NERDS OF COLOR ASSEMBLE: THE ROLE OF RACE AND ETHNCITY IN

FANDOM

A Thesis

by

SIMON SEBASTIAH WILLIAMS

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Approved by:

Co-chairs of Committee, Sarah Gatson
                          Joseph Jewell
Committee Member,   Corliss Outley
Head of Department,   Jane Sell

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ABSTRACT

With shows such as *Big Bang Theory* and the increased mainstreaming of San Diego Comic-con, now more than ever before, it is acceptable to be a "nerd". The question now becomes what efforts are being made to appeal to fans of color in traditional "nerd" activities, specifically comic books (this can include television shows and movies based on comic book characters), anime, and science fiction. Throughout the decades, there have been various attempts to have a discourse about the lack of diversity in nerd culture, both among its creators and characters from various properties considered beloved to nerds. Only, at the time of this writing, in recent years does there seem to be an increase among fans of color discussing these issues in the world at large, and not just in their own social group(s). This research will discover how minority fans feel about representation, or lack thereof, in the three above fandom. It will examine how minority fans feel about specific instants involving race and ethnicity in fandom from the past year. What I have discovered is that, issues of race are not discussed among the majority of fans and creators. Occasionally, when such issues are discussed there is an amount of hostility from white fans.

DEDICATION

To my mother, godfather and the late Dwayne McDuffie

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: MY JOURNEY THROUGH FANDOM

It is only for the last two years of my life that I have been able to wear the label of 'nerd' with pride. Growing up that was not the case, as I am sure it was not for many others. Now that 'nerd' is considered somewhat popular and many nerd properties and pastimes are becoming a part of mainstream culture that many of us can express own interests publicly without fear of ridicule. My own excursion through nerd culture and my struggle for a place in it is still ongoing. At the core of my journey, even when I did not actively know what it was I was becoming and identifying with, are the roles race and ethnicity play in fandom, the boundaries fans create, and how we interact with them. I believe explaining the experiences that have shaped me will also show the purpose of my research.

Identity Development

The two central themes of this chapter are identity and identity formation. Therefore, a definition of the terms and a discussion of their importance are necessary. *Webster's Dictionary* defines identity as "the individual characteristics by which a thing or person is recognized or known." Things such as style of dress, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation can be used to define a person's identity. A person can have many identities that are apart of them and often intersect. I currently have the identities of African American, male, nerd, heterosexual, and others I wish to keep private. Often, we place identities upon each other even when those identities may not truly fit the person. For

example, President Barack Obama, along with most Americans, identifies himself as African American, when in actuality he is biracial. The President says he self-identifies as African American because others have placed the identity and treatment that may come with it upon him (CBS News, 2009).

In identity theory, identity is "the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance," (Stets and Burke, 2000). I agree with this statement to a degree. What gives me pause is the notion of "expectations associated with that role and its performance" as I feel it could give way to negative characterizations and stereotypes. In addition, others can use it as a litmus test of sorts before a person can truly take on the identity and become a part of the group. Intersectionality between multiple identities can come into conflict with each other under this theory. If a person cannot fulfill all the expectations of one identity as it divergences with the expectations of another, is that person truly taking on that identity? Using my own voyage into the identity of nerd and how it intersects with my identity of African American I believe it to be true.   As it pertains to this research, those who have the identity of nerd take on the role, but may choose to reject some of negative expectations (social ineptitude, physical frailty, etc.) that non-nerds stereotype.

When discussing identity, the way that identity/identities develop need to have discussion as well. As a means to achieve this goal, I will examine Racial Identity Development Theory and Black Racial Identity Development. While both deal explicitly

with race, I believe each school of thought can be adapted to explain the development of most identities. Racial Identity Development Theory states that,

> a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group. . . racial identity development theory concerns the psychological implications of racial-group membership, that is belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential racial-group membership (Tatum, 1992).

I believe that most identities have some sort of belief system that evolve over time in reaction to perceived and real differences between different groups, i.e. Americans vs. Europeans, Sociologists vs. Engineers, etc. This theory is borne out in nerd culture as well. Even within the different subcultures of nerds, there are different belief systems that come about in reaction to each other. Anime fans may have a different set of beliefs than sci-fi fans, comic book fans may believe differently than video game fans, so on and so forth. The beliefs that I have seen through my exploration of nerd culture is that each group feels they are superior to other groups.

Black Racial Identity Development consists of five stages: Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment. Preencounter is when the African American has taken on many of the beliefs and value of the dominate white culture and try to distance themselves from other African Americans. The Encounter stage occurs when the individual has their first encounter with racism. Once they realize they cannot truly be a part of white culture, the person must then focus on their African American identity. This encounter leads to the Immersion/Emersion

stage. In this stage, the person begins to surround him or herself with visual symbols connected to blackness and actively avoid symbols of whiteness. The fourth stage, Internalization, involves the person becoming less militant or pro-black and becomes more accepting of white that are accepting of them. The final stage of Internalization-Commitment is where the person uses their sense of blackness as a springboard to address the concerns of African Americans as a whole (Tatum, 1992).

Examining my life, I realize that my experiences growing up fit perfectly within this framework, as I now find myself in the Internalization-Commitment stage. I do believe this framework can be applied to nerd identity as well as to African Americans. The Preencounter stage would be the person taking on the values of mainstream, non-nerd society. That would be things such as not watching cartoons or reading comic books after a certain age. The Encounter stage would be the person being labeled a nerd and being victimized for it despite trying to distance himself or herself from it. In the Immersion/Emersion stage, the person actively has visual symbols of nerd culture with them. They may read comic books in public, quote lines from various nerdy properties in casual conversation, and/or wear clothing emblazoned with images from their favorite nerd property. The Internalization stage will see the person continue their nerdy pursuits, yet also interact with non-nerds in a civil manner so long as the non-nerd is civil with them. The Internalization-Commitment stage will see the nerd use their identity for the betterment of nerds. That is the purpose of this thesis as I wish to improve nerd culture by increasing its diversity.

Social Construction of Nerd

When discussing nerd culture, we must first discuss how the identity of nerd has been constructed. Social construction is a theory that states that "there is nothing natural or normal about the world we inhabit, and that, rather, it consists of a series of conventions that are continually created by individuals who define situations and interact, albeit within broader contexts," (Forte, 2012). When discoursing about nerd culture or fandom, what that term means should be address. Fandom is demarcated as "increased specialization of interest, social organization of interest and material productivity," (Hills, 2002). To define it in simpler terms, fandom is the state or attitude of being a fan. An examination of any fandom, as any person or thing can have their own fandom not just geek culture, shows that they are religious in nature as defined by Emile Durkheim (though that may be considered blasphemous to some). In that fandom, especially nerd fandom has all the totems and symbols of all the major and minor religions of the world. With those totems and symbols, fans attach certain amounts of sacredness and profaneness to specific elements of their particular fandom (Durkheim, 1995). Some fans will have the same reverence for Batman, as a Buddhist will for the Buddha. The rented space for the convention is their house of worship, the characters and their creators the gods. The merchants as some type of priest because they take care of the sacred objects. For those few days of the convention all, the worshippers are able to be with those of a like mind as they discuss and express the love for their fandom. This reverence and the above mentioned persecution of nerds has led to nerd culture becoming a tight-knit group that is

wary of outsiders. Unfortunately, it seems outsiders are anyone who is not European American and male.

Throughout the years, the discourse surrounding fandom examines the way these groups are formed and interact with each other. When those who are apart of mainstream society examine nerd culture they often focus on images which reinforce the stereotypical vision of nerds. That of the bespectacled individual, obese or frail, socially inept and having one or numerous medical conditions. In addition to these attributes, the subjects are frequently European-American and male (Stanfill, 2012). The few times women are presented they are shown in the same manner, but more likely the focus will be on an attractive woman pretending to be a scantily clad character that are numerous in nerd culture. These repeated presenting of nerds as European-American and male lead many to believe that nerd culture or fandom is an exclusively whitespace. In a way it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy when the majority believe they are the majority and vocally resist any efforts towards change and diversity. To them whiteness is the norm and nothing should be done to change that lest everything they hold dear be destroyed.

Purpose, Definitions, and Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the way identities, particularly the racial identity and nerd identity, intersect and interact. By doing this, I believe that we can come to understand why there seems to be some levels of hostility when issues of race are discussed in nerd culture. To achieve this goal I believe that the best method to use is autoethnography. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that explores the researcher's personal experience and connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural,

political, and social meanings and understandings (Ngunjiri et. al., 2010). I believe autoethnography to be the correct method to use because while examine different sociological constructs caused me to remember my own experiences becoming a nerd and I feel a connection is able to be made.

Before examining my life and my transitions to nerd culture, I will first define some terms that will appear throughout the remaining parts of the chapter. The biggest definition is that of nerd or geek. I will use the terms interchangeably as I feel they are similar enough to do so. Nerd and geek as I define them is a person who has a great knowledge, adoration, and affinity for any particular thing. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on people who are nerds of comic books, anime, fantasy, and science fiction. Anime as I define it is any animation that is of Japanese origin. Fantasy as I believe it to be is a genre that deals with the realm of magic and medieval elements. Science fiction, or sci-fi, as I define it is a genre that deals with futuristic elements and technology, i.e. time travel, intergalactic travel, etc.

Early Life and First Encounters with Race

I suppose the best place to start is at the beginning. I was born in 1984, so I was able to view many of the cartoons and movies that my generation (nerd and non-nerd alike) view as nostalgic. I will not go into detail on every cartoon I watched, but they all (with one exception) fell into two camps in regards to race and ethnicity. These shows either had no minority characters or a few token characters, usually African American or Asian and/or female. In addition, in the shows with token characters were mainly stereotypes i.e.

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African Americans spoke in "jive talk[1]", Asians were geniuses and/or martial arts experts, etc. However, as a child I gave no thought to this as I was just enjoying the action or comedy in the shows.

Seeing, as there were so few African Americans in cartoons from the eighties, the ones that did appear I, often, latched on to, and they became my favorite characters on the shows. It did not matter what character traits they had, as long as the character was a hero and African American, or *sounded* African American, if the show featured non-human characters. Just getting to see people the same color as me was enough to make me happy. Going back and reviewing these shows has shown me that what I remember about them, and what actually happened in them, do not necessarily coincide. Still for the purposes of this paper, I will describe my feelings and memories at the time.

I will now give a brief discussion of 1980s nostalgia, its treatment of race and ethnicity, and the effect it had on me. I view '80s cartoons through the lens of nostalgia, may see them a bright, loud, thirty-minute toy commercials with a moral and/or Public Service Announcement tacked on at the end of the episode; long on style, yet short on plot. While this may be true, a number of people, me included, still hold them in high regard. The first of these cartoons I will examine is my favorite series, *Thundercats*. Premiering in nineteen eighty-five, *Thundercats* is the story of a group of humanoid felines (Lion-O, Tygra, Panthro, Cheetara, WilyKit, and WilyKat) forced to flee the destruction of their home world, Thundera, in a similar vein as Superman's escape from Krypton. Finding a

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[1] As I remember it jive talk was slang that was stereotyped to African Americans. Unfortunately, that involved some African American characters speaking in rhyme.

new home on the planet of Third Earth, the Thundercats seek to rebuild their society and defend the world from villains old (the mutants from the neighboring planet of Plun-Darr) and new (the evil wizard Mumm-Ra). I remember this from my childhood and after purchasing some of the DVDs in college.

