NEW HEROES:

Gender, Race, Fans and Comic Book Superheroes

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto

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This study offers an ethnographic account of one comic book publishing company's attempt to address divergent audiences through new heroes and how the readers of these texts come to understand them through interpretive strategies and subcultural practises specific to the comic book industry and comic book fandom. Specifically, this study focuses on the African American comic books published by Milestone Media and how fans relate to the stories and the new Black heroes according to six fundamentally interconnected principles and points of comparison. The interpretive strategies used by comic book fans revolve around i) their recognition of Milestone's corporate and creative identity as the mainstream publisher of African American comics; ii) their awareness of the debate between Milestone and other African American comic book creators regarding the authenticity of ethnic representation; iii) their reliance on subcultural principles specific to comics fandom, such as the collecting principle whereby the reader's recognition of specific artists and/or writers allows the fan to accumulate cultural capital within the subculture; iv) the fan's knowledge of genre history and of earlier attempts to create Black heroes; v) the fan's familiarity with formalized genre conventions and Milestone's place as an innovative publisher which retains most of the "classic" elements of the superhero formula, and; vi) in comparison to the market-dominating comic books published by other companies which promote a popular trend of gender extremism. For many fans the Milestone superheroes function as a focal point for interpreting revisionist notions of African American characters in comparison to more mainstream comic book ideals, and further, they facilitate a progressive interpretation of Black masculinity which incorporates intelligence with physicality. This research is an attempt to contribute to the current debate in Cultural Studies between perceptions of media texts as agents of hegemony and of audiences as active resisters. Rather than either of these extremes, this study argues that the reading of comic books is interpreted according to the ideological encodings of the producers and the socially positioned, fandom-based, decodings of the audience.
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PROLOGUE

It was a Saturday afternoon when I first came across Galaxy Comics and Collectibles, a comic book and gaming specialty store located in a middle class neighborhood on the fringe of downtown Toronto. I had been in dozens of comic book stores before and was confident about what I'd find inside, past the larger than life superheroes painted on the glass window. What I wasn't prepared for was the sheer volume of activity I found. On this day, Galaxy Comics and Collectibles was abuzz with more energy than I had ever seen in a comic book store before. Though every independently run comic book store has its own unique personality, they all have a certain ambience in common. In many ways Galaxy was no different from the thousands of other comic book specialty stores spread across North America.

Like almost every other comic book store, Galaxy was a cramped shop with a slight odor of old newsprint and its walls were covered with promotional posters featuring muscular men and busty women in colorful, skin-tight costumes. Some of these stylish advertisements were adorned with such immediately recognizable cultural icons as Superman or Batman, while the others depicted a collage of heavily muscled characters with dramatic names like "Savage Dragon", "Deathblow", and "Ripclaw", all of whom seemed to be bursting right through their two-dimensional confines. Higher up on the walls, out of the reach of grasping hands, was an array of older, rarer and thus more valuable comic books, each safely enshrined in a plastic mylar bag with acid free cardboard backing.

Waist high tables loaded with countless boxes of less prestigious back issues were lined up end-to-end down the center of the store. Several of the store's young patrons were bent over the narrow boxes, flipping through the various left-over comics seeking that elusive issue that could fill the gap in their own collections, or hoping against hope to discover a rare and expensive comic that had some how been mispriced and lumped in with the remainders. All of Galaxy's new comic books
were displayed at the back of the narrow shop on a wooden, and obviously home made, magazine stand. An alphabetical list of the thirty or so books that had come in the previous Wednesday was scribbled on the chalk board beside the display. A full third of the titles listed already had a line scratched through them to indicate they were sold out.

At the front of the store, near the entrance doorway and the pile of back-packs scattered underneath the "Please Leave All Bags Here" sign (cheerfully subtitled: "Shoplifters Will Gladly be Beaten to a Pulp!"), was a glass display case that doubled as a check out counter. Behind the counter were two teenage clerks, both of whom were busy tallying up customer's purchases while simultaneously trying to explain to an older gentleman why his ragged old copy of The Phantom wasn't worth thousands of dollars. It seems the man had heard a story on the radio about someone who had found comic books from the 1940s in their attic and had sold them for over a hundred thousand dollars, and now he wanted the same windfall. A couple more typical patrons, pre-pubescent boys in baggy jeans and oversized T-shirts, were impatiently attempting to squeeze past the unsatisfied attic cleaner so they could get a better look at the completed sets of trading cards that were housed on the three shelves inside the makeshift display cabinet/check out counter.

What did, at first, seem different about Galaxy Comics and Collectibles that Saturday afternoon was the noise. Often comic book stores are quiet places, each customer silently perusing the multitude of titles vying for his attention. But on this occasion the store was overrun with boisterous grade school age kids who had just started their summer vacation the week before. All around me were boys from around seven to twelve years old excitedly talking not only about what they were going to be doing over the summer holidays, but also about what comic books they were most looking forward to reading. During the summer months the comic book publishers pull out all the stops. They use every gimmick possible to make their books stand out from the hundreds of others that crowd the display rack. As I moved through the store I could here snatches of conversation peppered with a jannish lingo: "chromium cover die-cast design", "multi-universe cross over", "free holographic card", and "mini graphic novel movie adaptation". The adrenalin was high among Galaxy's young customers. You could almost feel the anticipation of the coming heroic battles that would be played out on glossy four colour pages for two to six dollars an adventure.

To the left of the cash register, in front of a display of various superhero action figures, there
was a relatively subdued Black child of about nine disappointedly telling his mother that they didn't have the hero he wanted. "There's no Icon or Hardware here" the boy, Mike, complained.

I interrupted, informing the exasperated looking mother that I had been doing some research on Milestone Media, the African American comic book company that published the exploits of the Black superheroes Icon and Hardware among others, and that there were no available toy versions of these characters yet.

"But I saw an Icon figure in that magazine", Mike said as he pointed to a recent copy of Wizard: The Guide to Comics that was sitting on the display counter.

"Oh, I know what picture you're talking about", one of the employees manning the cash register offered. "But that wasn't a real action figure. It was one of those home made ones that people send in so they can get their name in the magazine."

"That figures" the boy's mother said, as Mike and his younger sister quietly moved to the back of the store to look over the new comics. "I was hoping to find a couple of Black hero dolls for him to play with this summer. I guess we'll just have to stick with the Batman stuff for now."

Mike's mother, Sondra, explained to me that her son had been interested in comic books for the past couple of years and had become a voracious reader, devouring as many stories as he could get his hands on, sometimes twenty in a day. "I thought it was great that he was reading so much and having a lot of fun" Sondra said. "I suppose all young boys enjoy comic books at some point in their lives. For a while Mike was reading anything he could get his hands on. I was really happy though when he found a few of these books that starred Black superheroes. I think it's important for a child to read about people of his own colour as heroes some times. Now Mike buys these comics almost exclusively". Sondra continued as she nodded at a Milestone poster promoting an upcoming meeting of Icon and Superman, the original Man of Steel himself, "except for Batman, he still really likes Batman too" she laughed. "But now he plays Icon and Rocket (Icon's female side-kick, think of Robin with an attitude) with his little sister all over the house. That's good. I like that. Now he doesn't have to pretend to be Superman or Batman, or any other white guy superhero. That's good. It's about time we got some new heroes around here."

New Heroes indeed.

3
INTRODUCTION: "NEW HEROES"

I like the phrase "new heroes." I have heard it a lot over the past couple of years while exploring the world of comic books and their readers. It is a phrase that is almost deceivingly concise. It is a simple enough combination of words, but it alludes to a culturally important change in the way we see our world. "As anyone involved in fiction and its crafting over the past fifteen or so years would be delighted to tell you," wrote acclaimed comic book auteur Alan Moore (1986: 3) "heroes are starting to become rather a problem. They aren't what they used to be... or rather they are, and therein lies the heart of the difficulty. We demand new themes, new insights, new dramatic situations. We demand new heroes." In a world that is continually growing, continually changing, the old paradigms just don't cut it anymore.

One of the ways the world has been changing, at least in the West, is reflected in the manner that the traditional monolith of popular culture has sought to (re)address divergent audiences. This study offers an ethnographic account of one comic book company's attempt to address divergent audiences through new heroes and how the readers of these texts come to understand them through interpretive strategies and subcultural practices specific to the comic book industry and comic book fandom. Specifically, this study focuses on the African American comic books published by Milestone Media and how fans relate to the stories and the new Black heroes according to six fundamentally interconnected principles and points of comparison. The interpretive strategies used by comic book fans revolve around i) their recognition of Milestone's corporate and creative identity
as the mainstream publisher of African American superhero comics; ii) their awareness of the debate between Milestone and other African American comic book creators regarding the authenticity of creating Black characters in cooperation with one of the dominant (i.e. White) publishing companies; iii) their reliance on subcultural principles specific to comics fandom, such as the collecting principle whereby the reader's recognition of specific artists and/or the potential market value of the comic book allows the fan to accumulate cultural capital within the subculture; iv) the fan's knowledge of the superhero genre's history and of earlier attempts to create Black heroes; v) the fan's familiarity with formalized genre conventions and Milestone's place as an innovative publisher which retains most of the "classic" elements of the superhero formula, and: vi) their comparison of the Milestone books to the market-dominating comics published by other young companies which promote a popular trend of gender extremism.

For many fans the reading of a comic book is far from a passive activity, that does not necessarily mean that comic book fans are active resisters of hegemonic meaning, as several other audience ethnographies have argued. Rather, for the devoted comic book fan interpretation is a complex process shaped by inter- and intra-textual information shared with, and about, other fans and the creators themselves. As popular texts, the reading of comic books is interpreted according to the ideological encodings of the producers and the socially positioned, fandom-based, decodings of the audience. For readers familiar with the history and/or the conventions of comic books, the Milestone superheroes function as a focal point for interpreting revisionist notions of African American characters in comparison to more mainstream comic book ideals, and further, they facilitate a progressive interpretation of Black masculinity which incorporates intelligence with physicality. In other words, there is a sort of "contract" of meaning which exists between the two sides that positions any interpretation of textual ideology as both a personal and mutual concept. In this case, the contract is such that the producers have created Black characters which fulfill a need for new heroes and operate according to certain principles of non-extremist racial politics, thus allowing the readers to interpret the texts in cooperation with the producers' intended meanings as revisionist Black hero texts, and personally as alternative models of masculinity which stress holism rather than the one-dimensional hypermasculinity found in other contemporary comic books.
"What's wrong with this picture?"

Because the comic book industry is a medium very clearly dominated by some of modern Western popular culture's most quintessential images of heroism it is also one of the most obvious examples of unequal representation. Since its inception more than sixty years ago the world of comic books has been populated with the same type of characters in magazine after magazine. Chief among these ever popular characters is the seemingly endless variety of Superman-like costumed crusaders. Almost without exception these archetypal do-gooders, these modern mythological heroes --Captain Marvel, Captain America, Batman, Spider-Man, Thor, etc. etc.-- have always been white-bread defenders of "truth, justice and the American way." Like most other forms of North American mass media in the twentieth century, the comics have more or less managed to erase all evidence of cultural diversity. For decades young readers have encountered a defining and idealized image of heroism that was explicitly honest, law abiding, chaste, excessively masculine, and above all, white. For the majority of readers these caped avengers who could fly, bend steel bars with their bare hands and deflect bullets with their broad chests were the ultimate power fantasy played out in flashy monthly installments. Yet for comic book readers from different ethnic backgrounds there were no heroic models that they could directly identify with. No heroes they could call their own. Instead, they were required to imaginatively identify across boundaries of race as the only depiction of visible minorities in most comic books were the nameless criminals and barbarous savages that the real heroes defeated month after month. But just as the "truth" and the "justice" of the American way has begun to be questioned by voices that had previously been suppressed or marginalized, the heretofore unchallenged privilege of the white-bread comic book hero is on the decline.

The potentially harmful racial bias of comic books was so obvious by the early 1970s that the Black Owned Communications Alliance (BOCA) sought to capitalize on this image of unequal identification in their public service advertisement promoting the need for responsible racial representation in the media (Figure 1.1). "What's wrong with this picture?" asks the ad's copy in bold letters under the photograph of a young Black boy striking an heroic pose in front of the bathroom mirror --a towel tied around his neck for a cape, chest puffed out, fists defiantly resting on his hips. But instead of his own idealized image staring back at him, he sees the reflection of a generic, white costumed hero. "A child dreams of being the latest superhero. What could be wrong with that?" the
What's wrong with this picture?

Figure 1.1
"Plenty," is the answer, "if the child is Black and can't even imagine a hero the same color he or she is." The concern of the BOCA ad is clear. Children are impressionable and learn from what they see. And, the copy text goes on to argue, with the traditional white images of heroism that dominate popular culture Black children rarely get to see "Black men and women doing positive things besides playing basketball and singing songs." The BOCA ad is a call not only for more frequent and more diverse positive Black images in the media, but also for the development and support of Black owned media productions that would best be able to provide these much needed new heroes. On numerous occasions during the course of this study I was reminded of this advertisement, whether it was while rummaging through academic texts, talking to superhero fans, or self-indulgently reading huge piles of comic books. This advertisement, although dated, seemed to crystallize the all too common discrepancy between young comic book readers and the one-dimensional heroic types usually portrayed within those books.

In the 1970s the two major comic book publishing companies, DC Comics and Marvel Comics, both tried to create legitimate Black superhero characters. Both companies failed to achieve any long-lasting success because their Black characters were too closely identified with the limited stereotype commonly found in the Blaxploitation films of the era. More recently, in the spring of 1993, Milestone Media Incorporated, an African American owned and controlled comic book publishing company, began to provide the world with some new heroes. Included in their monthly roster of heroes are such popular characters as Icon, a super strong and straight laced hero in the Superman mold, and Icon's partner Rocket, the first unwed teenage mother to don the costume of a superhero; Hardware, a genius inventor who has constructed his own hi-tech armor; and Static, a wise-cracking high school nerd by day and electricity wielding superhero by night. Where once visible minorities were almost exclusively depicted on the comic book page as villains, indistinguishable petty criminals, screaming savages, and occasionally as comic relief side-kicks, today's characters of colour are finally starting to emerge as real heroes. As new heroes, demanded by new audiences.

This Study

This study offers an ethnographic examination (see Appendix) of contemporary comic book fandom as it relates specifically to the texts published by Milestone Media and the particularly loaded
and problematic representation of the Black superhero. As the field of audience studies has
developed in the 1980s and 1990s, in both the class-oriented British and the populist American
traditions, numerous critics have increasingly emphasized the role of the audience as active
interpreters in their everyday use of mass media; interpreters who can, and do, construct unique
readings contingent upon their own cultural position and personal experiences. However, most of
these audience studies (which will be discussed in detail in chapter 2) are critically informed by where
they consider the "true" meaning of the cultural texts to reside, with the producers or with the
consumers. Since the primary concern of this study is how the adolescent members of the comic
book reading audience use mass produced genre texts in their personal and social lives to construct
an understanding of race and gender. I feel it is important to focus not solely on the creators, the text,
or the audience members, but on all three. Yes, the media can exert power and influence over the
audience but only in so far as that audience might allow them to, and it is the readers that negotiate
the degree of that power and the direction of that influence.

The research presented here is based primarily on such qualitative methods as participant-
observation, textual analysis, and most importantly, interviews with several comic book creators,
retailers and over a hundred fans. For more than four years now I have been deeply involved in the
somewhat transient and loosely structured world of comic book fandom. Comics fandom is a
subculture that I have known of since I first began reading comic books as a child, but had never
become wholly involved with because I too, often thought of it as a little too fanatical for my own
tastes. As a subculture, comic fandom is an overwhelmingly male enclave (see Appendix for a
detailed breakdown of the informants by age, race and reading habits). There are female fans, but
they are much fewer in number and usually much less demonstrative about their passion for comics.
While there is a wide age range among comic book fans, I have focused here on the younger, and still
the most common enthusiasts: pre-adolescent and adolescent males. I have been reading the books
and the fanzines, frequenting a variety of comic book specialty stores, attending as many of the local
and the national comic book conventions as was financially possible, and cruising various computer
chat-lines devoted to comic books. I have experienced the anticipation that many fans savour when
they rush to their local comics shop on Wednesday afternoons eager to discover what has become of
their favorite heroes who more often than not were left in the clutches of evil arch-nemeses just a
month before. At more than one convention I have witnessed first-hand the awe in the eyes of young enthusiasts who have just spoken with their favorite writer or artist after standing in an autograph line for hours. I have haggled over the price of back issues I needed to purchase, and I usually lost the negotiation except when a particularly knowledgeable twelve year old consented to be my price advisor. And I have commiserated with fans and retailers over the demise of comic book series that were abruptly cancelled due to low sales figures and the highly competitive nature of the market.

In conjunction with participant-observation I have relied heavily on interviews as a source of insight into what these fictional adventures mean to individual readers. Most of this research was conducted in and around the greater Toronto area and was supplemented by brief stints in New York City, and in Chicago during one of the world's largest annual comic book conventions. Since my central focus involves the contribution of the producers' intended meaning in collaboration with the consumers' interpretation. I was fortunate to have been able to interview the co-founders of Milestone Media. I was amazed and grateful at the cooperation and encouragement they afforded me. As the creative forces behind a new publishing enterprise the Milestone founders were quite self-aware of the complexity of their relationship with fans, and about the intentions, political and otherwise, of their comic books. I have tried to supplement any holes in my interviews with the Milestone executives through the numerous pieces that have appeared about them in both the mainstream press and the fan-based magazines and newspapers.

For logical reasons the Milestone audience was much more difficult to pin down than were the Milestone creators. I am now well aware of why Janice Radway (1988) has referred to ethnographic studies of media reception as the problems of dispersed audiences and nomadic subjects. There is no single central event where comic book fans can be observed. The most likely places to find comic book readers is at comics specialty stores and at conventions. But even with these identifiable locations there is no guarantee that you will come across the same subjects more than once. Moreover, events like conventions are typically loud and energetic environments and while this can provide a wealth of observational material it also proved very distracting for fans. It is not easy to get a ten year old boy to answer a question about why he prefers one character over another when a model dressed in a skimpy Vampirella costume is walking by. Initially I attempted to organize relatively structured interviews with comic book fans through connections I had established at local
specialty stores. That strategy turned out to be entirely unsuccessful. It was next to impossible to arrange meetings. I was frequently stood up, or when the meetings did occur there was often an obvious lack of enthusiasm for the subject of comic books, an enthusiasm which I had previously seen the subjects display in abundance in the stores or at conventions. Ultimately, most of my ethnographic research was conducted "on the hoof", as it were, talking with comic book readers anywhere I could get them to talk to me -- in the stores, at the conventions, in shopping malls, and even while standing in line at the movies. On occasion this proved to be more than just a little frustrating because it limited my opportunities to revisit some particularly insightful informants. Eventually many of the people I interviewed became very familiar faces, popping up at the same stores at the same time each week, or frequenting every comic book convention in the area. Of these familiar faces, a core group of twenty five spirited comic book fans from different parts of the city became particularly important informants -- always willing to help illuminate my understanding of their readings, clarify my mistakes of interpretation, provide background information about characters, story lines, and creators, and even offering their market expertise on several occasions when I needed to buy hard to find comic books.

Rather than a formal interview which all too often implies an unequal relationship in favor of the interviewer who controls the subject, the tempo and the very language used. I consider my interactions with the readers to be more akin to conversations. In this case conversations were much more effective because the age difference between myself and the majority of the subjects, eighty-four percent of whom were between five and nineteen years old (see Appendix A for an exact breakdown of informants by age), proved even more distancing in a formal setting. I wanted to avoid the fans' perception that I was an authority with some sort of judgmental agenda. Instead of trying to "get at" certain perceptions I was developing through direct questions. I found conversing about a shared interest to be much more conducive in a collaborative sense. Here I have taken a cue from Lindlof and Grodin (1990) who discussed the practical advantages of the collaborative, unstructured style of interviewing as especially effective when faced with the difficulties of studying a dispersed audience and a system of media use (e.g. reading) that can not be observed directly. Moreover, conversation based on affiliation seemed to encourage the reader's enthusiasm because it is the way fans speak with each other, a way that, as previous audience researchers have often pointed out, is very
similar to gossip.

Where possible I have tried to include the age of the informant, and where relative I have included mention of their ethnicity (see Appendix B for an exact breakdown of informants by race). Although this study is concerned primarily with the development and the reading of Black superheroes I did not want to restrict myself solely to Black comic book readers. Instead, I think it is important to consider how readers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds respond to, and make use of, these new heroes as they are incorporated into their understanding of cultural concepts like race and gender. It would have been too transparent to write about these new Black superheroes as a one-dimensional gesture against the status quo, or as a hegemonic means of colonizing images of Black anger and/or masculinity. It is much more interesting to look at how these new heroes rework existing paradigms by including African American identities within the conventional narratives and iconography of the superhero formula, and to consider how these new heroes reflect audience member's interpretive practices by keying on their subcultural knowledge of the medium and the genre and how the texts facilitate an alternative reading of Black masculinity.

As a point of clarification, I should explain my use of the terms African American and Black throughout this study. While I realize that there are very real political contingencies inherent in the use of particular names for visible minorities within the current social climate of contemporary America (see, for example, Baugh 1991), a thorough examination of these contingencies is beyond the scope of this study. I do not, however, use the terms interchangeably. "Black" is used as a general term of reference and "African American" as a specific term of reference. In other words, because much of this study was conducted in a Canadian context the phrase "African American" was effectively inaccurate as many of the informants who identified themselves as Black were from non-African or non-American slave descendant cultural and historical backgrounds (e.g. those with a Caribbean heritage resisted the label of African American if I accidentally used the phrase in conversation). Even the phrase "African Canadian" rested uncomfortably with many of the fans I spoke with because they felt it portrayed them as merely in the shadow of "African Americans." Thus I use the term Black more liberally here than a study solely about race might because it is a term that can transcend certain cultural boundaries which the fans deemed relatively unimportant to their understanding of the texts. When I do use the phrase "African American" it is because I am
specifically referring to a person or a character who is clearly identifiable as such.

Although I have already mentioned identification as an important factor in the development of Black comic book characters, it is not my prime concern, at least it is not my prime concern in the limited one-to-one sense in which the term is commonly used to imply that men can only identify with men, women with women, Whites with Whites, and Blacks with Blacks. In fact, if theoretical and ethnographic considerations of media audiences have proven anything in the last twenty years it is that audiences are more than capable of manipulating the text in order to find a meaning that is applicable to their own social position. Whether it is Australian Aboriginal children cheering on the Indians in American Western movies (see Fiske 1989), lesbian viewings of television's *Cagney & Lacey* (see D'Acci 1994), or housewives writing *Star Trek* slash fiction (see Bacon-Smith 1994), media audiences have repeatedly shown that they can read between the lines to create their own heroes. As I have argued elsewhere in relation to film theory and celebrity identifications (Brown 1996), I think that to assume audience members need fictional characters with the same skin colour, the same gender or the same sexual orientation as themselves is to underestimate the polymorphous nature of identification. But, still, the desire to see heroes who at least look like one's self represented directly on the screen or the printed page is natural. There is no reason (other than the often cited excuse of economics) why some audience members should always be required to project their imaginative identification across boundaries of race, or gender, or sexuality. Here, then, identification is not always an explicit concern but it does seem to continually lurk just beneath the surface of many of the issues raised, particularly when it comes to interpreting models of race and gender.

The research presented here is an attempt to fill a void in media and audience studies, a void in both topic and focus. While several areas of adult media fandom have been thoroughly explored in recent years, such as the audiences associated with science fiction, soap operas, and romance novels, the large, widespread and highly visible world of comic book fandom has until recently been relatively unstudied. This is a curious oversight considering the extreme popularity of comic book characters in our culture and the amount of attention, often negative or condemning, given to the comics by other media and concerned parents, educators or religious groups who worry about possible harmful effects. The fact that the more frequently studied media fandoms are comprised primarily of adults probably accounts for their legitimacy as a research subject either in defence of,
or in question of, the popular perception that these fan groups are cultural deviants, behaving in a childish manner. On the other hand, because the principal audience for comic books has always been children there is still an impression that these books are mere chewing gum for young minds and are thus unworthy of serious consideration. Likewise, some critics feel that comic books are so simple that they can be dismissed without really being looked at. The sheer size of the industry alone should be some indication of how important a topic comics are -- publishers sell millions of books worldwide every week. Yet, for the most part, comic books and their readers are still looked down upon by both academics and the general public. Comic books, it seems to most people, are not to be taken seriously. Comics are to be casually read by young children and then outgrown, with as little thought as outgrowing an old pair of shoes.

In addition to looking at a relatively unconsidered medium, this dissertation is also an attempt to integrate what often remain as divergent interests in many considerations of popular culture. My focus here is neither the audience nor the text exclusively. Where others have chosen, for ideological reasons, to concentrate on one or the other of these points of access I hope to bridge the gap, as it were, between the different (but not necessarily opposing) domains by addressing the fans, the texts, and even the producers of the texts. This tripartite division can be seen, for example, within the realm of television studies. While a few researchers, (e.g. Todd Gitlin 1983, Feur et al 1984) have focused on the economic and institutionalized logic of production, others have concentrated on detailed analyses of particular television programs or genres (e.g. Deming 1985, Mayne 1988, Williams, 1988), and a growing number of scholars have centered their attention on the actual audiences and the often oppositional meanings they extract from television spectatorship (e.g. Ang 1985; Fiske 1987a and b: Jenkins 1988 and 1991; Lewis 1990 and 1992). This general shift in media studies from the text to the audience will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. Of course, there are practical as well as political reasons why most media research concentrates on one specific element of the producer-text-audience equation. It would take scores of researchers working around the clock and across the map to even begin a truly comprehensive study, and the financial and physical restrictions inherent in any such project would in all likelihood be insurmountable. It would also be unfair to claim that even the most narrowly focused of past media studies did not pay some attention to the interrelatedness of the different cultural factors. For example, out of necessity, every
consideration of producers or audiences also addresses the text to some degree. Still, I think cultural studies is only beginning to emphasize how the different elements of popular culture production and consumption work together so that the realms of what Stuart Hall referred to as "encodings" and "decodings" are understood as intricately interrelated on a number of levels.

As a medium, the world of comic books is an especially clear example of the interrelatedness that is possible between producers and consumers. Instead of seeing the creators and the consumers of mass produced cultural products as distinct groups, with the producers manipulating and capitalizing on the needs of the consumers or with the two groups locked in a struggle over the ownership and the meaning of popular texts, we need to start considering the relationship of production as potentially collaborative and mutually satisfying. We all too often demarcate the two sides as agents of contention rather than looking at them as an integratable whole. The linearly perceived relationship of producers-to-text-to-consumers does not have to be a rigid top-down or a resistive bottom-up situation.

The blurring of the boundaries in comic book production is a clear example of what might be happening in less overt ways in other media systems. In his insightful essay on the history and nature of the audience for superhero comics, one of the very few to address the topic in a discerning manner, Patrick Parsons (1991) argues that "more interesting in many ways than the influence of content on the special or at-large audience. is the influence of the audience --the specialized comic audience-- on the content itself, and more to the point, the manner in which the audience has been responsible for the changing nature of the content" (84). Parsons goes on to point out that the impact of the audience on the producers and the product can be articulated in at least three main forms: "the changing demographics of interested readers, the direct communication between fans and comic artists and writers; and the rise of writers and artists out of the fan audience" (84-85). As an entertainment medium the world of comics is relatively close knit. The creators and the consumers are often in fairly direct contact with each other at conventions or through letters columns, and more recently over the internet. This contact between the two sides has the potential to influence the stories themselves. The most literal and sensationalistic example of this negotiation of meaning occurred in 1988 when DC Comics allowed readers to decide the fate of Batman's sidekick, Robin, through a 1-900 telephone poll (they chose to kill the character by a slim difference of 5343 votes to 5271). On a
more typical level, the constant reader feedback helps the creators to fine-tune the characters and the plots from one adventure to the next.

Texts can and do influence readers. producers can and do socially manipulate consumers both intentionally and unintentionally, and audiences can and do interpret texts in a variety of active ways including resistance and playful cooption. It would be foolish to unconditionally deny any of these possibilities that exist in the system of reception. But, as I hope the following chapters will demonstrate through the example of specific comic books, their creators and their readers, it is also possible that popular media texts are constructed and interpreted through the negotiation of interests shared by the audience and the producers who work in cooperation to create a narrative that operates as a source of both social and a personal meaning.

I have tried to organize this work as a progression which moves from the academic background, to the comic books and their creators, and finally to the fans and the various relations that inform their reading of the books. Chapter two is an overview of the debate within Cultural Studies that revolves around the politically contentious point of where exactly the meaning of popular media texts resides with the producers or with the consumers. I argue that meaning is never clearly in the hands of either group but is created by audiences through personal interpretations informed by both the primary text and the reader's knowledge of other related texts—in this case including such elements as the medium; genre's history, the Black comics debate, and other youth oriented aspects of popular culture. Chapter three traces the history of comic books from the turn of the century to the early 1990s with an emphasis on the development of the superhero genre, the emergence of fan culture, and industry changes that ultimately lead to a creative environment where niche market comic books like those published by Milestone could flourish. Of particular interest in this historical review is the brief period in the 1970s when a wave of influential Blaxploitation comic books presented the first full fledged attempt at creating legitimate Black superhero characters. Chapter four considers Milestone Media Inc., their editorial philosophy regarding Black superheroes, the initial reception of their characters by individual fans and in the fan press. Chapter four also concentrates on the debate over legitimacy of representation and the "Black Aesthetic" that occurred between Milestone and other African American comic book publishers with more overtly political agendas.
Chapters five through eight are directly concerned with the devoted comic book audience and how the Milestone texts are understood in relation to specific influential factors. Chapter five looks closely at the underlying principles of reading as a social process, and considers the position of several real readers as they relate to the texts. Where chapter five explores the world of comic book fandom at an individualistic reader-based level, chapter six explores comic book fandom according to its defining and interpretive tenets, its cultural economy. I argue that there are very clear subcultural principles at work within comic book fandom that shape the reception process in socially contingent ways. Chapter seven looks at the readers' perception of the Milestone heroes as variations on the well-established genre of superhero comic books in general, and more specifically as a reworking of the earlier blaxploitation model of heroism that has haunted the image of Black characters for over twenty years. Moreover, chapter seven explores the idea that shared expectations based on established genre conventions results in an interpretive contract which is a central source of meaning construction for fans. In chapter eight I argue that of prime importance for understanding the appeal of Milestone comic books is how they are read by many fans as an alternative masculine ideal. A masculine ideal that reverses the most prevalent contemporary superhero model of hypermasculinity by emphasizing brains over brawn, a reversal that is especially powerful and progressive because it is written on the body of Black men who have historically been aligned with the unthinking, bestial side of Western culture's Nature versus Civilization dichotomy.

Chapter nine, the conclusion, returns to the question of meaning construction and stresses the various ways that the Milestone texts are understood by many fans not in blind compliance nor in active resistance, but in negotiation as the media producers and the audience struggle with changing notions of race, gender and heroism. The six main interpretive strategies employed by the fans of Milestone comics are recapped and contextualized in relation to each other. Though for purposes of study these points are encountered separately throughout this study, in fandom they are never distinct. The points of comparison are completely interrelated and should be understood as such. For example, the fans' recognition of Milestone's position in relation to the overall history of comic books and the superhero genre is part and parcel of the fans' awareness of Milestone's Black heroes as a reworking of earlier stereotypes. The conclusion also suggests what this study can contribute to our overall understanding of media audiences, race relations and the intersections where the cultural
industries meet with real people. It also dwells on what this study cannot tell us about popular culture, where the pitfalls of overgeneralization are and the limitations of niche market entertainments as agents of cultural change.

The following chapters also include numerous illustrations of the comic books themselves. I have reproduced these images for a variety of reasons. First, I think it is important that the reader should see as much of the primary text as possible in order to get a sense of the actual comics, their style, their energy, their intricate integration of narrative, dialogue and illustration. Second, I hope the visual examples help to support some of the claims that I make during analysis, by very literally illustrating points which pure prose might not do justice. Some comic book analysts who work from within the field they deconstruct have used the illustrated narrative style of the comics to its logical extreme for supporting difficult concepts. In *Understanding Comics* (1993), for example, Scott McCloud has written, or rather I should say drawn, an entire book about comics as an extended cartoon strip with himself as an illustrated host. Third, by including visual examples I hope to avoid the trap of figuratively erasing the media text from the reader's view. As Martin Barker pointed out in his study of British funnies: "it is nigh on impossible to see the original materials being analyzed in most critical studies. Too many critics expect us to take their descriptions on faith" (1989: 4). Due to the structural difference between the mostly one page funnies that Barker was concerned with and the lengthy composition of the comic books under consideration here, I have obviously not been able to reprint the stories in full. Instead of complete stories I have used single pages or covers as examples, but I think that even these samples should be enough to put the commentary to the test, as it were. This is one of the main advantages to studying comics as a media text. Comic books are reproducible whereas other media forms such as film, T.V., music, or live performances can only be described. And I have always found that mere description, no matter how colorful, is a process that necessarily reduces the vibrancy of a subject that so many audience members find exhilarating.

This dissertation started with a simple question: "How do fans make sense of the comic book texts they read?" Along the way the issues of race and gender became inextricably linked with the subcultural modes of evaluation that fans use. As a specific instance of contemporary culture, comic book fandom can reveal much about the way Western society deals with complex and abstract issues in very concrete and media influenced ways. There is much we can learn about fans and much they
can teach us about culture. More than just contributing to current academic debates about audiences and media studies I hope this research can help substantiate the importance of media use in the lives of young consumers trying to negotiate their understanding of our society and their place in it.
BETWEEN PASSIVE SHEEP AND RESISTANT AUDIENCES

In the study of mass media and cultural consumption an opposition has developed between theories of the producer's hegemonic power and the audience's ability to construct active, critical and oppositional interpretations. The age-old assumption of media audiences as cultural dupes, passively accepting the values and beliefs that serve the status quo has been repeatedly challenged by cultural studies critics since the 1970s. In response to the notion of public constraint or total control by popular texts, critics have sought to demonstrate that actual audiences partake in all kinds of active and subversive readings of dominant cultural forms and ideologies. Shaun Moores describes the debate as revolving around the "pairing of agency:structure, or creativity:constraint" where the opposition seems to be between "the forces of social transformation and the pressures of social reproduction" (1993: 117). In essence the dilemma has been politicized as a struggle between mass media domination and the common people's power of resistance. Increasingly, though not without criticism, cultural studies has been championing the free play and interpretive strategies of the subaltern. So much so that Evans (1990) has characterized recent audience work in media studies as defined by two basic assumptions: i) that the audience is always active (in a nontrivial sense), and ii) that media content is always polysemic, or open to interpretation. One of active audience theories main proponents. John Fiske, has gone so far as to declare that "popular culture in industrial societies is contradictory to the core" (1989a: 23).

While I would agree that consumers are active participants of popular culture rather than passive dupes, I am inclined to disagree with the notion that active consumption necessarily entails opposition or subversion. The domination versus resistance debate has key flaws on both sides. Theories of domination tend to assume a totalitarian view of production that sees all media in the
service of the ruling class, while theories of resistance fall into the romantic trap of implying universal resistance based on the activity of very select subcultural groups. On the one side I think it is wrong to presuppose that the mass media always and totally traffics in hegemony serving agendas, and on the other there has been a tendency to be overly optimistic about the supposed evidence of resistance and a convenient ignoring of the mainstream audience who seem content to enjoy the media on its own terms. Instead, what we need is to consider producers and consumers in less stereotypical and monolithic terms, and also to consider the relationship between the creators and the audience as potentially sympathetic rather than as always a struggle for power and meaning. In this chapter I want to chart the evolution of modern audience research in cultural studies to demonstrate how it has reached an overly affirmative position, outline the criticism that these studies and their methodology have recently come under, and finally to offer some suggestions about how the case of Milestone Media Inc. and its fans might provide an example for solving these problems.

Screen Theory and Textual Determinism

Though mass media studies became formalized in the 1940s through the Frankfurt School in their combined work on what Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer called "the cultural industry", in reference to the highly developed and corporation based music, film and broadcasting businesses, the domination/resistance debate that has raged in both the academic world and the popular press of English speaking cultures can best be understood as originating in the early 1970s amongst British intellectuals interested in the issues of ideology and mass communication. The influential cultural theories of Marx and Engels, that essentially posited the ideas of the ruling class as the ruling ideas for the entire social structure, lacked an adequate model of exactly how these ideas were communicated and internalized within a modern society. There was no explanation within conventional Marxism for how dominant social meanings were enculturated in the face of a rising awareness of the arbitrary, yet self-perpetuating, nature of class stratification. In order to account for social subjectivity and the methods by which consciousness is shaped, many media and culture critics were attracted to the works of Neo-Marxists like Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci that were translated into English in 1971.

In addition to Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis, Althusser's seminal essay "Ideology and
ldeological State Apparatuses" was readily adopted by British film critics, particularly those associated with the film journal Screen, and in a somewhat less direct means by French semioticians in the pages of Cahiers de Cinema. Althusser's famous essay challenged the conventional Marxist assumption that ideology is a "false consciousness" brought on by the discrepancy between economic reality and one's historical position. For Marx, ideology acted as a type of veil over the eyes of the working class that distorted their perception of their relation to the real world around them. Rather than seeing ideology as false, Althusser argued for a definition of ideology as a system which "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (1971: 162). In other words, ideology operates as a conceptual framework. As Stuart Hall puts it, Althusser's notion of ideology is a system "through which men interpret, make sense of, experience and 'live' the material conditions in which they find themselves" (1980: 33). As well as stressing ideology as an interpretive function, Althusser also emphasized that it has a material existence and therefore must be analyzed and interpreted through its material projections. By 'material existence' he was not referring to elements of material culture as rudimentary as a paving stone or a rifle (although many subsequent scholars have pointed out just how thoroughly culture is made material in even the most mundane artifacts), but rather Althusser believed that ideology's material existence always resides in social institutions, or in other words in an apparatus, and the practise, or practises of that apparatus.

Althusser proposed that such fundamental institutions of modern society as the family, the school, the church, the arts, and the mass media are Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) that operate to maintain and reproduce the existing unequal system of industrial production. Althusser's notion of ISAs is distinct from, but related to, the Marxist theory of State Apparatuses. For Marx, State Apparatuses were overtly repressive societal constructs such as the Government, the Army, the Police, the Courts, and the Prisons. The distinction Althusser makes is that the powerful Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) are part of the public domain and function by violence, whereas the ISAs are part of the private domain and function by ideology. According to Althusser, the RSAs of Marxist theory are active, organized and controlled institutions that very consciously enforce and regulate cultural standards. Conversely, ISAs are not directly coercive but foster consent by institutionalizing the social order as natural, or as Althusser says, "obvious". ISAs situate, or "interpellate", individuals as subjects within an ideological system. The apparent obviousness of dominant ideology as purveyed
by ISAs is nearly invisible in comparison to the heavy handed approach of the Repressive State Apparatuses. The Ideological State Apparatuses create subjects who regulate their own assimilation into dominant ideology. For Althusser "the individual is interpretated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection" (1971: 57, italics in original).

For film critics the appeal of Althusser's model of ideology was undeniable. With mass media being classified amongst the major ISAs, cinema theory shifted its focus from considering only the political content of individual films to the function of the cinema itself as a vehicle for deseminating the ideology of the dominant culture. How did the formal constructs of the cinematic experience position viewers as ideological subjects? Although Althusser's model was partially the result of his exposure to psychoanalytic theory, for Screen theorists it was the influence of Jacque Lacan, who fundamentally reworked Freud's ideas about subjectivity, that became crucial when combined with Althusser's concept of ISAs. Lacan emphasized the precarious status of personal subjectivity as it is produced through external symbolic/cultural systems. Rather than autonomous individuals capable of free expression, Lacan believed that the social world is written on our backs, acts upon us, and constitutes us as social subjects within a symbolic order such as language or vision. In essence, Lacan suggests that our image as a fixed and unified self is an illusion. Sign systems like language create for us a fiction whereby we can imagine ourselves to be the source of meaning when we utter the personal pronoun "I", or refer to someone else as "you". Likewise, for Lacan our visual perception of self and other as developed through the developmental "mirror" stage constructs a misconception of subjectivity and a failed relationship of identification and desire. In applying the principles of both Althusserian and Lacanian philosophy, Screen became the vanguard journal seeking to uncover the cinematic mechanisms that bestow the illusion of subjectivity upon viewers by suturing them into the narrative through identification with the fictional subjects on the screen.

The influence of Althusser's concept of ideology and Lacan's views of subjectivity became the defining feature of Screen theory throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. As Anthony Easthope explains:

*Screen's* analysis draws several implications from the Lacanian conception of subjectivity. One is that the subject does not exist outside or prior to discourse but is constituted as an effect within discourse through a particular stitching together or
suturing of the imaginary and symbolic. Another is that since there can be no signified without a signifier, there can be no imaginary coherence for the subject without an operation of the signifier in the symbolic to bring about the coherence. And a third is that a textual institution such as classic realism works to disavow the signifier, so producing a position of imaginary coherence in and for the readers by means of the various strategies through which the signifier is disclaimed. This corresponds to Althusser's understanding of ideology as producing submissive subjects, subjects who submit precisely in misrecognising their subordination as freedom. Much of subsequent work in Screen is devoted to analyzing these textual strategies in detail and to bringing the project into closer connection with the politics of feminism...

(Easthope, 1988: 42)

The effect of these theories can be seen in the work of three of Screen's most influential writers of the era: Colin MacCabe, Stephen Heath and Laura Mulvey. Their combined target became the classic cinema of Hollywood and its seemingly realistic presentation of a narrative world.

Mainstream film (or any mass medium) stood accused of fostering the illusion of a coherent world, of providing a transparent window onto the world, and granting the viewer a privileged point of view and a false sense of subjectivity. In his essay "Realism and the Cinema" (1974) MacCabe argued that the "classic realist text", be it film, literature or theatre, creates the illusion of transparency where spectators imagine themselves to be watching a real scene. The distinction between reality and the film as a constructed experience is effaced by the realist text, and in denying its own material existence film produces the misconception that the spectator is the actual source of the look. The invisible style that characterized classical Hollywood cinema established conventional mechanisms for aligning the spectator with the character on the screen. Editing procedures like the shot/reverse shot formation and the point-of-view camera angle were regarded by Screen critics as the cinematic equivalent to the Lacanian notion of "suture", which is also parallel to the Althusserian idea of "interpellation". As suturing techniques, the shot/reverse shot strategy links together an establishing shot of the narrative subject who is looking and the scene which he is looking at, thus his point-of-view becomes ours and we are metaphorically stitched into the text. Heath claimed in his 1977 essay "Notes on Suture" that as the camera controls and defines all vision, it creates a viewing subject with no alternatives but to "make the meanings the film makes for it" (58). The position of subjectivity that
we freely assume as our own is actually constructed for us. For MacCabe, Heath and other Screen theorists the cinematic apparatus served the interests of the dominant ideology by reproducing the existing social order as real, obvious and natural.

Uniting Screen's developing concept of false subjectivity as created by the cinematic apparatus with a feminist perspective, Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" (1975) has become one of the most influential articles in the history of cinema studies. In her analysis of the pleasures of looking and identification provided by film, Mulvey reasons that the narrative and structural mechanisms of cinema (lighting, editing, camera angles, etc.) are aligned with a scopophilic or voyeuristic male gaze that constitutes woman as an object to be looked at. According to Mulvey the world is ordered by a sexual imbalance, where pleasure has been split between the assumed dichotomy of active/male and passive/female. Thus, the "determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionistic role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." (Mulvey, 1973: 27) The classic Hollywood film creates and sustains this gendered dichotomy as natural by constructing the spectator's identification with the persona of the male protagonist, the spectator being forced to adopt the male lead's point of view, thus the male character acts as both the viewer's proxy and as the perfect ego ideal as first conceived in the Lacanian mirror phase. Mulvey argues that visually, emotionally and ideologically our subjectivity is forced into collusion with the dominant/hegemonic male gaze, in other words it is always through male eyes that we understand the cinematic world. As evidence Mulvey points to the numerous occasions in film where the display of the female image serves no narrative purpose, and indeed halts the narrative for the sake of openly fetishizing the female form, such as Marlene Dietrich's or Marilyn Monroe's musical performances or the lingering focus on almost any heroine when she first appears on the screen. For Mulvey then, the conventional mechanisms of cinema both inform and reflect the rules of culture that value male subjectivity while relegating female worth to mere objectivity. This dilemma is compounded in film for female spectators who are forced to either assume a transvestite viewing position or to over-identify with the fetishized female on the screen.

Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" represents a clear and extremely
influential model of the Screen theorist's textual approach to media. In essence the false transparency of the narrative world was seen as a discursive production of Althusser's concept of 'obviousness'. The power of cinema lay in its ability to seduce viewers into an internalized acceptance of dominant ideology. As an alternative the Screen critics touted the films of Jean-Luc Goddard and the acting style espoused in Brechtian theatre. Both Goddard and Brecht sought to draw attention to the structural conventions of their art. In Goddard's films the viewer is made aware of the camera's presence by unconventional editing techniques that foreground the narratives unnaturalness, while Brechtian performance is based on obvious and exaggerated acting styles that high-light the artificiality of the narrative and discourage spectator identification. Both of these avant-garde forms of entertainment ultimately alienated mainstream, middle-class and working-class audiences, and while this did circumvent the fear of viewers being ideologically situated by the text, it also proved far less popular than the classical realist cinema. For the Screen critics avant-garde film and theatre was ripe with revolutionary potential. They believed that in order to cast off the bonds of domination, the naturalized transmission of bourgeois ideology must be exposed. Cultural change and true subjectivity could only occur when the realist text was revealed as a loaded construct, as an Ideological State Apparatus that reproduced complacent masses.

**Comic Book Criticism**

Similar to the early Screen theorist style of cultural criticism, much of past scholarly work on comic books has approached the medium on a textual level, characterizing it as a purveyor of hegemony. In fact, beyond the fan-oriented, coffee-table histories of comic books (e.g. Benton 1991, Daniels 1995 or Robbins 1996), and those impressed by the superhero's similarity to his mythological ancestors (e.g. Rollin 1970, Schecter 1980, Nash 1992 or Gabilliet 1994) or his thinly disguised embodiment of numerous Freudian psychoses (e.g. Lang 1990, Terrill 1993, or Reed 1995), most forays into comic book studies argue that the medium is detrimental to young readers for any number of reasons. Among these indictments are the accusations that the comics are sexist (Young 1991, Pacora 1992) that they lower literacy levels (Rackham 1968, Brown 1948), and that they promote violence (Muhlen 1949, Fulce 1990). The most alarming and effective of these anti-comic book attacks came in the 1950s when Frederic Wertham accused the comics of causing
juvenile delinquency. Since the Wertham scare had very important consequences for the industry historically, I will be addressing the issue in greater detail in the next chapter. While these blatant scare-mongering attacks on comic books can be understood as a form of scape-goating that occurs in relation to every media (see Starker 1989), the more legitimate criticisms, the ones that are harder to diffuse, are the ones that indict comic books as dangerous because they influence ideology. Comic books, the critics in this vein argue, are extremely effective hegemonic tools that teach young readers how to be good little citizens and to accept the dominant ideologies as their own, even if that involves their further subjugation in the social system.

"Of all analyses of comics," claims Martin Barker in his investigation of children's funnies and ideology, "perhaps the most important is Dorfman and Mattelart's study of the Disney comics" (1989: 279). Dorfman and Mattelart's work is certainly the clearest example of condemning comic books as purveyors of hegemonic ideals. Written from a Chilean perspective at a time when Chile was struggling to break free from American domination, their How To Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic (1976) is a Marxist critique of Disney as an agent of cultural imperialism. A complex argument, Dorfman and Mattelart's position comes down to a belief that modern imperialism is dependent not only on economic and political forces but also the dissemination of the belief that the American way of life is natural and desirable. This ideological manipulation, they argue, is best done under the guise of innocent fun. In effect, Disney comic books become the most pernicious of American propaganda, colonizing the minds, the desires and the dreams of innocent children.

According to Dorfman and Mattelart, Disney comics are capable of promoting American capitalism because they speak directly to the lives of young readers and because they effect a transformation via the structure of the narrative. Their prime examples are the stories which feature the Duck family --Donald Duck, his Uncle Scrooge, and his nephews Huey, Dewey and Louie. Dorfman and Mattelart see the Duck family comics as a form of manipulation that appeals directly to children by replacing parents with a less restrictive environment populated by funny animal uncles and nephews. Attributing all creative intention to a single manipulative source, they declare: "He

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1 It would seem logical that the colonalizing hegemony of American style comic books would be of greater concern to non-American scholars. Recently, Germany's Reinhard Schweizer (1992) has published a book detailing the ideological and propagandistic premise inherent in the Marvel publishing company's superhero comics. Unfortunately no English translation for the text exists yet.
[Disney] invites children into a world that appears to offer freedom of movement and creation, into which they enter fearlessly, identifying with creatures as affectionate, trustful and irresponsible as themselves, of whom no betrayal is to be expected, and with whom they can safely play and mingle. Then, once the little readers are caught within the pages of the comic, the doors close behind them" (1976: 41). This seems to be an incredibly paranoid description of childhood reading if ever one has been written. Once "lured" into the peaceful domain of funny little animals, young readers are then "caught" in this evil world where cuddly creatures become monstrous and the fearless Ducks travel the world exploiting various cultures and robbing them of their wealth.

The narrative of the Duck family adventures is read by Dorfman and Mattelart as an intricate collection of capitalistic themes. In effect, Dorfman and Mattelart believe the stories offer a blueprint of American attitudes on such themes as compulsive consumerism, the fetishization of money, the subservience of women, environmental exploitation, the naturalization of class and social status and even the rewriting of history. Typically, each comic sees the Ducks setting off in search of some rare treasure that Uncle Scrooge insists upon adding to his incredible body of wealth. Thus, Uncle Scrooge represents the rich industrialist who wantonly exploits labor --they are only his nephews after all-- and wealth is depicted as an abstract concept with no connection to means of production --an endless supply of gold and jewels can always be found just lying around. Moreover, they argue, people from non-first world cultures are depicted as infantile and naive, too stupid to even value the material wealth that is already in their possession.

Overall, Dorfman and Mattelart's ideological analysis is compelling, although some critics such as Barker (1989: 279-299) have pointed out that How to Read Donald Duck lacks any real evidence regarding the intentionality of the Disney creators. Moreover, other scholars have looked at the same comics and come up with drastically different readings of Disney ideology that seem just as plausible. For example, Reitberger and Fuchs read the Duck family comics as "making fun of wealth in an absurd and at the same time most fetching way" (1972: 44), while Wagner (1973) considered the stories to represent a thinly veiled critique of capitalism, and Barrier (1973) argued that the comic books' real subject matter was not money but the ways in which human beings deceive and destroy themselves –and how funny they can be when they do it. It would seem that ideology, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. "This is, of course, the besetting problem of this sort of ideology critique."
argues John Tomlinson in his review of writings about media texts and cultural imperialism, "it implies that the critic has penetrated the 'superficial' meaning of the text to arrive at the 'true' ideological meaning... [thus remaining] at the level of a politicized reading of the 'imperialist text', not an argument about cultural imperialism" (Tomlinson, 1991: 43). Although I do believe that interpretations based on ideological analysis can be insightful, illuminating the text in often very politically aware ways, it often comes down to a simple privileging of the critic's own reading rather than a realistic consideration of how the text actually works for audiences. The intentions and the practises of both the creators and the consumers must be incorporated into the inquiry. Otherwise it's like shooting fish in a barrel, if you go looking for hegemony you'll always find it in some form. When tied too strictly to a political viewpoint you lose the chance of being surprised by the complexities of culture. Moreover, Barker also notes that Dorfman and Mattelart's theory of identification is far too restrictive to account for the complex relationship that exists between the readers and the comic books.

In his subsequent work The Empire's Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and other innocent heroes do to our minds (1983) Ariel Dorfman shifts his attention to superhero comics. It is worth noting that the cover illustration for the paperback version of The Empire's Old Clothes (Figure 2.1) is strikingly similar to the type of photograph that circulated in America when comics were being accused of instigating delinquency in the 1950s (Figure 2.2). In this popular image a child sits reading an adventure comic book with startlingly wide eyes full of wonder. Certainly anything this interesting for children must be harmful. In effect, the same iconography of fascinated reading is used to evidence the evils of comic books for drastically different reasons --one for the promotion of American values, the other for the erosion of American values. In The Empire's Old Clothes Dorfman spends much of his time concentrating on the early comic book adventures of the Lone Ranger, rather than just the Duck family, but he continues with the familiar themes of hegemony and cultural imperialism. Dorfman argues that the function of the costumed superhero in comic books is twofold: 1) he acts as a stabilizing figure of nature who ensures the happy resolution of social conflicts, and 2) he reproduces the myth of bourgeois social mobility that is so important for the preservation of capitalism.
On the first front, Dorfman argues that the hero is a prime example of the "famous optimism of the mass media" wherein everything gets "pleasantly resolved", thus reaffirming "that all contradictions can be overcome" (95). The hero of action comics enacts a conscious intervention and actively --and always successfully-- manages the crisis. He functions as a natural force that embodies the rules and behaviors of a just and rational world. "Since the hero is the decisive element in this turnabout," Dorfman writes, "he does not oppose the world, he does not rebel against its laws (be they written or secret). On the contrary, he appears as the natural and moral emanation of these tendencies. With his strength and abilities, he allows these rules to act on their own behalf, so that the system can uninterruptedly continue to reveal its incessant mechanical self-regulation" (96). The hero ensures that chaos and injustice are an impossibility. Wherever and whenever things go wrong --the bank is robbed, the perky girl reporter is kidnapped, angry space aliens attack-- the hero will appear to help restore the natural order of stability and goodness. He will punish the wrong-doers and avert disasters, then move on... to other adventures, other comic books. There is a double danger to this fantasy, as Dorfman sees it, for one thing the natural and edenic state that the hero fights to maintain is always an American and capitalistic state. And secondly the superhero comic book also channels all the reader's innate rebelliousness, energy, aggression, needs and instincts for transformation into preserving rather than challenging the state. In essence, Dorfman sees the hero as an unrealistic embodiment of a granted prayer.

On the second front, reproducing the myth of social mobility, Dorfman argues that the structure of the hero's adventures and his seemingly impeccable moral constitution reveal him to be the personification of the capitalistic ideal, an Horatio Alger character for our times, an Andrew Carnegie in tights, mask, and cape. Here the comic book hero leads by example:

...we must ask ourselves if the way the superhero confronts and defeats the imbalances that he encounters corresponds to some force (or forces) that the reader identifies as operating in his life on a daily basis, some force that demonstrates a similar energy and direction. Take the individuality of the (aptly named) Lone Ranger, for example. Anyone born in a market society is expected to get ahead all by himself, in solitude. In addition, we are taught that many times we fail because we're not able to get the better of everyone else. The dominant ideas and the productive system itself have prepared each consumer to feel that the way in which the Lone Ranger faces painful situations, in his capacity as the unyielding macho, is absolutely natural and commendable. Such an emphasis on
personal, competitive strength coexists with an opposite and complementary tendency toward paternalism, which the Ranger also satisfies as he emerges from outside the world to exercise compassion for inferior beings. The system preaches that we must fend for ourselves in order to triumph, but that once we are invested with superiority, once we have accepted a position of authority in the hierarchy, it behooves us to lend a paternal hand to those weaker than ourselves. In superhero comics, this ferocity of competition and gentleness of compassion are amalgamated into one being.

(Dorfman, 1983: 99)

In the superhero we find the self-made man of capitalism who rises above any obstacles through his sheer ingenuity and perseverance. Dorfman goes on to argue that the hero is an example for each and every young reader. Handicaps don't matter, "it doesn't matter if you're an outsider, if they treat you like a criminal, a dangerous element, or if they don't have any faith in your abilities and intentions. Your qualities will all be proved in time" (104). Thus the ideology of equal opportunity, the ideology that both justifies the position of those in power and holds out hope for a Cinderella-like ascent for those without, is enculcated.

According to Dorfman, the superhero's hegemonic function is at the root of his twin functions of restoring social order and embodying the myth of social mobility. "At the very same moment that he distances himself from society and becomes independent of its fetters," Dorfman argues, "he also guarantees its values and the status quo" (104-5). The hero is seen here as an hegemonic agent par excellence, a "mechanism of political domination" made human, or rather, superhuman. Dorfman mounts a substantial attack against comic books, and other forms of American popular culture, for their ability to colonize young minds. But like the Screen-inspired theorists in Europe at the time, Dorfman's argument was based entirely on textual analysis with absolutely no consideration of how actual readers might approach the texts in a variety of different ways.

The CCCS, Active Consumers, and the Turn to Ethnography

Although the Screen inspired theoretical position of the 1970s was central to many of the debates surrounding the mass media, it was not shared by all cultural critics. Even within Screen's own pages criticism and reworkings began to appear sporadically. Screen theory's prevailing assumption that all meaning is constructed by the text for the spectator privileged form over content and context and ignored the possibility that the spectator might be actively involved in the construction of
meaning. In the latter half of the decade a strong rebuttal to this extreme textual determinism became the focus of the Media Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (the CCCS). Rather than considering the text as the source of all meaning, the members of the CCCS emphasized the potential of audiences as active producers of meaning. By considering real people and not simply inferring the spectator’s inscribed position via the mechanisms of the text, the Birmingham group began to characterize media consumption as a site of ideological negotiation and contested interpretations. Charlotte Brundson, one of the Centre’s main contributors, explains the shift in audience consideration:

We can usefully analyze the ‘you’ or ‘yous’ that the text as discourse constructs, but we cannot assume that any individual audience member will necessarily occupy these positions. The relation of the audience to the text will not be determined solely by that text, but also by positionalities in relation to a whole range of other discourses... elaborated elsewhere, already in circulation and brought to the (text) by the viewer. (Brundson, 1981: 32)

While the members of the CCCS did not completely deny the text’s ability to construct subject positions, they did recognize that individual readers are already constituted as social beings and each person brings to the text a whole host of differing interpretive practises derived from unique life experiences. Accordingly, the CCCS members adopted an ethnographic approach in their study of media consumption and subcultural groups in order to get at the interpretive relationship that real people have in their daily use of popular culture.

Rather than film and the cinematic experience, members of the CCCS tended to focus their study of media consumption on television and its domestic use. The theoretical catalyst for much of the group’s work came from an early paper, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” (1973), by the Centre’s director Stuart Hall. Influenced by structural linguistics and semiotics, Hall was interested in charting how meaning is constructed by producers and deconstructed by consumers via the coded understanding of the narrative as a sign system. At the core of Hall’s argument was the now well recognized premise about the socially constructed nature of language as a symbolic code:

Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed --the effect of an articulation between sign and referent-- but to be "naturally" given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a "near-universality" in
this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently "natural" visual codes are culture-specific. However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly naturalized.

(Hall, 1973: 132)

As Shaun Moores puts it, "Hall recognized that media 'language' is not a straightforward 'tool' for transmitting ideas, or a transparent 'window' on the social world, but a necessarily refractive sign system" (Moores, 1993: 17). In other words, Hall saw television as a text that has to be 'made to mean' by both the creators and the viewers according to formalized, but polysemic, codes such as the clear-cut moral universe of the 'B' Western where the hero is signified by white hat and good manners. For Hall this sign system, which he referred to as 'rules of encoding', was "so diffuse, so symmetrically shared as between producer and audience, that the 'message' was likely to be decoded in a manner highly symmetrical to that in which it had been encoded" (Hall, 1973: 131). The communication process was regarded by Hall as a process, with relatively equal attention required for both the production of the text and the audience's interpretation of it. Yet despite his nominal inclusion of the producer's act of encoding, Hall, and many of the Birmingham group who later based their research on Hall's model, tended to explore the audience's variable means of decoding at the expense of equal consideration of the producer's intent.

Hall's model made the clear distinction that polysemic codes are not to be confused with pluralism. In other words, although there is a certain measure of openness regarding the text's meaning, there are also very recognizable limitations to that openness. While there is some free play within any connotative sign, this free play is not equal on all sides. According to Hall, there does exist a dominant order that works to create a preferred meaning.

Connotative codes are not equal among themselves. Any Society's culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classification of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested... The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into dominant or preferred meanings.

(Hall, 1973: 134)

But this preferred meaning is not absolute, instead it is only the first of three hypothetical decoding positions posited by Hall. Each of the three positions signify the political, economic and cultural
struggle and negotiation of meaning that may be involved in the communicative process of media texts. The first decoding position is that of the *dominant or hegemonic code*. Here the spectator takes the connoted meaning of the text at face value and interprets the message in exactly the way the producers intended. The viewer is operating within the dominant code. This hegemonic position is the interpretive practise that comes the closest to textual determinism. The second position is one where the reader adopts a *negotiated code*. This position is distinguished by a split within the individual between their global and their local understanding of the message. Interpretation within the negotiated code "contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground-rules, it operates with 'exceptions' to the rule" (Hall, 33). For example, a viewer may agree in principle with a News commentary promoting wage freezes as beneficial to the national economy but still resist any such practise at his own place of employment. The third, and perhaps the most enticing, decoding position suggested by Hall is the *oppositional code*. In this situation the consumer understands the dominant meaning but determines to interpret the message in a "globally contrary way". The message is filtered through an alternative framework of reference where, for example, every mention of national interest is understood as class, ethnic, or gender interest.

The most ambitious use of Hall's encoding/decoding model amongst the members of the CCCS was David Morley's *Nationwide* project. The popular BBC television program *Nationwide* was chosen as the subject for an extensive study by the members of the Birmingham group. The collaborative research project began in 1975 and was initially written up by Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley in 1978. Morley was to return to the subject numerous times in an effort to revise and expand upon their early theories. *Nationwide* served as the BBC's segue from the evening news to prime time entertainment programs. The hour long show was a more informal type of news coverage with a focus on human interest stories from around Britain and a common sensical, 'everyman' approach to major issues. In the first stage of the project Brunsdon and Morley attempted a primarily textual analysis of *Nationwide* in order to determine its ideological position and its means of addressing viewers. They were trying to isolate the preferred reading of the text, the *dominant code*, and the way in which it was inscribed. In essence, they argued that through its 'down to earth'
presentational style, its 'man of the people' host Michael Barratt, and its coverage of everyday life experiences from local communities. *Nationwide* constructed a unifying national text that encouraged viewers to see themselves as part of the British whole despite any surface differences. "The British people [united in their diversity] constituted together as members of the regional communities which make up the nation and as members of families" (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978: 92). The overriding hegemonic ideology communicated would seem to be one of national unity as modeled on 'homey' naturalism and Britain as a metaphorical family unit. But this initial study only accounted for the encoding half of Hall's formulation. Through subsequent research Morley moved beyond the shadow of textual analysis to consider how actual audiences read *Nationwide*.

In his subsequent research *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* (1980), Morley built upon the previous study by conducting qualitative interviews with viewers to determine their interpretive strategies. Morley was primarily concerned with how real social subjects reacted to the show's preferred reading of issues, whether they accepted or rejected the encoded message and the degree of identification they felt towards the text. Recorded episodes of *Nationwide* were shown to over twenty-five groups of viewers consisting of either managers, students, apprentices, or union tradesmen. After viewing the episode the groups were engaged in a discussion of the program's contents, and the comments were then analyzed by Morley. The choice to study groups of people with similar socioeconomic status was a reflection of Hall's perception of audiences as far from distinctively personal or privatized. Instead, most members of the Birmingham group believed audience research should be concerned primarily in demarcating 'significant clusters' of meaning interpretation.

Although *The Nationwide Audience* was an innovative study, its findings were ultimately rather inconclusive. Morley quickly became aware of the limiting nature of using Hall's model of decoding according to either dominant, negotiated or oppositional readings. While some of the decoding strategies fell within Hall's proposed types, no clear distinction could be made between the viewer's preferences for certain presentational styles and the reading of ideological content. Moreover, individual viewers, and even entire groups, seemed at times to mix two or more of the decoding stances or to create readings that fell entirely outside the range of Hall's model. For example, Morley found that a group of bank managers were clearly less than satisfied with the style
that *Nationwide* used to present a piece on the budget, which allowed them to focus on the technical constructions, while at the same time they so identified with the program's ideological position that it remained invisible to them. A group of shop floor workers enjoyed the general populist tone of the show but resented its economic alignment with the middle class. And even further, black college students were found to construct oppositional readings that did not invert the preferred reading, but rather opted out of any determinate reading all together. In the end Morley's research demonstrated the variety of interpretations possible from within specific socioeconomic groups. And while the encoded message of the text did function to influence the range of readings that could be made, other extra-textual factors such as subcultural background could not be accurately accounted for. Regardless of its limitations, *The Nationwide Audience* has become a seminal work, marking a distinct shift away from the traditional critical reliance on analysis of the text in isolation to an empirical consideration of how real people interact with popular texts.

Realizing the shortcomings of his experimental techniques Morley has subsequently revised and qualified his work on the *Nationwide* project (see Morley 1981, 1986 and 1992), but I want to turn now to the other major area of audience research undertaken by the Birmingham group, namely the body of work based on subcultures. Following a similar theoretical framework for encoding and decoding of hegemonic ideology, many members of the CCCS concentrated on ethnographic evaluations of popular subcultures. The 1976 anthology *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, featured work by some of the most influential scholars in Cultural Studies and formalized the qualitative, interpretive approach that still dominates the field today. As the title suggests, the ethnographic case studies in *Resistance Through Ritual* center on how various types of youth groups collectively resist the inscription of the class system in which they live. The subjects under consideration ranged from dress and behavioral codes associated with musical preferences for groups like the teddy boys, the mods, skinheads, and Rastafarians, to drug use amongst hippies and bikers, to more theoretical concerns about class, gender, age, and media use. With the exception of Pearson and Twohig's chapter entitled "Sociological Imperialism. Blind Spots and Ecstasies", all of the contributors characterize youth subcultures as symbolically and effectively resisting dominant culture. Within subcultural theory the process of encoding and decoding becomes a contested site, a battle for meaning. Recognizing the
ever present influence of the dominant culture, the authors still argue in the introduction that "cultural configurations will not only be subordinate to this dominant order: they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign – its hegemony. The struggle between classes over material and social life thus always assumes the forms of a continuous struggle over the distribution of 'cultural power'" (Hall and Jefferson, 1976: 12). Often this struggle for cultural power could be found in the way youth subcultures appropriated material objects and reinscribed their own meanings onto them via recontextualization.

Two of the contributors to Resistance Through Rituals, Paul Willis and Dick Hebdige, each went on to develop their subcultural ethnographies into landmark studies. Willis's Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs (1977) is an in depth ethnography of a group of teenagers in a Birmingham school. Through interviews and participant-observation research Willis portrays the working class 'lads' of his study as actively struggling to resist the class system as it is imposed by the school. The 'lads' constitute a counter-school culture, defining their existence in opposition to other social groups such as girls, immigrants and school conformists. The act of fighting, either against the other groups or amongst themselves, operated as a sign of their difference, becoming the main symbol of their masculinity and their collective resistance. Their behavior is ironic, for as Willis points out, their very resistance of the school system is the act that disqualifies them from access to middle class jobs. In effect, their perception of upward social mobility as nearly impossible causes them to opt out of the very system that may provide a means to ascend, thus subjugation seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet the school's insistence that a few working class kids have managed to succeed only reinforces the legitimacy of the class structure to the point where the middle class is seen as privileged "by virtue of an apparently greater competence and merit", and according to Willis this results in the 'lads' refusal to compete, and in a sense this becomes "a radical act: [as] it refuses to collude with [their] own educational suppression" (128). While to many this self perpetuating refusal to compete might be seen as an internalized reproduction of the class system through one of Althusser's primary Institutional State Apparatuses. Willis rejects this implied perception of the reproduction of dominant ideology as impenetrable. Instead, Willis's position is "more optimistic because there are deep disjunctions and desperate tensions within social and cultural reproduction. Social agents are not passive bearers of ideology, but active appropriators who
reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation, and a partial penetration of those struggles" (175). As with the hippy and biker drug users in his chapter of *Resistance Through Rituals* (and his 1978 follow up book *Profane Culture*) Willis regards the 'lads' of *Learning to Labour* as enacting failed, but aware, attempts at political opposition. Despite their failure to truly resist, these youths are far from passively incorporated into the dominant culture.

Perhaps the most enduring and influential work on youth subcultures to come out of the Birmingham group is Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Published only two years after *Learning to Labour*, and also having been developed from an earlier contribution to *Resistance Through Rituals*, Hebdige's study seconds many of Willis's themes. In *Subculture* Hebdige undertakes an ethnographic survey of various youth groups and forms a semiotic interpretation of their resistance as expressed through their dress, music, and behavioral styles. Like Willis, Hebdige concentrated on youth with working class origins who were frustrated by the economic futility of their social position in the late 1970s. Among his subjects were black immigrant Rastafarians, the high fashion influenced Mods, and the retro dandy Teddy Boys, but his most spectacular subculture was that of the Punks. The Punks were spectacular for Hebdige in both their highly visible and confrontational manner that was directly threatening to mainstream British culture, and in their adept reworking of mass media and material signifiers. Punks adopted a style that was very self-consciously in opposition to the values of dominant culture and they did so with a rather ironic temperament by fully exploiting the mass media's fascination with their particularly distinguishable counter-cultural movement. For Hebdige, Punks were a prime example of youth culture's subversive practise of *bricolage*, where signs are creatively reorganized, juxtaposed, and recontextualized to convey new meanings. As Hebdige describes it, "unremarkable and inappropriate items - a pin, a plastic clothes peg, a television component, a razor blade, a tampon - could be brought within the province of punk (un)fashion" (1979:107). This sense of anti-style takes on the properties of a political statement, of a 'refusal' of hegemonic ideology.

