girlhood through a lens of white girlhood and white femininity. Subversive iconicity provides Black characters and their producers with the freedom to exist without having to operate within organized groups that stifle their independence. In this instance, these female cultural producers allow their characters to define and express themselves within their narrative without external influence. What we see with both girls is that they shift the dialogue surrounding girlhood by refusing to engage in systems that seek to stifle them.

In both of these comics, we see these girls directly combat overtly and covertly racist structures in a way that forces readers to not only reevaluate the ways that both structures work but also forces the reader to watch the engagement from a usually marginalized point of view. This becomes a significant part of superhero narratives as most of these heroes are white and male, and through saving the world reinforce the pathology behind white saviors. The girls in these narratives act with whiteness in mind but work against ideas that whiteness is necessary and pivotal to their identity. Whiteness in these texts operates in non-shattering ways; it requires

constant navigation to be successful. By showing varied responses to the white supremacist structure, they can also show how girls of color deploy an array of tactics to combat structural oppression. This variety works as a counter to normative tropes, which say girls of color must react to whiteness in formulaic, non-threatening ways. In refusing to engage these tropes completely, these creators were able to allow their characters to maintain their youth while also saving the world.

Chapter Five: Black Reign: Black Geographies and the Alien Other

In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* Katherine McKittrick explores the interplay between geographies of domination, such as transatlantic slavery and racial-sexual displacement, and Black women's geographies, such as their knowledges, negotiations, and experiences.[194] Using the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, McKittrick suggests that geographies of domination must be understood as "the displacement of difference, wherein, particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and inhuman persons that in sum form the category of 'human being.'"[195] The racial implications of this hierarchy are that whiteness assumes a space of human with other racial categories assuming a status of inhuman. McKittrick goes on to suggest that the displacement of difference within the hierarchy demonstrates the ways that hierarchies serve as critical categories of social and spatial struggle. These geographical hierarchies root themselves in the understanding that geography and the way that geographies function are not static. We all can produce space and place and to give both meanings.[196] As such, it is necessary to look at how individual bodies navigate geographies and how space influences this navigation.

Black women's geographies call attention to the ways that Black women exist as inhuman, or what I call 'human other,' in the face of a framework that arranges global

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[194] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x.

[195] Ibid., xv.

[196] In "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place," Katherine McKittrick concludes that a Black sense of place locates the ways in which anti-black violence is in the Americas evidence protean plantation futures as a space of encounter. She further suggests that a Black sense of place is not a steady, focused, a homogeneous place but rather a set of changing and differential perspectives that are illustrative of legacies of normalized racial violence that calcify, but do not guarantee, the denigration of black geography and their inhabitants. See Katherine McKittrick, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place," *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8 (2011): 950.

geographies according to the assumption of a white, heterosexual classed vantage point. McKittrick's explores the human/inhuman binary, suggesting that Black women are both shaped by, and challenge, traditional geographic arrangements. In science fiction and speculative futures, this hierarchy of human/inhuman is often repurposed and enacted with human assigned bodies being those born on earth and non-human as extraterrestrial. Usually, the non-humans function as a threat to the human; the non-humans are the space invaders, the aliens, the zombies, or mutants. This relationship works simplifies the future, but it also ignores the already existent hierarchy that exists on earth. Our current hierarchy works to stratify those who, in the speculative future, may be classed as human. I suggest that in Black imagined futures, the hierarchy of humanness functions in a way that not only continues to mark Black women as a *human other*. I further suggest that when Black women come into contact with non-humans, it acts as a moment of remaking. The moment rejects the human/non-human binary through the inclusion of the *alien other*.[197]

"Black Reign: Black Geographies and the Alien Other" continues the discussion of Black female representation in comics. I focus on how Black female characters, whom I call the *human other*, interact with *the alien other.* I suggest this relationship pushes against notions of traditional geography, which situate Black womanhood as operating outside of humanity or humanness. I explore how *the alien other* influences Black women's identity, sense of belonging, and engagement with time and place in these texts. This exchange is reciprocal; Black women

[197] In *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack* World, Zakiyyah Iman-Jackson uses African diasporic literature to move against the idea that diasporic literature and cultural production should be interpreted as reactions to the racialization of human-animal dichotomies. Instead, she suggests that diasporic literature and visual texts critique and ultimately do away with prevailing conceptions of 'the human' found in Western science and philosophy.[197] For Iman-Jackson, Blackness does not seek to be included in 'the human.' Blackness is presented as itself, as opposed to a response to notions of humanness, and as such, refuses Eurocentric, western humanity. See Zakiyyah Iman-Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 1.

inform the alien other's identity. These interactions act as a site of critique of the necessity of multiple marginalized identities in supremacist structures. I use the term *alien others* as the beings in these comics are referred to as alien or extraterrestrial. While the human other and alien other mark each other as 'real,' I primarily focus on the way the alien other inform Black womanhood and belonging in these comics. Using Nnedi Okorafor's *LaGuardia* and Tony Puryear and Erika Alexanders's *Concrete Park*, I look at the moment Black women come into contact with alien species. I consider how the human and alien other negotiate their identities and relationship to each other.

Human/inhuman relationships function without the presence of the human, who, in this instance, is white and male. These identities do not require an explicit definition of human or other, as both exist as extensions colonial structures. If we accept that science fiction's framing of *the other* still centers whiteness, we can see the limits in these ideologies more clearly. Images and ideologies produced by European culture eventually gained strength by opposing itself against an imagined other. By moving the other outside of the "us" versus "them" binary, we can more accurately look at identity formation in the future. Included within global and universal identity-making, they have the potential to shift how we talk about marginalized people in the future.

In the speculative future, authors often frame the alien as the antithesis of humanity. In doing so, it also assumes that humanity or being 'human' includes Black and non-white bodies. I argue that in these futures, Black bodies are still deemed to be not quite human, thus placing them into the category of human other, a classification that shares attributes with the alien other. Black bodies do not refer to physical representations only; there is an underlying presence of Blackness that persists throughout all the narratives in my project. However, the persistence of

Blackness is not the same as having an active presence.[198] By placing Black women in these futures, we get a better look not only at how humans respond to alien invaders but how Black women's existence troubles this binary of human and alien other. I suggest that while binaries are vital to the ways we discuss comics and popular culture in a broad sense, it limits the scope of reading both Black women and *the alien other* in the same moment. Shifting the approach propels identity and identity formation beyond whiteness, towards interactions with nature, extraterrestrial beings, and other groups that may be framed pejoratively as a means of making whiteness visible. These voices highlight a complexity to *the alien other* and otherhood that binary relationships often miss.