While the series focused on the leader of the team Lion-O, who was quite literally a boy trapped in a man's body, my favorite of the series was and always will be Panthro. The oldest of the group, Panthro served as the strongest and most capable warrior. Although I did not note it at the time, Panthro was arguably the smartest member of the team as well, creating all of the weapons (except the mystical Sword of Omens), vehicles and devices the Thundercats used in their fight against evil. As I said earlier, of all the African American (sounding) characters, Panthro was my favorite simply because I thought he was African American. My belief was bolstered by the fact that Panthro was voiced by actor Earle Hyman, best known for his role as Grandfather Russell Huxtable on the popular eighties sitcom *The Cosby Show*. Despite his actual role as innovative technologist, it seemed Panthro's main role on the team was driving everyone around in the ThunderTank (the Thundercats main mode of transportation). None of this mattered to me as a child so long as I was able to watch Panthro battle the villain(s) (he did not usually defeat them, that honor went to Lion-O) and brandish his nunchaku[2]. The role Panthro occupied is one that I remember observing in other cartoons I watched in the 1980s.

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[2] A weapon that is two sticks connected by a short piece rope or chain. Made popular in the films of Bruce Lee.

The second series that I will discuss is *The Real Ghostbusters*. Premiering in 1986, *Real Ghostbusters* continues the adventures of the characters from the 1984 motion picture *Ghostbusters*. Growing up with the series one of my favorite characters was, again the only minority, Winston Zeddemore (portrayed by Ernie Hudson in the film and its sequel and voiced by Arsenio Hall in the cartoon). In my memory, Winston did not conform to the stereotypes of other black cartoon characters I mentioned earlier. Aside from an episode I remember of him playing in a ghostly baseball game, Winston was no more athletic than the other Ghostbusters. Yet in both movies and *The Real Ghostbusters* Winston was given little attention and character development compared to his compatriots Peter, Ray and Egon. Even in *Real Ghostbusters*, secondary characters Janine (their secretary) and ghost Slimer are giving more screen time and episodes devoted to them (Slimer was even giving his own spin-off series). Like Panthro, the majority of Winston's duties, when not helping capture wayward ghosts, involved driving the Ecto-1 (the Ghostbusters main mode of transportation).

From what I can recollect of eighties cartoons Panthro and Winston's role as team driver were not exclusive to these characters. On many shows consisting of a team, each member would have specific roles that would ultimately define their personality (scientist, fighter, weapons expert, etc.). Yet in most cases the role of driver, or pilot if the show took place in space, was relegated to the minority or woman of the team. In reference to Panthro and Winston, their position as superhero chauffeur is problematic in the fact that it recalls the role of servants, maids, etc., that were only available for African American actors in early Hollywood (Bogle, 2001). Fortunately, none of the African American

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cartoon characters of the 1980s degenerated to the levels of Stepin Fetchit, Mantan

Moreland or Sleep n' Eat[3].

As I noted earlier, many of the cartoons in the eighties had no minority characters

that I can remember. Three other cartoons that I enjoyed from the 1980s certainly fit that

role. Those three shows were *Transformers, He-Man and the Masters of the Universe,* and

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. All three shows went on to become multi-million dollar

franchises, spawning numerous comic books, video games, toys and live-action movies.

Yet only in the last ten years or so have minorities been included in the various cartoon

reboots of the three respective series. In *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,* there were two

Japanese characters, the Turtles teacher Master Splinter and their archenemy the Shredder.

However, from my memory, I did not think of either character as Asian. Because while

Splinter started out as an Asian man, the same accident that transformed the Turtles into

humanoids, mutated Splinter into an anthropomorphic rat, the role I remember him best.

In addition, the Shredder wore a mask throughout the series and had a voice that sounded

African American to me[4].

If one were to ask fans about the lack of minorities in the original cartoons, I

suspect that a common answer would that since the shows are fantasy and do not reflex the

real world it is alright that no minorities are present (this statement appears often when

issues of race and ethnicity are brought up in nerd culture). While it is true that these

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[3] These were three African American characters that were most popular in the 1930s and 1940s. The characters portrayed were most often extremely lazy, unintelligent, and docile some of the common stereotypes for African Americans at the time.

[4] Shredder was voiced by African American actor James Avery, best known for his role as Uncle Phil on *the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.*

series are fantasy, the question then becomes why "fantasy" is used as a justification and codeword for "whites-only" in nerd culture (Deeper in the Game, 2008). The idea of fantasy as a justification for the lack of minorities is what first spurred interest in studying issues of race and ethnicity in nerd culture. I first heard this idea through the website Race Fail '09. Race Fail came about in response to a science fiction author using the fantasy defense when they were questioned about the lack of minority characters in their work, even though the setting of their story was in a real country that has a large population of people of color. It is through this site and two other sites that came about around the same time, Racebending[5] and Racialicious[6] that I discovered there were other minority fans that had similar questions to my own when it came to issues of race in nerd culture. I believe the "fantasy defense" show the interplay between race and nerd culture. It does not occur to some fans that the two can and do interact, because in the minds of many fans nerd culture is exclusively a white space (Gatson and Reid 2012). If that were true, then it would be feasible for no minorities to be present in the culture itself and the media they enjoy. The responses I have heard are that discussing the issue of race is interjecting politics into nerd culture. Because these fans believe the media involved in nerd culture is merely entertainment, and bringing in politics ruins the space they have created. I do believe that the identities of nerd and minority can peacefully coexist, as I claim both identities and have meet others that do as well.

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[5] A site that came about in 2010 in protest to the film *the Last Airbender*. Based on the cartoon of the same name it cast all white actors for the main characters. Even though they appear as people of color in the cartoon.
[6] A site that examines the intersection of race and pop culture.

Both *Transformers* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* take place on Earth, albeit an Earth that contains sentient alien robots that transform into vehicles and anthropomorphic turtles who perform martial arts and have a constant craving for pizza respectively. *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* is fantasy as defined in literature, as it takes place in an alternate dimension full of magic and supernatural events (Encarta Dictionary). To the best of my recollection, while the show was filled with a talking tiger, mermen and a villain with a skull for a face, there were no minorities at all.

Reminiscing, it seems strange that I gave no thought to the lack of minorities in the cartoons I watched, because I was simultaneously familiar with everyday racism, and had already seen *Shaka Zulu*[7], *Malcolm X*[8], and *the Ernest Green story*[9]. Those movies combined with overheard conversations from my family led me to believe that most, not all, European Americans (as I had many European American friends) were racist and actively worked to oppress African Americans, which also led to a deep sense of Afrocentric pride in me. Despite this, I gave no thought at the time to media literacy, I was only interested in watching the shows and collecting the toys. I suppose it was due to at the time what I knew of racism was only in the overt sense (racial slurs, lynching, etc.). In addition, given the popularity of *The Cosby Show* at the time, I am now curious as to whether there was any effort to make cartoons with more diversity. *The Cosby Show* demonstrated that a show with a cast of minorities could be popular with people of all

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[7] The 1986 television miniseries dealt with the life of the titular African king, his rise to power, and ultimate downfall at the hands of the British Empire.
[8] The 1992 Spike Lee film details the life, activism, and death of the Civil Rights leader.
[9] The 1993 film details the story of the "Little Rock Nine", a group of African American high school student, and their experience of integrating, previously all-white, Central High School in Little Rock, AR.

races so long as the show is written well enough and has likable characters[10]. If such a formula could work in primetime, why could it not work on Saturday mornings and weekday afternoons?

The lack of minorities in cartoons of the eighties was not due to overt racism I believe, but still came about due to institutional and systemic racism in the entertainment industry (Feagin, 2006). Systemic racism is "extensive discriminatory habits and exploitative actions, and numerous racist institutions," (Chou, 2008). Institutional racism consists of "pervasive discrimination and segregation in employment, education, and housing…" (Feagin, 2006). The problem in this institutional and systemic racism is that if there are few minorities in the entertainment industry, there is little incentive to include them in the media produced. I suppose it is because writers and producers use their own life experiences in the creation process. If they have little to no familiarity with people of other races and ethnicities, then minorities will not be present or if they are, it will only be the basest of stereotypes. I believe this is true, however a majority of the world's media is created by white people and some features people of other races.

Growing older, the nineteen-eighties gave way to the nineteen-nineties. From what I recollect, the children's shows of the nineties were similar to those in the eighties in regards to the representation of race and ethnicity. The four, arguably, most popular children's shows of the nineties in the eyes of most nerds were *Batman: The Animated Series, X-Men: The Animated Series, Spider-Man: The Animated Series* and *Mighty*

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[10] While *the Cosby Show* is the first show I remember, there were other shows that existed in the 1970s. Shows such as *Good Times*, *Sanford & Son*, and *the Jeffersons* were very popular and starred African Americans.

Morphin Power Rangers. These four shows in addition to other children's programming did away with the morals and PSAs from a decade ago and instead chose place the center of attention strictly on the action or comedy. Around this, time my relationship to African American characters began to change somewhat. I still did not question the lack of diversity on these four shows or how the minority characters were portrayed. However, simply being African American no longer met the criterion for being my favorite character. I have faint memories of Superman, Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk and X-Men having cartoons in the eighties. However, it was at this time that I had some of my first clear experiences with the characters from Marvel and DC comics.

I was already somewhat familiar with the character of Batman thanks to the nineteen eighty-nine motion picture and reruns of the nineteen sixties television series. However, I developed a true admiration for the character (an admiration that has waned in recent years) due to *Batman: The Animated Series* premiering in nineteen ninety-two. The show is regarded by many as one of the greatest cartoons ever and one of the best adaptations of the character. The Dark Knight's battles against crime in Gotham City, both petty and involving his infamous rogues' gallery were the focus of the show. In addition to this, the psychology motivations of the villains and Batman himself were examined, something that had not been done outside of the comics and was a first for children's cartoons of any kind. I have memories of rushing home every day after school to follow the adventures of the Caped Crusader and yet again was not concerned with the lack of minorities on the show. In fact, most of the time I was more distressed about Batman's sidekick Robin not being present in many of the episodes. It seemed this Gotham, aside

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from Lucius Fox, a Latina police officer and one-episode characters, is a city almost devoid of minorities. In a city full of homicidal clowns, plant women and crocodile men; nearly no people of color seems strange.

The children's show I enjoyed the most in the nineties was *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* detailed the lives of five "teenagers with attitude", as we were told in the opening credits, which were given the power to transform into brightly colored superheroes in order to fight the evil witch Rita Repulsa and her legion of monsters. *Power Rangers*, as most fans call it and every subsequent series in the franchise was an adaptation of the long-running Japanese children's franchise *Super Sentai* (specifically *Kyōryū Sentai Zyuranger* for *Mighty Morphin*). In this case, battle scenes used the original Japanese footage while the rest of the episode was shot using American actors.