Though ultimately, like Willis's 'lads', the subcultures studied by Hebdige are essentially powerless to effect any real or lasting challenge to the status quo... it is their symbolic refusal that is crucial. Hebdige announced his optimism early on in the book, claiming: "I would like to think that this Refusal is worth making, that these gestures have a meaning, that the smiles and the sneers have
some subversive value, even if, in the final analysis, they are... just the darker side of sets of regulations, just so much graffiti on a prison wall" (1979:3). In *Subcultures* it is clear that, as Patrick Bratlinger remarks, "rebellion for Hebdige becomes a vital assertion of human freedom and creativity against 'regulations' and domination" (Bratlinger, 1990:125-6). With Hebdige's focus on the rebellious nature of subcultures and his sympathetic reading of their various styles as a subversive means of expression, the CCCS's concern with real people as active agents, as creative decoders, comes near to full fruition. This is not to suggest that Hebdige, or the other members of the CCCS, blindly champion the common man's creativity. In fact their recognition of the failure of these small scale rebellions begs the question of the efficacy of any subversive gesture within an adaptive hegemonic system. Hebdige himself recognizes this when he considers the example of Punk fashion's eventual co-option into the main stream. Within two years of its emergence Punk style could be found in high fashion magazines and among the collections of top designers. Hebdige uses this cycle of resistance and reincorporation as a qualifier to any overly optimistic interpretation of subcultural rebellion.

As it would in so many other areas, the voice of feminism provided a useful critique of the inherent biases of these early works in cultural studies. Only a year after the publication of *Subcultures*, Angela McRobbie penned an insightful criticism of the work of Willis and Hebdige, her former Resistance Through Rituals colleagues. In "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique" (1980) McRobbie acknowledged the ground-breaking merits of Willis and Hebdige's ethnographic work on youth subcultures, but she also expressed a strong concern for the elements of working class life left unmentioned. McRobbie charged that both Willis and Hebdige were guilty of making the implicit assumption that subcultures were a masculine site of activity. By privileging the male members of these youth subcultures both researchers were in effect contributing to the hegemonic norm that devalues and silences feminine subjectivity. Though the male ethnographers' access was admittedly limited by their own gender position, McRobbie's criticism did point in one possible direction where cultural studies would need to be wary of its own implication in reproducing dominant cultural values. To this end McRobbie herself (see McRobbie 1982, 1991, and McRobbie and Nava 1984) and other feminist critics (see for example Brunsdon 1981, Hobson 1982, and Ang 1985) refocused the ethnographic lens to consider gender as one of the primary frameworks by which to study audiences. Much of this work on female audiences and subcultures was careful to
consider practices undertaken within the domestic sphere, and found women's use of traditionally feminine genres to constitute a declaration of independence. In this vein Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1984) stands out as a crucial text.

As an American Studies and Literature scholar working in the U.S., Radway's *Reading the Romance* is in many ways a theoretical descendant of the slightly earlier work of feminist critics like McRobbie, Brunsdon and Hobson. Yet, as Radway reveals in her insightful introduction to the 1987 British edition of *Reading the Romance*, she was unaware of the developing area of audience and subcultural ethnographies within British cultural studies. Instead Radway approached her topic of mid-western romance readers as a response to the domination of New Criticism in American Studies. Rather than accept the notion that American culture could be best understood by consideration of its greatest works of literature, Radway assumed the task of trying to understand ordinary Americans through their use of popular novels. Due to the relative weakness of any Marxist tradition in the USA, at least in comparison to the much more overt class system that has always haunted British cultural studies, scholars like Radway were not as explicitly involved in debates over ideology and the hegemony of dominant culture. But Radway's alignment with developments in reader response theory and the new-found stress that was being placed on the reader as the active producer of a text's meaning (see Tompkins 1980) caused her research to address many of the same issues as her British counterparts. In particular, Radway was working from reader theorist Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities (Fish 1980), and originally set out to determine the real reader's interpretation of romances, in contrast to the all too often dismissive and condescending view held by most critic's. To this end she adopted an ethnographic method which challenged her textual focus: "It was only when the Smithton women repeatedly answered my questions about the meaning of romances by talking about the meaning of romance *reading* as a social event in a familial context that the study began to intersect with work being carried on in Britain" (Radway 1987: 67).

*Reading the Romance* intersects specifically with the feminist members of the CCCS's research into the themes of women's everyday lives, their domestic labour and their gender-specific use of media texts, and overall Radway seems to concur with the Birmingham group's growing emphasis on consumers as active agents and rebellious decoders. What Radway found through her discussions with a group of middle class housewives was that their practise of reading romance novels
was not a willful submission to misogynist beliefs, but rather it was a means to facilitate a temporary escape from their real life roles as wives and mothers. Reading was tantamount to a subversive act for these women because it allowed them to demarcate a time for their own pleasures. Radway determined that romance reading was valuable to these women because it served as escapism in two senses, one being the figurative escapism of identifying with the novel's heroine, and the second form of escapism, and perhaps the more novel of the two, was that the readers could literally escape from "the psychologically demanding and emotionally draining task of attending to the physical and affective needs of their families" (Radway, 1984:92). Due in part to Radway's then novel approach to a literary genre of listening to what the actual readers had to say, *Reading the Romance* was very well received, both in North America and Britain, and helped to popularize the ethnographic method as one of the most reliable means for studying contemporary culture.

**Popular Culture and Cultural Populism**

Thus far, as I have outlined cultural studies' focus on the ideological relationship between modern mass culture and audiences, it is apparent that a steady shift occurred away from the textual determinism of early *Screen* theory to the more populist perspective of audience ethnographers. From the mid 1980s on, this populist view has become commonplace in audience studies. Under the influence of the Birmingham group's particular style of British cultural studies several American-based scholars have furthered the view of audiences as active producers of meaning to an extreme. Scholars such as John Fiske, Lawrence Grossberg, Iain Chambers and Henry Jenkins have recently been accused of over-emphasizing the counter-hegemonic prowess of the subaltern. This trend followed primarily, but by no means exclusively, by U.S. scholars has come to be referred to as 'Active Audience Theory', and has been criticized as banal (Morris, 1988), as overly affirmative (Budd, Entman, and Stein, 1990), and as pointless populism (Seaman, 1992). Popular culture studies seem to have reached a point where the masses are always seen as exercising their power to manipulate the content of media messages against itself, against the dominant culture. And these apparently habitual and automatic readings against the grain are a means for people to symbolically empower themselves..."empowerment" here being more at the level of individual psychology than at the socio-political level originally espoused by cultural studies. Budd, Entman and Stein describe the
crucial and defining characteristic of much U.S. cultural studies as "its optimism and affirmative tone about audiences. Whatever message encoded, decoding comes to the rescue: Media domination is weak and ineffectual, since the people make their own meanings and pleasures" (1990: 170). The media studies pendulum seems to have swung from the original position that all power lies in the text's ability to reproduce dominant ideology, to the belief that audiences are always and fully able to resist the pressure of social reproduction.

By far the most prolific, and perhaps the most extreme, of the active audience theorists is John Fiske. While evidence of Fiske's turn towards a perception of the audience as always active exists in his slightly earlier essays (see Fiske 1986 and 1987a), his views became widespread with the publication of a trio of books: *Television Culture* (1987b), and the companion volumes *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989a) and *Reading the Popular* (1989b). In *Television Culture* Fiske provides an overview of the developments in television studies made primarily by members of the CCCS and attempts to carry their emphasis on social position and decoding practices one step further. Much of Fiske's concern in *Television Culture* has to do with what he refers to as "activated texts", that is, texts that are effectively produced primarily through the audience's appropriation of meaning rather than the producer's attempted positioning of the subject. Fiske sees television as an inherently open, polysemic text that caters to divergent readings in an effort to capture the widest possible audience. Hall's sense of a preferred reading that grounded most of the earlier works on audience interpretation is all but jettisoned by Fiske in favour of his optimistic view about the free ranging playfulness of the signifier. Indeed, Fiske's particular slant in reading key works has been criticized as a manipulation of the findings to serve his own agenda. David Morley has on more than one occasion disputed Fiske's interpretation of the *Nationwide* project, claiming "I have been puzzled to find some of my own earlier work invoked as a theoretical legitimation of various forms of "active audience"" (Morley 1993: 13). Fiske believes that the economic success of television lies in its ability to facilitate the "diverse and often oppositional" interests of viewers. Thus, Fiske concludes that "Far from being the agent of the dominant classes, it [television/popular culture] is the prime site where the dominant have to recognize the insecurity of their power... where they have to encourage cultural difference with all the threat to their own position that this implies" (1987b: 326).

In *Understanding Popular Culture* and *Reading the Popular* Fiske moves beyond just the
analysis of media texts to embrace subcultural practises of active resistance across a diverse spectrum including video game players, Madonna fans, shopping mall goers, jean-wearing, and the use of space at a public beach. One of Fiske's primary theoretical influences comes from Michel De Certeau's analysis of cultural power relations in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). In fact, De Certeau's theories have strongly influenced many of the critics who argue on behalf of the active audience, to the point that Jenkins' study of female fans of cult T.V. shows, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), takes its title from De Certeau's central concept of poaching. De Certeau characterized culture as an ongoing struggle between textual producers and consumers, between the dominant and the subordinate. As a struggle, or a battle, for possession of the text and its meanings De Certeau saw consumers as metaphorical poachers, making guerrilla raids into hegemonically controlled spaces. Like the more radical of the reader-response critics, De Certeau considered reading similar to someone renting an apartment, temporarily occupying a space and making it their own. Moreover, active reading for De Certeau akin to symbolic poaching, allowing the reader to take away only those elements of the text that are pleasurable and meaningful to their own lives: "readers are travellers: they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves" (De Certeau, 1984: 174). For De Certeau popular culture was the subordinated's art of 'making do' with the materials available to them. This general faith in people's ability to 'make do' is echoed in Fiske's optimism. As Moores sees it; "Fiske appears to be declaring optimism all round -- putting his faith in subordinated people to always make do with what the system provides, so that everything they touch turns to resistance against 'white, patriarchal, capitalist' structures" (1993: 131).

Fiske's collection of readings of popular culture are distinguished by his championing of the subordinates' ability to resist indoctrination into the hegemonic order. Thus, shopping in a mall is rife with various subversive practises. Among these subversive practises are activities such as shoppers contradicting the economic structure by consuming images rather than products, youths acting as 'tricksters' who thumb their nose at security guards and shoplift for amusement, women transgressing gender restrictions by exercising their (masculine) purchasing power, and the elderly taking advantage of the safe, controlled environment for their leisure time walks. Likewise, arcade video games are seen by Fiske as providing young subordinates "opportunities of resisting social control
and of adopting an alternative cultural stance" (1989b: 78). The Sears Tower in Chicago becomes not just an expression of economic domination, but a chance for individuals from all stations of life to tower over the restrictions of the city. And Madonna's self-presentation as a sexual object, as a 'Boy Toy', in the mid 1980s actually lead to the empowerment of her young female fans. Madonna's image is described by Fiske as "not a model meaning for young girls in patriarchy, but a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young" (1989b: 97). Like the antithesis of the paranoid critic who perceives conspiracy at every turn, Fiske seems to find cause for celebration on behalf of the subaltern in their every meeting with mass culture.

The type of work produced by critics associated with active audience theory has been ridiculed for its apparent simplicity. The accusation is that a dogged belief in polysemic texts and resistant readers preempts any careful consideration of historical or political realities and leads repeatedly to a predictable but undeveloped 'people against the power bloc' proposition. Meaghan Morris protests that this recent trend reduces popular culture studies to banality. According to Morris, "the thesis of cultural studies as Fiske and Chambers present it runs perilously close to this kind of formulation: people in modern mediatized societies are complex and contradictory. mass cultural texts are complex and contradictory, therefore people using them produce complex and contradictory culture. To add that this popular culture has critical and resistant elements is tautological" (1988: 19). One of the major complaints is related to the tendency to over-extrapolate from the specific and local to the general and universal. As Jim Bee notes in his review of Understanding Popular Culture and Reading the Popular: "There is no sense of any specific social formation. Australia, Britain and the USA. and by implication any "western" nation, are assumed to be homogenous for Fiske's analysis" (Bee, 1989: 358). Individual ethnographic accounts of singular moments of resistance and subversion are taken as the rule rather than the exception. As Budd, Entman and Stein have suggested, while most subcultural ethnographies do indicate the ability of individual audiences to construct their own meanings in particular circumstances; "Fiske and Grossberg argue that these alternative responses are the model for responses in general" (1990: 178). As an example of this over-generalizing they point to Fiske's reference of Australian Aboriginal children who reworked television narratives to emphasize the roles of non-white characters. From this
one case Fiske concludes that "different audiences worldwide are only a larger and more dramatic sign of the different audiences within a nation" (1986: 399). The leap from the consumption practises of a particular subculture to assuming the same types of practises for all audiences worldwide is remarkable. In effect, the exception becomes the rule.

Like many of the debates in academic circles, the criticism of scholars like Fiske and Grossberg is often flagrantly over-stated. Just as the critics argue that active audience research generalizes from a few cases to assume counter-hegemonic consumption as a norm, so to do the critics generalize from a few examples to assume that all American-style audience research is primarily redemptive. In fact, even the most oft criticized researchers are well aware of the dangers involved in basic generalizations about audience practises. Grossberg, for example, has written that modern audience research is not simply about redemption, it:

does not say that people always struggle or that when they do, they do so in ways we condone. But it does say, both theoretically and politically, that people are never merely passively subordinated. never totally manipulated, never entirely incorporated. People are engaged in struggles with, within and sometimes against real tendential forces and determinations in their efforts to appropriate what they are given. Consequently, their relations to particular practises and texts are complex and contradictory: they may win something in the struggle against sexism and lose something in the struggle against economic exploitation; they may both gain and lose something economically; and although they lose ideological ground. they may win some emotional strength.

(Grossberg, 1988: 169-170)

This seems to me to mark a clear distinction between simple-minded overgeneralizing of the audience's power to construct redemptive readings and the inherent complexity of audience interactions with mass-produced texts.

Related to this tendency to the accusation of overgeneralizing is a concern about the nature of cultural studies' most common methodology. The numerous projects that I have been rather loosely referring to here as 'ethnographies' are not actually ethnographies, at least not in the strictest anthropological sense of living and participating in a culture's way of life over an extended period of time. They are termed ethnographic because they rely on qualitative research first and foremost. There has been a great deal of variation in the degree of ethnographic methods used in cultural studies. Some researchers such as Paul Willis have rigidly adhered to practises of complete immersion
into the (sub)culture being studied. In *Learning to Labour* Willis attended classes with his subjects, worked alongside them at their first jobs, and participated in their home and social lives over a three \year period. Willis also supplemented his participant observation by conducting structured interviews with the "lads", their parents, teachers, and employers. At the other extreme, work like Morley's original *Nationwide* research consisted only of structured interviews in an institutional setting. Currently it seems that most cultural studies scholars conducting research on audiences utilize a combination of personal insight, casual observation, select interviews, and published commentary. For example, Jenkins' "ethnography" of science fiction media fans is based on his years of personal involvement in the subculture, interviews with fans at conventions, materials published in fanzines, and personal correspondence with numerous participants. In her trenchant essay "What's Ethnographic about Ethnographic Audience Research?" (1989), Virginia Nightingale suggests that it is misleading to use the term ethnographic in connection with this type of research on media audiences. As Nightingale sees it, real ethnography must involve a complete and lengthy participation in a culture in order to provide an accurate "thick description" of the subjects' everyday lives. According to Nightingale, individual interviews on the street and in the home are incapable of providing sufficient enough information for forming any real insights.

In her criticism Nightingale also argues that the claim to ethnographic findings in cultural studies is employed as a way to confirm the researcher's own *a priori* assumptions. Graeme Turner agrees that the practise is "deployed as a spurious method of authenticating the researcher's own readings" (Turner, 1990: 160). And further than just padding the researcher's own opinions, the recourse to ethnographic validation is questioned as a false construction of real consumers. Although recognized as ground breaking, Radway's *Reading the Romance* has been regarded by some as problematic in that it claims to let the readers speak for themselves. In her review of theories of spectatorship in the cinema, Judith Mayne remarks that Radway's:

desire to name "real readers" is neither transparent nor innocent, for the women readers who appear in Radway's analysis are mediated by her questions, her analyses, and her narrative. It is inevitable that such projections exist in this kind of analysis, and unless those projections are analyzed, then we are left with an ideal reader who seems more real because she is quoted and referred to, but who is every bit as problematic as the ideal reader constructed by abstract theories of an apparatus.
positioning passive vessels. (Mayne, 1993: 84)

The concern over the validity of popular culture studies' use of ethnography appears to revolve around two central confusions. The first is the confusion that seems to exist between the researcher's voice, the subject's voice, and the researcher's voice on behalf of the subject. The second confusion is about whether audience studies should maintain a narrow subject focus or attempt to consider all interrelated aspects of the subject's everyday life --in other words, by looking primarily at a single form of media use (e.g. television, romance novels), are researchers turning their backs on the wealth of complex, multi-dimensional ways by which an audience member becomes situated as a unique cultural identity?

The root of the first confusion lies, I think, in the outdated conception of ethnography as an objective, scientific exercise rather than an interpretive narrative. There has been a growing recognition within anthropology in recent years that ethnology is a humanistic enterprise. The subjectivity of the researcher's experience and theoretical opinion is increasingly understood as crucial. The belief in objective ethnography is an illusion. James Clifford has gone so far as to claim that: "Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of something 'made or fashioned'", and that "[P]urely objective ethnography is impossible" (Clifford, 1986: 6). Thus, anthropology has found itself "at the vortex of the debate about the problem of representing society in contemporary discourses" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: vii). But this does not mean that the baby should be thrown out with the bath water. Ethnographers have managed to adapt by incorporating their own presence into the project, whether through an admitted recognition of their inherent biases and influence, or the inclusion of reflective autobiographical elements. We should also note that traditional ethnography has never been limited to detailed participant observation but has included a wide range of methods that are perfectly suitable for the study of audiences, such as qualitative methods, life histories, self-description, autobiographies, material culture, anecdotes, formal and informal interviews. And in that contemporary audience studies are not as frequently plagued as the discipline of anthropology is by the subject culture being totally foreign from the researcher's own, the researcher's opinion in relation to the audience's should not be regarded as insubstantial just because it is formed within the context of an ethnographic study. In other words, to criticize current
audience study's use of ethnographic support for the author's own reading is to devalue the researcher's opinion, which is possibly as valid as the consumer's and was certainly formed in interaction with audience members. Consequently, I feel that criticisms such as Lull's complaint that "What is presented in much cultural studies writing about audiences is actually the writer's position, his or her relation to the media content, to the family, to the social environment" (Lull, 1988: 240), should be taken with a grain of salt. As Tania Modleski (1989) has noted in relation to feminist analysis of mass culture, a curious logic has arisen that critics and researchers are not valid consumers of, and participants in, popular culture. In reality it is often the case that the critics are fascinated or passionately involved with the subculture or medium being studied.

The second confusion related to the ethnography of media audiences is a matter of degree. A tension exists in the discrepancy between the ethnographic project of regarding culture in the way that Clifford Geertz describes it as an entire way of everyday life, and contemporary cultural study's narrow focus on only the consumptive practises associated with a particular media. The parallel development of audience and subculture research has often resulted in an interweaving of the two concepts. But this interweaving may not always be appropriate. An audience does not always constitute a subculture with shared interests beyond a single text. Many critics have recently remarked on the difficulty of studying audiences due to their fluidity. Allor claims the problem is that the "audience exists nowhere; it inhabits no real space, only positions within analytical discourse" (1988: 228). Others, such as Chang have gone so far as to claim that "the conception of audience as people, as a collection of individual psychological entities, should be rejected" (1987: 650). Even Janice Radway has argued that audiences:

are set in relation to a single set of isolated texts which qualify already as categorically distinct objects. No matter how extensive the effort to dissolve the boundaries of the textual object or the audience, most recent studies of reception, including my own, continue to begin with the 'factual' existence of a particular kind of text which is understood to be received by some set of individuals. Such studies perpetuate, then, the notion of a circuit neatly bounded and therefore identifiable, locatable, and open to observation. Users are cordoned off for study and therefore defined as particular kinds of subjects by virtue of their use of not only a single medium but of a single genre as well.

(Radway, 1988: 363)
The problem, as Radway and others have seen it, is that the audience is a false construct of the researcher's imagination. For real people, being the member of an audience is only one of many activities that shape individual perception. Rather than concentrating on a singular element of people's lives, Radway proposes that audience ethnographies should attend to "the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it" (1988: 366). A complex and formidable task if ever there was one.

Of course the most practical dilemma in pursuing the type of project proposed here by Radway is the sheer scope of the research. No individual researcher could ever hope to achieve total access to all aspects of a community's life, and even if one were granted this unprecedented leeway it would be impossible to cover all the ground required. Even in the most traditional anthropological ethnographies, groups are necessarily cordoned off according to distinctive features like religion, language, and gender. The difficulty of conducting research on such a grand scale is apparent in attempts like Paul Willis' *Common Culture* (1990) project. With funding from the Gulbekian Foundation, Willis orchestrated a team of qualified researchers who undertook over a dozen separate ethnographic inquiries of young people throughout Britain in 1987 and 1988. While in some senses research of this type is ideal, there are also numerous drawbacks. Aside from the logistical and financial nightmares of organizing such a project, there is the matter of accounting for variances in the individual researcher's techniques, biases, interpretations and conclusions. In the preface to *Common Culture* Willis claims responsibility for the basic arguments put forth, yet he confesses that "some of those involved may disagree, sometimes profoundly, with what it finally says" (Willis. 1990: vii). If some members of the research team disagree profoundly with the final conclusions, then what are we to make of the validity of such research? It would seem that to cover a wide expanse one must sacrifice direct involvement. Instead of direct contact with a culture, we receive analyses not just second hand from the original researcher, but also thrice removed by a senior scholar who interprets someone's interpretation of subcultural interpretations.

David Morley has recently characterized this disjuncture between analysis of specific media use and the call for broader investigations of everyday life experience as a split between the micro and the macro. Morley notes that recent criticisms of audience research have feared "the prospect of a
field dominated by the production of micro (and often ethnographic) analyses of media consumption processes, which add up only to a set of micronarratives, outside of any macropolitical or cultural frame" (Morley, 1993: 16). The apprehension is that by focusing on specific practises of consumption, researchers are often blinded to the larger socio-political realities of contemporary life in mediatized cultures. But Morley is right to point out that we should not lose sight of the fact that "macro structures can be reproduced only through microprocesses" (17). The danger is in assuming that the macro (the public, the theoretical, the global) is somehow more real or more important than the micro (the private, the empirical, the local), which has unjustly and inappropriately been regarded as merely inconsequential and anecdotal. It is through the micro that we can begin to understand the macro. To turn away from analyses of specific media forms and their interpretations is to ignore how the complexity of culture writ large is played out in reality.

The Case of Milestone Media Inc.

The major problem, as I see it, is that for all of cultural studies', audience research's, and reception theory's investigations of media usage there is still an habitual oversimplification of the producer/consumer model. The rigid perception of mass communication as the linear producer-to-text-to-consumer process leads to a limiting view of audience activity. With this model in mind as the sole means of production, scholars interested in the circulation of ideology were equipped with a structure that is all too easily broken down into binary opposition. The producer is stereotypically equated with the power bloc, the status quo, the moral majority, the government, and so on. The producer comes to stand as a proxy for all the elements of society that seek to reproduce their repressive hegemonic ideology. On the other hand, the consumer has come to equated with the subordinated, the subaltern, the disempowered, the masses, and so on. The consumer is seen as all the little people that ideology is constantly trying to indoctrinate. Thus, the producer/consumer relationship is consistently characterized as a struggle for meaning. Of course this is a vastly oversimplified account, but it is the basis for much of the work undertaken in the study of popular culture. This model has long rooted mass communication research in an oscillation between the poles of domination and resistance, the domination perspective being that producers successfully manage to hoist their beliefs onto the people, and the resistant view being that some consumers create their
own subversive meanings in the face of their powerlessness. While in many situations I would be forced to agree with both poles, I do not believe domination and resistance are the only alternatives.

The central assumption of both the domination and resistance poles has been that producers are tantamount to the nameless, faceless purveyors of dominant ideology, but this is too narrow a view to be applied to all forms of mass media. Certainly many producers are identifiable individuals with interests that do not align with the power bloc. For example, as an African-American owned and controlled comic book company, Milestone Media Inc. operates on a somewhat different level than one might assume the older, and more traditionally corporate, comic book publishers do. Rather than perpetuate traditional comic book images of idealized white heroes and villainous ethnic Others, or at best the black hero as faithful sidekick, Milestone works to challenge dominant cultural stereotypes. Through their editorials and stories these comics tackle issues relevant to minority and majority concerns. Far from disseminating dominant ideology, Milestone brings it out into the light for questioning. Likewise, many producers of mass media entertainments might best be understood as challenging rather than reproducing hegemony. The most obvious forms are those like Milestone that address groups often excluded by the mainstream. Television programs like *In Living Color* and *House of Buggin*, the films of Spike Lee and John Singleton, and the novels of Terry McMillan are all examples of mass-mediated texts that bring dominant ideology into question. We might also begin to consider mainstream entertainments like television's *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons* as they are informed by the liberal concerns of their creators.

Admittedly, I recognize that even the most subversively intended mass entertainments can and do contain some hegemonic elements, but realistically I feel many consumers attend primarily to the intended (in this case subversive) meanings. That audiences can and do perceive mass-mediated meanings in different ways has been a central finding of media effects research. These different readings discovered in effects research are tantamount to biased misinterpretations, rather than the more overtly political active audience readings, readings against the grain, documented by cultural studies scholars. A famous example of this polysemic reworking is the case of the audience's selective readings of Norman Lear's groundbreaking 1970s television series *All in the Family*. The enormously popular TV program revolved around the antics of Archie Bunker (Carol O'Connor), an exaggeratedly bigoted, chauvinistic, working class patriarch, and his predictable arguments with his
liberal. Hippieish, son-in-law Mike (Rob Reiner). The producer's stated intention with *All in the Family* was to parody bigotry and chauvinism through the character of Archie, but in fact numerous viewers adopted the position of cheering Archie rather than laughing at his offensive comments. Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) found that racially prejudiced viewers in North America were inclined to think that Archie's racist arguments made sense and that he routinely won his debates with Mike, while less prejudiced viewers believed just the opposite. Similar results regarding *All in the Family* viewers were achieved by Wilhoit and deBock (1976) in Holland, and by Meyer (1976) in his study of six to ten year old audience members. Yet, for every misreading based on pre-existing prejudices there is the strong possibility that other audience members are capable of understanding the liberal text as it was intended.

This blurring of audiences' reading practices is a bias facilitated by the common perception of producers as exclusive purveyors of dominant ideology. The logic is that if producers are trying to position consumers, then active decoding must be synonymous with resistant reading. But we should not confuse activity with resistance. Audiences can make active interpretations at the same time that they read with the grain of the text, and reading with the grain does not necessarily imply being hegemonically situated. As it stands now, consumers of popular culture (i.e. almost all of us in the West, if not the entire world) are represented as either passive acceptors of meaning or as active resisters. Hall's original model of decoding has been polarized so that the hegemonic and oppositional positions have eclipsed the median position of the negotiated code. Perhaps Hall's notion that the negotiated code constitutes a split reading of global ideology and local understanding is too literally halfway between the poles of domination and resistance. Instead, I would argue that negotiated meaning is more realistic in the colloquial sense of the word, as a negotiation between two sides not necessarily in opposition but potentially in a cooperative arrangement. In other words, sometimes meaning is constructed on both sides via communication and commonality.

Many of the mass mediated texts that contain elements of subversive ideology in themselves are widely circulated and consumed, while others cater to, or develop, a niche audience. The "crucial distinction for communication in our time," Budd, Entman and Stein have argued, is between "mass advertising communication, in which consumers pay little and are asked only to be counted as witnesses to the ads, and specialized communication that may be noncommercial or subsidized, in
which there is a shared subculture between makers and consumers that either does not interest most people or offends them" (1990: 173). This distinction helps to clarify the concept of media subcultures. Much of the work dealing with audiences and subcultures has ignored the notion that it is "shared... between makers and consumers". Media texts with a strong fan community, such as the one that exists for comic books, feature communication between the creators and the readers as a core element. The two sides meet at conventions, in specialty book stores, at book-signings and promotional appearances, in "letters to the editors" pages, through specialty fanzines, and through dual membership where most of the producers have risen from within the ranks of fandom. And contrary to Radway's (1988) fear that by focusing on a single medium or genre we exclude how other media forms impinge on interpretation, shared subcultures like comic fandom can be seen as focal points for more general popular tastes of the audience. For example, the comics produced by Milestone are only one element (although a central one) of an entire taste category. This multi-textual interweaving of similar media entertainment preferences is apparent in a casual glance through one of the comic books. Interwoven with the colourful pages of the adventures of any of Milestone's ethnically diverse superheroes are advertisements for action movies, body building equipment, video games and films by Black directors, as well as editorials about racism or how action star Wesley Snipes would be perfectly cast as a comic book hero, and readers' letters about sharing comics with friends at school or discussing the similarities between their own and the star character's taste in fashion, music, literature or sports stars. All of these elements constitute a shared taste culture concerned with issues of entertainment, ethnicity, sexuality, masculinity, and social acceptance.

To a great extent the modern comic book industry, perhaps more than any other mass medium, represents a negotiation of textual meaning between the producers and the consumers. In a highly formalized way, the comic book industry exemplifies the specialized communication that Budd, Entman and Stein describe as "a shared subculture between makers and consumers" (1990: 173). Of course the infinite personal variations that constitute every individual consumer's unique social position --including such influential features as economics, politics, age, ethnicity, gender and religion-- effect interpretive practises at a very basic level of comprehension. But beyond these primary constitutive factors, a medium as highly specialized as the comics industry is able to incorporate producer/consumer negotiations as a key interpretive element in more direct ways than
can other popular mediums. For the most part, the close knit system of interdependence between the comic book creators and the fans operates as an unofficial network of reciprocity, where the two sides frequently remodel their conception of specific titles based on input from the other side. The unofficial, but frequent, contact between the parties (e.g. at conventions, through letters pages) constitutes a basis for meaning negotiation and fan readings based on subcultural knowledge is unprecedented in other mediums. The well-documented activities of fan communities devoted to television programs such as Star Trek, Twin Peaks, or Cagney and Lacey may be able to momentarily affect network decisions about cancellations, but the comics subculture constantly goes these fans one better by regularly influencing the content of stories. As a clear example of this direct influence, many comic fans point to the occasions when the unofficial system becomes formalized in contests and opinion polls such as a recent promotion conducted for an upcoming Spawn/Spider-Man crossover that asked fans to vote on who should draw the book, who should write it, and which characters should guest star in it.

To analyze a comics company such as Milestone Media Inc. as a mass media producer which does not exclusively traffic in the reproduction of dominant ideology, and Milestone and its fans as a shared subculture with open lines of communication, is to circumvent the assumptions that textual meaning is always an ideological struggle and that to reject passivity one must read oppositionally. Milestone's unique situation within the comic book industry as an African-American controlled mainstream publisher emphasizes some of the historical and social problems minority creators have been forced to contend with. Milestone's emphasis on new heroes from a variety of cultural backgrounds challenges the earlier white-washing of the industry's fictional universes. The acceptance and active consumption of these comic book superheroes by primarily young male readers from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds illustrates how these texts are used as a means for forming and negotiating images of acceptable masculinity. While past cultural research on mass media audiences has focused on the consumer to the point of almost totally excluding the producer's presence, in this account I include a profile of Milestone's development as a company in that it affects the overall form

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2 A "crossover" refers to a comic which features two or more characters who usually do not appear together. There are two basic types of crossovers: "intra-company crossovers" features characters owned and published by the same company, e.g. Batman and Superman since both are properties of DC Comics, and, "intercompany crossovers", such as the Spawn and Spider-Man one mentioned above, where the characters are owned and published by different companies, in this case Image Comics and Marvel Entertainment respectively.
and interpretation of the text. The model of producers versus consumers has also lead past research to concentrate on those consumers who produce the most dramatic and oppositional readings of the text. This focus has been somewhat misleading by depicting the oppositional readings of a minority of consumers as the most valid and active. By considering *Milestone* readers who agree with the ideological content of the comic books I will be attempting to shift the focus of active audience study from the oppositionally constituted minority, to the accepting majority.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WORLD OF COMICS

Some critics trace the origin of the comic book to such ancient artistic endeavors as paleolithic cave drawings, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Roman papyrus rolls, or Medieval European tapestry. Others argue that the modern comic book truly began in England with the early 18th century caricature prints of Hogarth, Rowlandson, and Gillray. Either way, it is undeniable that the use of pictures to convey narrative meaning is an enduring and fundamental communicative process.

The comic book medium as we recognize it today was launched into commercial publication in the 1930s and was shaped by the twin predecessors of cartoon strips and pulp magazines, both of which coincidentally began in 1896. The modern comic book is a hybrid mating of the animated form of the newspaper comic strip and the tales of fantastic adventure from the pulps. Although comic books are popular around the world, it was in America that they were born, and in America that the most popular series are still created. Because this study is concerned with the superhero genre, the most typical comics genre and in many ways the most American of all genres, I restrict the discussion in this chapter primarily to the history of American comic books. This history of comics is on one side a reflection of changes in American culture, and on the other a focus on the harmful effects of popular culture on young consumers. The evolution of the comic book reveals a narrative medium that has grown from a few simple stories produced for children to an over $400 million per year industry based not only on character recognition and entertainment value, but also on social relevance, creator status and an active fan subculture. A brief review of the birth and development of the comic book medium leading to the first wave of Black superhero comics in the 1970s, and to the industry changes which set the stage for companies like Milestone Media Inc. to emerge in the 1990s.
will help to illustrate the limitations and the potentials involved in the production of socially aware stories operating within a specific medium and genre.

This is far from a complete history of the comic book medium. The time and space needed to write such a history are immense, besides there are lots of densely-illustrated fan-written histories that already cover the many minute points of the medium's development. I do feel that even this brief history is necessary before dealing with the Milestone titles and the comic book fans themselves for a number of reasons. First, I hope this background sketch will provide a sense of the complexity of the industry's historical development. It is a history that many comic book readers are well aware of, and which is constantly referred to by both the creators and the fans. Second, in recounting the development of the superhero genre I want to stress the formalization of distinct narrative conventions. One of the fans' main interpretive strategies when faced with a new line of comics like those published by Milestone is to measure them according to their degree of formulaic conventionality and innovation. In order to understand Milestone as a variation it is necessary to understand the convention. In a similar vein, the fans' interpret the Milestone characters in comparison to the existing comic book stereotype of the blaxploitation hero, and since these heroes arose out of specific historical conditions and have remained time-bound, it is perhaps best that they are introduced within their historical context. And third, the fans relate to the Milestone comics as an alternative to those marketed by other contemporary publishers who arose out of industry shifts which catered to comics fandom. It is important to understand these historical shifts that lead to new industry dynamics and the possibility of new independent publishers like Milestone Media.

I have arranged this chapter in a chronological order from the 1930s to the 1990s, in order to give a sense of the changes which have occurred in the fifty plus years that the comic book industry has been in existence. This account is divided according to six pivotal points in the medium's development, and while these points follow each other historically they also emphasize different properties that are important for understanding the world of comic books today. The first section covers the period known to fans as the Golden Age of comics, from 1938 to 1946. During this time the fledgling medium began to take shape and the superhero genre established conventions (e.g. flashy costume, super powers, mild-mannered secret identity) which are still recognizable today. The second section deals with the post-World War II comics, 1946 to 1960, and the moral panic that
occurred because parents feared comic books were turning their children into juvenile delinquents. Adults have always had fears about the media corrupting innocent children, and the comic book witch-hunt of the McCarthy era is one of the clearest examples of paranoia and scapegoating in this century. It is also an incident that still lingers in the minds of comic book fans and affects much of what the industry does today. The third part covers the tumultuous years between 1961 and 1970, referred to as the Silver Age, when Marvel Comic's self-doubting characters rejuvenated the superhero genre, and when counter culture comix forced a recognition of more controversial topics and proved the feasibility of independent publishing. In the fourth section, covering the years from 1971 to 1980, the emergence of "socially relevant" comics and the short-lived subgenre of blaxploitation heroes are discussed. Inspired by the blaxploitation films of the same period, the jive-talking ghetto warriors of the 1970s have cast a long shadow on any subsequent attempts to create viable Black heroes in the comics.

Parts five and six focus more explicitly on some of the recent market changes which have lead to the current climate of the comics industry that made an African American owned company like Milestone possible. The fifth section concentrates on the 1980s, a time when the entire system of distribution was radically altered as comic book specialty stores came into dominance and formalized the world of fandom and new principles of connoisseurship based on the recognition of individual creators as well as favorite characters. And finally, the sixth part deals with the recent explosion of creator-owned comic book companies made possible by the direct distribution system and the fan preferences established in the 1980s. Milestone Media Inc. is only one of the new publishers to emerge in the 1990s, all of whom took advantage of recent shifts in the industry to branch out on their own in order to maintain creative, legal and financial control over the products they produce. To understand the place of new heroes for contemporary fans it is important to grasp the historical and economic conditions that have shaped the comics' market, and the superhero genre specifically. The creators and the fans are well aware of these historical contingencies which are part and parcel of the way modern comics are read and interpreted.

1 The term "comix", or sometimes "komix", is often used to distinguish mainstream comic books meant for children from underground books meant for an older audience. The "x" marks both their counter-cultural affiliation and their often X-rated themes.
There Comes a Superman (1938-1945)

What is commonly called the Golden Age of comic books began in 1938 and lasted until approximately 1946. Prior to 1938 the comic book medium was a fledgling enterprise with only a handful of publishers, most of whom were reprinting humorous comic strips from the Sunday funnies. The industry was really launched in 1933 when Harry Wildenberg and M.C. Gaines, both salesmen for the Eastern Color Printing Company, bound together various left-over newspaper comic strips (for a useful history of comic strips see Waugh, 1947) in a cheap magazine format and sold them to Proctor & Gamble to be used as a free give-away. This first comic book, *Funnies on Parade*, was a huge success and other give-aways quickly followed. In July of the following year, 1934, Eastern Color Printing began selling *Famous Funnies* at the corner newsstand and were soon turning a profit of $30,000 a month during the height of the Depression. Dozens of other publishers hopped on the bandwagon and the comic book industry was born.

In 1936 National Allied Publications (which would later become industry giant DC Comics) began publishing *New Adventure Comics*, the first comic book to feature wholly original stories. As the series name suggests, *New Adventure Comics* was a move away from the funny cartoons that had dominated the young industry. Inspired primarily by the older pulp heroes like Zorro, The Shadow, Doc Savage, and The Grey Seal, *New Adventure Comics* incorporated these particularly masculine fantasies of empowerment with the styles of such popular newspaper adventure strips as *Dick Tracy*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Flash Gordon* and *Secret Agent X-9*. The shift to action comics which followed introduced a whole host of books featuring detectives, soldiers, jungle men, explorers, cowboys and spacemen. By the start of 1937 the dominant influence of the comic strip's approach to visual narration had been fully incorporated with the adventurous story lines typical of the pulp magazines. This assimilation was only natural considering that many of the writers and artists were active in both, or all three, of the mediums at the same time. Still, comic books were a small concern. Yes, they sold well, but they had nowhere near the kind of mass appeal that radio held for children. At least, not yet.

In June of 1938, the most important date in comics' history, the dynamic narrative elements of pulp adventure fiction coalesced perfectly with the growing popularity of the cartoon's visual story-telling techniques with the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 (Figure 3.1). The famous cover featured a muscular man in blue tights, red shorts and a red cape hoisting a car over his
Figure 3.1
head as terrified villains run for their lives. Superman became an instant hit with Depression-era kids. The product of the teenage imaginations of writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Schuster. Superman revolutionized the budding medium and fostered what would become the dominant comic book form: the superhero adventure genre. Initially it had taken Superman a few years to break into the world of comics as Siegel and Schuster offered their character as a daily strip to several newspapers with no avail. Eventually the Superman portfolio ended up in the hands of M.C. Gaines who passed the property on to either Harry Donefield or Vincent Sullivan at DC Comics, the former National Allied Publications. DC felt the character might be suitable for one of their new adventure books and bought a 13 page story that Siegel and Schuster pieced together from their initial compilation of strips at a cost of ten dollars a page. But DC's $130 was well spent, as it also bought from Siegel and Schuster. as per the standard industry agreement, all the rights to the character that would go on to earn countless millions and become one of the most famous fictional personalities in the world.

The fundamental elements of the Superman story are simple, well known, and reflect the influence of heroic predecessors from Greek mythology to the pulps. On the eve of the planet Krypton's destruction a scientist and his wife place their only child in a small spaceship bound for Earth. Like Moses in the reeds of the Nile, the alien infant is found in a Kansas corn field by the loving Ma and Pa Kent, who raise the boy as their own. Over the years young Clark Kent discovers his miraculous powers and vows to his dying foster parents that he will always use his gifts to fight for truth, justice, and the American way. Disguised as a mild-mannered newspaper reporter for the Metropolis Daily Planet with a hopeless crush on fellow reporter Lois Lane, Clark becomes the red and blue-clad champion of the oppressed and vanquisher of evil known as Superman. In addition to the sheer wonder of Superman's heroic feats, it is the dual identity of the character and the persistent charm of the archetypal Clark Kent/Lois Lane/Superman triangle that is credited with the title's lasting popularity. The timid Clark Kent seems to be the point of identification for every self-conscious young male reader. If Superman was the wishful fantasy of Siegel and Schuster as two average Cleveland adolescents, Clark Kent was the reality. As Jerry Siegel would eventually describe the inspiration of Kent: "As a high school student, I thought I might become a reporter, and I had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn't know I existed or didn't care I existed. It occurred to me: What if I was real terrific? What if I had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings
or throwing cars around or something like that? Then maybe they would notice me" (quoted in Goulart, 1991: 75). The Clark Kent/Superman duality struck a chord with young readers all over the world. The dream of an average man secretly harboring an all-powerful alter ego is a fantasy not just of Siegel and Schuster's but of all Superman's fans as well.

As the quintessential superhero, the archetypal defender of truth, justice, and the American way, Superman has long been perceived by critics as an effective agent for maintaining ideological hegemony. Born at the end of the great Depression and on the eve of World War II, Superman was originally a much more problematic character than he is generally perceived to be. In his essay, "From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman" (1980), Thomas Andrae traces the evolution of supermen in 1930s science fiction pulps to the emergence of the benevolent Superman in 1938 as a metaphor for the drastic change in the way capitalism was seen in the wake of the Depression. Andrae argues that the best way to understand the popular appeal of Superman at that particular moment in American culture is "by interpreting it as a response to the collapse of the Horatio Alger ethos of laissez-faire individualism and its replacement by the experimental collectivism of the New Deal" (Andrae, 1980: 125). With the American economy in ruins the very foundations of capitalism were in doubt. Perhaps the most basic theme of the American mythos has always been that under the free enterprise system, with a little hard work, self-reliance, frugality and good old Yankee know-how, each and every lowly citizen would inevitably find wealth and happiness. Clearly the Depression had proven this a lie, as only a handful of rich and powerful individuals prospered at the expense of the rest of the nation. Increasingly, the dangers of excessive individualism came under fire.

It is this mood of "bitterness and frustration caused by the Depression and the desire to gain power and mastery over a chaotic economic situation [which provided] the focus for the superman's character" (Andrae, 1980: 127). The evil supermen from the science fiction of the time were cynical warnings against the dangers of excessive individualism. Even Siegel and Schuster's first superman story, "The Reign of the Superman" (1933)2, which long preceded the famous comic book version of the character, cast the superman as a villain. Coincidentally, 1933 was also the year that a newly

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2 "The Reign of the Superman" (1933) was written by Siegel under the pen-name Herbert S. Fine, and featured several accompanying illustrations by Schuster. It appeared in an early science fiction fan magazine, *Science Fiction: The Advance Guard of Future Civilization*, which Siegel edited while still in high school.
elected Adolph Hitler announced his plans for an army of "Aryan supermen", much like those predicted by Nietzsche. In Siegel and Schuster's short story the superman is really a poor raggedy man who is lured from his place in a long breadline by the leering, bald-headed scientist, Professor Smalley, who offers food and a new suit of clothes. Smalley drugs the destitute man with an experimental serum which turns him into a mental giant who can see the future, who knows everything, who can read other peoples' minds, and who can transport himself to anywhere in the world with a simple thought. Smalley decides to kill this new superman so that he can assume the superpowers for himself, but the superman reads his mind and kills Smalley instead. The superman declares himself a god and then sets out on a campaign of world domination. He forces people to give him all their money, turns them into his slaves, and plans to have the armies of all the major world powers kill each other. However, the world is saved when the superman loses his powers and is forced to once again take his place among the countless poor in the breadline. This early version of superman as the ugly side of the American dream clearly expresses the ambivalence many people felt towards the myth of success during the depression. Although the character's meteoric rise may be attractive, he is ultimately condemned as evil because he resorts to criminal means and pursues a path of unbridled economic individualism very similar to the one perceived to have caused the nation's political and economic ruin.

The comic book Superman of 1938 was, in part, a response to these feelings of frustration brought on by the lingering chaos of the Depression. Superman symbolized a reworking of the American dream, a reworking that accorded with Roosevelt's concept of the New Deal where "the ideal of individual success was transformed into an organizational ideal of success through self-sacrifice and collective effort under the direction of strong leader" (Andrae, 1980: 128). In fact, in the first several issues of Action Comics Superman's adventures still retained anti-establishmentarian themes. Superman was, at times, an outlaw: fighting the police to free juvenile delinquents raised in the slums, attacking corrupt politicians and greedy industrialists. The early Superman was truly a champion of the oppressed. However, as the expansion of federal power was legitimized under the New Deal, the American government fostered an image of benevolence and as a protector of the nation's welfare. With this shift in the political winds to a notion of individualism tempered by a respect for the greater good of the nation, and the increasing patriotism inspired by the awareness that
America would likely become embroiled with the war in Europe, the remnants of radical individualism that persisted in Superman were replaced by a wholesale identification with the state. Just prior to America's involvement in World War II the publishers insisted that Siegel make it clear that Superman would always work with the law and that all controversial issues would be avoided. Thereafter Superman became what Umberto Eco describes as "a perfect example of civic consciousness, completely split from political consciousness" (Eco, 1979: 123). In other words, Superman, and practically every superhero who followed in his footsteps, is restricted to fighting crime on a local scale rather than to righting social injustices on a global scale.

In part because the political changes that occurred in the early Superman stories so clearly reflected the moods of the nation during a tumultuous period, coupled with action-oriented stories and dramatic illustrations which appealed directly to young readers, by the fourth issue of Action Comics Superman was an incredible success. National sales of Action "quickly rose to 500,000 a month and by 1941 the magazine was selling 900,000 copies of each issue. The Superman magazine, started in 1939, soon reached a circulation of 1,250,000 and grossed $950,000 in 1940" (Goulart, 1991: 78). In addition to starring in two comic books a month, Superman prospered in his own newspaper strip, radio program, live-action and animated movie serials, and toy merchandising. By 1942 Business Week reported that children were spending an estimated $15 million a year on comic books, mostly thanks to "Superman [who] has shown the way in a new field of publishing. Indeed, Superman had fast become a financial juggernaut, a cash-cow for the publishers, but not for Siegel and Schuster. Although the creators continued to work on the product of their imaginations for a number of years they did so under the "sweat shop" conditions that have dominated the industry for much of its history. Over the years Siegel and Schuster unsuccessfully sought to regain their rights to Superman. A lawsuit filed in April 1947 seeking $5 million in compensation for lost earnings from Superman and such exploitive spin-off characters as Superboy, Supergirl, and Superdog resulted in an award of $100,000 but failed to regain any of their rights to the character (see "Supersuit", Newsweek, 1947). The legal battle between Siegel and Schuster and DC Comics continued until the late 1970s when the publisher agreed to provide the creators with artistic recognition and a minimal annual pension in an attempt to avoid bad publicity during the preparation for Superman: The Movie (1980).
While the Superman phenomena almost single-handedly ensured the financial feasibility of the budding comic book medium, more importantly the character introduced the superhero genre that would become the mainstay of modern comics. As comic book historian Mike Benton points out: "No other genre has been so closely associated with comic books as the costumed superhero. Since the debut of Superman, there have been over a thousand major and minor comic book superheroes in a fifty-year period" (Benton, 1993: 174). The fantastic and colourful adventures of the superhero have always worked well with the visual and narrative possibilities unique to the comics page. Following Superman a host of other superhero characters quickly appeared in comics of their own. Centaur Comics' The Arrow, and DC Comics' The Crimson Avenger were the first to appear but neither managed to endure long. It was almost a year after the publication of Action Comics #1 that the second superhero appeared on the newsstands, and also established a tradition of fierce copyright protection that is still exercised today. Wonder Comics #1, May 1939, featured Wonder Man, the brainchild of Victor S. Fox, an ex-accountant for DC Comics, as drawn by Will Eisner. Aware of the vast profits DC was making with Superman, Fox sought to establish his own publishing company and contracted Eisner and Jerry Inger to create Wonder Man, who was almost identical to Superman. Wearing a predominantly red rather than blue costume, and being an Earthling rather than a Kryptonian, Wonder Man otherwise had identical powers of flight, strength, invulnerability and an alter-ego as a timid radio reporter. DC immediately sued Fox for infringement of copyright and the courts ruled in DC's favour. Wonder Man never made it to issue number two.

Ironically, the same legal fate befell the Golden Age's most popular superhero, Captain Marvel (Figure 3.2). In 1940 the Fawcett Publications team of artist C.C. Beck and writer Bill Parker created Captain Marvel who appeared first in Whiz Comics and then in Captain Marvel Adventures and America's Greatest as his notoriety increased. A variation on the dual identity theme, Captain Marvel was really the teenage Billy Batson who, under the instruction of a mysterious wizard, discovered that he could transform into "the world's mightiest mortal" simply by uttering the magic word "SHAZAM". The character was so successful that it fostered two hit spin-offs with Captain Marvel, Jr. and Mary Marvel. In 1941 DC began legal actions against Fawcett arguing that the concept and depiction of Captain Marvel was similar enough to Superman to constitute copyright infringement. Unlike the quick decision against Wonder Man, the legal battle between DC and
Chapter 8 "BOOMERANG"
Fawcett dragged on through the 1940s and into the middle 1950s before Fawcett acquiesced to the ruling that Captain Marvel was an infringement of copyright and gave up publishing. As an example of the protective strength of copyright to build and destroy fortunes, DC itself took over all the rights to Captain Marvel and began publishing the character again in the 1970s.

The wave of colorfully costumed superheroes who followed Superman is impressive. Some of the most popular are still around today, others enjoyed a relatively short lived career of two to fifteen years, and many disappeared after only a few adventures. DC Comics quickly added Batman, Wonder Woman, The Green Arrow, The Green Lantern, The Flash, and Hawkman to their roster. Fox Publications found some success with The Flame, The Green Mask and The Blue Beetle, while numerous other small comic book publishing companies offered the likes of Amazing Man, Ultra-Man, Atom Man, Hydroman, Bulletman, Spark Man, The Hangman, The Cat-Man, Captain Flag, Captain Midnight and countless others. While DC dominated the Golden Age of comics, one other publisher did manage to emerge as a solid contender and would go on to command an overwhelming share of the comics market from the 1960s on. The company was of course Timely Publications, which would later be renamed Marvel Comics. After some experimentation with humorous comic books, Marvel decided to stick with adventure tales and in October 1939 published their first superhero book entitled *Marvel Comics, #1*. This landmark comic was the debut for Marvel's first two star superheroes, Bill Everett's The Submariner and Carl Burgos' The Human Torch. Capitalizing on the patriotic fervor during World War II, Marvel's next success was the introduction of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's Captain America in March 1941, nine months before Pearl Harbor. The striking cover of *Captain America, #1* depicted the red, white and blue clad hero punching Hitler in the face and immediately sold close to a million copies. Inside, the story of Captain America's origin was yet another variant on the dual identity, wimp-to-hero formula as a secret serum transforms a skinny army-reject into a tall, muscular masculine ideal.

As would befit the times, the comics of the early 1940s produced numerous super-patriotic heroes in the tradition of Captain America. Minute Man, Uncle Sam, Captain Flag, Major Victory, and the Fighting Yank joined the legions of established heroes like Superman, Captain Marvel, Batman, Wonder Woman and The Human Torch in fighting the Nazis every month (at least on the covers). In all, over thirty new super patriots appeared in the comics during the war years. All of these heroic
characters were Anglo-Saxon with any depiction of ethnicity reserved for the grotesquely caricatured images of Germans and Japanese. Unfortunately the only exception to be found was the deplorable stereotype of Whitewash, a buck-toothed and rag-clad Black youth who fought against the Nazi's alongside such young heroes as Bucky, Toro, Knuckles, and Tubby in the pages of Young Allies Comics (1941). Otherwise, like everyone else during the war the superheroes did their part at home as well as on the battlefield. On splashy covers the heroes promoted the sale of war bonds, warned children about spies and saboteurs, encouraged blood donations and product rationing. While the cheap escapism provided by the comics had allowed them to prosper during the depression, propagandistic images of American heroes socking it to the grotesquely rendered Axis forces and promoting the sale of war bonds solidified the medium's popularity. As historian William Savage points out, World War II "stimulated the comic book industry, not only by providing much of the editorial matter but also by expanding the audience for comic books. Hundreds of thousands of comic books were shipped to American service personnel around the world." (1990: 11). The patriotic comic books produced for G.I.s were often times even more rudimentary than those created specifically for child readers in order to facilitate "quick and easy reading" and to accommodate many of the soldiers who were functionally illiterate. In catering to the low literacy levels of many of the G.I.s the comics became excessively simplified in some cases, further solidifying the public's perception of the medium as sub-literate trash.

In the years after the war the comic book industry would have to readjust its themes to suit an era of different concerns. But by the time the war ended in 1945 the dominant themes and conventions of the superhero genre were firmly in place. In The Comic Book in America (1993) Mike Benton identifies the four main conventions established in those early years that are still employed today. First, the hero wears some sort of distinguishable costume, usually of the colourful "long-underwear" variety to symbolically mark himself as an above average adventurer. Second the character must possess some form of super power that sets him apart from ordinary men, be it of alien origin (Superman), induced by science (Captain America), or developed through years of self improvement (Batman). The third convention of the genre is the presence of a dual or secret identity. And last, the superhero must be motivated by an altruistic, unwavering moral desire to help humankind in the fight against evil.
Comics in Trouble (1946-60)

The post-World War II comic book industry was still a booming business. In 1945 the combined annual sales of ten of the top publishers reportedly amounted to approximately 275,000,000 copies. By 1947 the figure had climbed to 300,000,000 and in 1949 it was nearly 340,000,000. But according to Ron Goulart, what these "fantastic sales figures don't show is the desperation that plagued comic book publishers, and the anxious, industry-wide retooling for new product" (1991: 161).

The initial novelty of the superhero had begun to wane and the larger, somewhat older and less idealistic audience (many of whom were veterans who had begun reading comic books in the trenches) was interested in different fare. Catering to this aging audience of adolescent boys and ex-service men, publishers drastically increased the amount of sex and violence depicted in their books. Voluptuous women in skimpy, skin-tight outfits, often in scenes of rapturous bondage, became the industry standard. The years between 1946 and 1954 were the hey-day of what serious collectors and comics historians refer to as "good girl art", or what the young male readers at the time referred to as "headlight comics". The 1948 cover of Fox's Phantom Lady #17 (Figure 3.3) was a prime example of this type of bondage-tainted cheesecake and would repeatedly be brought forth by critics as an illustration that comic books had become nothing more than "kiddy porn". The turn to mildly risque, pin-up type illustrations infected every genre of comic books from the superheroes to horror. Faced with the problem of creating situations where exaggeratedly drawn women could be shown in the most revealing clothes, the stories usually involved women as either heroines in bathing suit-type costumes or damsels in distress who were invariably tied up with their clothes strategically torn. Among the popular "Good Girl" comics were such series as Mysta of the Moon, Gale Allen and the Girl Squadron, Patsy Pinup, Sky Girl, and of course the long running Sheena: Queen of the Jungle. The abundance of good girl comics on display at the corner newsstand may have bolstered sales but it also brought a lot of unwanted attention as parents began to take note of just what was going on in the "funnies" their children were reading.

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3 The phrase "headlight comics" is a direct reference to the way female breasts were illustrated on the comics' covers. The breasts always pointed straight ahead and the nipples were always noticeably erect, or in the "high beam" position as it was called.
The 1950s was one of the most curious eras in American cultural history. The post-World War II decade was a time of economic prosperity, the birth of the Baby Boom generation, and the rise of television which very quickly became a fixture in almost every home in the nation. But the 1950s was also a time rife with various perceived threats to the American way of life, namely fear of The Bomb, communism, the Cold War, and juvenile delinquency. For many Americans fond memories of Elvis Presley and Howdy Doody are tainted by the shadow of building backyard bomb shelters and rhetoric of Senator McCarthy's communist witch hunts. While films like *Grease* and television programs like *Happy Days* paint the 1950s as a nostalgic ideal when rock 'n roll was good clean fun and the quarterback always dated the cheerleader, historians who lean towards the left have frequently reminded us that the decade was foremost a time of political and cultural uniformity. It was an era that stressed the virtues of conformity and domesticity, and which worried about cultural dissent. Like the godless Reds who were accused of being everywhere and nowhere, of destroying the very fabric of American civilization, the juvenile delinquent became the focus of domestic fears. Perhaps even more powerful than the external threats posed by the Bomb and the Cold War, juvenile delinquency was a threat from within, it was being bred right in our own homes. Hollywood expressed the growing concern over juvenile delinquency in such films as *The Wild One* (1954), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Hot Rod Girl* (1956), *The Delinquents* (1957), and *High School Confidential* (1958). It was every parents' worst nightmare, that their child might be a juvenile delinquent, that their child might be different. And as dominant culture often does, it began looking for scapegoats, for outside forces that could be blamed (see for example Starker, 1989). One of the media elements blamed for causing juvenile delinquency was the comics industry.

With the war over and the world safe from such easily identified and easily personified threats as the Nazis, the superhero comics gave way to the horror comics which would become the most popular genre in the early 1950s. With the evidence of Hiroshima and the start of the Cold War, it was perhaps predictable that horror comics --like many other popular forms that had utilized horror before, from folklore to film-- would find an audience by expressing the fears that Americans tried to leave unacknowledged. With communist witch hunts across the land and countless bomb shelters being installed in suburban homes, the comic book industry was able to tap into the underlying level of paranoia. Avon's *Eerie* which appeared in 1946 is considered the first true horror
comic but it was not published on a regular monthly basis until 1951. In the following years many new and increasingly graphic horror titles would join the trend from both new and established publishers. Marvel came out with a whole line of horror comics like *Marvel Mystery* and *Marvel Tales*, and for a while even superheroes got in on the act as *Captain America* became *Captain America's Weird Tales* and Harvey Publishing's heroine the Black Cat became a narrator for *Black Cat Mystery*. The most notable publisher to be attracted to horror comics was William Gaines who in 1947 had inherited Educational Comics (EC) from his father, comic book pioneer M.C. Gaines. The younger Gaines quickly changed the "E" in EC to "Entertaining" and, in 1950, launched a line of infamous horror comics including *Weird Fantasy*, *Weird Science*, *The Haunt of Fears*, *The Vault of Horror* and *Tales from the Crypt* which would attract nation wide attention and result in one of the most crucial periods in the industry's evolution.

In addition to incorporating the sexual depiction of terrorized women established in the era's headlight comics, EC's titles were unabashedly gruesome in their depiction of violence. A flip thru the pages of any given EC comic might reveal such common sights as peoples' heads being torn off by walking corpses, Earthlings being eaten alive by space monsters, a man dismembered and his bodily parts being used as baseball equipment, or a female heroine addict's eyes being pierced by a hypodermic needle. Despite EC's graphic and sensationalistic story-telling style, the tales were usually thinly disguised moral parables that in one form or another challenged authority. An abused wife murdered her husband, a cruel school bus driver trapped in a bus full of vampire children, a lowly office worker doing killed his demanding boss, and children get even with unfair parents by planning their murder. While the EC comics were clearly excessive in their particular brand of poetic justice, the quality of the stories was generally well above other comics fare and were often written by such notable authors as Ray Bradbury and H.P. Lovecraft. EC comics were also among the first to consistently acknowledge the individual talents of the creators. As a regular feature Gaines would include profiles of the writers and artists like the now legendary Graham Ingels, Wally Wood, Jack Davis, Harvey Kurtzman and Frank Franzetta. Thus, EC readers were able to follow the work of their favorite artists and writers more closely than ever before and in some instances the creators became the reason that fans would buy individual issues. This concept of the "fan favorite" would develop over the years until it became one of the defining characteristics of contemporary comic fandom.
With their lurid style of illustration and gleefully violent stories, the horror comics typified by the EC line played right into the hands of the comic industry's ever-present critics. Those critics were now gaining national attention as all of America seemed concerned with the rise of juvenile delinquency. In an age of strident, anti-communist McCarthyism the relatively ununited comic book industry found itself poised for a fall. The most diligent leader of the crusade against the comics was Dr. Frederic Wertham, a New York forensic psychologist who claimed that comic books were a direct and possibly the only cause of juvenile delinquency. Wertham's attack on the comics began with an article entitled "The Comics... Very Funny: Marijuana of the Nursery" published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* on May 29, 1948. The opening of the article is indicative of the common sense language and the sensationalist style that Wertham would repeatedly employ as a scare tactic directed at parents.

An anxious mother consulted me some time ago. Her four year old daughter is the only little girl in the apartment house where they live. The boys in the building, from about three to nine years old, hit her, beat her with guns, tie her up with rope whenever they get a chance. They hit her with whips which they buy at the circus. They push her off her bicycle and take her toys away. They handcuff her with handcuffs bought with coupons from comic books. They take her to a vacant lot and use her as a target for bow and arrow. They make a spearhead and scare her. Once, surrounding her in this way, they pulled off her panties to torture her (as they put it). Now her mother has fastened the child's panties with a string around her neck so the boys can't pull them down.

What is the common denominator of all this? Is this the "natural aggression" of little boys? Is it the manifestation of the sex instinct? Is it the release of natural tendencies or the imitation of unnatural ones? The common denominator is comic books.

Wertham's rhetoric and his simple "monkey see, monkey do" logic struck home for many 1950s parents who were worried that something might be wrong with their children, that they might be in some way different, and his subsequent articles published in magazines such as *Reader's Digest, Collier's, Ladies' Home Journal*, and *National Parent Teacher Magazine* allowed him to further tap directly into the fears of concerned middle class parents.

With so much negative attention being brought on by the likes of Wertham, and the general air of paranoia, it was not long before the hitherto ignored comics industry took its place alongside
other communication mediums which had been subjected to moralistic government investigations. The motion picture industry had already been examined by the censorious Hays Office, and radio and television had been forced to form the National Association for Better Radio and Television in order to stave off the critics. Thus, in April 1954 the comic book industry came under fire from the U.S. Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in the United States, which was headed by Senator Estes Kefauver. The first and most influential participant to take the stand was Wertham who preached dramatically against the effects of what he broadly referred to as "crime comics". By "crime comics" he meant any comic that mentioned crime, including such diverse genres as cops-and-robbers, superheroes, science fiction, western, jungle, horror and even romance stories. Responding to questions posed by the Senate subcommittee, Wertham handed them comics as a ready made scapegoat: "If it were my task, Mr. Chairman, to teach children delinquency, to tell them how to rape and seduce girls, how to hurt people, how to break into stores, how to cheat, how to forge, how to do any known crime, if it were my task to teach that, I would have to enlist the crime comic book industry." (quoted in "Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency", 1954: 87). In response to the obvious condemning of the comics industry that was going on at the hearings, EC publisher William Gaines became the only volunteer witness to defend comics. In particular he tried to defend his own horror titles which were under scrutiny. The Senate subcommittee immediately treated Gaines as a pornographer for children. They refused to let the publisher read prepared statements regarding anti-censorship rights, and under questioning the subcommittee forced Gaines into the dubious position of having to defend how much blood could be shown dripping from a woman's severed head before he would consider it in bad taste.

In conjunction with the "Kefauver Hearings", as they came to be known, Wertham's grand opus against the comics, Seduction of the Innocent, was published shortly after the Senate investigation began in 1954. Wertham's basic premise was that comic books at worst turned innocent children into vicious delinquents, and at best caused an irrevocably distorted view of the world. Wertham summarized the negative effects of comic book reading as the following:

1. The comic book format is an invitation to illiteracy.
2. Crime comic books create an atmosphere of cruelty and deceit.
3. They create a readiness for temptation.
4. They stimulate unwholesome fantasies.
5. They suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas.
6. They furnish the rationalization for criminal and sexual ideas, which may be ethically even more harmful than the impulse.
7. They suggest the forms a delinquent impulse may take and supply details of technique.
8. They may tip the scales toward maladjustment or delinquency.

(Wertham, 1954: 118)

In short, Wertham claimed that all comics contained glorified images of criminal violence which inspired children to behave in a similar manner. As proof Wertham offered the testimony of several delinquents under his care who claimed: "I got my bad ideas from the comics; stabbing, robbing, stealing guns and all that stuff." While the grittier urban crime comics were accused of being instruction manuals for delinquents, Wertham accused the most traditional of superhero comics of instigating what he saw as an even worse deviance: homosexuality. Wertham claimed that superheroes, those muscle-bound men running around in tights, were obviously gay. Wonder Woman was undoubtedly a card-carrying, man-hating dyke who indoctrinated young female readers, and Wertham described the relationship of Bruce Wayne (Batman) and his young ward "Dick" Grayson (Robin) as "like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together" (1954: 191). And if the characters were not criminals or homoerotic, they were surely fascists like Superman, who Wertham saw as needing an endless stream of subhuman enemies to bend to his will.

Wertham’s methods were far from scientific. Since its original publication in 1954, Seduction of the Innocent has been widely criticized as alarmist propaganda. Even before his best-selling book was published, Wertham’s scare tactics were refuted in both the academic and popular press. In the December 1949 issue of the Journal of Educational Sociology Frederic M. Thrasher, a professor of education at New York University and a member of the Attorney General’s Conference on Juvenile Delinquency, argued that the attack on comics was tantamount to scapegoatism. Thrasher claimed that Wertham’s theories constitute an extreme position, which is not substantiated by any valid research, and is not only contrary to considerable current psychiatric thinking, but also disregards tested research procedures which have discredited numerous previous monistic theories of delinquency causation. Wertham’s dark picture of the influence of comics is more forensic than it is scientific and illustrates a dangerous habit of projecting our social frustrations upon some specific trait in our culture, which becomes a sort of ‘whipping
'boy' for our failure to control the whole gamut of social breakdown. (Thrasher, 1949: 48)

Even the editors of Collier's, who first published Wertham's views, later offered an editorial arguing that comic books were being singled out as a convenient excuse but were logically no more responsible for delinquency than Treasure Island or Jack and the Beanstalk. But none of these rebuttals defending comic books ever managed to catch the imagination of parents the way Wertham's accusations did. More recently, critics like Sharon Lowery (1983) have outlined the numerous faults in Wertham's work, from overgeneralization, to selective illustration without story context to a complete disregard for the complex nature of juvenile delinquency.

Seldom has the public been concerned with whether a study was methodologically sound or not. Parents were scared that their children were growing up different from them and a scapegoat was needed. In tandem the Senate subcommittee investigations and Wertham played on the fears of parents everywhere and the backlash against comics was devastating. The moral majority decided that something must be done about comic books lest they corrupt the very fabric of American culture. As an indication of the hysteria induced by comics, James Gilbert cites the following plea to the American Bar Association's special subcommittee into the links between crime and the mass media:

Large metropolitan cities to small hamlets have passed local laws censoring or banning crime comics; state laws are under consideration; groups have been formed, both national and local, to remove crime comics from places of sale and we are currently witnessing in many localities what almost amounts to an hysteria, evidenced by the mass burning of crime comics by parents' and childrens' groups.

(quoted in Gilbert, 1986: 85)

As this statement suggests, the anxiety about the content of comic books was widespread. A follow-up report published less than a year after the Senate subcommittee hearings claimed that over sixty communities had held their own formal investigations into the distribution of comic books in their towns, and many had begun to implement regulatory measures (see Feder, 1955: 31).