These comics explore the blind spot that exists within discourse regarding both Black women and *the alien other*. I use these for a few reasons. Both show Black women and extraterrestrial beings live together as opposed to against each other. They are less about invasions and more accounts of how both species navigate realities that have marked both as less than human. Unlike some of the texts I used in previous chapters, there is not societal restart; instead, these futures act as continuations of the world "as we know it." With this continuation, we can see how Black women fare when systemic marginalization persists. Black women complicate the binaries of human/other that exist in comic book narratives. They highlight the complexities of the future by showing the ways marginalized identities are represented among each other. I suggest that futuristic binaries are non-existent, and through the exploration of these many others, we see how multiple identities exist within a colonialist existence. We can understand how multiple others, or identities, exit exists in the face of imposing humanity.

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[198] My use of 'persistence' suggests that even when not physically present, blackness continues to function as a rubric of social governance. Blackness can be invoked without the presence of Black people.

In centering both Black women and aliens within these dystopian futures, this works in direct contrast to their intended use. I am not arguing that racism or xenophobia ceases to exist in dystopian futures; in fact, I suggest they are more overt. Through the introduction of the alien, a Black imagined alien; we come to see the plight of Black women and non-humans in more nuanced ways. I am particularly interested in how aliens highlight the complicated relationship. Black women have with citizenship and belonging, especially the idea that aliens call attention to the cultural hybridity of Black women and Black womanhood. Cultural hybridity speaks to the multiple intersecting identities that Black women possess. [199] I suggest that cultural hybridity functions as a means of discussing otherhood in the future. Cultural hybridity allows us to see the similarities in bodies that have been marked as oppositional.[200]

This chapter uses a comparative lens in looking at *the other*, as I suggest *the other* in the Black imagined dystopian future relies on Black women in their restructuring. Black womanhood acts as a signpost through which we come to know *the other*. I suggest that through the exploration of aliens in these futures, I can illustrate how the presence of both Black women and aliens destabilize structures intended to uphold old ways of self and group identifications. One must consider a few factors: the role that the other plays in these readings and how these roles destabilized racial binaries. The marginalization of the other in narratives lacks the potential to expand definitions of race and humanity as there is no agency given to these bodies.

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[199] My definition of cultural hybridity is informed by John D. Márques who defines it as the abilities of individuals assigned to subaltern groups to draw from an array of knowledges, experiences, and epistemologies in the constitution of their subjectivities make the individuals less manageable by colonial powers. See John D. Márques, *Black-Brown Solidarity: Racial Politics in the New Gulf South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 15.

[200] For discussions of racial and cultural hybridity see Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

However, placing the other is in conversation with human others; has the potential to shift how we discuss race, gender, and belonging.

I seek to accomplish two things in this chapter. First, I explore space as a Black geography, suggesting that space functions as a Black geography through its entanglement with the colonization of foreign land and the implementation of forced labor through the PIC. I further suggest that these geographies allow us to look closer at the ways that Black women, as human others, inform alien identity and vice versa. I use *Concrete Park* to explore space as Black geography, paying close attention to the way that Oasis, a prison planet, functions as an extension of the prison industrial complex. I also explore Scare City, a city of exiles, create new geographies on this planet.[201] I juxtapose the relationship between space as black geography against the landscape of New York and LaGuardia, suggesting that human others and alien others are united in the face of a global club government set on the continual marginalization of black women and aliens.

Using the prison industrial complex (PIC) as a point of entry, I then explore these futuristic geographies that provide space for the human other and alien other to coexist. Namely, I explore the close and intimate relationships between Black women and aliens and how these relationships render both groups visible. I pay close attention to the ways characters Lena, Luca, and Monkfish assume a space of other in *Concrete Park*. The human occupation of Oasis changes every aspect of the land. The change is in direct relation to the violence humans brought to the land. The violence that exists on Oasis reflects a long and tenuous relationship between the penal system, earth, and Black and brown bodies. Alien others are used as commentary on

[201] Scare City is another name for the "New Earth Correctional Colony City Number Two." The Ice Mines are where prisoners are taken upon arrival to Oasis. If they survive their sentences, they are often able to go home.

how society on earth functions and forces alien bodies to remake identity in the face of US imperialism and conquest. I then look at Nnedi Okorafor's *LaGuardia*, specifically the character Future, who assumes multiple identities in her dystopian future.[202] I am concerned with how she navigates US citizenship and her Nigerian identity while carrying an alien baby, particularly her how her existing nationalities merge with her newfound alien identity. I suggest that these Black women in the future negotiate multiple spaces in similar ways to current negotiations, drawing attention to the multiple existences of Black women in the universe and these imagined futures.

Section 5.1: The Human Other, the Alien Other and in Space

Black women hold a significant space in the future. In some imagined futures, they are physically present but silent; we see them in comic book panels, but they do not speak or engage the storyline in any significant way. Other times they are physically absent, but present ideologically, which we see through the treatment of aliens, zombies, and other speculative forms. Even when black women are not physically present in the future, there are still bodies that reflect the treatment black women receive. What inadvertently happens is that a binary becomes established, one that is predicated on Black women performing and existing in specific ways. When she is absent, other beings assume her place ideologically. Sometimes they are zombies; other times, they are extraterrestrial beings, but ideologically Black women always exist in these futures, but physically, they are disposable.

I suggest that their physical presence is just as significant, if not more than their ideological presence. This chapter explores the physical appearance of Black women in these futures. I am interested in what happens when both Black women and extraterrestrial beings

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[202] Floral is a species of alien in the comic.

coexist. In *Race in American Science Fiction*, Isaiah Lavender III suggests that otherhood begins with thinking about race along the Black/white binary. Otherhood marks inclusion and exclusion without troubling what either of those things means. To be alien is to also exist outside of earthly norms, to be ostracized based on the difference of locale and species as opposed to race. These are markers that still take up phenotype while ignoring how phenotype has been refuted as a metric in the inclusion.

The creation of the other was in response to the need to define oneself, a negative opposing factor to render itself visible but also to place whiteness in a place of control. Control over narratives surrounding the future is having control over the future. In other words, white people dictate who is deemed white and who are deemed as other. Whiteness, as we understand it today in the US, is a construct, a public fiction that has evolved throughout American history in response to changing political and economic needs and conditions.[203] Whiteness is not defined by exclusively black bodies or bodies that have been created as the other. There is a negotiation of what constitutes white as determined by members within the group. The outcome of which creates a hierarchy of whiteness where certain white bodies are more valuable than others and where all bodies of color are rendered violent and unstable.