In its early popularity, Power Rangers was very controversial as many parents felt the show was too violent (Associated Press, 1994). I recollect having conversations with my fourth grade teacher during recess, as I believed other shows at the time such as Batman and X-Men were more brutal. This was the first instance of me defending something I liked from those that did not understand it, a practice many nerds engage in on a regular basis. Issues of race also took place, but were not discussed in great detail (Everett, 1996). The five rangers were identified by the color they wore, as both superheroes and civilians. There was Zack (black ranger), Kimberly (pink ranger), Billy (blue ranger), Trini (yellow ranger) and Jason (red ranger). The incident that people talked about was that Zack was African American and Trini was Asian American. There was

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enough of a controversy about this that in the middle of the second season, when the two actors that played these characters left the show, the new black ranger was an Asian American boy and the new yellow ranger was an African American girl. It led to all future series in the franchise (except for one) to not cast African or Asian Americans as the black or yellow ranger, if there was one in the series. Although there was a similar example of poor costuming choices with the character Tommy. Tommy was added in the middle of the first season as an adversary (under mind control) than becoming an ally as the green ranger. In later seasons, he was made the leader (as the white ranger) and then red ranger until his departure. It was either shortly before or after becoming the red ranger that Tommy was revealed to be Native American.

The issue of race that was not discussed was the characterization of the main cast. For the sake of full disclosure, all the rangers were stereotypes to varying degrees. Jason was the jock; Billy was the nerd, Kimberly the valley girl, Zack the jokester and Trini the shy friend. To the show's credit as it went along the rangers were shown to be deeper than they first appeared and were allowed to grow and develop. The problem is that for Zack and Trini, in addition to the aforementioned costume controversy, there characters played on the stereotypes about their respective races that have been ubiquitous in Hollywood.

While all the rangers grew to be proficient fighters, early episodes showed Jason, Zack and Trini to be the martial artists of the group. Although Jason and Zack were shown doing other things (Zack will be discussed in a moment), aside from dealing with her Acrophobia (fear of heights), all the episodes I remember that focused on Trini involved martial arts. In addition, while not explicitly stereotyped as the "smart Asian" Trini was

the only member of the team who could decipher Billy's 'technobabble' and frequently translated for the benefit of the other rangers. This, in addition to some martial arts films I once watched while visiting my father (who ironically would not let my little brothers watch Power Rangers), helped to bolster my belief at the time that all Asian were experts at karate (the blanket term for martial arts at the time). I had no Asian classmates or friends to repudiate this credence.

Reviewing the series again, the worst of the stereotypes on *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* came in the form of the character Zack, the black ranger. What I remember most his constant dancing, in most light-hearted scenes. It was so much so that he even created his own fighting style that combines hip-hop dance moves with Kung Fu. I do not remember why, but I defended the character when my older cousins would tease me for liking Power Rangers. I suppose it was merely because I enjoyed the show and wanted to defend all aspects of it. In addition to the dancing problem, was the portrayal of Zack's fears. Zack possessed a fear of snakes and bugs, while common phobias his reaction when presented with the objects of his terror were exaggerated almost to the point of coonishness[11] (Bogle, 2001). I recall in two specific episodes that dealt with the rangers concurring their fears only Zack reacted in such a 'comical' manner.

I will address one final thought I have regarding *Mighty Morphing Power Rangers*. As a child, and still today, I was unsure of the race of Jason the red ranger. He appeared as if he could be Asian or at least multiracial. However, due to the fact that he was the leader

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[11] The term coon came about in the 1800s. It was a stereotype that portrayed African Americans as lazy, easily frightened, unintelligent, and buffoons (Bogle, 2001).

I merely assumed he was European American. This is because at that point in my life all the superhero teams I was familiar with were lead, if not by an intergalactic being, by a European American. So I simply made him European American whether Jason truly was or not. This plays in the notion of "whiteness as default" (Sue, 2004) and those in charge could not be people of color. Traditionally in all seasons of Power Ranger, the red ranger has been the leader of the team. Fortunately, in later seasons, the position of red ranger has been held by minorities and for that, I am appreciative to the producers of Power Rangers for allowing children of color to be able to see someone who resembles them in a leadership position (the reason for this will be discussed later).

X-Men: the Animated Series and *Spider-Man: the Animated Series* were mentioned early; however, instead of discussing both shows separately I will converse about them as part of the block of cartoons featuring Marvel comic characters. During the entirety of the nineties Marvel comics had what I refer to as the golden age of Marvel animation, as they had many cartoons on at the same time that were popular to varying degrees. In addition to Spider-Man and the X-Men, there were cartoons based on Iron Man, the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, the Silver Surfer, and the Avengers. It was through these cartoons that I became aware of the Marvel universe. I knew of Spider-Man and the Hulk, but did not know they existed in the same universe with other heroes. My love of these cartoons is what led me, later in life when I could afford to buy them, to begin reading the comic books they were adapted from. The same can be said of DC comics, with the cartoons *Batman*, *Superman* and *Justice League*, although I am admittedly a bigger fan of Marvel than DC.

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In addition to fostering my love of Marvel comics, the Marvel cartoons of the nineties exposed me to the knowledge that black superheroes existed. I will say black in this section, as opposed to African American, because the characters Black Panther (who I first discovered in episode twenty of *Fantastic Four*) and Blade (*Spider-Man* episode twenty-two) are not American. At that point, in time it never crossed my mind that superheroes were anything but European American. When I first saw the character of Storm in *X-Men: the Animated Series*, it not only began my love for the character but also caused me to wonder if other black characters existed. Thankfully, I found out they did thanks to the other Marvel cartoons. Although, with the exception of X-Men, Avengers and Iron Man, the only time black superheroes appeared were guest starring in an episode. However, those episodes are the ones that retain the fondest memories of their respective shows. I was just amazed and appreciative to see superheroes that resembled me. While I was and am a fan of characters such as Superman and Spider-Man, I never identified with them. Due to characters such as Black Panther, War Machine and Bishop, I began to believe that a kid with dark skin and African features could save the world as well (there was just the problem of not having superpowers, martial arts training or access to a high-tech suit of armor). A more detailed discussion of black superheroes will take place in a subsequent article.

Looking back, I wish the cartoons I grew up had been more diverse. I believe the cartoons of today also suffer from a lack of diversity. Sadly, it seems that the cartoons of today that are beloved by young and old nerds alike such as *Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes*, *The Super Hero Squad Show* and *Young Justice* are more diverse than the comic

books they are adapted from. Even then, those shows only have one or two minority

heroes as part of the main cast. I do not know why such a void of color in children's'

programming (at least that which is adored by older nerds such as myself), nor do I want to

speculate as to the thoughts of the writers and producers of these shows. However, the

lack of diversity is problematic and must be rectified not only for the sake of minority

children, but for European American children as well. The media is a teaching tool that

defines the norms and values of a society. Children learn both consciously and

subconsciously about the world around them and how to interact with it (Cortes, 2000).

I feel the lack of diversity in children's media does a disservice to children of color.

While they can enjoy the programs, they watch they can never truly identify with a hero

that does not look like them. While a child may idolize Captain America or Superman and

try to emulate the values they represent, society and sometimes their own peers will remind

them they cannot be them (Goldman, 2010). For example, a little girl may love Superman

but she cannot be him as he is male but she can be Supergirl (Superman's teenage cousin).

An African American boy may love Iron Man but cannot be him as the man in the armor is

European American; however, he can be War Machine, Iron Man's African American

sidekick, although I do not believe, many children want to voluntarily pretend to be the

sidekick.   I remember as child always pretending to be Spider-Man. I could image myself

crawling up walls and swinging on webs as he did (which I would not mind being able to

do today) but knew I could never truly be Spider-Man as the man behind the mask, Peter

Parker, was European American. Children of color should be able to see a hero(es) that

resemble their skin tone and life experiences to add to their sense of self-worth. It would

be a mistake to believe a child's entire identity and self-esteem should come from fictional characters, however I believe seeing a person similar to you in positive roles can only add to what should be coming from parents and other authority figures in the child's life. Children of all races should see heroes of all races interacting together positively as an example of proper race relations.

Middle School and Identity Conflict

In the fifth grade, I had my first experience of my identities of nerd and African American not meshing in the minds of others. As stated at the beginning of the article I was not able to take pride in being a nerd. I do not consider myself particularly smart at the time (I was not very good at math or spelling) but apparently, my classmates did. At that time, paying attention in class, doing my schoolwork and predominantly wearing glasses classified me as a nerd, as these were the primary stereotypes of nerds at the time. Due to the popularity of the television sitcom *Family Matters*, I was called Steve Urkel, the show's most popular character, on a regular basis. Steve Urkel was the annoying next-door neighbor of the Winslow family, an African American family living in Chicago. He was the stereotypical nerd due to his glasses, extreme intelligence (inventing things no high school student should be able to) and social ineptitude. Seeing, as we were both African American, wore glasses and were smart my classmates must have felt the comparison was valid.

The thing that was most upsetting at this time was my African American classmates questioning my blackness. Because I paid attention in class, did my work and did not listen to rap music (though this was more not being allowed to listen) I was told that I was

"trying to act white." At the time, I felt I was the only person in the world who had this problem of being accused of not being authentically black. Discussions I had as an undergraduate, at a historically black college, has shown me that I was not alone in my suffering. I tried to defend myself saying that I was just as black as any of my classmate due to my skin and hair alone, to no avail. Luckily, I had teachers and my mother to convince me that there was nothing wrong with being a good student. So instead of trying to change my behavior to get the other kids to like me, I was more determined to make good grades. I felt the best revenge was to be successful and hoped they would not be (I have not really seen any of my old classmates since then so I do not know if my hopes happened).

All this leads me to wonder where this notion that one could not be African American and intelligent came from. I suppose it could be from some sort of internalized racism. That is "when socially stigmatized groups accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities, and societal place, which results in self-devaluation and the invalidation of others within the group," (Harper, 2006). Traditionally, African Americans (particularly males) have been stereotyped as being unintelligent and media in the nineties did very little to dispel the stereotype (Harper, 2006).

As I remember, shows such as *Martin*[12] and *the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*[13] did not show intelligent African American characters in a positive light, if they were present at all. For example, the character of Carlton Banks from *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* was shown as

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[12] The sitcom from comedian Martin Lawrence dealt with the life of DJ Martin Payne and his group of friends.
[13] This sitcom from rapper and actor Will Smith, dealt with the character of the same name. Smith played a teenager who moved from Philadelphia to live with his rich aunt and uncle in California.

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intelligent. Instead of being celebrated for that Carlton's intelligent, in addition to his admiration for singer Tom Jones and style of dress (sweaters, wing-tip shoes, etc.[14]), was a source of ridicule, particularly from his cousin Will (the focus of the show). This issue was at the forefront of an episode that has been clear in my memory since I first viewed it. The episode focused on Will and Carlton pledging in an African American fraternity. After the hazing period, during which Carlton was singled out for harsher treatment than the other pledges, he was still denied entry by the chapter president. The reason given was because the president considered Carlton to be a "sell out" or an African American who actively attempted to gain the favor of whites by acting like whites. Although it is the only time, I remember it happened in the series, Carlton's defense of his blackness and acknowledgement of the racism he faces, the same other African Americans face, was a source of inspiration to me. Because it showed me that, there was not one true definition of blackness and it is more than the stereotypes of what was portrayed at the time.