Thus the comic book industry underwent a major upheaval during the middle of the 1950s. Soon after the public outrage began, the entire line of EC horror and mystery titles was cancelled and Gaines moved on to create Mad magazine, which, as a magazine, would not be subject to the same content restrictions as those adopted by the comic book industry. All of the large comic book publishing companies voluntarily banded together to form the Comics Magazine Association of
America (CMAA) in order to escape the witch hunts with what little audience they had left. The main purpose of the CMAA was to enforce a strict moral code aimed at regulating the content of comic books (for a detailed discussion of the development of the comics code see Nyberg, 1994). The CMAA set up an independent review body called the Comics Code Authority (CCA) that would evaluate comic books prior to their publication to ensure they met code standards. Most retailers agreed to stock only comic books that were marked with the CCA seal of approval, so companies that could not, or would not, conform to code standards were forced out of business. Interestingly, Gaines initially tried to conform to code standards but decided to quit the industry when one of his science fiction comics was returned by the CCA with the requirement that the hero, a Black astronaut, be recoloured white. Of course the disappearance of such notorious but popular publishers as EC, Fiction House, and Avon served a dual purpose for the rest of the industry, it "cleaned up" the image of comic books and it removed market leaders from the small but competitive industry.

Today the comics code is regarded by many as highly restrictive censorship, but upon its implementation the industry gladly touted it as "the most stringent code in existence for any communications media" (quoted in Daniels, 1971: 84). Among other things, the code insisted that: a) parents, teachers, policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall not be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority. b) in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds. c) all lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be omitted, and d) suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive postures are unacceptable.

Just two years after the Comics Code was implemented, many of the smaller publishing companies closed down due to poor sales. In 1952 there had been more than five hundred comic book titles fighting it out at the corner newsstand, but by 1956 their numbers had dwindle to less than three hundred. With the demise or sanitizing of horror comics the second half of the decade was a rather bleak period for comic books. In addition to the problems created by Wertham and the Kefauver Hearings, the rise of television's popularity provided a great challenge for comics. Many of the publishers figured that the best way to produce wholesome fare that would also appeal to a new generation of television fans was to feature TV characters in their own comic books. The late 1950s saw such TV-originated comic book series as I Love Lucy, Leave it to Beaver, Davey Crockett, and
Sgt. Bilko. Likewise, comic books aimed at younger children --and approved by cautious parents-- enjoyed a resurgence with popular titles like Dennis the Menace, Richie Rich, and Casper the Friendly Ghost. But by far the most popular genre of the post-Comics Code years was science fiction. Comics like Mystery in Space, Fantastic Worlds, Crusader from Mars, Space Adventures, and Adventures into the Unknown reflected the era's fascination with science. With the invention of the atomic bomb many Americans saw science as a mysterious and possibly dangerous new frontier and the comics were quick to hop on the bandwagon. Even such stalwarts as Superman and Batman spent most of their time between 1954 and 1960 fighting off space creatures who seemed to invade Metropolis and Gotham on a monthly basis.

Overall, the late 1950s are regarded by most comics historians as an age neutered by the Comics Code Authority, an era which produced an abundance of bland, childish and insipid books.

Reviving the Superhero (1961-1970)

The next major period in the history of comics is referred to by critics and fans as either the "Silver Age" or the "Marvel Age". With the demise of so many rival publishers including Ace Comics, Avon Publications, Premier Publishing and Superior Comics, the late 1950s and early 1960s marked the almost unchallenged ascent of DC and Marvel as the "big two" of comic book publishers, a dominance that these two companies still share today. Just as the superhero had solidified the success of the comics industry when it first emerged, it was the superhero who is credited with resuscitating the struggling industry in the early 1960s. Unofficially the Silver Age began in the late 1950s when DC Comics decided to resurrect some of the company's most popular pre-World War II characters. Among DC's successfully revamped characters was The Flash, The Green Lantern, The Atom, Hawkman, and The Justice Society which became The Justice League of America.

The boon enjoyed by DC at the onset of the 1960s due to the rebirth of superheroes was soon noticed by the editors over at Marvel Comics. Seeing how well the Justice League of America comic series was selling for DC, Marvel publisher Martin Goodman instructed his chief editor Stan Lee to concoct a team of superheroes for themselves. With the assistance of legendary artist Jack Kirby, Lee created the revolutionary comic book series The Fantastic Four which debuted in 1961. Though it adhered to the standard conventions of the superhero genre, The Fantastic Four were heroes unlike
any seen before in the pages of a comic book. The team consisted of Reed (Mr. Fantastic) Richards, an aloof scientific genius with the ability to stretch his body, his fiancee Sue (Invisible Girl) Storm, her teenage brother Johnny, who was actually an updated version of the Human Torch, but who cared more for girls, cars, and showing off than for fighting criminals, and of course the fan favorite Ben (The Thing) Grimm, whose chunky orange skin made him look more like a traditional comic book monster than a hero. These were heroes plagued by personal problems and self-doubts, they were in many senses more realistic than traditional superheroes and the changes struck a chord with comic book readers. The semi-tragic hero with as many down-to-earth problems as supervillains to defeat became a trademark of Marvel and helped earn the company the largest share of the comic book market. The first issue of *The Fantastic Four* made an incredible impact and by the third instalment the book was touting itself as "The Greatest Comic Magazine in the World" and was also the first issue to raise the price of comic books from 10 to 12 cents.

The dynamic team of Lee and Kirby had discovered the formula for Marvel's success with flawed superheroes. Their productive style of collaboration soon resulted in another landmark character when their take on the dilemma of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde hit the stands in the spring of 1962 with *The Incredible Hulk*. #1. Looking like Hollywood's version of Frankenstein's monster, the Hulk is actually mild-mannered scientist Bruce Banner who, due to exposure to a "gamma radiation bomb", becomes the bestial superbeing whenever he is angry. In quick order Lee and Kirby added a plethora of popular humanized heroes to the Marvel pantheon. Thor, Iron Man, Daredevil, The X-Men, and The Avengers all debuted in the early 1960s, and such classic characters as the Submariner and Captain America were reintroduced.

The most popular hero to emerge from the period was Spider-man. Introduced in the final issue of *Amazing Fantasy* in 1962 (Figure 3.4), Spider-man was the epitome of the Marvel superhero, a high school science nerd who gains superstrength and the ability to stick to walls when he is bitten by a radioactive spider. As Les Daniels remarks in his history of Marvel comics: "Lee used him [Spider-Man] to challenge the very concept of the super hero. Spider-man was neurotic, compulsive and profoundly skeptical about the whole idea of becoming a costumed savior. The Fantastic Four argued with each other, and The Hulk and Thor had problems with their alter egos, but Spider-man had to struggle with himself" (1991: 95). As a teenager himself, Spider-man was also the clearest
example of the adolescent power fantasies so essential to superhero comics since the original dual identity of Superman/Clark Kent. As the character declares in his first appearance on the cover of that Amazing Fantasy, #15, as he swings across the roofs of New York with a criminal under his arm: "Though the world may mock Peter Parker, the timid teenager... it will soon marvel at the awesome might of Spider-Man!".

By the middle of the decade the superhero revival was in full swing as all of the remaining publishers either reintroduced old heroes or created new ones. Ironically, the industry was also given a boost by its old rival, television. On January 12th 1966, the American Broadcast Company aired the first episode of the campy Batman television series. It took a few weeks for the show to really catch on but once it did Batman was an enormous success. The campy style of the program fit well with the mood of the 1960s and was deliberately played up in order to distance the character from any possible criticisms reminiscent of the Wertham scare a decade earlier. The series only lasted for three seasons, but for those three years Batman seemed to be everywhere. The television series boosted the sales of not just Batman comic books but of all the superhero titles and the show's campiness reinscribed for parents the wholesome image of comic books as harmless kids fare. Perhaps most importantly the Batman television series illustrated the financial benefits to be gained for the comic book industry by merchandising their characters and capitalizing on the wider audiences available through other media. Ron Goulart notes that "the Batman TV series inspired merchandising spin-offs—toys, games, peanut butter, clothes, costumes, and more—that grossed $150,000,000 in 1966" (1991: 261). Marvel and some of the smaller publishers were quick to join DC in marketing their characters in a variety of mediums, thus increasing their revenues and ultimately their reader base. The most obvious later examples of building on a single popular instance of a comic book character by mass marketing the image to the point of cultural exhaustion are the synergistic phenomena surrounding the film versions of Superman in 1980, Batman in 1989, and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in 1990.

While the popularity of the superhero genre was being re-invented during the 1960s, the later half of the decade is notable for the rise of subversive, adult oriented underground comics. Closely associated with the era's hippy movement, the underground comics were generally referred to as comix or komix in an attempt to both distinguish themselves from the mainstream industry and as a
marker of their often X-rated themes. The comix are distinguishable for their subversive content, satirical portraits of sex and drug use, their combined use of psychedelic and Disney-esque styles of illustration, and their audience of adult readers. Fittingly enough, the first formal underground comic appeared in San Francisco when Robert Crumb sold the first issue of his own, self-published *Zap* on street corners in 1967. Featuring characters that would become counter cultural icons like Mr. Natural and Whiteman, the first issue was soon reprinted and sold in the thousands before Crumb struck a deal for distribution all over the country. Dozens of anti-establishment artists/writers joined the fray while Crumb expanded his output with such famous titles as *Despair, Big Ass Funnies, Head Comix, and Fritz the Cat*. In 1971 Gilbert Sheldon gained notoriety for his characters Wonder Warthog, a superhero spoof, and the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, three perpetually stoned hippies. At the same time, but in a more revolutionary, less humorous spirit, Manuel (Spain) Rodriguez unleashed his anarchist superhero Trashman who just loved to kill members of bourgeois society. Chicago creators like Justin Green, Skip Williamson, Jay Lynch, and Art Spiegleman became popular from their work in *Bijou Funnies*. As the comix quickly evolved special political and social interests were soon addressed in titles like the feminist *It Ain't Me, Babe* and *Wimmins Comix*, the environmentalist *Slow Death Funnies*, and the classic gay liberationist *Gay Comix*.

As the popularity of the underground comix grew there was no denying their impact on the comic book industry. Roger Sabin points out in *Adult Comics* (1993) that by the "early 1970s there was a whole new, alternative comics culture in America. Publishers like Last Gasp, Kitchen Sink and Rip Off were putting out entire lines of comix, while at the grass-roots level, self-publishing was more widespread than ever. At the underground's height --roughly 1968-74-- it has been estimated that the six major comix publishers were between them selling 100,000 comix per month" (41). The success of the mature themed comix and the complete artistic autonomy enjoyed by their creators would have a profound effect on the mainstream publishers, lasting long after the underground comix themselves had gone out of favor. Chief among the influences of the comix was their attention to formerly taboo topics and their innovative use of non-standard systems of distribution.

**The Turn to Relevance (1971-1980)**

One of the most influential features of the underground comix was their use of more mature
themes. The mainstream publishers were not about to center all their stories on sex and the virtues of recreational drug use, but they were encouraged to test the boundaries of the Comics Code. The comix had shown that an older audience interested in mature issues existed and that it was possible to successfully distribute non-Code approved titles. Remarkably, in the spring of 1971 Stan Lee received a letter from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare requesting that the influential Marvel comics help warn young people about the dangerous effects of drug use. Marvel responded by publishing a landmark anti-drug story in *Spider-man* issues #95, 96 and 97. The story featured an epic battle between Spider-man and his arch-nemesis the Green Goblin, as well as the accidental death of a drug user who thought he could fly from the top of a building not to mention the overdose of Peter Parker's college roommate. Because the Comics Code did not allow drug stories, not even anti-drug stories requested by the government, the three issues were refused the CCA stamp of approval. Marvel decided to release the issues anyway and they were incredibly well received, garnering praise from both fans and media critics alike. Marvel's decisive action forced the review board into an awareness of the changing times and thereafter the Comics Code Authority granted much more freedom to the industry in regards to the issues they could address and the ways they could depict them.

This greater level of creative freedom became apparent just a few months later when DC launched its even more dramatic anti-drug story in *Green Lantern* #85 and #86 (Figure 3.5). Both of DC's issues received Code approval despite their sometimes quite graphic portrayal of formerly taboo topics. The anti-drug comics written by Denny O'Neil and illustrated by Neal Adams were part of a larger Green Lantern story arc that forthrightly addressed other controversial issues like political corruption, overpopulation, pollution, religious cults and racism. Indeed, the topic of racism was becoming an area of concern for the editors of the comic book superhero, and was featured as the catalyst for the Green Lantern's soul searching journey. Early on in issue #76 an elderly Black man confronts the hero: "I been reading about you. How you work for the blue skins. and how on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins. and you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there's skins you never bothered with... the black skins! I want to know how come?! Answer me that, Mr. Green Lantern!" Green Lantern can not answer the question but vows to begin exploring the

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A story arc is any adventure that requires more than two comic book issues to complete.
social injustices found on Earth as well as in space. By issue #87 the storyline featured the character of John Stewart, a Black man who temporarily replaces Hal Jordan as Green Lantern, and who by the mid-1980s in issue #182, would become the new Green Lantern (sometimes referred to by fans as the Black Lantern) when the original hero decides to resign.

The impetus of social relevance in the comic books of the 1970s is apparent in the short lived explosion of minority heroes. In the early 1970s with the loosening of the Comics Code and the industry's subsequent search for appropriate socially relevant topics, comics turned, as the industry had so often done before, to other mediums for inspiration and found it in the era's popular blaxploitation movies. The blaxploitation films seemed to have the blend of action, heroism, and profit that the comics industry could easily incorporate into the world of the superhero. Although not pervasive until the 1970s, the first real Black superhero in comics was Marvel's Black Panther, who emerged briefly in 1966 as a guest character in *The Fantastic Four* #52. Under his form-fitting cat suit the Black Panther was really T'Challa, the king of the fictitious African nation Wakanda. The character was not overtly related to the Black Panther political movement but Lee and Kirby had obviously been somewhat inspired by the organization, and at the very least the character's name was a hip reference to the struggles of Black American culture. The Black Panther appeared sporadically over the next few years as a member of the superhero team The Avengers, and in 1969 Marvel added the second-ever Black superhero, the Falcon, a reformed criminal who became a sidekick for Captain America. Although the Falcon would become a popular character in his own right and was given his own mini-series in 1983, he was destined to remain in the shadow of Captain America, their often unequal relationship seen by some as an unintended metaphor for the Black experience in White America.

The term blaxploitation has been used most recognizably to describe the sixty or so Black-oriented action films produced between 1970 and 1975. But blaxploitation has also been used to describe a small group of mainstream Black superhero comics published during the same era and inspired by the films. The blaxploitation films were generally low-budget productions which centered on the action-adventure exploits of a sexually charged Black protagonist, a character type that critic Daniel Leab dubbed "Superspade". As he (and later she) defeats a white villain or a corrupt system, all set against the backdrop of a large urban ghetto. The genre emerged in response to two separate
problems faced by the film industry in the late 1960s. The first problem was political, as a large, post-Watts riot, Black community began to demand that Hollywood rescind their racist hiring practices and their tradition of unequal or degrading cinematic representations. In his study of African American film images, Ed Guerrero notes that blaxploitation films "were made possible by the rising political and social consciousness of black people --taking the form of a broadly expressed black nationalist impulse at the end of the civil rights movement-- which translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen" (Guerrero, 1994: 69).

The second influential factor was economic. The film industry was in serious financial trouble due to a wave of failed big-budget epics. In fact many of the major studios teetered on the verge of bankruptcy and were forced by the banks to completely restructure their production and distribution systems. "At a time of financial exigency." Tommy Lott pointed out in his discussion of Black film theory, "some Hollywood studios discovered that there was a large Black audience starving for Black images on the screen. This situation provided an immediate inducement for them to exploit the box office formula of the black hero which, subsequently, became the earmark of the blaxploitation flick" (Lott, 1991: 43). The cheaply produced blaxploitation films satisfied, for a time, the immense Black audience looking for heroic characters and more importantly, from a production standpoint, the films managed to earn significant profits for the studios.

Although there were dozens of famous blaxploitation feature films, or rather I should say infamous because the short-lived genre is typically recalled by critics and fans alike as a somewhat embarrassing moment in film history and racial representation, I want to briefly outline only two of the most famous films here. Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song and Shaft. These two films represent two of the earliest instances of the genre. They also represent an important dialectical split in racial politics. I will discuss the importance of this political divide in more detail in the next chapter when I relate it directly to the new hero comic books published by Milestone Media Inc. and ANIA. Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song (1971), written, produced, directed and starring Melvin Van Peebles, tells the story of Sweetback, a "bad nigger" sex stud who was raised in a whorehouse. The thin plot has to do with Sweetback's journey through the underbelly of the ghetto while being pursued by the police for nearly killing two officers who were brutalizing a Black revolutionary leader. Along the way Sweetback repeatedly proves his manhood by out fighting and out screwing a number of adversaries.
"Sweet Sweetback" cost Van Peebles only $500,000 to produce, but became an immediate success grossing over $10 million nationally in its first year of release. Despite the film's financial success and its undeniable popularity with Black audiences, "Sweet Sweetback" also set off a series of debates among Black critics regarding the aesthetic value of the film and the dangerous ideals it portrayed. Essentially the debates inspired by "Sweet Sweetback", and its subsequent imitations, were divided across the long standing political rift between Black America's aspiration to harmonize with the dominant culture and the impulse to separate from it. While for some the film was a revisionist portrayal of a Black hero that compensated for years of desexualized, Sidney Poitier type, Black images that promoted stoic perseverance and conformity as the only legitimate means for acceptance by the larger society, For others, blaxploitation was a degrading representation of a Black culture populated with nothing but pimps, hookers, dealers, druggies, and macho studs. The only aspect of the film that was uniformly regarded as a positive step was that "Sweet Sweetback" was, at all levels, a completely independent Black production.

In contrast, "Shaft" (1971), directed by Gordon Parks and starring Richard Roundtree, was a studio backed project that openly sought to capitalize on the new-found Black audience by formalizing the conventions of the Black action hero. "Shaft" was less politically contentious and became a smash hit with both Black and White film-goers. Rather than a "Sex Show" performer, John Shaft was a more traditional hero, a hard-boiled, macho private eye, who also happened to be Black, hip and sexually active. The film's plot revolves around Shaft's effort to rescue a mob boss's kidnapped daughter who is being held by members of a downtown white mafia. Like Sweetback (or a Black James Bond), Shaft also gets to sleep with numerous women, both Black and White, over the course of his adventure. "Shaft" was a huge success and spawned the sequels "Shaft's Big Score!" (1972) and "Shaft in Africa" (1973) before the genre quickly exhausted itself. Although "Shaft" reproduced many of the key ingredients of the blaxploitation film as established only months earlier by "Sweet Sweetback", it garnered a different reception from critics. Most critics applauded it for creating at least a marginally more positive Black role model, while more politically extreme critics ridiculed it as a white-produced film which basically presented white heroic fantasies in a Black face. Discussing "Shaft", Mark Reid argues in his review of Black action films that in their "obvious effort to attract a Black popular audience through rhetoric and images appealing to that audience. MGM, like other
major studios, invested black heroes with mainstream values. In doing so, they did not create mythic black heroes. Instead, like doll makers who painted Barbie's face brown, they merely created black-skinned replicas of the white heroes of action films" (Reid, 1988: 30-31). Though the images presented in both films are problematic by today's standards in regard to racial stereotypes, they are also indicative of the demarcation in Black cultural politics whereby Sweet Sweetback becomes aligned with a segregationist position and Shaft with an integrationist position (see Lott, 1991 or Guerrero, 1994).

The comic book industry was quick to take their cue from such popular blaxploitation films as Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, Shaft and their numerous imitators including Superfly, Top of the Heap, The Man, The Mack and Black Caesar. Publishers were eager to tap into a market segment that they had ignored for far too long. But instead of producing straight blaxploitation heroes, the comics publishers melded the superficial conventions of the film genre with the characters they knew best, the superheroes. The comic book versions may have looked and talked like John Shaft but they were given fancy costumes and superpowers. The comic book blaxploitation heroes were also watered down for a younger audience so that such prominent film conventions as the hero's sexual prowess were left out of the stories. The ingredients that the comics did retain were usually much more in line with the politics of Shaft than they were with Sweet Sweetback or any of the other films that took professional criminals as their heroes. Though they were occasionally reformed criminals or wrongly accused criminals the comic book blaxploitation characters were always very clearly heroes. They were hip Black heroes with a streetwise agenda to clear drug dealers out of the ghettos they defended. Like the films that inspired them, the blaxploitation heroes of the comics did not last for very long. By the late 1970s they had all disappeared except for the intermittent guest appearance in a more popular character's book. Still, because comic book fans are so well aware of the medium's history, it has been hard for publishers to shrug off the ghost of the jive talking blaxploitation heroes. The characters are still available in back-issue bins in every comic book store and many of them still make the random guest appearance in a variety of contemporary comics. As I will explore in later chapters, even today's young fans interpret modern Black comic book heroes in relation to those who emerged for a brief period in the early 1970s.

Undeniably, the most widely recognized blaxploitation character in the comics was Marvel's
Luke Cage, who first appeared in 1972 in his self-titled series *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* (Figure 3.6). Far from Marvel’s earlier venture into Black heroes with the noble Black Panther, who was obviously constructed as a positive role model for Black children, Luke Cage was a trash-talking, streetwise, ex-con forever on the run from the law. Originally scripted by Archie Goodwin with art by Billy Graham and George Tuska, Cage is the epitome of blaxploitation’s angry young Black man. Sent to prison for a crime he did not commit, Cage volunteers for a medical experiment that gives him extraordinary strength and steel-hard skin. Cage escapes and sets up shop near New York’s Times Square as a mercenary ‘hero for hire’. By issue #17 Cage is granted a more conventional superhero name and the title of his book is changed to *Luke Cage: Power Man*, but by 1986, after having the longest run ever for a book featuring a Black protagonist, the series was finally cancelled due to declining sales. Many loyal readers were upset by the demise of the character and in 1991 Marvel briefly resurrected the hero in a comic simply called *Cage*. Faced with the dilemma of a purely 1970s character existing in the 1990s, *Cage* writer Marcus McLaurin undertook the novel task of what the *Village Voice*’s Gary Dauphin describes as: “dialogu(ing) with ’70s Black macho--the historical space of Cage’s origin--hoping to critique the type while still relying on it to make the comic fun. It’s a neat enough trick when it works, but when it doesn’t, today’s Cage is a skipping record, hitting the same blustery note over and over” (Dauphin, 1994: 35). Apparently Cage’s appeal had worn off and *Cage* completed its run after only 20 issues. The character still appears occasionally as a guest hero in other on-going Marvel comic books.

When Tony Isabella moved in 1976 to DC Comics from Marvel, where he had worked on Luke Cage, he was given the task of developing the company’s first Black superhero. DC had in mind a character dubbed “The Black Bomber” who was actually a bigoted white Vietnam veteran who had undergone war-time experiments that would cause him to turn into a Black hero during times of stress. Fortunately, Isabella persuaded DC to drop the concept and accept his character, Black Lightning, instead. The electricity-wielding Black Lightning was actually Jefferson Pierce, an ex-Olympian turned inner-city school teacher with a passion for cleaning up the ghetto he lived and worked in. Like Cage, Black Lightning was inspired by the blaxploitation heroes of the screen. His self-titled series was launched in 1977 with a cover illustration featuring Black Lightning beating up a warehouse full of baddies while he declared: “You *Pushers* have wrecked the city long enough --Now

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its my turn to wreck you!" Like all the other blaxploitation inspired comic book heroes, Black Lightning was a watered down nod to the Black power movement of the 1970s and the stories concentrated on his war on drugs. The series only lasted eleven issues, less than a year, but the character was popular enough to garner numerous guest appearances. One such appearance occurred in 1979 when Black Lightning was asked to join the all-white Justice League of America (Figure 3.7). In an issue surprising for its admission of racial politics among superhero characters, the writers had Black Lightning turn down Superman's offer on the grounds that he didn't want to be the League's token Black hero. In the 1980s Black Lightning became a team leader in the series *Batman and the Outsiders*. In 1994, following this time in the steps of Milestone's new heroes, Black Lightning was relaunched in a second on-going series of his own.

Luke Cage and Black Lightning were not the only blaxploitation heroes to appear in the comics, they are just two of the most widely recognized ones, the ones that modern fans and creators cite time and again as influential on the new heroes of today. Following the early success of Luke Cage, Marvel began to feature the Black Panther in lone action in 1973 in the sixth issue of a comic book entitled *Jungle Action*. By 1977 the character was given his own book, *Black Panther*, which lasted only 15 issues before being cancelled in 1979. But the Black Panther, the landmark hero, has subsequently been revived for two mini-series, one in 1988 and the other in 1991. Marvel tried for a third solo Black superhero with the size-changing Black Goliath in 1976, but the series never caught on and was finished by *Black Goliath* #5. Aside from individual minority heroes, the 1970s also saw a revamped version of Marvels' *X-Men* emerge as a racially diverse team that would become one of the most popular comic books of the 1980s and 1990s. Reworked in 1975, the new *X-Men* helped to expand the presence of ethnically and nationally diverse characters as heroic ideals by including Storm (African), Colossus (Russian), Nightcrawler (German), Thunderbird (Native American), Banshee (Scottish) and Wolverine (Canadian). Over the years the X-Men would constantly revise their roster to include almost every nationality possible, and would expand on their metaphorical nature as *mutant* heroes to encompass an overriding narrative on the evils of bigotry and discrimination.
Direct Distribution and Comics as Big Business (1981-1991)

The second area where the underground comix would affect the main stream comic book industry was in the matter of distribution. The comix proved it was viable to market comic books directly to their primary audience, yet in the mid-1970s the major publishers were still relying on newsstand distribution. By the end of the 1970s an alternative kind of retail outlet was starting to emerge: the comic book specialty store. Old comic books were increasingly sought as valuable collectors' items and a number of printed antiquities dealers were doing so well with out-of-print comic books that they opened retail stores specifically for selling old comics to fans and collectors. Phil Seuling, a comic book fan and entrepreneur, noticed the growing market for rare back issues and theorized that these specialty stores could be as adept at selling new comics as old ones. Seuling formed the Seagate distribution company and approached the major comic book publishers about distributing their titles directly to the specialty stores. Newsstand sale were declining due to what many saw as a lack of distinctive comic book promotion, so the publishers decided to experiment with this novel form of direct distribution. Especially enticing was the minimal risk posed to the publishers by the distribution arrangement whereby the comic book stores agreed not to return unsold copies in exchange for a greater discount.

The system of direct distribution was considered a success. According to Ed Shukin, then Marvel's vice president of sales: "Seagate grew very quickly from nothing to a multimillion-dollar business, and may very well have been the savior of the comics industry" (Quoted in Publishers Weekly, 1985: 34). Before long several other distribution companies sprang up and there emerged hundreds of stores specializing almost exclusively in comic books and comic-related merchandise. In 1981 Marvel tested the strength of the direct distribution system by releasing the first issue of a new comic, Dazzler, exclusively through the comic book specialty stores. Dazzler #1 sold an astounding 428,000 copies --nearly twice what other new comic books were selling at the time. Dazzler's triumph proved that despite the slow attrition of the traditional retail outlet for comic books the direct market could provide a sound financial base for the industry's growth. The development of direct distribution and the comic book specialty store allowed the industry to expand beyond the narrow purview of the corner newsstand and to market their books directly to the growing subculture of fans and collectors. Indeed, the rise of the direct market was incredible through the 1980s. In the middle
of the decade *Publishers Weekly* reported that an estimated 3000 comics specialty stores opened between 1980 and 1985 and that direct distribution accounted for over 50% of all comic book sales and was the fastest growing market (*Publishers Weekly*, 1985: 34). Maggie Thompson, co-editor of the weekly trade journal *Comic Buyer's Guide,* estimated in 1990 that "there are about 5,000 specialty shops in the U.S." and that their "annual sales rose from $130 million in mid-1986 to $400 million last year [1989]" (quoted in Fost, 1991:16).

The rise of the direct market allowed publishers to streamline production and avoid costly print over-runs. In 1981 Pacific Comics, a small California based publisher, broke ground by selling their comics exclusively through the specialty stores. Pacific's *Captain Victory and the Galactic Rangers* by Jack Kirby became the first of a wave of comic books distributed by independent publishers. The notoriety Kirby had achieved with fans for his work at Marvel in the 1960s and 1970s helped to ensure the success of *Captain Victory.* During the early 1980s dozens of small independent comic book companies appeared, many owned, operated, and featuring the work of former fans. Among the most popular and enduring were Comico, First Comics, Eagle, Americomics, Mirage and Capital. As Benton points out, "unlike Marvel and DC, the independent comic book publishers bypassed the newsstands completely and distributed exclusively to the collectors' market" (Benton, 1993: 84). By moving away from the newsstand market the independent companies and certain Marvel and DC titles were no longer required to conform to any of the Comics Code Authority regulations because the specialty store retailers were not bound by the same display restrictions that the newsstands were. American comic books were now able to address more mature themes, and in some cases became increasingly violent and sexual.

With the direct market now accounting for around 60% of the total audience for comic books, the devoted fan and collector came to dominate the world of comic production. The fans were knowledgeable about the books and began to focus on certain artists and writers as consistent producers of exceptional comics. Suddenly the individual writers and artists were as, or even more, important to the readers than the fictional characters. Seeking to retain their emerging stars, the major publishers felt the pressure to share some of the increased profits. As an incentive for their writers and artists, both Marvel and DC set up programs in 1982 that offered creators financial bonuses based on the sales of the titles they worked on. As comics historian Paul Sassienie points out, although DC was
the first to implement the commission system, "it cost Marvel a great deal more money than it cost DC, because the incentives did not begin operating until a comic sold more than 100,000 copies. At that time hardly any of DC's titles qualified, whereas almost all of Marvel's did" (Sassienie, 1994: 106). The big two companies also allowed their creators to exercise an increased amount of artistic freedom in the depiction of certain characters. For example, DC Comics allowed popular artist/writer John Byrne to retell the origin of Superman with Ma and Pa Kent still alive to advise their son, and Lex Luthor as an evil businessman rather than an evil super-scientist. And in extreme cases creators were sometimes allowed to keep the copyright of their work, such as the material published by Marvel under its Epic Comics alias.

The publishers also catered to the purchasing logic of the collectors by releasing an increasing number of first issues, mini-series, maxi-series, and "Collectors' Issues!". The mini and maxi-series was an ideal way for the publishers to explore alternate facets of popular characters at the same time that it created a product specifically tailored for the collectors' market. In addition to a mature content the special series were generally accorded higher production standards (e.g. glossier paper, better colour, better binding) and featured the work of the best available writers and artists. These high format issues also doubled their profits through later reprints as graphic novels -- book shelf quality bindings aimed at adult readers with more money to spare. The exceptional quality of some of these series also formalized the growing trend of comic book auteurism. For example, in 1986 the British team of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons were enjoyed a phenomenal success with their adult-oriented twelve issue maxi-series The Watchmen. The series explored what it would be like if superheroes existed in the real world through the personal lives of two generations of flawed costumed heroes. The story is a complex reworking of fifty years of superhero mythology and has been declared by many critics as the greatest comic ever created.

Comic book sales continued to rise through the late 1980s thanks to the existence of comic specialty stores and the superhero genre continued to dominate the form. New and old fans were also (re)discovering the world of comics in large part due to the enormous amount of media attention focused on Superman's fiftieth anniversary in 1988, marked by such events as a Smithsonian exhibition and Superman's appearance as the first ever comic character to grace the cover of Time magazine. Also the incredible success of Tim Burton's Batman which went on to become one of the
top five grossing movies of all time and sparked a new wave of Bat-mania so intense that many critics dubbed 1989 "the year of the Bat". By the start of the 1990s the industry was looking for ways to capitalize on the sometimes obsessive nature of the collectors' market. They found an answer in "gimmicky" covers and artist recognition. Todd McFarlane was a young artist working for Marvel when he first attracted fan attention with his work on The Incredible Hulk #340 in 1988, and then gained incredible notoriety as the regular artist on The Amazing Spider-Man. McFarlane's depiction of Marvel's most popular character was a distinct and energetic rendering that readers could recognize at a glance. So tremendous was McFarlane's following that in 1990 Marvel launched an all new Spider-Man title featuring McFarlane as both writer and artist. With the de rigueur "1st All-New Collector's Item Issue!" emblazoned across the top of the book and McFarlane's distinctive artwork on the cover the comic was a sure-fire success. The Marvel marketing department decided to issue the comic with a variety of different coloured covers so that collectors would be compelled to buy as many variants as possible in order to have a complete set. Spider-Man #1 sold over 2.7 million copies in short order and set a record as the best-selling American comic book ever.

The following year Marvel broke its own record with the publication of X-Force #1, drawn by Rob Liefeld, another fan favorite. In addition to Liefeld's art and the status of being a first issue, the comic was distributed pre-bagged in clear plastic with one of five different trading cards enclosed. The gimmick worked again as collectors bought numerous copies and X-Force sold over 4 million books. Marvel set a new standard again in 1991 with the publication of X-Men, Vol. 2 #1 with art by the popular Jim Lee. This time the comic was released with five different covers that when placed side-by-side created a single image. Many collectors bought all five versions and sales were nudged over the 8 million mark. Interestingly, sales to consumers were not as high as anticipated for the new X-Men comic but because of the no return policy for specialty stores Marvel still made the astounding sales while some dealers were stuck with the unsold copies. With the comic book industry now making more money than ever, many creators became increasingly discouraged with the traditional system whereby the publisher took in the majority of the profits and retained all the legal rights to any popular characters that the writers and artists may create. In a bold move the creators behind the best-selling comic books of all time, Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld and Jim Lee, joined with a few of Marvel's other top talents, all of whom felt they were not getting a good enough deal,
and in March of 1992 they left to form Image Comics.

**Creator Owned (the 1990s)**

The birth of Image marked one of the most dramatic shifts in the history of comics' enduring struggle over creator recognition and corporate ownership. When the independent publishers emerged with the advent of direct marketing in the early 1980s, companies like Pacific Comics were able to offer notable creators such as Jack Kirby, Dave Stevens and Mike Grell the chance to own their creations. But even though some of the independent titles became extremely popular such as Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* from Mirage Studios, they were always individual efforts that did not pose much of a threat to the larger publishers. Never before Image had so many top names risked leaving the protection of the industry's largest publisher to strike out on their own. That these artists were at the height of their popularity, each with a devoted following of fans, helped to ensure that they could break away from the market dominance of Marvel and DC. Proving that their recognition as creators was a key to the success of their work at Marvel, the founders of Image placed their own names above the title of their books and subsequently broke the record for sales of independent comics with Rob Liefeld's *Youngblood* #1 (April 1992), then Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* #1 (May 1992), and then again with Jim Lee's *WildC.A.T.S.* #1 (August 1992, Figure 3.8). Despite the production problems of continually shipping books late and growing criticism about weak writing skills, Image has remained popular and many of the creators have made millions by also licensing their characters to toy companies, movie studios, and for animated television series.

Image, now the third best-selling comic book publisher just behind Marvel and DC, seemed to capture a mood that had been around ever since Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster signed away their creative rights to Superman for $130 in 1938. The relationship between characters and their creators has long been contested terrain in an industry which has always been dominated by a work-for-hire standard. The question of comic book characters and copyright law has had a long and well documented history in the legal journals (see for example Kurtz 1986, Feldman 1990, or Helfand 1992), yet this legal history has dealt almost exclusively with defending the publisher's properties from exploitative piracy, not with the discrepancy between the author's creation of a character and the
publishers owning all rights to that character. Both Marvel and DC have made hundreds of millions from their world famous superheroes, while the character's real creator is often forgotten. But the times and the nature of comic fandom have changed since 1951 when the courts ruled that DC's defence of Superman against Fawcett's Captain Marvel was not misappropriation or unfair competition because, as the judge claimed "in the case of these silly pictures nobody cares who is the producer--least of all children who are the chief readers--the strips sell because they amuse and please, not because of their ownership" (quoted in Harris, 1985: 260). As the case of Image illustrates, today's reader, whether adult or child, often does care who the creator of a comic book is. With a greater variety of comics on the market and a wider range of content and craftsmanship to choose from, some creators are clearly judged as better than others.

Image garnered much of the media and fan attention and came to represent a sort of zeitgeist of the comics world in the early 1990s. But Image was far from alone as numerous other young creator-owned independent companies were struggling to market their new books. More ambitious than ever before, these fledgling companies were creating not single books but entire superhero universes. Malibu Comics' "Ultraverse" includes Prime, Mantra, Hardcase and The Strangers. Dark Horse Comics' "Greatest World" features Agents of Change, Ghost, Barb Wire and Titan, and Defiant's line stars Warriors of Plasm, The Good Guys and Dark Dominion. Among this fresh group of comic book companies was Milestone Media Inc. In many ways Milestone is similar to the other neophyte companies. They are creator owned, they have chosen to work within the superhero genre, and their comics do constitute a coherent universe. But unlike most other publishers Milestone Media is a predominately Black company, with Black owners, mostly Black creators, and it's first four on-going series featured Black superheroes. The comic book industry is very aware of it's own history, and the development of Milestone should be seen as an event made possible by a specific historical moment. When Denys Cowan, Derek Dingle, Michael Davis and Dwayne McDuffie united to form Milestone they did so with the full knowledge of the comic book medium's evolution to the point where creator-owned companies had become a feasible project. They were also well aware of the long and

5 In comics terminology "universe" refers to a publisher-specific collection of characters and stories. For example, the DC Comics' universe is home to all the DC characters (e.g. Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman), while the Marvel universe features only Marvel characters (e.g. Spider-Man, The Hulk, Iron-Man). Each universe is a self-contained unit and the characters from one universe could only meet those from another if there was an agreed upon "cros-over" between publishers, like on the rare occasions when Marvel and DC have gotten together so that Superman could co-star with Spider-Man, or Batman with The Hulk.
sometimes tainted growth of the superhero genre, and of the Black superhero experiments of the 1970s. They understood the practical problems of distribution and creative deadlines, and they knew the social and ideological problems they faced in creating Black characters that were more than just one-dimensional stereotypes. In the next chapter we will see not only the impetus for the birth of Milestone as a company but also how the media and the industry's perception of Milestone as an African American comic book publisher was a source of both glorification and vilification, and thus an obstacle to overcome.
Once every two weeks the promotional posters are changed by the owner of The Comics Kingdom, a medium-sized comic book and fantasy games specialty store located in downtown Toronto. On the third Wednesday of January, 1993, the group of boys who made their lunchtime trek from the Junior High School three blocks away were surprised to find a new "teaser" poster on display. The poster depicted seven heroically-garbed Black characters flying directly out at the viewer from above a burning cityscape. In plain large print across the top of the poster was written "Milestone: 2 • 27 • 93", and at the bottom, centered between the DC Comics and Milestone Media corporate logos, was the simple declaration "If you're not there, you just won't get it."

I watched from the far side of the store, next to the display of new comics that were quickly being picked over and bought up. A small group of fans gathered around to ponder the promotional poster. "What's this Milestone thing all about?" asked Jim, one of Comics Kingdom's regular customers while he waited for one of the part-time staff members to retrieve his reserved books from the back room.

"It's a new independent company," explained Barry an aspiring comic book artist in his early twenties who also worked the cash register most weekday afternoons. "They're totally Black-owned and they'll be publishing a whole line of Black superhero books."

A few other customers, eager to hear more about any upcoming series they might be interested in, gathered around Barry. He explained what he knew about Milestone. That it was a Black-owned company, that it was to feature an entire universe of ethnically diverse super characters, that all the stories would be set in the fictional city of Dakota, and that it was the brainchild of a couple of popular comic book veterans Denys Cowan and Dwayne McDuffie. Milestone, Barry predicted, was going to be one of the most interesting independent comic book publishers around.

"I don't get it," said Jeremy, another regular who had just finished paying for his stack of comics and had returned to inspecting the poster. "If they're an independent how come the DC logo is on the poster?"
"Well..." Barry hesitated. "they're an independent who is published and distributed through DC's system."

"Doesn't sound too independent to me" Jeremy countered.

"Is it like the Vertigo or the Piranha Press stuff?" somebody in the small group asked.

"No!"

"Is it like Brotherman type books?" someone else asked.

"No!"

"Is it going to be all the Black DC heroes in one team book?" asked another.

"No, it's going to be really different," Barry assured them. "and the books are going to be better quality, not like some of the underground Black series that hardly anybody reads."

"If you say so Bear" said Jim with more than just a hint of friendly sarcasm in his voice. Some of the other young customers laughed outright, the rest merely smiled to themselves. Knowing how hard his audience was to please, Barry simply responded with a noncommittal shrug, a pantomime gesture which implied they should all hope for the best but be prepared for the worst.

None of these comic book fans, a third of whom were Black themselves, expected much from the fledgling company which had grandly named itself Milestone Media Incorporated. They had all seen some of the embarrassing Black superheroes the mainstream industry had created in the past, and more than a few of them had tried reading the uneven and politically motivated Black books that were currently on the market. Political rhetoric wasn't what these young fans wanted, nor did they want more rehashed characters who were already out of date when they first appeared in the 1970s. What these readers wanted were great superhero stories and art. They wanted new heroes.
A MILESTONE DEVELOPMENT

This racist administrative government with its Superman notions and comic book politics. We're hip to the fact that Superman never saved no black people.

-Bobby Seale, Chicago 7 trial, 1969

When the Milestone poster which promised dramatic things to come began appearing in comic book stores across North America it was, for some, a first glimpse at a new universe of superheroes, while for others it was the beginning of the much anticipated launch of Milestone's line of comic books featuring ethnically diverse heroes. In this chapter I want to introduce Milestone Media, the comics, the characters and the men behind the colour pages who feed the fantasies of adolescent boys around the world. Although the original premise of my research was to map out the culture of comic book fandom in general, I quickly became aware that the best way to understand the subcultural principles that affected interpretation was to concentrate on comics of a specific type.

Fans read comic books across key points of comparison and the unique situation of the Milestone line facilitated very specific access points along the seams of race, genre traditions and independent publishing. Fans construct their interpretations according to the logic of their subcultural values, and more specifically they read the Milestone books in comparison to other independent Black publishers, in comparison to earlier blaxploitation influenced characters, and in comparison to the market-dominating superhero types on offer from the popular creators at Image Comics. As subsequent chapters will explore, all of these interpretive points lead Milestone fans to
weave an understanding of masculinity that differs from the standard perception held by many other comics fans. A concept of masculinity that privileges intellect as much as it does naked muscular power. As the case of Milestone and its fans demonstrates, we can best understand the process of media reception used by comic book fans as an active strategy. It is not necessarily active in the sense of being oppositional or counter-hegemonic, but in the sense of being a negotiation of meaning premised on a wide but limited range of meanings made possible between the producers, the readers, and the comics. All of these points will be explored further in subsequent chapters. Here I want to detail the problematic position held by Milestone Media. I say "problematical" because of Milestone's identity as a Black publisher who is corporately aligned with the industry giant DC Comics. This a position that is compounded by the contentious and disputed nature of African American cultural politics and the lack of consensus that surrounds the debates about the legitimacy of a Black Aesthetic.

The first thing that comes to mind when one studies the development of Black superhero comic books is the long tradition of racist stereotyping that African Americans have been subjected to by the mass media. Although the pervasive media stereotyping does play a large part in any representations of African Americans, to recount this history and the literature about it here would merely be redundant. For those interested in this topic I would suggest the influential works written by Bogle (1973), Cripps (1977), Dates and Barlow (1990), and Silk and Silk (1990). Because the Milestone books are produced by Black publishers and creators who are sensitive to the way minority characters have been portrayed in the past, they represent not a perpetuation of negative stereotypes but a redressing of many of those detrimental images. Instead of concentrating solely on the comic books themselves it is essential that we also consider the information which circulates around the primary texts. With comic book fandom the readers are often well aware of the creative forces behind the texts and incorporate as much extratextual information as possible into their interpretation of the stories, such as previous comics the creators have worked on or the creators' relationship to the rest of the industry. While some fans may have been caught off guard by the appearance of Milestone's first promotional poster, their lack of awareness did not last long. Comic book fans are voracious consumers of extratextual information related to upcoming projects --so much so that an entire support industry of fanzines and internet chat lines has flourished. Insider reports about the
development of Milestone Media soon circulated throughout the fan community and all of the associated knowledge about the company's editorial agenda and the criticism of Milestone by other Black comics creators became an important ingredient in fan readings. In the following pages I will be describing the creation of Milestone, its corporate structure and creative agenda, and review its core line of comic book titles. I will also be addressing the dispute over the authenticity of Black comics characters that plagued Milestone, and suggest how their contentious political position actually facilitates reader acceptance and identification.

Creating Milestone Media Inc.

The Milestone line of comics was officially launched in 1993, yet throughout 1992, a full year before any of their comic books were even printed, Milestone Media Inc. was already receiving a great deal of attention within the pages of industry magazines and professional fanzines such as The Comic Buyer's Guide, The Comics Journal and Wizard: The Guide to Comics as well as in the mainstream press with articles about the developing company appearing in The New York Times, The Washington Post and Newsday, among others. At a time of incredible growth within the comic book industry, Milestone was immediately distinguishable from the numerous other high profile independent publishers by virtue of their designation as a Black-owned company featuring Black characters. From the very beginning many fans understood Milestone as something more than just a new line of books, as more than just another superhero blank slate onto which they could project their own fantasies. Milestone was, and is, seen as a culturally loaded property—"loaded" because it is different from the norm, because it is a conscious attempt to rework industry conventions- whose obvious inclusion of racial identity into the often all too white world of comic book superheroics has alternately been embraced, rejected, ignored and negotiated by readers from across a wide spectrum of predisposed social positions. Contrary to the assertions made in recent years about the open-ended qualities of media texts by some of the cultural studies scholars discussed in Chapter 2. Milestone is a clear example of a popular medium whose political nature, both inherent and ascribed, works to inform and define certain readings.

Milestone Media Inc. is an independent publishing company. It was initially owned and
controlled by four young Black men: Derek T. Dingle, Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan and Michael Davis. Davis, an experienced comic book artist and Milestone's original Director of Talent Development, left the company in its first year when he was appointed the CEO of Motown Animation and Film works. The three remaining owners are uniquely qualified for their venture into the risky business of distributing comic books featuring Black superheroes. President Derek T. Dingle brings to Milestone an acute publisher's business sense from his previous experiences as the Managing Editor of Black Enterprise and as a staff writer for Money Magazine. Dwayne McDuffie is the company's Editor-in-Chief as well as one of its most prolific and popular writers. McDuffie is a former editor and writer for both Marvel and Harvey Comics, and at one time or another worked on almost every character in the Marvel universe with particular success on the Deathlok and Spider-man titles. Perhaps the best known of the Milestone founders is Creative Director Denys Cowan who is regarded as one of the industry's leading illustrators. Cowan has worked professionally since he began as an inker at the age of 15 and has developed a fan following for his distinct artistic style on such comics as DC's The Question and Batman and Marvel's Deathlok. Milestone is the brainchild of these creators. Dingle, McDuffie, Cowan and Davis, in both its corporate structure and its narrative message.

Seeking to redress the lack of minority characters in the world of comic books, the Milestone founders were able to take advantage of the industry changes in the early 1990s that were conducive to the formation of high profile independent publishers. The notion of creating comic books about Black characters by Black creators was not in itself a new idea. As early as 1947 the privately produced All Negro Comics appeared on the newsstands but only lasted for a single issue, and in an early editorial Milestone itself paid tribute to previous efforts at creating African American comics by people such as Arvell Jones, Keith Pollard, Ron Wilson, Aubrey Bradford and Skip Kirkland in 1976 (see "The Company Line", all Milestone March 1993 issues). And several independently produced and distributed Black comic books were already in limited circulation by 1993 like Malcolm 10, Nog, and Sustah-Girl from the Chicago based Onli Studios, Jason E. Sims' critically praised Brotherman from Big City Comics Inc. out of Texas, and the work of Seattle's Stan Shaw and Toronto's Ho Che Anderson. What was different about the creation of Milestone was that they chose to create their comics independently from within the mainstream system. Rather than self-publishing in limited runs
Milestone entered into an arrangement with DC Comics that guaranteed their books would be printed in a quality format and would be fully distributed at an international level along with DC's own books. This business deal has allowed Milestone to flourish and has also been the object of some criticism from other Black comic book publishers.

With the launch of Milestone in February 1993 following so soon after the groundbreaking success of the Image line of comics, and given the separatist tone of some African American movements in the U.S., one can not help but wonder if the impetus for Milestone's creation was in some way reactionary. But the three Milestone principals, Dingle, McDuffie and Cowan, deny the perception that they were inspired by what they saw happening at other companies. "We got together to fill what we saw as a lack of minority representation in comics" argues Cowan, "it wasn't like Image where we got mad at somebody and broke away. That's a very sexy story but it's not what happened to us. We could have done any of our books at Marvel or DC or Dark Horse but we wanted to ensure we maintained all of the creative control over our characters no matter what. Besides we started to develop Milestone long before the Image guys became thoroughly disenchanted with the established system". According to McDuffie, their approach to creating Milestone was much more organized than some of the other new companies might have been. "We were so meticulous about our business plan and the creative concept the business plan supported that it took us one and a half to two years from the time we began meeting every week to meeting daily to set the company up." Yet McDuffie adds, "it was while we were in the planning stages that Image was announced and we thought 'great, there must be something in the air'." What was indeed 'in the air' was the financial viability of independent comic books driven by creator recognition and supported by the proven basis of the direct market. Rarely had the world of comic books been more ripe for diversification.

In much of the early press coverage the Milestone founders suggest that their earliest dreams of creating Black superhero comics came while they were still young fans, long before any of them had actually entered the business professionally. Cowan and Dingle in particular were childhood friends who would read comics and then experiment with making up their own stories starring Black heroes. In an interview for the nationally distributed fanzine Wizard: The Guide to Comics, Dingle described Milestone Media as basically "an outgrowth of what Denys and I started as children. We were classmates, we read comics together--and when we read comics, we found a paucity of Black
characters... We started creating our own characters, as a lot of fans did, and they reflected ourselves and our experiences. Fast forward 20 years later, Denys became a very accomplished artist in the comic book field. I stayed in publishing management; Denys, along with Michael Davis and Dwayne McDuffie, decided there was a need to establish a line of Black comic book characters and then they expanded from that to multicultural comics. In order to preserve this idea and to protect it, they needed a company and someone with experience in publishing. That's when they called me" (quoted in O'Neill, 1993:44). Once the idea started to take shape, around June of 1991, the group began to meet every Thursday evening at Cowan's Brooklyn studio to work out their shared vision.

All four of the principals were in agreement on two points that would be fundamental for the Milestone ethos. The first point was that they wanted their comic books to reflect people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Although three of Milestone's original four comic book series focused solely on Black heroes they were always careful to declare that their line emphasizes multicultural characters. According to McDuffie the editorial goals they have maintained from the very first stages of planning have been "to increase the diversity of the comics industry by reflecting the complexity and the diversity of the real world that we all live in. We could have done just African American comics because that is obviously the experience that we understand best, but we realize that that is only one of many possible viewpoints that we want to bring forward for our readers." The second crucial point the Milestone founders agreed upon was the need to reach the largest audience possible through a professional system of distribution. With their combined experience of the comic publishing business they knew that creating quality books would not be a major problem. Distribution difficulties on the other hand have often been the downfall of new companies without the manpower or the established contacts to see that the books get into enough stores on time every month. Consistency of printing and distribution is a key factor in establishing a large and loyal fan following. If a reader picks up an issue and is intrigued by the book the publishers need to build on that interest immediately. If the next issue does not appear on the stands for another four months there is a good chance the reader will have moved on to other titles or not be willing to invest his or her dollars in a series that is difficult to follow on a regular basis. Even the extremely popular line of

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1 Ironically, since Milestone was so clearly distinguished as a Black comic book publishing company sales of their non-Black superhero titles soon faltered. Currently Milestone is down to three main series, Iron, Hardware, and Static. All of which feature African American heroes. 109
comics from Image have been harshly criticized by retailers and fans alike for their inability to meet monthly release dates.

In order to fulfill their distribution goals the Milestone group struck a cooperative deal with DC Comics, the industry's second largest publisher. DC's status within the industry and their experimentation throughout the 1980s with such cutting edge concepts as prestige format books, maxi-series, inter-company cross overs and their AIDS awareness program made them a likely partner for the Milestone group. On a practical level Denys Cowans' long and notable career at DC helped to open doors and ensured that the Milestone proposal would reach the desk of Paul Levitz, DC's vice president in charge of business operations and legal negotiations. The initial formal proposal put forth by Milestone outlined three major areas: strategic marketing information, a detailed description of the four original books, and a profile of the company's financial and corporate structure. DC was immediately interested in the potential partnership. During the fall and winter of 1991 the two companies entered into a series of meetings to hammer out the legalities and establish a suitable system that would essentially see DC operating as the printer and distributor for Milestone's comics. The arrangement in negotiation had never been tried before in the comic book industry. The nearest model was the work undertaken by the Will Eisner and Jerry Iger studio in the 1930s and 1940s. The Eisner/Iger studio would be contracted by a publisher to create a comic book that the larger company would then print and distribute. The work was free-lance in nature and Eisner and Iger always relinquished all legal rights despite sometimes inventing the entire concept, character and book from scratch. Such was the case with almost all of the Eisner/Iger work of the period (except for Eisner's enduringly popular *The Spirit*) including their production of the Superman inspired Wonder-Man for Victor S. Fox in 1939.

Fundamental to Milestone's agreement with DC was that they would not relinquish any of the legal or creative rights to their work. Throughout the negotiations Milestone, and their lawyers, insisted on three basic points: 1) that they would retain total creative control; 2) that they would retain all copyrights for characters created under the Milestone banner; and 3) that they would have the final say on all merchandising and licensing deals pertaining to their properties. Rather than the work-for-hire deals of the Eisner and Iger era, the Milestone/DC contract, which was finalized in May of 1992, is comparative to the standard relationship between independent film production
companies and major Hollywood studios. Much like large film studios who pay small independent production companies a creative service fee and a share of the royalties in exchange for the distribution rights of a movie, DC Comics has in effect licensed the characters, editorial services and creative content of the Milestone books for an annual fee of $500,000 to $650,000 and a share of the profits. In addition to printing and distributing the books DC is also responsible for promoting the Milestone titles within the pages of their regular comics, in all marketing materials, at conventions, and in any other mediums such as the recent venture of the DC family of comics going interactive through a special promotional arrangement with American Online. By entering into a partnership with DC, which is a subsidiary of the multi-media conglomerate Time-Warner, Milestone became an immediate presence in the comic book industry. Their books were guaranteed to be produced and distributed on time, automatically appeared in all the major retail ordering catalogues, were granted better shelf space in comic specialty stores, and were made available in convenience, grocery and regular book stores. DC also serves as Milestone’s licensing agent for other media and ancillary products and helps to arrange lucrative deals like the award winning 100 card set of Milestone trading cards produced by SkyBox International.

This innovative relationship meant that Milestone could avoid the precarious dangers faced by most independent publishers. Although the early 1990s was a period of incredible growth for the comic book industry with over 1200 individual titles being released every month, it was also a time when many lower profile books could be lost in the crowd. Don Thompson, co-editor of the weekly trade paper *The Comics Buyer's Guide*, has noted that for minority based comics, "There have been some independent publishers, but they aren’t reaching a real wide audience. This [Milestone] is the first independent company to get any major financing. Others are run on a shoestring. This deal makes them a major force" (quoted in Silverman, 1993: 31). The Milestone founders point out that the deal with DC also freed them up to produce an entire line of comics rather than a single title, and the conventional wisdom is that a publisher needs a minimum of four books to be recognized as a cohesive group. By starting with four books, fans were exposed to a new Milestone issue every week and could begin to recognize character and company consistency even if just from the covers. In addition to the practical business aspects, the prospect of launching multiple series simultaneously was also a crucial element for the presentation of Milestone’s political agenda. The central goal of
Milestone in their attempt to address the lack of minority representation in comics, and the often stereotypical nature of that representation when it does occur, is to show the quality and diversity of African American life. "To," as Dwayne McDuffie puts it, "break up the idea of a monolith".

In a special edition of the critical fanzine The Comics Journal focusing on Black comics artists, McDuffie explains their desire to create an entire line:

There's a creative freedom that we gain by doing more than one book. My problem--and I'll speak as a writer now--with writing a black character in either the Marvel or DC universe is that he is not a man. He is a symbol. Like Wonder Woman--if you write Wonder Woman, she is all women. You can't do a character. On the other hand, if I write a white character--as I have in most of my career, because that's what's available--like Dr. Doom or Captain America, neither one of them represents white Americans. Cage is all black people. Deathlok is all black people. It limits the complexity and the roundedness of the characters. If Milestone had done just one book, whoever that character was would have been limited to being like what Sidney Poitier was in the 1950s movies. But we present a range of characters, guys who are all different from each other, as different as all of us are from each other. We all share an interest in comics, but we all are very different politically and socially--what we think is important, who we think should be president, and any other issue--just like any other group of human beings. By putting a line of characters out, suddenly there is enormous creative freedom. I would not presume to speak for black people in this country. It's ridiculous to attempt to do that. An analogy: you watch the news every night and the anchor man will say, "Black opinion on this issue...[laughter]...is this." No one would even begin to try to do that with whites. It's ludicrous for me to sit here and say, "White opinion on abortion is this." But because we are so used to dealing with blacks or with anyone considered the other as a monolith, we think it's okay to say, "This is their opinion." Well, in my house there are different opinions, much less within my community and within all blacks in America--we all agree on every single thing? We're all the same guy? Of course we're not. And as long as the media keeps presenting us that way, it promotes racism.

(quoted in Norman, 1993: 68-9)

While other independent Black comic book titles such as Ebony Warrior or Zwanna: Son of Zulu contain much more overtly political messages about cultural nationalism, to the point of their being accused of promoting racism against whites and other groups, Milestone has tried to avoid the stigma inherent in "message comics" in favor of emphasizing cultural diversity.

From the very beginning the Milestone creators have made clear that their comics are meant
to be entertaining stories that seek to promote racial understanding as a consequence of portraying hitherto under-represented groups as complex and diverse people. It was a conscious decision by the founders that in approaching their creations as entertainment first and a source of political agency second they would be better able to effect cultural change without alienating the core audience of comic book readers. Months before the books were released, Michael Davis stressed in a Washington Post piece, "We are not going to produce preachy comics. What we want kids to do is pick up our books and get a better understanding of the multicultural experience." (quoted in Singletary, 1992: E4). In the introductory editorial page of all four of the first issues, Milestone openly declared their general agenda: "Diversity's our story, and we're sticking with it. The variety of cultures and experiences OUT THERE make for better comics IN HERE. When people get excited about the diversity IN HERE maybe they'll get just as excited about the diversity OUT THERE---Call it a mission". This political message writ large does not mean that the Milestone titles have stayed away from specific controversial topics. Within the first year the various storylines had explored a variety of sensitive issues including gang violence, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and the often strained Black and Jewish community relations. But despite these progressive topics, Editor in Chief McDuffie maintains that Milestone's "major job is to entertain people, because even if you want to send a message you need to recognize that the best propaganda is the kind people don't notice. Nobody wants to sit through a lecture."

The Comic Books

At the end of January 1993, DC Comics' free promotional pamphlet, Direct Currents, boldly announced: "It's a major milestone in comics... Milestone Media, that is! Milestone is an all-new line of comics featuring the adventures of a culturally diverse mix of superheroes, battling in the city of Dakota, and driven by internal conflicts that shape them in ways rarely explored in comics" (Kupperberg, 1993: 1). Hardware was the first series released on February 23rd. Blood Syndicate followed the next week with Icon the week after, and Static rounded out the month. A year later the original four books were joined by Shadow Cabinet, Kobalt and Xombie. The diversity that Milestone hopes to represent is apparent in the fundamental differences of each of the titles. Yet despite their differences, the metaphorical nature of the first mainstream culturally diverse comics universe is
expressed in the titles' shared heroic responsibilities. "Linked in their struggle to defeat the S.Y.S.T.E.M." a Milestone press release declared, the battle of Dakota is a "clash of two worlds: a low-income urban caldron and the highest level of privileged society."

*Hardware* (Figure 4.1), written by Dwayne McDuffie and initially drawn by Denys Cowan, is the story of Curtis Metcalf, an exceedingly brilliant inventor employed by Alva Industries, an incredibly high-tech corporation. Metcalf has a father-son relationship with his white boss Edwin Alva, Dakota's most prominent businessman and leading industrialist. Alva had sponsored Metcalf's education and encouraged his achievements since discovering him at a grade school science fair. Believing he was a favored son, Metcalf is shattered when he discovers that Alva has only been exploiting his genius all along and really sees him as no more than a useful servant. Hand-in-hand with this personal revelation, Metcalf realizes that Alva's industrial empire is a front for his illegal activities as one of Dakota's leading organized crime bosses. Metcalf feels compelled to seek vengeance on Alva's criminal empire and uses his unparalleled skill as an inventor to create a super state-of-the-art cybernetic battlesuit to wear into his personal war. Armed with an array of plasma guns, laser cannons, micro-rockets and jet packs, Metcalf becomes Hardware and sets out to destroy Alva--"A cog in the corporate machine is about to strip some gears...". Hardware is Milestone's angry Black man who fights against personal injustices and battles the powers that be, which are clearly represented by the corrupt, all-powerful figure of Alva the white father.

As the series has continued, Hardware's role has developed beyond that of an extremely disgruntled employee to a more mature hero. Unlike more traditional comic book characters who seem to embody noble heroism as an innate personality trait, Hardware is portrayed as a man who must learn to conquer his own rage. Writer Dwayne McDuffie describes the series as "about a very confused man who has to come to terms with his own life, his own morality and his responsibilities before he can truly be a hero. Hardware is a book about a man who must overcome his worst instincts and rise above his personal problems." Thanks to the help and criticism of Hardware's cast of supporting characters—including Metcalf's girlfriend Dr. Barraki Young, a professor of African American Studies at Medina University, and Deacon "Phreaky Deak" Stuart, a computer hacker extraordinaire and clandestine information gatherer for Hardware--Metcalf is slowly learning to channel his anger into more than just personal vengeance. Throughout the series Hardware has

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A COG IN THE CORPORATE MACHINE IS ABOUT TO STRIP SOME GEARS...
fought to understand his world, and to atone for the lives he callously takes in his initial battles with Alva's forces, and eventually even enters into an uneasy alliance with his former nemeses.

Milestone's second core title to see publication, *Blood Syndicate*, is also perhaps their most controversial. Written by Ivan Velez Jr., and illustrated by Chris Cross, *Blood Syndicate* (Figure 4.2) is the story of a racially mixed super-powered street gang. The character's super-powered origins can all be traced back to the night of the "Big Bang", one of the fundamental events of the Milestone universe. The Big Bang was supposed to be the final turf war between all the major gangs on Dakota's downtrodden Paris Island. The police intervened by firing a radioactive gas into the melee that they thought would act as a marker allowing them to arrest over five hundred gang members by morning. Instead, the experimental gas killed hundreds and left the few survivors with superhuman abilities. A group of the powerful "bang babies" banded together to form the most formidable gang ever: the Blood Syndicate. Among the gang's members are: Wise Son, whose molecular structure has been converted into ultra-dense matter which makes him impervious to any physical harm; Fade, a ghost-like transparent character whom we later find out is also HIV positive; Flashback, Fade's sister who can rewind time at will but only for a few seconds; Masquerade, who can manipulate her appearance to take the shape of any object or person she desires; DMZ, a mute and masked mysterious character with powers of flight, invulnerability and superhuman strength; Third Rail, who takes on the equivalent power of any energy source he touches be it an attacker or an electrified subway rail, and: Brick House, a female bang baby who was fused with a solid brick wall and has become incredibly strong and virtually unstoppable.

The Blood Syndicate is clearly not a team of superheroes. They are a street gang of urban outcasts more concerned about protecting their turf and garnering respect that they are about doing good for the greater community. The members of the gang often fight amongst themselves as much as they fight their enemies. Among the storylines that *Blood Syndicate* has dealt with are Fade's sexuality, Flashback's problems with drug addiction and the ongoing reliance of the characters on the gang as a surrogate family. A central theme of the book is the bleak reality of gang violence. Unlike other comic books about super-teams like DC's *The Justice League*, Marvel's *The X-Men* or Image's *Youngblood*, *Blood Syndicate* is a consistently realistic treatment of violence and its repercussions, or at least as realistic as is possible in a book populated by super-powered beings. As McDuffie, who
also edits *Blood Syndicate*, told *Comics Scene* magazine in a special issue on the rise of new comic book universes. "The primary rule in our universe is that actions have consequences. If you punch someone through a wall, it *hurts*. If someone gets shot, they bleed. You can't deal with this kind of violence and tell people there are no consequences. That goes across our entire line. Hardware killed some people in the first issue--he was absolutely wrong--and he will pay for it." Denys Cowan adds that "A lot of the violence in *Blood Syndicate*, the down-and-dirty violence as well as the mental violence, can be much scarier because you can relate to it. That's why we feel that the violence in *Blood Syndicate* affects people much more than any other titles, because it's *real* violence" (quoted in Nazzaro, 1993: 49). Although the characters of *Blood Syndicate* are quick to resort to violence, the Milestone editorial stance tries not to glorify the street gang mentality but to reveal the flaws and effects of that violence.

Contrary to the anti-heroics of *Hardware* and *Blood Syndicate*, Milestone's third book, *Icon*, is a traditional superhero series. Written by McDuffie and drawn by M.D. Bright, *Icon* (Figure 4.3) is often referred to as the flagship title of the Milestone line. Icon's story really begins in 1839 when an escape pod from an exploding extraterrestrial starliner lands in a cotton field in America's deep south. A slave woman named Miriam discovers inside the pod a little Black baby who is actually an alien being whose appearance has been altered by the ship's defence mechanisms to resemble the first type of life form encountered. Miriam christens the child Augustus Freeman and raises him as her own. Seemingly immortal, the adult alien now resides in Dakota as the successful corporate lawyer Augustus Freeman IV. Freeman is an extremely conservative Republican who continuously espouses the virtues of a Horatio Alger 'pull yourself up by your own bootstraps' philosophy while keeping his Superman-like powers a secret. On one fateful night a group of teenagers from a nearby housing project attempt to rob Freeman's luxurious home. With his extraordinary powers of flight, strength and his bullet-proof skin Freeman scares away the intruders and admonishes them for their unlawful ways. Among the teenagers that night is Raquel Ervin, an idealist streetwise girl from the inner city who revisits Freeman the next week and convinces him to use his powers on behalf of those without any. Ervin designs their costumes and Freeman becomes the red, yellow and green clad Icon while with the assistance of an alien power belt that allows her to absorb and refocus energy Ervin becomes his partner Rocket. As an early company preview describes their relationship: "Because Augustus has
had so much for so long, he doesn't fully understand the needs of the people whom he protects. The teenage girl who insists on becoming his sidekick, Rocket, is a product of Dakota's worst section, Paris Island. She and Icon have a profound effect on one another. Rocket gets a glimpse of Augustus' affluence, and inspiration from his mighty deeds. Icon, in turn, learns of a world of misery and failed expectations that he didn't believe still existed in this country. Together, Icon and Rocket tackle the world's toughest villains--and some of our biggest problems.

The partnership between Icon and Rocket is an uneasy one. The two characters represent different ideological poles politically and they often act as platforms for the narrative to work out diverse reactions to controversial issues. On the one side Icon is a very conservative persona very much akin to the Booker T. Washington success through perseverance philosophy he has adopted, while on the other side Rocket, a Toni Morrison and W.E.B. Dubois fan, stresses the social injustices at work in the world that subjugate the downtrodden. The characters have clashed over such things as Rocket's decision to keep her baby when she accidentally becomes pregnant (thus becoming the first superheroine who is also an unwed teenage mother), and Icon's decision to support a new amusement park that caters to the rich but is being built on the ghettoized Paris Island, thus displacing poor people with nowhere else to go. Derek T. Dingle points out that "Despite, or perhaps because of, their different viewpoints Icon provides us with the opportunity to explore opposing ideas about how Black Americans should operate. In effect you get these two people, these two political ideals who challenge each other to better themselves. She challenges Icon to be a real hero for the people who need one, and he in turn challenges her to become more responsible." Rather than taking a solitary political stance according to one racially informed position, Icon carefully illustrates the various personal and political perspectives that are possible within a single cultural community.