Otherhood's rhetoric draws attention to race and racism as they are constituted by science fiction's historical, social, scientific, and technological engagement with the present.[204] In this regard, science fiction offers Black people a chance to think about the future of race while also rethinking and often reliving painful historical moments. These futures are grounded in history

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[203] Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 12.

[204] Isiah Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 31.

while using the same historical devices to speculate on the future. Using Sylvia Wynter's discussion of human/other and Katherine McKittrick's exploration of Black geographies, I suggest that the alien other challenges and expand the ways we talk about both the alien other and human other, in this instance, Black women. I further suggest that these speculative futures are represented through the prison industrial complex (PIC), with Black women functioning as a nexus for understanding how freedom and autonomy within these colonialist structures.

I suggest that speculative fiction and the introduction of the 'alien other' rework and further destabilize these Eurocentric, Western binaries. Black comic book authors use the 'alien other' troubles these binaries and how they are deployed in speculative fiction. In *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan states that exposing the blind spots, or the unmarked, within theoretical frameworks leaves room to construct new ways of knowing.[205] These new constructions ultimately provide space for multiple meanings around identity to exist regarding the representation of marginalized bodies in the future. I argue that Black women have played a marginal role in the conversation about humanity and otherhood. Using the dystopian future and the intergalactic colonization of space, I explore the alien as the conduit for the production of meaning regarding the Black female body. The speculative nature of comics provides freedom in the creation of the future but, more specifically, the distortion of space and time and how that shifts definitions of humanity and non-humanity.

I explore how these relationships are troubled in two ways. First, I look at how the 'alien other' is represented through the land, looking at the ways that Oasis, a prison planet, operates in the future. I suggest that through the colonization of the planet, there is an attempt to establish it as a traditional geographic space but the presence of Scare City, a city on the planet, and those

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[205] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2017), 3.

that inhabit it shift the geographies from traditional to Black. Second, I explore how the alien other navigate life on Earth with Black women. I suggest that the Earth-bound alien other illuminates the multiple existences of Black womanhood. Black women's engagement with alien bodies in this reality renders Black women visible. This relationship further destabilized the human-inhuman binary, which is informed by race, gender, nationality, and species. My goal is not to explore the ways that these texts disrupt binaries but to look at the ways that multiple sites of exclusion provide new ways of reading Black women. When we talk about the hierarchy of humanness and the stratification of western society, it is a reductive conversation. The hierarchy does not consider the intricacies of those within them; instead, it minimizes the complexities of those in the system. By placing the alien other in conversation with the human other, as opposed to humans, I show the flaws not only in the hierarchy of humanness but in using human/humanity as the basis for understanding Black women in these futures.

Section 5.2: Black Futures, Black Geographies,

Concrete Park is set in the near future. The United States is hit with a "poor youth population bomb," which leads to hunger and panic. There is substantial gang activity in the US, and this bomb makes gangs bigger than ever as youth join as a means of survival. Isaac introduces us to this new planet after being sentenced to the prison planet for charges we never know, and for some time, we are uncertain. Isaac has been arrested before but was incarcerated in the US prison system and did not realize Oasis existed until he woke up in a transporter ship en-route to the prison planet. This arrest is different as the trial, verdict, and sentence are kept secret from him and those around him. We never learn about his crime; he wakes up with a tattoo barcode on his face. Isaac introduces us to Oasis, Scare City, and the NEC.

Concrete Park refers to an ancient site on Oasis. Before the colony existed, magic and gods ruled the planet. Over time, the planet became barred, but the ghost of Rose shows the reader the origin story of Oasis.[206] In *Concrete Park*, we learned that Oasis was not always a desert planet but had oceans, plant life, and more. Excessive violence depleted the planet of its resources and created the desert planet we see in the comic. Violence and hatred are the biggest threat to life on Oasis, and it persists daily. Oasis, originally called Kepler 56-B, is an uncharted and uninhabited planet. First identified and immediately covered up by German astronomers in 2007, Oasis was named after the greatest of German astronomers.[207] Evidence of this earth-like world was kept secret for years. Eventually, secret initiatives began, complete with manned and unmanned explorative missions.[208]

The journey to Oasis evokes a relationship to the Middle Passage and the enslavement of Africans. When the prisoners arrived, they were forced into labor that often worked them to death. We do not know the why and what the resources are that they are mining, except they work in the ice mines. It is dangerous work, that results in many deaths, and the NEC does not care because the prisoners are young, poor, and unwanted; they are disposable. Saidiya Hartman asserts that the slave, those exiles from their country, define the position of the outsider.[209] Life on Oasis is so rough for prisoners that they are willing to commit suicide on the transport ships.

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[206] Rose was Isaac's little sister, who was murdered in a drive by In Los Angeles. her murder was the last memory Isaac has before being transported to Oasis.

[207] The planet was named after Johannes Kepler, the German astronomer who discovered the three major laws of planetary motion.

[208] Puryear, Tony and Erika Alexander, *Concrete Park* (Dark Horse Books, 2015), Glossary.

[209] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 5.

In a panel, a black female prisoner blew herself up to avoid having to work in the mines again, acting as an example of the realities of life on Oasis.[210]

Oasis belongs to the United States, but the New Earth Council (NEC) operates the planet. The NEC, the entity that controls and runs Oasis, grew from a small initiative of the EU countries into the military government of the new world. The NEC operates the massive ships that take the human exiles on their two-year journey to the prison planet. They also direct mining operations.[211] We also know that the US sent a large number of prisoners to Oasis, but the planet serves as a global stopping point for those accused of unknown crimes. In *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues that prisons are partial geographical solutions to political-economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crises.[212] As a result of this relationship, human bodies (criminal bodies) become commodities for continuing this system, resulting in a higher incarceration rate and more stringent CA laws. Gilmore interrogates how certain types of people, land, capital, and state capacity became idle (surplus) and why the outcome is logically explicable but not inevitable. Gilmore plays close attention to how California's economic crises of the state became some of the critical issues for prison growth, in particular, labor issues and poor investments. Her text

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[210] Angela Davis suggests that Black female resistance on plantations resulted in open acts of counter-insurgency, where violence was enacted on Black women and men with equal intensity. The Black female subject exists as a potential insurgent, marking Black women as a consistent and direct threat to slave systems. The woman blowing herself up instead of working in the Ice Mines parallels this moment as she not only threatens the PIC but she draws attention to the violence of Oasis. See Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Massachusetts Review* Vol. 13, No. 1/2, (1972): 91-95.