Also during this time, gangster rap was popular and artists such as Tupac, Biggie Smalls, Snoop Dog and Dr. Dre, as I remember and perceived them in their lyrics and music videos, were more concerned with smoking weed, drinking forty's (forty ounce bottles of malt liquor) and killing their rivals in the most gruesome manner possible than making a positive impact in the African American community. The message these artists conveyed was that being "hood" or "ghetto" was the only way to be and if you were not then you were not a true African American. Trying to better oneself through education did

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[14] As I remember, baggy clothes and sneakers or Timberland boots were considered authentic African American fashion.

not fit that mold and thus if one wanted to be smart it must mean they were trying to give up their blackness.

The sixth grade gave me my first exposure to anime. For this chapter I will use the American definition of anime, which is an animation originating from Japan (the Japanese definition is simply animation from any country). There has been anime on American television since the early nineteen-sixties with the shows *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer* (I will use the American names for all the anime shows mentioned). I remember waking up early one Saturday morning, about six AM, earlier than I ever had on a Saturday. I turned on the television and saw the series *Dragon Ball*. *Dragon Ball* is a broad interpretation of the Chinese story *Journey to the West*, which chronicles the adventures of super-strong, monkey-tailed hero Goku and friends on their quest for the Dragon Balls, mystic orbs that would grant one wish to the person who finds all seven. I was so enthralled by the first episode I saw I made it a point to wake up early on Saturday morning to watch it.

I also remember watching the shows *Dragon Ball Z* and *Samurai Pizza Cats* before catching the school bus and watching *Sailor Moon* whenever I had the day off from school. I was not aware of anime at the time, but I somehow knew these shows were not from America due to the quality of animation and story. When I found out these shows came from Japan, it began a fascination with the country. My love of anime (as well as a rekindling of my love for Thundercats and Voltron), and that of many other fans, grew in the late nineties with the programming block *Toonami* on the cable channel Cartoon Network. In addition to showing American action cartoons, *Toonami* premiered many anime shows (including the ones mentioned above) to a wider American audience, albeit in

a censored, watered down version from the original Japanese version. I again remember rushing home afterschool to watch all the shows and had some of the same feelings of excitement I had on Saturday mornings. As mentioned earlier, my love of anime led to a desire to learn about Japan. Unfortunately, some anime fans view anime and Japanese pop culture as a representation of Japan as a whole (Bricken, 2012). This comes from the exotification and fetishization of Asian culture (Napier, 2007). My love of anime has decreased in recent years due to my increased interest in American comic books. However when I have the time I will view episodes of a series online, as this is the way most fans today view anime due to the cancelation of Toonami in two thousand-eight and the reduction of anime available on network television.

My nerdy interests were somewhat dormant in high school as all of my free time was devoted to football. However, I did occasionally talk about anime with some of my classmates. Again, I had to defend my love of anime to those that did not understand. I went about defending myself the wrong way though by saying that there were fans that were older than me, so I could not have been that bad. This tactic of saying that one person or subculture of nerds is worse or more embarrassing than other has been used by nerds in the past (Bricken, 2011). As a marginalized group, the ostracizing of certain nerd cultures should not happen and also happens when issues of race and ethnicity are discussed. During my senior year of high school, I happened to discuss my interest in anime with a girl in my calculus class. Knowing we shared a similar interest, she invited me to attend A-Kon, a large anime convention in my hometown of Dallas Texas, with her family. Unfortunately, A-Kon was the same weekend as graduation and my sister, brother-

in-law and niece were visiting from Chicago so I could not be there. It did, however, introduce to the concepts of fan conventions and cosplay (the act of dressing up as your favorite character at conventions devoted to nerd culture), ideas I had not heard of at this point. I have still not attended A-Kon, for reasons that will be discussed later, but still hope to be present one day.

College and Formation of Nerd Identity

My freshman year of college I attended the University of Texas at San Antonio, where my nerdy interests were once again taken up. Since I could now make up my own schedule, I was once again able to watch *Toonami* in the afternoons and Saturday morning cartoons. Now that I could stay up later, I began watching *Adult Swim*, which increased my love of anime. *Adult Swim* is a block of programming that airs late night on Cartoon Network that features American cartoons and anime that are meant for an older audience than Cartoon Network's daytime programs. At that time, I joined an anime club on campus and was able to see shows, both animated and live-action that had not been shown in American. So I was introduced to the idea of watching foreign shows in their original language with English subtitles (my preferred method of viewing foreign media). Around this time, I began becoming more interested in issues of race and ethnicity, due to the fact that I was one of the few African Americans on campus and the only one in the anime club.

The summer of my freshmen year I had my first experience with internet fandom and the boundaries they entail (Lamont, 1999). Around this time, I joined a message board for the video game *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, a website that no longer exists.

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In addition to discussing the game, there were sections devoted to anime and comic books. Upon joining the site, I was warmly received by members of the site. By sharing a similar interest, I was able to cross the social boundary and be giving group membership (Lamont, 1994). One day I decided to start a topic about the lack of minorities in anime. My question apparently violated the moral boundaries (Lamont, 1994) put in place by the other members of the site due the response I received. The response to my topic was immediate and hostile. Members were saying things such as what I was saying was not true and that because anime is Japanese and there are no African Americans or Latinos in Japan I should not expect to see minorities. I agree with the second point to a degree if a show takes place in Tokyo or feudal Japan, however anime such as *Cowboy Bebop* and *Samurai Champloo* incorporate elements of jazz and hip-hop respectively, two genres of African American music. If writers and animators can integrate, portions of African American culture why not have them in the shows themselves if they take place in the future or another country?

The thing that disturbed me most was one member suggested I place a picture of actors Laurence Fishburne or Samuel L. Jackson in the corner of the television screen while watching anime in order to see more minorities. I stopped posting on the topic and the message board altogether shortly afterwards. Apparently, issues of race were beyond the boundary of what was acceptable on a message board dedicated to a video game about buxom women in skimpy bikinis playing volleyball. My punishment for violating this boundary was the hostility and bullying I received (Lamont, 1999). I have seen this hostility used in other websites consecrated to nerd culture or one of its subcultures, unless the site deals with issues of diversity in nerd culture and even there is no guarantee that the

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hostility will not be there. The hostility and bullying is used as a scheme to silence those

who encroach upon the set boundaries.

My sophomore year I transferred to Prairie View A&M University, a historically

black college. Due to my poor performance as a freshman, I devoted myself to my studies

and spent little time with my nerdy activities. I watched the few anime DVDs I owned and

played video games (the cable in the campus apartments went out frequently), but did

nothing else. There was no campus clubs allocated to anime or nerd culture and I did not

seek out other nerds. At this point being a nerd was still unacceptable, although I was

more open with my love of anime. I still remember the looks of ridicule when I walked

around campus with a shirt emblazoned with *Dragon Ball Z* characters.

The spring semester of my senior year (2007) saw the release of the anime *Afro*

Samurai. Based on a manga (Japanese comic) of the same name, *Afro Samurai* tells the

story of a black samurai named Afro (voiced by actor Samuel L. Jackson) and his quest to

avenge the death of his father in a futuristic yet feudal Japan. When I first heard the about

series I was very excited as this would be the first time a dark-skinned character would be

the star of an anime. Viewing the show, I began developing a critical eye and was troubled

by some elements of the show. Firstly, I was surprised, but not disturbed, by the amount of

violence in the first episode alone. The level of blood and dismemberment in the show

was unlike anything that had been shown on network television. The most problematic

portion of the show was the character of Ninja Ninja (also voiced by Jackson). Ninja Ninja

was Afro's subconscious given physical form, albeit imaginary. Supposedly, the opposite

personality of Afro, being the antithesis made the character the grossest of stereotypes

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about African American. The character was part coon and part buck[15] (Bogle, 2001),

choosing to run from danger and try to convince Afro to do the same and then trying to

induce Afro to sleep with a woman he had just met. The character was loud, buffoonish

and added nothing to the overall story. I so despised the character that I felt no remorse

over his ultimate sacrifice to protect Afro in the final episode, something I could never say

about a character that was a protagonist.

Excelling in Prairie View's sociology department led me to be noticed and

ultimately accepted into the graduate program of the sociology department at Texas A&M

University. It is here, after talking with classmates and professors that I let my nerdy

interests expanded beyond anime. As I became more interested in nerd culture, I found

more internet spaces devoted to geeks. Around this time, it was becoming more acceptable

to be a nerd.   I also began examining the role race and ethnicity played in nerd culture and

fandom.

Now, when not reading and/or writing for class, I spend most of my time on

internet sites devoted to nerd culture catching up on the latest news in the world of comics,

sci-fi and anime. There are three specific days of the week that are important to nerds that

I have familiarized myself with. Tuesdays are the release of new DVDs and manga,

Wednesdays are the release of new comic books and Fridays are the premieres of movies

and video games. Because new comic books are released every week, as opposed to

movies and manga, Wednesday has become the most important day of the week for me.

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[15] The buck is a stereotype that claims African American men are hypersexual and seek sexual gratification at
all cost, especially with white women.

On Wednesdays, I do some schoolwork and/or surf the internet, then around noon I catch the bus to go to my LCS (local comic shop). I go at this time to guarantee I get first pick of the new comics. Making my way past the racks of older comics, I head to the back wall, which houses the new releases. After picking out what I and what I can afford (this will be discussed in a moment) I make my way to the front. Many times when I go to my LCS I am the only customer there and I never seen another African American. When I do see other customers they are roughly in their twenties, male and European American, the supposed majority of nerds. I have built somewhat of a rapport with the owner, a Latina woman, and if there are no customers in line behind me, we chat a bit about the world of comics. She is aware of my research, but we have not had any discussions about race and ethnicity in comics. Once my comics are paid for I usually head back to my apartment, unless I have work or a meeting to go to, and catch up with the latest adventures of my favorite heroes.

I brought my first manga in 2008 with *Dragon Ball* volume one and my first comic book in 2011 with *Black Panther: The Man without Fear*. Those two purchases began my particular comic book and manga collections. They have also shown the role socioeconomic status plays in nerd culture. One can be a part of nerd culture simply through online participation, then again if one does not have access to a computer let alone internet access they cannot. However to achieve what Susan Napier calls subcultural capital that is "the knowledge and expertise that one gains about the object of one's enthusiasm that allows one not only to feel comfortable with other like-minded fans, but also to gain status among fellow enthusiasts," (Napier, pg. 150) one must be able to

purchase the materials. To obtain subcultural capital a person has to at least be middle class.