The final title to be released in Milestone's initial line was Static (Figure 4.4). The most light-hearted of the four original books, Static is the story of Virgil Hawkins, a typically geeky 15-year-old student at one of Dakota's troubled public schools, Ernest Hemingway High. Trying to impress some of the guys at school Virgil sneaks off to witness the gang warfare on the night of the Big Bang. Sprayed by the same radioactive gas as the gang members, Virgil survives to discover he now has the ability to manipulate electromagnetic currents, he can generate force fields, "taser punches", lightning bolts, and even fly by surfing on electrically charged discs of metal such as garbage can lids or
manhole covers. A comic book fan himself, Virgil relishes his chance to don his home-made blue and white tights and one of an assortment of baseball caps, to become the dashing teen superhero with the ready quip, Static. Like the early Spider-Man stories to which Static bears more than just a passing resemblance, Virgil's adventures always incorporate the realistic dilemmas faced by a kid who is also secretly one of Dakota's greatest heroes. He still has problems with girls, homework, bullies, his older sister, and trying to keep his part-time job at a fast food franchise despite consistently being made late for work by super villains. Among his eclectic group of adolescent friends the only confidant who is aware of Virgil's secret identity is Frieda Goren, Hemingway High's most popular babe and girlfriend to one of Virgil's buddies. Static is a fun-loving book that explores the troubles and pleasures of modern adolescence at the same time that it offers traditional superhero fare and not so traditional problems, like trying to diffuse the bombs and the propaganda of a militant Black terrorist, accepting that one of your best friends is gay, and losing your virginity.  

Static is definitely the kid in the Milestone line up. He reacts to things as an average adolescent does. He doesn't have all the answers, he doesn't even know all the questions. Like many of Static's readers. Virgil Hawkins is trying to be the best possible person he can be despite what seem to be overwhelming odds. Virgil: Static sometimes behaves badly but his exploits usually take on the aura of a moral parable about the need to be responsible, kind, understanding, tolerant, and to find peaceful solutions to frustrating problems. As the youngest, and clearly not the most powerful, of Dakota's heroes Static often focuses on Virgil's ability to out-think rather than out-gun his opponents. Denys Cowan describes Static as "by far our funniest book --a lot of humour and wit that works well with the character development of the stories-- but it also deals with the belief that the underdog can win by not succumbing to the I'm-bigger-and-stronger-than-anything-in-the-universe-so-I'll-just-smash-your-head-in mentality that we see in some comic books." As Static, Virgil must learn to mature in order to survive. He is not Billy Batson who can just shout "Shazam!" and become the full grown and supremely powerful Captain Marvel. Underneath the costume and the witty repartee Static is still the same geeky kid struggling to defeat the bullies and keep his world in order. 

In the spring of 1994, one year after the Milestone universe was launched, the company undertook its first crossover event. A crossover is a marketing strategy to boost sales of interrelated series and is generally considered a momentous occasion in the world of comics. All of the titles in a
company's line are engaged in a single epic story line that affects each of the characters in the fictional universe. The "Shadow War" crossover was used to reveal the government treachery behind the Big Bang, the initial riot that created Static and the Blood Syndicate as well as countless villains, and to launch Milestone's second wave of comic books Shadow Cabinet, Xombie and the short-lived Kobalt. In Shadow Cabinet a covert team of superpowered operatives are assembled by Dharma, an all-seeing Eastern Indian, to undertake Mission Impossible-style assignments in order to secretly protect humankind. The Shadow Cabinet team includes an resourceful array of heroes such as Iron Butterfly, a headstrong Iranian woman with the ability to reshape any metal to her will; Sideshow, a Black neo-hippie shapeshifter who takes on animal forms; Iota, a playful woman who can shrink herself or any object she touches to the most miniscule proportions; Donner, a super strong woman created by her father's genetic experiments in Germany; and Blitzen, a super fast woman who is both Donner's usual assignment partner and her lesbian lover. Xombie is less a superhero series than an unusual combination of supernatural science fiction and various religious mythologies. The main character is Dr. David Kim, a Korean American research scientist who is accidentally injected with his own nano technology --microscopic robots which can manipulate atoms and rearrange molecules. Kim, in effect, becomes a man who can never die. His body is capable of immediate self regeneration. The final title to be added was Kobalt, which writer John Rozum describes as the sole proprietor of the "post-modern weirdness corner of the Milestone universe." The series is a semi tongue-in-cheek spoof of the ultra hard boiled characters popular at other companies. The rough and grim Kobalt is forced to take on a teen sidekick and the new partnership becomes almost a comedy of errors in the way of superhero crime fighting.

Critical Reception

As a distinctly innovative change in the comic book publishing industry, the launch of Milestone was reported in dozens of newspapers, more than any other new comic book publisher in the last fifty years. In fact, any coverage by the popular press is considered a remarkable boost for the entire comics industry since even after more than sixty years the medium has never managed to achieve the status or public notice accorded to other entertainment mediums like film or television. Clips about the formation of Milestone appeared in the entertainment news broadcasts on CNN, MTV
and *Entertainment Tonight*, as well as being mentioned on such fan-based programs as the Canadian cable show *Prisoners of Gravity*. The press surrounding the formation and development of Milestone Media commonly fell into three overlapping categories: 1) general praise for the multicultural agenda of the company with a particular emphasis on the need for positive role models for Black children; 2) business oriented profiles of the unique publishing arrangement between Milestone and DC Comics; and 3) coverage of the criticisms directed toward Milestone by smaller independent Black comic book publishers. Though intense media focus on a new product can usually help ensure public awareness and increased sales, for Milestone it became a double-edged sword. On the one side the media attention was a welcome and positive exposure, but on the other side the tone of the articles portrayed Milestone as a specifically Black company to such an extent that the progressive racial element of the books overshadowed any other perceptions. In other words, the Milestone comics were somewhat marginalized as *Black* comics rather than as entertainment that just happens to feature Black characters. In an entertainment industry, especially one geared towards a young audience, to be perceived as political is really the kiss of death.

Without fail the newspaper articles praising the development of Milestone dwell on the founders’ experiences as Black childhood comic book fans. "As a child Derek T. Dingle, president of Milestone Media Inc., loved comic books" reported *The New York Times*. "But when he and a friend, Denys Cowan, read about the superheroes and their mythical powers, they sensed that something seemed wrong besides just creepy villains and criminals. 'We didn't see any heroes in the comic books that looked like ourselves... None of the characters were African Americans.'" (Byrd, 1992: F8). Or as quoted in *Newsday*: "As youngsters, when we read comic books, we never found Black characters. There were green and blue characters, but no one of a black hue" (quoted in Silverman, 1993: 31). These accounts then segue into casual comments by current young readers bemoaning the lack of Black superheroes. For example the *Washington Post* reports the somewhat muddled comments of an 11 year old comic book fan who claims "Sometimes I want a Black idol. Sometimes you want an idol to be like you in the comic book. They don't have anybody that involves people like me. If I wanted to be like one of them, my idol would have to be white" (quoted in Singletary, 1992: E1). In addition to illustrating the fan origins of the Milestone founders, these early articles emphasize that the Milestone comics are positioned to fill the enduring void of positive role models for Black children.
There is little or no mention of these young Black reader's lives outside the realm of their association with comic books. While there may not be a strong presence of heroic Black characters in the comic book pages that does not mean that these children might not be finding positive role models in other areas of their lives such as through sports, music, film, friends and family. The sense presented in the press coverage is that the Milestone comics are not just one of many possible sources these children might have for developing an affirmative sense of self based on skin color, but perhaps the only or most fundamental source.

The thrust of much of the newspaper coverage was that Milestone was at the forefront of a new, more enlightened age in the world of comic books. As the title for another piece in The New York Times declared, just a few months after the Milestone books began to appear on the stands: "New Superheroes Free the Comics From the Old-Boys' Network". The article actually is concerned with a variety of changes in the industry including a marked rise in the popularity of female superheroines like Marvel's She-Hulk and Dark Horse's Ghost and Barb Wire, the popularity of serious comics aimed at an adult audience such as those in DC's Vertigo line, e.g. The Sandman, Hellblazer and Enigma, and the acceptance of several outed gay and lesbian characters in mainstream comics, for instance Northstar in Marvel's Alpha Flight or the Pied Piper in DC's The Flash. But the article focuses on the Black characters of the Milestone books as the vanguard to this supposedly new and enlightened age of comic books and includes an illustration of Icon and a photograph of the Milestone creators. Other articles, including one in Black Enterprise magazine, refer to Milestone's development of Black superheroes as a full blown "revolution". In fact the "revolution" catch phrase became an essential and defining element in the public perception of Milestone. While coverage of this type is undoubtedly good exposure for a new line of comic books it also set up Milestone as the Black comics publisher. The "revolution" rhetoric espoused by the press was reinforced by Milestone's own promotional materials such as their posters and in-comic advertisements that carried the tag line "This Revolution Will NOT Be Televised", and subscription forms declaring "A Revolution in Comics, Ongoing Monthly". Despite the founders' constant claims that their comics would be first and foremost about good superhero stories regardless of the color of the character's skin, Milestone was placed in the bind of being perceived as not just another new line of comic books but as a producer of revolutionary, pro-Black stories. period. The necessarily narrow focus of the media items
so clearly linked Milestone with an agenda of creating Black superhero role models that some readers thought, as one 15 year old fan told me: "Oh, I don't pick up Milestone books cause I already know what they're about. It's a Black thing." However much Milestone wanted to start from scratch and have their success or failure determined by the quality of their story-telling, they quickly became burdened with their target audience's preconceived ideas of what identifiably minority based comics must, or at least should, be about.

The second main focus of the press coverage surrounding the creation of Milestone Media Inc. concentrated on their unique relationship with DC Comics. All of the media reports at least mention the unprecedented publishing agreement and the industry fanzines often described the deal in great detail due to its potential to reform company alliances and the very nature of independent publishing. The corporate structure of a major publisher taking a small independent group under its wing also garnered attention strictly as an innovative business arrangement and a potential model for minority-based companies to achieve widespread success, and conversely for established corporations to diversify their interests. The weekly business newspaper Crain's New York Business gave the cooperative deal front page coverage and argued that if Milestone succeeds in breaking the dominant white mould "they may create opportunities for Latino, Asian and female writers and artists by broadening the established market for comic books" (Breznick, 1993: 1, 28). Likewise, a piece in the business section of The Wall Street Journal reported that "Established companies are joining forces with small and minority businesses that understand niche markets. The partnerships grew out of decisions by the big companies to look outside their corporate cultures to add ethnic diversity to their product lines. Simply hiring Black artists and editors wouldn't achieve the same result, says Paul Levitz, publisher of DC Comics, which will distribute the Milestone produced comic books. 'By reaching to an outside structure, you can tap into a passion that you couldn't put together on demand.' Mr. Levitz adds." (Wynter, 1993: 12)

The most detailed account of the Milestone Media/DC Comics deal was the cover story in the November 1994 issue of Black Enterprise. The article stresses that "Partnerships between large corporations and small independent companies are hardly new, but Milestone serves as a model of how a small Black firm can benefit from forging a strategic alliance with big business" (Brown, 1994: 84). But in addition to the potential benefits of these possible unions the piece's author, Carolyn M.
Brown is quick to point out that such affiliations often bring with them their share of criticism from other Black organizations. Indeed most of the attention in the popular press was concerned not solely with the ground-breaking development of Milestone Media, but with the apparent clash between Milestone and some of the other, smaller independent Black comic book publishers. Foremost amongst Milestone’s critics was Ania (Swahili for “protect” or “defend”), a small consortium of Black independent comic book publishers based in Oakland who accused Milestone of Uncle Tomism. Ania argued quite vehemently for any reporter willing to listen that Milestone was callously creating white superhero clones merely painted black. Upon hearing about the publishing and distribution deal arranged by Milestone with DC Comics, Ania’s president Eric Griffin began to slander Milestone in the industry trade magazines for not being “Black enough” and for selling out by working with (or for) a large, predominantly white multi-national corporation. Ania’s primary allegation that the Milestone line is a white-washed sell out stems from the fundamental ideological difference between the two organizations. Ania’s perspective is a more radically political belief in Afrocentrism as an empowering force, whereas Milestone’s approach to presenting Black characters in comic books is not an attempt to create overtly political role models but to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the Black experience in contemporary life.

The different approaches adopted by Milestone and Ania reflect the divergent African American political strategies that Ed Guerrero has described as a constant “oscillation between two polarities: the impulse to integrate with the system and the urge to separate from it” (Guerrero, 1994: 71). While I. and I suspect Guerrero, realize that there is a much wider range of political strategies than these two poles, and a variety of complex cultural aspirations beyond the binary of assimilation and separation, these are particularly cogent positions relating to the images on offer from Milestone and Ania. Indeed, though I run the risk of simplifying these issues of media representation into a two-dimensional dichotomy, it is still and important dichotomy to discuss. Moreover it is a dichotomy set up not by me, but by the media coverage of the Black comics debate and set up by the rhetoric of the two publishing concerns. At stake for these two comic book publishers is the problem of representing Black characters which retain a certain amount of legitimacy within the Black community. Clearly Ania is of the opinion that Milestone’s characters are not authentically African American because they are under the supervision of DC Comics. Conversely Ania believes that their
own characters are legitimately African American expressions because they are completely independent publishers. This dispute over Black representation in the arts and independent control is not a new one. Ever since the Harlem Renaissance the dilemma of how to properly represent the Black experience has been pondered by the likes of Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois and Richard Wright. In fact the clearest expression of the debate occurred in the early 1970s (perhaps not so coincidentally at around the same time that blaxploitation films were becoming popular as were the original Black superhero comics inspired by those films) under the rhetoric of the Black Aesthetic. The most representative expression of the Black nationalist movement in the arts was the volume of essays reproduced in the book simply entitled The Black Aesthetic (Gayle 1971).

Mirroring many of the more militant, post-Civil Rights era, Black Power sentiments of groups like the Black Panthers, the essays collected in The Black Aesthetic called for Black artists to create works that address the unique lifestyles, beliefs, mythologies and problems of the Black community. Larry Neal, for example, wrote in his contribution:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics.

(Neal, 1971: 272)

According to the argument put forth by Neal and other contributors to The Black Aesthetic (see for example the essays by Gayle, Fuller, Mayfield, Gerald, and Miller), for artists to continue laboring under the yoke of white culture and the white aesthetic is to pursue cultural genocide. The Black artist, the argument continues, must create new forms that speak only to a Black audience and are governed only by Black authorities, creators and critics.

The example of blaxploitation films is useful because it succinctly demonstrates the principles of the Black Aesthetic, and because it closely parallels the point of divergence between the strategies used by Milestone and Ania (not to mention the influential historical link that exists between
blaxploitation films and Black comic book superheroes). As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Sweet Sweethack's Baadassss Song (1971) and Shaft (1972) not only stand apart as the progenitors of blaxploitation film but they also represent distinct approaches to the portrayal of Black masculinity and heroism. Of the two films, many critics consider Sweethack to be the most legitimately African American production according to the principles of the Black Aesthetic. Sweethack was produced by, written by, directed by, and starred Black artists completely independent from any of Hollywood's major studios. Shaft, on the other hand, despite being directed by and starring Black artists, has often had its authenticity as a Black film questioned because it was produced and distributed under the control of MGM, a major Hollywood studio. In short, where Sweethack was clearly marked as an independently-created and politically-motivated Black film, Shaft was strictly a studio-backed moneymaking project framed by Hollywood's ideology of inclusionary entertainment and thus was safer and less militantly anti-white.

Although both films were very well received at the box office, the critical responses they provoked were clearly divided according to political factions. Political extremists like Huey Newton and the Black Panther Party praised Sweethack for assembling "the first truly revolutionary Black film ever made... [which] presents the need for unity among all the members and institutions within the community of victims" (Newton, 1971: A). Other Black critics regarded Sweethack as anything but revolutionary or positive. In the more politically conservative Ebony magazine, for example, Lerone Bennett chastised the film for romanticizing the poverty and misery of the ghetto and argued that "some men foolishly identify the Black aesthetic with empty bellies and big bottomed prostitutes" (Bennett, 1971: 108). Conversely, Shaft was generally applauded by conservative critics, both Black and White, for expanding the representation of Blacks in mainstream cinema, while radical Black nationalists derided the film as a pre-packaged production which emphasized middle class (white) ideals. In his review of Black film heroes and the blaxploitation genre, Mark Reid reiterates this extreme position when he writes of Shaft that despite the film's "obvious effort to attract a Black popular audience through rhetoric and images appealing to that audience, MGM, like other major studios, invested Black heroes with mainstream values. In doing so they did not create mythic Black heroes. Instead, like doll makers who painted Barbie's face brown, they merely created black-skinned replicas of the white heroes of action films" (Reid, 1988: 30-31).
The split within African American political ideology which is indisputably represented in the contrast between *Sweetback* (independent, separatist) and *Shaft* (commercial, integrationist) is reiterated in the juxtaposition between Milestone and Ania. While certainly there other contingent issues of representation involved in this split between *Sweetback* and *Shaft*, and for that matter between Milestone and Ania, it was the separatist/integrationist antagonism that was primarily of concern at the time (see Guerrero 1994 or Reid 1988). Likewise, it is the same sense of binary opposition between Milestone and Ania that informs many of the fans understanding of the two companies debate over representation. The political differences between Milestone (commercial, integrationist) and Ania (independent, separatist) are strikingly apparent in the contrasting content of their comic books. Ania essentially consists of four companies, Africa Rising, U.P. Comics, Afrocentric Comic Books, and Dark Zulu Lies, each the producer of a single color title. Africa Rising's *Ebony Warrior* by writer Eric Griffin and artist Steven X Routhier is the story of Komal Jackson, a high-tech genius who turns down lucrative offers from large corporations in order to return to his southern home of Yorktown. During the day Jackson teaches children but at night he dons a hi-tech suit of armor to fight street crime as the Ebony Warrior. In essence *Ebony Warrior* is much like *Hardware* except for the emphasis placed on Jackson's turning down the Fortune 500 companies so that he can actively participate "in the struggle to uplift our people". U.P. Comics' *Purge* (Figure 4.5) written by Roosevelt Pitt, Jr. and illustrated by Bill Hobbs is an all out action title where the title character seems to exist solely for beating up criminals one after another in a relentless pursuit of the real problem, the evil (white) drug importers. The first (and only) *Purge* book gives little information about the character but an insert card does describe Purge's alter ego as Richard James Kincaide, the owner of a multi-billion dollar corporation who has set out on a "Purification Agenda" to rid his city of crime. The most critical of the Ania titles is writer and artist Roger Barnes' *Heru: Son of Aurance* from Afrocentric Comic Books. Set in ancient Egypt, *Heru* is the tale of the miraculous appearance of the magical Heru at a time when hordes of light-skinned Arab and Mediterranean savages from the north invade the kingdom of Pharaoh Akhenaton. Heru arrives just in time to drive away the barbarians who were corrupting the richness of their Egyptian culture. Barnes, who holds a graduate degree in African history, bases his work in *Heru* on texts from ancient Egyptian mythology and reworks the events and the moral parables into a comic book format.
without losing sight of how these sacred legends might still be applicable for people living in contemporary American culture.

Perhaps the most visible, certainly the most controversial, of the Ania books is Dark Zulu Lies' Zwanna: *Son of Zulu* (Figure 4.6) by artist John Ruiz and the outspoken writer Nabile P. Hage—who dresses up as Zwanna for comic book conventions and once, in full costume, was arrested for climbing the Georgia capital building and tossing down copies of his comic book. Spouting funky Luke Cage-inspired dialogue like "I got that jungle love for you, baby!", prince Zwanna is a student from Africa, a descendant of the legendary Chaka Zulu, living in the U.S. and attending Black American State University. At the hint of trouble Zwanna "zhaabs out" and becomes a ruthless Black avenger clad in nothing more than a loin cloth and a tiger tooth necklace. With the aid of his magical spear, Zwanna fights racism to the extreme, skewering skin heads in the street and impaling and decapitating a group of white transvestites out to destroy world leaders and rape Zwanna himself. An unabashedly radical comic book, *Zwanna* has itself been accused of racism against whites, not to mention sexism and homophobia. The extreme image of Zwanna was often used as the public face of Ania in mainstream articles chronicling the clash of the Black publishers. In contrast to the slicker and much more conventionally heroic portraits of Milestone characters such as Icon, Rocket and Hardware, Zwanna became his own worst enemy. As Gary Dauphin noted in his *Village Voice* cover piece on the rise of the Black superhero, it was the ugliness of Zwanna's image of racial struggle that probably prompted Nabile P. Hage's departure from the Ania group. Others contend that Hage left the fold when Ania eventually softened its stance against Milestone.

In addition to the *Village Voice* review, the Ania vs. Milestone debate was mentioned in nearly every newspaper article about the two companies and was prominently featured in such widely read magazines as *Entertainment Weekly* and *Newsweek*. Ania's Eric Griffin claimed that the Milestone books were not true Black voices: "Basically what Milestone does is create white characters painted Black. They're *not* culturally aware." (quoted in Spotnitz, 1993: 12). And the flamboyant Nabile Hage told *Newsweek* that "Milestone is coming from a corporate American perspective. When your superhero is a Black Republican, that just doesn't work for inner-city kids. Our [Ania's] stories are uncensored and straight from the streets. We're not afraid to offend the establishment." (quoted in Waters, 1993: 58). On the other side—although in hindsight Milestone now denies ever publicly
responding to Ania's remarks—Milestone was reported as responding defensively to the accusations with comments like Michael Davis's "How many black publishers are there in this country? What we need are 78,000 more of them. What we don't need is to be jumping on each other's throats." (quoted in Spottis, 1993: 12) Dwayne McDuffie's rebuttal that "the idea that the black experience is limited to one kind of person is ridiculous" (quoted in Waters, 1993: 58-9). Other independent Black comic book publishers including Alonzo Washington, the creator behind Omega 7 Comics, and Jason Sims, president of Big City Comics Inc. and creator of the popular Brotherman series joined in the fray by openly accusing Milestone of selling out. The two main points of criticism were that Milestone's characters are nothing more than "Superman in blackface" or "a chocolate-dip Superman", and that rather than being truly independent Milestone's publication and distribution deal reduces them to the status of DC Comic's token Black creators and characters.

The "Superman in blackface" comment was initially heard quite a lot in reference to Milestone's most conventionally superheroic series Icon. The parallels between the two characters are undeniable. Both are alien castaways discovered as infants in small rocket ships which crashed in farmers' fields. Both are raised by their rural foster parents who teach them that with great powers comes great responsibility. Both are incredibly conservative and almost comically straight arrows. They wear similar costumes and possess almost identical powers. At first glance the only difference seems to be the color of their skins. But it is the marked similarities between Superman and Icon, the degree of conformity to the well established superhero genre, that allows the series to explore how conventional heroism might differ from a minority perspective. Thanks primarily to Rocket, Icon's partner and social conscience. Icon is often forced to confront not just criminal masterminds and supervillains but also the social injustices that dominate the world around him. Ironically, this attention to social injustices is also depicted as one of the reasons why Icon is in fact more conservative than Superman. Given that both Superman and Icon are regarded as establishment heroes, and given that all other things being equal Icon is still seen as a minority hero, Icon writer McDuffie describes Icon as "much more straight laced than Superman who is actually way more liberal in his outlook. By virtue of Icon's Blackness, and his presence as a symbol, he has to be a lot more careful about what he says and does than Superman would... because nine times out of ten Superman is going to get the benefit of the doubt where Icon wouldn't automatically be granted that
privilege." Once the reader digs below the surface similarities to appreciate the narrative differences between the characters and their story lines it becomes difficult to see Icon as merely a chocolate-dip Superman. As the fanzine Hero put it in their description of Icon as one of the best on-going series of 1994: "Anyone who still hasn't picked up a copy of this series because they believed all the Superman-in-blackface hype is missing out on one of the best comics available today. Icon and Rocket are complex characters that deserve a following in their own right."

The parallels that many critics seemed to focus on between not just Superman and Icon but between all of the Milestone titles and the entire Superman line were explored in Milestone's second year of publication. "Worlds Collide" was a 14 issue inter-company crossover event during the summer of 1994 that ran through all four of Milestone's original series. DC's Superman line including Superman: The Man of Steel, Superboy, and Steel, and a special collaborative Worlds Collide #1. Since Milestone is an independent company with an independent universe of characters, the first problem the creators from both sides faced was finding a way for their heroes to come in contact. The solution was a typically comic bookish scenario wherein Lois Lane's mild-mannered mail carrier, Fred Bentson, finds that every night when he goes to sleep in Metropolis he instantly wakes up in Dakota, where he leads a second life as another mail carrier. Obviously distraught by sleep deprivation Bentson alternately seeks help from research scientists in Metropolis and Dakota. Manipulated by Hardware's arch-nemesis Edwin Alva, Bentson is soon stretched to the point where he metamorphizes into the nearly omnipotent creature called Rift. The warped Rift somehow unites the two realities and the heroes of Metropolis and Dakota must combine their efforts in order to save at least one of their worlds from Rift's wrath. The similar characters from the two universes are matched up: Icon with Superman (Figure 4.7), Static and Rocket with Superboy, Hardware with Steel (DC's African American, armor-wearing superhero who emerged in the wake of Superman's much publicized death and resurrection story lines in 1993). In addition to the financial success of Worlds Collide (the Milestone titles sold better than ever before and found new fans amongst Superman's regular readers) the crossover gave Milestone the opportunity to highlight the differences between their characters and the similar characters of a more traditionally white superhero universe.

The second main criticism voiced by Ania and a select few other Black independent comic book publishers was that Milestone's publishing and distribution deal meant that they were really

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under the control of DC Comics. Both Milestone and DC steadfastly deny this perception of their relationship. Milestone's Denys Cowan points out that "We began Milestone as an independent project long before we even entered into discussions with DC. Dwayne, Derek and I personally pooled together over $300,000 of our own money to get things going. We are responsible for all of the creative and editorial content of our books, and we retain all of the legal rights to our characters and any other properties related to the Milestone universe." Likewise, Milestone president Derek T. Dingle is adamant that, "We are an independent producer of comic books in every sense of the word, DC is just our distributor not our parent company." But despite Milestone's protestations, the company's critics doubt their creative freedom. The skeptics feel that Milestone can only grow as much as DC allows them to and can only publish racially aware stories so long as they fall within the general guidelines of the DC world view. "The proof of our independence" the Milestone founders say, "is in our stories." They point to the controversial topics that DC would never touch in their own books such as homosexuality, race wars, and teenage pregnancy, to their well-rounded treatment of characters from all sorts of minority backgrounds, and to their indifference in seeking the Comics Magazine Association of America seal of approval for their titles particularly when the CMAA requires the removal of all racial epithets which the Milestone books often include as an intricate part of stories dealing with racism (see Newswatch, 1993: 12).

But Milestone's claims to true independence and creative freedom were recently challenged by DC's decision to censor the cover of the much anticipated Static #25. The special anniversary issue centered on the impending ordeal of Virgil (Static) Hawkins losing his virginity. To accompany the sensitively told story of this very real phase of Virgil's adolescence Milestone commissioned a fully painted illustration from artist Zina Saunders to grace the cover. The painting depicted Virgil with the mask of his Static costume pulled back, kissing his girlfriend Daisy while reclining on a couch, a sex manual and a strip of condoms scattered on the floor. DC Comics balked at the prospect of publishing the painting as a cover image. Despite Dwayne McDuffie's offer to have the condoms airbrushed out of the picture DC still refused to print the cover because, according to DC's executive Vice President and Publisher, Paul Levitz: "DC Comics has a policy of not showing sex on covers." Regardless of the fact that the proposed cover did not show sex but only the likely preface to a responsible sex act, DC deemed the illustration too suggestive and effectively censored Milestone's
creative vision. As a token compromise Milestone was forced to accept DC's criterion and the special anniversary issue of *Sruti* #25 hit the stands with a mostly blackened cover and a heart shaped close up of Virgil and Daisy kissing. The full version of the originally planned cover appeared on the second page of the book. It would seem that when push comes to shove Milestone is limited by the corporate decisions made by DC.

Essentially the short-lived debate between Milestone and Ania --a debate that greatly affected how the Milestone books were initially received-- is a single expression of a long standing cultural dilemma. What is at stake is the very definition of a Black identity. In this case the debate is over comic book superheroes, in other instances it has encompassed film, television, religion, music, sports and politics. The argument about whether or not the Milestone characters are really Black is, at least for most comic book fans, ridiculous. "Of course they are", is the audience conception. But within the realm of cultural politics the debate is much more important and much more complex. It is a question of establishing identity based on either visible ethnicity or cultural criterion, both of which are indecisive and constantly changing variables. The fundamental accusation made by Ania is that the Milestone characters (and by implication the Milestone creators) may be visibly Black but they are not so culturally. There are, of course, numerous problems with defining Black identity through this essentialist type of criteria. It assumes constants that simply do not exist in the real world. For example, the essentialist view assumes that Black culture can be reduced to a particular set of experiences and ideologics, and no matter how many caveats are applied to the definition of this culture it still reduces countless complexities of lived experiences to a few commonalities which are privileged over others. Furthermore, even the concept of biological criteria for defining Black identity is well recognized as problematical. Exactly where does one draw the line that distinguishes someone who is biologically Black from one who isn't? Skin colour? What about light skinned African Americans? Blood percentages? What about people of mixed parentage? In short, even biological definitions are hard to pin down. As Tommy L. Lott quite correctly points out in his discussion of Black identity and Black identified films: "the tension between biological and cultural criteria of black identity is resolved in terms of a political definition of black people" (Lott, 1991: 49). Black identity is defined by politics. In other words, the question of biological and cultural identity becomes inextricably linked to the notion of political identity.
This association of Black identity with political identity is clearly the problem that underlies the differences between Milestone and Ania, a problem that goes far beyond whether Icon talks like Superman or not. It is a disagreement that won't be resolved within the pages of a comic book, but it does influence how those pages are read. Moreover, the connection of Black identified comic book characters with a grounding in political agency has been a fundamental preconception associated with the Milestone books. Because the Milestone characters have been so readily identified as Black by the mainstream audience for comics, they have also been limited by being identified as "political".

**Limitations**

Before going on to examine how actual comic book readers have responded to Milestone's line it should be pointed out that *en masse* the Milestone titles have proven neither an incredible success nor a disappointing failure. In the few years that the books have been on the market they have garnered a relatively large amount of media attention, praise from critics and numerous fan awards from specialized subgroups particularly those who participate in the on-line comics bulletin boards via Genie, Compuserve, and American On-Line. And while the books have notched up impressive sales and are almost always in the top 200 of the over 1200 comics published monthly, they rarely break into the realm of the "Top 100" list. They have managed to outlast many of their competitors who came on the comics scene at about the same time, most notably the Ania group, none of whose books made it past the first issue. Despite award-winning stories, first rate artwork and favorable endorsements Milestone has had to struggle with public resistance. In the fall of 1994 Denys Cowan told the leading professional fanzine, *Wizard*, "I have been completely surprised by the resistance our books have received from the direct market. I thought there would be some resistance, but I also thought that our idea would have appeal. I didn't expect the scale of resistance we've seen. Having been in the comics field for 20 years, it's frustrating." (quoted in Shutt, 1994: 81).

The most obvious reason for Milestone's disappointing sales figures could possibly be simple racism. After all, according to the limited statistical information available about the audience for comic books (see Parsons 1991), the majority of comic book readers are white males between 8 and 25 years of age (comics fandom as a subculture will be explored in more detail in chapter six). But the issue is much more complex than the oversimplified and reductive "White-boys-don't-want-to-
read-about-Black-superheroes” logic. Indeed, the Milestone principles point to the fact that regardless of the ethnicity of the core audience for comics their books routinely “sell through”. In other words, all of the copies put on the stand by retailers are sold and Milestone books rarely hang around long enough to end up in the back issue discount boxes. The central problem would seem to be that in the direct market retailers are ordering fewer copies of the Milestone books than they do of more easily recognizable series, thus restricting the sales potential of a new company whose titles fall just outside the margins of traditional comics fare. Comics specialty store owners calculate their orders based on how many copies they believe their patrons will buy. The problem is that some of the retailers feel, as several told me directly: “I don’t have a lot of Black customers so I’d never be able to sell a lot of Black books.” Jake, the owner and until recently the sole staff of All-Star Heroes, claimed that he never ordered more than the six issues of each Milestone title that were requested by some of his members because he did not want to get stuck with a bunch of “activist” books that no one else would be interested in. “My customers are on the younger side,” explained Jake, “they want to read about superheroes, not about politics and race problems.” These retailers, the gatekeepers between the publishers and the consumers (see chapter six), have been swayed by the attention given to Milestone’s status as the Black comic book company and have assumed that because Milestone is a “black thing”, non-Black readers would find little to enjoy in their books. This perception is mirrored by many comic book readers and I will return to this problem in greater detail when I discuss the readers’ understanding of the Milestone books.

Ideologically, the comic books published by Milestone Media are caught in a bind. They are simultaneously criticized by the likes of Ania and other African American activist creators for not being political enough, and by the mainstream, mostly white, audience for being too political. In fact Milestone treads that thin line between racial politics and entertainment, a difficult position to occupy. Like other forms of mass media it is important for Milestone to avoid being perceived as political. In our culture for a media text to be perceived as political is for that text to be marginalized. Herman and Chomsky, in their analysis of how modern news coverage is made to conform with the beliefs of a dominant elite, argue that any mass media will be disregarded if it is characterized as biased, as too politically oriented. “In the media, as in other major institutions,” write Herman and Chomsky, “those who do not display the requisite values and perspectives will be regarded as "irresponsible."
"ideological." or otherwise aberrant, and will tend to fall by the wayside" (1988: 304). If Mass-produced texts appear to be too politically informed they are often ignored as merely ideological preaching, complaining, or propaganda.

Milestone's editorial claims for being a multi-cultural line of comic books rather than strictly an African American line is part of their attempt to be perceived as less extremist than the tag of being a Black company implies. Yet, while many fans do embrace the Milestone books as entertaining comics first and as Black comics second, others are still wary of the potential politics that might overwhelm the entertainment value --something a young consumer with a limited budget is very wary of when single comic books can cost up to seven dollars. This tricky bit of market positioning is one that Milestone has yet to master. The over riding image of Milestone as a Black company interferes with the audience's ability to move beyond simple preconceptions. Preconceptions that assume the fans already know what the books are about, in this case, political rhetoric. While the novelty of Milestone as a mainstream, Black-owned, publishing company gained them a lot of attention it also limited ability to move beyond that one-dimensional status. Case in point: by the fall of 1995 weak sales forced Milestone to cancel four of their seven series: Blood Syndicate, Xombi, Shadow Cabinet and Kobalt. Interestingly the titles that were cancelled all featured non-African American characters, or racially mixed teams, while the ones that remain, Icon, Hardware and Static, are all headlined by Black superheroes. Some of the cancelled series, such as Xombi and Blood Syndicate, were highly praised by critics so differences in quality does not seem to be the only reason that some of the Milestone titles failed while others have lived on. Rather it appears that comic book readers, influenced by all of the publicity about Milestone as the Black publishers, are willing to except Black superheroes by black creators (though not all of the Milestone creators are Black, a point that many fans are unaware of), but do not look to Milestone for superheroes that fall outside of their perceived specialty. In other words, Milestone is restricted by the market perception that has pigeon-holed them as only a Black, and hence inherently political, publisher of superhero comics.

In addition to the racially informed perception of the Milestone books that restricts open ended interpretations, the fan's reception of the comics is likewise contingent upon how they are perceived in relation to the rest of the industry. The Milestone books are interpreted in comparison to
other black comics and in comparison to other currently popular series, particularly the highly influential titles produced by Image Comics. The acceptance or rejection of the Milestone stories at a general level has also been shaped by their conformity, or lack of it, to popular comic book trends. For example, in the three years since Milestone began publishing they have avoided participation in two trends that have dramatically increased sales of other companies titles. The first trend Milestone avoided was the movement towards gimmicky covers that proved excessively popular in the early 1990s. Other companies, including industry leaders Marvel, DC, and especially Image, boosted their sales to collectors through the use of embossed, die-cut, foil enhanced, holographic and other cover variations. In a desperate attempt to find novel gimmicks one publisher even shot a bullet through stacks of his comics and then sold the "bullet hole" books as limited edition collector's issues. Milestone's goal of concentrating on quality story telling rather than gimmicky features--substance rather than flash--may have made them less competitive and less appealing to an audience seeking to collect the next hot thing.

The second highly visible industry trend that Milestone has avoided participating in is the "Bad Girl" phenomenon. Alluding to the Good Girl art of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Bad Girl trend refers to the currently popular practise of depicting extremely large-breasted superheroines in skin tight costumes and sexually suggestive poses. Books like DC's Catwoman, Topp's Lady Rawhide, Crusade Comics' Shi, Malibu's Mantra, Eternity Comics' Lady Death, and Harris Comics' Vengeance of Vampirella have all shot to the top of the charts primarily thanks to the sex appeal of their leading heroines. Milestone has steadfastly refused to participate in the Bad Girl trend despite the fact that it means some readers will spend their comic book allowance on other titles. Contrary to joining the current trend of exploiting sexy female heroes Milestone has been praised by some critics for bringing "many credible female characters to the comic world, with Rocket, star of Icon, in the forefront. In fact the general consensus is that Icon is clearly Rocket's book" (Rimmels, 1995: 36). In fact the frustration of sales hampered by not conforming to popular comic trends like the Bad Girl phase was apparent in Dwayne McDuffie's editorial regarding the censorship of Static's anniversary cover, the one that DC Comics objected to because condoms were included in the illustration: "Here's the sad part, if I had commissioned a cover where Daisy was wearing a thong and kicking one leg high in the air so everybody could get a really good look at her crotch, or if she had her back to the
camera and her spine arched at an improbable angle to accentuate her ass, or if her enormous breasts, miraculously immune to the effects of gravity, were positioned so you couldn't quite tell whether those shadows were her nipples, there would be no problem. Problem? Heck, we'd probably have a "hot book" on our hands."

Far from a blank slate that audiences can play with and interpret in any way they choose, Milestone comic books both intentionally and incidentally restrict and inform the readings that fans make of the text. The fan's reading is shaped by a complex web of associated, extra-textual factors before he or she even opens the comic book. Impressions of Milestone as the Black comics company, impressions of Milestone as an attempt at "revolutionary" politics, knowledge of Milestone as under the wing of DC Comics, and awareness of genre conventions and popular industry trends are all part of the cultural baggage that the Milestone books carry with them. The unique status of the Milestone line means that they are understood by fans as encoded with certain properties that inform, define and restrict the range of possible interpretations that the readers can make. And all of these perceptions that impinge on the actual enjoyment of the Milestone narratives are further constricted by the readers' degree of involvement in the culture of comic book fandom. It is through the realm of fandom that some of the most interesting modes of negotiated readings are performed. Comics fandom operates on certain principles that involve levels of interaction with not just the text and other fans but also with the creators themselves. Before continuing with the social structure of fandom and how it influence readers' perceptions of the texts, the next chapter will deal with individual Milestone fans and how they relate to the comics within a limited range of culturally defined possibilities.
THE READERS

Before turning in the next chapter to comic book fandom as an organized activity premised on certain subcultural conventions, this chapter will address a sample of actual comics readers. The comic book fans discussed here were chosen because they come from a variety of cultural and economic backgrounds and because they exhibit some of the most important recurring themes that I encountered over the course of my research, specifically they express a sense of continuity between themselves and the comics' creators, and they are experienced in a variety of the social aspects that define comic book fandom such as attending conferences and frequenting comic book specialty stores. The readers profiled here also situate their reading of comic books in relation to other media that explore common themes such as hero-oriented video games and action movies, all of which reveals the fans' interest in "masculine" pursuits and in comic book characters as models of masculinity. In a broader sense, this chapter is also about the need for audience studies to address how young males interact with the media in a way that does not invalidate their pleasures under the assumption that they, unlike female consumers, are more willingly indoctrinated into a patriarchal, hegemonic standard.

As a media audience, the majority of individuals who participate in comic book fandom are clearly distinguishable by age and gender. Unquestionably the largest bulk of comic book fans are males between the ages of eight and twenty-two. In fact, these two defining features - age and gender, young and male-- are crucial for understanding the type of connections that exist between the readers and the media text. The relationship between young people and the media is a constant concern. One
of the fundamental beliefs of our culture is that children are innocents, susceptible to the corrupting influences of the world around them. The agents of that feared corruption have changed over the centuries, from literacy and free speech, to the most familiar and the most contemporary of villains: the mass media. The image of a wide-eyed child held spell-bound by television, hypnotized by violent video games, or writhing in sexual ecstasy to popular music is never far from the discourse on children and the media. This popular image, a precise symbolic shorthand, has often been used to alarming effect in relation to the supposed corrupting influence of comic books (see, for example, Figures 2.1 and 2.2 in chapter two). Ironically, where we fear this undivided and rapturous attention to the media on the premise that it is "doing things" to young minds, it is the same sort of devoted attention that we would reward children for if it occurred in school. Of course we usually do not think of education as brainwashing, school is good, but popular culture is different, popular culture is bad.

"Many parents I know have similar feelings," wrote David Denby in a recent cover story for The New Yorker, "and quite a few are surprised by the depths of their ambivalence and in some cases misery on the subject... upset by the way popular culture in all its forms has invaded their homes, and the habits, manners, and souls of their children... And a few parents I know have given themselves over to bitter rage and are locked in an unwinnable struggle to shut out pop culture and the life of the streets --the two are now indistinguishable-- from their children's experience" (Denby, 1996: 48). Despite Denby's inaccurate conflation of popular culture and life of the streets, the two are by their very definitions separate facets of the modern urban experience. he does explicitly voice a fairly common Conservative and neo-Liberal concern that is usually dressed up by politicians in the rhetoric of re-establishing an idealistic culture of "Family Values." That these romanticized, good 'ol family values never really existed in the first place is irrelevant to the social and political agenda of saving innocent children from the evils of the media machine. Under the guise of protecting innocent young children, adults have always looked for scapegoats, outside forces to which we can point and say "See, that's the real problem. That's what is making our kids different from us!" Our society's current fears about rap and hip-hop music, the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and Sailor Moon television programs, and the unknown evils of the internet are not new, they are merely a modern version of the same fears that previous generations expressed about the printing press, the newspaper and the radio (see Starker, 1989). It should be clear by now that the comic book industry has been
subjected to the same sort of accusations which are leveled at all media for supposedly corrupting young, innocent, minds.

The fear that the media are doing terrible things to our children has lead to countless projects, each trying to study how the media affects young consumers. More than with any other audience group, when it comes to children and the media, the stilted old model of the hypodermic needle is brought into play. The hypodermic model is a crude theory of media effects that assumes a whole array of harmful values and ideas are directly injected into a passive audience. On almost any given day in North America one can pick up a newspaper and find some article about the dangers of the media, or some parent's fear that the media are really behind what is "wrong with kids today." Thus, most research into the topic of media and children can be roughly lumped together under the heading of effects research. The other side of the coin, the side that has been largely ignored, the side that might shine a much more revealing light on the place of media in late twentieth century culture, would be research concerned with the way children relate to and use the media. As David Buckingham writes in the introduction to Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media (1993), one of the few works to directly confront these issues, "there has been very little attempt to investigate the ways in which young people use these media, and the meanings and pleasures they derive from them" (5). This is precisely the premise of my research here, to investigate the way young male readers use a particular set of comic books to construct meanings and to derive personal and social pleasures.

The Gender Divide in Fandom Studies

Much of the work centered on youth and media use, whether it follows the hypodermic model or not, is also concerned with exploring the gender divisions that seem so apparent in children's media. Youth-oriented media texts are generally regarded as extremely effective agents of socialization, particularly when it comes to teaching the roles and the standards of culturally appropriate gender behavior. For the most part, the media teaches little girls to be passive, frail, dependant and beauty conscious, while conversely the media teaches little boys to be active, tough, independent and aggressive. Think Barbie vs G.I. Joe. Although different mediums are criticized for different reasons, the gender divide is represented fairly evenly throughout. As far as reading is
concerned, this gender-based division is both constructed by and reflected in the traditional split between girls' and boys' literature. For girls there are romances, melodramas and other relationship-based stories, while for boys there are science fiction, military and other action-adventure stories. In her historical survey of the gender differences in children's literature, Elizabeth Segel (1986) points out that adults impose and foster gendered divisions in reading preferences. "The publisher commissioning paperback romance for girls and marketing science fiction for boys, as well as Aunt Lou selecting a fairy tale collection for Susie and a dinosaur book for Sam, are part of a powerful system that operates to channel books to or away from children according to their gender" (Segel, 1986: 165). Where the books deemed suitable for girls dealt with inter-personal relationships and domestic elements, Segal argues, the books for boys were the exact opposite. "The boys' book was, above all, an escape from domesticity and from the female domination of the domestic world... Boys' books are the epitome of freedom in part because they are an escape from women, the chief agents of socialization in the culture" (171). Although Segel does not mention comic books specifically, they are still a clear example of this socialized gender division. For girls there are such popular romance oriented series as Young Romance, Archie and in Britain Jackie, while the comics for boys, the ones that dominate the market, take as their chief concern costumed superheroes, secret agents, cowboys and detectives.

This institutionalized split in reading types has long lasting effects beyond the genders' traditional preferences for different literary genres. In essence, boys and girls are socialized to read for different things and in different ways. The argument, put forth most succinctly in the collection Gender and Reading (Flynn and Schweickart, 1986; in particular see the chapters by Flynn, Schibanoff, Suleimen, Fetterly, and Bleich), is that men learn to read from a goal-oriented perspective whereas women learn to read from a more social perspective. Just as some popular linguists, such as Deborah Tannen (1994), characterize men's speech as "report" talk --direct, functional-- and women's speech as "rapport" talk --social, supportive-- there is a similar demarcation of men's and women's reading patterns. Men are seen as reading on a more individualistic basis, following an authorial voice and attending to the narrative as a linear form of communication, as a chain of information, all in an attempt to get the story straight. Women, on the other hand, are thought by such analysts as the ones cited above from Gender and Reading, to read primarily as a social experience. They perceive the
narrative not as a chain of events but as a world to be entered and explored, often unthethered by the singular voice of the author, they are more reflective and engage with the book in a sort of dialogue or conversation in which they can be active contributors. As David Bleich found in his study of gender-based reading patterns, women relate to a narrative "as if it were an atmosphere or an experience... without strict regard for the literal warrant of the text, but with more regard for the affective sense of the human relationships in the story" (1986: 256). In this regard, the male type of reading has been institutionalized as the proper or academic way to read a text, while the female type of reading has remained on the periphery as a less legitimate form of reading. Because women's pleasure in reading has been marginalized, both in the way they read and what they read, they have often resorted to creating their pleasures where they can within the text. Female reading has been characterized through its necessity to rewrite the texts in ways that serve their own interests in the face of a male dominated culture, for example imaginatively developing romantic sub-plots or concentrating on the lives of minor characters. This gender division in reading has gone a long way in explaining the practices of a number of female fan communities who actively relate to media texts. The female reader and the media fan, whether male or female, appear to be synonymous, both read the text as a social world in which they can be involved.

The female reader of media texts, the female fan, has become remarkably visible over the course of the last two decades. A wide range of studies have explored the ways that the media socializes women, and the ways that women use the media for their own ends. Female comic book readers are no exception to this trend. There has been an impressive number of studies which have taken young female readers and romance comics as their subject, unfortunately most of them are concerned with British comic books, still their findings can shed quite a bit of light on how girls relate to comic books generally. Among the most notable has been Angela McRobbie's on-going research on Jackie and its readers (see McRobbie 1981, 1982b, 1991), which has been joined by other similar studies of girls and their comics by Walkerdine (1984), Willinsky and Hunniford (1986), Frazer (1987), and Moss (1993). It is not my intention to review this body of work here (for a discussion of this work on romance comics see Barker, 1989, chapters 7, 8 and 10). I have not done research explicitly on female comic book readers, nor on romance comics. In fact, romance comics have all but disappeared on the North American market and would be extremely difficult to study today.
What I do want to point out by mentioning these studies is that they outnumber any comparable works on male comic book readers, despite the much larger number of boys who read comic books. This bias seems especially curious since the entire comic book medium, in both North America and Great Britain, is primarily geared toward its established male audience.

The work conducted by McRobbie, Walkerdine, Frazer, Moss and others about girls who read romance comics is premised on a feminist approach that seeks to expose the presentation of limiting gender based stereotypes and to validate female pleasures in media use. This focus is similar to many of the ethnographic based accounts to emerge from the field of Cultural Studies in the last decade and a half. When, in her 1980 essay "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique", McRobbie first accused Paul Willis (1977) and Dick Hebdige (1979) of ignoring female members of working class subcultures in favor of emphasizing masculine activity, she defined an agenda of feminist research that would come to dominate Cultural Studies. McRobbie effectively argued that by concentrating solely on the male members of Willis' working class "Lads" and Hebdige's Punks, both studies, in effect, contributed to the hegemonic norm that devalues and silences feminine subjectivity.

As Cultural Studies' ethnographic project shifted from youth subcultures to media audiences it became an increasingly fertile ground for feminist scholars to cultivate. The convergence of female media users as subject, ethnography as method, and feminism as theory, has proven a perfect fit for demonstrating one of the central political theses of feminism, which is to show, as Sherry Ortner has put it, "how practice reproduces the system, and how the system may be changed by practice" (Ortner, 1984: 154). In other words, feminist based research on media audiences has repeatedly justified women's pleasure in relation to such traditionally "female" genres as soap operas and romantic fiction by illustrating the various ways that they use the texts to understand and to counter the female position within a misogynistic culture.

Thus, due to the politically and personally motivated enthusiasm of feminist scholars and the wealth of fascinating female audience groups, the most notable Cultural Studies works in the 1980s and early 1990s have generally been those which concentrated on how women use media texts strategically in their daily lives. Among these are the landmark studies conducted by Brundson (1981), Hobson (1982), Modleski (1984), Radway (1984), Ang (1985), Walkerdine (1990), Lewis (1990), Bacon-Smith (1992), and D'Acci (1994), to name just a few. Since women have long
occupied positions of social subordination on several levels --within the home, at work, in media representation-- these academic studies of women audiences have been tantamount to an emancipation of female pleasures and textual practises. It has become common wisdom in the field that women can, and do, draw their own meanings from popular culture rather than automatically accepting patriarchal/hegemonic ideology, no matter how blatant or appealing the package seems to be. While these studies (and the numerous others similar to them) clearly demonstrate the ways that audiences actively resist or evade being hegemonically situated by mass media texts, I am always struck by how narrowly defined the field has become in their wake. Given the diversity and the sheer number of media texts that women must contend with in Western culture, the repeated investigation of the female audiences for soap operas, romantic fiction and Star Trek seems rather limiting.

Moreover, aside from the dogged investigation of a few core media genres, I am concerned that this emphasis on female audiences validates the agency of one gender at the expense of another. As Ien Ang has recently pointed out: "most research that sets out to examine gender and media consumption has concentrated exclusively on women audiences" (Ang 1996: 177. italics in original. also see van Zoonen, 1991). The unequal investigation of female audiences might also run the risk of perpetuating some of the very misconceptions that feminist theory originally set out to resolve. Firstly, by extrapolating from the activities of a select group of fans to the media consumption of women in general, the individualities of different lived experiences is effaced for women. And secondly, the repeated emphasis on exclusively female audience members can become problematical if women are then dialogically constructed as the Other sex, the one that needs investigation, the one that is deviant... thus leaving men as the norm, as the yardstick against which women are measured. But my main trepidation about the lack of men's audience studies is that where women have been emancipated from the assumption of ideological dupism, men have been more or less ignored because their pleasures are seen not to be in need of rescuing, as the dominant beliefs seem to serve their interests. The danger is that this split along gender lines tends to authenticate the harmful assumption that male audiences are beneath careful consideration, and to confirm the belief that all men simply read along with the text and gladly let themselves be indoctrinated into a self-serving, hegemonic order. Where female pleasures in media use have been validated, there has been, by exclusion, a parallel invalidation of male pleasures. I do not think that any of the feminist based
research on audiences meant to reduce gendered media use to the level of women = active resisters and men = complicit dupes, but there has been a tendency for the overall understanding of audiences to drift into this sort of essentialism.

In fact, until very recently, there has been little investigation of male audiences. What we do know about male audiences is primarily centered on the consumption practices of homosexual men. Interesting work, but polemically it unintentionally aligns gay men with women (an alignment that has frustrated the gay movement for decades), and as deviant Others. Martin Barker echoed some of the concerns I express here when he wrote of the female audience bias in Cultural Studies:

I am interested in the absence of any equivalent [studies outlining how women negotiate dominant constructions of femininity] for men and boys. It is curious to ask why it is nigh on impossible to imagine a parallel study of, say, soft porn. violent adventure or sports stories, arguing that men's pleasure in these genres is not evidence of their textual subordination or ideological construction; rather it reveals the ways in which men have to negotiate with dominant constructions of masculinity --or even of femininity-- and through fantasy cope with the stresses and demands of living out those constructions.

(Barker, 1993: 160, italics in original)

Barker is right to point out that there has been a notable absence of any equivalent studies of liberating media use for men or boys. Things are, perhaps, changing in the 1990s with scholars like Ang and Hermes calling for more equilateral research: "we would argue that it is now time to develop a mode of understanding that does more justice to variability and precariousness in the ways in which gender identities --feminine and masculine subjectivities-- are constructed in the practices of everyday life in which media consumption is subsumed" (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 142). There is a growing field of literature concerned with images of men in the mainstream media, especially film (see for example Cohan and Hark, 1993, or Bingham, 1994b), but not much has been written about men as active negotiators of cultural texts.

The kind of emancipatory work performed on behalf of female audiences is almost unthinkable for male audiences because male audiences are seen, almost by definition, as not requiring any justification for their pursuits. Since Western culture is still rooted in a decidedly patriarchal system, masculine subject positions are still regarded as unassailable positions which
merely reproduce hegemonic standards. Where recent feminist theorists have gone so far as to find subversive and empowering traits in what were previously regarded as some of the most conformist of gender specific behavior, such as women's use of cosmetic surgery (Davis 1991) and makeup (Radner 1989), it is hard to imagine resistance-based theories applied to specifically "male" activities. As perhaps the most obvious of "men's media use" pornography is a good example of the a priori limitations that male oriented audience studies might face, limitations that a similar female audience study would not. To my knowledge, Andrew Ross's (1989) call for a similar audience based study of pornography as a traditional "men's genre" has never been answered. Perhaps the closest we have come are such autobiographical accounts of academic and presumably liberal men found in texts like Men Confront Pornography (Kimmel. 1989). It is almost impossible to imagine an audience-based study of men using pornography that might in any way parallel past studies of women using romantic fiction. In fact, the only audience based studies that I am aware of which justify pornography use as a source of personal liberation and political agency have been conducted with women (see Loach, 1993) and with gay men (see Burger, 1995). Any straight men who use pornography, the assumption seems to be, must be doing so in a self-serving manner that exploits women and perpetuates patriarchal norms. I am aware that there have been a number of pro-pornography writings, by both men and women, that argue for positive aspects of male pornography use, but these have always remained in the realm of the theoretical, perhaps apprehensive of the obvious and hard to defend against criticisms --"Of course real men say they don't use pornography in a sexist manner!"-- that an audience study would be subjected to.

I feel that by disadvantaging how real male audiences use media texts which are commonly defined as "men's genres" is to run the risk of merely perpetuating gender stereotypes. Just as feminine subjectivities should never be assumed, neither should masculine ones. Mainstream masculinity is not a stable, consistent position against which other subject positions can be deconstructed. If it has been regarded as a foundation, then it is time that foundation is addressed. Since this study is a consideration of how a masculine audience relates to a traditionally masculine media text, it is important to look at some of the specific readers upon whom my research is based, and to look at some of the ways that they approach texts of masculinity.

I met all but a very few of the fans I spoke with over the course of this study through comic
book specialty stores and at comic book conventions. The readers discussed in this chapter are no exception. In every case I was first introduced to these fans by the owners, or by one of the employees, at the various stores where the fans are members. Like comic book fans often joke, "membership has its privileges." But where they mean privileges such as substantial discounts in the cover price of a comic, or as access to the dealer's information about upcoming books, for me the privilege translated into access to the members. In the following chapter I will consider the "gatekeeping" function of the comic book specialty store owners within the overall subculture of comics fandom in more detail, for now I want to point out that these retailers were extremely helpful for putting me in contact with individual fans. Usually the people working at the specialty stores were able to introduce me to some of their customers during peak hours on Wednesdays and Saturdays (when the week's shipment of new comics arrive). On other occasions they would go out of their way to arrange for me to meet Milestone fans at prearranged times in the store or at conventions. This system of using the store owners and staff as intermediaries proved more fruitful than when I initially approached comic book fans on my own. I found all of the fans more willing to talk with me after the "gatekeepers" had given me an endorsement.

As I mentioned in the introduction, most of the interviewing for this study was done on an informal basis. In the first few encounters I tried to administer a verbal questionnaire but all of the potential informants were disinterested in this type of approach. They would suddenly turn quite when only a few minutes before they had been boisterously arguing some small point of comics lore with friends. When I switched to a conversational style the readers were more willing to expand on their relationship to the comic fandom. Suddenly many of them seemed to feel like they were "on solid ground," as one formerly reluctant informant put it, "when I'm talking comics I'm the authority."

The following readers were all particularly forthcoming individuals. They do not, of course, represent the full vicissitude of comic fandom. Comic fandom is a very large and diverse subculture with distinct pockets of interest, each fully deserving of their own study. For example, within comic fandom one could consider various intersections such as female readers of underground comics or adult readers of Japanese comics meant for children. But the readers discussed here are fairly representative of the audience for mainstream superhero comics generally and Milestone comic books in particular. Each of the readers chosen for this chapter also give voice to different areas
which proved important to understanding the way fans relate to the Milestone books.

A Sampling of Readers

THOMAS

Thomas is seventeen years old. He lives in a middle class suburban home with his parents and his two younger brothers, Dave, fifteen, and Peter, eleven. Both of Thomas' parents are first generation immigrants. His father is a contractor from Jamaica, and his mother, originally from northern Africa, works part-time in an auto parts office. Thomas has a lot of close friends, many of whom do not share his enthusiasm for comic books and a few who do. "Some of my friends who aren't into comic books tease me sometimes." Thomas explains, "but the rest of us just ignore them. So long as I enjoy them I'm not going to give up collecting any of my favorite titles."

Thomas began reading comic books as a school activity when he was in grade two and has always associated comics with learning. Although Thomas now refuses to mix his enthusiasm for comics with school for fear that high school teachers might ridicule his choice of reading materials, he does attribute his good grades to the reading skills he developed from comic books. Like almost all of the high school age kids who were still serious comic book fans, Thomas has always seen his interest in comics as more worthy than those of his non-comic book reading friends because it involves reading. For Thomas, reading comics is a sign of his intelligence.

We had a really cool teacher [in grade two]. He always kept lots of books around the classroom for us to read. A lot of these were comic books and he encouraged us to read them. I always thought it was so cool that he would let us read comics in school, not a lot of teachers would allow that. In fact, I remember him letting me take some of the comics home so that I could become a better reader. It's not that I was stupid or anything. I just wasn't all that great a reader. I think I was bored by all those little kiddie books they made us read most of the time. Anyway, I really got into the comics he had and began reading them everyday, by the end of the year I tested the highest in the class for reading skills. I was reading stuff that was meant for kids in the fifth grade. While all the other kids were just playing video games or listening to music, I was reading things. I don't care what people may say about comics being stupid, they're not. In fact they're a lot more sophisticated than some of the stuff they used to make us read. If I'm a good student, and I am, its cause of comics.
After his initial introduction to comics, Thomas gradually began to pursue comic books outside of the classroom as well. Initially, he recalls, he pestered his parents to buy him comics from the corner drug store, and then when he was a little older he took to spending most of his allowance on Marvel Comics at *Four Colour Worlds*, a comic book specialty store that opened up not far from his home. For Thomas the specialty store was his first foray into the world of comics fandom, a world which he had read about in the letters columns of his favorite series but had never experienced first hand. The discovery of other individuals with a similar devotion to comic books further ensconced Thomas’ interest in the medium and refueled his relationship with comics from an individual pursuit to a social experience.

I couldn’t believe it. I had been buying comics at the Mac’s Milk near my school, but the pickings were pretty slim. They had a fair number of DCs and a few Marvels but some weeks they would have four issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* all at the same time and then you wouldn’t see another one for a couple of months. There were lots of times that I would read a cliff-hanger and then never be able to find the next issue to find out what happened. Then my Dad told me about a new store called *Four Colour Worlds* which opened up not far from our house. I was in awe! All these new comics every week without missing an issue, it was great! Plus they were all at U.S. cover price\(^1\), which was a real bonus. John [the store’s owner] really knew his stuff. He started pulling books for me before I even knew what it meant and he introduced me to a few of the other fans who were into the same titles I was. Man it was great to talk to other guys who were into comics. We would run into each other at the store every Saturday and shoot the shit about the comics we had read the week before... you know, which ones were good, which ones sucked, who the best artist was. Could Wolverine beat up The Hulk, stuff like that. It changed the way I read comics, now I had to be more careful cause I knew I’d be talking about them with other fans and I wanted to make sure I got it right.

For Thomas, getting it "right" seems to mean understanding the story in its full complexity. He needed to comprehend all of the narrative possibilities so that he could discuss not just that single story, but, as he put it, "everything that everyone else might see, including what the writer meant, what

\(^1\) Many Canadian comic book specialty stores offer the week’s new releases at the suggested retail price for American retailers, often with a further ten percent discount for members. For example, a normal Milestone issue is currently priced at $3.50 Can but is sold in specialty stores for $2.50 Can, the current U.S. price. This is a considerable incentive for fans who buy several comics each week to shop at specialty stores, particularly since some books can cost seven or eight dollars an issue.
it might mean for future stories, what I would do in a situation like that, or what other characters might do." Thomas' reading of the text began to be influenced by extra-textual factors that emerged from his growing involvement in fandom.

Thomas kept his comic books in pristine condition even before discovering the world of fandom through his local comic book store. He never folded them, tore them, or discarded them the way many young comics readers do before they adopt the collector's mentality that is so prevalent in comics fandom. Today, Thomas has an impressive collection of mint condition comic books, all safely bagged with acid-free backing boards and stored in a dozen long cardboard boxes. Though he has never actually counted them all. Thomas estimates his collection to consist of about a thousand comics. He desperately wants his parents to buy a home computer so he can list all his comics in a specially designed data base which would allow him to keep an accurate account of their value, ostensibly for insurance purposes but also, he confides, for bragging rights. For a time Thomas achieved a great deal of status within the small community of fans who frequented Four Colour Worlds.

One time, not long after I got to know him, John paid me to help him man a booth at a local comic con. My friends were pretty impressed because you really gotta know your stuff to do that and not get ripped off. All these guys are trying to shit you and tell you that that book isn't worth the sticker price, but I knew what I was doing -- knew when to sell a comic below Guide price, when to sell it above$2. By this time I was spending more time talking about the books than I was reading them and I realized some people thought me a real authority. I still remember the time this guy, Scott, asked me to explain an issue of The Uncanny X-Men to him. It is a complicated series so it was understandable, he wanted to make sure he had gotten all the references to other stories so he confirmed it all with me. I enjoyed that, it was the first time someone came to me because I was an expert on something.

In fact, I first made contact with Thomas through a clerk at Four Colour Worlds, which is a relatively small, small family-run comics store. Until recently Thomas was very active as a fan, even tried his hand at writing original comic book stories, and became known to the store's regular

2 "Guide price" refers to the most recent value of a given comic book according to The Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide, or more recently Wizard: The Guide to Comics. The prices listed in these books are considered a strong indication of a comic's market value but are rarely 100% accurate since a book's popularity changes on a weekly basis. A knowledgeable fan or retailer is aware of the "mood of the market" and knows when the value of a comic has risen or fallen in comparison to the price given in the guide.

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customers as a friendly and knowledgeable comics expert. Thomas, like most regular comic book
readers, detests the stereotype of fans as "geeky losers". But he also will admit to being a fairly hard-
core fan. "Three or four years ago I was much more into it than I am now. I would never miss an
issue of any of my titles, no matter how broke I was, and I went to just about every con my friends
and I could get to." Currently, Thomas has eased up on his comic book collecting because he is busy
with a part-time job at a local gas station, a job he took, in part, to help support his increasingly
expensive comic book habit. Still, he is always one of the first customers at the store each week when
the comics arrive, and he attends at least two of the larger local comic cons a year. One of his goals is
a pilgrimage to either the San Diego or the Chicago annual conventions, Thomas wants "to just go,
with lots of money in my pockets and just, you know, totally geek out for a couple of days."

While Thomas' original passion was for the comics published by Marvel, especially Spider-
Man and all the X-something titles, he now favors "more mature comics, like The Sandman, Preacher
and most of the other Vertigo titles." He claims to have left behind the popular superhero type of
books. Those are what his younger brothers are reading now. Although there is no real evidence to
back it up, Thomas fits the profile of older fans who most retailers and comic book professionals
believe grow out of superhero fare by the age of sixteen. The sole exception to Thomas' recent
embargo on superhero comic books are those published by Milestone Media, all of which he lists
among his favorite on-going series. As Thomas explains it, his first criteria for continuing to buy any
series is that it must be a "quality" title, the story must be well told and well illustrated, and thus have
the potential to increase in value. Thomas attributes his perception of these qualities in the Milestone
books coupled with his interest in seeing substantial Black characters in comics that initially attracted
him to Milestone. In many ways his curiosity about Milestone may have been racially based but, like
many serious comic book fans, Thomas is quick to point out that regardless of the character's skin
colour he would drop the books if the stories did not meet the standards of quality that he was always
watchful for since becoming involved in fandom.

As a fan who happens to be Black, I couldn't resist picking up the first Milestone
books after I read about them in a magazine. They're a little uneven in quality but I
never miss Icon or Hardware or Static, and I used to really like Xombi before it got
cancelled, they've really won me over. The stories are generally strong, although
Static, has gotten a little weak lately, and the art is occasionally great. I've been a fan
of Dwayne McDuffie since he was writing at Marvel. McDuffie really cares about what we fans think. I mean I've seen him pick up on things in the letter columns and include them in stories just a few months later. I've even "talked" with him over my friend's computer during one of those *American Online* chat-special things. That was so cool, we really talked about what was going on in *Icon*.

The fact that the books had to "win him over" before he would add them to his *must have* list was important to Thomas. Because Thomas takes his skills as a fan and a collector very seriously, it is after all what gains him some respect in the eyes of his comic book friends, not to mention his younger brothers. He was not willing to buy the books solely on the premise that they featured Black characters. The colour of the characters or the creators is not as important to Thomas as is the quality of the work and the fact that the creators were sensitive to the input of fans. "Man, if I bought them *just* because they were Black." Thomas explains, "that would be insulting, that would be tokenism just as much as when Marvel and DC and everybody thought they *had* to have at least one Black superhero running around." Thomas points to the fact that as a Black man he was willing to give both *Purge* and *Ebony Warrior* a chance, but that as a serious fan he could not justify any loyalty to series that fell well below his personal standards of quality. "It's not that they weren't trying, they get an "A" for effort, but the books just weren't up to snuff --spelling mistakes, confusing art-- not my style."

While Thomas feels he should be supportive of positive images of Black characters in comics, those characters must first be acceptable according to his fan derived principles of quality, originality and collectability.

In recent years. Thomas has supplemented his passion for comics with a detailed interest in other media. As with almost all of the other comics fans I met, comic books are only one of several area of popular culture that Thomas is involved with. Unlike when he first began reading comics and looked down on other kids for being involved with non-reading based hobbies. Thomas now sees comics as one example of his many areas of media expertise. He is also a serious fan of rap music, video games and independent films. In fact. Thomas has become such a serious film buff that his future goal is admission to a good college animation program. Not surprisingly, Thomas often uses cinematic comparisons when describing comics.

I can just picture *Static* as a big budget movie," says Thomas. "maybe starring that kid
who was in Fresh, get him to grow some dreds and he'd be great. The special effects would have to be cool, like in that X-Files episode where the guy was sort of a human lightning rod. I can picture it now, of course I'd be the ideal director -- ha, ha-- but all the flying stuff can be done now in really believable ways and the costumes could be like those kevlar suits they use in the Batman movies."

Thomas now sees his relation to comics primarily through the lens of a film fan. "I still enjoy the adventure of books like Icon and Static -- the wouldn't it be cool if I could fly and do all that superhero stuff kind of fantasies-- but I look at them more like little movies... you know, like action movies but with costumes. I'm more into realistic heroes now, the kind you see in action movies -- I know, I know, they're not realistic either-- but they are probably more likely to happen than finding a magical old sword that turns me into a Greek god or something." Moreover, Thomas cites this preference for more realistic heroes as the reason for preferring the Milestone characters over other currently popular superheroes. "Too much of the stuff out there right now is a joke. I look at my brothers' books and they're all these ridiculously large guys, and women with huge tits, all running around with guns the size of cannons. I mean, come on! At least with Milestone the heroes are a little more realistic, they have the kind of personalities and the kind of problems that could really happen."

STEVE

Steve is a relative newcomer to the world of comic books. He is ten and estimates that he has only been reading comics for about two years. Before getting his first comic book from a friend at school. Steve's only experience with superhero fiction was the Batman movies and such Saturday morning kids programs as The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, The X-Men, The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and Batman: The Animated Series. Steve lives with his mother, Sarah, a restaurant manager, and his older sister, Judy, in a two bedroom apartment. Steve's father left when he was three years old and they have not heard from him since.