[211] While the comic does not explicitly state who is included in the EU countries these are the countries that are currently members: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

[212] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 26.

calls attention to how black and brown people become racialized in California as a means of growing prison populations and increasing the state economy. What we can also tell from the images in the comic, is that most of the people imprisoned on Oasis are people of color. You do not see any white bodies on the planet.

Whiteness and assumed humanity function differently in these dystopian futures. With the centering of white male bodies, we also see an uptick in technology and surveillance of these criminal communities. Whiteness is visible through the system whiteness created with humanness being attached to the lack of criminality.[213] From the onset of *Concrete Park*, Erika Alexander and Tony Puryear, highlight the parallels between Oasis as not only prison but as an extension of the transatlantic slave trade. The text rests on prisons noting that while Oasis exists, the US present system still exists and functions in the same way as it always has; Oasis is an additional prison colony. In the future, the PIC does not dissipate; in fact, it multiplies. Oasis still depends on earth for many of its resources, including food and water clothing in other perishables. We subsequently learn that earth has potentially abandoned the colonies breathing the prisoners there to starve or survive on their own.

Los Angeles and, more broadly, California, is essential to how we understand the PIC, the way it functions in the future, and how that affects Black women. Isaac is sent to Oasis after his little sister is murdered; her murder propels the story. The experiences of Isaac and the fact that Los Angeles and California become the gateway to Oasis serves not only to highlight how policing functions in the future but also calls to the evolution of location-based violence again

[213] This creates what Hartman calls 'the afterlife of slavery' which results in skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and the enslavement of Africans. These work to create new forms of subjectivity not only for people of African descent but also African, European and others. See Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

Black and non-white people. The prisonization of California, as Angela Davis calls it, is a massive system of incarceration that exists with the implicit consent of the public.[214] In other words, prisons exist within the site of non-incarcerated people while simultaneously being rendered invisible due to the framing of incarcerated people. Prison exists as cognitively disconnected for many; we can separate ourselves from PIC. In this future, the effects of the PIC are visible. Prisons perform the ideological work to relieve us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism.[215]

In *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick suggests that geography is not secure and unwavering; we produce space, we produce its meaning, and we work very hard to make geography what it is.[216] In *Concrete Park*, Oasis exists as an example of this geography. Throughout the text, we see that Oasis is in a constant state of change. The colonization of the planet by NEC ultimately changes the planet from peaceful to angry. We see the shift through flashbacks, which show the planet pre-NEC but also through the introduction of plant life on Oasis, as the NEC abandons those that inhabit the land. After colonization, the planet became barren and stopped existing as the planet that it was before being 'found.' This alludes to the ways that Scare City and its inhabitants ultimately refuse colonization and forced labor and, in doing so, show how Scare City acts as a Black geography.

The production of Black spaces in the diaspora is tied to locations that were and are explicitly produced in conjunction with race, racism, captivity, and economic profit.[217] These

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[214] Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 14.

[215] Ibid., 16.

[216] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xi.

[217] Ibid., 9.

traditional geographies require Black displacement, Black placelessness, Black labor, and a Black population that "stays in place."[218] Oasis serves as a traditional geography rooted in racist American history, with Scare City acting as a site of resistance and as a Black geography that refuses coloniality and forced labor. Scare City shows how Black geographies can exist simultaneously within a traditional extraterrestrial space. These geographies were put in place by conditions of slavery, but the inhabitants of these geographies can be spaces for their safety and benefit. Scare City functions as this type of site, a site of resistance within a system of bondage. Living in Scare City as a human means you have escaped the ice mines and are no longer subject to physical labor on the planet. Those that live there have no more freedom than those in the mines; they are still susceptible too early death, random acts of violence, and live in consistent fear.

Accessing Scare City requires prisoners to escape the Ice Mines, which are where prisoners are taken and worked to death. The Ice Mines represent captivity in ways similar to that of the American plantation. Escaping the Ice Mines to Scare City, marks the City not only as a site of liberty, as prisoners no longer labor for the NEC, but also as a site of resistance. Those who flee have also refused to engage with colonialist, traditional spaces. While Oasis is fundamentally different from earth, with multiple suns, 36-hour days, two Saturday nights, and a climate that makes it impossible to grow food, it still maintains familiar social systems and social structures. In this way, *Concrete Park* alludes to and calls towards the familiar.

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[218] Katherine McKittrick defines geography as a location through which a moving technology can create differential and contextual histories. Further, traditional geographies are defined as the formulations that assume we can view, assess, and ethically organize the world from a stable (white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed) vantage point. See McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii.

Concrete Park uses both traditional and Black geographies to illuminate the ways the prison industrial complex persists as a self-functioning system to keep the human other and alien other isolated from humans and also each other. In worlds like Oasis and Scare City, race and racism are not at the forefront of discussions and decision making but act as an undercurrent of the society. People do not talk about race but allude to the effects of race. Their presence is a direct reflection of the ways that race and over-policing of racialized bodies function in America and globally. As such, Oasis, Scare City, and the mining colonies all exist as operative offshoots of racist ideology and praxis. Life on Oasis becomes tied to the value of marginalized human beings but also the aliens that inhabit the same space. Luca, a former mine worker on Oasis, highlights the relationship that exists between humans and alien bodies on Oasis.

Section 5.3: Communal Living and Identity Building Among *Others*

Luca is the only female gang leader in Scare City, but she is not the only Black leader. She originally came to Oasis to work in "Ice Mine Nine," to work off her sentence. Luca tried to escape the mines five times. Each time, she authorities captured her. On the sixth attempt, she was able to flee to Scare City. Through Luca, we learn the rules of Scare City and the way that humans must act to survive. There is only one rule in Scare City, fight. The rule is "be down or lay down," which alludes to gang life and the need to join gangs to survive. Initially, Luca was in one of the only businesses for women.[219] She was a sex worker but transcended this role after murdering two men. She was taken in by the M80's, which she eventually came to lead.[220]

[219] Luca states that there are three main roles women assume in Scare City. While she does not explicitly state the roles, it can be inferred that they are: prostitute, gang member, or gang leader/businessperson.

[220] There are 6 major gangs, out of hundreds of smaller gangs, sets, and militias in the city. The M 80s or an all-woman gang. they have a tiny territory in the shoulder section of scare city and own a small portion of the alcohol trade in the city.