A volume of manga costs about ten dollars apiece, I currently have over a thousand dollars' worth in my apartment spanning three series (luckily, I was able to buy some used copies). A twenty-page comic cost between three and four dollars. On average, I spend about fourteen dollars a week on comics, although I have seen other spend over thirty dollars in one purchase. When I was between jobs for a time I found myself selling old textbooks and DVDs, I no longer wanted in order to buy comic books. Even now, I check my finances before procuring new comic books and have had to pass up on certain comics due to price. For a child on any race who has a parent(s) working multiple jobs simply to provide basic necessities they will not be able to spare three to four dollars a week for a luxury item like comic books. Class inequity affects minorities to a larger degree than European Americans (King, 1988), so poor and working class minorities cannot gain subcultural capital and participate in nerd culture.

Conclusion: Marvel, My Universe?

In conclusion, my voyage into world of nerd culture has been a long one. As I stated at, for first time I can proudly say to the world that I am a nerd. Sadly, even though I can say that, my desire to see others that look like me and my classmates has been met with hostility. I can be a part of the culture so long as I do not mention issues of race and ethnicity. My hope is that my research, my voice and the voice of others who wish to see more diversity in nerd culture will finally bring about change. Fans and creators such as the late Dwayne McDuffie have also spoken out regularly about the lack of diversity in

comics and the reaction of European American fans whenever it is included, no matter how

miniscule the amount[16]. Other critical race scholars such as Jeffery Brown, Adilifu Nama,

and William Foster have examined the representation of Africans and African Americans

in comic books. I will continue upon their discourse in future writings and the next

chapter. My journey into nerd culture has led me to question the way minority characters

are treated and perceived by white creators and fans. I will examine this issue explicitly in

my next chapter dealing with Marvel Comics. I will focus on their first minority hero the

Black Panther as I argue that his treatment can be applied to all minority superhero

characters.

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[16] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u16sKK-1oLQ In this video, the late Dwayne McDuffie discusses his experience as a black writer dealing with the expectations of white fans.

CHAPTER II

MARVEL, MY UNIVERSE? EXPLORING THE IDENTITY ATTACHMENT OF A

BLACK NERD TO MARVEL'S AFRICAN KING

My journey through nerd culture has led me to question issues of race and ethnicity. My focus at this time has been on comic books. Comic books have been a part of American popular culture since the 1930s; originally thought of as a children's medium, it has become more acceptable in recent years for readers of all ages to enjoy comic books (Malewitz, 2008). Comic book genres range from horror, comedy, romance, science fiction, crime drama/detective, and drama. In this country, the most popular genre of comic book is the superhero genre (Duncan & Smith, 2009). That is where characters with superhuman abilities, either natural (through evolutionary mutation possible in the comic book universe), magical, or through technological means, defend their respective city, country, and/or world from forces determined to rule the world, or cause mayhem. Some heroes work alone, some as a part of a group, and/or occasionally team-up with other heroes. Many people believe superheroes are the modern day equivalent of mythology, because of the complexity of the characters, struggles they go through, and overcoming of their personal flaws (Winterbach, 2006). With the popularity of superheroes, not only in comic books but also in movies and television, it is necessary to examine their portrayal and treatment of those not in the mainstream society such as minorities and homosexuals. This is because popular culture often illustrates and helps to shape mainstream society's views on social issues.

Herein, I will focus on one comic book company, Marvel. The reason this company is the focus of this discussion is because it is one of the most famous comic book companies in the world and thus has the larger fanbase and worldwide appeal than other independent comic book publishers (CBR News Team, 2012). The second reason is that I am a bigger fan of Marvel than any other comic book publisher (including their chief rival DC comics) and possess more of their works to analyze. Because I have grown up as a fan of Marvel comics and its characters, I feel better equipped to analyze their work as both a fan and through the critical eye of a scholar. In addition, I will not focus merely on the comic books I own (print and digital), but also on television and motion pictures (both animated and live-action). This is because even though comic book reading is becoming a more popular pastime, many people only know of these superhero characters through the above-mentioned mediums. They reach a wider audience than those who would go to a bookstore or comic shop to purchase comic books. Popular as I define it means a character has had his or her own solo comic book, animated series, and/or movie or, barring that, featured prominently in a series.

There are numerous popular African/African American superheroes within the Marvel universe. However, they are not as popular or well-known as European American counterparts such as Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, Iron Man or Wolverine. Using the definition of popular explained above, Marvel's most popular Black superheroes are Black Panther, Blade, the Falcon, Misty Knight, Power Man/Luke Cage, Storm, War Machine, and Monica Rambeau (aka Captain Marvel/Photon/Pulsar). While this is a small list compared to the number of white characters, it is gargantuan compared to the number of

Latinos, Asians, Arabs, and Native Americans that exist in Marvel (this is true for comics in general though). Thus, this chapter will examine the character of Black Panther and how he has influenced me. I focus on this character because out of all of Marvel's Black superheroes, he is one of the most popular and again because I own media that features this character it is to this character that I am mostly deeply connected as a fan at this stage of my life and analytical career. More importantly, the early history, presentation and reception from fans demonstrate the role race and ethnicity plays within comic book culture.

Purpose and Methods

For the purposes of this chapter, I will examine the African superhero Black Panther, specifically discussing whom his creators were, his origin stories, his popularity compared to European American heroes, and how audiences perceive him. When examining the character of Black Panther I will use the two methods of participant observation and content analysis. Participant observation is defined as "the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities," (Kawulich, 2005). I use autoethnographically-grounded participant observation to learn how fans relate to the character of Black Panther and if any issues of race are present. I am a participant in comic book and nerd culture, only now I will apply a critical eye to the culture I identify myself as a member. To achieve this goal I examined and participated in two websites that are devoted to geek culture or one of its subcultures and which I visit on a daily basis. The two websites were *Comics Alliance* and *Topless Robot*.

Comics Alliance is a site that is owned by America Online, which focuses on comic books of all kinds (not just Marvel) and related materials, i.e. movies, cartoons, and merchandise. The site also explores and celebrates content created by fans. I chose this website for the chapter because, in addition to a somewhat diverse staff (both in terms of race and gender), *Comics Alliance* regularly discusses issues of race and gender in the world of comic books. Also, as mentioned in the previous chapter, when these issues are discoursed somewhat of a backlash occurs with readers of the site.

Topless Robot is a blog owned by Village Voice Media Holdings and edited by one Rob Bricken, a European-American man. This particular website focuses on nerd culture in general and all its subcultures (comics, video games, sci-fi, etc.). I chose *Topless Robot* for this chapter, because it represents the sophomoric nature that is typical of many nerd culture websites and the stereotypical view of nerds. Also, as most of the site's consistent commenter's identify themselves as European or European-American, the few times issues of race are discussed the indifference and/or hostility from fans is ever present.

Another way I engaged in participant observation was through the use of social media and having discussions with creators. During the summer of 2012 I found myself engaging Marvel employees Dan Slott (current writer of *Amazing Spider-Man*) and Ben J. Morse (This Week in Marvel podcast) on social media, specifically Twitter, about issues of race in their comics[17]. Their responses to me were indicated their view that story is more

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[17] https://twitter.com/simonsebs/status/219080709007097857 On Twitter I questioned the introduction of another white, male character in a recent storyline in *Amazing Spider-Man*.

important than the racial make-up of the comics[18]. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Texas A & M University. Because this study is dealing in part with publicly accessible internet websites, and with much unobtrusive normal participant observation of my everyday lift, it was exempt from full board review.

The reactions I have received can be explained as color-blind racism. In the text *Racism Without Racist*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva discusses the ways in which racism still exists in America even though the overt racism of the past is no longer around. What Bonilla-Silva describes as color-blind racism, "… explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics," (Bonilla-Silva pg.2). The idea of color-blind racism came about after the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s. Because at this point in time racists and racism was seen as an unacceptable trait to have. So many whites could no longer actively demonstration their racism in public without some sort of reprisal. In this way, color-blind racism is a way for whites to express their views about race without using overtly racist language.

The example Bonilla-Silva provides that is most apropos to the conversation I participated in is that of meritocracy as a defense for white privilege (Bonilla-Silva pg. 32). What I have been told is that the best characters receive their own solo titles and race is not considered in the decision[19]. As I have made known, most often those best characters are white. I have inquired as to why such a distinction is taking place, but at the time of this writing, I have not received an answer. I truly believe if the merit of characters was all that

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[18] https://twitter.com/DanSlott/status/221733142308978688 Current Spider-Man writer Dan Slott responded to me that characters that can sell a book get solo comic books.
[19] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUjMrSENBfM This is a YouTube video I made in response to Ben J. Morse and I also discussed my feelings about issues of race in comics.

was being judged we would see a more equal balance between white and non-white characters in Marvel and the comic book industry as a whole. The problem with the idea of meritocracy is that it ignores the discrimination that existed in the past, and still exists today (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). It also fails to take into account that early in America's history (some would argue it still continues today) the opportunities to gain merit such as education and wealth accumulation were largely denied to people of color.

The second method that I used is content analysis. Content analysis is described as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages," (Stemler, 2001). The content that I analyzed is Marvel media, comic books and animation, starring or featuring Black Panther that comes from my personal collection and material from the Evans library of Texas A&M University. I feel content analysis is appropriate to use because while it is important to learn how fans feel about the character, we must also learn if the way the character is portrayed influences fan opinion. To accomplish this objective the media Black Panther is presented in must be examined.

Marvel History: The Foundation of the House of Ideas

Before discussing Black Panther, a brief history of Marvel comics is warranted. Marvel comics originally began in 1939 as *Timely Publications*.   Around this time, some of Marvel's oldest characters Captain America, the Human Torch, and Namor the Sub-Mariner were created, characters that still exist and are popular today[20]. In the 1950's

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[20] Although the Human Torch that is best known today is the character Johnny Storm of *the Fantastic Four*. The original Human Torch was an android.

Timely Publications transitioned into *Atlas Comics*. During this time, the focus shifted

away from superheroes and emphasized other genres of comics. Chief among those genres

were westerns, romance, and comedy. Marvel comics as we know it today began in 1961.

In the sixties Marvel created many of their iconic characters and superhero teams.

Characters such as Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, and the Fantastic Four proved to be

very popular with fans. The popularity of these characters was due to the fact, that unlike

other superheroes of the time, Marvel characters had problems in both their superhero and

civilian life, thus they felt more relatable to readers (DeFalco et al, 2008). Ask the average

person who does not read comic books to name Marvel superheroes and the answer will

most likely be Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, X-Men[21] (specifically Wolverine), and/or

the Incredible Hulk all European Americans (with the exception of Wolverine who is

Canadian).

History of the Black Panther

Marvel comics' first, and arguably most popular, black superhero is the Black

Panther (T'Challa) ruler of the fictional African nation of Wakanda.   In addition to being

Marvel comics' first black superhero, he is the first black superhero to appear in

mainstream comics'. Other African American characters appeared around the same time

(Gabe Jones[22], Robbie Robertson[23]); however, Black Panther is the first character of

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[21] X-Men itself debuted in September 1963 and contained no characters of color. I always found this strange because the struggle against the persecution of mutants, the core of the X-Men story, is seen by fans and scholars alike as an allegory for racism, sexism, and/or homophobia (Trushell, 2004). Despite this the early comics only featured European American heroes and villains.