Steve knows that his mother does not approve of his reading comic books. She thinks it will hurt his grades. She also fears that it will keep him from meeting more children and from getting out of the apartment more. Although he is blessed with a good sense of humor and is very polite. Steve is also an extremely shy boy. He has few close friends, avoids social activities, and is most content when
he can find some privacy in the small apartment and closet himself away to read for a few hours. Steve's use of comic books fits well with his solitary tendencies. One day he proudly informed me that he has never read a comic book just once; he always reads it right through two times in a row and then rereads and rereads favorite scenes until he has them memorized. Then, if he owns the book, he will often reread the entire story again on later dates.

I read my comic books a lot. You could pick any comic I have and I can tell you exactly what its about. I used to read them so much that they would fall apart. The staples would fall out or I'd bend the covers back until the whole book stayed rolled up like a tube when I put it away. Now I'm more careful. I try not to put creases in the comic or to tear the pages. I want to have a good collection in case I sell it one day. I even put them in bags when I get the chance. But I still read them at least twenty times before I buy another comic.

Like many comic book fans, particularly those who are in the younger half of the spectrum (from about five to twelve), any superhero comic is of interest to Steve. Most fans limit themselves to a specific genre, in this case the superhero genre, but read a wide variety of comics within that category. No comic book is read in isolation; it is always measured in comparison to other books which are deemed similar in some way, either due to the characters or the creators. Since he is a fairly new fan there is an incredible wealth of back issues out there that Steve is desperate to read. The family budget is limited so Steve tries to borrow as many comics as possible from among a small group of classmates who he knows are regular comic books buyers, and he makes sure to commit the stories to memory before he returns them. Contrary to his mother's fear that comic book reading will isolate Steve from friends his own age it actually has helped him create a new circle of friends.

I especially like *Spawn* and *Superman* and *Static* but I don't really care. I mean I'll read any superhero stories that I can. Sometimes, if I have some Christmas money or birthday money. I just go through the discount bins looking for the cheapest books they have. There are a couple of guys in my class who read a lot of comic books so I get them to lend me their books when they're done with them. I'm *real* careful with those. Its a lot of fun to read the same stories that someone you know has already read. We talk about them and argue about who the coolest characters are. Some of the other guys think its a waste of time, but they're stupid. Most of my friends now are into comics too.
Steve does, of course, prefer some characters over others and he places Static high on his list of favorites. For Steve, his enjoyment of *Static* is directly associated with his ability to identify with the character. Steve would often make comparisons between what he sees as deficiencies in his own life and the social short-comings that are so broadly depicted in the meek alter egos of the comic book superheroes.

If I had to choose... I guess I like Static the best. He's great. He has really cool electrical powers, he's funny and he's not some boy-millionaire like Tim Drake [a.k.a. the current Robin] with a Batman to teach him stuff. I guess it's cause Static is closest to me. I mean, I'm not Black or nothin' but I live in the same sort of house that Virgil [Static's secret identity] does, and he doesn't really fit in at school either. I don't think its his powers though, I mean every hero has some kind of special power and lots of them would be more fun than Static's. It'd be great to have a suit like Ironman's or to be able to stretch like Mr. Fantastic, but Static always knows what to say, that's kinda the coolest part. I'm more like Virgil, he's cool but nobody sees it until he becomes Static.

The way Steve often emphasized the parallels he perceives between his own life and that of the costumed characters he reads about makes him a text-book example of how superhero comics are *supposed* to work. He identifies with the down-trodden, mild-mannered, Clark Kent side of the characters and fantasizes about becoming a Superman. "Yeah, there are times." Steve explained, when I asked him which characters he feels the closest to, "even when I'm sitting in class, just day-dreaming, when I think how great it would be if I really had electrical powers like Static, and I could fly around saving people and having people notice me, especially having the girls really notice me." For Steve, the typical superhero transformation from wimp to He-man is not simply a fantasy of power, it is also a fantasy of *attention*. As a pre-adolescent male it is not surprising that part of Steve's comics inspired fantasy is to be noticed by the girls in his class. Don't most heterosexual boys approaching puberty dream of receiving more attention from the girls around him? At it's most rudimentary level, in comic book terms, we might think of Clark Kent's eternal longing to be noticed by Lois Lane.

Steve's fantasy of receiving attention from the girls in his class may be one common to many young males. But Steve's comic book influenced fantasies of attention also expresses a need to be
perceived apart from women, specifically his mother and sister. To Steve comic book reading is an assertion of his own identity, of a masculine identity which helps him carve out his own space in a female-dominated home. Steve uses his comic books and the fantasies they inspire as a way of asserting his own autonomy. They are a critical tool in his attempts to define masculine activities and behaviors.

I think one of the reasons I like comics so much right now is because my Mom and my sister hate them. I always have to watch what they want on TV, listen to the music they want to listen to, and stuff. Neither one of them likes comics so it's one of the few things that are my own. All my friends who read comics say the same thing, their moms and their sisters think comics are stupid. If anyone in their families get it, it's their fathers or their older brothers. Only guys read comics, it's a man's thing. They are all about guys and they're for guys so --uh-- women wouldn't know how to behave in a comic anyway, they'd probably just panic and stuff. Like my friend David says, "its men doing manly things."

That the perceived masculinity of the heroes and of the medium is a key to their appeal for Steve is associated by him with the lack of adult males in his life. On three separate occasions Steve expressed a great deal of hostility towards his absent father, an hostility that seemed to revolve around the unfairness of the situation for his mother, who has to work long hours and still watch the family budget very carefully, and around leaving Steve in what he regards as an all-female apartment. Steve has no strong male presence in his life, no father, no uncles, no big brothers, and no male teachers. When I asked Steve if he ever talked to non-comics book fans about the books he reads I got an unexpected response:

Oh yeah, all the time. My Mom says I'm driving her crazy when I do that. If my Mom is fussing about my clothes not matching or being wrinkled I'll say something like, "Well, you know Mom, I don't think Batman would worry too much about his clothes". Or if my sister is asking me about how her hair looks or how her make-up looks, I'll tell her "Guys don't care about that, why should I care what your hair looks like, I don't think I'd care what his sister's hair looks like."

Rather than really talking about the comic books with his mother and sister, Steve uses the characters as a reference point for how he should behave, and how he should relate to his family. The superhero characters with whom Steve has spent an increasing amount of time are the most convenient blueprint
of masculinity available to him on a daily basis. In a sense, I do not think it would be too great an exaggeration to say that, at least metaphorically, the comic book superheroes have taken the place of his absent father.

**JORDAN**

Jordan is fourteen and has lived in three different cities in the past four years. His father is an army officer, his mother a homemaker. Unlike most of the comic book fans who I met, Jordan understands his relationship to the texts on an individual level rather than a social one. While many of the fans, like Steve, may perceive themselves as modestly awkward in social situations like school or team sports, they still enjoy the alternate social contact that they have established through comics fandom. "Solitary" is a word Jordan often uses to describe his life. As an only child and the perennial new-kid-in-town, Jordan feels that he rarely manages to have the social contact or the close personal bonds he would like with others his own age.

Jordan often takes comfort from his sense of social solitude by "really getting into" his comic books. It isn't that Jordan has no friends -- in fact, Jordan is very personable and makes new friends easily -- but that his favorite comic book characters are his best and most consistent friends. Jordan first took up comic book reading when he was seven. His Dad bought him a dozen or so comic books to read in the car during a particularly traumatic cross-country relocation.

I think my Dad just wanted to shut me up for a while, stop me from balling my eyes out, but I remember reading the comics... well mostly *looking* probably, cause I wasn't the greatest reader at that age, and just being mesmerized. Let's see, there was a couple of Spider-Mans and Supermans, a Batman, a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and some of the X-titles. They were great. I've still got them in my collection, but they're in pretty rough shape cause I just kept reading and reading them.

Over the years Jordan has repeatedly turned to his fictional friends for comfort: "No matter what happens, or where we move, they are always there when I need them." For Jordan, the "they" he is referring to as constant friends are both the actual comic books and the familiar characters that he visits within the pages.

As a devoted fan Jordan was able to recount for me many of the specific narratives that he
cited as his favorite stories of all time. In some cases he could recite bits of dialogue or captions almost word-for-word. In addition to this precise cataloguing of canonical events, Jordan, like many fans, was also able to flesh out the lives of characters is amazing detail. No event or off-handed comment seemed to be too small for attention. He knew, for example, how many buildings Bruce Wayne had donated to Gotham University in the name of his parents, and Jordan had mapped out on several pages of an old spiral bound notebook all of the events that he knew had happened to Icon since he had crash landed on Earth in 1839. He also had filled in some of the gaps in Icon's history with events that he thought might have possibly happened. Much of Jordan's identity --the way he sees himself as a person-- is bound to the everyday qualities of the comic book characters he favors in that he consciously identifies personalities that he would like to know or perceives as similar to his own. In a very tangible way. Jordan seems to be interested in establishing what Ang (1985) has called the "emotional realism" of the characters, the foundational elements that allow readers to understand the text as ringing true to their own lives and their perception of the world. rather than identify with the characters merely as role models, he identifies with them as characters types who appear authentic because they can be fleshed out by his own imagination.

I spend so much time with these guys that it's almost like getting to know them as people. And if you look around they are like real people. They have whole personalities and I don't want to lose sight of that. Its the little things that make them real, the things that regular fans all know. Adding this stuff about Icon just helps me understand him as a person until more of his personality is revealed in the books. He is the kind of guy I'd probably like to know in real life, he's also sort of like how I'd be if I was in his situation.

Although an avid fan, Jordan has in recent years become a very discriminating collector. His principal criteria of late has been more the artist than the character or the stories. Because Jordan is an aspiring comic book artist, he has decided to closely follow the style of several of his favorite draftsmen. For Jordan, as for many other fans, the artwork in a comic is pivotal to understanding the overall feel of the story. The key distinction Jordan makes is between "scratchy lines" and "clean lines." According to Jordan scratchy illustrations are "harsher" in tone, using thin pen lines that are
not smoothed out by an inker\textsuperscript{3}, thus leaving a more ragged or angular feel to the illustration, and by extension to the story (see, for example, Figure 4.2 by Denys Cowan in chapter four). Clean lines, on the other hand, are bolder, smoother and less detailed, closer to a more cartoonish style and feel (see, for example, Figure 8.7 by Ty Templeton in chapter eight). As with most of the long-time fans I spoke with, Jordan stresses his ability to distinguish between individual artists based on the style they typically employ. Topping Jordan's personal list of "hot artists" are M.D. Bright, the artist on Milestone's \textit{Icon} series, and Humberto Ramos, formerly of Milestone's \textit{Hardware} and the current penciller on DC Comics \textit{Impulse}.

I know everybody is into art right now --Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, Rob Liefeld, Scott Campbell-- you just can't get away from all the hype about those guys at Image, but to me they all look the same in a lot of ways, so I'm trying to follow some of the other guys who I think are underrated. My personal favorites right now are Bright and Ramos. They both have really clean lines. I'm moving away from that real scratchy look, which I used to love. When Ramos took over for Cowan on \textit{Hardware} I thought "Aw, shit!", Cowan's scratchy style was so distinctive I thought the art would just go down the tubes. But it didn't. If anything it looked even better with Ramos, it had an almost graphic design feel to it. Where M.D. Bright's work is clean in a really classic sense of superhero art, Ramos work is really stylized, kind of like Manga or Anime\textsuperscript{4}, except I can still tell the characters apart.

In a sense, Jordan's growing interest in the illustrators is a further step in the social contact he feels with the comic books themselves. The artist are "like people I actually know, I mean I read about them, what they're up to, and I check out their work every month." Furthermore, Jordan describes "the ultimate high-light of my life" as the day he met M.D. Bright at a convention.

I was at this big con in the States with some old friends... they had relatives there. It was great. We were getting some really good prices on stuff and checking out the artists'
alley, where guys doing these little local books try to sell you their original art or promote their own books. I met M.D. Bright on the second day and it was amazing. He's a pretty cool guy, didn't try to shuffle me off or anything. He signed a copy of one of my *Icon* books and one from an old *Falcon* series he drew years ago that I had just bought at the con. I told him he was my favorite artist and he said it was good to meet people who could really give him some feedback on what he had been drawing... he took a quick look at a couple of the things I had brought from my portfolio and said I showed some promise, but that I had to work on my panel transitions more than just my figure drawings. He gave me some good tips and I was flying after meeting him, what a buzz... and I look for those things when I read his books now, to see how he does transitions and face expressions.

For Jordan, the creators are as much heroes as the cape-wearing characters they draw. The comics themselves provide a link between Jordan as an isolated fan who would love to become a professional artist one day, and the world of current comics professionals.

**TODD**

Todd is eleven and a devoted fan of the Milestone line of comic books. He lives with his mother and grandparents in a small, government-subsidized home on the northern fringe of Toronto. Todd's mother, Janine, is frequently ill and her bad health has cost her a number of part-time jobs over the last couple of years. His father lives across town, and Todd spends two weekends a month visiting him. Todd has mixed emotions about his parents' divorce. On one hand he admits to "loving them both very much." while on the other he complained that "their bad relationship, their divorce, is a real pain in the ass for me."

Todd's parents are, or rather were, an inter-racial couple. His mother is the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants, and his father, who moved to Toronto from Detroit, is African American. With his diverse cultural background, Todd seems, at times, to be struggling with the choices available to him. His father is very active in local cultural politics and has imbued Todd with a strong sense of Black nationalism. "It's kind of weird," Todd explained when I first asked him about his background.

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5 Each comic book page is made up of several different panels, often of varying size and shape, each containing a different scene. There are a variety of ways that the story can flow from one panel to the next (see McCloud 1993), but if the transition between the panels is awkward the narrative thread can become confusing for even the most seasoned of readers.

6 Figure drawings are free-standing illustrations of characters. These are the most common type of illustrations for aspiring artists to work on because the characters can easily be posed in heroic stances. Most comic book professionals stress the need for young illustrators to develop their skill with the less glamorous aspects of comic illustration, such as backgrounds, page organization, or panel transitions.
"sometimes, when I think about it, it seems almost strange. Here I am, a Black man, trying to learn more about my people and my background, but I live in an all-White house with my Mom and her folks. Don't get me wrong, they're great... but the house is full of Ukrainian pictures and religious stuff, except for my room where I have posters of Nelson Mandella and Snoop Doggy Dog." Todd feels quite literally trapped between two cultures, which may have something to do with his passion for forms of popular culture that he can readily identify as "Black".

For Todd, comic book fandom is only one pursuit among many. Todd is also into rap and hip hop music, basketball, video games, action movies, and is getting more and more interested in tagging (graffiti art). "My grandparents get mad when they see me spending all my money on CDs and comic books, but its about things they can't understand. I don't think its just the money, its cause its a Black thing." Todd's embrace of popular culture forms that he defines as "Black" is an important element in his continuing attempt to define cultural boundaries within his own life. They act as a mild form of rebellion against his mother's and his grandparent's influence which he perceives as "White."

In this regard the Milestone comic books make perfect sense for Todd, who unlike many of the other readers I spoke with does care first and foremost about the race of the characters. For Todd, his current interest in the Milestone books is a chance to renew old pleasures in a way that he feels is more culturally responsible.

I've always liked comics a lot --Batman, Spider-Man, The X-Men-- but I was getting tired of them. I was getting into other stuff and I kinda stopped readings comics. You know. I was going to some rallies with my Dad on the weekends and meeting a lot of other people, learning a lot of different things about Black culture. I just didn't want to read about all these White heroes anymore, except that I did give Superman another try, for a little while, when I heard that Shaquille O'Neal is a huge Superman fan. Then I came across some article in Vibe7 about all the new African American comic books, and I thought "Great!", now I could read comic books --which I still love-- and they'd be about Black guys and Black culture.

In addition to the entire line of Milestone books --"Except Kobalt, I hated Kobalt, not cause he was White but because the whole concept was tired right from day one"-- Todd also lists among his favorite comic books a variety of what are generally referred to as underground Black comics.

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7 *Vibe* is an American magazine devoted to Black media and culture. The article Todd is referring to is "Toon Black, Toon Strong" by Joseph V. Tiereis in issue #8, Vol. 3, October 1995.
including *Killer Ape*, *Brotherman*, *L.A. Phoenix*, and *Jonathan Fox*. Todd points out, "Its hard to find a lot of the independent titles, at least with Milestone's books I can get them at any comics store, but the other titles are pretty hard to track down. Basically I'll take whatever Black comics I can lay my hands on since there are so few to begin with." That these titles represent a wide range of cultural politics does not concern Todd. Rather than seeing them in a type of opposition he reads them as a continuum. "I don't care much about the real specifics," Todd says, "if some are in the Malcolm X mode and some are in the Martin Luther King mode, that don't bother me none. It's like the difference between a Spike Lee movie and a John Singleton movie, sure they're saying different things... but I like them both." For Todd, reading Black oriented comic books, any Black oriented comic books, is a way to reaffirm his own identity despite surroundings that may run counter to his cultural preferences. The comics are a sign, a text that Todd can choose and posses which clearly represents his efforts to align with his father and a distinct cultural group.

In addition to reading a wide range of Black identified comic books as a continuum, Todd also relates the comics to other media texts. His comparison of the comics to films by Spike Lee and John Singleton is typical of the way Todd sees comic books as merely one element in a whole constellation of popular culture texts that express his identity along racial lines. Todd compares the comic books he reads to the "energy" he finds in hip-hop music. Both mediums, he claims, appeal to him on an artistic or sensory level. More concretely, Todd characterizes the topics and themes central to his enjoyment of both the comics and hip-hop as the struggle of Black men to succeed in a racist world, and of people trying to rise above the conditions they have been forced to live in. For Todd, who approaches the books from a specifically Black perspective, the stories found in Milestone are about the Black urban experience. Whereas for other fans, like Jordan and Thomas, the stories are less culturally specific and more about the eternal struggle of every man.

The Milestone books are more energetic than a lot of those tired old White books. You see the same thing in hip-hop, you know, there's just more to it, it's more original and you can just feel the energy... its like African American people have just been waiting to explode in different areas and have all these new ways to look at things. They [Milestone comic books and hip-hop music] are really about the same things. They're both about making your way in a racist world. a world where no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, people always look at you funny if your skin is
different. I like Milestone because they show Black people being heroes and succeeding, whether they’re from the projects or the 'burbs.

In more specific terms, Todd often compares the comic books to action films featuring Black actors. Though he admits that Jean Claude van Damme and Arnold Schwarzenegger movies are his all-time favorites, Todd also bemoans the lack of successful action films with African-American leads.

Thank God for Wesley Snipes! I mean Arnie and Wham Bam van Damme are great but why is it so hard for people to accept a Black action hero? Sure, people always say that guys like Danny Glover and Damon Wayans have done big action movies... but come on, they’re always the side-kick, who's kidding who here? It’s good to see them up there but why not make them the stars. At least you don’t have that problem with comics like Hardware or Blood Syndicate or Jonathan Fox. In the Comics it's O.K. for a Black guy to be the hero. Things are, I hope, starting to change in movies too. Now you’re getting more Wesley Snipes films and stuff like Bad Boys, which actually had two Black leads. I still think it has something to do with the comic books cause these guys know all about them. Will Smith even has the Milestone books framed on his bedroom wall on The Fresh Prince of Belair.

Todd also plays the common fan game of speculating about who would star in the big screen adaptations of favorite comic books. If it were up to Todd, Densel Washington would be cast as Icon, Jada Pinkett as Rocket, and Eric La Salle would star as Hardware. "I'm sure that Black superhero movies are going to be the next big thing in Hollywood." Todd said, "after Meteorman and Blank-Man and Mantis all bombed cause they didn’t take Black superheroes seriously, I think they’re finally going to hit big. With Wesley Snipes doing The Black Panther, Lawrence Fishburne doing Luke Cage, and --this is so cool-- Shaquille O'Neal starring in Steel, how can they miss?" For Todd the comic book superheroes represent a launching pad for more widespread yet similar images of Black men as heroes. This in turn affects how he looks at the comic books as a core expression of a common theme in Black popular culture.

WILL

Will, probably the most spirited comic book fan I encountered, is only fourteen years old but knows more about the industry than most fans twice his age. His mother teaches English at a
community college and his father is a dentist. They live in a recently remodeled home in an affluent downtown neighborhood. It becomes obvious soon after meeting Will that he is an enthusiastic learner and his parents point out he has always done well at school. Recently Will has been trying to organize a comic book club at school and I have no doubt that he will be able to put it together despite any administrative obstacles. Will is typical of serious comic book fans in many ways. He collects a wide range of comic book series and related merchandise (e.g. posters, cards, T-shirts), he hangs out at his favorite comics store at least twice a week, usually meeting friends there that he may spend hours discussing comics with, and he attends every comic book convention within the greater Toronto area. Will traces his interest in comics to his father, but he also identifies it as the source of most of his social contact with his peers.

Like many other fans, Will claims to have been introduced to comics through his parents. Often parents who were subsequently amazed by their children's devotion to comics fandom were the ones who started the whole process by buying them the occasional comic as a special gift or an incentive to develop reading skills. For Will, his initiation to the subculture of comics fandom was less casual than it was for many other fans. His father, John, a long-time comics fan himself, introduced Will to comic book fandom at a relatively young age. Will can vaguely recall attending his first comic convention when he was around five. For Will and John, comic book collecting has become a real father-and-son activity, a social bond between generations. They share books, often attend conventions together and shop at the same comics store, although as his Dad reluctantly admits, Will now often goes his separate way, with other fans and friends his own age, and then meets up with John again for the ride home.

It's kind of a blur [Will's first convention experience], but I do remember my Dad taking me around and showing me some of the people dressed up in costumes and stuff. Even back then I knew I was going to be hooked. Its something my Dad and I can share. But I think I'm much more into comics now than Dad ever was. I've got a massive collection of comics and I'm pretty sure I've got the longest 'pull list' at my store. Actually, just money-wise I'm lucky my Dad enjoys them too. No. I'm just kidding. The best part about it is that we can both talk about the same stuff --my

8 A "pull list" is a comic book reservation list members keep on file at their comic book specialty store. Each week, when the new books come in, the store will automatically "pull" whichever books the customer has reserved and store them in a safe location. This service is a mark of the fan's dedication to collecting, ensuring that he or she will never miss a desired book because it was sold out before they could make it to the store.
Mom thinks were both crazy-- a lot of my friends can't talk to their Dads at all. Dad also doesn't mind that I spend less of my time with him at cons and stuff. He realizes that I have a lot of friends my own age who are into comics and we often talk about the stories in ways that my Dad doesn't care about anyway. You know, like who's drawing what and why a writer has some character doing something totally different. Like when the stories went down hill in Static and started to get really stupid and we spent weeks talking about who the new writer was and why they were having trouble, then my friend Mike told us that he was on the net and saw that the writers were listening to all our [the fans] complaints and promised to change the stories back to the way they originally were. For my Dad it's mostly nostalgia, I think, but for us its more important.

I met Will at one of the smaller regional comic book conventions held near the Toronto International Airport. We were introduced by Dave, the owner of The Black Knight comic book store, whom I had previously spoken with on several occasions and was well aware of my research interests. Fortunately, I happened by The Black Knight dealer's booth located in a poorly lit back corner of the convention hall just as Dave was discussing the collector's potential of the Milestone titles with Will and two of his friends Mike and Andy. Both Dave and Will were certain that in a few years the first few Milestone comics would be rare collector's items, while Mike and Andy felt that the Milestone books would never be worth more than a couple of dollars because they did not feature artwork by any of the currently "hot" artists. Dave called me over and introduced us as mutual fans of Milestone (something that retailers often do when they know several of their customers share an interest in a particular character or creator). Will was eager to explain that he had recently added several of the Milestone titles, Icon, Hardware and Static, to his list of monthly purchases. "I've added them to my list." Will clarified "because they're usually really good stories. Good in the same way that the real classic superheroes are. or at least were. Now-a-days even guys like Aquaman and Green Lantern are being screwed around with too much. everybody wants to publish Bad Girls and tough guy heroes. Milestone's books are better than that. they're much more classic."

Will's comic book preferences definitely lean toward the classic style of superhero characters. Will counts such characters as Superman, Batman, Aquaman, Green Lantern, Captain America, the Flash and Spider-Man --"I know Spider-Man isn't as classic as the other ones, the DC heroes, but he's a modern classic"-- as among his long time favorites. Will's preference for what he calls "classic"
superhero stories and characters is a trait I found common to most of the Milestone fans. By "classic" Will means very traditional characterization whereby the heroes are clearly good guys and their adventures conform to the formulaic superhero plot of saving the world from evil supervillains. For Will, and many of the other Milestone fans I spoke with, their categorization of the Milestone stories as classical is determined as much by what the comics are not as by what they are. In other words, the Milestone comics are measured in comparison to other contemporary comic books, such as those published by Image and/or Ania, and found to be much more conventional. Perhaps it is because Will's love of comics was passed along to him by his father that the traditions of the superhero genre are important to him. At times Will seems almost oblivious to the colour of the characters' skin, what matters most is the degree to which the books conform to the "classic", or the core, narrative conventions of the genre. Consider Will's comments about Icon:

I know about the bit of controversy that surrounded Milestone when they first came out. I read in a couple of the 'zines that some people were complaining that Icon was just a Black Superman rip-off, though personally I don't know anyone who has ever read the books and still thinks that. But, man, those kinds of comments --what do they mean? I mean every superhero is "like Superman", duh, where do they think the "super" part of the name comes from? It doesn't mean he's a rip-off or any less of a hero. "Like Superman". hey that's a compliment not an insult. In fact, what I like about Icon is that he is like Superman, well not just Superman, but all the great comic book heroes. The stories could almost be any one of the classic heroes, they are very well done, very much like all the best stories that have become real landmarks in the comic books. I mean its the way superhero stories are supposed to be, not just all these Image style characters running around pounding on each other.

For Will, a traditionalist even at the age of twelve, it is his perception that the Milestone characters fall into the noble category of classic heroes that is of the utmost importance to the interpretive strategies he adopts and the pleasure he finds in reading the Icon series.

One of the reasons that Will prefers the traditional superhero types over the newer breed of hard-boiled types is that Will identifies with the strict moral code they convey. "You could do a lot worse than trying to live up to the standards of a superhero," Will explained, "the real heroes are always honest, fight fair, and defend people without powers. They're real men, not just a bunch of well armed mercenaries who would just as soon shoot you as talk to you." In a very conscious way
Will uses the characters he reads about as his model for proper masculine behavior. They present the ideals and he adopts them as his own personal standard of how to act like a real man.

Many of the fans I spoke with were reluctant to label themselves as such, because of all the negative stereotypes associated with the term "fan" or "fan boy". Stereotypes that some of the older readers (primarily those between fourteen and twenty) felt hit rather close to home at times. Will, though, was proud to call himself a fan: "Just call me a geeky fan boy, I don't care. People assume that anyway, so why not flaunt it? I admit I'm not one of the jocks at school, but so what? I've got friends and I'm proud to be known as the biggest comics fan around." Will has invested a lot of his self-esteem and his sense of identity in being the best comic book fan he can be. And, to Will, being the best does not mean just having the largest comics collection of all his friends or knowing the most about the characters, their history and the creative teams (although all these points play a large part in his definition of being a fan). Being the best fan means being able to use all this accumulated information to form the correct reading of the comic book. What Will stresses above all else is his ability to read the comics from an informed position so he can arrive at what he feels is the correct meaning, in other words, the exact narrative meaning that the creators wanted to communicate. When I suggested that for many people reading is a much more open-ended concept, Will disagreed vehemently. "No, comics always have a real meaning in each story, you just have to know enough, catch all the references and the clues, in order to understand them properly." In this sense, Will very carefully constructs his readings premised on all the associated bits of information he can gleam from the world of fandom.

Thus, for Will, the Milestone books are interpreted inter-textually according to all the information he can gather about the creators, and intra-textually through all the self-referential, genre based, clues he can find. I asked Will how this might affect his reading of a comic book like Hardware. He explained that although there was never much in the fanzines about Hardware there were numerous other resources that he could draw upon. Will talks to his friends who read Hardware, scans the computer chat rooms devoted to the Milestone titles, and pays careful attention to which professional will be attending comic book conventions in his area so that he can ask them questions if they are involved with the Milestone books or are known friends of Milestone creators. The degree of contact with the creators, whether its through fanzines or the net or meetings at conventions, is a
privileged source of narrative meaning for Will. He sees his role very clearly as the one who strives to decode the text correctly, but as often as possible Will "decodes" in cooperation with the makers of the text, looking for clues and inside information that may shed light on aspects of the story that he had not yet considered.

I'm right up to date on all my 'zine reading so I know what all the artists and writers have said about the books long before they actually come out. I know what a guy like John Byrne is trying to do when he takes over Wonder Woman, trying to bring her back to her Amazonian roots at the same time that he wants to make her more believable for the Nineties. I also know that Byrne did the same thing for Superman about ten years ago, and a few of the Marvel titles before that, so I'm going to be looking to see if he does as good a job as he did before or if he's just using the same old tricks thinking we won't notice if he redoes Wonder Woman in exactly the same way he did Superman.

I still do things like check all the bulletin boards for the comics I buy on a regular basis. I see what other fans think about the books and then go reread them to see if I agree with them. For a comic like Hardware it's sometimes hard to find information but when you do it can really pay off. Like when this guy I hadn't met before told me at the store that he figured this weird kind of friendship that's developing between Hardware and Icon is sort of like the Batman and Superman thing over at DC. I hadn't thought of that but now I can see it. It makes a lot of sense and I'm sure the Milestone guys have picked up on it. Mostly the Milestone guys are great over the net. The writers and the artists and the editors are always coming on line and answering questions or telling us what they think about the books they are working on. Then I usually have an idea of what exactly they mean in the story.

Intra-textually, Will, like many comic book fans, divines the meaning of a single comic book primarily by how it relates to and retells previous comic book adventures. This theme is an important one and I will be looking at in much greater detail in the next chapter. It becomes almost like a game of detection for Will, priding himself on being able to recognize an incredible amount of self-referential points. "That's one of the funnest things about Milestone, they're loaded with things only a real fan would notice. Static especially. cause Virgil is a comic book fan himself... so he's always making jokes about superhero banter. or pretending he's Spider-Man. or Batman or something." Because Will sees himself as a real fan. and sees the books as full of in-jokes that only a real fan could understand, he often took it upon himself to explain some of the more parodic episodes to
other fans who might not be catching the references. I was present when Will was explaining a cross-over issue to a bemused friend:

This is hilarious, did you catch all this? They're making fun of the old Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes stories. I mean they've got the new Superboy and Static and Rocket done up in these cheesy 1950s costumes to make fun of the whole teen-superhero bit, they just call it "The League of Superteens". They even make fun of the hairstyles. And check out this, the "superteens' walk of fame", that's where the old Legion used to put up statues of dead Legionnaires, so that means that all these Blood Syndicate guys are supposed to be dead. And I love this, look at the names they find on the "Mission Monitor": Frat Boy, Mall Hair Girl, Dough Boy, even Fan Boy.

For Will, more than half the fun of comics is being fan enough to decode all the inter- and intra-textual information which adds an extra layer of meaning onto the basic narrative.

TONY

Tony is nine years old, the youngest of five children, and has lived in a working class Italian neighborhood his whole life. His father works construction. His mother manages the house and is primarily responsible for the children. She also occasionally works at a friend's beauty salon when she has the time or when the family needs the money. Tony can often be found hanging around with his friends at the comic book store, Hidden Worlds, conveniently located just down the street from his house. It was on a summer afternoon at Hidden Worlds that I first met Tony and subsequently his friends Frank, Neil, Jim and Mark. Actually it was on Hidden Worlds' back steps that I first met them. The store's owner usually lets them use the small, covered, back porch as a meeting place on the condition that they do not leave it messy. This arrangement was reached as a compromise -- as a way to keep the kids as customers but also to stop them from clogging up the front entrance to the small store.

Throughout this study I have concentrated on Milestone comics and their fans. Tony and his friends are not Milestone fans. They are die hard fans of various Image comic book series. I think it is important to include Tony and his friends in this sampling of readers to illustrate a portion of fandom whose interests run counter to those expressed by many of the Milestone fans. In fact, quite a few of the most active comics fans, particularly those between eight and fourteen years old, currently
favor the Image style of comic books, indeed many more than those who favor the Milestone books. While my main interest over the course of this research has been focused on Milestone, I do not want to lose sight of the larger world of comic book consumption. Moreover, because many of the Milestone fans relate to the books on a comparative level, Image fans like Tony, Frank, Neil, Jim and Mark are consequential because their favored books are one of the things that other fans read in comparison to. The significance of this juxtaposition of Image and Milestone will be dealt with in much greater detail in Chapter 8 where I discuss how the comics construct masculinity and how the readers negotiate that construction.

Tony picked up comic book reading where his older brother left off. When Tony's brother, Angelo, turned twelve he decided he was too old to be reading comic books anymore and passed the few remaining books he had laying around the house to Tony. He enjoyed the hand-me-down comics and Tony quickly became a regular at Hidden Worlds, where some of his friends from school already picked up their new books each week. From the very beginning Tony and his friends have shared a strong interest in the comics published under the Image banner. Some of their favorite series include Spawn, Gen 13, Deathblow, Supreme, Youngblood, Prophet, Wetworks, and Ripclaw. "Some weeks," Tony explained. "when a bunch of good books all come out at the same time, we decide to share. It costs too much money for each of us to buy every book we want, so what we do is decide who will buy what and then we read them and pass them around... but you get to keep the book you originally bought. It's kind of fun that way. we all sit around out back reading and talking about the new comics." In an informal sense, Tony and his four closest comic book friends are a casual book club. They meet to discuss comics on a weekly basis (either Wednesday or Saturday afternoons), they all read and share the same books, and they agree upon the standards by which they judge certain comics to be better than others.

Every comic book fan has individual preferences for determining which books they like. For example, with Thomas it is primarily the quality of the writing, for Jordan it is the personal believability of the characters and the style of illustration, for Todd it is the ethnicity of the characters and the creators, and for Will it is the classical narrative style of the story. For Tony Frank, Neil, Jim and Mark the necessary ingredient for a good comic book is not so much the story but the artwork. More specifically, it is the way the characters' bodies are depicted.
We like them big... the bigger the better. If I were a superhero I'd want to be built like this [pointing to Badrock, a gargantuan member of Team Younghlood] he's fucking huge. You could beat on anybody if you're this size. Look at the arms, that would be an awesome size to be. Guys like Superman are supposed to be tough but I bet he'd piss himself if he saw someone the size of Badrock or Deathblow coming at him. They are sooo pumped, who even needs powers? Man, I'd just flex my muscles and everybody would take off.

It's clear from the quotation above that Tony, and some of his friends, fantasize themselves as the Image heroes. In describing the characters he constantly slips between referring to "them" and then talking about himself with the properties of the fictional characters. When I asked Tony about this, he replied "Oh yeah, we are always joking around about who we'd want to be. I usually pick Prophet cause he's tough and huge and mysterious and he really kicks ass. That's what I want to be, a real man, you know, just lots of muscles and stuff when I'm bigger, that would be really cool."

Part of this group's use of the Image comics as physical ideals was played out in the way they bantered with each other. On several occasions when I saw them together they would playfully insult each other's virility. On one such occasion, when Jim claimed he was going to be as large as Supreme after starting to exercise with weights, the others all laughed at him. "Nah, you're too big a wuss to look like that!" Tony chided him. "Yeah," agreed Mark. "you couldn't be a man like that no matter what you do --ha ha-- where as me, I got Deathblow muscles written all over me." "The only thing you got written all over you." Jim responded while cupping his hand in front of his chest to represent large breasts, "is Lady Death titty-muscles!" Certainly there is a decisive perception of gender norms being bantered back and forth here between these boys. Their ideal is to be as "manly" as Supreme or Deathblow, which is to say as muscular as these characters. And parallel to this ideal is the ultimate insult of being too "womanly", of being a "wuss" (half wimp, half pussy), or of having an equally as exaggerated female form like that of Lady Death. This was a perception that is not isolated to Tony and his friends. Many of the fans I spoke with over the course of this study held similar sentiments. I think this base perception of gender as expressed in the Image comic books and revelled in by Image fans is important, a perception that is markedly different in the Milestone titles where muscles are not the mark of masculinity, and I will be returning to this in much more detail in chapter eight.

Although Tony was the most vocal of the group, the others all agreed with his sentiments. In
their attention to the extreme body types currently on offer from the likes of Image, Tony, Frank, Neil, Jim and Mark echoed an interest in comic books that I heard from numerous (approximately 60% of the 128 informants) other young fans. For these fans, unlike many of those who preferred the Milestone books to the Image ones, the comic book characters represented purely physical ideals of masculinity. Contrary to fans like Steve who see characters like Icon and Static as models of masculinity primarily for the way they behave, Tony and his friends find their enjoyment of the comics relates directly to a masculine fantasy of muscles and power. As Neil put it,

I like the Image heroes better because they're huge. Some of these other guys are O.K. but let's face it, someone like Batman just isn't man enough to take on somebody like Bloodstrike. Bloodstrike would probably just crush him in a few seconds. None of this 'I don't kill cause I'm a good guy' crap. Bloodstrike would fold him in half and put him in the ground. A real man like Bloodstrike, with all those muscles and all those babes he has working for him, that's the way to be a man. Forget the gadgets and the secret weapons, someone gives you a problem you just let him have it. That'd be cool, that's the way I want it.

**Drawing Conclusions**

By citing real, individual comic book readers my intention is to bring a sense of the fan's own voice to my review. My fear is that by describing specific fans it might seem that I am stressing the solitary nature of reading. In fact, what I want to stress is that for many comic book fans reading is primarily a social act not a solitary one. As the previous chapter on comic book fandom as a subculture, and as some of the specific examples mentioned above illustrate, comic book reading must be understood as latently social on a number of different levels. Whether it is Will gaining prestige among other fans for his authoritative readings, Jordan feeling a sense of kinship or continuity with both his favorite characters and his favorite artists, or Tony and his friends sharing, talking and fantasizing about comic books, it is clear that fans can and do use the texts as a bridge to social contact. To borrow a term from Brian Stock (1983), who discussed how literacy has historically empowered groups and created collectivities with the power to challenge traditions, we might think of comic book fans as a "textual community".
Of course I do not want to deny that reading, any reading, is done on an individualistic basis. Physically and cognitively, reading is almost always a solitary activity, but at the level of interpretation social factors often take over. Common sense tells us that for some people reading is doubtless the most individualistic and personal of all forms of media consumption. We may listen to music in crowded clubs, we may attend movies in huge theatres with hundreds of strangers, and we may watch television in our living rooms with friends and family, but reading is always done alone. In her ongoing work on book clubs and other reading groups Elizabeth Long (1985, 1986, 1987) has challenged the dominant perception of reading as a quintessentially solitary pursuit. Long (1992) has argued that by construing textual interpretation as a fundamentally solitary practice the collective nature of reading is suppressed. Accordingly, reading is aligned with the realm of the private and the personal rather than the public and the social, thus reading as a political activity is neutered because it is perceived as an inconsequential micro process, whereas real political change is regarded as occurring only at the level of the collective, in the realm of macro processes. What is overlooked by this traditional perception that Long describes is that macro structures (e.g. abstract ideological foundations such as democracy, fascism, or misogyny) can only be realized through micro processes (e.g. reading, listening, watching).

But as the comic book fans I have discussed above show -- or the book clubs discussed by Long, or indeed any of the literary based textual communities previously mentioned such as Radway's romance readers-- reading is seldom as solitary a practice as common sense would have us believe. Due to the fan-based nature of the comic book industry many of the readers feel, either directly or indirectly, that they are involved in a social practise. Long's description of reading groups is equally applicable to comic book reading practises.

Reading in groups not only offers occasions for explicitly collective textual interpretation, but encourages new forms of association, and nurtures new ideas that are developed in conversation with other people as well as with the books. Reading groups often form because of a subtext of shared values, and the text itself is often a pretext (though an invaluable one) for the conversation through which members engage not only with the authorial "other" but with each other as well.

(Long, 1992: 194)

It is important to note that even for comic book readers who have little or no direct contact with other
fans there can still be a sense of social contact with the books and the characters themselves. In the same way that Jordan feels his favorite comic book heroes are like old friends who are always with him no matter where his family moves, other comic book fans can develop a sort of parasocial relationship with the text. In other words, the text itself takes on the properties of a social being. Consumers no longer simply watch or read the text, they relate to it as a friend. In effect the comic book itself, and the characters within it, are ascribed fully developed personalities which the fans can develop a type of rapport with. If developed outside of any larger social context, such as a fandom, this parasocial relationship can develop negative properties (e.g. the much-hyped cases of celebrity stalkers who claim an intimate attachment with actors they have never met in person). This type of relationship can, of course, happen with consumers of any media texts, but that it happens for young males reading traditionally masculine texts a disruption to many of the gender stereotypes that surround media fandom reading practices.

By focusing on a masculine subculture one of the things that this study can show is that the gender division in ways of reading (e.g. women read for social reasons, men read for facts) is far from accurate. For many young male readers the comic books satisfy a social function. They read for a sense of community, either with the characters and the narrative world, or with other fans. The most obvious examples that I have recounted here are the cases of Jordan and Tony. Jordan does not read for mere narrative fact but for an entire world to which he can escape. He reads the characters as complete people not as formalized plot conventions. The informal reading group organized by Tony and his friends uses the comics as a bridge to discuss shared interests and to explore their interpretations of particularly masculine fantasies. Both of these reading strategies confound the perception of reading styles demarcated by gender. Moreover, in relation to reading practices, the argument has been made that women are none too subtly forced to imitate male reading strategies in order to succeed in arenas such as academia and business where only the masculine form of reading is valued. Due to women's forced adaptability, then, they are regarded as cross-readers, or as bi-readers. This strict adherence to binary gender categorization has always seemed ludicrous and limiting to me. Its sort of like forcing the square pegs of culture into the round holes of theory. Rather than seeing male fans as reading in a feminine way, a theoretical trope that continues to devalue non-institutionalized (re: non-masculine) reading strategies, we should consider that both
men and women are capable of reading from a variety of subject positions, with a variety of intents, and in ways that satisfy a variety of pleasures and needs.

If on one level Jordan’s attention to the presence of the creators is indicative of a parasocial element of his reading, it is also, on another level an indication of a type of interpretive contract that exist between the creators and the consumers. The formal rules of the comics medium and the superhero genre mean that creators must work with a limited set of signifiers and that the readers are free to understand these signs within a limited range of possible meanings. The most striking example of the fan side of this contractual arrangement is the case of Will. For Will meaning can only be determined through the close attention of formulaic elements and evidence of the creators’ intentions. In a way this makes Will a strong example of what has always been described as a “masculine” reading formation, he very clearly searches for a correct reading based on the intention of the writers and artists, but more than this. Will’s interpretation is further premised on how these intentions fit within the entire fictional world of comic book superhero stories. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of genre traditions in the interpretive strategies of comic book fans. Readings are based on the necessity of both sides, the creators and the consumers, following the rules of comic book narration. The following chapter will deal with how fans consume the Milestone stories according to the contractual principles of the superhero genre in general, and specifically in relation to the long and troubled history of Black superhero characters, such as those from the era of blaxploitation.

Another theme that becomes apparent, one that I will be taking up in detail in Chapter 8, is that for many fans the comic book superheroes that they read and fantasize about represent masculine ideals. Comic book superheroes are clearly among the most straightforward representations of masculinity our culture has to offer. They are powerful, tough, independent, resourceful and dashing. They are, in short, the epitome of everything our society tells little boys they should be. The comic book model of masculinity asks what young reader wouldn’t rather be a Superman than a mild manner Clark Kent, a Spider-Man rather than an awkward Peter Parker, a swashbuckling Static rather than a geeky Virgil Hawkins? A fan like Steve, and there are many fans like Steve, is a prime example of how some boys turn to the comics to construct their understanding of masculine attitudes and behavior. Living in a fatherless household Steve uses the superheroes as a model of masculinity and as a way to separate himself from the female dominance he feels while
living with his mother and his sister. He even goes so far as to cite his fictional heroes as standards he tries to live up to when it comes to little things like his mother still picking out his clothes for him. In a similar way Will looks to his favorite superhero characters as a model of moral masculinity. For Will they represent an ideal of conduct, they show how a real man behaves, and it is a standard against which he can compare his own life. All too often boys are presented with a confusing barrage of images in our culture all trying to tell them how to be a man. For many young boys, like the readers presented here, the task of sorting through the ambiguous flotsam of masculinity to discern what it means to be a man is not a simple one. Where other cultural texts may be vague, the comic books can always be counted on to clearly mark out the boundaries of masculinity.

Contingent upon these characters being read as a masculine ideal is the fact that they also represent a fantasy of identification. In fact, "fantasy" is a term that the fans I spoke with mentioned over and over again. If there is any one thing that all the members of comic book fandom have in common it is that they have an immense emotional involvement with the characters they follow. They have invested a great deal of themselves in their imaginative identification with their favorite superheroes. The fictional characters are not merely role models to be emulated, they are subject positions to be occupied. In this case they are particularly masculine positions endowed with particularly satisfying strengths and weaknesses, powers and adventures. Symbolically they are masculine subjectivities that the readers can identify with for a time and experiment in fantasy with alternative positions and ways of dealing with conflicts or dilemmas. The importance of these masculine fantasies can not be overstated and will be taken up in much greater detail in later chapters. Consider the way Ang describes the role of fantasy in her discussion of women and melodrama:

Fantasy is an imagined scene in which the fantasizing subject is the protagonist, and in which alternative, imaginary scenarios for the subject's real life are evoked... the pleasure of fantasy lies in its offering the subject an opportunity to take up positions which she [or he] could not assume in real life; through fantasy she [or he] can move beyond the structural constraints of everyday life and explore other, more desirable situations, identities, lives.

(Ang, 1996: 92-93)

Ang's description is perhaps even more applicable to young boys reading superhero comics than it is to grown women watching melodrama. The women may be playfully experimenting, but many of the
boys are actively searching for alternative positions that can help them make sense of their world and their place in it. The fantasy opens up new modes of masculinity. It does not matter if the fantasy of costumed men with incredible powers is realistic or not. It does not matter if the characters have the same skin color as the reader. What matters is that the fans can explore worlds of imagination, playing with different roles, trying on different masks.
COMIC BOOK FANDOM

The practice of media fandom provides a highly visible and intensely concentrated example of how people interpret, internalize and use popular texts in their everyday lives. Fans are extraordinarily interested and often active textual participants, many of whom organize into loosely structured interpretive communities based on a shared fascination for a specific text, genre or medium. Comic book fandom is one of the most popular and best organized of media fan cultures. A reader's degree of participation in fan culture is a strong marker of his or her personal involvement with the text, and of how the properties of the text are mediated according to certain presuppositions. Fan cultures, particularly ones as formalized as comic book fandom, are influenced by rules and conventions, both textual and extra-textual, that shape and perpetuate a fan's reading of a media text. In this chapter I want to sketch a portrait of the world of the comics fan, and to outline how some of the formal aspects of comic book fandom operate as a cultural economy, as a system in which the readers can invest and accumulate cultural capital, and which effects textual understanding. By considering how the cultural phenomenon of fandom involves fans in both textual and social experiences it becomes possible to approach an understanding of how comic fans use texts, such as the Milestone titles, to develop a sense of self in cooperation with others via a negotiated narrative meaning.

While the central focus of my research has been the comic books published by Milestone, I want to make clear that I also intend this study as a consideration of comics fandom more generally. It would be impossible, and pointless, to separate Milestone fans from the wider range of comic book fans. By considering comic book fandom in general we can better understand the position of the
Milestone books and readers, and by looking at those readers expressly we can better understand the elements of the overall culture of fandom. Within the world of comic book fans there is a great variety of tastes and reading habits, and while most readers do prefer certain series over others they almost never specialize to the point of reading only one series exclusively. Comics fans usually follow a number of different characters or titles from a variety of publishers, or they may collect the work of individual writers or artists. The audience for Milestone must be understood as an audience devoted to comics generally and to (Black) superhero comic books specifically.

The Comic Book Fans

"This Is Not A Clubhouse!" declares the emphatic, hand-written sign taped to the front door of The Black Knight comics, cards and collectibles store. But on any given Saturday or weekday afternoon a clubhouse is exactly what The Black Knight looks like. The corner entrance to the store is often blocked by up to a dozen young males drinking pop, hanging from their mountain bikes, rocking on their skateboards and discussing comic books. During peak hours The Black Knight's owner, or one of his two teenage employees, routinely points to the sign and reminds the group to move around to the side of the building or else risk being banned from the store. Its common knowledge that no one has ever really been banned, but after some mock bravado everyone complies with the request in order to avoid straining their valuable relationship with the store's owner. Inside, the small store is often crowded, particularly on Wednesday afternoons when the week's shipment of new comic books arrive. High on the walls are an array of colorful promotional posters featuring a seemingly endless number of brawny men and busty women in skintight costumes striking heroic poses. Each poster promising a breath-taking universe of must-have action that the reader just can't afford to miss: "Blasting your way in February", "Roaring your way in April", "Screaming your way in December", and so on. Hung just beyond reach, on the walls not decorated by posters, are plastic mylar-bagged comic books with sticker prices ranging from $10 to $95. Many of these highly sought after back issues are "hot" titles only a few weeks old but already worth five or ten times their original cover price. The few really rare comics worth upwards of $100 are locked away in the glass

1 As the culture of collecting has grown since the mid-1980s there has been a great deal of attention placed on books that sell well in the first month of their release. Since the demand for these books is initially greater than the supply their resale value among collectors can increase dramatically. The sometimes fleeting "hotness" of a comic is regarded as a strong indication of audience trends or popularity shifts among fans.

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display cabinet that serves as a front counter, beside such other valuables as a few miscellaneous pieces of original artwork, a couple of books signed by their authors, and rare trading cards --the assorted Holy Grails in the world of fandom.

Manning the cash register is The Black Knight's owner, Dave, a large man in his early thirties who is nearly always dressed in jeans and one of the Spider-Man T-shirts from his extensive personal collection. Dave, like most comics store owners, is friendly and personable with his regular customers. He chats enthusiastically with each as he rings up their weekly purchases and usually recommends an upcoming comic book or two that the buyer might be interested in. During the busiest store hours Dave almost mechanically alternates between conversing with some of the regulars about recent books and future story lines and gruffly reminding some of the younger clientele not to block other peoples' access to the new comics displayed alphabetically from Animal Man to Zen Intergalactic Ninja on the home-made magazine stand. The customers on any given day, though predominantly male, are a diverse lot. Most of them stand relatively mute in front of the display of new comics while their eyes scan the titles and flashy cover art, frequently reaching out to extract a book from its pile for a quick flip through or for a better look at the cover work. Some of the browsers decide at a glance whether or not they'll be adding the book to their list of purchases, while others read almost the entire story before making up their mind, despite the hand written sign above the display reminding customers that "This Is Not A Library! If You Want To Read It, Buy It!". Among those considering what comics to buy are a few kids under seven years old who have been brought to the store by older siblings or sometimes by mothers who tend to wait impatiently by the counter, pocketbook in hand. Peering over the heads of the youngest patrons are the pre- and early teenage boys of every shape and size that make up the bulk of the crowd. Mixed in with the group is a scattering of older men mostly in their twenties and early thirties but occasionally ranging upwards to senior citizens. Most of these adult comic book fans dress casually, but on occasion suits and ties do sometimes appear. In addition to the mothers, young women do at times venture into the crowd. A few of these women actually read comic books themselves but most are wives or girlfriends who don't seem to share any real enthusiasm for the four-color worlds on display.

Once they have made their selections, some of the customers move away from the display rack and enter into discussions about the comics industry with friends or acquaintances. Others go on
to search the cardboard bins lined up at table height down the center and along the back walls of the store looking for inexpensive back issues to fill holes in their collections. Quite a few simply proceed to the cash register, pick up the books that have been specially held for them if they are members, and then sheepishly duck out after only a few perfunctory words with Dave. This is part of the most noticeable and regular routine of comic fandom. It happens in much the same way every week in comic book stores around the world. Of course the exact make up of a store's clientele varies by region and by the emphasis on what type of comics a store stocks, but the same pattern consistently holds true. These men (and women) are loosely united in the makeshift community of comic book fandom. Some are active participants while others are passive, remaining on the edge of social interaction and preferring a solitary pursuit of their hobby. In fact, industry professionals have estimated that the hard-core comic book fan, he who lives and breathes comic books, although the most noticeable constituency, actually constitutes only 10 to 20 percent of the total audience. Yet still it is the devoted fan that is the lifeblood of the industry, guaranteeing sales, influencing trends, supporting small publishers and providing a constant source of energy and feedback. The distinction between a comic book fan and an occasional reader is a difficult one to make. Many within the community feel that only those who actively participate in the formal workings of comic book consumption --shopping at specialty stores, developing a collection, attending conventions, etc.-- can be called fans. But although this most identifiable portion of the audience for comic books is the source for most of the research in this study, I have found it hard not to consider individuals who regularly buy comics at the corner convenience store as "fans". Despite avoiding active consuming practises such as discussing the stories with other readers or even saving the comic books, these seemingly uncommitted readers, some of whose responses I include in this study, often manifest a distinctly involved sense of self via the comic narrative that can rival even the most devout of hard-core fans.

An exact profile of the comic book fan community in North America is a difficult one to sketch. Due to the extremely competitive nature of the comics industry the major publishers and distributors are reluctant to disclose any detailed information on sales or audience research. As Calvin

2 In order to establish a dependable clientele, most comic book stores have instituted a "members" program. Membership is usually free and guarantees that a customer's favorite titles will be reserved for him and held in a safe place for up to a year. In addition to the monetary bonus of regular discounts, being a member also functions as a minor mark of status in the fan community.
Reid has noted in the trade journal *Publishers' Weekly*, the big two publishers, Marvel and DC, are "notoriously tightlipped about sales figures" (1990: 22). Despite this reluctance to divulge exact numbers it is possible to estimate on the size and nature of the comic book reading community in North America. Weekly or monthly sales figures alone are an inaccurate measure of audience size. According to comics retailers a customer's regular weekly purchases can be anywhere from a lone book to over twenty issues, often with multiple copies of certain titles being bought by a single collector/investor. Conversely, it is impossible for sales statistics to account for readers who share or trade books amongst themselves. By assuming the conservative figure of twenty million comics sold monthly divided by an average of sixteen copies per customer, Patrick Parsons has estimated the size of the domestic North American comic audience at about 1.25 million (1991: 77). But industry professionals and trade papers routinely posit the shifting audience size as much larger, from four to six million at any given time.

Since its emergence in the 1930s the comic book audience has always been viewed as an audience of children. Various studies of comic book reading habits conducted over the past six decades (see, for example, Muhlin 1949, Lyness 1952, Lyle and Hoffman 1971) have indicated that until the 1970s the overwhelming majority of comics readers were children between the ages of seven and eleven. The advent of the Marvel Age, increased prices, changes in the distribution format and the rise of formalized structures of media fandom in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the loss of many younger readers, and the average age of the remaining readers increased to between six and seventeen years, with a mean age of about twelve (Christman, 1984: 110). A mid-1980s study of comics specialty stores conducted by *Variety* indicated the customer's age range to be between sixteen and twenty-four with a mean age around eighteen (Bierbaum, 1987: 42). Currently, such industry leaders as DC Comics advertise available promotional space in their books with the copy declaring, next to an image of Superman soaring high above Metropolis, "Buy the Power of Comics! Millions of Boys 7-17."

According to the staff I questioned at twenty comic book outlets located in heavily populated lower- and middle-income urban areas, the general readership can be broken down into three main categories. There is the traditional pre-adolescent group aged six to eleven, the core audience of adolescents between eleven and seventeen years of age, and the adult market of consumers from
eighteen up with a heavy concentration in the early twenties. Comics retailers often distinguish between the age groups based on the type of comic books they prefer. As Joe, a twenty-two year old part-time sales clerk and a student at a creative arts college, described the difference between the audience segments: "The young kids go for the cartoony books like the Disney stuff and easy-to-read superhero titles like the Batman and X-Men books based on the animated [television] series. The older kids are into all the flashy superhero stuff, Image and Marvel books, some of the independents who hop on the bandwagon of every trend once its declared "hot". And the older readers, the college guys usually go in for the Sandman3 type of book. But mostly I'd have to say everybody buys superhero books in one form or another, even if the older guys don't like to admit it."

The most easily recognizable fact about the comic book audience in the 1990s is that it is overwhelmingly male. Bierbaum's 1987 study of comic book stores indicated that with even the most generous of estimates only six to ten percent of customers are female. Likewise, none of the over thirty retail store managers I spoke with estimated their clientele to consist of more than ten percent women. Walk into a comic book store or a comics convention at any given time and you would be hard pressed to find more than a handful of women. If comic fandom is a clubhouse, the club would at first glance seem to be "The He-Man Woman Haters' Club" from the old Little Rascals film shorts. I do not mean to imply that female comic book fandom is any less important or intriguing than the activities of male fans. Quite the contrary, in fact as a minority of the core audience female fans represent the possibility of some very interesting differences in reading styles. Here, I only want to point out that, statistically, feminine interest and concerns have been skewed to the periphery of the comic book industry. As will be discussed in later chapters, the masculine preoccupations of the industry and its surrounding fandom is one of the most significant elements in comics' social role and symbolic use in identity formation.

Traditionally comic book readers have always generally been a predominantly white and masculine audience. Historically such socio-economic factors as low childhood literacy rates and lower household incomes limited the means and abilities for children of ethnic minorities to participate in comics reading. Over the years though children from non-white backgrounds increasingly found themselves drawn to the world of comics. As the African American industry

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3 DC Comic's The Sandman, written by Neil Gaiman, is generally considered the high-water mark of quality and sophistication for monthly comics. It has won numerous literary awards.
professionals from Milestone and Ania declared in the preceding chapter, it was their childhood involvement with comic books that lead to their choosing careers as writers, artists, and editors. Likewise, many of the current top industry talents such as Jim Lee (*WildC.A.T.S.*), Brandon Choi (*Gen 13*), and Bernard Chang (*The Second Life of Dr. Mirage*) often credit their early years as die-hard comic book fans for their success. Currently, however, even the most cursory survey of any fan gathering in North America still reveals an relatively white majority. Yet, by most accounts, the subculture of comic book fandom is quickly becoming a more ethnically diverse community as the range of products increases thanks to micro-publishing systems such as direct distribution. Of the over twenty comic book specialty stores I polled through out ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the Greater Toronto Area the racial mixture ranged from one retailer's estimate that 70% of his customers were White, 20% Asian, and 10% Black, to another's estimated distribution of only 40% White, 30% Asian, and 30% Black. Of the 128 fans I interviewed or spoke with for this research 50% were White, 32% were Black, 14% were West Asian, and 4% were Hispanic or East Asian (see Appendix for more detail).

When I first began approaching comic book readers and declared that I was interested in talking to fans in general, and fans of the Milestone books in particular, many people were reluctant to identify themselves as comic book fans. To be a "fan" in Western culture is considered by some to be part of a dubious category of social misfits. And to be a comic book fan one seems to run the risk of being stereotyped as an awkward, pimply faced geek. "I'm no fanboy", one fifteen year old male maintained despite his Batman baseball cap and an armful of new comics. "I just like to read them. Its' not like I get geeked out over them or anything." The stereotype of comic book fans as nerdy adolescents with little or no social skills and an almost pathological obsession with superhero power fantasies is a contentious point for many comics enthusiasts. "Contentious" because it is an image not without some factual basis. While very few comics consumers described themselves as fanboys --a term that Roger Sabin defines in *Adult Comics: An Introduction* as "contemptuous... implying attitudes that [are] anal retentive, adolescent and emotionally arrested" (Sabin, 1993: 68)-- most agreed that the stereotype had a grounding in reality and were quick to point out others who really were comics nerds. "See that guy over there", a thirteen year old asked me as he pointed to an overweight teenager perusing the racks at *Yesteryear's Heroes*, "he is your typical comics geek.
Probably no friends, no life. He's here every new comics day and he never misses a convention."

When I asked how my informant knew all this about the other customer if he had never spoken to him, he said without a hint of irony "because I always see him here and I almost always bump into him at the cons."

Confronted with the idea of the nerdy, nit-picking fan, many readers seek to distance themselves from the stereotype. When I asked one comics aficionado to describe a typical fan he painted this portrait: "I'm not one, but let's face it, a lot of the fans are real geeks, you know nerdy, pimply, either really skinny or fat. They definitely don't know how to dress: Bi-way jeans and shoes, bad haircuts, T-shirts that don't fit, the whole geek uniform [laughs]. And for girls forget it! These are definitely not your average high school jock type. Most have never been near a girl, maybe that's why they go for all these cartoon babes in skimpy costumes. Something to jerk-off to until they work up the courage to buy a Playboy. Of course there are lots of normal comics fans around but its the damn geeks everyone thinks of when you tell people you're into comics." Commenting on the negative stereotype of the comics fan, another reader in his mid-teens suggested that the character of Jerome from the recent novel What They Did to Princess Paragon by Robert Rodi was an exaggerated but also painfully realistic lampoon. Consider this passage describing Jerome's first visit to a comic book convention:

...nearly everywhere at the convention there was a misfit of some recognizable type. Jerome had never seen such a number of them, stuffed into ill-fitting clothing, peering out at the world from beneath stringy or pubic-fuzzy hair.

The sight rendered him happy beyond measure.

At long last, he had found a crowd of people among whom he could hold his head high! After so many years of skulking about in the shadows, here was an opportunity to walk where he willed. For no one here would look on him with ridicule, any more than he would so look on them. This was his home port, his paradise found--nothing less than geek Valhalla.

As he walked through the enormous exhibition hall the convention staffers called the dealers' room, he saw himself reflected again and again in the form of large, perspiring persons who sifted determinedly through cardboard file boxes filled with musty-smelling antique comic books, searching, no doubt, for the elusive issues they needed to complete their already bloated collections. They could also be seen buying science-fiction movie posters, portfolios of fantasy artwork, old pulp novels, pirated videotapes of Japanese cartoons, and more. It was filled with treasures, this brightly lit.
wonderful world, this dealers' room; and, most exciting of all, these outcasts who inhabited it, these gun-shy specimens, these refugees from the caprices of culture and class, were stopping everywhere and talking to each other. They had formed a society to replace the one they didn't fit.

(Rodi, 1995: 111-112)

Although carried to a comical extreme, Rodi's description is an accurate summation of the stereotype of comics fans: social and physical misfits, "nerds", who are overly devoted to their colorful objects of fascination and who have opted out of mainstream culture in preference for a world of their own making, populated only by fictional heroes and like-minded enthusiasts.

The negative stereotype of fans as immature, socially awkward "fanatics" is not limited to comic book buffs. In her article, "Fandom as Pathology", Joli Jenson points out that both academics and the popular media have often characterized fandom as "excessive, bordering on deranged, behavior" (1992: 9). Jenson goes on to discuss two particular fan types, the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd, as constructed images of deviance, as disreputable forms of the "other" that the rest of society uses as a marker to distinguish their own behavior as "normal". Indeed the notion of the deranged fan as a lethal lunatic has become one of the most pervasive notions of our societies fascination with media figures in the late twentieth century. The infamous legacy of murderous fans like Charles Manson (a Beatles fan), John Hinkley (a Jodie Foster fan), and Dwight Chapman (a John Lennon fan) is joined by what seem to be almost weekly reports about demented fans stalking celebrities as diverse as Michael J. Fox, Cindy Crawford, David Letterman and Anne Murray. The image of the violent delusional fan has even become the subject of Hollywood films such as The King of Comedy (1983), Misery (1990), and the appropriately entitled The Fan (1986). Likewise, the fan swept up in the emotion and the mob mentality of the hysterical crowd is a familiar concept played out most commonly by the young women who have screamed, cried and fainted over the years at the rock concerts of Elvis, The Beatles, David Cassidy, The Bay City Rollers, and The New Kids on the Block, to name but a few. And these collective mobs of fans have turned dangerous on more than one occasion such as the disaster at The Who's Cincinnati concert where eleven people were trampled to death, and any number of sporting events, particularly European football matches where fan rivalry reaches fevered and often violent sometimes deadly heights.

But unlike the image of the potentially dangerous fan, the stereotype of the comic book
devotee falls into the tradition of the silly and juvenile media buff. Comic book fans are regarded in much the same way Star Trek fans are. The well researched community of Star Trek fandom (see, for example, Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992, or Penley 1991) has often been criticized by the media and scholars alike as a collection of "kooks' obsessed with trivia, celebrities, and collectibles; as misfits and 'crazies'; as 'a lot of overweight women, a lot of divorced and single women'; as childish adults; in short as people who have little or no 'life' apart from their fascination with this particular program" (Jenkins, 1992: 11). Change "overweight, divorced and single women" to "over or under weight, adolescent and nerdy boys", and "program" to "comic books" and the same derogatory description would apply to the standard perception of comics fandom. "When I told some of the guys at school that I was still into superhero comics they really started to ride me", one high school senior told me. "they called me a little kid, a geek, a loser, a nerd boy... asked if I really believed in Superman and Wonder Woman, if I could memorize all the stories I'd ever read, stuff like that. I denied it all of course, told them I just collected as an investment. I didn't want them to think I was a fanboy, but like all the other people you see here today [at a comic book store] I have-uh-sorta committed all this weird information to memory. But those guys just wouldn't understand. It doesn't mean I'm a geek about it like some fans, I'm just really into comics."

The stereotype of geeky fanboys and not quite grown up adult men, social misfits all, feverishly devoted to the exploits of two-dimensional fictional heroes, memorizing worthless facts such as in what issue did Marvel's character Wolverine first appear and who drew the most issues of Hawkman is an image that most comic book fans admit exists, but always in those around him, never in himself.

I do not mean to suggest that the negative aspects of the comic book fan stereotype are true and that most fans live in a sense of denial about their own practises. Instead, I want to point out that there are varying levels of fandom from the most extreme personification of the stereotype to those who appear quite removed from the more active participation in the subcultural practises. In their study of soap opera fans, Harrington and Bielby (1995) distinguish between "fanship" as an individual activity and "fandom" as organized fan activity. This distinction is a useful one because it clarifies the degrees of social involvement that every enthusiast might partake in. There is a vast difference between the fan who reads a comic book for private pleasure and a fan for whom reading the book is only the first step in their process of participating in various inter-related fan events.
There is also a vast difference in the discursive cues that these two, and countless other, types of readers have at their disposal for interpreting, personalizing and making sense of the story in the course of their everyday life. At the other end of the spectrum from the fan as fanatic is someone like John, an eighteen year old college student, who receives his comics through mail order subscription. "I've always liked comics, I think they're a great medium for telling stories that television and literature can't handle. But I neve; go to the comics specialty stores, even though there's one right down the street from where I work. I don't want to get caught up in that whole fan thing, you know, caring about what's hot and what's not, who drew what... I'll pick up a fanzine every now and then just to see if there is anything new I might be interested in. I guess I would still have to call myself a fan, but I really just want to read my stories on my own." Although a comic book fan, John is part of the less noticeable comics audience, preferring not to participate in many of the formal aspects of comics fandom that influence how certain readers interpret and use the stories.

In his discussion of British comic book enthusiasts who read 2000 AD featuring the popular character Judge Dredd, Martin Barker argues that "the image of the 'fan' is not some social/mental 'stereotype' which actual fans feel insulted by. Rather, it is a real site which the conditions of the comics industry has created and encouraged." If, as Barker believes, the fan is in part a construct of the industry it is a carefully crafted image molded from the cojoining of readers' fascinations, and the publishers' economic needs. "Go to a convention -or just read about going-" Barker continues. "and experience the careful management of the possible encounters between readers and creators. Watch the comics press news, and see the magnification of new hero authors to Homeric heights. The image of the 'fan'. I would argue, is a cartoon drawn from the actual social relationships allowed by the dominant production forms in the present-day comics industry" (Barker, 1993: 179-180). While I would not want to deny Barker's observation that the comic book producers "manage" the relationship between the producers and the fans, at least to some extent, for financial reasons, I do think he has overestimated the publishers' position as the creators of fandom. In fact, as was discussed in chapter three, comic book fandom was initiated by the readers who then affected some of the elements of production including systems of distribution, the resale market and creator recognition. Moreover, the subculture of fandom operates for readers well beyond the purview of the producers, in daily encounters with friends at school or in the comics stores, and in some cases the practises of
comics fandom actually work against the interests of the publishers, for example when fan opinions elevate a "troublesome" artist to star status or when fans circulate Slash Fiction that takes excessive liberties with established characters. Contrary to Barker's perception that fandom is a subject position created by the industry, these meetings between audience and industry are mutually interdependent in that they shape the very identity and perception of fans as a subculture and validate many of the formal aspects of comic book fandom.

Subcultural Capital

Given that many comic book fans either described themselves as outsiders, or felt the burden of the "nerdy-fanboy" stereotype (approximately 80% of the fans I spoke with reported feelings of social awkwardness around non-fans, at school or at home), it is not surprising that they often turn to fandom as a way to bolster their perceptions of self-worth. The world of comics fandom allows readers to explicate their familiarity with the texts, it justifies their passion for the medium, it provides a form of social approval for their behavior and it helps structure their interpretations of the texts. I would like to emphasize a point I have made elsewhere (see Brown, forthcoming), namely that the understanding of comics and the practise of comic book fandom is greatly influenced by the way the social value of the text is constructed according to the principles of what Bourdieu has referred to, on a general level, as cultural economy.