Figure 5.1: Lena

We often see her juxtaposed against Lena, her alien girlfriend. We are introduced to Luca as she lays in bed with her alien girlfriend, Lena. What we see in this panel is that much of Luca's image is formed through her relationship with Lena, who she sees as perfect. Luca feels as though she is not enough for Lena stating That when she is with Lena, Luca is not "a drunk or a fat ex-holey With a plastic flower in her hair."[221] Lena makes Luca forget about all of the things she had to do to stay alive. It is to Lena that we began to see the way the aliens assimilate and to human culture on Oasis. Lena is an alien, but only appears as a human. She lives as a Black woman, melding the alien and human other. In Figure 5.1, we see Lena. Her eyes and mouth are the only things that give away her alien identity as they glow blue.

Lena is desired by many in Scare City, who call her the definition of beautiful and alluring. That Lena so visibly embodies black womanhood while existing as an alien is essential. There is an oppositional relationship at play that uses the alien other as a means of calling attention to stereotypes placed on black women. We first see it with Lena's beauty serving as a

[221] A holey is a slang term which means a friend or associate from the mines, a boon coon (i.e. ace boon coon)

significant part of Luca's identity. She uses Lena as an index of her beauty, suggesting that Lena is too beautiful to date her. This draws attention to Luca's self-esteem issues but also points to the fact that Black women act as the source of beauty for other Black women.

Lena is physically violent. In a world that feeds on violence, we often see Lena patiently waiting while Luca gets into gunfights or is on the wrong end of an assassination attempt. In these instances, Lena appears and disappears without warning, which often shifts the plot in the story. She usually appears right after or before a moment involving Luca. For example, when Luca becomes injured or has done something that influences their relationship Lena appears from thin air.[222] While Lena does not speak a known language, she emotes using bullets. When she is scared or angry, her eyes and mouth shine sky blue, and bullets ring out. In this way, Lena is a living weapon that calls to a history of weaponizing Black women's behavior. She is not invincible, but her abilities allow her to navigate Scare City as a Black woman with ease. Had her alien form not existed, her Black female body would be open to the violence of the City. Had her human form not existed, her experiences in Scare City would not have existed as it did. As a Black form, Lena has cover and relative anonymity in Scare City. She is known for her beauty, which does not mark her as a threat. This melding of human and alien is an example of how one takes on the identity of the majority as a means of survival. Throughout the pages of the comic, we see multiple alien species assume human bodies as a means of survival. The same way that humans depend on violence is the way that aliens depend on human bodies.

What is most significant about Lena's visual Blackness is that Blackness becomes a point of reference in the making of the alien and human other. In a space where human otherness exists in relationship to the revocation of freedom. To have Black female identity informed by another

[222] Lena wants appeared suddenly after Luca kisses a man. he also appeared suddenly when the other gang meet leaders attempt to assassinate Luca.

Black female body ultimately acts as a refusal of whiteness but also a rejection of a system that categorizes Black women as a human other. Though Lena is an alien other, her phenotype makes her part of a long history of Black women, which also acts as a visual counterpoint to the ways that Black womanhood works in these futures.

The survival of those in Scare City shows that a Black sense of place exists on Oasis that ties Black bodies, criminal bodies, and alien bodies together. All three of these entities resist the violence that earth attempts to inflict on Oasis. While initially reproducing violence, these same groups began to move away from it as the planet starts to evolve. The collective resistance enacted by all three groups illustrates the ways that marginalized people refuse, humanity steeped in inhumane actions. This active resistance works to illuminate the plight of alien and Black bodies. We see a similar interaction in *LaGuardia* through the cohabitation of alien and Black bodies and how it exists as a regenerative interaction. With *LaGuardia,* this relationship becomes more of a discussion of how earth negotiates a global identity with the inclusion/exclusion of alien life. Scare City exists as a result of a colonialist project. Still, *LaGuardia*, which consists of a similar project, shows how the earth responds to being inhabited and potentially recolonized by aliens.

Section 5.4: *LaGuardia*, Biafra, and the Pure Species

LaGuardia, named after the airport in New York, focuses on Future, a Black woman who leaves Nigeria to give birth to her part alien baby in the US. Future and her unborn child act as a negotiation of space and race, as the world, rejects aliens and those who support alien bodies. Future's identity also depends on her location, something that Future illustrates through her travel to America. The story begins with Future arriving and LaGuardia airport in New York. Through

Figure 5.2: Biafran protest at Citizen's Nigerian University from *LaGuardia*

flashbacks and exploration of other characters, we get a glimpse into the climate that Future left behind in Nigeria. Future flees Nigeria in an attempt to get away from her fiancé, Citizen, but also so that her alien baby can be born in America and be protected by US citizenship laws. This text highlights the complicated relationship that exists among the African diaspora, especially the complex relationship that exists with nationality, gender, and race and how alien identity

illuminates the overlapping and complicated nature of these identities. All of these inform Future's choices, and as she changes locations, the ways that she exists change as well.

In "Unsettling the Coloniality Have Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," Sylvia Wynter discusses the relationship between humans and the irrational other, noting how the irrational/sub-rational human other works to frame race. Wynter makes a note of the ways Black and indigenous bodies both occupy a space of human other, which simultaneously marks whiteness as 'normal' and human in the face of the 'abnormal' Black and indigenous body. The other works not only as a marker of normalcy but also as a site of entry into how Blackness and otherness inform each other within a racist and sexist system. The other and human work to maintain ideologies of order which fix societies in terms of insider/outsider, normal/abnormal, and many other binaries. For Wynter's, it is an evolutionary marker that changes over time. As the world evolved, new understandings of the other began to be put in place; understandings that were based on new descriptive knowledge of the human.[223]

Citizen assumes the status of human, one that is exclusionary to aliens. Okorafor imagines a future where Biafra still exists, and those within Biafra seek to remain 'pure' through the exclusion of aliens. Thus begins the exploration of the complexities that exist within this futurescape. In our current time, Biafra was a secessionist Western African state that unilaterally declared its independence from Nigeria in 1967. Located in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria, Biafra was primarily inhabited by the Igbo people.[224] After a two-year conflict, which resulted in the estimated death of 500,000 to 3 million, Biafra ceased to exist as an independent

[223] Ibid., 300.