[22] A character who appeared in the war comic *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos*, the story of a fictional World War II unit.

[23] An editor at the fictional *Daily Bugle*, employer of Peter Parker/Spider-Man.

African descent to have superpowers. Created by two of the most recognizable names in the comic book industry, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the Black Panther debuted on July nineteen-sixty-six in *Fantastic Four* issue fifty-two (DeFalco et. al., 2008). The time of Black Panther's creator is important to note as it is the product of the time. One of the most significant events of the 1960s is of course the Civil Rights Movement. At this time, African Americans were engaged in civil disobedience and other forms of protest against the De Facto and De Jure racism that existed. I believe it is due to these protests that African Americans began to question their lack of visibility in all forms of American society and forced American society to examine itself. Lee stated in an interview for the animated series that the creation of Black Panther came about because he noticed a distinct lack of representation of African Americans in comic books.[24] In that issue the Black Panther may be seen as a villain of sorts as, he invites the Fantastic Four to Wakanda under false pretenses. He then proceeds to attack the Fantastic Four and nearly defeats them singlehandedly. Once it is revealed that T'Challa was only trying to prove himself a worthy leader and avenge his father's murder all is forgiven. The Fantastic Four go on to assist the Black Panther, in issue fifty-three of the *Fantastic Four*, in defeating the master of sound Ulysses Klaw, the man responsible for the death of the previous Black Panther. From that point on the Black Panther becomes one of the Fantastic Four's fiercest allies and has served as a member and team leader on occasions when members of the core team are unavailable.

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[24] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TehIhmOJpl0 A YouTube video where all the participants involved in making the Black Panther animated series discuss their thoughts on the character.

Although the Black Panther of the comics debuted three months before, I believe in the minds of non-comic book fans and some comic fans (Bricken, 2011) when they hear the name Black Panther they automatically think of the Black Panther Party, the militant, revolutionary political group. This is problematic for any fan of Black Panther, looking for scholarly discussion of the character or fan groups. In fact, unless one is very specific in doing a web search, most results for Black Panther will either be the actual animal or the Black Panther Party. In *Fantastic Four* issue one hundred-nineteen (1972) Black Panther briefly changed his name to the Black Leopard to avoid any connection to the Black Panther Party (DeFalco et al, 2008). Given the militancy and controversy that surrounded the Black Panthers during the height of their prominence, Marvel may have felt they needed to distance the character from the party so as not to offend readers (or more likely reactionaries who do not read comic books and would automatically link the two because they have the same name).

In May of 1968, the Black Panther joined one of Marvel comics' most famous superhero teams, the *Avengers* (issue fifty-two) and became one of the team's most iconic members. Despite this Black Panther has never been head of the team during his long association, unlike Captain America, Iron Man, or the Wasp, although other African American superheroes have led the Avengers. After seven years of being a secondary character Black Panther was given his first starring role in *Jungle Action* issue five (1973), a series which ran until1976 (DeFalco, et al, 2008). After the cancellation of Jungle Action, Black Panther received another solo series written and drawn by one of his creators Jack Kirby. Following the end of Kirby's run on the character in 1979; Black Panther had

various miniseries in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Black Panther would obtain his next

solo comic series in 1998 under the writing of Christopher Priest[25].

The Black Panther received a revamp of sorts in 2005 with the series Black Panther

Volume Four written by director and former president of entertainment for BET Reginald

Hudlin, and drawn by one of Marvel's most popular artists, John Romita Jr. The first six

issues of his run formed the story arc "Who Is the Black Panther", which is a reimagining

of the character's origins. I only have digital copies of the first two issues; however this

story arc was the foundation of the plot for the six-episode Black Panther animated series

of which I own a copy. Therefore I will examine this story in detail when discussing the

various animated appearances of Black Panther. One of the significant developments to the

character of Black Panther is his marriage to X-Men character Storm in 2006 (DeFalco et.

al., 2008). Most of the trade paperbacks (collection of a comic story arc represented in

book format) I own featuring Black Panther show them as a couple. However, I will only

examine Storm as she pertains to her relationship with Black Panther and his

representation.

Many countries in the Marvel universe and Wakanda have a certain level of

mysticism. It seems the scientific and the mystic are in conflict in the mind of Wakanda's

citizens. This is the theme that runs throughout the story arc *The Deadliest of the Species*,

written by Hudlin. In the story T'Challa is in a coma after surviving an attack from, the

ruler of the fictional European nation Latveria, Doctor Doom. So as to keep national

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[25] Unfortunately, due to lack of availability (in print and digital) and lack of funds on my part I do not have
access to these issues and thus cannot scrutinize them. The Texas A&M Evans & Cushing libraries, while
having many comic books, have very few starring minority characters.

stability the Wakandan council led by Storm as queen appoints T'Challa's younger sister Shuri as the new Black Panther. However, before fully becoming Black Panther Shuri must undergo a ritual to be accepted by the Panther god, the patron deity of Wakanda. In the midst of Shuri's trial, Storm enlists the aid of a witch doctor to help her travel to spiritual limbo to rescue T'Challa. Further problems arise for the country when a group of mystic on the far side of the continent summons Morlun, a character that first appeared in Spider-Man, to attack the wounded T'Challa. When conventional means fails to stop Morlun, Shuri realizes that Wakanda's current crisis comes from too much reliance on technology. To defeat their enemy they must depend on the spiritual instead of the scientific. In a way they must resort to a primitive state in order to survive.

The most momentous event to happen to Black Panther and the nation of Wakanda occur in the two thousand-ten story arc *Doomwar*. Archenemy of the Fantastic Four and one of Marvel's top villains', Doctor Doom helps stage a coup in Wakanda so as to have access to their stores of vibranium. With help from the X-Men and Fantastic Four, Doom is defeated but at a high cost. In order to protect the vibranium from Doom's malevolent scheme, T'Challa uses a process to render all Wakandan vibranium inert, thus taking away Wakanda's source of economic independence (Phillips, 2010).

The events of *Doomwar* led into the most recent Black Panther comic. In December of two thousand-ten Black Panther took over the Daredevil comic book and numbering with *Black Panther: The Man Without Fear*, number five hundred-thirteen written by David Liss (Melrose, 2010). After the story arc *Shadowland* Matt Murdock (Daredevil) leaves his neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen under the protection of T'Challa

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while he goes on a journey of self-discovery. T'Challa agrees as he wishes to test his abilities without help from friends, family, Wakanda or the panther god, which grants him his powers. *Black Panther: The Man Without Fear* is the first comic I ever bought with my own money. The thing I enjoyed most about the series is that the Black Panther's intellect is on full display. Viewing other Black Panther comics it would seem his strength comes from access to Wakanda's resources and technology. In *The Man Without Fear* he is able to defeat his enemies with devices he created using objects that can be purchased at any Radio Shack or similar store.

After issue five hundred-twenty, *The Man Without Fear* next three issues were tie-in comics to Marvel's crossover event *Fear Itself*. A brief synopsis of *Fear Itself* is a new villain with connections to Thor summons seven magic hammers to Earth and a battle between those who find the hammers and Earth's heroes ensues. I make note of these tie-in comics because they are the only comics I own that expressly deal with racism and xenophobia. The hammers coming to Earth somehow resurrects the Captain America villain Hate-Monger, whose powers allow him to bring out extremely hateful feelings in other people (issue 521).

Following another tie-in with the crossover event *Spider Island* (where most of the citizens of New York City gain Spider-Man's powers) Black Panther transitions from *The Man Without Fear* to *The Most Dangerous Man Alive*. In *The Most Dangerous Man Alive,* Black Panther takes on Spider-Man and Daredevil villain the Kingpin. Teaming up with fellow Avengers Luke Cage and the Falcon, they stop Kingpin's scheme to take over Wakanda's resources by controlling its central bank. This story arc and others involving

Wakanda remind me of the exploitation of Africa through imperialism (Hopkins, 1968).

Europeans taken over the resources of Africans with force and deception, only in a

fictional world were the invaders repelled. *The Most Dangerous Man Alive* ended in

February two thousand-twelve with the cancellation of the series due to low sales

(Melrose, 2011). At the time of this writing there have been no reports of when or if Black

Panther will be getting another solo comic book. Black Panther will appear in the

upcoming comic *New Avengers* that will debut in January 2013. Writer Jonathan Hickman

claims the Black Panther will be an integral character in the story (Sunu, 2012). I am truly

interested to see if that will happen as I have enjoyed Hickman's past work, particularly as

writer of the most recent (at the time of this writing) *Fantastic Four* comic book.

Black Masculinity

When viewing Black Panther we must also examine how he portrays the images of

black masculinity. With my reading of Black Panther, I find it difficult to fit him into

framework of Black Sexual Politics. That is "a set of ideas and social practices shaped by

gender, race, and sexuality that frame Black men and women's treatment of one another, as

well as how African Americans are perceived and treated by others," (Collins, 2004).

From all the media I have analyzed he appears to be a combination of the "Athlete" and the

"Black Patriarch" image. The athlete image comes about due to Black Panther's physical

prowess. In all the aforementioned comics Black Panther will use his fighting skills, along

with some technology, to combat his adversaries. As opposed to some other Marvel

heroes who solely use their intelligence and technology when battling (this will be

discussed in detail in a later section). Black Panther's sexuality is virtually nonexistent in

the comics I have read. His duty as a defender of Wakanda, and sometimes pride, takes precedents above all. In the series *The Man Without Fear* T'Challa separates himself from his wife on his journey of self-discovery and even chastises when she rescues him during a fight with Spider-Man villain, Kraven the Hunter. Compare this to the character of Tony Stark (Iron Man) who has been portrayed as a hypersexual playboy at different points throughout his various media.

A revelation into the black masculinity of Black Panther comes in the observation of his interaction with his former wife, Storm of the X-Men. Before the examination however, I will give a brief description of the character and marriage. Marvel comics first, and most recognizable, African American female superhero is Storm (Ororo Munroe). Created by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum, Storm debuted on May nineteen-seventy-five in *Giant Size X-Men* issue one (DeFalco et al., 2008).

Examining Storm's origins has shown some of the stereotypes about African Americans that persist in the media. Storm was born in Harlem, shortly afterwards her parents moved to Egypt to escape growing anti-mutant sentiment, a metaphor for racism, and actual racism (Dickey, 2007). At the age of five, Ororo is orphaned by an accident that kills her parents. She then is taking in by group of thieves and becomes skilled in their arts (Dougall, 2006). Storm's life as a child thief is constantly referenced in the comics and she is shown using those skills on numerous occasions (Yost, 2009). As a teenager, Ororo makes a trek across the Serengeti, meeting a young T'Challa before finally settling in Kenya (Yost, 2009). Once her powers over the weather are revealed she is worshipped as a goddess.