As Fiske (1992) argues, the culture of media fandoms are associated with the tastes of the disempowered, of people who are subordinated by the socio-economic system that determines the status of individuals within the general community. The institutionalized image of fans as social misfits devoted to accumulating worthless information about 'crass' entertainments has caused fandom to be devalued as one of the basest and most superficial aspects of popular culture. But comic fandom, and the practise of comic book collecting in particular, is evidence of the complex and structured way that avid participants of popular culture construct a meaningful sense of self. They create a culture that simultaneously resists the tyranny of high culture which dictates what cultural commodities should be considered "art", and forms what Fiske calls a "shadow cultural economy" (1992: 30) that mimics bourgeois standards. Fiske's term is derived from Bourdieu's metaphor of culture as an economic system divided along the twin poles of cultural and economic capital.
Bourdieu's theory provides an apt language for discussing how people attempt to invest in and accumulate qualities that are perceived as valuable within a culture. Like our capitalist economy, the cultural system distributes its resources on a selective basis to create a non-fiscal distinction between the privileged and the deprived. The system ascribes value to certain "tastes" and devalues others. Typically the tastes that are privileged are those associated with the higher classes. Dominant tastes are seen as superior by most members of Western culture because the ruling class naturalizes their tastes through the control of institutions such as universities and other school systems, museums and art galleries. High culture is socially and institutionally legitimated as the "official" culture, distinguishing between the "haves" and the "have nots". Thus, like economic capital, one can invest in an education or invest in a good suit to better one's chances of advancing socially and economically up the ladder of official culture.

In his grand opus Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1984), Bourdieu crafts a detailed analysis of social hierarchy in contemporary France. He builds from the basic notion that "good" taste, social status, and economic position are intricately related. "To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'" (1984: 1-2). By considering both cultural tastes and economic status as measurable capital, Bourdieu constructs a two-dimensional graph onto which he maps social/hierarchical space (Figure 6.1). The north-south axis measures the amount of capital (economic and cultural) one possesses, and the east-west axis measures the type of capital (economic or cultural).

Fiske emphasizes two limitations of Bourdieu's model. The first is Bourdieu's narrow focus on economics and class as the discriminating features of social position. Other discriminatory features such as sex, ethnicity, and age need to be included in the model. Fiske's second criticism is that Bourdieu makes the mistake of underestimating the complexity of proletarian culture. The model is primarily concerned with social stratification amongst the "haves" since the "have nots" are assumed to have no capital with which to negotiate their social position. This view ignores the power of the subordinated to construct their own semiotic texts from, and often --at least according to the current populist trend in cultural studies-- in opposition to, the original texts provided by the cultural industries. It is easy to see how people disempowered by sex, ethnicity, and in the case of most comic

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FIGURE #1

SENIORITY IN BOURGEOISIE +

architects  lawyers  doctors

academics

businessmen  manufacturers

artists

farmers  unskilled labour

ECONOMIC CAPITAL -

CULTURAL CAPITAL +

ECONOMIC CAPITAL +

CULTURAL CAPITAL -
fans, age, would fall somewhere in the southern hemisphere of Bourdieu's model. But by looking closely at the complex system of meanings that constitutes the culture of comics fandom we can see how the traditionally disempowered act to bolster their social position within the community of fans. Bourdieu's rules for gaining prestige within the general culture are mimicked by popular culture, allowing members of fan communities to accumulate, within the subculture, an equivalent to the forms of social status and self-esteem that accompanies cultural capital. While many of the comic book fans I spoke with were from traditional middle-class backgrounds, they still relied on their expertise as fans to boost their self-esteem. Though not disempowered in the economic sense of the term, as Bourdieu would see it, most of the younger comic book readers are disempowered within their families by virtue of their age, and dozens of these young fans also complained of being social outcasts at school (certainly not an uncommon feeling among adolescents). But an outcast in one social situation can become an admired authority figure in another.

Despite the swelling ranks of adults within the comic fan community, most people still perceive the medium as childish. They believe comics consist of immature, simple stories, and 'cartoony' art. This condescending view is in fact, far from the truth. Modern comics deal with highly complex issues in mature and innovative ways (see, for example, the analyses by Berger 1978, Barker 1989, and Witek 1989), and as was discussed early in this chapter, the age range of comic book readers has grown over the past two decades to include a significant number of adolescent and adult readers. But the stereotypical perception of comic books as a childish medium with childish enthusiasts is a form of criticism common to all popular fan cultures. Such notable fandoms as those associated with Star Trek, The Rocky Horror Picture Show, or even Harlequin Romances are characterized in the popular imagination as childish, as feeble-minded enthusiasts or arrested adolescents. The problem is that fan cultures challenge what the bourgeois have institutionalized as natural and universal standards of "good taste". As Bourdieu tells us, the economy of culture is so powerful that any aesthetic tastes not conforming to the established norms of high culture are devalued to the point of being socially unacceptable. Any practises that do not adhere to the dictates of "good taste" are taken as markers of an individual's inferiority. Fans and their subject of enthusiasm are necessarily looked down upon by the greater society because their aesthetic preferences amount to a disruption of, and threat to, dominant cultural hierarchies.
Because pursuing a leisure activity that is in "bad taste" is considered by teachers and parents alike--prime representatives of the powers-that-be for young fans--to be detrimental to one's development, society often adopts a paternalistic attitude of wanting to save fans from the harmful effects of popular mediums. There is a moral backlash that accompanies all new and suspect forms of entertainment, from the early pulp novels and turn of the century movies, to modern music videos and role playing games (for a detailed discussion of various media and moral panics see Starker 1989). In his study of television science fiction fandom, Jenkins points out that:

"M事项 viewed as undesirable within a particular aesthetic are often accused of harmful social effects or negative influences upon their consumers. Aesthetic preferences are imposed through legislation and public pressure; for example, in the cause of protecting children from the "corrupting" influence of undesired cultural materials. Those who enjoy such texts are seen as intellectually debased, psychologically suspect, or emotionally immature."

(Jenkins, 1992: 16-17)

This moral condemnation of undesirable aesthetics and institutionalized regulation of the medium is particularly clear in the history of comics. The criticism of comics, under the guise of protecting children from the corrupting influence of the medium, was almost solely responsible for the drastic decline in sales and the near death of the industry in the 1950s (see chapter three). To this day, even though the self-imposed censorship of the Comics Magazine Association of America has been voluntarily adhered to by all the major publishers since 1954, the medium is still occasionally attacked by the moral right who have recently closed comic shops in several U.S. cities, accusing them of selling obscene literature. Likewise, such books as John Fulce's simple-minded denunciation of modern comics, Comic Books Exposed: Seduction of the Innocent Revisited (1990), (published by the same people responsible for other great classics of fundamentalist paranoia such as Lord! Why Is My Child A Rebel?, The Lucifer Connection, and Backward Masking Unmasked: Satanic Messages Hidden in Rock Music) charge the comic book industry with corrupting innocent children.

Many of the comic book fans that I have spoken with complained that authority figures, primarily parents and teachers, constantly ridiculed their reading of comics as immature behavior and detrimental to improving literacy levels. Andrew, a twelve year old honor student, complained that his teacher had a narrow minded understanding of acceptable reading material. "Every Wednesday in my
advanced English class." Andrew explained, "we have what's called a 'silent reading' period where everyone has to bring a book to read for pleasure. The problem is that Mr. Lewis always checks what you're reading, and if it isn't considered worthy you're given a penalty and sent to the library to get a real book. So one day I brought in my copy of Maus to read and I got in real shit from Mr. Lewis. He said, "That's just a comic book" and that I'd never learn to appreciate the classics if I only read picture books. Well that really pissed me off because I do read the classics, I've already read Gilgamesh, Beowulf, some Dickens, some Sherlock Holmes and stuff, meanwhile the people around me are still reading The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew. I explained to him that Maus was a serious book about the Holocaust and had won all kinds of awards, but he didn't care... sent me to the library to get something real to read." I heard similar stories about concerned parents. "I have to hide my comic books from my Mom", one shy comics fan of about fourteen claimed. "She doesn't like me reading them cause she thinks I'll never learn to read really well. I told her I've stopped reading comics but she's still suspicious, checks my room sometimes, looks in my closet. Maybe if I just sat around and watched T.V. like my sister she wouldn't worry about me becoming illiterate."

The legacy of the Wertham comics scare still haunts the fan community, as does the stereotype of comics as childish and the readers as immature nerds. The problem with comic fandom gaining legitimacy within contemporary North American society is that it contradicts the standards of "good taste". Ironically, fandom seems to offend dominant cultural standards by applying the same rules of appreciation to popular texts that are supposed to be reserved for elite texts. John, a thirteen year-old who helped me locate rare comic books on several different occasions, seemed bewildered that his father, a successful businessman, resented John's dedication to comic art. "My Dad loves art," John explained. "he has a large collection of paintings, and he pays a fortune for them. But when I brought home some original comic art that I bought at a con he said it was a waste of money. What a hypocrite. when he buys art because its by a famous artist that's okay, but when I buy stuff from a comic artist he thinks its a joke." In fact, John's knowledge of comic book artists, their styles, their techniques and influences, not to mention the piece's fiscal value and chance of appreciation, would likely rival any university trained critic of "legitimate" art. As Bourdieu notes, "[T]he most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which [good] taste dictates shall be separated" (1980: 253). The general public
regards the acute attention fans pay to comic books as inappropriate for simple, mass-produced, disposable texts. The close scrutiny, collecting, analyzing, re-reading, and accumulation of knowledge is deemed acceptable for a serious work of art but ridiculous for a mass medium. Yet it is by mirroring these very practises of the Official cultural economy that members of the fan community seek to bolster their cultural standing within their own circle of social contact.

For example, Kevin, an extremely knowledgeable fourteen-year-old comic book fan who first helped me find my way through the ritual of bargaining with dealers at conventions, described to me that he felt like other fans listened to his opinions, but that outside of fandom he was socially awkward. "It's taken a while," Kevin explained as he looked through a small pile of second-rate original artwork being sold by a local inker who needed the money to pay his back-rent. "But among the other fans I know, I'm considered a real authority on collecting. Even the guy who owns the store I usually get my books from is amazed by how I can tell who drew what just by looking, and how I can remember all kinds of little details from old storylines --you know, like the name of the law firm that Icon works at, or what Wolverine's favorite beer is. At school." Kevin continued as we moved on to a corner table where the dealer was selling laminated versions of the publishers' promotional posters. "uh, I don't know. I sorta don't really fit in with a large group of people. I've got lots of friends and stuff, but when I'm with other comic book fans I'm the one they come to for advice. I like that. It makes me feel good." For Kevin this sense of accomplishment, this sense of an elevated status in comparison to his position in other social situations, is achieved through his mastery of attributes valued within the cultural economy of comics fandom. Specifically, Kevin spoke of his ability to identify the work of significant creators and to recite from memory information that helps to illuminate the importance of certain storylines. Kevin also spoke proudly of the praise he receives for accurately assessing the value of individual comic books as well as entire collections, and for knowing which books will increase in value due to artistic merit and shifts in market interests. In short, a comic book fan like Kevin is able to gain cultural capital within the fandom community by adopting manners of connoisseurship that parallel those valued by Official culture.

Many of these critical skills that can boost subcultural capital for knowledgeable fans like Kevin are based on the comic book itself as a revered form of material culture. Comic fandom is rather unique in relation to other popular culture fan communities because it is almost exclusively
centered around a physical, possessable text. For *Star Trek, Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or *Grateful Dead* fans, it is the experience of viewing the show, hearing the band, or participating in ritual consumption that is of prime importance. And while reading the comic is obviously fundamental to comic fans on an individual basis, it is the *possession* of the actual comic that acts as the focal point for the entire community. Other fan cultures can own a *New Kids On the Block* album, or videotape all the episodes of *The X-Files*, they can even purchase all the T-shirts, dolls, and posters they want, but none of it carries the same ability to substantiate fan authenticity in the way that owning a copy of *Wolverine* #1 does. In discussing comic books as popular icons, Harold Schecter goes so far as to claim that it is the physical book that is of prime importance. "When a Batman fan sees a mint-condition copy of *Detective Comics* #1 in a display case, he doesn't want to take it out and read it," Schecter argues. "But, for the true devotee, there is a special potency --magic, numinosity, call it what you will-- about the original. It's enough for him just to stand nearby and gaze at it, to be able to go home and tell his friends --veneration in his voice-- that he actually saw a copy of *Detective* #1. Some comic books have so much of this potency that they endow their possessors with mana, so that, at the comic book conventions, the owners of especially rare issues are themselves regarded with a certain sense of awe" (Schecter, 1978: 264). The awe that such noteworthy collectors are often regarded with, despite Schecter's claim for a magical transfer of mana from a rare comic book to its owner, is due more to the owner's earned reputation as a skillful fan. The awe Schecter describes is understandable when we consider the ability of canonical texts to endow their possessors with cultural status. A fan's comic book collection only reflects well upon the collector if it proves his ability to exercise cultural knowledge in making discriminating choices of what is, and what will be, valuable. Knowledge, acquired through detailed observation and participation in fan activities like conventions and fanzine consumption, and the ability to use that knowledge properly to collect worthwhile titles, amounts to the symbolic, or the immaterial, capital of the cultural economy of comic fandom. The comic book itself represents the physical currency, the material substantiation of the fan's subcultural skill and participation.

Collecting is an important marker of status within official culture. It signifies the ability to distinguish between objects of worth and worthlessness, a knowledge of important canonical features, and a substantiation of "good taste". Elite collecting is based upon the ability to discriminate and thus
to acquire the exceptional rather than the common. First editions are more important than reprints, originals than copies, old than new. Fan collecting on the other hand is often seen to be inclusive rather than exclusive: the emphasis is not so much on acquiring a few good (and thus expensive) objects as upon accumulating as many as possible. The individual objects are therefore often cheap, devalued by the official culture, and mass-produced. The distinctiveness lies in the extent of the collection rather than in their uniqueness or authenticity as cultural objects.

(Fiske, 1992: 44)

This may apply to most media fan communities but for comic fandom, which is based so intently upon the collection of primary texts, it is not so much the size of the collection as its uniqueness and its inclusion of canonized comics that counts. "Collecting the entire run of, say, Prime or Static is relatively easy to do if you're willing to spend the bucks", an eighteen-year-old fan told me during a regional Toronto convention. "The books will be out there, somewhere. But the real skill comes from being able to collect what is going to be valuable when it first comes out, or at least when you don't have to pay much more than cover for it. That's the sign of someone who knows what they're doing when it comes to comics."

To amass cultural capital within the comic community, the fan must build an extensive knowledge of the industry. The fan strives to become, as Larry, the successful comics negotiator at the Chicago Super Con, was described by his friends: "the master of his domain". Fans are what Bourdieu refers to as "autodidactics", individuals who are self-taught in an effort to raise their status within the subculture as a compensation for their lack of cultural capital and the economic capital that often comes with it in mainstream society. By reading and collecting comics for an amount of time, by participating in cons, and reading various fanzines, fans develop an ability to discriminate between different writers, different versions of a character, and most commonly between different artists. Indeed, the shift in comic book connoisseurship from concentrating on characters to concentrating on creators as markers of quality worth collecting had a profound effect on the structure of the industry from the late 1980s on. The ardent fan learns which creator(s) and character combinations result in the best comics and which comics will be valuable in the future because they include the first appearance of a writer, artist, or character that will likely become popular. Conversely many fans can
tell at a glance which comics are destined to flop. If a fan is consistently right, then he gains status among other fans and his collection exists as verification of his knowledge about comic culture.

One of the condemnations of popular culture levelled by critics such as Allan Bloom (1987) and Eric Donald Hirsch (1987) is that it is canonless. For Bloom, the move from canonized literary texts to mass culture is one of the central problems causing the erosion of Western culture. "The failure to read good books," Bloom argues, "both enfeebles the vision and strengthens our most fatal tendency --the belief that the here and now is all there is" (1987: 64). Contrary to popular culture, the argument goes, elite culture arises from an appreciation of established canons. It professes that certain works of "art" are monumentally significant in the historical development of culture and that the significance of individual works lies in the authoritative presence of a single creator. This is juxtaposed with the belief that popular culture is repetitive formulaic fluff and all works are anonymously produced and uncritically consumed. But the necessarily discriminatory skills of the comic collector disproves this narrow view of media texts. The ability to discriminate between significant and insignificant comic books creates a very specific canon. Comics historian Thomas Inge outlines the "variety of factors that determine which comic books are the most desired by collectors" as: A) original issues of popular titles, B) the work of particular creators, C) the titles of a specific publisher, and D) complete runs of favorite characters (1984: 9-11). These strategies of comic collecting are identical to those of high culture. Like official cultural practises, comic fandom recognizes historically significant events such as the first appearance of Batman in Detective Comics #27 or the engagement of Superman to Lois Lane in Adventures of Superman #50. And increasingly, the author/artist as creator has become an especially important marker of canonical value. While fans with a moderate understanding of why some comics become valuable can easily discern that a landmark issue like The Death of Superman is significant, it takes an experienced eye to tell that a particular artist or writer has what it takes.

The cultural economy of comic fandom is based on the ability to acquire canonical texts, as determined by either plot or creator significance. By possessing these comics, the reader substantiates his participation in fandom and builds his knowledge of creators, characters, and storylines. As I said earlier, comic fandom is unique from the fan cultures that exist around other popular mediums because it is so fundamentally based on the serial, possessable text. It is also unique in that it has
taken on a directly economic guise. As the popular press is fond of reporting, rare and significant comic books are worth a lot of money. Action Comics #1 with the first appearance of Superman is worth between $100,000 and $120,000, and Detective Comics #27 with the first Batman story can fetch anywhere from $110,000 to $125,000. Even contemporary comics like the four-issue A Death in the Family series, where Robin was killed as the result of a 1-900 phone survey, can sky rocket from a $1.85 cover price to over $100 in a matter of hours. The market value of comics is carefully monitored via weekly, monthly, and annual fanzine price guides. Like any other market the prices are based on supply and demand.

The irony of this justification is that the entire comic book market is an unintentional parody of high culture while at the same time retaining many of the principles and rules inherent in the high culture model. The real value of the comic is not monetary but cultural. In other words, although the monetary value single issue may rise to $40 within the first month of it's release, the $40 is really incidental in comparison to the status one can achieve for quickly recognizing the quality of the comic on the day it is released. Like the high culture world of art collecting, value is a relative term. It requires cultural knowledge of the creator, a historical sense of tradition, a knowledge of generic conventions, and a recognition of the avant garde to determine the "hard" value of a work. And as the bourgeoisie scoff at the nouveau riche who can afford to buy fine art but can't really appreciate it, comic fans condemn buyers who are in it just for the money. A fan letter reprinted in the letters-to-the-editor page of the March 1993 issue Spawn #9 sums up the attitude towards non-fan "collectors".

...the day Jason and I purchased Spawn #7, we bore witness to the strange phenomenon of brain-washed consumers. It was hard to watch and understand. Three middle-aged professionals walked into the store we frequent and picked the shelves clean like a vulture would a corpse. They bought everything from Alpha Flight to Youngblood. They were impartial about their purchases, everything was sucked into the ever-growing stack of comics. Over $70 was spent by each of them and they happily walked away with their prize catches of the week, beaming tidings of joy over their investment -- but what is their investment? We could guarantee over 75% of the merchandise would not be looked at but merely shoved into polyurethane bags to sit and rot on the chance the market might increase its value.

For a real fan the comic can not just be bought. It must be understood and enjoyed. The
economic aspects of collecting are false. Simply acquiring the books is the act of a heartless villain: an investor. The fan collects because he loves the medium and the stories told. As Steve Geppi, the president of Diamond Comics Distributors, wrote in a special issue of Wizard celebrating the 100 most collectible comics, "I found myself automatically listing comic books which have achieved a significant dollar value. Well, I'm not sure if the books I list here will necessarily fall into the category of elite comic investments; but I do know these books are special, and collectible for the best reason of all: they are the stuff which childhood dreams are made of" (Geppi, 1993: 6). Thus, to truly understand the logic of fandom we must realize that many of the claims about a comic book's monetary value is posturing. The dollar figure attached to each comic in the price guide is an indication of their cultural value not their monetary value. "Truth be known", one of The Comics Cavern regulars whispered to me as we left the store one sunny spring afternoon, glancing over his shoulder, wary of prying ears. "I know how we all just told you what great investments comics are, but don't put too much stock in that coming from this bunch, they, we, are all fans not investors. There isn't one of us that would part with his comics for any amount of money." First and foremost fans are fans because they share a love of the tales told in comics.

The Formal Structures of Comic Book Fandom

If comic book fans have "formed a society to replace the one they didn't fit", as Robert Rodi suggests in his humorous novel, then it is a society clearly organized around several key formal structures. Among the more concrete and visible of these formal structures are the comics specialty store, the comic book convention, and the array of amateur and professionally produced fan magazines. Aside from the actual texts themselves, the comic book specialty store is one of the prime elements of fan culture. Emerging first in the 1970s as an off-shoot of head shops and specialty book stores, the comics shop really expanded to cater to the growing niche market in the early 1980s as a result of the advent of direct distribution. With approximately 400 comics shops in the U.S. by the end of the 1970s the number has now reached to over 5,000 in the U.S. alone, with thousands more in Canada, Britain and the rest of the world (Fost, 1991: 16). Comic book specialty stores, like The Black Knight mentioned above, deal almost exclusively in comic books and related objects of fan interest such as role-playing games, action-figures, posters, collector's cards, science fiction and/or
These stores provide a focal point for the entire culture of comic fandom. They mediate between the readers and the publishers, the fans and the industry professionals, and they give the fans who might otherwise feel secluded in their entertainment pursuits a place to meet and express their common interests.

Although each comic book shop is unique, there is a certain atmosphere common to all of them. By their very nature they are rather insular, a distinct enclave for fans and run by fans. Most of the stores were established not by outside retailers looking to capitalize on a new market but from inside the realm of comic fandom by long-time enthusiasts risking their own capital in order to develop stores designed to satisfy their own needs, and those of fellow fans. Remember, even Phil Seuling's free-lance development of the direct distribution system (see chapter three) that was so vital to the welfare of the comics industry and gave rise to the comic book specialty store as a viable outlet, was born out his interests as a fan. Without fail every one of the specialty store owners I spoke with claimed to have been a fan long before they became entrepreneurs. "I was always into comics, even when it wasn't cool to be, and opening up my own store just seemed like the perfect thing to do". the thirtysomething owner and sole employee of the mid-town Cape 'n Cowl store remarked. "Now I get to do what I love, talk to other fans, read all the comics I want, and pay the rent at the same time. It's great!" Others, like Ken the co-owner of Magical Realms, a comics and rare science fiction bookstore located in a middle class suburb of Toronto, saw it as a chance to be more than a fan, to be a little closer to the professional side of the relationship. "I always wanted to draw comics when I was a kid. I'd try to imitate Mike Grell or Neal Adam's style but I wasn't really good enough." Ken remembered. "I still work on some local photocopied fanzine stuff once in a while but I'm happy working at the store. It's as close as I'll ever get to being a pro but I do feel like I'm privy to a lot more of the insider industry stuff than I ever would be as just a fan." Even those retailers who are not independent entrepreneurs but rather managers or franchise owners of individual stores in large chains like The Silver Snail or 1,000,000 Comics, claimed to have entered the business through their love of comics. John, who manages 1,000,000 Comics on Toronto's busy Yonge Street said, "I worked here part-time while I was going to University for economics. Then when I graduated I just couldn't face a suit-and-tie, nine-to-five job so I asked myself what did I really want to do. And this is it. I love comics and I'm in charge of my own business. Not bad, eh?"
Although the business and the social structure at every store is remarkably similar, each store has distinct qualities based on stock preferences, location and the personalities involved. For example, among the over thirty comic book specialty stores in the Toronto area a few of the best known ones are identified by their unique atmospheres. The Silver Snail outlet in the heart of Toronto's bohemian Queen West district is generally considered the premier comic book store in the city. Across the street from the popular Black Bull biker bar and an outdoor T-shirt/jewelry market. The Silver Snail is located between a trendy used clothing store and an environmentally responsible head shop. The Silver Snail's flashy new storefront window has a large built-in display area that promotes a different theme every couple of weeks with life size cut outs or mannequins of characters like those from Neil Gaiman's Sandman series favored by the neighborhood's Goth population. Inside, the store is larger than most with distinct areas for new, recent and back issues, as well as for graphic novels, books about comics, books on art, alternative magazines, toys, sculptures, and an entire second floor for games and role-playing related merchandise. Fans come from as far away as the suburbs to shop at The Silver Snail, because as one enthusiastic young customer explained to me -- and his nearby mother, who made the long trip with him every two weeks because she was afraid to let him go downtown on his own - "They got it all here. They're big and they order lots of everything I want, so I know I'll be able to find it all." The Silver Snail's size and large staff ensures that customers can easily find most recent mainstream titles in sufficient enough qualities to avoid annoyingly quick sell outs. Overall, the Silver Snail is seen as a store with a bit of everything for both conservative and alternative tastes. But the store's efficacy is also regarded by some as a lack of charm. "I come here because I like the area and can get what I want, but it's a little too professional for my tastes", a customer in his early twenties remarked. "It doesn't have that feel of a neighborhood shop anymore... it's too big, too clean -uh- I sometimes miss the type of store where you recognize the same faces all the time and everyone knows you by name."

Almost the antithesis of The Silver Snail is a fan favorite, The Comics Cavern, located in a residential area of middle class suburban Mississauga. A family business, the store is owned and run primarily by the twenty-four-year-old David, his mother, and some friends. David opened the store over ten years ago as an evenings and weekends venture while he was still in high school. The Comics Cavern is actually a small house converted into a cramped retail store with minimal floor space. The
narrow center display rack for new and recent comics is nearly overshadowed by the mismatched, overstuffed cardboard file boxes that line the counters and floors along three of the walls in the small store. Along the fourth wall is the narrow, cluttered display case full of rare items, and it is hovered around this counter that any number of young fans can be found at any given time. "It's a local hang out, a home-away-from-home for some of us", one adolescent customer tells me while he and a friend compete to see who can find the best erotic poses in the newest issues of Image's Gen 13 and Marvels X-Men. "Some owners," he explained, "don't like you hanging around too long but David's cool."

Catering to a very specific clientele of personal friends and a core group of members from the two nearby high schools, The Comics Cavern is an extremely insular place where unfamiliar customers are often met with indifference or disdain from the regulars, despite David's polite encouragements. The fans who frequent this store define themselves as members of a distinct in-group and are wary of outsiders who might look down upon or trivialize their interests.

Another type of store, the alternative comic book shop, is typified in Toronto by The Beguiling. Ranked by The Comics Journal as one of the top five comic book stores in North America, The Beguiling is a two level store located among the small restaurants, specialty book stores, and rare video outlets in the avant garde area known as Mirvish Village. On the first level is a wide assortment of scholarly and pseudo-scholarly books about popular culture and the media, hard-to-find European erotic graphic novels by cult favorites like Moebius and Milo Manara, and coffee table art books on such controversial soft core pornography topics as gay and lesbian photography and stylized sadomasochistic paintings. On the second level are the new and recent issue comic books that include most of the mainstream superhero type books but also includes numerous "adult oriented" books from the alternative and underground presses. Side-by-side with the newest Batmans and Spider-Mans are such mature themed comics as Chester Brown's satirical black comedy Yummy Fur, Dan Clowes absurdly exaggerated portrayal of urban life in Eightball, Peter Bagge's aggressively paranoid Hate, and Harvey Pekar's popular autobiographical series about blue collar life in Cleveland, American Splendor. In addition to these, and other, mostly satirical/critical series, are the other more sexually overt mature comic books, from the glossy, high quality Penthouse Comix, to the eroticized cartoonishness of Omaha the Cat Dancer and Cherry, to the very explicit work of various gay, lesbian, and bondage-oriented titles like Drawn and Quarterly, 2 Hot Girls on a Hot Summer Night, 208
Women on Top, The Art of Spanking, and Horny Biker Slut. The explicit illustration of sex appears to be a dominant concern for the alternative comics at The Beguiling. Accordingly, the customers at The Beguiling are, on average, older than comics readers at more traditional stores. The Beguiling’s emphasis on alternative subject matter creates an environment different from other stores and allows adult readers to continue participation in fan culture at the same time that they expand their reading material beyond that geared for children and adolescents. The Beguiling also permits the customers to perceive a certain amount of distance between themselves and the stereotype of all fans as arrested adolescents.

In summary, the tightly-knit, but highly competitive, network of comic book specialty stores are for many readers the heart and soul of fandom as a cultural activity. As a focal point for comics fandom the specialty store provides a unique service. Not only does the store guarantee a large assortment of the dozens of new comic books released each week and a large catalogue of back issues, it also acts as a conduit for fan-related information. The store provides insider gossip from the publishers and distributors about upcoming projects and controversial developments. For example, months before Milestone Media publicly announced that their series Xombi and The Shadow Cabinet would be discontinued due to poor sales. I was warned of their inevitable demise by Gordon, the owner of Capital City Comics. “I know you are interested in the Milestone stuff,” Gordon explained when I asked how he knew the books were about to be cancelled. "I heard some rumblings last week from the guy I order my books from, and I thought you might want to know. I haven't told anyone else yet, so that should kinda give you a leg-up on some of these young guys who are always giving you advice.” In effect, Gordon was offering more than just idle gossip or good advice, he was giving me privileged information --a form of subcultural currency. By letting me know something that some of my young informants were not yet aware of, Gordon was selectively attempting to raise my standing within the hierarchy of his store.

The specialty stores also control the ordering and reserving of much sought after materials, and are the main source of information about comic book conventions, personal appearances and fan clubs. Many of the stores also act to promote and develop the writing and illustrating talents of fans trying to break into the industry. Numerous stores provide wall space for sample drawings by customers and some provide an informal network of contacts, introducing aspiring writers and
illustrators to each other, and on rare occasions, to professional talent scouts. More than a couple of aspiring artists told me that they wanted to post their work on the store's walls in the hopes of being discovered. The "discovery theory" is, I suspect, nothing more than comic fandom's version of an urban legend. No one personally knew anybody who had been discovered through the stores, but everyone was certain that it had happened. Of course there are dozens of examples that the fans recirculate to emphasize the fluidity between the ranks of amateur, aspiring artists and the real thing. "I had my doubts," a sixteen year-old told me, "until I heard about how Norm Breyfogle (the artist for Ultraverse's flagship title Prime) had been discovered when some guy at DC saw his stuff on a store wall." Unfortunately, the accuracy of this "discovery" story is doubtful as Breyfogle himself is cited in the fan press as having gone through many of the regular channels to become a professional artist.

Interestingly enough, in support of the discovery theory, a clerk at Yesteryear's Heroes produced an issue of The Batman Family, an anthology style Batman title from the 1970s, which reproduced artwork submitted by fans including one piece from a young Norman Breyfogle.

As a result of the various activities undertaken at comic book specialty stores, an informal sort of hierarchy is often observed by the patrons. The owners are afforded the most status and respect because they are in a sense the gatekeepers of the fan community. The owners of these small shoppes are privy to valuable information, often linking the reader to the publishers. In a sense the owner's status and access to information and materials makes him a broker of cultural capital. Just as Gordon of Capital City Comics was able to offer me a bit of symbolic currency which I could use in my dealings with the fans who frequented his store, other owners can help readers establish or confirm status. Given this gatekeeping function, it is not surprising that many fans went out of their way to develop friendly relationships with the owners of their local comic book stores. Dave, of The Black Knight, recalled one high school aged member who brought him a greeting card every holiday and then complained vehemently when Dave had not reserved a limited edition comic for him. "The kid was all pissed-off at me cause I didn't pull a book that he hadn't ordered," Dave explained sarcastically, "all his friends had been smart enough to order the book ahead of time, but he figured since he had brought me these cards that I should automatically get him books that would turn out to be hot." The owners are also typically the most devoted fans with the longest history of comics involvement. They have spent decades reading and collecting comics, and they represent for many
fans the next best thing to becoming a professional comic book writer or artist, they have managed to take their passion for comics and turn it into a full-time profession.

Next in status to the owners are the store's staff members who in addition to fulfilling many of the same functions as the owners, but to a lesser extent, are often aspiring comics creators themselves. Usually in their late teens or twenties, many comic shop employees are long-time fans who have made a conscious decision to pursue careers as comic book professionals and work part-time in the stores as a way to support themselves while honing their craftsmanship as writers or artists. "Its the perfect way to bide my time while I'm working on developing my style, and I get to take advantage of all this stuff I know about comics that is no good for any other job", Steve, a nineteen year old employee of Cosmic Adventures observed, "and its a really sympathetic environment to work in. I can keep up with all the industry changes and get feedback on my work from some of the customers who really know their stuff." As semi-pros. or at least talented "wannabes", these staff members are often regarded as minor celebrities and their views and opinions about comic books are respected accordingly. Similar to the status of specialty store employees are the regular fans who devote much of their time to the pursuit of comics fandom and hopefully to a career as industry professionals. A small step down from the store's staff because they are not seen as capable of affecting anyone's access to new comics or fan-based events, are the fans who have willfully displayed not only their knowledge of comics but also their ability to write or draw them. Moving down the hierarchical ladder of fandom, one's expertise and involvement with comics collecting and fan activities becomes the marker for their position. Leaving aside individual charisma for the moment, those who have participated in comics fandom the longest or with the most intensity are accorded the most status, while those who are new to the experience or who seem to have only a casual, undeveloped interest in comics are granted little respect. As one informant succinctly expressed the importance of subcultural knowledge in relation to acceptance at fan conventions: "In academics its 'publish or perish', right? Well at a comics con its 'know or don't go'".

But just how do the young comic book enthusiasts amass detailed information on the current and historical aspects of the industry? For many a quick wealth of knowledge is gleamed from the various comic book fanzines that are readily available at almost any comics specialty store and at some magazine newsstands. As a point of clarification, the term "fanzine" is customarily used within
various fandom cultures to denote independent, non-commercial, amateur publications produced by fans for fans. The low budget, often photocopied, 'zines are a haven for fan criticism and fan authored original stories and artwork, and have played a critical role in bringing lesser known creators to the attention of a wider audience (see Sanjek, 1990). In Over Fifty Years of American Comic Books (1991), comics historian Ron Goulart traces the origin of the comic book fanzine to Ted White's 1952 publication of The Story of Superman. 1953 saw the start of the fanzine Fantasy Comics, and a slate of other fanzines dedicated to EC Comics including The EC Fan Bulletin, Concept, EC Scoop, Graham Backers, and Potrezie. In the 1960s several now legendary fans produced what the Price Guide refers to as "the first true comics fanzines". Dick Lupoff headed up the comics and science fiction dedicated Xero. Jerry Bails and Roy Thomas began publishing Alter Ego, and Don and Maggie Thompson started their long careers with Comic Art. Then, as Goulart puts it: "Comics collectors and fans got their bible in 1970. when Robert M. Overstreet published the first edition of his Comic Book Price Guide" (1991: 316). Known now simply as "the guide", Overstreet's annual publication is a 300 plus page book with articles about the history of comics and fandom, special topics such as women in comics or how to restore damaged books, and a detailed list of recommended prices for every comic book ever published.

Currently, what are still commonly referred to as "fanzines" are in effect more akin to professional magazines. Although still produced by publishers with their roots in organized fandom, and ostensibly still for the fans, the bulk of the magazines are glossy, professional journals distributed for profit and promotional purposes. Numerous small circulation comic book fanzines still exist in the true sense of the word, featuring fan-authored art, stories and criticism, but the most popular and influential 'zines in the 1990s are Wizard: The Guide to Comics, Comics Scene, and Overstreet's The Fan. Each of these monthly publications are dominated by lengthy interviews with industry professionals about their current work and upcoming projects. They also include small news items about each of the publishers, commentary about trends and related issues such as the development of comic book characters for film and television, tips on how to draw or write comics, and regular contests featuring the best of fan art. Though informative, up-to-date, and attractively packaged some fans consider this new breed of professional fanzines an oxymoron. "Yeah, I read 'em once in a while, probably more than I should", confessed Scott, an eighteen-year-old regular at The Black Knight.
while flipping through the latest issue of The Fan. "You can't really call them fanzines, but everybody does, they're more like advertising features for the big companies. Look, every one of them has the same stuff this month—an interview with John Byrne about his taking over Wonder Woman, Frank Miller bitching about censorship, something about one of the "Bad Girl" comics—all the same stuff that you get in the companies' own promotional newsletters. It's interesting but they really just exist to help sell more comics, that's why the pros are willing to give them so many interviews and draw some covers for them." At the other extreme, there do exist comics magazines more concerned with issues and less with promoting sales, such as the long-running The Comics Journal: The Magazine of News and Criticism, which does not shy away from controversial topics like creators' rights, censorship, and the juvenile disposition of comic books.

What the current crop of popular fonzines may lack in criticism they make up for with the sheer volume of information each magazine contains, information that devoted fans can use to organize their collecting or add to their interpretation of certain stories. "When I first bought Hardware I was sort of looking at it as Milestone's version of Batman, you know, lone avenger, high-tech gizmos, no super powers", a recent convert to the Milestone comic books explained, "but then I was reading in one of the fonzines. I think it was Comics Scene, about the development of the company and how McDuffie and Cowan had met while working on Marvel's Deathlok... and then it dawned on me -duh- Hardware was more like Deathlok with a reliance on machines and an alienation from his body. The stories took on a whole new light for me after that." With their access to the top professionals and the ever-changing fan favorites, these fonzines also seem to close the gap between the readers and the creators. In addition to the frequent interviews and the occasional celebrity columns, the magazines often contain features like "A Day in the Life of Todd McFarlane", and contests where the winner is drawn into an actual comic book or gets to work for a professional studio. "I always send in my best stuff to the 'zine contests", an aspiring sixteen year old illustrator told me. "I'm just waiting for the day when I get a phone call from one of the big name guys asking me to fill in for them for a while. It happens all the time. Last month in Wizard, Jim Lee chose the top three pieces of fan art and the first one was so good that he said right in the magazine he was ready to give the guy some work if he could get out to San Francisco on his own."

Over the last two or three years comic book readers have begun to rely on electronic bulletin
boards (BBSs) as a new form of communication. Indeed, in the 1990s comic books have become increasingly hi-tech with experimental marketing ventures including interactive comics software and CD-ROM comic "discs" (see Jensen, 1994). A surprisingly large number of the readers I spoke with claimed to use the comics BBSs at least once a week to discuss stories, gossip, and comics-related topics. Logically, this segment of comic book readers is heavily skewed towards those from higher income households as internet communication is dependent on having regular access to a computer and modem. Part of the popularity of comic book BBSs is likely due to the fact that they allow readers who do not want to be perceived as stereotypical fans to still partake in a discussion of their interests. "Over the computer is a great way to discuss comics with other fans", one middle-aged reader explained. "That way I can talk to people who read the same books, hear their opinions, clarify points, find out what's coming up if they've heard anything I haven't. And best of all, nobody knows who I am on the internet. I'd be too embarrassed at my age to hang out at a convention talking comics with teenage boys." The largest and best organized of the BBSs are the comic book forums located on the American Online, Compuserve and Genie systems. The World Wide Web also has hundreds of professional and amateur sites devoted to every conceivable aspect of the comics. Each of these forums include a long list of discussion topics that subscribers can log in to including almost every comic book title, and related areas such as "Casting Comic Book Movies", where fans can suggest who would best portray certain characters if a comic were turned into a feature film, or, "Collector's Corner", where fans from across the country help each other locate hard-to-find back issues. Like the traditional fanzine, the BBSs also feature categories for fans to submit their own stories and artwork for discussion and downloading by other fans.

One of the main attractions of the computerized BBSs for fans is that they provide another link of communication between the readers and the comic book creators. Industry professionals often make guest appearances on the large networks to discuss their past and future projects. Fans can ask unmediated questions, offer suggestions, point out failings, and sometimes even lobby for work. Other professionals, like Milestone Media's editor-in-Chief Dwayne McDuffie, habitually log onto the system for enthusiastic chats with the readers: "I've always been into computers so I thought that the

internet would be a great way to stay in touch with our fans and have a little fun at the same time." McDuffie continued. "It's great to hear what people think about the stories as soon as they hit the stands, and the feedback is important --not definitive, mind you, because a lot of the fans who are active on the Boards are older and have different interest from our core audience-- but it does let us know when we've really struck gold and when we've really blown it." As an added bonus, some of the publishers will offer free previews of story lines and art work for subscribers to download. Occasionally comments regarding the work are solicited by the publishers directly, and indirectly the potential popularity of the comic is indicated by the amount of attention it attracts and how often an image or story is downloaded.

In addition to commercial publications, fan networking and the local comic specialty store, the comic book convention, "comicon" or simply "con", is another major focal point of modern fan culture. Cons range in size from the monthly regional ones that attract anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand fans, to the annual "Super Cons" that last from two to fourteen days and attract tens of thousands of fans from around the world. The bible of comic book collectors, The Overstreet Price Guide, describes cons as an event where:

Dealers, collectors, fans, whatever they call themselves can be found trading, selling, and buying the adventures of their favorite characters for hours on end. Additionally if at all possible, cons have guests of honor, usually professionals in the field of comic art, either writers, artists, or editors. The committees put together panels for the con attendees where the assembled pros talk about certain areas of comics, most of the time fielding questions from the assembled audience. At cons one can usually find displays of various and sundry things, usually original art. There might be radio listening rooms; there is most certainly a daily showing of different movies, usually science fiction or horror type. Of course there is always the chance to get together with friends at cons and just talk about comics: one also has a good opportunity to make new friends who have similar interests and with whom one can correspond after the con.


As Overstreet's description indicates, cons often appeal to a much wider range of fandom than just the comic book enthusiast. they also incorporate film and paperback literature fans and role-playing gamers. What must be kept in mind is that devoted fans tend to participate in several fan communities at the same time. Thus, the cultural negotiation that is conducted within the comic fan community can
be somewhat extrapolated to include fans of other media and other genres. The con is seen by many fans as an individual's final point of entry into the social order of comic culture. Because the cons are the largest and the most dynamic experience possible in comics fandom many of the fans refuse to consider anyone who has not attended a con as a fan at all. In fact, no matter how knowledgeable a fan may be, he is open to the criticism of being a "con virgin" until he has experienced a major convention. The con is a place for fans to accumulate and demonstrate their cultural knowledge of comics. It is the marketplace of fandom's cultural economics.

According to comics historian Ron Goulart (1991), the earliest American comic book conventions were modest affairs held in privately owned lofts in New York City's Greenwich Village around the mid-1960s. By 1968 local enthusiasm for the events had apparently grown to the point where Phil Seuling (who was also instrumental in developing the direct distribution market) was able to organize the first annual Comic Art Convention, a four day event held at the New York Statler Hilton and featuring such notable talents as Bill Everett, Jack Kirby, Jim Steranko, Gardner Fox, Gil Kane, and Joe Kubert. Borrowing from the established tradition of science fiction conventions (see Sanders 1991), North American comic cons --and also by the early 1970s British and European cons-- quickly expanded into a lucrative business with several organizations competing to sponsor large cons in major cities and regional cons in smaller towns. Following Seuling's lead, most conventions feature appearances by industry professionals (with the size and status of the event reflected by the popularity of the guest attendees), discussion panels focusing on diverse comics related themes from 'how to break into the industry' to 'who is faster, Superman or the Flash?', and of course numerous dealers with back issues and rare comic books for sale. Today the largest and most respected American Super Cons are held each summer in San Diego and Chicago, each featuring top name talents for autograph signings and attracting thousands of enthusiasts from around the world. In France, where comics have attained a higher degree of respectability among the general public than in North America, for a week every January the town of Angouleme is given over to a celebration of comics that attracts a staggering 300,000 people and has been described as "The Cannes of Comics." If the comics specialty store has become the church of comic book fans, the Super Cons have become their Mecca.

A Super Con, such as the 20th anniversary of the Chicago Comic Book Convention which
took place over Independence Day weekend in the summer of 1995, is similar to a regional con but with every activity heightened to almost hysterical extremes. As an unaccustomed attendee to the Chicago Con, which was held in the expansive Rosemont Convention Center, I was initially surprised by the sheer volume of people and activities. Making my way from the over-crowded parking lot, through the lobby, and into the long line of visitors waiting to pay their admission and pick up a complimentary bag of assorted freebies, I was constantly surrounded by small groups of mostly adolescent males eager to scout out the various galleries. Some of the conventioneers were better prepared for the experience than others. Standing in line, I noticed that one young teenager in a group of five was dragging with him a dolly stacked with three large and obviously well-loaded cardboard comics storage boxes, while his friends each carried only one small spiral bound notepad. "It's only my second time at the con", Jerry, the box carrier explained, "so its going to be my job to hold onto everybody's comics, the ones we brought for trading and signings and stuff, while these guys do all the running around to get the best prices on issues we need... I'm sorta the command central." Other visitors were armed with back-packs or briefcases full of comics and up-to-date price guides, video recorders, pocket cameras, art portfolios, and money belts. It seemed that everyone going to the con was prepared, with the exception of a few bewildered looking parents and girlfriends.

Inside, the con is divided into distinct areas for publisher's promotional booths, independent artists and small press tables, the dealer's gallery, and separate rooms for film screenings and discussion panels. Dominating the main hall are the elaborate display booths set up by Marvel, D.C. Comics, Dark Horse, Malibu and the other major publishers. Each booth is a colorful design, with Marvel's and D.C.'s featuring elaborate panels and tubing structured around over-sized video screens playing clips from movies and television shows based on their characters. The main purpose of these fanciful publisher's booths is to promote their upcoming projects and to raise their recognition factor among the fans. To this end, the publishers vie for the attention of convention goers by giving away thousands of glossy posters, buttons, trading cards, and even free samples of some of their comic books. In addition to the give aways, the publishers present some of their best known talents for autograph sessions at various times through out the convention. Depending on the popularity of the creator, fans will line up for hours for the chance to have a book signed, artwork critiqued, or even
just to exchange a few words of encouragement or criticism. Along with the opportunity to talk to some of the creators, the publishers' booths often seek fan approval and/or feedback on upcoming storylines by providing color photocopied samples of comic books still in development that won't be seen by the general public for months.

The possible exchange of ideas and information between the publishers and the readers at the conventions is regarded by many fans as a unique possibility for actually helping to shape the stories they love. For example at the Milestone table within the D.C. Comics booth, Mike, a sixteen-year-old fan, was able to argue his case to a D.C. public relations representative regarding the apparent impending departure of the main character Augustus Freeman, a.k.a. the alien Argus, from the *Icon* series. "They've been hinting about Icon's leaving Earth for the last few months now... and when I read that bit from a future story that shows him saying good-bye to Rocket and going back to his own planet. I though: Oh shit! They can't do that. can they?" complained Mike. "So I told the guy at the desk that I'd be *real* upset if they changed the book that much. And he told me that the series is supposed to be about Icon as a concept not as a specific character, and that they were going to be experimenting with the idea of using Rocket and maybe some others as an icon. That may all be okay, I said, but its just not the same without *the* Icon in the story. So we talked about it for a while, and he said that he would pass along my comments because other people said the same thing today, so maybe they'll have to rethink what they're going to do." Now it is not likely that the individual comments made by Mike or any of the other fans would directly affect a storyline already put into development, nor is it likely that *Icon* writer Dwayne McDuffie ever really intended to remove the character permanently (and as it turns out, the character of Augustus Freeman returns to Earth as Icon after only a few issues away), but the general opinions of the fans are expressed and they do ultimately influence the creator's understanding of the book. Most importantly, many of the fans *feel* that they are involved to some extent in the construction of the comics they read and are encouraged by this general aura of contribution that abounds at the cons to try further communication with the writers and artists of their favorite series.

The most active part of any convention is in the area reserved for the dealer's tables. Dozens to hundreds of comic book retailers from near and far rent 4' by 12' tables from which to hawk their old and new comics, cards, and collectibles. At the Chicago Comicon, just inside the doors to the
hectic dealers hall I found Brian, the "command central" for his friends. At first glance --to the uninitiated-- the auditorium looks like an overcrowded market with people fighting to get the stall's owner to barter with them, barkers shouting about the price and quality of their merchandise, and masses of people pouring through the bins looking for that one special find. "We've been doing pretty good so far," Brian informed me. "We've already gotten most of the easy-to-find stuff at decent prices, like this issue of Wolverine I wanted that Larry got for $7... he really soars at these kinds of things, they're all out now looking through the bins for the really tough stuff." A few minutes later Larry returned and asked Brian if any of the others had found a good price for the Evil Ernie books featuring the early appearances of Lady Death. They hadn't, so Larry dashed off and then quickly reappeared with three mint comics, which he smugly told us he only paid a total of $15 for. "You really gotta know what you're doing at a con like this," he explained. "It's not like at the store where you're a regular and you can, more or less, trust the guy not to screw you on the price. Here you gotta know when their jackin' up the price and telling you "it's so hot" so you gotta buy it right away and shit. I like it [the con] cause I know the prices in the guides, and I know what the books are really worth, and which ones are hot but not worth a lot of cash cause they're easy to find. I can usually talk them down once they realize I know what I'm doing." Larry ran off again as soon as he had finished clarifying how he managed to so prodigiously navigate the dealers. "Cool, huh?", Brian asked. "he's like the master of his domain this year."

But despite the flurry of events, as both Overstreet's instructional and Rodi's fictional descriptions indicate, the con is perhaps most importantly a place where fans can meet and talk. Some fans even go so far as to exchange addresses in order to further their discussions of common interests. Visitors freely exchange information and opinions with one another in an environment where they know they are safe from ridicule. "I love coming to events like this", a man in his early twenties told me. "I can really talk about the stuff I enjoy, without feeling like the other person is looking at me like I'm some kind of childish weirdo." Safe from the scorn of the outside world, a mundane world that legendary Marvel publisher Stan Lee refers to as populated by nonbelievers, fans are able to interact and thus often shift their perception of the comics themselves. Consider the two pre-adolescent white males I found stocking up on back issues of Milestone's Hardware. "We both like Static a lot and had read Hardware once or twice before during the cross overs", they explained.
"but we always thought that, hey, if you want to read an Iron Man story you might as well have the original and not a rip-off. But we were talking to this older Black guy at lunch. I think maybe he was a dealer or worked for one of them or something, anyway he was telling us about how cool Hardware is now and how its gotten away from the suit thing and into a lot of interesting stuff. So we thought that if the guy could get us hyped up by just talking about the book we better pick up some of the issues he recommended and give it another shot. Now I'm going to read it as more than just an Iron Man/Deathlok clone."

Conclusion

Comic book fandom is a loosely organized experience that is capable of affecting how individual readers interpret the fictional narratives. A reader's awareness of a specific text's place within the lexicon of the hundreds of different titles published every month colors his definition of that book. Fan-derived familiarity with the medium, the genre, the publisher, the writer, the artist, past story lines, behind-the-scenes gossip and so on, all come into play when reading a comic book. Even for those less visible comic book enthusiasts who participate in the individual realm of fanship rather than the communal realm of fandom, the associated knowledge and cultural rules of the fan subculture play an influential role. Whether the individual/private comic book reader agrees with, mimics, or refutes the activities of active fandom he can hardly ignore it's dominant presence. The conventionalized aspects of comic book consumption often combine with each reader's unique social position to produce an informed and negotiated reading. "informed" of both trans-textual facts (e.g. the character's back-story or similar events in other comic books) and extra-textual facts (e.g. historical genre references, knowledge of the creative team, or monetary value of the comic), "negotiated" in the sense that all of the different influences and contingencies are interpreted in relation to one another.

One of the most unusual aspects of comic book fandom is the degree of integration that exists between the fans and the small industry of professionals, or perhaps more importantly is always perceived by the fans to exist, and thus directly influences their reading of the comics. Even if an individual reader has never attempting or experienced any form of contact with the producers he is aware that this integration plays a factor and he feels that his interests, or those of other fans with
similar concerns, are taken into account. As was outlined in chapter 2, media fandom ethnographers in the cultural studies tradition have predominantly linked fan subcultures to notions of marginality, disempowerment, resistance, and opposition. As Harrington and Bielby point out, "Henry Jenkin's poachers, Constance Penley's slashers, and Camille Bacon-Smith's fanziners, for example, are groups that ostensibly organize as alternatives to marginalized social status" (1995: 181). While comic book fans may be ridiculed and marginalized as geeky fanboys by society at large, their existence is for the most part encouraged by the creators and publishers. Through contact at conventions, comic book specialty stores, fanzines, electronic bulletin boards and monthly letters-to-the-editors columns, readers can feel like active participators in the medium's construction. For comic book fans, meaning interpretation does not necessitate a counter hegemonic stance against monolithic ideologies, but often a form of negotiated understanding. The exact meanings that the readers make from the texts are as diverse as the readers themselves, but are also informed by the specific properties of comic book consumption. In the next chapter I want to look further at the process of comic book reading as it is informed by the social infrastructure of the fan culture, and to look closely at some of the actual Milestone readers and the properties that they bring with them to the text.
I walked out of the air conditioned lobby of the Holiday Inn located on the edge of a long strip of hotels adjacent to Pearson International Airport. The Holiday Inn was hosting one of Toronto's largest annual comic book conventions. After two hours of squeezing my way through the crowds of fans milling around the dealer's tables looking for deals and rare Golden Age books, I needed a breath of fresh air.

It was cooler out on the back steps, but the sun was much brighter than the perpetually dimmed lights of the hotel lobby. My eyes took a minute to adjust.

A group of four teenagers, two White, two East Indian, were leaning against the wall to the left of the tinted glass doors I had just come through. They were comparing shopping lists and debating who had gotten the best deals so far. One of them, who looked to be the oldest at about seventeen, pulled a stack of at least thirty comic books out of a square, tattered briefcase. The others started laughing as he divided them into two piles. One pile for those he had paid for and the other for those he had slipped into his case when the dealer wasn't looking.

To the right of the doorway sat a Black child of about twelve. His yellow plastic bag of assorted complimentary "goodies" -- coupons, buttons, gaming cards, and numerous comics shop flyers-- was on the grass beside him.

He was reading the most recent issue of Static.

He looked up at me with an expression of mild annoyance when my approaching shadow fell across the comic he was reading. I interrupted him, to be precise, just as Static was to save a crowd of onlookers from disaster during a riot in Dakota's new Utopia theme park.

"Can I help you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Maybe." I explained my interest in Milestone comics and he heard me out patiently.

"Yeah, I'm a big Milestone fan. They're almost the only thing I read on a regular basis anymore."

He got to his feet slowly.

"I even did this myself", he said as he pulled a wrinkled black windbreaker out of the backpack he
had been sitting on. He showed me the sleeves of the jacket. On one was a four-inch hand-drawn picture of Icon striking a heroic, mid-flight, pose. On the other was a similarly sketchy picture of Buck Wild, Milestone's parody of funky 1970s hero Lake Cage. "Pretty good, huh? I'm going to be a pro one day."

I was surprised to see Buck Wild given the same amount of attention as Icon. I asked him to explain the jacket.

"You mean why not Rocket or Hardware or something, right?"

"I guess"

"Well," he started to explain as he proudly slipped into the jacket despite it being far too warm to need it. "When I first read the stories with Buck in them I thought they were kinda weird making fun of all those old superheroes. I mean, I thought it was funny but it seemed kinda out of place, you know. Right after Rocket found out she was pregnant and all."

He began to pack up the rest of his stuff in his bag, saying his mother should be picking him up soon.

"But then I was telling my Dad about it, and he said he remembered Shaft and Superfly and guys like that from movies when he was younger, and that they may seem stupid now but he used to think they were the coolest. So I don't know. I started thinking about it, how guys like Icon owe a lot to guys like Luke Cage and stuff. It just seemed right to put them both on my jacket. He's also real fun to draw."

He waved to a freshly washed mini-van that had turned into the hotel's circular drive way.

"That's my Mom. Gotta go."

"So do you mean they're sorta the same?" I asked quickly.

"No. Not the same. But --hmmn-- you gotta know one in order to understand the other. I guess."

Unfortunately he sauntered off to the van with his back-pack hanging off his right shoulder and his yellow plastic bag dragging across the curb on his left side before I could ask any more questions.
I'm not really sure why but I still love just sitting back and reading. I mean really reading, my comics. It's not that I don't read anything else, cause I do, but there is always something exciting about the feel of the paper and the energy in the stories. I'll read my favorite comics over and over again. I've got some Luke Cage and other early Marvels from when I was a kid that I've pretty well memorized by now. And it's kind of weird, when I read comics I find that even though I'm really into the story I'm always thinking, in the back of my head, how it compares to other stuff. You know... other comic books, other books, movies I've seen, even some of the music I listen to. It all sort of just gels in my head sometimes.

-James, a 24 year old comic book fan

Reading, as the quotation above stresses, is a fundamental element --and naturally enough a crucial element-- of the comic book-consuming experience. Not so coincidentally "reading" is probably the most widely used term in media studies as both a literal and metaphorical catchphrase for what audiences do with texts --be they books, films, television programs, music, clothing and anything, or rather everything, else that is open to interpretation. As was discussed in chapter two, the cultural studies pendulum has swung from the original mass culture critics' view whereby readers were seen to be always and totally hegemonically incorporated by the reading process, to the opposite extreme characterized by the likes of Fiske and Chambers that steadfastly admits every individual reader's proficiency to "construct their own readings" and to "read against the grain." What I want to explore here are some of the ways that Milestone readers understand these comic books not solely
from the position of passive sheep nor solely as diligently resisting readers, but rather as culturally situated individuals who interpret the text in relation to associated extra-textual influences. In other words, for a great many of the fans I spoke with (whether they were Milestone enthusiasts or not) comic book reading is a core activity that crystallizes an entire cluster of interests and values.

In this chapter I want to explore two of the subcultural modes of evaluation that fans use specifically to interpret the stories published by Milestone. Since comic book fans are rarely ever fans of just one publisher or just one type of comic, they relate to each individual book as part of a whole. That is to say, they understand a given text by how it relates to other comics, both historical and contemporary, and how it differs from those same texts. In the case of Milestone the first of two very important and interrelated factors addressed in this chapter is how the stories conform to established genre conventions and how they incorporate innovations to the core superhero formula. The second point of comparison discussed in this chapter is the fans' understanding of Milestone's characters as a reworking of the earlier blaxploitation stereotypes found in superhero comics.

Because the comic book is a medium primarily directed at children and adolescents, the essential issue for most studies of the industry has always been about the possible harmful effects the comics might have on young readers. Frederic Wertham's infamous Seduction of the Innocent (1954) and the Kefauver Senate Hearings in the early 1950s are only two of the most notorious examples. More recently, articles such as Tan and Scuggs' "Does Exposure to Comic Book Violence Lead to Aggression in Children?" (1980) and Shetterly's "Graphic Comics Stir Controversy: Is censoring violence, sex, and "immorality" in comic books the answer?" (1991), revisit the air of comics paranoia in a modern context. Likewise, a recent wave of police morality squad raids on comic book specialty stores and the occasional Hard Copy television expose on the evil influence of comics on defenseless children revisits the comic book burning days of the 1950s. Interestingly enough, Hard Copy's episode which aired in the early Fall of 1995 accused comic book writer/artist Todd McFarlane of promoting racist beliefs in his best-selling series Spawn. The program focused on an issue that involved flashbacks of a Black man being lynched, yet the reporters and an outraged psychologist totally ignored the fact that the hero, Spawn, is himself a Black man and that most, if not all, of the

1 The owners of several comic book stores throughout the U.S.A. have been charged with selling offensive material to children. The charges are primarily related to "Adult Only" comics, which the retailers claim were never sold to minors. Given the long history of persecution the comics industry has faced, the comic book community (both creators and fans) have responded to this new wave of charges by establishing the "Comic Book Legal Defense Fund" to assist with legal fees.
readers familiar with the series recognized the story as what McFarlane intended: as a warning against racism. It would seem that the often uninformed pattern of criticism against comics is still alive in the 1990s. Moreover, this type of misunderstanding based on a quick glance by censorious watchdogs at a single comic book page actually works against the medium's potential ability to address real world evils like racism. Issues such as racism, the watchdogs claim, are too serious for the coloured page. Rather, comic books should stick to the appropriately childish fare of supervillains and criminal geniuses. But the actual fans, those who really looked at the issue of Spawn that seemed so inflammatory, had no problem with the story. Not because they were being brainwashed by racist propaganda, but because they were adept enough readers to understand the story as a whole rather than as an isolated, single panel, racist image.

I want to explicitly stress the point often forgotten by the critics, the censors, the concerned parent's groups and the religious right, that for those who read comics, even the most die-hard of fans, the books are only one of countless possible sources that might influence their understanding of social roles and cultural values. It should be obvious that readers come to a text as already socially constituted individuals, each of whom posses a unique filter through which to interpret the book, a filter shaped by their infinitely varied life experiences. The comic book is but one strand in a complex web of potentially influential social and personal forces. Yet, clusters of interests and values shared by particular groups are real, especially for a group with as strong a common interest as comic book fans. Often it is out of similar social, economic or historical backgrounds that otherwise diverse peoples will seek out particular entertainments. That comic book fans enjoy a wide range of associated entertainments, all with a decidedly youthful and masculine bent --from video games to action movies-- reveals that the comics themselves, however primary a text they seem to be to the individual reader, are perhaps best understood as a central key to a larger world of subcultural values. Indeed, it would be impossible to study a cultural product as complex and symbolically loaded as the Milestone comic books by merely looking at the primary texts themselves. To isolate the texts as the sole bearers of their meaning(s) would be to deny how they function inter-textually in the lives of the readers.

In order to understand how popular texts operate across the possible diversity of social and ideological relations it is necessary, as Bennett and Woollacott have argued, to "abandon the
assumption that texts, in themselves, constitute the place where the business of culture is conducted, or that they can be construed as the sources of meanings or effects which can be deduced from an analysis of their formal properties" (1987: 59). This is not to say that the text should be abandoned altogether. In rejecting the traditional text-centred approach I would not want to go so far as to posit all meaning as residing in the audience. Rather, the text should be understood as a central site around which cultural ideologies are formed by readers in relation to intra-, inter-, and extra-textual references. In other words, it must be kept in mind that any cultural text is, to some degree, always a preconstituted object just as every reader is always subject to an individual preconceived frame of reference. It is this shifting mass of cultural relations that I am interested in here. Some of the most consistent readings made by comic book fans seem to be heavily negotiated according not just to their own personal and social backgrounds (extratextual), which is an obvious influencing factor anyway, but also according to their knowledge of comic books and the superhero genre (intratextual), and their interest in related mass media texts associated with Black popular culture (intertextual).

With the Milestone books, too, we can see how the comics operate for many readers not in compliance with, or in opposition to, the text alone but are understood in relation to other popular media. When discussing their favorite comic books most of the readers I spoke with went beyond commenting on this single medium to include, among other things, their interests in action movies, arcade games and various forms of popular music. "When I read comics", James claims in the citation above, "I'm always thinking, in the back of my head, how it compares to other stuff." For many readers, especially those involved however tangentially in the subculture of comics fandom, the books are not merely read in isolation, rather their meaning is always at least partially derived from how they "compare to other stuff". This common practise of reading in relation to other media texts is an open-ended concept. The limitless differences in personal and social situations experienced by every individual reader means that there can quite literally be as many readings as there are readers. Yet, there are certain related interests that seem to be shared by a great number of comics fans that help to inform their understanding of the books. The next two chapters will address separate, but interrelated themes, regarding how the Milestone books are read by many young men in relation to contemporary action movies and television programs featuring Black heroes and as a modified and
potentially progressive ideal of masculinity. But first, in this chapter, I want to focus on a couple of the more loosely organized aspects that characterize how some fans receive the Milestone books in relation to: 1) the overall genre of comic book superheroes; and 2) other comic books featuring Black superheroes, particularly the blaxploitation titles from the 1970s. All of these points of comparison tend to key on the visible ethnicity of the characters as a defining aspect that sets them apart from other, more traditionally "waspish", comic book heroes. This emphasis on the "Blackness" of the Milestone heroes is accumulatively read by some fans as yet another mask, another layer of the costumed identity, worn by the heroes. Understood from the fans’ point of view, the Milestone books facilitate a reading in relation to other superhero characters that reworks the position and the possibilities of heroic African American figures.

In different terms, we might also think of comic book reading as the satisfying of a contract. A contract which is fulfilled when the writers and the artists manage to captivate the needs and the fantasies of the fans, and the fans have learned how to demand their expectations be met. It is a fact that the comic book world is a small one where the producers and the consumers can speak to each other directly. This contact has allowed the publishers to discern the tastes and pleasures of their audience, and it has allowed the fans to establish a symbolic system which appeals to their desires. For fans the comic book is more than just a static, one-dimensional text, it is a cherished orchestration of symbols and signs and meanings that are interpreted through a shared knowledge. The creators work within a given sign system to tell a story that is both unique and familiar. Moreover, the readers learn to work out these stories in specific ways according to their own personal preferences and more formalized standards of evaluation. The formula becomes a sort of meeting place for the creators and the readers to negotiate individual stories. The contract, as Martin Barker sees it, "involves an agreement that a text will talk to us in ways we recognize" (1989: 261). Thus, the first step in relating to the comics text, of negotiating the contract between the creators and the consumers, is learning what to expect and how to read the sign system properly.

**Comics as Reading**

It seems obvious that popular culture and media fans approach the reading of texts in a different way than do academics. Where scholars may tend to concentrate on the stylistic and
structural features of a literary work, fan groups have generally been found to refrain from evaluating a text on such artificial formalities and instead focus on the free play of the narrative's meaning, the believability of characters, and the satisfaction of the fantasy (see for example Radway 1984, and Jenkins 1992). This practice of reading for a sense of identification with the story and the characters rather than for vaulted artistic merits lead Elizabeth Long to conclude in her study of recreational reading groups that: "It is more fruitful, then, to examine reading as a culturally embedded and potentially variable set of attitudes and practices than to conflate cultural classification with textual evaluation as does the traditional categorization of reading habits" (Long, 1987: 307). I would agree with Long that the culturally interpreted meaning of the text is of prime importance for media fans, and thus should be of prime importance to any critics approaching the texts. But it is also important to note that comic book fans seem to differ as readers from other fan groups in their attention to the formal stylistic conventions of the medium. Indeed, it is the basic ability to read a comic page properly that many fans use as the essential distinction between themselves and what they often refer to as "the nonbelievers". Within the shadow cultural economy created by comics fandom the fundamental capacity to read comic books is just the first, but also the most essential, step in valued interpretive skills.

The importance of reading ability, at its most fundamental level, was made clear to me by a group of three young fans when I first began to talk with readers about their interpretive practices. I had a rather discouraging time approaching some of the fans at the first local convention I attended - one of Toronto's smaller monthly comic book gatherings held this time in the lower concourse of the Hilton Hotel. Armed with a tape recorder and a small note pad rather than a bag full of comics, I must have seemed out of place to the droves of young enthusiasts pouring through the back issue bins and haggling with dealers over the value of certain wall comics (the unusually rare and valuable comics displayed on walls behind the makeshift booths), and discussing the validity of a collection of ash-can comics. As I approached people throughout the afternoon many were more than willing to indulge my questions, while others quickly excused themselves from conversation once they found

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2 Extremely rare limited edition books literally salvaged from trash cans by publishers in the 1940s. During this boom period of superhero expansion most of the highly competitive publishers were desperate to copyright as many potential superhero names and titles as possible. In order to do so the publishers would refurbish unsold comic books with fake covers and submitted the bogus books as legitimate copies of undeveloped characters, thus securing all legal rights. For example, an old copy of Superman might have its cover replaced with a quickly sketched picture of "Miraculous Guy" so they would have the rights to any character bearing that name that might be developed in the future.
out I wasn't a newspaper or television reporter. It seemed like everyone wanted to be the token fan who would appear on the local news telecast of the de rigeur human interest bit on "those silly fans who pay hundreds of dollars for a single comic book." Late in the day, in a stairwell outside the main dealer's hall. I found three eleven-year-old boys who initially regarded me with some suspicion, but who finally explained to me that many fans do not like talking with anyone they perceive as a non-fan. Rather than being snobbish or exclusionary, they argued, some fans avoid discussion with anyone who appears unaware of the world of comics simply because it is too hard to explain the meaning of the books.