[224] The Igbo people are an ethnic group native to Southcentral and Southeastern Nigeria.

state.[225] In Okorafor's future, Biafrans are framed as separatists who want to keep aliens out of Nigeria, a state that acts as a hub of alien life and welcomes all "people from around the universe." That Biafra would be against the inclusion of aliens, is a mirroring of the ways the Hausa people excluded the Igbo people from Nigeria during the conflict. Biafrans, more specifically, the Igbo, were murdered in the Northern region of Nigeria and ultimately fled east to avoid further onslaught.[226] The replication of this highlights the ways that the human other often replicates the actions of the state, and normative humanity, in the marginalization of foreign bodies.

Though Citizen is Igbo and perceived to be part of the separatist movement, he refuses to engage in the attack of alien bodies but does, at times, replicate xenophobia, anti-alien rhetoric. Nigerian soldiers question his loyalty after he refuses to 'pick a side.' He is also under pressure from the Biafrans, who question his dedication to the state and their purity. Citizen becomes the gateway to this future when he unknowingly becomes the carrier of an alien species after he buys Future a plant. Unbeknownst to him, the plant is an alien species called Floral that Citizen took care of until it was big enough to be given to Future. During a full moon, Citizen, who had an open cut, was exposed to the Floral's spores.[227] Once the cells entered Citizen's system, they merged with Citizen's DNA and caused Citizen to evolve into a part human, part Floral species. Citizen impregnates Future, his altered DNA mixing with hers, which resulted in Future carrying a part Floral fetus.

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[225] Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Biafra,” accessed May 13, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/place/Biafra.

[226] Ibid.

[227] Spores are a reproductive cell, or group of cells, produced by some plants that are capable of developing into an adult plant without combining with another reproductive cell.

Discussions regarding the relationship between human and other require an exploration of location and locations influence on what or who is human or alien. In doing this, Wynter highlights the capacity through which the self-defined human come to know themselves through the categorize human other. Notions of human versus human other highlight the construction of Blackness as abnormal and draws attention to the role Black bodies play in the construction of European as racially pure secular subjects.[228] Black bodies are necessary for the making of a western ideology while simultaneously being marked as outside of humanity. This is exacerbated by the character Future, the Black female protagonist in *LaGuardia*. She gives birth to a human-alien hybrid baby and simultaneously has her DNA changed from human to alien. Not only does she embody racial hybridity, but she also alludes to how new species affect race and gender in the future.

The Floral, later named LetMeLive, subsequently travels to the US with Future.[229] This alien works against primary notions of aliens and contagion, which frame exposure as a result of a violent outbreak. In this instance, alien procreation is peaceful and accidental. This shifts how we see aliens, from menacing to mundane. It is through Futures pregnancy that we can see not only the treatment of aliens but how this treatment illuminates the reality of Black bodies, primarily those who interact with aliens. I suggest that at this moment, the merging of Floral, Citizen, and Future's DNA acts as a site of the hybridization of human and alien races. This racial hybridity serves as a means of critiquing the ways this new alien/human hybrid species challenges notions of race, status, and belonging on earth.

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[228] Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 309.

[229] LetMeLive names himself after arriving to America. While he does not explain why he chose the name, this character spends most of the comic trying to stay alive. The survival of Future’s unborn child depends on LetMeLive’s survival.

Figure 5.3: Future entering US through LaGuardia International and Interplanetary Airport

The impregnation of Future leads to her having to flee Nigeria for America, which is a 'safer' place to give birth to an alien-human baby. This assertion disregards the fact that Nigeria has globally been hailed as a welcoming hub for aliens and instead marks Nigeria, through its proximity to the Biafran separatist movement, as unsafe. In many ways, this continues the speculation into what a successful Biafran Civil War would have looked like in a future moment.

Had Biafra succeeded in its succession, the perpetual conflict would have resulted in a lack of safety and care for Nigerian people. Future's fleeing highlights this potentially chaotic relationship but also draws attention to Future's American identity and the way that both allow her to move through the world and pass as human while also being an incubator for an alien-human hybrid species.

Upon arriving at LaGuardia International and Interplanetary Airport, we see that a pregnant Future is taken to the back to be questioned by TSA. This questioning centers around Future's Nigerian heritage and the relationship Nigeria has with alien bodies. Nigeria welcoming all aliens marks the country and those that are from Nigeria to extra scrutiny, as the US is 'safer' for Future but possess the same xenophobic and racist ideologies as the Biafran people. In an interview with vulture.com, Nnedi Okorafor states that incidents at the real LaGuardia Airport informed the comic saying:

> "It was literally the airport. I just had multiple incidents there where I felt very alien […] I felt rage many times in the LaGuardia airport. In a row. I travel a lot, and there was a time where I came through that airport multiple times, and a similar incident kept happening, especially with my hair, that was really frustrating."[230]

That Okorafor cites this as a point of origin for the comic with Future subsequently entering LaGuardia as a child of an immigrant who is carrying with an alien species is a literal interpretation of the multiple statuses that immigrants and children of immigrants assume in the US and globally.

The alien other is posited similarly to the human other, as the antithesis to humanity. Alienness, like Blackness, operate as in ethno-political signifier of racial and species difference.

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[230] Abraham Riesman. "Author Nnedi Okorafor Talks *LaGuardia*, Wakanda, and … Garfield?" *Vulture*, January 9, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/01/nnedi-okorafor-talks-laguardia-wakanda-and-garfield.html.

In *LaGuardia* are aliens marked as non-human entities that work to frame what human identity looks like in the future. In doing so, they further work to illuminate black women's involvement in their identity-making. *LaGuardia* is ultimately a story of immigration and navigating various locations as a hybrid being. The notions of otherhood, whether alien or human, are conflated in a way that suggests that all beings that exist outside of a Western, Eurocentric identity are subject to be lumped together. The complexities that Okorafor presents are layered. Citizen functions as both Biafran and Nigerian, until exposure to the Floral forces him to pick a side. He eventually flees to America as well, after his apartment is set on fire by Biafrans. While his choices are made for him, Future constantly navigates all of her identities, without the ability to choose one over the other. She is Nigerian-American, which means she must navigate the world with the complexities of being Nigerian in a Nigerian-Biafran conflict and being of the African diaspora in America, which still enacts racist language and violence against Black bodies. Throughout the text, we see Future becoming more and more of a Floral, which highlights that not only will she have to navigate the world as a Black woman, she must also navigate it as an alien, which in Okorafor's future are separate but similar. Future must also navigate all of these spaces as a woman, which is highlighted through her pregnancy and the profiling she receives as a result of being both pregnant and Nigerian-American.