In 2006, Marvel comics announced they would be marrying their two most popular African/African American superheroes (DeFalco ET. al., 2008). The project was collaboration between Reginald Hudlin and popular African American author Eric Jerome Dickey. Upon first hearing the news I was upset with this decision because I felt it went against established canon. The characters met as teenagers, went their separate ways shortly after, and had little to no contact afterwards. Thus it would be difficult for them to fall in love and marry so quickly. To rectify the characters history together was retroactively changed to show that they stayed together longer and still loved each other after all this time (Black Panther, vol. 4 issue 14). Both Hudlin and Dickey stated that the decision to marry Black Panther and Storm was an attempt to increase African American and female readership (Weiland, 2006).

I originally found this story line to be pandering and insulting as I felt Marvel was simply marrying the two characters simply because they are the two most popular African/African American superheroes. However, after finding evidence in the comics of their relationship I have changed my opinion (*Black Panther* #26). That being said I do believe the way the marriage was presented was problematic. Ororo and T'Challa's marriage showed up as a tie-in comic to the crossover event *Civil War*. Marvel has not done this with the marriages of their European American superheroes. For example, The Invisible Woman & Mr. Fantastic, Cyclops & Jean Grey, the Vision & Scarlet Witch and Spider-Man & Mary-Jane Watson all got special issues devoted to their weddings within their respective comics (DeFalco et al, 2008). The wedding of the two most powerful African characters in the Marvel universe deserved the same treatment. Unfortunately, in

the summer of 2012, due to the crossover event *Avengers vs. X-Men* the marriage of Storm and Black Panther has been annulled. As with their marriage, the break-up took place with tie-in comics and has not been giving much attention. The only thing that can be said is that, with the exception of Mr. Fantastic and the Invisible Woman, Black Panther and Storm join a large list of superheroes who are no longer in relationships either due to death or divorce (DC Women Kicking Ass, 2011).

In their first meeting as teenagers, detailed in the miniseries *Storm*, T'Challa is still the athlete but also has some of the tendencies of the "Buck" image. The Buck is a hypersexual African American male whose only concern is sexual pleasure, particularly with white women, by any means necessary (Collins, 2004). During a conversion, T'Challa admits to Ororo the number of women he has slept with, shortly before they have sex for the first time (Dickey, 2007). At this point in the story, Ororo would be considered "Confined Sexuality" as she is just being to discover and become comfortable with her sexuality.

In the tie-in comic, to the event *Avengers vs. X-Men*, *Versus*[26] (issue five) we see the dissolving of the Storm and Black Panther marriage. Through their battle, we are given an example of Black Sexual Politics albeit an exaggerated one. In the midst of the fighting, the thoughts of both characters, about why their marriage failed, are displayed for the reader to see. Storm thinks Black Panther was too cold or unemotional during their marriage. I feel this can be interpreted as a lack of passion on the part of T'Challa and that

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[26] A comic that detailed fights between various Avengers and X-Men characters.

he is desexed to a degree. Without this level of sexuality, he is no threat to any of his

white counterparts or white readers.

Comparison to White Heroes/ Science vs. Magic

Part of the draw to this character for me is that in the Marvel universe Black

Panther, as well as the entire country of Wakanda, presents a balance of strength and

intelligence. Black Panther is one of the eight smartest people in the Marvel universe

along with other superhero comrades Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic), Bruce Banner (the

Hulk), Tony Stark (Iron Man), Henry Pym (Ant-Man/Giant-

Man/Goliath/Yellowjacket/Wasp) and Hank McCoy (Beast)[27], all European Americans.

The only other minority of that list is Amadeus Cho, a young Asian American, although he

is not a superhero but merely a companion to the Hulk and later Hercules. However,

although his intelligence is showcased in all incarnations, unlike his counterparts

T'Challa's physical prowess is shown just as much as his brainpower. Mr. Fantastic will

use his stretching powers against a villain only if he has not already invented a device to

deal with the situation. Without his hi-tech armor or similar weapons, Tony Stark is

unable to defend himself, let alone the world (in early comics his heart would fail without

the armor). Bruce Banner is essentially a ninety-eight pound weakling until he becomes

infuriated and transforms into the gargantuan, green-skinned personification of rage the

Hulk. Therefore, while Black Panther is shown as an equal among his intellectual peers,

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[27] http://www.comicvine.com/myvine/shoe/8-smartest-people-in-the-marvel-universe-that-were-collected-by-the-intelligencia/75-33493/ This list was compiled by fans based on a storyline at the time.

his fight skills and physical stature still fits with the hyper-masculinity of superheroes and the stereotype of African American males (Brown, 1999).

One of the few characters that are similar to Black Panther in this regard is Marvel's flagship character Spider-Man (Peter Parker). While he is more content to punch his enemies and/or use his webbing Peter Parker is shown to be very intelligent, though not in the class of the aforementioned characters (though he has worked for Reed Richards and Tony Stark). Even before receiving the radioactive spider-bite that gave him his powers Peter was shown as the stereotypical nerd. After obtaining his powers, and decides to use them for good (following the death of his uncle), he goes on to create a number of devices no high school student should be able to invent. Chief among those tools are his mechanical web-shooters and webbing. In current comics (*Amazing Spider-Man*) Peter Parker is employed as a scientist at Horizon Labs a think-tank for some of the brightest minds in the country. I would argue that Peter Parker's life as a nerd and the problems it brought about (bullying, social ineptitude, etc.) allows fans to connect with the character as see elements of their own life through his eyes. I am inclined to wonder why Black Panther has not received similar levels of admiration from fans due to the parallels between the two characters.

In addition, while all of the aforementioned heroes' powers have a technological or scientific basis, Black Panther's are rooted in the supernatural. Peter Parker was bitten by a radioactive spider during a school fieldtrip. Reed Richards and Bruce Banner were exposed to radiation over the course of scientific accidents. Tony Stark and Henry Pym invented advanced suits that allow them to protect the world. Even Hank McCoy who is a

mutant[28], his most iconic appearance (blue fur, fangs and claws) in comics came about due to genetic experiments he performed on himself. In contrast to gain the title of Black Panther once a year, any Wakandan citizen can face the current Black Panther in hand-to-hand combat in a special tournament (Hudlin, 2005). If victorious that person then performs a ritual that allows them to communicate with the chief deity of Wakanda, the Panther god. If deemed worthy by the panther god, the new Black Panther is bestowed with enhanced strength and senses.

As I mentioned earlier, despite comic books becoming more visible in mainstream society many people's first and sometimes only exposure to superheroes is through film and television. As discussion of Black Panther's appearances outside of comic books will now begin. My first memory of Black Panther came in nineteen-ninety-five with the Fantastic Four animated series. The episode *Prey of the Black Panther* (episode twenty-one), as I remember it mirrors the character's introduction in the original *Fantastic Four* comics. I recall being fascinated with the episode, as the concept of African/African American superheroes was still novel to me. To my recollection before Black Panther, no people of color ever appeared on the Fantastic Four cartoon. Seeing Black Panther almost singlehandedly defeat the Fantastic Four, something only Doctor Doom and Super Skrull (an alien with all the powers of the Fantastic Four combined) have done, was strangely a source of pride for me. I should not want to see the heroes lose, but still I found myself rooting for Black Panther simply because it was one of the few instances where I was able

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[28] Mutants in the Marvel Universe are peopling who posse a gene that normally manifests at puberty and endows them with some type of superpower.

to see someone that resembled me in the cartoons I enjoyed. I was also amazed by the presentation of Wakanda. On the one hand, it presented the image of Africa that was already familiar to me with the housing and dress of the people. However, behind the grass huts and loincloths there lay sophisticated technology equal to anything the Fantastic Four had.

Black Panther's most significant animated appearance is on the cartoon *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes*, which premiered in the fall of two thousand-ten. The Black Panther officially joined the team in episode eleven, *Panther's Quest*, when he seeks the team's help in avenging his father and retaking Wakanda. The inclusion of Black Panther provided some much needed color to the Avengers as at that point the team consisted of Iron Man, Hulk, Thor, Captain America, Ant-Man and Wasp, all European Americans (and one Asgardian). Unfortunately this is the only episode Black Panther has had devoted to him. Throughout the first and second (which has not completed at the time of this writing) season the other Avengers have several episodes where they are the focus. I want to believe Captain America, Hulk, Thor and Iron Man have received the majority of attention because Marvel wants to have synergy with their cinematic universe (all four characters have recent successful live-action films). However, that does not explain why Wasp, Hawkeye, Ms. Marvel and Ant-Man are the emphasis of several episodes. While Luke Cage, War Machine and Falcon have made guest appearances the team is still exceedingly white with seven European Americans (with the accumulation of Hawkeye and Ms. Marvel) to one African. I am pleased however that Black Panther's intelligence is shown whenever he appears. In many episodes, he is shown to be Tony Stark's intellectual

equal and comes up with scientific solutions in addition to fighting. Unfortunately, while

Black Panther is shown to be as intelligent as Iron Man and Ant-Man; and as proficient a

fighter as Captain America he only assists the others when the situation calls for either of

those specific skill sets.

<div align="center">**Perception from White Fans**</div>

When discussing Black Panther one must also talk about the country, he rules:

Wakanda. Since its debut alongside Black Panther, Wakanda has been shown as one of the

richest, most powerful nations in the Marvel universe. Wakanda has the largest deposit of

the fictional, rare metal vibranium (a metal which absorbs vibrations and is virtually

indestructible) in the Marvel universe, and according to the animated series precious

metals and oil reserves (which they have no need to excavate or drill due to the value of

vibranium). Because of Wakanda's vast resources, many of Black Panther's stories

revolve around defending Wakanda from those who seek to overrun the country and

exploit their wealth. Due to the strength of the current and previous Black Panthers and

the Wakandan people, the country has never been invaded. Because of this the country has

been allowed to grow and develop with no outside influences and technology that rival,

and in some cases surpass anything in the Marvel universe.

Wakanda represents what Africa could have been without the brutal parts of the

continent's history. Free from the violence of the slave trade and imperialism, Wakanda

was able to become the power it is today. With its blend of science and sorcery Wakanda

is a part of what is known as afrofuturism (Nama, 2011). Afrofuturism is a literary and

cultural aesthetic that combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy,

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Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western cosmologies in order to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color, but also to revise, interrogate, and re-examine the historical events of the past (Dery, 1994). In all depictions of Wakanda the afrofuturism is present. Alongside futuristic weapons, computers and hovercrafts you will see Wakandans dressed in popularly rendered "traditional" African garb and African art.

My research into Black Panther has shown me that the afrofuturism of Wakanda has some comic book fans upset. They believe Wakanda is unrealistic because it is an African nation that does not resemble the Africa that is seen in *National Geographic* or the evening news (Bricken, 2010). This sort of fan critique is interesting, because while comic books deal with the real issues of death, loss, hierarchy, evil, love, power, etc., the search for realism in superhero comics is deeply subjective. Realistically, when a person is exposed to massive amounts of radiation they do not gain superpowers (this was the most common way in early Marvel comics). Realistically, humans are not able to fly without the aid of some type of aerial vehicle. Realistically, prisoners of war are not able to escape their internment by building powered suits of armor out of spare parts (that is how Tony Stark became Iron Man). Realistically, women's bodies are not the pneumatic models of muscular curvature designed by a largely male aesthetic gaze.