"I won't talk about comics with anybody else unless I know they're into them... not even with some of my other friends cause they don't even know how to read them", Michael, the tallest of the three friends explained while adjusting the strap on the new X-Men baseball cap he had just bought. "Yeah", chirped in Eric and John in unison, which seemed appropriate since I had at first mistaken them for twins in their matching Spawn T-shirts and black Los Angeles Kings baseball caps. "Some people are just so stupid when it comes to reading comic books", Eric continued. "they don't know whether to look at the pictures and then the words, or read all the words first." "He's right", confirmed Michael, really warming to the topic and. I think. the chance to lecture to an adult. "Lots of people get totally confused when they look at a comic book. My Mom. for instance, is really pretty cool about my collecting comics. she calls it --ugh-- 'my little hobby'. and even tried reading a few of my favorites one time just to see what I was into. But she drove me crazy with questions. Not about the characters or the stories or anything, but about which words went with which panels. She was reading them all mixed up and they didn't make any sense to her. I finally had to take them away from her and tried to explain the stories... but she never did get it." "Nothing", Eric said. "is as annoying as someone who can't even read a comic. That's why a lot of people here may not want to talk to you if they think you aren't a real fan." "No kidding", John added without even lifting his eyes from the new X-Force comic he had just removed from a protective mylar bag. "There's no point in talking to somebody at a con if they're illiterate!" Clearly there was a sharp distinction to be made by fans about an individual's ability to understand comics based on what the fans see as the most fundamental level of reading. In this case reading is seen as being grounded in technical skills which differ from mainstream culture's larger, standard sense of literacy.
Comic book literacy is in fact quite different from what we usually think of as literacy. Put simply, the comic book medium's unique and highly stylized combination of printed words and sequentially ordered drawings expands the concept of "reading" beyond the conventional, literary sense of the term. I had my first glimpse of how confusing comic book reading is for individuals unfamiliar with the medium's conventions several years before the fans above expressed their frustration with the inability of outsiders to read comics properly. When I had students read Frank Miller's acclaimed graphic novel *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* for an introductory course in popular culture studies, I was astounded by the number of people who claimed the text was completely unintelligible to them for pages at a time. Many of the students complained they did not know whether to read the captions or the dialogue first, to look at all the images, or indeed what order the images were supposed to be in. After numerous failed explanations about the unrestricted formations of comic book reading, I was forced to pair up the students who were having comprehension problems with those in the class who were more comic book literate and could help guide the inexperienced through the book page-by-page, panel-by-panel. While some students learned with a little guidance how to interpret the semantic conventions of the graphic novel, others were never able to master what they regarded as a confusing collage of images and words. It also quickly became apparent during in-class discussions that only the students who were adept comic book readers could move beyond the narrative style to consider the book as a cultural text ripe with a revisioning of Reagan-era American mythologies. In effect, the reader's familiarity with the technical styles and conventions that allows him or her to read the book's narrative in the literal sense is analogous to the fan's "reading" of the book in the wider, more metaphorical sense as a cultural text.

Figure 7.1, from *Hardware* #29 (1995), is an example of a contemporary comic book page. The composition of this page is conservative and would seem very straight-forward to a regular comic book reader. But the assemblage of even a conventional page such as this is also typical of the structural arrangement often found confusing by non-fans. The action of this single page is itself rather simple: Hardware (who is in the midst of a battle with the Milestone universe's gang of rogue "bang babies", The Blood Syndicate) first ensnares one enemy in a type of electrical whip, and then cybernetically draws his gun and fires on the other members of The Blood Syndicate while his thoughts silently narrate the events. Seems clear enough, right? Well what is clear for fans is not
Of course, it only fires stun pellets. But there's no reason to tell them that.

Pam Pam Pam

Although, I might want to mention it to Casper, here.
always so for everyone else. Comic book illiterate people are generally confused by the non-linear order of both the visual and the written elements presented in a page such as this one.

For example, visually the action flows from the large panel (1) in the top left corner to the smaller panel (2) in the top right corner where Hardware begins to construct his "flow gun", then directly downward to the uniformly sized panels (3 and 4) where the gun is assembled and completed. In essence, a page such as this one follows the usual Western pattern of reading from left to right and top to bottom, but because panels overlap and are not in a strict sequential order like a newspaper comic strip, some readers become lost and move down to panel 5 immediately after the first panel, and thus read the story out of order. Although panel 5 directly overlaps panel 1 and is not exactly below panel 4, it is never the less the fifth lowest on the page and the farthest to the left on that level and thus it's proper sequence is after all of the illustrations arranged above it. The shot fired in panel 5 is carried over to the left for panel 6 where we see most of the Blood Syndicate scatter, and then down to panel 7 where "Fade" continues to advance on Hardware. Besides the variation in panel sequencing, non-fans also tend to find the lack of visual agreement between the various action scenes unsettling. In other visual mediums such as television or film, actions and effects are typically matched through conventional editing techniques. If Arnold Schwarzenegger fires his gun towards the right of the screen, the next scene matches the angle of the bullet as it hits the bad guys who are facing left. But then, cinematically, the shift from panel 5 where Hardware is shooting up and towards the left, appears disjointed with panel 6, where the bullets zing by to the right and the center of the frame. For those readers more familiar with the conventions of film than comic books, the flow of the action becomes awkward and contradictory, while for comics fans such linearly framed panel-to-panel transitions are unnecessary.

In conjunction with the visual sequence of events there are four separate written elements that the reader needs to comprehend on this page. The first is the writing in the shaded boxes --"Plasma Whip: DEPLOYED"-- which most fans recognize as a disembodied (because there is no directional point emanating from the dialogue box), computer-generated voice (because of the computerized font). In this case it is the sound coming from Hardware's on-board computer system, referred to as Dobie, which controls the mechanical aspects of his armor. The second written element is the internal narrative of Hardware's thoughts represented in the self enclosed white boxes --"What the hell am I
doing?"-- which comment directly on the action occurring in the panels. This *internal* monologue is sometimes confused by non-comic book readers with the third written element of this page: the character's *spoken* dialogue. The depiction of Hardware's spoken words in panel 2 --"Dobie? Initiate flow gun assembly"-- is visually represented in a box which at first glance appears very similar to the box containing the character's internal thoughts, but is distinguished by the convention of the bow's frame, which has rounded edges and a jagged point that indicates the source of the voice. The last, but perhaps most stereotypically *comic-bookish*, written elements on this page are the onomatopoeic sound effects, "Pam Pam", that represent the discharging of the gun in the final three panels. Even the action on a relatively simple page like this one can be quite confusing for new readers, and the problem is greatly compounded when the thoughts and voices of multiple characters are represented simultaneously.

For most fans, this form of literal reading of a comic page is just the most obvious and most directly text bound step in forming an understanding of the book. But I do not mean to imply that comic book reading is easy, and that those who cannot do it are slow learners. The perception that the comics are a childish medium and thus should be easy to understand has been the cause of many an adult's misinterpretations regarding the narrative intention of books like Todd McFarlane's anti-racism story in *Spawn* (not to mention their embarrassment at being out-read by eight year olds). Indeed, comic book reading is such a specialized skill that several academics have tried to deconstruct the symbolic conventions (see for example Faust 1971, Abbott 1986, and Schmitt 1992), while other scholars have attempted to explain the comic book's unique properties as akin to the language of film (see for example Lacassin 1972, Fell 1975, and Coleman 1985). Yet, to date, the most informative works for explaining the technical conventions of comic book language have come not from the critics but from the comics' creators themselves. Targeted towards fans and non-comic book readers alike, both Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1991) and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) are thoughtful, self-reflexive meditations on how exactly the comics page works to tell a story. Both Eisner and McCloud explain the conventions of the comic book style in great detail and with numerous graphic aids. McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is itself written entirely as a comic book with the author as an illustrated host who quite literally walks the reader through the world of comics language. They each outline such complexly stylized conventions as the
numerous forms of panel-to-panel transitions, the various ways of representing emotion, sound, smell, movement and time, and the multitude of techniques for effectively combining the written word with images in order to create a whole that is greater than either of its parts. More than just "how-to" instruction manuals for reading comics, Eisner and McCloud's works demonstrate the complexity of skills that must be mastered before a consumer can feel comfortable with reading a comic book.

Beyond the fundamental technical skills required to read a comic book in the literal sense, comics are perhaps best understood as read by fans, in the metaphorical sense, as a unique genre of fiction closely tied to its medium of presentation. If we continue with "reading" as a loosely defined metaphor for what people do with popular texts, then we might consider the visual and structural components of the medium, in tandem with formalized genre conventions, as akin to de Saussure's concept of *langue*, the culturally shared knowledge of the grammatical rules that constitute a system of language, and the potentially unlimited utterances shaped by these rules, expressed in individual comic books and variably understood by readers as its *parole*. For adept comic book fans the unique structural qualities of the illustrated page have become an invisible foundation, just as film editing techniques are overlooked by most viewers and grammatical rules are taken for granted by native speakers of a language. Instead, for fans, it is the understanding of the genre elements of comics' *langue* that is important.

Popular genres, regardless of the medium --be it literature, film, television or comic books-- essentially involve recognizable, often stereotypically one-dimensional characters acting out a relatively predictable formulaic story within a familiar setting. Individual texts are singular expressions of the overall genre and utilize standard narrative components (e.g. stock characters, plot devices, iconographic costumes) which have achieved an air of prior significance due to their accumulated use in other related works. In other words, the audience's relation to any specific genre text that employs recognizable conventions is dependent on their awareness of the genre as a whole. The audience negotiates a reading of a specific genre text premised on the preordained, value laden narrative system utilized across the entire genre. For example, the solitary figure smoking a cigarette in a darkened bar was a conventional image in many Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s. But the image and all of its elements, from the clothes, the lighting, and the music to the actor's face, takes on an entire spectrum of associated meanings related to the larger identifiable genre of Film Noir.
The generic whole becomes, in effect, greater than the sum of its parts in an individual text. The significance of the scene is based on the audience's familiarity with the tenets of the genre. As a particular instance of the Film Noir genre, this single scene acts like an encoded shorthand narrative device for viewers and suggests, at a glance, the desperate atmosphere of a doomed private investigator. Thomas Schatz, in his definitive work on cinematic genres, describes the emergence of recognizable genres as a combination of a repeatable form, style and theme which is embraced by audiences.

It is not their mere repetition which endows generic elements with a prior significance, but their repetition within a conventionalized formal, narrative, and thematic context. If it is initially a popular success, a film story is reworked in later movies and repeated until it reaches its equilibrium profile—until it becomes a spatial, sequential, and thematic pattern of familiar actions and relationships. Such a repetition is generated by the interaction of the studios and the mass audience, and it will be sustained so long as it satisfies the needs and expectations of the audience and remains financially viable for the studios.

(Schatz, 1981: 11)

Schatz' description is as applicable to comic books as it is to film. Comic book genres consist of elaborate, self-referential themes and conventions that produce a familiar story with a fundamental appeal for its audience. Even the smallest scene in a comic book is potentially rife with years of generic influence. For example, when Static is beeped by the police in issue #34 and he shows up as a shadowy figure outside the window of a station house mumbling ominously: "You have summoned me, Commissioner?" Most fans understand in an instant the tongue-in-cheek reference to the clandestine meetings of Batman and Commissioner Gordon, and grasp the humorousness of Capt. Gil Summers disgruntled "Will you please cut that out... and get in here!"

As a mass medium the comic book, like the motion picture, has long incorporated a wide range of different genres including, but not limited to, Science Fiction, Horror, Western, Gangster, Jungle, Romance and Funny Animals. And recently, particularly in Europe and in the expanding North American adult market, more mature-themed books have developed their own comic influenced genres of social satire and criticism. But the genre most commonly aligned with comic books, and most crucial to an understanding of the entire medium, is the superhero genre. No other genre has been as closely associated with the medium as the superhero has been, with well over a
thousand different costumed characters appearing within the industry's first fifty years. Just as comic book readers need to develop their familiarity with the medium's technical conventions in order to understand the narrative, fans also define their perception of the books according to their familiarity with the superhero genre. This genre familiarity is a cumulative process. Only with repeated readings does the genre's formulaic and thematic essence come into focus and the reader's expectations begin to take shape. Like the novice readers who find comic books difficult to read, many new comics enthusiasts struggle with the often disjointed stories that are structured according to the peculiar logic and narrative conventions of the superhero genre. Like all genres in all mediums, the comic book superhero genre is a well constructed world unto itself. In this world men and women can fly, lift entire buildings with a single hand, run faster than the speed of light, shoot electricity from their fingertips or plasma rays from their eyes, all while parading around in colourful and revealing spandex tights. As absurd as these formulaic elements may seem they are only the most obvious cliches, and easiest to comprehend for anyone with just a minimum of exposure to the superhero genre. Beyond these surface conventions the superhero formula is also dependent on such generic elements as the malleability of time (characters routinely travel to the future, or the past, or exist in separate eras simultaneously), space (trips to the far end of the cosmos are as common as going to the corner store), and even reality (dream realms and different dimensions often merge with the characters' version of reality). In the superhero genre anything can, and does, happen. But despite the seemingly infinite possibilities, the world of the comic book superhero --like any genre-- is ordered according to certain rules of convention.

The narrative formula of the superhero story is essentially a modernized version of the classical hero myth as described most notably by the likes of psychoanalyst Otto Rank in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1909), folklorist Lord Raglan in *The Hero* (1936), and mythologist Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Despite their different backgrounds, each of these scholars describe a similar heroic pattern or cycle whereby the hero, who seems an ordinary man but is actually the progeny of exceptional parents, must heed the call of adventure and set out on a quest to vanquish a seemingly all-powerful evil force, thus protecting the community. Characteristically the hero acquires magical powers as a type of gift from the gods as well as an assortment of reliable helpers, and eventually he returns to his people with certain boons and a greater
wisdom, he marries the Princess and becomes the true King and leader he was born to be. At their core, contemporary comic book superheroes are not all that different from such legendary heros as Hercules, Odysseus, King Arthur, Gilgamesh or Robin Hood. The only major difference between the adventures of comic book heroes and those of their classical ancestors is one of marketing. Because the superhero must return every month for a new story, the hero's quest is never completely resolved via marriage and/or his reintegration into the community. Rather, the comic book adventure is a modification of the original heroic myth due to the cyclical nature of mass entertainments. The superhero is a perfect example of what Jewett and Lawrence (1977) have described as the American monomyth. Instead of a final resolution, the hero of contemporary commercial myths is required to repeatedly turn down the comforts of a normal life. The hero must ride off into the sunset ready to begin his quest all over again, with a new villain and a new batch of innocents to save from the ever-present forces of darkness.

In his essay "The Myth of Superman" (1979), semiotician Umberto Eco takes this divergence between the hero of classical mythology and the superhero of modern narratives as a key to understanding the appeal of Superman tales as they relate to plotting and temporality. "There is, in fact," writes Eco, "a fundamental difference between the figure of Superman and the traditional heroic figure of classical or nordic mythology or the figures of Messianic religions" (108). This fundamental difference, Eco argues, is that the mythological character of the comic books must become an emblem, an easily identifiable archetype, but at the same time he must be marketed as a hero of a novelistic romance (i.e. he must be repackaged anew week after week). To this end, Eco continues: "Superman's scriptwriters have devised a solution which is much shrewder and undoubtedly more original. The stories develop in a sort of oneiric climate --of which the reader is not aware at all-- where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said" (Eco, 1979: 114). For the most part, Eco is quite right about the hazy historical structure of these comic book narratives, particularly later on when he stresses the convergence of different stories all featuring Superman at various ages (e.g. as Superbaby, Superboy, and Superman). But I would take issue with his aside that "the reader is not aware at all" of these temporal distortions. Perhaps casual comic book readers are oblivious to this
oneiric climate. But most comic book fans are very keenly aware of which stories have a canonical importance thus making them more historically contingent than others. Serious fans are also clearly aware of where individual stories fit into the overall mythos, and when the myths begin all over again. For example, in 1990 DC Comics cleaned house, as it were, and began the tale of Superman all over again, even renumbering all the subsequent comic books from number one on again. In a sense, the superhero myth is both timeless --always renewing with little variation on the core formula-- and temporally specific --allowing stories and genres to build on what has gone before.

The basic elements of the superhero genre have remained almost unchanged since the formula was established during the first wave of costumed heros who followed in the footsteps of Superman in the late 1930s. Comics historian Mike Benton (1993) identifies the four main conventions established in those early years that are still employed today: 1) the hero must wear some form of distinguishable costume that sets him or her apart from ordinary people; 2) the protagonist must possess some form of superpower, be it of alien origin (e.g. Superman, the Martian Man-Hunter), granted by the gods (e.g. Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel), induced by science (e.g. Captain America, the Hulk), or developed through years of self improvement (e.g. Batman, the Green Arrow); 3) the character hides behind the guise of a dual or secret identity, and; 4) the superhero must be motivated by an altruistic, unwavering moral desire to fight against evil. These classic elements are woven around the typical adventure formula that sees the hero defending the lives of innocent people through his life or death struggle against a superpowered villain or an evil criminal mastermind. In the over fifty years that the superhero genre has existed numerous other conventions have been added into the mix. For example, such stock characters as the ultra-violent soldier-of-fortune, the mutant whose very powers exclude him from a normal life, the stern and diligent police chief contact, the nosy but beautiful reporter girlfriend, and the cheerful boy side-kick have all become part of the genre's narrative shorthand. For a fan familiar with the superhero genre every appearance of a female reporter is instantly recognizable and measured in relation to the character's conformity or deviation from previous archetypes like Lois Lane (Superman) and Vicki Vale (Batman). Teenage characters who gain superpowers are understood in comparison to established expressions of the same convention such as Captain Marvel or Spider-Man. Likewise, specific powers are assessed relative to other characters with the same skills. Each publisher's universe seems to have a super-fast hero, a
super-strong hero, an ocean-dwelling hero, and an expert archer. The common fan wisdom that in the world of comics there are "no new heroes, only new costumes" seems true enough. A few archetypal powers and personalities are merely shuffled around, mixed and matched, in the creation of new characters. Even Milestone's line of new heroes has to be measured in comparison to the established norms of comic book superherodom. The new heroes at Milestone, as we will see, are new in more than just their costume design.

The addition of new elements and the revamping of old ones is all part of a genre's natural evolution. Each new genre text must involve some degree of invention as well as convention in order to satisfy readers with a familiar narrative at the same time that it reinvents the story to keep it fresh and exciting. It is a curious bind faced by all producers of genre-aligned texts, whether they be popular genres such as Western, Horror, or Gangster fiction in comic books, film or television or such classical genres as Gothic literature, cubism, chamber music, or even Roman architecture. Each creator must vary the format while simultaneously repeating the elements that made the genre popular in the first place. As each new genre text combines varying degrees of invention with certain requirements of convention, the genre itself evolves in both its formal style and in its relation to the audience. Indeed, it is the audience's ever-changing relation to the genre and its constantly shifting cultural position relative to the text's central themes that necessitates the reworking of any genre. The predictable evolutionary pattern of genres has been outlined in similar ways by critics working in different disciplines, from the broad classical humanities (Focillon, 1942) to popular literature (Cawelti, 1976) and popular film (Schatz, 1981 and Grant et al, 1985). The comics' superhero genre has followed a pattern which closely corresponds to that of other genres in other mediums, through the usual stages of experimentation, classicism and refinement.

The initial experimental stage of a genre's development is the period where the narrative formula is established and the multitude of possible conventions are narrowed down to a few easily recognizable key ingredients. For the superhero genre this experimental phase is clearly marked by the emergence of Superman in 1938 as a culmination of heroic juvenile literature, pulp adventure serials and the comic book medium's search for a defining story form. Through the early 1940s the superhero genre quickly formalized itself via a transparent and rather one-dimensional retelling of the basic Superman story and iconography under the guise of countless costumed heroes. By the
time the United States joined World War II in 1941 the superhero genre was clearly defined and firmly ensconced in the collective consciousness of North American popular culture. The 1940s and early 1950s are considered by many to be the classical era of superhero comics. During this period of war time patriotism and post-war optimism the genre's formula and all its associated conventions were clearly established and the comic book superhero sold more magazines every week than at any other point in the genre's over fifty year history. Schatz refers to this genre stage as one of formal transparency, when both "the narrative formula and the [film] medium work together to transmit and reinforce that genre's social message --its ideology or problem-solving strategy-- as directly as possible to the audience" (1981: 38).

Following the proliferation of the classical period, genres typically achieve an over-saturation of its basic message and the audience demands more sophisticated variations. Characteristic of the refinement stage, the genre's conventions that became so universally familiar during the classic era are reworked to the point of parody, subversion, and reinvention. For the superhero genre, and for the comic book medium as a whole, this stage of refinement was both facilitated and hindered by the moral panic and self-censorship of the industry brought on by the Wertham and Kefauver attacks. The superhero genre nearly collapsed in the late 1950s and early 1960s from the twin conditions of narrative exhaustion and censorious limitations. But during the later 1960s and early 1970s new life was breathed into the genre via the subversive superhero parodies circulated in the underground comix, and more importantly through the onset of Marvel's flawed heroes such as The Fantastic Four, The Hulk and Spider-Man. By this point the themes and conventions have become so ritualized that the genre often moves from formal transparency to opacity. The form itself becomes a focus of the message, the structure as well as the narrative constantly feeds inward on itself to reconfigure the staples of the genre to reflect a changing cultural environment.

Since the comic book medium is still considered a juvenile market, with a constantly shifting audience of new young readers and aging fans, the superhero genre is a unique combination of typical evolution and atypical non-evolution. What I mean is that the current crop of superhero comic book series ranges from those that might be considered classical in tone and style (formal transparency), to the majority of titles currently on the market that carry on the classical formula but have updated it to meet the demands of young readers in the 1990s, and to those series that self-
reflexively reconsider the entire genre and all its themes and conventions (opacity) at the same time that it perpetuates and celebrates the history and the future of superheroes. There are always new young readers who, at any given moment, are encountering superhero comics for the first time. For these readers new to the genre the industry supplies numerous titles in the classical mode with relatively simple stories and artwork such as *The Adventures of Batman and Robin* series based on the syndicated Saturday morning program *Batman: The Animated Series*. The enormous popularity of a character like Batman makes him an ideal example of the concurrent variations of the genre. In addition to *The Adventures of Batman and Robin* which is geared towards the youngest segment of the market there are four other monthly Batman series, each addressing a nominally different level of genre familiarity (reflected, not incidentally, in the different cover prices). Both *Batman* and *Detective Comics* are suited to the mid-range audience with conventional modernized superhero stories, while *Legends of the Dark Knight* and *Shadow of the Bat* appeal to older readers and those with a well developed familiarity with the genre and the Batman mythos. But at the same time that the industry is able to retell the same "naive" or "childish" story over and over again to new audiences -- the classical phase of the genre frozen in time-- the fans who pride themselves on their intimate knowledge of the genre require works that adapt the superhero genre to their needs. Indeed, even the most archetypal of superhero characters are routinely reconstructed, literally reborn, in order to adapt their mythology for a different age. In the late 1980s, writer/artist John Byrne alone was responsible for reinventing such legendary characters as Superman, the Human Torch, the Sub-Mariner and She-Hulk. Unlike film or other popular mediums where most genres are clearly geared toward adults, the circular and ever-renewing nature of a great portion of the comic book audience allows, in fact requires, the superhero genre to both develop *and* remain static.

This unique and apparently contradictory tension that arises from the comic book superhero genre striving to both evolve in order to satisfy the fans who are familiar with the established conventions *and* to retain the genre's traditional formula and style for new readers is occasionally combined in texts that simultaneously capture the genre's past, present and future. Works such as the recent and extremely popular mini-series *Marvels* (1994-95), written by Kurt Busiek and illustrated by Alex Ross, exemplify the superhero genre's self-reflexive development, its ties to time-honored features, and the influence of subcultural knowledge on the fans' interpretation of the story. *Marvels*
was a four issue "Prestige Format" retelling of the entire history of the Marvel Publishing Company's fictional universe. Busiek's carefully woven script is structured as an autobiographical narration by Phil Sheldon, an average New York photojournalist, and is strikingly portrayed in Ross' painted panels with a sense of realism never before seen in comic books. In *Marvels*, Manhattan becomes a world filled with regular people who react in a myriad of different ways to the sudden presence of superpowered beings, or "Marvels" as they are dubbed. Through Phil's eyes we witness the birth of the superhero era in the late 1930s with the arrival of the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner, the rise of the classical superheroes, and the fear and the prejudice surrounding the newer, less noble heroes such as Spider-Man and the X-Men. From adulation of these earthly gods: "Just to catch a glimpse of him [Captain America] always in motion, always moving forward, like a force of nature in chain mail. Never a hesitation or a backward glance... We were in awe of him. Of all of them." To fear and loathing of these dangerous genetic anomalies: "Super-powered mutants. Freaks. They looked just like normal people, but you never could tell. Stinkin' Muties! In a way, the mutants were worse than the super-villains. Who would protect us from the mutants?". The strength of *Marvels* is that it manages to explore the concept of superheroes from the point of view of average citizens, thus questioning and recontextualizing all of the fantastical features of the genre at the same time that it recounts every major, and many of the minor events, in the Marvel universe's fifty-plus years of history.

"The big things were obviously easy to spot", said Jordan, who at 36 years old is a long time superhero fan as well as the owner of a small comic book and magazine store in London, Ontario. "The invasion of Galactus. Spider-Man being blamed for Gwen Stacey's death. All that stuff I clearly remember from when I was a kid and what I've seen in reprints a million times since. But it was the great little details that made *Marvels* so interesting. You know, seeing all those classic events again but through the eyes of real people really made me re-think what's going on in superhero books." Many of the younger readers ignored *Marvels* altogether or found it an interesting yet someone confusing and depressing book. But for fans with a detailed sense of the genre's history, particularly older fans who fondly remember the classic comics from their childhood, *Marvels* unique twist on the genre's core formula layered an additional level of elegiac meaning onto the historical narrative at the same time that it retained all of the formal conventions. The breadth of the story manages to question both
the formal transparency of the genre's classical era and the initial opacity of its modern period. By working so clearly within the genre but shifting the narrative focus onto the more realistic effects that superpowered heroes would have on the world around them, *Marvels* develops the potential dark side of the genre for readers who are already well aware of the historical and formulaic significance of key events. Indeed, *Marvels'* attention to retelling and recontextualizing even the smallest of details in a new, less one-dimensionally "cartoony" light was so pervasive and accurate that the subsequent graphic novel version of the story included a page-by-page index of original sources in its postscript. Likewise, many of the fans pointed to Alex Ross' incredibly realistic depictions of familiar and legendary scenes as allowing them to re-think just what it would be like if superheroes really did exist, right down to the wrinkles in their costumes.

*Marvels* is not the only example of a mature, self-reflexive reworking of the traditional comic book superhero genre. It is merely one of the most recent and most critically acclaimed series to evolve beyond the traditional formulaic narrative. As the subculture of comics fans with a thorough and sophisticated understanding of the genre has come to represent a central core audience, other creators and the publishers have also successfully satisfied the innovation desired by this constituency at the same time that they continue to offer the same classic narrative to new and/or younger readers.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Frank Miller's now legendary depiction of the caped crusader in 1985's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* set the standard for reinventing and elevating the genre. "He [Miller] has taken a character whose every trivial and incidental detail is graven in stone on the hearts and minds of the comics fans that make up his audience and managed to dramatically redefine that character without contradicting one jot of the character's mythology," writes Alan Moore in the introduction to the graphic novel version of *Dark Knight*. "Yes", Moore continues, "Batman is still Bruce Wayne, Alfred is still his butler and Commissioner Gordon is still chief of police, albeit just barely. There is still a young sidekick named Robin, along with a batmobile, a batcave and a utility belt. The Joker, Two-Face, and the Catwoman are still in evidence amongst the roster of villains. Everything is exactly the same, except for the fact that it's all totally different" (Moore, 1986: 3). At the same time Moore's own mini-series *Watchmen* (1986), illustrated by Dave Gibbons, reconsidered the entire history of superhero adventures through a complex story of global conspiracy with a cast of original costumed characters representing conventional heroic types (e.g. a Superman type, a
Captain America type, a Punisher type, etc.) from both the classic and modern era of the genre. By using recognizable superhero types, grounded in the most conventional of cliches, Moore is able to critique the shortcomings of the genre while simultaneously raising it to new heights of clarity. This self-reflexive, parodying technique has grown very popular in such recent series as *Golden Age* (1994-95) and again in Kurt Busiek's *Astro City* (1995).

It is within this self-reflexive vein that the Milestone comic books are read by many of the fans. Although, at first glance, the Milestone titles may not seem as consistently concerned with questioning the superhero genre --at least not as explicitly as such mini-series imbued with a heavy a sense of historical gravitas as the *Marv*

els, *Dark Knight* or *Watchmen* sagas-- the Milestone books are still understood as they relate to the genre as a whole. In other words, many readers interpret the Milestone books as a natural development that brings into question the traditional racial bias of the genre, and for fans familiar with the medium's established representation of Black characters these new heroes are understood as a redressing of the one-dimensional blaxploitation comics of the 1970s.

**Reading Milestone**

Unlike many of the other minority-oriented comic books on the market today, all of the Milestone titles are firmly grounded in the traditions of the superhero genre. Numerous other African American series (some of which are discussed in more detail in other chapters) are using the comic book medium as a means to express alternative stories ranging from a cartoonishly illustrated depiction of urban Black teenage life in Rex Perry's *Hip Hop Heaven*, to the starkly realistic historical biography of Martin Luther King Jr. in Ho Che Anderson's *King*. But the editors at Milestone have very consciously chosen to work from within the industry's most dominant genre. As Milestone writer Matt Wayne explained in the first editorial page of the company's superteam mini-series simply entitled *Heroes*: "The idea of a bunch of world-famous superheroes having tremendous battles and hair-raising adventures may seem generic, but that's what we get for working in a genre." Like every costumed hero that has emerged in the last sixty years, the Milestone characters are relatively simple variations of the core model of the comic book superhero. In fact, comic book historians argue that "almost all of the original superhero concepts were developed between 1938 and 1943 (with the
exception of the early '60s Marvel characters like the Hulk, Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four, whose super powers resulted from radiation exposure). Of the seven most significant comic book superheroes [Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, Captain America, Captain Marvel, and Plastic Man], only one was created after 1943" (Benton, 1993: 176). All subsequent comic book heroes have been mere variations of these basic types.

The resemblance of key Milestone heroes to stock characters of the superhero genre is obvious. Much has been made of Icon's uncanny similarity, in both powers and personality, to the Man of Steel himself, Superman. But the resemblance of the other Milestone heroes to conventional superheroic types has not gone unnoticed by the fans. Icon's teenage partner Rocket fits the classic mold of "sidekick" first established with the inclusion of Robin in the Batman titles and later repeated almost endlessly with such youthful characters as the Green Arrow's Speedy, Captain America's Bucky, the Human Torch's Toro, and Aquaman's Aqualad, to name just a few. Other Milestone characters are an amalgam of previous heroic types and conventions. Static is a wise-cracking nerdy teenage superhero comparable to the original portrayal of Spider-Man, and he wields electrical powers much like those of DC Comics' off-again-on-again character Black Lightning. Likewise, Hardware seems to embody the grim outlook, intelligence and determination of a Batman and the weapons-filled super armor of an Iron Man. And of course, the team format of the Milestone series' Blood Syndicate, Shadow Cabinet and Heroes are all informed by such prototypical superteam titles as DC Comic's legendary Justice League of America and Marvel's extremely popular The Avengers or The X-Men.

The self-referentiality inherent in a genre as tightly and consistently defined as the comic book superhero genre is, on occasion, made very explicit. For example, for the month of November 1995 all of the Milestone titles featured nostalgic covers designed to pay tribute to favorite Golden Age artists and illustrated by guest creator Howard Chaykin, himself an almost legendary fan favorite among comic book artists and writers. Each of the covers depicted their respective Milestone heroes in a scene and style imitative of classic covers from the dawn of the superhero genre. Compare the cover from Icon #31 (Figure 7.2) with the famous 1940 cover of Batman #1 by Bob Kane (Figure 7.3). The other Milestone titles in the nostalgia series were similarly self-reflexive. Hardware #33 was modeled after Hit Comics #10 by Lou Fine, Static #29 was after Captain Marvel Jr. #7 by Mac

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Raboy, *Blood Syndicate* #32 was after *All-Winners Comics* #1 by Bill Everett, and *Xombi* #18 was after *Adventure Comics* #73 by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. "I felt". Chaykin claimed of his inspiration, "that it would be in keeping with the boyishness at the heart of comics to pay tribute [to the Golden Age creators] in bright color and heroic imagery." But by literally inserting the ethnically diverse Milestone heroes into these classic scenes originally dominated by White-only superheroes, these nostalgic covers emphasize more than just typical genre homage. This series of images also stresses the cultural and racial bias that has long dominated the mainstream comics industry, and that the Milestone characters represent a fundamental reworking of even the most basic and time honoured conventions of the genre.

Initially, many fans I spoke with referred to the Milestone characters in much the same terms that the ANIA group and other Afrocentric publishers used, referring to Icon as a Black Superman and to Hardware as a Black Iron Man. But where the ANIA members and their like meant the descriptions as a harsh defamation of Milestone's characters as culturally invalid, the readers' use of these terms did not necessarily denote criticism. While it is true that some readers were concerned that a character like Icon was so obviously similar to Superman that he could not possibly be more than the Man of Steel in blackface, most Milestone fans immediately welcomed the character as a long overdue variation on the Superman type.

I met Michael and Eric, two fourteen year old Jamaican-Canadians, at *The Comics Cavalcade* a small specialty store in a lower income area of North York, just beyond the edges of York University campus. Despite being best friends and having long shared an almost identical comics buying list, Michael and Eric were keenly divided over the issue of Icon as a Black Superman. "I don't buy it, man" declared Michael as he tilted his head to indicate the back issues of Icon displayed in the store's carefully haphazard front window. "I mean a lot of people I know buy that book but it hasn't really caught me yet. I can go for Hardware and Static, yeah. Static's cool. But if I want a Superman book -which I don't- I'd go to the original." "Don't believe him." Eric told me, as he leaned back against the faded NO LOITERING sign. "He's just dissesing Icon cause the rest of us all like the book and he wants to be different. Besides, I'm worn out from all this Super-Oreo crap about Ike. You can tell the man is Black. Just look at him! And don't be telling me he don't act Black. I mean how's Black supposed to act? hmm?" Eric checked his rising voice as he and Michael both
glanced at a group of teenage girls passing into the convenience mart next store. Adjusting his oversized, low-rider jeans and pulling up the tongue on his untied Air Jordans while Michael brushed imaginary dirt from the sleeves of his Toronto Raptors starter jacket, Eric resumed, "And I don't really care if he is a Black Superman, is that supposed to mean that a Black man can't be Superman? I don't think so. So what if he's a little uptight sometimes. Black can be uptight. I like Icon being Black, it's cool, but really skin colour don't have to mean all that much in comics." "That's true" Michael chimed in, "you've already got guys who are green, blue, purple, red and all kinds of other weird colours." "Really", Eric continued with a look of revelation on his face, "Icon isn't even Black, he's really this kinda blue-silverish looking alien who has only taken on a Black identity as a disguise while he's on Earth."

In fact, Eric's defensive observations about Icon hit on a couple of key concerns associated with the Milestone characters that fans often repeated in various ways. The first --"how's Black supposed to act?"-- which was discussed in some detail in the chapter related to the development of Milestone and the editorial dispute with other Afrocentric publishers, is that to deny Icon, or any of the other Milestone characters, as a legitimately Black character because he is a successful lawyer and a straight arrow republican is to deny anything but the most monolithic perception of black culture. The Milestone books are far from representing the Black experience in the U.S. as a darkened reflection of White culture, instead it shows a diversity of possible and existing social and political situations. Even at an economic level. Icon, whom the Milestone founders fully admit owes much historically to the image of Superman, has the implications of the Superman relation tempered by the inclusion of Rocket, an unwed teenage mother from the projects, as the team's driving force.

The second often repeated observation --"Black identity as a disguise"-- links the development of mainstream published Black superheroes not explicitly with a social and political need to provide positive images but rather with the larger genre traditions that necessitate variations on the basic model of the comic book hero. Because all of the Milestone characters are so identifiably situated within the superhero tradition, their visible ethnicity is read by some fans as just another logical variation of established types. In effect, ethnicity is read almost like another layer of the colorful costume, skin pigment operating metaphorically in tandem with the actual mask traditionally worn by comic book heroes. Moreover, at the time of Milestone's inception early in
1993 some of the fans I spoke with, both Black and White, accepted the parallels between Icon and Superman as a natural evolutionary step to be taken by a company linked with industry giant, and Superman publisher, DC Comics. In a self-perpetuating industry where no good character goes without spin-offs, an archetypal figure like Superman can beget such diverse variations as Supergirl, Superboy, Bizarro Superman and even Superdog, Supercat and Supermonkey... so why not a Black Superman? Indeed, the launch of Icon was doubly suspect for some fans not just as an imitation of Superman but as a possible replacement.

Just months before the first Milestone books were released, the Superman character, the most recognizable figure in comic books, was killed off in a much publicized battle with an alien villain named Doomsday. DC Comics spent nearly a year flogging possible Superman reincarnations including a new Superboy, a cyborg Superman, a dark vigilante style Superman, and perhaps most significantly, a Black Superman. The character was dubbed Steel, a mysterious mallet-wielding African American steelworker (John Henry Irons, an obvious nod to the African American folk hero John Henry), and was clad in an armored Superman-like costume. While the cyborg and the vigilante Superman were eventually run off, Irons' character was granted his own series, Steel, after the original Superman finally returned (Figure 7.4). With the reinstatement of the archetypal Superman at the pinnacle of the Superman family of characters, the true origin of Steel was finally revealed, thus situating him clearly within the realm of Superman variations. In the story "In the Beginning!" which appeared in Steel #0 (1994), written by Louise Simonson and pencilled by Chris Batista, we find out that John Henry Irons was indeed named after the folk hero who died proving he could pound railway steel faster than a steam driven machine could. "That's why your pa named you after him," John's grandfather explains to him in a flash-back sequence. "John Henry used his muscles to beat one machine, an' your pa hopes you'll use your brains... and become the machine's master." Indeed, the theme expressed so succinctly in this origin tale, the theme of heroic Black men shifting from purely muscular achievements to more cerebral triumphs, is a central concern of some Milestone readers and I will be returning to it in much greater detail in the next chapter. The story goes on to explain that the young John Henry Irons was orphaned when his parents were senselessly killed because they had attended a freedom march (shades of countless other orphaned heroes), and was raised by his paternal grandparents. Irons attended Yale on a baseball scholarship and excelled at the
"Then Doomsday smashed his way into Metropolis.

"When the battle between him and Superman moved nearby.

"I sketched up a sledgehammer and pushed down toward the fight.

"Superman had served me now I was going to help him.

"But an explosion collapsed the building.

"...and I was buried when I finally cleared my way out.

I learned the truth...

"...Doomsday died in the battle... but so did Superman.

"Still owed him my life, so I decided to try to take his place.

"Do what we would have wanted, so I refashioned the ammowhit.

That's it!!

But, because of his encounter with Superman...

That family now encompasses all of humanity.

Reverse the current. Sledgehammer. It's time to break steel up!!"
science of ballistics. From there he went on to be a top research scientist for Amertek, until he witnessed first hand the mass destruction caused by one of the weapons he designed for the military. Irons deleted his other designs, faked his own death, and became a skyscraper steel worker in Metropolis where Superman saved his life one day after a support cable snapped. Thus, when Superman died in his battle with Doomsday, Irons took it upon himself to be the new Superman. "Still owed him my life," Irons recounts, "so I decided I'd try to take his place, do what he would have wanted." So now the official Superman family really does include a Black Superman.

Though some fans incorporate the visible ethnicity of the Milestone heroes into an understanding of a genre system constantly struggling to reinvent its core character types, that does not mean they discount some of the deeper changes implied by the development of a hero like Icon just because he is Superman-like. Whereas Steel's position as the designated Black hero in the official Superman family of comics is sometimes commented on because of his direct relationship to the original Superman (as a temporary replacement and because they are, after all, acquaintances who both originally worked in Metropolis), the fans' general awareness of Milestone as a Black-owned and controlled publishing company tempers most of the suspicions of tokenism. In other words, though the Milestone heroes' generic lineages are clearly associated with several key White characters, that does not negate their symbolic significance as some of the most truly innovative comic book characters to appear in decades due to their emphasis on ethnic variety, including East and West Asian, Hispanic and Native characters as well as their leading African American heroes..

"Don't get me wrong, I like Buck, but he's no Icon."

-Reggie. Letter-of-the-Month. Icon #33

While at the Chicago Comicon I struck up a conversation with a seven year old boy dressed head to toe in matching Tommy Hilfiger clothes, he was glad to list all of his favorite Milestone fight scenes for me as I scrambled to write them all down. As I listened to his sound effects-filled lecture on why Static could probably kick Spider-Man's ass and why the Blood Syndicate had it all over the X-Men, I noticed a concerned looking man in well pressed jeans and a black Nike pull-over approaching us. The man, who appeared to be in his early thirties, turned out to be the boy's father and quite diplomatically but firmly asked what I was talking to his son about. When I explained that I
was doing some research on Milestone comics he smiled, introduced himself as Matt and sent his son to wait in an autograph line with his friends. "I'm a Milestone fan too", said Matt as he tapped a small black and grey pin on his chest that was decorated with the company's trademark "M". "Just picked up a handful of these over at the DC booth." I asked who had been the Milestone fan first, him or his son. What I got in reply was a thoughtful comment on the relationship between the different generations of Black superheroes and comic book fans.

"Well...," Matt replied as we sat down in wobbly chairs around a dirty plastic table next to the over-priced pizza and hot-dog concession stand. "I have to admit that Tim introduced me to some of the Milestone titles even though I was the one who got him started on comics just a year or so ago. I used to collect comics as a kid, mostly Marvel stuff, but I had gotten out of it as an adult. Then Tim's teacher told us that his reading skills were coming along too slowly so I began picking up some basic books like Supermans and Batmans to read with him. Now he's an avid reader. Of course I would have liked him to be reading about heroes that were Black rather than always having White role models but I didn't think there was much out there that was appropriate for someone as young as Tim. I read Luke Cage and the Black Panther as a kid and loved them --Oh, yeah and I vaguely remember seeing what's his name? The Black Hornet? No. The Brown Hornet! That's it. On The Fat Albert Show and even thinking that he was cool, though he was just a weird little cartoon superhero--anyway, they may all have been pretty silly but I thought they were great at the time. they let me see someone like me doing good things, saving people, beating up drug dealers and not being just a bad guy or a side-kick. But those guys, as out of date as they were, are long gone. Then Tim borrowed a copy of Hardware from a friend of his and we read it together. It blew my mind. Here was a brother of today doing it all. From that point on I've encouraged Tim to include all the Milestone titles with his weekly buys, I even give him extra allowance to make up the difference, and we both read them. These characters are maybe better, more realistic than guys like Cage, they're not spending all their time trying to be really Black but they're doing the same thing that the books I used to read were doing. They may be new versions of the old guys but they let my kid dream about saving the world."

As Matt's comments about his old reading experiences and his new ones with his son imply, reading the Milestone comics in relation to the superhero genre as a whole is only one of the most basic points of comparison that shapes the fans' understanding of the books. More specifically many
comics fans I spoke with, and every one of them who, like Matt, was old enough to remember or have read reprints of books from the 1970s, mentioned that they enjoyed the Milestone stories as a reworking of the famous blaxploitation comics from a generation ago. Though the politically contentious blaxploitation comics of the 1970s served, for a while, the needs of young Black fans who felt alienated from most mainstream comic book products, none of these tough street-wise characters stood the test of time. The original Black Panther lasted only 15 issues after moving from *Jungle Action* to his own title in 1977. Black Lightning only appeared in 11 issues of his own series before being relegated to the occasional back-up story in the books of more popular DC heroes, and even the best known "superspade" from the era, Luke Cage: Hero for Hire, who began his adventures in 1972 was finished by 1986 and could not survive a short-lived revival in 1992. Much like the blaxploitation films that preceded them, these jive-talking heroes are remembered, albeit fondly, as an embarrassing period in comics' history. Yet, for better or worse, these macho men of blaxploitation remained the only significant representation of Black heroes until Milestone appeared on the scene a few short years ago. In a medium that revolves around creators and fans that are perhaps more self-consciously aware of the historical developments of the superhero genre than the participants in any other popular genre of entertainment are, it was only natural that Milestone would explicitly address the blaxploitation period.

When I first met with the principle founders of Milestone they had just published a few weeks earlier a tale in *Icon* #13 (Figure 7.5), written by Dwayne McDuffie and pencilled by M.D. Bright, that a great majority of the fans would subsequently point to as a particularly important and enjoyably self-referentially loaded narrative (every single fan of the Milestone books chose this issue of *Icon* as one of their five favorite stories). The story marks the debut of Buck Wild: Mercenary Man, an obvious tongue-in-cheek parody of Luke Cage: Hero for Hire. As a slice of pure 1970s blaxploitation, right down to the disco-era superhero costumes, funky head band, and Buck's humorously inappropriate catch-phrase exclamation "Sweet Easter!". The story dives right into Buck Wild's raid on a criminal hide-out where he overpowers several armed thugs. Unfortunately, Buck is

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3Buck Wild's exclamation of "Sweet Easter!" is meant as a direct parody of Luke Cage who was always shouting "Sweet Christmas!" presumably because stronger language was deemed inappropriate for a comic book.
captured and entranced by the "P-Whip" of his archenemy Lysistra Jones4 --herself a hip-hugger wearing parody of the Tamara Dobson and Pam Grier-type of roles from such blaxploitation films as *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). Still under the magical sway of the "P-Whip", Buck is sent to fight Icon and Rocket who are trying to close down a crack-house which, as Buck puts it, "is sho 'nuff property of my main mistress, Lysistra Jones". After a brief battle ("Aunt Jemimma's Do-Rag!" declares Buck after Icon recovers from one of his patented "belief defying" strong punches, "you's about one tough son of a biscuit") Icon and Rocket are able to subdue the out of place hero.

To Icon and Rocket's surprise, Buck is defended by a crowd of on-lookers until the pain of Icon's grip helps Buck remember who he is. "I do remember" Buck mutters through clenched teeth as he proceeds to narrate a sequence of flashbacks that more than subtly mirrors the origin story of Luke Cage (see chapter 3). "It all started when I was convicted for a crime I didn't commit... the joint wuz rough, but I wuz gonna do my time real quiet-like and go straight. But one of the racist pig prison guards had other ideas... -You call me *mister* Charlie, boy!- "mebbe it wuz cause I useta date his sister, I dunno. I knewed right then that there was no way I'd survive my sentence. That's when I volunteered fo' the experiment. They was experimenting with freezing people, and unthawin' em years later. Like frozen food. The deal was, if I survived the experiment, they'd knock some time offa my sentence. But it didn't work." WHOOM! The lab where Buck is being frozen in a cryogenic tube explodes. "Before the explosion", Buck continues, "nuthin' had frozen yet but my brain. But somehow the accident gave me Tungsten-hard skin and belief-defyin' strength". Having explained how his brain was frozen in 1972, and hasn't thawed out yet, Icon and Rocket decide to help Buck defeat Lysistra Jones. After a quick arrest, Rocket sums up this story's nod to history when she tells Buck in the final panel "You are what you is. And 1972 was a long time ago. Maybe it's just time to move on."

When I asked writer and Milestone Editor-in-Chief Dwayne McDuffie, who was jokingly billed as "Trouble Man" in the credits to this particular issue, about Buck Wild he was reluctant to admit that the character was meant as anything more than good fun for a bunch of fans turned creators. "Nothing more?" I pressed. "You mean, like a scathingly accurate social satire?" Denys

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4Lysistra Jones is described on the back of her Milestone trading card as: "She developed a unique but effective fighting style from viewing countless hours of cheesy martial-arts films. After a similar marathon session of viewing a series of "blaxploitation" films, she decided to become the "Black Queen of Crime" (or "Queen of Black Crime", she's still deciding which). In addition to her criminal genius, she is also a talented choreographer."
"Black Caesar" Cowan, Milestone's Creative Director, joked from the corner of McDuffie's cramped office which was packed with art samples for upcoming issues. "Nah... we were just having some fun with the old stuff." In this specific case, as with their entire line generally, it was clear that the folks at Milestone were wary of positioning their stories as anything more than good clean hero fun, in fear of being perceived as "political" rather than entertaining. But it is also clear that characters like Buck Wild and Lysistra Jones operate as both a nod to the troubled history of Black superheroes and as a point of reference against which the Milestone characters can be read as a reinvention of the heretofore dominant Black superheroic type. This is certainly how many of the fans read Buck Wild, and by extension the entire line of "new" heroes published by Milestone. While the Milestone characters are undeniably fresh variations of the overall superhero type, part of the pleasure fans derive from their close readings of the books, made possible by their subcultural knowledge, relates to their perception of the Milestone characters as emerging from a specific, albeit short lived, historical context.

While the heavy-handed comics from the blaxploitation era, like the motion pictures that inspired them, may in hindsight be characterized as having failed "in certain ways to represent the aesthetic values of black culture properly" (Lott, 1991: 42), their influence is not forgotten by the Milestone creators or their fans. They may not have been perfect but they still facilitated a sense of identification with the heroic for many young readers. By today's standards a character like Buck Wild is obviously a playful spoof of one of the genre's most awkward periods in time, but he is also a validation of the positive aspects of those past heroes. Working on at least two levels Buck Wild is both history lesson and camp. Fans loved the character as either parody or homage. Many wrote in asking for Buck's return or maybe his own series. His trading card was, according to several young fans, the most sought after in the Milestone series of over fifty cards, and at least one fan took to painting him on the sleeve of his jacket. Recognizing his popular appeal, Milestone brought Buck back for several issues, even having him stand in for the original Icon when he was off in space contemplating a return to his own planet. Yet, finally, in perhaps one of comics most self-reflexive and metaphorical moments, Buck was killed off and in Icon #30 -"Because you demanded it!"- his funeral laid to rest not just Buck Wild but all the blaxploitation characters that he represented.

This hilarious 30th issue of Icon is full of so many allusions to historical characters that only
a real genre fan would be able to catch them all. In this story Milestone manages to pay tribute and mark the end of an era that has haunted Black comics for decades. In the story, which is told mostly in flashback sequences, Icon's eulogy is repeatedly interrupted by various villains who had each previously fought Buck while he personified different blaxploitation heroes. First Lysistra Jones, "in the fine, foxy flesh, baby!", describes her first battle with Buck when on the edge of defeat he swallowed an "experimental growth serum created by a White guy much smarter than me" to become the giant Buck Goliath (a nod to Marvel's Black Goliath). Next the pink-suit-wearing pimp Sweet Stick Max describes his battle with Buck when "he was working as a sidekick to that World War II hero, you know, The Patriot." After Max's "Ho Hordes" subdued The Patriot it was Buck in a crazy flying suit that saved the day as Jim Crow (a parody of Captain America's Black sidekick The Falcon). The Cockroach Andy, who mutated into a giant cockroach when his ghetto tenement was used as a dumping ground for nuclear waste, tells of how Buck Lightning (re: DC's Black Lightning) destroyed his plans to set off a roach bomb that would have mutated every one in the city of Dakota. And finally, in a tribute to the Black Panther and all the other forgotten Black characters that were associated with African royalty and dark magic, the Kingfish temporarily reanimates him as Buck Voodoo for one last battle before Darnice, Buck's partner while he was the substitute Icon, tells him "I love you, Buck, but your time has passed."

In an eulogy for a comics era thinly disguised as a eulogy for a specific character, Icon's speech sums up the attitudes of both the Milestone creators and many of their fans. "I am considered by many to be a hero, an example of possibility and achievement. And recently, Buck has patterned himself after me", the character of Icon declares in a speech dripping with extra-textual self-awareness. "But years before I arrived, Buck Wild was already there, fighting the good fight. Although we may, from our current perspective, have found him crude and ill-informed, we cannot deny his importance. Intentions count as much as actions. And Buck was nothing if not well-intentioned. He spent his life fighting for what is right, all the while struggling with questions of identity and public perception that we still do not have answers for. He reinvented himself time and again, searching for a comfortable way to present himself to the world. And while we winced on occasion at his embarrassing speech and demeaning behavior, more often we cheered him on... Because whatever else he was, he was always a hero. A hero for those of us who had no heroes. were it
not for him, we wouldn't be here today... And for all his failures, he died as he lived, trying to do what was right. Let us hope that when our day is done, history remembers us as kindly as it remembers him."

Ironically, despite the criticism made of Milestone by ANIA and other independent African American comic book publishers (see Chapter 4) that their characters could not possibly be authentic because they were tied through distribution with industry giant DC Comics, a number of the comics fans I talked to regard the ANIA type books as stuck in the blaxploitation era. By adamantly and very self-consciously creating comic books that emphasis a "Black Aesthetic" whereby all Afrocentric art must be separate from, and in opposition to, the dominant White cultural industries, some independent publishers are actually perceived as less progressive by the core audience of fans. For example, when I asked Matt, at the Chicago Comicon, if either he or his son Tim had come across any other Black comics that they enjoyed as much as the Milestone titles, with only a moment's hesitation, he said they had not. "There is some good stuff out there with Marvel and DC, like Storm and Bishop and Steel, but I'm kinda turned off the big companies right now anyway. I have been looking at some of the small-scale stuff that gets hocked around here and at some of the shops back home. Some of it's pretty cool but a lot of the superhero stuff is way too sexual in a juvenile "lets-draw-dirty-pictures" kind of way, and lots of it is trying so hard to bring in Black solidarity and weirdly screwed up politics that they're a little embarrassing, and definitely not for my kid yet. I mean, running around in a leopard-skin G-string for back-to-Africaness? Come on! Haven't things changed since the Black Panther? Time to move on." It would seem that by focusing on the politics of cultural nationalism the ANIA form of comic books are seen by some as ridiculously out of place.

It is a problem faced by the entire medium. Perceived as eternally childish by non-fans, and restricted by the genre-based tastes of the bulk of comic book buyers, it is difficult for superhero comics to address serious issues. Certainly it has been done on occasion in even the most mainstream of books with great maturity and shocking effects. In recent years The Hulk has carried a story line in which a major character died of Aids, in Captain America Steve Rogers was diagnosed with a rare cancer caused by the very growth serum that gives him his tremendous powers, and in Night Cries Batman was confronted with the effects of child abuse. But other examples illustrate the limitations that hinder social awareness in comics. In 1991 Marvel published a mini-series featuring a minor
character, North Star, from the Canadian superhero team Alpha Flight. The story centered on North Star's coming out of the closet, and it garnered a lot of media attention. Even though the character was a practically unknown commodity, the fact that a superhero in comic books for children was gay seemed outrageous to a good deal of the public. For Ania and other Afrocentric publishers the risk is that by presenting their political views in the form of a comic book, those views become lessened to the point of self-parody. A loin-cloth wearing, spear-carrying hero may seem to be the perfect embodiment for radical Black politics, but in the pages of a comic book it also resembles some of the most embarrassing stereotypes of Black characters.

Milestone, on the other hand, by recognizing their development within the context of the superheroic genre and in relation to blaxploitation characters in particular, seem to have produced books that satisfy the fans' desire for traditional adventure narratives first and weave the racial/political dimension in as a result, rather than as a cause, of the comics. Rather than producing ethnically informed and explicitly counter-hegemonic books from the fringes of the industry, Milestone has managed to construct racially informed comics that are more subtly counter-hegemonic and work from within the mainstream of the superhero genre. By situating themselves so firmly within the most basic of comic book traditions, while reworking and critiquing those very same traditions, Milestone's presentation of Black superheroes has managed to push the envelope. One of the most startling confessions I heard while interviewing comic book fans was from a thirteen year old boy in Toronto's grand Mecca of comics stores, The Silver Snail. "I think I used to be pretty racist" he told me under his breath after looking around to see that nobody else was in listening distance. "I didn't like any of the Black kids at school, or nothing. They always seemed kinda stupid hanging around acting tough in their baggy jeans and big jackets. and all. I don't even like rap or anything like that. But I've always been a big Spider-Man fan. I pick up everything with Spidey in it. So anyways, one day I'm talking to the guy behind the counter here who usually pulls my books for me and he says that if I like Spider-Man I should give Static a try. At first I thought "yeah, right!", but then I picked up a couple of issues one day when I had some spare bucks, and I really liked them. Static's pretty cool. So I don't know, maybe I've just grown up or something, but I do know that I look at Black people differently now. Or really I should say I don't look at them differently anymore." Quite a feat for a comic book.
For the most part Phil describes himself as an average thirteen year old boy. He lives in a recently renovated townhouse with his mother, Ashley, a bank teller, and his step-father, Frank, who works for the city's department of Parks and Recreation. Phil does well in his junior high public school but complains that he's easily bored by the curriculum. He initially comes across as shy but is actually quite outgoing and popular with his peers. His parents tease him about dating five different girls in the past year. Phil is also a serious comic book collector and was consistently articulate and enthusiastic on the several occasions that I interviewed him.

On one of those occasions, Phil insisted I accompany him back to his room so he could show me some of the comic books he had been talking about. At first glance his bedroom seemed like the typical middle-class bedroom of a thirteen-year-old. There was an assortment of crumpled clothes scattered on the floor, dozens of music CDs littered the shelves, and about a dozen unopened school text books were being used as paper-weights on the small desk that occupied one corner of the room. There was a window framed by twin bookshelves on the back wall, while the three remaining walls were almost completely covered with --as might be expected in a healthy, heterosexual adolescent boys room-- pin-up posters featuring countless "perfect" bodies. Bodies clad in bathing suits and tights, bodies in wholesome poses, in athletic poses, in sultry poses.

But I was surprised to find that of all these posters of perfectly primped bodies only two were bikini shots of Sports Illustrated swimsuit models. Crowding out a smiling Tyra Banks and a smoldering Kathy Ireland were dozens of muscular men in costumes that looked like they were almost painted onto their bodies. Batman, Prime, Supreme, Badrock, Daredevil, Spawn, Wolverine, Pitt, and the Hulk were just a few of the characters that populated the walls of Phil's bedroom. In a strange way, it looked like an absurdly colorful collage of bodybuilders all caught in a final pose down for a panel of unseen judges. "Like my wall-paper?" Phil asked proudly. "My Mom keeps bugging me to take them down now that I'm in junior high but it took me too long to get them all together... so they're staying right where they are, thank you very much."

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"Aren't some of these guys drawn a little -uh-...". I was looking for the right word that wouldn't offend Phil. "a little big?" I finally decided.

"Yeah, maybe some," Phil laughed. "I mean check out The Hulker over here. Look at those arms wouldn't that be cool? They are sooo huge!"

" Wouldn't what be cool?" I had to ask, a little confused. Phil was an aspiring comics illustrator so I initially assumed he meant it would be cool to be able to draw like that.

"To be that big," He responded, quite matter-of-factly. "That's one of the reasons I'm leaving 'em up, they're my inspiration. Dad got me some weights in the basement and I'm working out semi-regular now. Gonna be huge one day."

I was a bit surprised by the revelation that Phil wanted to lift enough weights to be huge one day. I couldn't get the image of that old Charles Atlas advertisement out of my head. The one that appeared in almost every superhero comic book and showed a skinny youth who loses his girl when a muscular beach bully kicks sand in his face, and he doesn't get her back until he follows the Atlas principles of body-building (which appeared to involve throwing a lot of furniture around), returns to the beach all buffed up and socks it to the bully. Phil had previously, on several occasions, ridiculed some of his peers whom he regarded as too involved in athletic activities. "That's interesting." I tried to sound encouraging as Phil pretended to flex his biceps and pop his neck muscles, "but some of these guys are literally as big as houses."

"Well that's what the girls like" Phil replied, making it sound almost as much like a question as a statement. "Plus," he quickly added as his slightly devious smile returned, "when you're that big nobody fucks with you. You could tell off anyone you want and all they could do would be to take it. Not like now. Man, any problems you got --POOF!-- they're gone."
READING COMIC BOOK MASCULINITY

Lois Lane please put me in your plan
Yeah, Lois Lane you don't need no Superman
Come on downtown and stay with me tonight
I got a pocketful of kryptonite

He's leaping buildings in a single bound
I'm reading Shakespeare at my place downtown
Come on downtown and make love to me
I'm Jimmy Olsen not a Titan, you see

He's faster than a bullet, stronger than a train
He's the one who got lucky, got his cape around Miss Lois Lane
I can't believe my dilemma is real
I'm competing with the Man of Steel

"Jimmy Olsen's Blues"
The Spin Doctors, 1993

In part, the last chapter addressed how some readers viewed race as a form of masquerade in the Milestone comic books, as yet another layer added to the superhero genre's conventions of costume and masks. In this chapter I want to explore the concept of masculinity as it is presented and perceived by Milestone and their readers. Time and again, when asked about the appeal of the Milestone titles, many of the comic book fans I interviewed would return to the way the characters acted as heroes and as men. "For me it really isn't an issue of whether they're Black or White," a White twelve-year-old fan told me when I began research, "I like Icon and Static and Hardware because they're tough guys, but not too tough, if you know what I mean". At the time, I did not know what he meant ("tough guys, but not too tough" ?!?), but as I spoke with more comic book readers it became increasingly apparent that masculinity in contemporary comic books is understood according to the
medium's quintessential depiction of masculine duality. Superhero comics have always relied on the notion that a super man exists within every man, and while the readers were well aware of this most fundamental convention they were also aware that some of the newest and most popular books were erasing the ordinary man underneath in favor of an even more excessively powerful and one-dimensional masculine ideal.

As comic book fans, none of the readers I spoke with restricted their consumption to the Milestone titles alone. They were all well aware of what was going on in the pages of other popular series and a fundamental part of their overall understanding of the superhero genre is based on how the contents of some books can be interpreted in relation to the ones next to them on the store shelves. Just as the Milestone readers construct their understanding of the text in relation to other contemporary African American-oriented comic books and to the historical antecedents of the superhero genre, their interpretation is also shaped by the way the books compare to the most popular comics currently crowding the stands. To be precise, the Milestone comics are recognized, in a large part, by what they are not, namely, Image Comics. In other words, the Milestone stories are understood in comparison to the flashy, market-dominating comic books published by the various studios that fall under the umbrella of Image Comics. Driven by an exaggeratedly stylized form of illustration, the Image books have foregrounded rather excessive visions of traditional gender types. It seems that following Image's lead, everywhere one looks now in a comic book store, the display racks are full of excessively macho and excessively muscular, costumed supermen. It is in comparison to these hypermasculine images that many fans have formed an understanding of the Milestone characters as alternative masculine ideals, specifically Black masculine ideals that stress compassion and intelligence rather than physical force. Those who count the Milestone books among their preferences seem to do so because they offer an alternative to the extreme of hypermasculinity, or as one reader put it: "with Milestone it isn't always the guy with the biggest arms that wins... it's the guy with the biggest brain."

Clearly the most developed theories of gender have come from the feminist movement. and perhaps the greatest contribution of feminist scholarship since the 1970s has been its consideration of gender as a social construction. Within cultural studies Laura Mulvey's landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema", first published in 1975, has influenced numerous critics over the
years who have substantiated, expanded and contradicted her arguments about the passive female and active male roles in contemporary Western culture, and how these norms are tied up with the masculine cinematic gaze and viewer identification. Most of these works were concerned with exploring the role of women in popular culture and have assumed, along with Mulvey, that masculinity and its inherent privileges constituted an unmarked category, a "natural" gender identity. Recent works like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and the growing influence of Queer studies have refocused interests to include the consideration of masculinity, particularly heterosexual masculinity, as a social construction. In relation to popular culture studies, modern film theory has lead the way in investigating masculinity via specific stars including Warren Beatty (Bingham, 1994), William Holden (Cohan, 1991), and Gary Cooper (Brown, 1995), and in relation to such male dominated genres as the western (Pumphrey, 1992), the horror (Clover, 1992), and the action film (Tasker, 1993). Similarly, other areas related to popular culture research such as sports psychology (see Messner and Sabo, 1990), musicology (see Robinson, 1994), and even dance studies (see Burt, 1995) have all contributed to the deconstruction of masculinity as a natural, stable gender identity. The masculinity of popular culture's traditional, idealized hero is beginning to be recognized in much the same terms as femininity has been understood, not as real and unified, but as a carefully orchestrated performance, or in other words, as a masquerade. But if the heterosexual male is the site of gender and sexual privilege in North American culture, as it is undeniably perceived to be, then we might ask just what the masquerade of masculinity operates to disguise?

The contemporary understanding of gender as a socially constructed identity --as masquerade, as performance, as drag-- is in many ways a response to the earlier feminist critique of patriarchy based on the "politics of the body" that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Simply put, that feminist trope assumed what Susan Bordo has referred to as "an oppressor/oppressed model which theorizes men as possessing and wielding power over women - who are viewed correspondingly as themselves utterly powerless" (Bordo. 1993: 23). This binary structure situates men as active, women as passive, men as violent, women as having violence done to them. This deterministic linkage of role and sex within feminist discourse is hampered by what many of the new feminist theorists charge is an overly simplified, pessimistic, dualistic and paranoid view of cultural subordination.
Parallel to some of the major feminist-influenced developments in audience studies that have advanced the notion of consumers able to make of the text what they want, many contemporary feminist scholars have begun to challenge the underlying assumptions of the earlier feminist theory that women are powerless, cultural dopes. Recent feminist work has even gone so far as to find subversive and empowering aspects in women's use of cosmetic surgery (Davis, 1991) and makeup (Radner, 1989). Influenced by deconstructionism, poststructuralism, and cultural studies, modern feminists often seek to explore the complex, multifaceted dimensions that are possible in the reading of every cultural act. Central to this new wave of gender studies is Judith Butler's work on the performative nature of gender. Butler's concept of gender as a learned set of characteristics that have assumed an air of naturalness lays much of the groundwork for the understanding of gender (both feminine and masculine) as a socially constructed ideal that this chapter is based on.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler investigates the performative nature of gender roles as they have been socially constructed within Western culture. Her goal is to provoke gender trouble by denaturalizing traditional gender categories grounded in biological determinism. Butler's theory of gender is twofold: a consideration of gender as performance and a claim for parody as the most effective means for undermining the current binary frame of gender. For Butler, gendered identities are not a reflection of one's authentic core self, but are a culturally coded effect of performance. "Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow: rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts (1990: 140, italics in original). Gender does not prescribe our performance, rather it is performance that ascribes our gender. According to Butler's deconstruction of the traditional theory of mind/body and nature/culture dualism, there is no real and biologically determined self at the core of our being, only the mannerisms and gestures we have learned. Butler argues that bodily "acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler, 1990: 136). The body itself. Butler continues, is "not a 'being' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural
field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (139). Butler argues that there is no nat
ural gender identity or even any form of androgyny that pre-exists socialization. A person is not
born man or a woman, but rather becomes one. As Butler puts it: "Gender is the repeated stylization
of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to
produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). To borrow the metaphor first
coined by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1929), this stylized performance of gender is the way in which
both sexes construct a mask, or use gender as a masquerade.

In different and less psychoanalytic terms, cross-cultural evidence suggests that masculinity is
a very carefully constructed concept. And if it is not overtly recognized as a mask, masculinity is
consistently perceived in a great variety of cultures as something that must be achieved, that must be
learned, that must be created. In his wide-ranging, cross-cultural study of masculinity and rights of
initiation, Manhood in the Making (1990), David Gilmore argues for the existence of a "constantly
recurring notion that real manhood... is not a natural condition that comes about spontaneously
through biological maturation but rather is a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against
powerful odds" (Gilmore, 1990:11). Western culture is no exception to Gilmore's definition of
masculinity as a "category of achievement." From little league, to driving a car, to standing up for
one's self, our culture is rife with the rituals and the behavioral standards that define masculinity.
Comic book superheroes, those powerful men in masks, are the ultimate parables (or parodies) of
modern masculinity.

It is feasible that a clue to the question of just what does the masquerade of masculinity
operates to disguise? lies in the very notion of the masquerade and the implication of an underlying,
unstable level of gender identity. Indeed, duality seems to be an inherent tension of masculinity as it
is played out in some of the most archetypal metaphors of the masculine condition in Western
culture. Among the most enduring and common themes in popular culture is the split male persona.
Whether in Jungian psychology or low budget horror films, great literary works or modern comic
books, masculinity has often explored its own duality. The male identity in the twentieth century is
perceived in extremes: man or mouse. He-man or 98 pound weakling, jock or nerd. At the one end is
the hyper-masculine ideal with muscles, sex appeal and social competence, at the other is the brainy
but skinny and socially inept failure. But these two male extremes are not as far removed as they
might seem. Warrior and wimp exist side by side, each defining the other in mutual opposition. The binary perception of these extremes is extended from the binary logic of the male/female gender distinction. To be a "real man" means to ascribe to the hyper-masculine ideal, while anything less is regarded as feminine. The denigrating terms for the nerdish male —*sissy, wussy, wuss*, and *girly man*—clearly mark the gender transgression feared by the He-man. The man who fails to present an overtly masculine front is derided as not a man at all, but as a woman. Yet, even in this post-Reagan era when masculine ideals in popular culture have skewed towards the likes of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, we can see these blatantly masculine performances as masks for the insecure nerd that coexists within most masculine identities.

In the following pages I will outline how masculinity has traditionally been constructed in popular culture, how comic books have and continue to represent for readers a unique and divided understanding of the masquerade as a fantasy of power based on the external trappings of masculinity, and finally how Milestone's use of classic but progressively reworked narrative conventions and African American characters repositions concepts of Black masculinity.