Section 5.5: Conclusion

In *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha L. Womack states that the idea of using sci-fi and speculative fiction to spur social change, reexamine race, and to explore self-expression for people of color is nothing new. The Black visionaries who sought to alleviate the debilitating system and end the racial divide used the genres as devices to

articulate their issues and visions.[231] Okorafor ultimately highlights the complexities of existing within the diaspora, the profiling of Black bodies in America, the internal conflicts within Africa and how the exclusionary tactics regarding aliens, repurpose not only conflicts within Africa but the effects of US colonialism on the world. While the alien other is framed as threatening, they also serve as a site of racial speculation. The alien other in these futures highlights the multiple locations of exclusion that exists. What Okorafor and Erika Alexander have done is use alien species to highlight the ways that humans reproduce harmful interactions and hierarchies as exclusionary tactics.

[231] Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 124.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

When I began this project, I had friends, family, and colleagues ask, "why is this even important? What will looking at Black women in the future achieve?" The future is valuable as authors and creators use their realities, science, and global history to form these futures. Speculative futures are imagined but rooted in truth. Most looked at me with skepticism as the idea of global pandemics, and the destruction of society seemed a bit far-fetched concerning the current moment, then COVID-19 happened.[232] The COVID-19 pandemic hit the world and the imagined future; the future so many saw as unrealistic, became a reality. As I finish this project, we are under a 'stay in shelter' order, which limits one's movement in an attempt to prevent the spread of disease. Mobility is limited, and the world as we have come to know it is over. Discussions around life will be pre and post-COVID-19. The pandemic has also exposed the limits of our present society. However, with the speculative future, we are given a blueprint of sorts. Novelists like Octavia Butler show us how to survive a world that has collapsed due to racism, greed, and climate change. Comics like *The Walking Dead* show me how pandemics can decimate most of the world, but people can still survive through building community. These imagined communities often reflect the current relationships between people, including who we see and how we see them. Through the future, we are allowed to reimagine the constructs and how they are deployed.

Isiah Lavender III states that the science fictioning of race can allow us to comprehend events that have happened when many thought [they] would not happen, ever, though it could

[232] Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an illness caused by a virus that can spread from person to person. COVID-19 has no known cure or vaccine to the virus. The outbreak began in Wuhan, China and was first detected in the United States of America in January of 2020.

happen in a parallel world.[233] We see in these moments that reality has come to resemble the speculative, but what if we continued to use these speculative moments as a basis for understanding our present? How would this reimagining force us to rethink our current systems? Ultimately, my project seeks to understand the ways that the future forces us to reimagine the present.

The goal of my project has been twofold. First, it aims to center black storytelling and black storytellers in graphic novels and literary fiction. I began my dissertation with a white male content creator, not to focus on the white male perspective, but to speak to the limits of the white imagination in the deployment of black bodies and black futures. Black women, in particular, know that tropes created by the white imagination do not define their existence. Instead, my goal was to turn toward the works of Black content creators to explore how they imagine and reconfigure normative tropes that seek to placate their importance in society. This reimagining is the second goal of my project. *Nubians of Plutonia* begins the process of a real-time reclamation of Black narratives by Black authors. To start the process of reimagining, pushing against, and often dispelling the tropes that have followed Black women and girls for centuries. It calls attention to how Black creators see more than what tropes can dictate. Black authors can create new meanings and understandings around the production and dissemination of imagery regarding not only Black women and girls but Black survival.

Section 6.1: Looking Back, Looking Forward

The futures I discuss seem distant, but the truth is, temporally, the future is nearer than it appears and is always in the process of being made. The same way we are continually making

[233] Isiah Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 201), 219.

Figure 6.1: Michonne in *The Walking Dead* comic and Danai Gurira, the actress who played Michonne on the TV series

the past is the same way we continuously make the future. We see Octavia Butler imagine a future of greed, addiction, violence, and political zealotry. *Parable of the Sower*, written in 1993, envisioned an America that, in 2024, would be in national decline as the president touted "Make America Great Again." As I finish this project, our world resembles the bleak future Butler imagined, complete with a president who says he will "Make America Great Again" as well.[234] What was going on in 1993 to make Butler write with such clairvoyance? How was she able to write about the future with such accuracy?

In an interview, Butler states, "when I wrote [*Parable of the Sower*], the time was different. I was trying not to prophesize. Matter of fact, I was trying to give warning."[235] Butler

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[234] 'Make America Great Again' was the campaign slogan of the 45th president of the United States of America.

[235] Interview with Octavia Butler. Joshunda Sanders. https://inmotionmagazine.com/ac04/obutler.html. Accessed 2/19/2020.

goes on to say she researched World War II in preparation for writing the book, paying close attention to how a country goes fascist. She studied the past, the historical cycles, and used that to speculate on the future. Butler is not the first author to do this, as the science fiction genre is an amalgamation of science, history, and speculation. Her historical accuracy should make us take pause, though, not only because of her efficiency but because of her survivors and how they survive. Black girls live and act as an ideological counter to the chaos that envelops Butler's speculative future. *The survival of Blackness provides hope to Black readers.* The story is universal while also showing that futures can be Black, female, young, and sophisticated.

Section 6.2: Nubians of Plutonia, the Remix

This project was a massive undertaking, even as I narrowed my scope by centering the experiences of Black female bodies. I wrote a significant amount about Black girls in comics and graphic novels, but something I unknowingly did was center the work of adults. When Black adults write about Black girls, no matter how much it reflects the experiences of Black girls, it acts as an act of remembering. Black girls and Black girlhood in the future should not be dependent on Black women and Black men remembering, it should depend on Black girls responding to their lived experiences in real-time. Narratives about Black girls by Black girls become just as necessary as Black women creating worlds for Black women to exist. To complete this project without acknowledging the importance of Black girls to Black girls' futures would be a misstep. The act of remembering is important; being able to recall moments of personal youth and use them in speculative writing is imperative, but it is equally essential to allow the voices of these marginalized groups to speak for themselves. You run the risk of Black content creators using Black girls to 'correct' the problems of their youth.