As with all fiction, reading superhero comics requires a willing suspension of disbelief when dealing with superpowers, aliens and sentient androids. The question then becomes why is an African nation that is free from poverty, civil war and disease such a difficult concept to grasp for some European American fans? These fans are able to suspend their disbelief with other parts of the Marvel universe that are more improbable

than Wakanda. Places such as Asgard (home of Thor), the underwater city of Atlantis, and the Savage Land, a tropical land in Antarctica that still contains dinosaurs. The difference between these three areas (along with much of the Marvel universe) and Wakanda is that they are made up of people with European features or the character most associated with the area is European American.

Throughout the decades, Marvel has had several of their comic book characters turned into animated series. Blade and Black Panther are the only minority characters to receive their own solo animated series. Storm, War Machine and the Falcon appear in other Marvel series, but as members of a team. In 2008 Marvel announced collaboration with BET Network to produce a primetime Black Panther animated series (IGN, 2008). The series premiered in Australia in early 2010 and was supposed to premiere on BET around the same time (Findlay, 2009). It instead appeared on BET in November of 2011 although I was not aware of it at the time. Although I did not view the show when it premiered, when it came out on DVD in January of 2011, I purchased a copy.

As I previously mentioned, the plot of the Black Panther animated series is based off of the story arc *Who Is the Black Panther*, written by Reginald Hudlin who also served as writer and executive producer for the cartoon. The series features an all-star voice cast consisting of Academy Award nominees Djimon Hounsou and Alfre Woodard as T'Challa and his mother respectively, Kerry Washington as Shuri, and Grammy Award winner Jill Scott as Storm (with cameos from Hudlin and Stan Lee). The series is another reimagining of the character's origins. While the Fantastic Four are mentioned, they do not appear and Ulysses Klaw is no longer a physicist but now a hired assassin. As in the comics, Klaw

attempts to take over Wakanda to control its resources only this time he assembles a team of villains and also enlists the aid of Wakanda's chief adversary Niganda and the Roman Catholic Church. The team consisted of *Captain America* villain Batroc the Leaper, Radioactive Man, the Black Knight and *X-Men* villain Juggernaut. In addition to the schemes of Klaw, the series also shows the Marvel version of the George W. Bush administration, complete with caricatures of Condoleezza Rice (also voiced by Woodard) and Donald Rumsfeld, attempting to exploit the situation in order to gain Wakanda's resources.

I personally enjoyed the series; however I would not be surprised if some fans did not for various reasons as no one thing will be liked by everyone. While I would disagree with those who say they did not enjoy the animation or characterization, discussion of those issues falls outside the scope of this article. However I must discuss the complaints of some fans about the story. Some fans felt the series and the comic it was based on was racist and anti-white. Statements such as "Hopefully he won't start going on and on about how inferior white people are again like he did in the comics." "…heavy anti-American sentiment. Just like Hudlin's comic." "Hudlin's comic run AND written by Hudlin, so anyone who isn't black is evil and out to ruin the perfect black paradise known as Wakanda," appeared on the internet when the animated series was first announced (Bricken, 2010).

My view of the series is not that the show is anti-white, but is anti-imperialism. Throughout the series it is mentioned how fiercely Wakanda defends its borders from all invaders not just those who are European or European American. Although given the

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history of the continent it would stand to reason that most the attempted assailants of Wakanda would be European. As I mentioned earlier, some fans claim Wakanda to be unrealistic because of the history of Africa. Yet some of those same fans conveniently ignore that history in order to accuse Hudlin of racism. I believe some fans are merely threatened by a powerful group of people that are not European.

My research has shown that some fans say they do not like Black Panther, because they cannot relate to the character. The reason they cannot relate to the character because he is a super-intelligent king with the wealth, power, and technology of an entire country at his disposal (Brothers, 2012). The question then becomes, why are characters such as Iron Man and DC comics' flagship character Batman (Young, 2012) extremely popular? Both Bruce Wayne (Batman) and Tony Stark (Iron Man) were born into affluence and inherited multi-billion dollar company, which they use to fund their battles against crime. I am under the impression that most comic book fans, of any race, are not "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropists[29]" who invent futuristic devices. The thing that most of these fans have in common with Batman and Iron Man is that they share similar skin tones.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the title of this article is a play on one of Marvel's catchphrases, "Marvel your universe," (DeFalco et al, 2008). Given the treatment of Black Panther and their other African American characters, I feel that only some people are considered a part of that universe. When I see things such as the reaction to Black Panther, and the reaction from Marvel creators and executives to enquiries about race, I do not feel like a member of

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[29] This is a quote from Tony Stark in the 2012 film *Marvel's The Avengers*

the universe, although I do still identify with its arguably key minority characters. With Marvel's growing success due in large part to their movies, they can and should make more of an effort to reach out to non-European American fans, if for no other reason than to increase profits.

The Avengers movie grossing over a billion dollars worldwide is due to not only European American fans viewing the film, but people of all races. I do believe that a concentrated effort to bring in fans who are not European American, male and/or heterosexual will be better for Marvel and the comic book industry as a whole. As more individuals read comic books and interact with the genre's heroes through broadcast and filmic media, fans' interpretations of the way minority characters are presented becomes of greater importance across the social landscape as these fans interpret and deploy issues of race, particularly racial identity, and racial power in cultural settings. I see some improvement from Marvel, but there is more that can be done. In the Avengers movie and the four movies[30] of the five[31] that precede it the character of Nick Fury is played by African American actor Samuel L. Jackson, despite the fact that the character is white in the comics. Due to Jackson's appearances in the films, all subsequent animated appearances of the character are shown as African American. I wish to expand upon these findings by doing a more detailed analysis of Marvel's treatment of their minority superheroes.

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[30] *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, *Thor*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger*
[31] *The Incredible Hulk*

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

My life experiences and research into nerd culture has shown me the role race and ethnicity plays within it. As I have previously mentioned, I believe we now live in a golden age of nerd culture. Many motion pictures based on superheroes and fantasy novels released in the last ten to twelve years have gone on to become blockbusters. Reading comic books has become a more acceptable hobby with many public libraries now offer comic books and manga alongside the works of Shakespeare, Twain and Dickens. Television shows that detail the lives of nerds (*The Big Bang Theory*, *IT Crowd* and *Community*) or based on franchises beloved by nerds (*Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead*) are very popular with mainstream audiences. While I believe we live in a golden age in all the above mentioned successes, the presence of minorities within the properties and the culture itself is very limited.

Throughout this thesis I wished to answer two specific questions. The first question is what is considered acceptable boundaries in nerd culture, who determines what is acceptable and what are the penalties for violating these boundaries? The second question is who creates and controls the image of minority characters in nerd culture and how do non-minority fans react to these characters? I believe the first chapter "My journey through fandom" answers the question of boundaries. The answer I believe is that European American fans control the boundary, particularly on the internet. Unless the site is a safe space for those that are not European American, male and/or heterosexual; issues

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of race, gender and sexual orientation are considered unacceptable. If one brings up these issues in an unsafe space the consequences are ridicule and persecution. In many cases even if the site is a safe space or willing to discuss the issues diversity the ridicule and persecution will still come if the website is not actively moderated. Contrast this with what are considered acceptable boundaries in nerd cultural and one can see the irony. Things such as going on long tirades, positive or negative, about issues that are considered unimportant to mainstream society. It is also tolerable to panic over rumors or images about upcoming movies or comics (which often times leads to tirades).

The second chapter "Marvel, my universe?" addresses the question of creation and control in regards to minority superheroes. My research has shown me that all of Marvel's black superheroes were created by European Americans. I believe that is due to the lack of minority writers and artists working for Marvel comics. The issue of control falls to both the comic book publisher and the fans. The publishers decide the presentation of the character and how they are writing. Fans decide whether to purchase the comics featuring these characters. If the character does not sell well they are less likely to have their own solo comic book or any of the media that comes with it, i.e. animated series or motion pictures. The question I have still been unable to answer is whether these characters are not promoted because they are not popular or vice versa. The reception to these heroes usually seems to be indifference at best. When there is an instance of a black hero replacing a white hero, such as the case of Miles Morales (ultimate Spider-Man), results in a great deal of hostility from many European American fans. Some fans believe these

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characters to be pale imitations of the true (white) character and/or an attempt by the comic publisher to be political correct.

The issue that connects both articles and the overall theme of this thesis is that issues of race and ethnicity are still difficult to discuss in nerd culture (as are all issues of diversity). There has been a slight increase of people discussing these issues; the reaction they get for European American fans shows much more discussion is required. Many of these fans feel that the inclusion of non-white characters is indicative of an agenda or politically motivate. These fans claim that such agendas do not belong in their entertainment. On the rare occasion a minority character is given a starring role in a nerd property some of these European American fans feel something is being forced upon them.

While I have been able to examine Marvel comics African/African American superheroes, lack of resources and financial limitations prevented me from scrutinizing these characters as thoroughly as I would have liked. For any future research I will apply for grants or fellowships such as the Minority Fellowship Program from the American Sociological Association. With additional funding I will be able find more material to analyze by shopping at local comic book shops, bookstores, and internet sites such as Amazon or EBay. Any material that I cannot purchase, I will attempt to find by making greater use of any university or public library that I will be able to access.

In the midst of conducting my research I thought about different issues I would like to dedicate to future research or if anyone reading wishes to continue my inquiries may use the following examples. I devoted much of the first chapter discussing how much of my life as a nerd has consisted of my viewing of anime. The way issues of race and ethnicity

occur among fans and non-fans of anime are of interest to me. I want to study the treatment of Japan by European Americans in terms of anime. There seems to be two extreme conflicting views when it comes to anime. At one end of the spectrum you have fans known as weeaboo who prefer Japanese culture to their own native culture and attempt to be Japanese themselves. At the other end you have individuals view anime and it fans with disdain to the point where they view the entire country of Japan in a negative view. The thing both groups have in common is that they are fetishizing Japan based on its popular culture, without learning about the country as a whole.

In chapter two, I examined Marvel comics' treatment of their black superheroes. For future research I would like to examine DC comics' black superheroes as, and then compare the two companies. In addition I would like to examine both companies treatment of all their minority superheroes. Because while the number of black superheroes from both publishers is small, the number of Latino, Asian and Native American superheroes is much smaller.

I feel that many of the issues I have addressed can be done away with in time. As the United States of America becomes more diverse I believe all faucets of pop culture and the entertainment industry will become more diverse as well. I believe children of all races deserve to see heroes that resemble them in a starring role, as I believe it will have a positive effect on their self-esteem as it effected mine growing up. That has been the whole purpose of research in an attempt to make nerd culture more inclusive for the generations of nerds that will follow. Any non-white person who wishes to be a part of nerd culture should not be made to feel like a minority within a minority. I truly believe

that pop culture has an influence on mainstream culture. If more non-white, non-male, and/or non-heterosexual characters are shown in, not as stereotypes but as regular, everyday people I believe they will be more accepted by society as a whole. Once this happens, as I believe it will, my sincere hope is that the world (or the United States at least) will become a tolerant, more peaceful place.

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