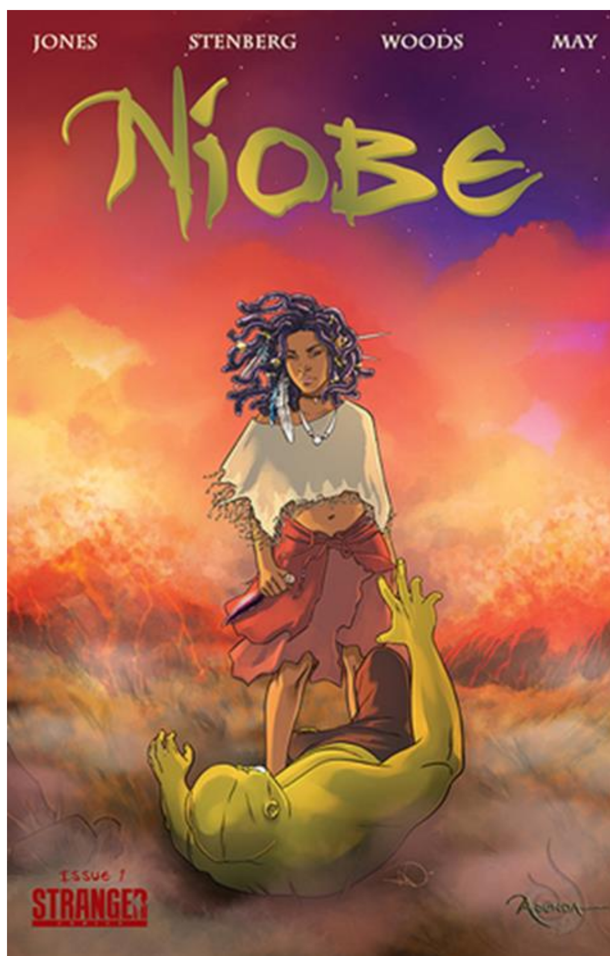

Figure 6.2: Cover Issue #1 of *Niobe*

The inability to find a Black girl comic book creator whose work is being published by more known comic book publishers reflects the limits of the genre and industry.[236] It shines a light on the absence of Black female characters in narratives by Black authors and draws attention to the fact that Black girls rarely control their narratives. On the 'Goodreads List of Black Female characters,' which focuses on the text where the main character is a Black woman or girl, there are a large number of texts written by Black women, but only one was written by a Black girl. Actress Amandala Stenberg's *Niobe* is the only comic on the list Stenberg and was a

[236] I only use comics from more known comic book publishing companies and imprints. There are black girls creating content in many areas.

child at the time it was written. She is now an adult. Futures imagined by Black girls are not included, which is frightening when considering the number of Black women and girls that read comic books daily.[237]

Calling attention to the way Black women and girls exists in the future is fruitful but also overwhelming. There is often the tendency to conflate Black girlhood with Black womanhood, and I admit that I fell into the trap when I began this project. This conflation results from an internalization of the falsehood that regulates Black femininity and the representation of Black femininity in popular culture. As the project evolved, I saw the importance of placing Black girls in a text with Black women. It is not a question of conflation but more a desire to speak to the circular existence of Black girlhood and Black womanhood. What my project has done is amplified black girls' role in the speculative future and how that manifests into Black womanhood. From there, I look at how Black women come to reimagine themselves. These bodies, at times, represent the dreams of what the authors thought they should do or how they should react to the world around them.

Black bodies become a projection not only of the dreams of Black creators but also the idea of Black futures, futures where Black bodies can rebel, create, defend, and amplify a reimagined mode of being. This exploration of freedom becomes an exploration of the meanings that become attached to Black girlhood and womanhood and how those are deployed and reimagined in speculative futures. The freedom that exists in these texts allows for a redefining of Black female identities. The freedoms the future provides works to facilitate shifts in representation, which ultimately continue the work of destabilizing harmful and exclusionary stereotypes regarding Black women, Black girls, and Black lives.

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[237] *Niobe* follows Niobe Ayutami, an orphaned half elf, on a quest to save the world of Asunda.

The inclusion of Black girlhood subsequently meant that other aspects of Black female identity were glossed over in favor of more specific elements of Black female representation. One of the things that was not adequately taken up in this project but will be included in subsequent work were queer Black women and girls; my project focuses on cis-gendered, heterosexual women. Similarly, to the inclusion of Black girlhood, there is an urgency in critiquing and centering Black queer women, Black transgender women, Black LGBTQ+ people, Black genderqueer people and Black gender non-conforming people in comics and graphic novels.

When dealing with such a new and unexplored topic, I spent more time troubling certain aspects of Black womanhood that are often centered in discussions and spent less time at the margins that exist within Black womanhood. The reality is, no project could ever completely unpack all that is Black womanhood, an idea that became more pressing as I completed this dissertation. While the work is not exhaustive, it is written to provide a rubric for elaboration. In other words, the margins that exist within black womanhood were not explicitly addressed or critiqued here; I hope that the work I do will become a blueprint of sorts for exploring all marginalized communities in comics; whether they be the Black community, queer communities, or other communities of color. I hope that this work continued to be built upon until there is and establish a field of study that incorporates all aspects of raised, gender, in sexuality in the exploration of comic books and graphic novels.

Comic books and graphic novels can provide the same commentary and depth as *Parable of the Sower*. Throughout this project, I sought to explore the potential of the comic book industry and the potential for Black girls and women to be represented differently within these speculative worlds. The entry back into comics and the speculative world comic book creators

began with *The Walking Dead*. I fell in love with the character Michonne, her strength, her skill, her presence, but she never felt like a complete character. She still does not feel complete. We learn that she was a mother and lawyer before the apocalypse, but she does not evolve, nor does she possess the layers that other characters in the comic have. When you consider how popular her role is, the lack of depth is jarring. The trouble behind her lack of development could lie in weak plot points, the uncertainty of the zombie future, the looming death, or it could be a result of Robert Kirkman, the comics creator.

I often think about how Michonne may have been depicted had her character been created by a Black woman, would she still wield her katana? Would she have been portrayed as the creator of chaos among the group of survivors? How would the survivors receive her? All of these things come to me each time I read my favorite comic. We will never know the answer to this, but what I know is that if we want Michonne to have the complexity of Lauren Olamina or Future Nwafor Chukmebuka, there needs to be more Octavia Butler's and Nnedi Okarafor's creating these futures. *Nubians of Plutonia* was never meant to be exhaustive. Black women and girls are far too complex to be generalized, to be watered down. This project is a peek into a world that is overwhelmingly white and male; these are the bodies that write (or not) Black women. Black authors and Black female characters have the ability to shed the limiting stereotypes placed on them; to push back on how Black women are represented. It is time to welcome Black women and girls into the future. It is time to reimagine how we are portrayed and to question normative tropes and stereotypes that are not "for us or by us." There is value in the Black perspectives on the future, Black authors are often able to see who has been left in the cracks of the narratives, and they pull them out to the front. When we speculate on the future, we should not question if Black girls and women survive in the future, we should be asking how.

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