**Masculine Traits**

Identifying what constitutes masculinity in Western culture is not as straightforward as it sounds. In "Learning to be a Man", part one of his recent book about constructing masculine identities, Ian M. Harris (1995) lists no less than fifteen role types often invoked as male ideals, including 'adventurer', 'breadwinner', 'playboy' and 'tough guy'. Common to all these roles are the stereotypical traits associated with Western culture's contemporary notion of masculinity: strength, control, confidence, aggressiveness, individuality, toughness, and emotional reserve. This vague form of definition regarding just what it means to be a man is essentialist. As Robert Brannon (1976) describes it "our culture's blueprint of manhood [reads as] No Sissy Stuff, The Big Wheel, The Sturdy Oak and Give 'em Hell." In essence masculinity is perhaps best conceived as it is defined semiotically, or in other words through the symbolic contrasts between masculinity and femininity. In fact, according to R.W. Connell the concept of masculinity is inherently relational: "*masculinity does not exist except in contrast with femininity*" (1995: 68). In short, masculinity is generally defined by what it is not, namely "feminine", and all its associated traits -hard *not* soft, strong *not* weak, reserved *not*
emotional, active not passive.

One of the most obvious and central focal points for characterizing masculinity has been the male body. As an external signifier of masculinity, the body has come to represent all the conventions traditionally linked to assumptions of male superiority. "Of course", Susan Bordo has observed in her discussion of contemporary body images. "muscles have chiefly symbolized and continue to symbolize masculine power as physical strength, frequently operating as a means of coding the 'naturalness' of sexual difference" (1993: 193). The muscular body is a heavily inscribed sign. Nothing else is thought to mark an individual so clearly as a bearer of masculine power. In fact, muscles are so adamantly read as a sign of masculinity that women who develop noticeable musculature --for example, professional female body builders (see Schulze, 1990)-- are often accused of gender transgression, of being butch or too manly, in much the same way that under-developed men are open to the criticism of being too feminine. Many critics have stressed the symbolically phallic nature of the masculine ideal when the muscles seem to literally encase the male body in a sort of defensive armor. In his study of the male pin-up Richard Dyer notes that above all else "muscularity is the sign of power --natural, achieved, phallic" (1982: 68). The reductive, Freudianesque, model of masculinity as a phallic state is useful for understanding how symbols coalesce into the extremes of hardness versus softness. The status and the power of the hard male body is only achieved in contrast to those cultural identities represented as soft and vulnerable, among them women, homosexuals, children, and the elderly.

This standard of masculinity so vigorously reinforced in Western culture is at root a fascist ideology in that it anthropomorphizes authoritarian attitude towards physical ideals and gender superiority, as well as carrying intonations of racial superiority. In Male Fantasies (1977), Klaus Theweleit outlines the existence of two mutually exclusive body types observed by German fascists. The first was the up-standing, steel hard, organized, machine-like body of the German master, and the second was the flaccid, soft, fluid body of the perennial Other. According to Theweleit the hard masculine ideal was the armored body, armored by muscles and by emotional rigidity marked by a vehement desire to eradicate the softness and the emotional liquidity of the feminine Other. Although the feared body of the Other was most directly modelled on the feminine it was, as we know from Nazi practices of extermination, also projected onto the body of both the homosexual and the Jewish
man. The ridicule of the gay man as unmanly, as in essence a woman, is among the most pervasive stereotypes of modern times, reaching far beyond the confines of Nazi Germany. Likewise, as Bordo points out, "in anti-Semitic tracts and cartoons, the Jewish man is represented as dwarfish, soft, womanish, simpering, impotent, a castrate. Such stereotypes, albeit often in more polite form (e.g., the "nice Jewish boy", the ineffectual scholar, the meek husband or dutiful son dominated by the castrating Jewish Mother) continue to haunt Jewish men today" (1993: 700-701). Hence, we must keep in mind that the standard phallic version of the masculine ideal is deeply grounded in not just misogynistic and homophobic ideology but also in thinly veiled racist terms. I want to return later to just how these naturalized racist terms have worked against understandings of Black masculinity in contemporary popular culture.

The muscular male body has long been a decisive sign of masculinity and physical superiority. From ancient Greek statuary to modern comic book superheroes there has been a fairly consistent notion of what the perfect man should look like. Art historian George L. Hersey (1996) has argued that a very specific model of physicality has been favored ever since the Greek sculptor Polykleitos established a system of ideal body measurements in the fifth century BC. The Polykleitan model stipulates that the body should correspond to the dimensions of the head. The total height should be between seven and eight heads, with very specific subdivisions at the nipples, umbilicus and groin which must measure two, three, and four heads respectively, from the top down. This physical model has always been an influential factor in figure art and can be seen clearly in the works of such notable painters as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Durer, Raphael and Rubens. The Polykleitan proportions have also been an ideal beyond the world of classical art. Most notoriously, it provided a concrete archetype of physical perfection for the eugenics movement pursued by Nazi Germany. Seeking to make the Aryan ideal a reality, the Nazis instituted state-controlled breeding of individuals who conformed to the classical proportions of the Polykleitan form. The state calculated that within 120 years all Germans would look like ancient Greek statues if "lesser beings" were removed from the reproductive pool. Tens of thousands of compulsory sterilizations took place on individuals whose body types did not conform to the ideal, and much of the early anti-Semitic propaganda was premised on the supposed deficiencies of the Jewish body. Despite such catastrophic cases the Polykleitan body is still the ultimate sign of masculinity today. Moreover, it is the model upon which
the muscular illustration of the comic book superhero is based. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the monthly fanzine articles that teach readers how to draw their own superheroes, the instructive illustration all show the aspiring illustrators how to measure out heroic looking bodies by using the Polykleitan system of head proportions. The muscular superhero body is a direct descendant of Greek statuary.

Certainly superhero comics are one of our culture's clearest illustrations of hypermasculinity and male duality premised on the fear of the unmasculine Other. Since the genre's inception with the launch of Superman in 1938 the main ingredient of the formula has been the dual identity of the hero. While the superhero body represents in vividly graphic detail the muscularity, the confidence, the power that personifies the ideal of phallic masculinity, the alter ego --the identity that must be kept a secret-- depicts the softness, the powerlessness, the insecurity associated with the feminized man. As his very name makes clear, Superman is the ultimate masculine ideal of the twentieth century. He can fly faster than the speed of light, carry entire planets on his back, cause tidal waves with a puff of breath, see through walls, hear the softest whisper from hundreds of miles away, melt metal with a glance, and squeeze a lump of coal in his bare hands with enough pressure to create a diamond. He is intelligent, kind, handsome and an ever vigilant defender of truth, justice, and the American way. Superman, however, has never been complete without his other self, Clark Kent. The underlying Clark Kent identity emphasizes just how exceptional a masculine ideal Superman represents. Clark Kent is an exaggeratedly ordinary man, he is shy, clumsy, love-struck, insecure, cowardly, hidden behind thick spectacles, and easily bullied by others. In short, where Superman is associated with all of the social attributes prized in men, Clark Kent represents those traditionally associated with femininity and thus feared as unmasculine. In his study of the masculine myth in popular culture, Antony Easthope claims that "stories like Superman force a boy to choose between a better self that is masculine and only masculine and another everyday self that seems feminine" (1990: 28). In essence, Easthope is suggesting that the dual identity of the superhero character provides the fan with two separate and opposite set of characteristics with which to identify. Easthope overlooks the fact that it is not necessarily the powerful character that the average reader identifies with, but the overall fantasy of empowerment, the chance to transform from a Clark Kent into a Superman.

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Despite the derisively castrated portrayal of Clark Kent, it is this failure-prone side of the character that facilitates reader identification with the fantasy of Superman. As Umberto Eco quite rightly points out: "Clark Kent personifies fairly typically the average reader who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow men; through an obvious process of self-identification, any accountant in any American city secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, there can spring forth a superman who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence" (Eco, 1979: 108). Indeed, Superman's two young Jewish creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, have often admitted that the character grew out of their own feelings of masculine inadequacy and their heroic fantasies of transforming into the perfect man. The archetype of nerdy, ineffectual, mild-mannered Clark Kent who metamorphosizes in a moment of crisis into a virtual super man, unfettered by the limitations of strength, time, space or mortality is a fantasy played out over and over again in superhero comic books. "Though the world may mock Peter Parker, the timid teenager..." declares the cover of Amazing Fantasy #15 (1963), "it will soon marvel at the awesome might of Spider-man!" Spoiled playboy Bruce Wayne becomes Batman, the dark knight avenger. Shy scientist Barry Allen becomes Flash, the fastest man alive. Blind lawyer Matt Murdock becomes Daredevil, the man without fear. Frail Dr. Don Blake becomes the mighty Thor, and as the poster for the comic book-based movie The Mask (1994) declared, wimpy bank clerk StanleyIpkiss goes "from Zero to Hero" when he dons an ancient mask. The list is endless, for nearly every comic book hero there is a variation on the wimp/warrior theme of duality. The story of superheroes has always been a wish-fulfilling fantasy for young men whereby they can imaginatively cast off their mundane selves and revel in the ideal of super masculinity.

It is perhaps no small coincidence that the two teenage creators of Superman, Siegel and Schuster, were Jewish (for a interesting discussion of Superman's Jewish roots see Salamon, 1992). The Jewish male has long suffered under the cultural tyranny of goyish standards of masculinity. Ivan Kalmar points out in The Trotskys, Freuds, and Woody Allens: Portrait of a Culture (1993), that Superman is a "great American symbol of masculinity: the superhero in blue tights and red boots who had for half a century symbolized the male's quest to turn from sissy to macho" (255). A quest, Kalmar goes on to explain, which universalized a particularly Jewish problem. "the old eji [embarrassed Jewish intellectual] male dilemma of how to turn from nerd to super-man" (261).
Metaphorically, Clark Kent is to Superman what the Jewish male is to the goy.

...Clark Kent as a Jew? Studious, somewhat awkward, and dedicated to his work, and yes, wearing black-rimmed glasses, he looked (except for his strong build) every bit like a "nice Jewish boy." One thing responsible for the "Jewish Superman" poster's success [a popular 1960s poster which showed an Orthodox Jew opening up his traditional coat to reveal a Superman outfit with the letter shin in place of the "S"], was perhaps that it subconsciously expressed what Jewish boys and men, including Superman's creators, have felt: as Clark Kent turned into Superman, he represented not only the nerd turning hero but also the Jewish male turning real man—a goy.

(Kalmar, 1993: 256)

What is clear is that for many boys, and for many men for that matter, whether Jewish or goy, the conventional dual identity of the comic book superhero serves the wishful fantasy of transforming from a common man into an exceptional one. The framework of the Jewish masculine dilemma helps us to understand the essentialist nature of the Superman fantasy and the importance that it might play in the lives and the self-image of many readers.

Putting aside, for the moment, the issue of how appropriate a metaphor the superhero myth might be for readers from traditionally marginalized and emasculated cultural groups, the dual identity of the hero fits well with the typical age of most readers. Though the demographics of the comic book audience is constantly shifting, the core groups of fans have always been males of adolescent age or younger. This is an impressionable age, and boys or young men often cast about for culturally sanctioned images of masculinity. Given the young age of most comic book readers, another logical way to interpret the dual nature of the superhero's identity is as a metaphor for puberty. While Clark Kent simply changes his clothes in order to become Superman, many of comics' other superheroes undergo actual physical transformations. Spider-man was bitten by a radioactive spider, Daredevil was doused with mysterious chemical waste, Wolverine was subjected to experimental surgery that grafted steel to his skeletal structure. The bodily metamorphosis of characters like the Hulk or Captain America are obvious allegories for the physical and emotional changes brought on during adolescence. The Hulk's alter ego, Dr. David Banner, is very similar to the Clark Kent mold of a "puny", mild mannered wimp who, after being exposed to dangerous gamma rays at a military testing site, turns into a looming mass of green muscles whenever he gets angry. The symbolic cover from the first issue of The Incredible Hulk (Figure #8.1), published in 1962, stresses
the drastic puberty-like physical changes Banner undergoes to become the Frankenstein-inspired mass of muscles. He gets big, his voice gets deeper, and he's ruled by his hormones. The origin of Captain America follows a pattern much like the Hulk's, and countless other superheroes. Steve Rogers was a scrawny patriot deemed too frail to defend his country at the onset of World War II. Yet, in a famous seven-panel page from Captain America #1(1941) we see his body grow from wimp to he-man. The scientist responsible for Rogers' transformation narrates the scene: "the serum coursing through his blood is rapidly building his body and brain tissues, until his stature and intelligence increase to an amazing degree!" The army and government officials in the room gape in wonder. -- "Wh-why look...", "He...he's changing!" they stammer. "It is working!", the doctor continues. "There's power surging through those growing muscles... millions of cells forming at incredible speeds!" Unfortunately the page concludes with a gestapo spy shooting the scientist, and the formula for his wonder drug dies with him. But the readers can still dream that one day they too might be transformed from their scrawny, ineffectual, unmasculine selves into a super soldier, a hero and one of the world's most masculine ideals.

As if the dual identity, Clark Kent/Superman convention and the emphasis on identity change via physical transformation from wimp to He-man did not already present what Scott Bukatman refers to as, "as obvious an allegory of pubescent metamorphosis as one could imagine" (Bukatman, 1994: 100), some superhero comics make the change from insecure youth to hypermasculine adult even more explicit. The most recognizable tale in this vein of pubescent transformation is the story of young Billy Batson who learns from a mysterious wizard that by merely uttering the acronym SHAZAM, Billy can magically mature into the full-grown and super-powered Captain Marvel. For modern readers, the Captain Marvel story is replayed in an even more exaggerated form in the pages of Ultraverse's popular series Prime (Figure #8.2). Launched in 1993 among the flurry of new comic book universes to emerge following Image's bold move into creator-owned publishing, Prime is the story of Kevin Green, a thirteen-year-old boy who learns one day that because an evil military scientist performed illegal fertility experiments on his mother, he now has the power to mutate at will into a Superman-like hero endowed with what the Prime publishers describe as: "the strength to juggle mountains, the power to fly through the stars, and the ability to create a body Arnold Schwarzenegger would envy." The appeal of the adolescent power fantasy is summed up by the
series' co-writer, Len Strazewski, in the foreword to the best-selling graphic novel reprint of Prime's first four issues: "What teen-age boy wouldn't want to fly... impress the cutest girl in school... kick the butt of a bullying gym coach? That's the fantasy of Prime, the biggest, boldest hero in the Ultraverse - -and the embodiment of the spirit of the Ultraverse." Similar to Prime is Dark Horse Comics' Hero Zero. Consider the character description offered on the back of a trading card depicting a gigantic, eight-story-tall, costumed hero walking down a city street: "Fourteen-year-old David MacRae is living a fantasy. With a word to Zero, the talking gemstone on his chest, David becomes the size changing Hero Zero! Able to become either incredibly large or incredibly small, he has power enough for any two crimefighters!" Even comic book advertisements, such as the legendary Charles Atlas "98-pound weakling" ad, often revolve around the male daydream that if we could just find the right key, the right word, the right experimental drug, the right radioactive waste, then we too might instantly become paragons of masculinity.

Relying on traditional models from psychoanalysis, some psychologists have gone so far as to explore the rather transparent wish-fulfilling fantasy of the superhero transformation as being linked to specific developmental stages in a boy's life. Concentrating on the Moses-like legend of Superman's childhood origins, Andrew Lotterman argues that "the story of Superman incorporates the unconscious dynamics of the latency stage of development , i.e., the period from five-and-a-half to ten years of age. Indeed" Lotterman continues, "the Superman legend can be expressly understood as a myth of latency" (1981: 492). Going even further, Robert Lang (1990) explores the entire Batman mythos as a constant replaying of what Freud identifies as the pre-adolescent, "family romance" stage of development. According to Lang, Batman can be best understood as Bruce Wayne's continual struggle to overcome castration anxiety and to replace the all-powerful father due to the fact that his parents were murdered before he was able to successfully resolve his oedipal conflicts. Although Freudian interpretations of comic books like Lotterman's and Lang's are interesting, I do have doubts about the veracity of their psychosexual claims as projected onto readers. What these types of analysis do reveal though is the comics' preoccupation with boyhood fantasies of one kind or another, be they Freudian or not. It is also interesting that the developmental stages referred to correspond very clearly with the traditional age of the core group of comic book buyers.
That the superhero comics' appeal lies in the reader's identification with the ideal heroic characters seems obvious. "I read them because they're cool, cause Spawn's cool and everything. I mean it'd be great to be able to kick ass the way he does." Steve, an incredibly enthusiastic twelve-year-old fan explained one day over a Coke. Steve's friend, Joseph, whom I had just met for the first time that afternoon when I caught up with them leaving Yesteryear's Heroes, agreed: "No matter how boring my own life is, and it is pretty boring most of the time, the comics are always exciting... and for a little while at least, I get to be Batman." While discussing what he calls "Comic Book Masculinity", Alan Klein argues that "the reader is set up to be simultaneously impressed by the superhero and dismissive of the alter ego, a situation that underscores the overvalued place of hypermasculinity for readers of this genre of comic books" (1993: 268). Clearly, the comics do split masculinity into two distinct camps, stressing the superhero side as the ideal to be aspired to, but unlike the fascist ideology of phallic masculinity as mutually exclusive of the softer, feminized Other discussed by Theweleit, comic book masculinity is premised on the inclusion of the devalued side.

Even if Clark Kent, Billy Batson, Peter Parker and Kevin Green exist primarily to reinforce the reader's fantasy of self-transformation and to emphasis the masculine ideal of Superman, Captain Marvel, Spider-man and Prime, they are still portrayed as a part of the character that is essential to their identity as a whole.

Of Macho Men and Bad Girls

Interestingly, this reliance in superhero comic books on portraying sexual identity as an ideal that requires the incorporation of its opposite side is a specifically masculine model. As James Whitlark has pointed out in his discussion of dream doubles in psychology, "This theme (transformation from weakling to wonder) is not an invention of the comics. It descends from the long tradition of the popular adventure story" (1981:107). From the Scarlet Pimpernel, Zorro and Tarzan to the Werewolf and even The Nutty Professor (both the original Jerry Lewis version of the film from 1963 where Jerry transforms from a nerdy professor to a suave lounge lizard, and the 1996 remake where, thanks to special effects. Eddie Murphy alternates between extreme obesity and thin ladies' man), masculinity has involved alternating between disparate identities. Where men alternate between Clark Kent and Superman, Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde, Professor Kelp and Buddy Love, female
tales of transformation seem to be based on a more solitary sense of identity. For women, transformation is usually portrayed as a Pygmalion process, personified in classic fairy tales like Cinderella and in such popular modern movies as *My Fair Lady, Educating Rita, Pretty Woman*, and even *La Femme Nikita*. In the comics, superheroines have never been a primary concern. Most often they were created as companions for (and to capitalize on the popularity of) the already established male heroes. Superman begat Supergirl, Captain Marvel begat Mary Marvel, Batman begat Batwoman and then Batgirl, Bulletman begat Bulletgirl, Hawkman begat Hawkgirl, and the Hulk begat She-Hulk. As carbon copies of the male heroes, many of the early superheroines initially had their own secret identities but none of the characters proved popular enough to last. Even the wholly original Wonder Woman, one of the most widely recognizable characters in the comics industry, has seen her series cancelled on numerous occasions since the book's inception in 1941. Yet, in recent years writers have given up on the parallel reliance on the convention of secret identities for female super characters.

"For years," Rogers Cadenhead wrote in the popular fanzine *Wizard*, "the conventional wisdom in comics has been that female characters can't succeed in their own books. After spirited efforts with protagonists like Wonder Woman and She-Hulk, companies resigned themselves to the fact that their largely male audience largely wants to read about large males" (Cadenhead, 1994: 42). Yet, despite this conventional wisdom, despite the years of failure, new costumed heroines are currently popping up at an unprecedented rate and with an unprecedented success. In the early 1990s female characters, Crusade Comics' Shi, Harris Comics' revised version of Vampirella and Chaos! Comics' Lady Death, have led the way for what is now an increasingly popular sub-genre of superhero comics. The trend was quick to grow when sales figures proved consistent and industry leaders like Image began to publish an array of female crime fighters. Countless other companies have followed suit, to the point where the racks are now overstuffed with extremely buxom, sword toting women in skin tight or barely there costumes. Figure 8.3, an advertisement for an upcoming Image Comics cross-over series featuring the characters Glory, the eternal goddess, and Avengelyne, the heavenly body, is typical of the new superheroine genre. These sometimes short-lived comics, which are presently among the hottest in the industry, have been dubbed by the fans and critics "Bad Girl" books, as both a description of their less-than-innocent sexual appeal and as an allusion to their predecessors, the "Good Girl" art of the late 1940s and early 1950s (see Figure 3.3 in chapter 3).
THE "ETERNAL GODDESS" & THE "HEAVENLY BODY"

Together they must put aside their considerable differences and confront the evil that pits one against the other.

ROB LIEFELD & ROBERT NAPTON

image
their most obvious these Bad Girl comic books operate as cartoon titillation for young readers, titillation laced with strong dominatrix overtones. Interestingly enough, while I was at the Chicago Comicon in 1995 I was struck by the discrepancy between the thousands of male fans feverishly collecting the vividly illustrated Bad Girl titles while at the same time completely ignoring a live Penthouse Pet sitting alone in an autograph booth trying to promote the magazine's new line of erotic Penthouse Comix. It would seem the fans prefer their fantasy women when safely contained in their superheroine costumes, if not on the printed page itself.

Many of these currently "hot" superheroines now forgo the secret identity route all together. Among the most popular lead females without a dual identity are Lady Death, Barb Wire, Ghost, Zealot, and Avengelyne. Even the recently revamped Wonder Woman no longer bothers with her mild-mannered Diana Prince persona now that she has revealed her identity to the world so that she may better defend it. Perhaps the clearest example of how costumed heroines have been able to shrug off the nerdy secret identity more effectively than their male counterparts is the case of Marvel's She-Hulk. When first launched into her own series in 1980, her story and her visual presentation as a character who would transform from the frail Jennifer Banner to the savage She-Hulk were very much in line with that of her cousin Bruce Banner, aka The Hulk. But after the failure of that initial run, Marvel relaunched She-Hulk in 1989 as a self-referentially humorous series and as a character without an alter ego. Gone was the melodrama and the agonizing transformations, instead the sexy new She-Hulk playfully taunted readers. "Okay, now. This is your second chance," declared the revamped She-Hulk as she held up a comic from her previous series, "if you don't buy my book this time. I'm going to come to your house and rip up all your X-Men." "She luxuriates in her strength and striking appearance," declares her official Marvel profile, "and after she discovered that she could make the physical switch between Jennifer and the She-Hulk at will, and without changing her personality, she rarely took the trouble to look commonplace... For her, it's easy being green. Marvel's maladjusted male heroes may feel almost guilty about their powers, but She-Hulk revels in hers. This is one Marvel character who does not have an identity crisis" (Daniels, 1991: 217). This theme of bad girls and the erasure of secret identities is an important for understanding the world of comic books as it currently stands. I'll return to this theme in a moment, but first I want to look at the state of male superheroes in the 1990s and how they address split identities and gender ideals.

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For males, particularly young ones, the typical male superhero persona offers an immediate and highly visible example of the hypermasculine ideal. The polarized attributes coded as desirable/undesirable, masculine/feminine are simplified in the four-color-world of the comics' page to the external trappings of idealized masculinity. Discussing a recent convention held at the Toronto Royal York Hotel with a group of five 10-year-olds one summer afternoon on the front steps of the Comics Cavern, I asked if anyone had met the guest star, popular artist Dale Keown, best known for his dramatic illustrations of the Hulk. The topic quickly turned from the artist himself to the merits of his new series, *Pitt*, being published by Image. "Pitt could kick the Hulk's ass." Jim, the unofficial spokesman for the group declared while the others nodded in enthusiastic agreement. I asked why they thought this given that the two fictional characters from different comic book universes had remarkably similar powers. Jim went on to explain, "There's no doubt about it. I mean all you gotta do is take a look at them. Pitt is the man. The Hulk is big and all, and I'll always kinda like him, but check out Pitt [pointing to a promotional poster in the store's window], he's got arms like Mac trucks". "Pitt's like the Hulk on steroids". Kevin, perhaps not so coincidentally the smallest boy among the friends added. "You just don't get any bigger and better than that". Clearly, bigger does equal better for this particular group of boys, but the sentiment was not theirs alone. Consider these representative comments, all from boys under fifteen years old:

- I really like the artists who can get the muscles right. Big and cut. I'm not interested in little guys in costumes.

- Prophet is awesome. Look at the size of his pecs... and his shoulders are just sooo wide. it looks really cool, like he could just bench press the bad guys to death.

- I liked the story of *Marvels*, and the artwork was great, so realistic it was more like photographs than drawings, but I didn't like the way he showed the heroes. They lost all their size, they just looked like normal people and that was kinda disappointing.

- The coolest thing about the X-Men right now is the way they're drawing them. The women are really hot, but even better the guys are massive. Who's going to fuck with guys this big? Forget the super powers. Even Wolverine, who is the smallest guy in the X-men, looks like he's too muscular to even fit through a doorway.

Even more than the flashy, colorful, and always skin-tight costumes that separate comic book heroes from the ordinary world, the ever-present muscles immediately mark the characters not just as
heroes but also as undeniable masculine ideals. "Comic men are tall and square-shouldered", Peter Middleton recalls in his introspective discussion of masculinity. "Only the foolish or the bad have bodies that don't conform to this stereotype. Roundness or fatness or any sign of effeminacy are all clear indications of weakness. Much of the commonest form of the heroic male figure depends on an almost erotic exaggeration of the male physique, especially in the superhero comics" (Middleton, 1992: 31). By reducing all other body types to the level of inadequacy, the muscular male body of the standard superhero comes to stand for all of the associated qualities of masculinity. As a sort of semiotic shorthand, the muscular body represents for many readers the obvious qualities of strength and power but also the implied traits of heroism, toughness, honesty, perseverance, moral turpitude, confidence and success. Comic book superheroes. Middleton goes on to quite rightly declare, "are ideal figures of what the male reader would like to be: strong, tall, handsome and awesomely powerful. Heavy shading on the drawings outlines their tense muscles. Many of them look like the men in photos of body builders" (1992: 32). Yet, by focusing on the external trappings of masculinity characterized by the musculature of the superhero's body, young readers may run the risk of over-internalizing these rather one dimensional gender symbols.

As Middleton and countless other critics and fans alike have noted, comic book heroes look remarkably like professional bodybuilders. Interestingly enough, while on one hand the fictional comic hero is modelled after the bodybuilder, on the other hand the real bodybuilder is reciprocally patterned after the superhero. This circular relationship reveals an extreme pattern of over-identification with the hyperbolic signs of masculinity presented in superhero comics. In his insightful ethnography of a southern California gym, Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction (1993), Alan Klein discusses bodybuilders as men who have over-identified with what he calls Comic Book Masculinity. "Comic book depictions of masculinity are so obviously exaggerated", Klein claims, "that they represent fiction twice over, as genre and as gender representation" (267). What is so obviously exaggerated in the comics' depiction of masculinity is the overvalued status of the hypermasculine/Superman identity in comparison to the denigrated Clark Kent side of the heroic equation, all of which signifies the insecurities many men seek so desperately to conceal. Klein argues that for many bodybuilders the obsessive quest for ever larger, more imposing, more powerful looking physiques is an attempt to negate the soft, fearful, feminine side.
that they so despise in themselves. For bodybuilders, Klein continues, "the body, can, in this instance, come to represent a defensive form, a protest masculinity, just as do other, typically male symbols such as Harley motorcycles and military uniforms" (270). Klein's subjects spoke of fantasies where they would be so large, so impressively muscled, that the mere sight of them would inspire fear in other men, in this way bodybuilders attempt to realize the trappings of masculinity without developing any depth of character beyond a compensatory hypermasculine image.

It is perhaps obvious that given Western culture's emphasis on strict gender role division during early socialization, preadolescent and adolescent boys are impressed by the powerful potentials of comic book superheroes. Yet, as Klein's work makes clear, some boys who idolize the trappings of masculinity, exemplified by the musculature of these costumed heroes, may run the risk of pursuing self-esteem solely through a defensive body image.

In repeatedly recounting that it is in passing through adolescence that many are first struck by bodybuilding (not coming to take it up seriously until sometime later), we get a further glimpse of the anxiety at the core of certain young males. At thirteen or fourteen years of age, boys are fairly incapable of distinguishing between form and function. They are not only groping toward adulthood, but more specifically, they are working to separate from their mothers, a move that seems to necessitate some form of male worship in conjunction with female denigration. The lure of the large, powerful looking male is obvious at this point. The adolescent boy's confusion of hero and heroic form, though primitive, is in most cases a developmental stage to be passed through, in time leading to the ability to separate form from function. Some, however, remain at this level, stuck into thinking that the body is the only vehicle through which one can work out larger issues, hence measuring complete (physical and mental) growth corporeally.

(Klein, 1993: 271)

Clearly, not all boys who confuse hero and heroic form go on to develop bodybuilding careers, but their self images, their identities as men in culture, will still be formed around particularly skewed ideas of gender role expectations.

Rather than outright condemning comic book depictions of masculinity, Klein reserves his criticism for societal constructions that lead readers to value and identify with the hypermasculine rather than other potentially radical, liberating or transgressive gender traits. In fact, Klein recognizes that "insofar as these comic book constructs are part of childhood socialization, their dualism could be functional, even therapeutic, were one to acknowledge the positive attributes of the superhero's
alter ego and the dialectical relationship between wimp and warrior [after all] both male and female co-exist within the Superman/Clark Kent figure" (Klein, 1993: 267-8). Unfortunately, the potential that Klein sees as possible in the superhero's co-dependant male/female identified personas, were it not for our overvaluation of the purely masculine side, is presently even more disparaged in the extremely popular line of Image comics. Since Image's inception in the early 1990s it has become the fastest growing comics publisher in the history of the medium, and is currently second only to the industry giant Marvel in monthly sales. As might be predicted of a company formed by popular artists rather than writers, Image's success can be credited to their flashy artwork depicting excesses of costumed heroism and constant large scale battles. The Image books are identifiable by a distinctive in-house style of portraying the heroic body. As eager participants in the "Bad Girl" trend, Image women are uniformly illustrated as impossibly lean, silicone-injected and scantily clad women wielding phallically obvious swords. Even more pronounced than the unrealizable physical extremes of the Image women are the incredibly exaggerated representations of the male hero's body as a mass of veiny muscles. The Image trademarks of buxom cheesecake women and massive beefcake men are well-illustrated in the cover illustration for one of the company's many cross-over specials, this one featuring Prophet and Avengelyne (Figure 8.4). The male's hulking form dwarfs the dominatrix-like superheroine. Indeed his bulging arms alone are bigger than her entire body. And these two characters are among Image's most modest.

With the Image books, the already reductive aspects of comic book masculinity are reduced even further into the realm of the purely symbolic. Image's very name suggests the extremes that their stylized portrayals of masculinity have taken as pure form, as pure image. Catering to many fans' desires for larger and more powerful superheroes, Image provides hypermasculine ideals as more excessively muscular than Superman or Batman ever dreamed of being. The Image artists have taken the Polykleitan ideal and increased it tenfold. The heroic bodies they portray are no longer even possible bodies, they are exaggerated caricatures of masculinity and masculinity. Such character entitled books as *Supreme* (Figure 8.5) and *Bloodstrike: Assassin* (Figure 8.6) typify the Image superhero's overstated, hysterical, iconographic status as masculine spectacle. With forearms bigger than their heads, biceps as large as small subdivisions criss-crossed by highways of bulging veins, and shoulders so wide they can't be contained by the covers they grace, the Image heroes set a new
standard of hypermasculinity. Even the Image characters' names (Supreme, Bloodstrike, Ripclaw, Maul, Impact, Badrock, Shaft, Die Hard... etc. etc.) indicate the macho preoccupation with size and violence that mark them as indisputably masculine.

Although incredibly popular with the younger fans --especially those awkward preadolescents who are so commonly ridiculed by the larger fan community as immature "fan boys"-- the Image titles, and those of the numerous publishers who imitate the Image style, are commonly disdained by many other readers for their emphasis on hyperbolized art at the expense of plot or character development. "These books are nothing but poster pose after poster pose," Thomas, a comics fan in his late teens, complained while flipping through his younger brother's recent Image purchases. "The art is really polished, but that's it. There's no story to speak of, just a bunch of guys, who look like they'd put Mr. Universe to shame, running around fighting each other and posing for the camera."

The concentration on art over story has lead Image to frequently do away with the convention of the superhero's mild-mannered alter ego. Where the classic superhero comic book may have asked "boys to identify with Superman as a super-masculine ideal by rejecting the Clark Kent side of themselves" (Easthope. 1990: 29), the Image books have made that rejection unnecessary. Clark Kent, it seems, no longer exists. By down playing, or completely erasing, the hero's secret identity the Image books mark an extreme shift to the side of hypermasculinity as an ideal not even tokenly tempered by a softer, more humane, side.

It is clear from even the most casual glance at the dozens of new comics put on display each week that the hypermasculine body type now dominates the superhero genre of comic books. The most notable exception is the plethora of Bad Girl characters who have managed to gain a prominent foothold either alongside the excessively macho heroes or in their own series. Why then have sword toting women become popular in an era dominated by male characters as big as houses? The likely answer is that together the hypermasculine and the Bad Girl superheroes (none too subtly) symbolize extremes of gender representation. The hyperbolic style of illustration that has lead to increasingly stylized and exaggerated depictions of the muscular male body has likewise resulted in a skewing of the female form. For every mountain-sized Prophet and Supreme there is a curvaceous Avengelyne and Glory. But more than this theory of simple gender extremism, the Bad Girl phenomenon represents the dark side of the new superhero hypermasculinity, the side that is repressed. In short,
these scantily clad heroines are phallic women, clear symbols of castration anxiety.

This chapter began with the premise recently formalized by Judith Butler that gender is a social construction as much as it is a biological predisposition. Butler’s theory of gender facilitates a more complex interpretation of the seemingly contradictory semiotics of the Bad Girl (e.g. big gun, skimpy costume), than as mere gender extremes. Because, as Butler puts it, gender is performative, the tough-as-nails Bad Girl who runs around with over-sized guns and broad swords --obvious phallic symbols-- might best be understood as enacting masculinity. She is far from the passive female who simply screams in fear and faints away until the male hero arrives to save the day. No, the Bad Girl is much more likely to pick up her Uzi, or her magical sword, and blow the bad guys to pieces. Despite her exaggeratedly female appearance the Bad Girl characters perform a variety of tasks that have been semiotically coded as masculine activities. In other words, these sexy killers can be read semiotically as men in drag. It would seem that the creators at Broadway Comics were onto something when they wrote in the back pages of an early issue of their premiere Bad Girl series Fatale: "We were all tired of the ‘Rambettes’ --female heroes who might as well be men" (Guzzo, 1996: 25). At least at a symbolic level, then, the physical extremes that typify the Bad Girl --huge, gravity defying breasts, mile long legs, perpetually pouty lips, and perfectly coifed big hair-- amount to an almost hysterical mask of femininity.

The Bad Girl trend is the comic book equivalent of the hardbody action heroine in modern cinema (for a discussion of the multiple gender transgressions of women in contemporary action films see Brown 1996), or of what Carol Clover has referred to as the Final Girl in modern horror films. Clover describes the Final Girl as one who "not only fight[s] back but do[es] so with ferocity and even kill[s] the killer on [her] own, without help from the outside" (Clover, 1992: 37). Strongly influenced by Butler's theory of gender as performance, Clover goes on to argue that the stock character of the Final Girl is clearly marked as masculine through her ability to survive agonizing trials, rise to the occasion, and defeat the monster with her own hands and cunning. According to Clover, horror films "operate on the basis of a one-sex body, the maleness or femaleness of which is performatively determined by the social gendering of the acts it undergoes or undertakes" (1992: 159). In fact, the comic book Bad Girl is much more than the equivalent of the Final Girl. She goes her one better... where the Final Girl represents masculinity in drag only when she is finally forced
into action, the Bad Girl luxuriates in her masculine aggressiveness, often ridiculing any male characters who can't live up to her standards of toughness and openly flaunting her gender transgressions (all while wearing low-cut tops and high-cut shorts).

The comic book Bad Girl is an excellent example of what Freudians call the Phallic Woman. Through her masculine behavior and her use of very obvious phallic symbolism (swords, guns, whips), she embodies that most feared of women, the one who has usurped the power of the phallus, the one who has literally stolen the phallus. As a phallic woman in a medium and a genre that favors fetishistic costuming, the visual representation of the Bad Girl character almost always resembles the stock figure of the dominatrix from the world of pornography. Moreover, this notion of the costumed heroine as a thinly veiled dominatrix is not new. Even with Wonder Woman, the first super heroine, the analogy was obvious. In her mini-skirt, armored bustier and steel bracelets, Wonder Woman was the first in a long line of moderately fetishized heroines. Even Wonder Woman's golden lasso is layered with implications of bondage: when men are bound with it they must submit to her will, on the other hand when Wonder Woman is tied up with the lasso by a man she loses all her powers. And certainly the Jungle Janes and the Phantom Ladies who lead the wave of Good Girls in the 1950s owed as much to the popular bondage photos of Bettie Page as they did to their heroic male counterparts. The half-naked, Amazon-inspired Rambettes who fill the comic book pages of today look and act less like pin-up cheesecake and more like hard-core mistresses of pain.

As Valerie Steele (1996) points out in neo-Freudian terms during her discussion of fetish clothing and culture, the symbolic function of the dominatrix, of the sexually attractive Phallic Woman, is an attempt to deal with the otherwise unbearable stage of castration anxiety. Given the age of many comic book readers it is not surprising that extremely attractive, almost aggressively sexual female characters, who represent castration anxiety would find some purchase. The castration anxiety embodied by the Bad Girls is clearer in some examples than in others. Like Delilah cutting Sampson's hair to steal his legendary strength, many of today's Bad Girls are able to directly steal a man's power with just a touch or a kiss. Rogue, a hardbody Southern belle and ex-villain, one of Marvel Comics' mutant team the Uncanny X-Men, can steal a man's psyche by touching her flesh to his. Likewise,

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1 When the Tim Burton film Batman Returns (1992) co-starring Michelle Pfeiffer in a form-fitting, head to toe, black rubber Catwoman costume, complete with whip, the dominatrix overtones were hard to ignore. The rubberized Pfeiffer version of Catwoman was almost immediately featured on the cover of the fetish magazine *Fashion, Fetish & Fantasy*, No 13. 291
Broadway Comics' newest Bad Girl sensation, Fatale, is described in her company bio as a "powerful, good-looking woman born with the ability to absorb knowledge, abilities and strength from other people--especially men--through physical contact." It is perhaps no small coincidence that for both Rogue and Fatale their preferred method for stealing a man's strength through physical contact is to kiss him. One of Batman's recurring villains, Poison Ivy, wears a special lipstick that gives her complete control over the men she kisses. Figure 8.7, from Batman & Robin Adventures #8 (1996), is a clear example of Ivy's sexual domination of men. in this case Robin, the boy wonder. Of course Poison Ivy is attractive enough that men clamor to kiss her even when she is wearing a different lipstick, one strong enough to kill. "She's kissing him!" the heavily armed soldiers of fortune cheer when Poison Ivy turned up as a guest villain in Wonder Woman #95 (1995). "Hey, I want some of that! Me, too! I'm next! No, me!" In the end she leaves at least thirty men dead from her lethal kisses.

While this theme of castration anxiety would seem fairly obvious with most Bad Girls, and certainly with ones who have the power to steal a man's strength and will through a kiss, it is still a neutered symbolic form of robbing the phallus of its power. Not to be outdone, the publishers of Penthouse have recently jumped into the ever-competitive comic book market with their own line of "comix" with such sexy--and sexually active--superheroines as Hericane, Miss Adventure, Pubic Justice and Action Figures. As pornographic, adults-only comics the Penthouse stories often make explicit the things that can't be said in comic books published for younger audiences. namely some of the sexual/fetishistic aspects that remain just below the surface of mainstream stories about muscular men and sexy women who run around in skimpy costumes. In the March/April 1996 issue of Penthouse Comix, the saga of Young Captain Adventure, aka Joey Pike, spells out exactly how women steal a man's power. In this installment one of the old guard of heroes, Philadelphia Freedom, visits Young Captain Adventure to warn him about squandering away his powers on "mindless, incessant sex!". Superimposed over an array of graphic flash-backs, Philadelphia Freedom chides Young Captain Adventure: "Think back to the last time you got banged right before a big battle and you had squandered your precious bodily essence --Think!!-- You were slammin' some chick, really crammin' her...and then...the big battle droid broke in and kicked the snot out of you. Don't you see the connection, son? When you make like a piston in a formula V engine with all those babes, you reduce your powers."
YOU LOVE ME, DON'T YOU, ROBIN?

YES.

WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO KISS YOU AGAIN?

YES.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR ME?

ANYTHING.

YOU'D BECOME MY WILLING SLAVE...

JUST FOR THE CHANCE TO KISS ME AGAIN.

YES.

TEENAGERS.

EVERYTHING IS RUSH, RUSH, RUSH...

WELL, YOU DON'T START AT THE TOP FLOOR WITH ME, BUSTER...

YOU HAVE TO WORK YOUR WAY UP.

HAH!

YOU MAY KISS MY FOOT.

YOU HAVE YOUR PETS, HARLEY. NOW I HAVE MINE.
The rise of the comic book Bad Girls is an interesting case. Bodily they represent gender at an extreme opposite of the currently popular hypermasculine heroes, while symbolically they enact masculinity, they become the dominatrix, the Phallic Woman, and thus represent a very specific example of castration anxiety. The Bad Girl is much more than a "cogential double for the adolescent male", as Clover (1992: 51) has described her concept of the Final Girl. In Freudian terms, we might think of the Bad Girl as both the castrated and the castrating. In other words, as the hypermasculine male superhero has come to represent an exaggerated version of the already exaggerated masculine ideal, as the feminized/castrated/Clark Kent side of the traditionally dual identified hero has been almost completely effaced, it has begun to surface in the mutated form of the Bad Girl. Perhaps that's why Bad Girls no longer have secret identities of their own. Bad Girls don't need secret identities, they already are the secret, the emasculated/emasculating flip side of the hypermasculine characters.

In the same language of gender-as-performance the hypermasculine superhero might best be understood as a homeovestite, in other words, as one who dresses up in the costumes of his own gender. In his discussion of mutant superheroes as metaphorical bodies of alienation, Scott Bukatman likens the Image hero to Klein's bodybuilders who value the hypermuscular body for its ability to communicate masculinity without an act, via the obvious over-presence of masculine signifiers, the body's presence becoming, in effect, its own text. Bukatman insightfully notes, "In these postmodern times of emphatic surfaces and lost historicities, origin tales are no longer stressed: the hyperbolically muscular heroes of Image Comics are nothing more or less than what they look like; the marked body has become an undetermined sign as issues of identity recede into the background. Most of these heroes seem to have no secret identities at all, which is just as well [since] some have purple skin and are the size of small neighborhoods" (Bukatman, 1994: 101). Indeed, Bukatman is correct, the Image brand of superhero is nothing more or less than what he looks like. As Howard Chakin's semi-satirical 1993 comic book mini-series Power and Glory put it, "Why be a hero when you can just look like one?" The feminine side of the equation has been so successfully sublimated that it ceases to exist at all within the male heroes. Even the limited two-dimensional depiction of masculinity that superhero comics have represented ever since Superman emerged almost sixty years ago has now begun to skew towards a simpler, more macho, one-dimensional depiction. If the hypermasculine identity of the masked superhero has traditionally stood as a utilizable, imaginative fantasy
masquerade of idealized masculinity, then with the Image style of hero the masquerade has come to be all there is, an entity unto itself. The external trapping of masculinity, the message seems to be, is all one really needs to be a man.

It is in relation to this style of superhero books, either Image's own titles or the many imitative series they have inspired other companies to produce, that many readers interpret the Milestone books. Since comic book readers are well aware of both current and historical trends, this knowledge often influences individual readings of particular books. In the last chapter I addressed how Milestone fans' awareness of other comic books featuring Black superheroes affected their reception of the Milestone characters. I now want to address why some readers have embraced Milestone specifically as an alternative to the Image model of comic book masculinity that now seems to dominate the market.

**Black Masculinity**

The dominant Western myth of idealized masculinity, as discussed so far, is dependent upon the symbolic split between masculinity and femininity, between the *hard* male and the *soft* Other. And in the misogynistic, homophobic and racist view of this ideology, the despised Other that masculinity defines itself against conventionally includes not just women but also feminized men. The ridicule of gay men as effeminate is so pervasive in our culture that any detailed discussion of the stereotype here would merely be redundant. But the emasculating (re: castrating) criticism of effeminacy is also routinely projected by the dominant onto those marked as Other primarily by their cultural or religious backgrounds. As the quotation from Susan Bordo made clear earlier in this chapter, Jewish men have faced a long history of negative, feminized stereotypes. This caricature of the physically weak Jewish man has been so detrimental that, as historian Paul Breines documents in *Tough Jews: Political Fantasy and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry* (1990), many Jewish men reacted to the Holocaust by exaggerating and imitating the hypermasculine qualities of their Nazi oppressors. Similarly, Asian men have been perceived in Western culture as non-physical. Derided in stereotypes as skinny, weak, small, and humorously near sighted, Asian men are often stigmatized as unable to meet Western standards of masculinity based on physical size. Even legendary martial artists like Bruce Lee are perceived as rather smallish, which contributed to his being restricted to the role of
boyish side kick. Kato, in the *Green Hornet* television series until he left Hollywood to pursue a feature film career in Hong Kong. Nor has this image of the small, effeminate Asian man lessened since the era of Bruce Lee, as Thomas K. Nakayama (1994) has shown in his analysis of the Hollywood film *Showdown in Little Tokyo*. The movie uses Lee's son, Brandon, as a generic racial and sexual Other against which to measure the unassailable hypermasculinity of the star, Dolph Lundgren, a large muscular White man who physically dominates all the men in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo, and wins the beautiful Asian woman (Tia Carrera) as a prize.

But not all Others have been constructed as equal by the dominant masculine ideology. While the gay man, the Jewish man, the Asian man (and many other "Others") have been burdened by the projection of castrated softness, the Black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being *too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily. Ironically, much of the tension regarding the hypermasculine stereotype of Black men is a logical cultural development for a people systematically denied full access to the socially constructed ideals of masculinity. In his discussion of the sexual politics of race, Kobena Mercer argues that Black masculinity must be understood as a paradoxical position in relation to dominant gender ideals. As he puts it:

> Whereas prevailing definitions of masculinity imply power, control and authority, these attributes have been historically denied to black men since slavery. The centrally dominant role of the white male slave master in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plantation societies debarred black males from patriarchal privileges ascribed to the masculine role. For example, a slave could not fully assume the role of "father", as his children were legal property of the slave owner. In racial terms, black men and women alike were subordinated to the power of the white master in the hierarchical social relations of slavery, and for black men, as *objects* of oppression, this also canceled out their access to positions of power and prestige which in gender terms are regarded as the essence of masculinity in patriarchy. Shaped by this history, black masculinity is a highly contradictory formation of identity, as it is a *subordinated* masculinity.

(Mercer, 1994: 142)

In 1990s North America the situation has not changed all that dramatically for a large majority of Black men. Legally sanctioned institutions of slavery may no longer exist, but persistent racist fears and ideologies continue to economically, politically, and socially oppress Black men. According to recent statistics (Goar, 1995: A1) the unequal discrepancies between Black and White America are as clear as ever. One third of the 29 million Black citizens in the U.S.A. live in poverty, the average...
Black American earns $6,700 less per year than the average White worker, and is twice as likely to be unemployed. One in every three Black children are currently growing up without a father in the home, and perhaps most shockingly, although Black Americans constitute only 12 percent of the nation's population they represent 51 percent of the country's prison population. Yet, society at large still presents a cultural ideal of masculinity that Black men are expected to measure up to, at the same time that it denies a great many Blacks access to legitimate means for achieving that ideal.

The history of the Black male paradox --emasculated, but at the same time feared-- is grounded in a long tradition of subjugation and resistance. bell hooks has described the Black man's cultivation and embrace of a hypermasculine image as a logical response to antebellum and post antebellum views held by White supremacists that characterized Black men as feminine, a rhetoric that "insisted on depicting the black male as symbolically castrated, a female eunuch" (hooks, 1994: 131). The clearest, and most often cited, examples of hypermasculinity as compensation from the first half of this century are the boxing phenomenons Jack Johnson and Joe Louis. Both these fighters, and their future reincarnations from Sugar Ray Robinson to Muhamed Ali and onward, personified Black hypermasculinity as a means to resist emasculating racism, their prowess in the ring reinforced by widely circulated images of the two men, shirtless and intimidatingly muscular. By the Civil Rights era, the more overtly political and rebellious Black Panther movement articulated what Hunter and Davis refer to as "a radicalized Black manhood. throwing off the imagery of the emasculated and shuffling Black male dictated by racial caste" (1994: 23). Even in contemporary Western culture, the most pervasive and influential images of Black men are tied up in hypermasculine symbols. The two primary means to legitimate success for Black males in popular culture, sports and music, ensure the replication of such ideals from the world of sports as Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, Bo Jackson, Emmet Smith and Shaquelle O'Neil, and from music such overtly masculine examples as L.L. Cool J, Snoop Doggy Dog, Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur and the members of Naughty by Nature. Images that consistently associate Black men with extremes of physicality and masculine posturing. Over the years, in a diversity of ways, Black men have responded to their shared experience of cultural alienation by adopting "certain patriarchal values such as physical strength, sexual prowess and being in control as a means of survival against the repressive and violent system of subordination to which they were subjected" (Mercer, 1994: 137).
Recently, Richard G. Majors' concept of "cool pose" has proven an insightful term for understanding the dynamics of Black masculinity as it has developed in response to unequal conditions in the modern urban environment. In a series of closely related works (see Majors 1986, 1990, Majors and Billson 1992, and Majors et al. 1994) Majors argues that Black males have accepted the traditional values of Western masculinity but are so restricted by social and political factors that many of them have been deeply frustrated by their inability to enact these traditional masculine roles.

"In brief," Majors explains, "cool pose originated as a coping mechanism for the "invisibility", frustration, discrimination, and educational and employment inequities faced by Black males. In response to these obstacles, many of these individuals have channeled their creative talents and energies into the construction of masculine symbols and into the use of conspicuous nonverbal behaviors (e.g., demeanors, gestures, clothing, hairstyles, walks, stances and handshakes)" (Majors et al. 1994: 246). Majors includes in his examples of the cool pose such diverse behaviors as the use of humor, feigned emotional detachment, and specific stylistic expressions like the Black athlete's inventive basketball dunking, football spiking and endzone dancing, as well as Black musical performers' aggressive posing and graceful yet strenuous dancing styles. A prime ingredient of the cool pose as a compensatory form of masculinity is an exaggerated style of toughness. "Symbolic displays of toughness defend his [the Black male's] identity and gain him respect; they can also promote camaraderie and solidarity among black males" (Majors and Billson, 1992: 30).

Unfortunately, as Majors is always careful to point out, the ritualized hypermasculinity performed by many Black men as a cool pose, particularly the preoccupation with enacting a tough persona, is rife with the negative potential to promote dangerous lifestyles (e.g., gang bangers, tough guys, drug dealers, street hustlers, or pimps), and to reinforce harmful stereotypes.

The "cool pose" that is so important to the understanding of Black masculinity in contemporary Western culture is, in essence, another metaphorical mask. "For some black males", Majors and Billson write, "cool pose represents a fundamental structuring of the psyche --the cool mask belies the rage held in check beneath the surface... black males have learned to use posing and posturing to communicate power, toughness, detachment, and style" (1992: 8). Of course the concept of Black culture's employment of a mask is not a new one. James Baldwin's novels were about the complexity and effectiveness of masking as a defensive strategy, and psychoanalytic accounts of the
Black position such as Frantz Fanon’s much cited *Black Skin, White Masks* (1970) have formalized the concept. What is interesting though about the cool pose as a mask of masculinity is that by its very definition --a mask of a mask-- it becomes a location of exaggerated masculine signifiers. Hence, both by projection of the dominant White society’s fears, and the Black male’s embrace and over-compensating performance of extreme masculine values, many Black males (consciously or unconsciously) are perceived as relatively *too* masculine. Relatively too masculine, that is, when compared to the dominant White middle-class patriarchal norm. While the cool pose can, and often does, embody attitudes beyond those of toughness and fearlessness, attitudes that suggest alternative forms of masculinity that might exercise a genuine control over traditional masculine features of symbolic physicality as power, it is the trope of toughness and bodily presence --as reductionist and potentially harmful a stereotype as this is-- that is most commonly associated with popular images of Black masculinity in the modern world.

Throughout history, White society’s fear of the Black man has been grounded in notions of masculine physicality and sexuality. While muscles act as a visible signifier of masculine power as physical strength, Bordo points out, "they have often been suffused with racial meanings as well (as in numerous film representations of sweating, glistening bodies belonging to Black slaves and prizefighters)" (1993: 195). Under the racial and class biases of our culture and compounded by the hypermasculinization of the cool pose, muscles, as a signifier of "natural" power, have been strongly linked with the Black male body. So strong is the association, Kobena Mercer argues, that classical racism "involved a logic of dehumanization, in which African peoples were defined as having *bodies but not minds*" (Mercer, 1993: 138). The dehumanizing aspect of this myth, a myth that Mercer claims many Black men do not want demystified because it in some ways (e.g., strength, sexual prowess) raises them above the status of White men, is that while an emphasis on the body as brute force is a marker of the difference between male and female it is also a key symbol in the division between nature and culture. As much as the body has been related with the "virtues" of masculinity it has also been associated via racial and class prejudices with the insensitive, the unintelligent and the animalistic. Further, the more one’s identity is linked to a hypermasculine persona based on the body, the more uncultured and uncivilized, the more bestial, one is considered to be. Following the binary logic of the male/female, nature/culture, civilized/uncivilized, body/mind dynamic, Blacks have
historically and symbolically been represented in racist terms as pure body and little mind.

Because of this racist ideological paradox, Blacks in Western culture, and Black men in particular, have been forced to shoulder the burdens of the body itself. In contemporary culture Black men are often seen more as beasts, as rapists, as gangster, as crack-heads, and as muggers--literally as bodies out of control--than they are as fathers, as scholars, as statesmen and as leaders. It is perhaps this split between the mind and the body that marks one of the greatest threats of (self)destruction facing Blacks today. Like Majors' concern for the negative consequences of the cool pose as a lifestyle choice in an urban environment of unequal opportunity, bell hooks also writes poignantly that: "I continue to think about the meaning of healing the split between mind and body in relationship to black identity, living in a culture where racist colonization has deemed black folks more body than mind. Such thinking lies at the core of all the stereotypes of blackness (many of which are embraced by black people) which suggests we are "naturally, inherently" more in touch with our bodies, less alienated than other groups in this society" (hooks. 1994: 129, italics in original).

Recognizing the ruinous consequences of this perceived split between Black men's bodies and minds, Mercer, Majors, hooks and numerous other Black scholars and cultural critics see the need for new models of Black masculinity, models that counter the dominant stereotypes not by reforming the hypermasculine image of the Black male into an image of refinement, restraint and desexualization, but by incorporating the associated properties of the mind (e.g. intelligence, control, wisdom) into the popular presentation of Black male identity. It is here that the Milestone comic books seem to work for many readers as a promising alternative form of Black masculinity specifically, and Western masculinity in general, particularly when read against the more pervasive current form of comic book masculinity portrayed in the Image, and Image-like, books.

"A brain... and a plan."

If comic book superheroes represent an acceptable, albeit obviously extreme, model of hypermasculinity, and if the Black male body is already culturally ascribed as a site of hypermasculinity, then the combination of the two --a Black male superhero-- runs the risk of being read as an overabundance, and potentially threatening, cluster of masculine signifiers. Luke Cage, Black Panther, Black Lightning and the other heroes who emerged during the blaxploitation era of
the mid-1970s were often characterized in their origins, costumes, street language, and anti-establishment attitudes as more overtly macho than their whitebread counterparts. Even today, Black superheroes seem to over-signify masculinity, often to the point of being repositioned as humorous characters. While the 1990s have been exceptionally good to hit comic book superheroes being seriously and faithfully adapted for feature films such as *Batman* (1989), *Batman Returns* (1992), *Batman Forever* (1995), *The Mask* (1994), and *The Crow* (1994), the same can not be said for Black superheroes. Instead of the grim, serious neo-noir success of other comic books turned into films, the only Black entries in this ever expanding movie genre have been the comedies *Meteor Man* (1993) and *Blank Man* (1994). Rather than legitimate super-powered heroes, *Meteor Man* and *Blank Man*, as enacted by Robert Townsend and Damon Wayans respectively, are bumbling spoofs. Although well-intentioned films, with ultimate true heroism from the comedic protagonists, they are overwritten by the image of the Black costumed hero as a failure, as a buffoon incapable of exercising real power. Even the short-lived television series *Mantis* (1994), starring Carl Lumbly as a crippled Black scientist who fights crime with the aid of his exo-skeleton reinforced Mantis costume, was so badly done that it was considered a comedy by most comic book readers when in fact it was meant as serious science fiction drama.

Many of Milestone's most popular characters embody the difficult task of playing it straight as Black superheroes, at the same time that they emphasize the hero's intelligence as one of their most significant attributes, all without diminishing the masculine power fantasy so important to fans of the genre. In direct comparison to the typical Image hero, Milestone heroes are much more realistically depicted, in both the narrative and in the illustration of the muscular male body—compare the over-inflated bodies on the cover of Image's *Supreme* (Figure 8.5) and *Bloodstrike* (Figure 8.6) with the portrait of a relatively skinny Static on the cover of *Static #1* (see Figure 4.4 in chapter four). "I really like the Milestone titles for what they're not, namely: Image books", Oliver, a thirteen year old claimed while organizing his purchases just outside the dealer's hall of a local comic book

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2 Ironically, both the *Meteor Man* and *Blank Man* movies, as well as the *Mantis* television program, were heavily advertised on the back covers of all the Milestone comic books. The audience seemed a likely match but many of the readers I spoke with who saw the films found them insulting. What the fans wanted were serious superhero characters like those in the comics, what they got were parodies of a genre in which they had a great deal of personal investment.

3 *Mantis* was a serious attempt at live-action superheroism, unfortunately it was hindered by a low production budget. Several of the Milestone fans who followed the *Mantis* series were impressed by the fact that the main character's costume had been designed by Denys Cowan, one of the original founders of Milestone.
convention. "Static and Hardware and even Icon are a lot more realistic, not so cartoony. I mean... I know they're comic books but come on, look at those guys [in the Image books], their fucking huge! At least the characters at Milestone look like they could fit through a doorway." Just as some readers related to the Milestone books as an alternative or a variation on the theme of Black superheroes as presented in the earlier blaxploitation style comics and/or the contemporary Afrocentrist and more politically extreme books personified by the ANIA publications, other readers understand the Milestone line as it stands in relation to the dominant Image style's emphasis on hypermasculine/hypermuscular bodies and underdeveloped narratives featuring, what one comic book dealer called, "brainless brawl after brainless brawl".

What Milestone comic books do is put the mind back in the body, the Clark Kent back in the Superman. That Milestone does this so often with Black superheroes also allows them to develop the image of powerful Black men as much more than mere hypermasculine brutes. --"tough, but not too tough." As a way to broach discussions with readers I would always ask them what their favorite comic book stories were and if they could recount them. For those who counted Milestone stories as among their favorites there was an overwhelming preference for adventures that were resolved through intelligence rather than brute force. When the conclusion to Milestone's third cross-over event, "The Long Hot Summer", was published, many of the readers I had spoken with were eager to point out that the surprisingly peaceful resolution to an amusement park riot was indicative of the company's approach to brains-over-brawn. "Man, just when you thought everything was going to get really, really bloody". Thomas and Jerry, two fans in their late teens explained, "Wise Son [leader of The Blood Syndicate posse] gets to the park's communication systems and simply talks people out of hurting each other... basically shames them into being responsible for their actions." Likewise, Larry, a high school junior who had recently opened his own small comics shop with his older brother and his mother, was able to recall, almost word-for-word, his favorite bit of dialogue from Hardware #9. "Hardware is fighting this Alva Technologies-created female version of himself called Technique", the student recalled. "when he loses his jet pack and is falling from thousands of feet up. He grabs his pack and tries to fix it while he's falling. Thinking: 'So here's where I find out if I'm the genius that my I.Q. tells me I am.' When the pack works again, moments before becoming street pizza, he says, and this is a great line. 'Worked like a charm! Who says those tests are culturally biased?'"

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As Paul, an enthusiastic Black thirteen-year-old fan remarked: "It's nice to see cool brothers in the comics who can think their way out of a rough spot. You know, Icon's a lawyer, Hardware's an all-purpose science super-genius, and Static, well he's just a high school kid but he's the coolest, and I think the smartest, of all them. Yeah, I'd stack Static up against any other superhero any day. He's the man." Other readers seemed to agree: "Oh yeah Static, he's got the best sense of humour and the thing is everybody thinks he's just this kid with wimpy lightning powers, but he's the smart one, always putting down guys bigger than him by being smarter." As an example of the preferred Milestone brains-over-brawn style, several fans chose one of Static's earliest adventures as among their favorites.

The story entitled "Pounding the Pavement", written by Robert L. Washington and Dwayne McDuffie, appeared in the August 1993 issue Static #3 (Figure 8.8). The tale features the first appearance of a powerful new villain, Tarmack, in Milestone's fictional setting of Dakota City. As the characters in the book point out, Tarmack looks and acts like a Black version of the evil, liquid-metal T2000 from the popular movie Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1992). Essentially, Tarmack is a shape shifting mass of, well, tarmac. Usually configured in the shape of a large and muscular Black male body, Tarmack can transform himself into liquified states or change his appendages into whatever weapon he desires, including knives, hammers, and anvils. One of Virgil (Static) Hawkins' friends describes Tarmack as "a six-foot blob of silly putty that turns into Riddick Bowe whenever it wants to". The problem is that Tarmac has his sights set on making a name for himself as the guy who takes down Static. He first tries to challenge Static to a fight by destroying a local high school hangout, unfortunately. Static, who was tied up washing dishes at his part time job in a nearby burger franchise, arrives too late to fight, but fortunately he is in time to rescue the bystanders who have been trapped in the building's rubble.

At school the next day, while Virgil is asking his friends to describe Tarmack, word comes that "the guy who trashed Akkad's is at the playground calling Static out!" Tarmack taunts Static's masculinity, calling him a coward unless he shows up to fight. "STATIC! Are you deaf, or just afraid?" Tarmack bellows while tearing up all the rides at the playground. "Hidin' behind yo' ugly momma won't help boy!" Making up an excuse about having asthma and the excitement being too much for him, Virgil sneaks off to change into his Static costume and returns to confront Tarmac with his usual wit. "Hey, Hatrack", Static calls. "Let's work this out over coffee, some cappuccino for
me... a nice cup of silt for you". They proceed to battle for a while with neither gaining the upper hand, then, when Static proves more concerned about the safety of innocent bystanders than with the contest. Tarmac dares Static to show up at a deserted parking lot at midnight in order to decide who's the toughest.

Riding the subway home after school. Virgil and his friends debate what will happen in the final showdown between Static and Tarmac. "I think the high n' mighty Static is gonna get his ass handed to him", argues Larry. "Tarmack has all the Terminator 2 moves! Hammerhands, spike hands whatever! He can melt whatever he touches!" "Well, I think Static's gonna kick butt!" Virgil argues back. A little defensive. A little nervous. "I think you're both wrong." Interrupts Frieda, the only one of Virgil's friends who knows his secret identity. "Static's too smart to fall for such an obvious trap".

"That guy's too dumb to set such an obvious trap, or any trap. Static'll fade 'im", Virgil counters good naturedly. "You think ol' stinky goo head is out of Static's league?" "He's older! And Bigger! Static should leave him to Icon!" Frieda warns. "Listen", Virgil confides to Frieda under his breath. "I know its dangerous. I'm not buying into this anymore than you. But I've got two things he doesn't. A brain... and a plan".

Later that night, in the Avalon mall parking lot, a lone and angry Tarmac bellows: "STATIC! It's ten after midnight! If you're hidin', you best come out now!" Tarmac spins around just in time to see a trench-coat clad figure surf to the ground on electrical currents. "That's better! Turn around! I want to see your face when you die!" Tarmac screams as he winds up a massive hammerhand punch. "Have it your way toyboy... wha!?" As Tarmac delivers his blow the body bursts in a spray of water. Tarmac is left soaked and clutching a deflated plastic clown. "What the @#&* is this?"

"KAWARIM!!!!", the real Static replies from the shadows as he shoots a powerful charge of electricity through Tarmac. "Ancient Ninja art of misdirection. All you need is something some idiot could mistake for you and... some idiot. Guess which one you are." Angrier than ever, Tarmac chases Static across the parking lot. Suddenly, Static turns and uses his electromagnetic powers to wrap a wire fence around Tarmac. "How do I do it, you may ask. How do I stay one jump ahead of you?" "How you want to die, is all I'm askin'!" Tarmac yells, as his body begins to liquify and escape through the links in the fence. "It's easy. You're a moron." Static taunts in a fake British accent. "Also, I was here early. Several hours, in fact. Been shoppin'"
"What're you dumpin' into meeee!" screams Tarmac as Static throws several canisters into the now completely liquid villain. "Old aerosol cans. Got 'em on sale. Freon. don't you know. Amazing what you can find in a bargain bin, huh. Wanna see what else I got? All Tarmac can do is howl in pain and frustration as Static hurls flashbulbs and dry ice onto the quickly solidifying form lying on the ground. "Sheesh! I gotta get a better class of supervillain." Static scoffs as he explains: "See, I figured your liquid body and all that heat went hand in hand. So if you went through some changes, you'd burn up."

"Sllloww inn... brrr..." Tarmac gasps. "Brrr? You actually say brrr? I don't be-lir-ve it!" Static jokes as he pours a cannister of freezing liquid oxygen over the now defeated Tarmac. And as a final insult, Static climbs aboard a steamroller from a nearby construction sight and proceeds to literally flatten Tarmac. "You are sorely in need of a name change, dude. That "Mack" thing is so '70s... I know what... how about I paint a stripe down your middle and... Presto! Ta-da! 'I-75, the Living Interstate!'"

Static #3 ends with the humiliating defeat of Tarmac and the arrival of Holocaust, a bigger and badder villain for Static to deal with in the next issue. On one level it is tempting to develop the case that this issue of Static critiques an outdated model of Black masculinity, in much the same way that the Buck Wild stories from Icon discussed in the previous chapter addressed the blaxploitation era superheroes. After all, apparently inspired by Tarmac's one-dimensional macho posturing. Static even goes so far as to declare "That "Mack" thing is so 70s" But for the Milestone fans who pointed to this specific book as a favorite, it is the story's difference from the current hypermasculine and "brainless" Image comics that makes it important. The message of "Pounding the Pavement" is clear: brains win out over brawn. Nor is this message an isolated incident. Static storylines have repeatedly portrayed the teenage hero as victorious because of his quick thinking. Numerous bragging and swaggering supervillains have faced Static, most of whom are clearly more powerful than him, and boastfully macho about their intentions to beat him up. Yet time and again Static outthinks the baddies. Other examples cited by readers include Static's capture of a super-powered car thief, Joyride, by pretending to lose a drag race thus playing on the villain's ego and tricking him into stepping out of his car whereby he loses all his powers, or Static's continual outsmarting of the recurring villain Hotstreak, who is too stupid to realize that the new hammer he holds so proudly is
made of metal and thus can be controlled by Static's electrical currents. Static's form of intelligent victories is clearly read by some Milestone readers as a positive alternative to the standard formula found in the market-dominating Image-type books. "You'd never really see an Image hero winning a fight by being funny and smart enough to know dry ice and aerosol cans could knock out a serious bad guy", Paul, the thirteen year old Static fan explained one day while we were sitting on the steps of the Black Knight comics and collectibles store. "In other comic books they're much more likely to just keep on pounding each other until the good guy rips the villain's head off, or something crazy like that."

By emphasizing brains-over-brawn as a fundamental problem solving technique in many of their stories, Milestone comic books suggest acceptable variations of the masculine ideal for their readers. Rather than espousing the reductionist hypermasculine might-makes-right norm of the Image books, Milestone's series continually depict heroism as a matter of intelligence first and power second. This suggests intelligence is the greatest power of them all. For Black readers, and for non-Black readers sensitive to minority concerns, the alternative depiction of Black masculinity bearing the attributes of both mind and body is, as Thomas declared, "progressive, realistic, radical, and a much needed reworking of the African American image in the media." Although it is clear how the Static tale recounted here stresses the reincorporation of "a brain... and a plan" as more significant than muscles and brute force, it's typical comic book superheroish narrative might seem to undercut any claims made about it representing new forms of masculine ideals. It is, after all, still a relatively straightforward comic book story about two superpowered costumed characters fighting it out. But when carried to its furthest extreme, Milestone's narrative style which is interpreted by many readers as antithetical to the dominant hypermasculine Image style, the alternative models on offer from the Milestone books are made explicit.

The most apparent revisionist models presented are usually within the pages of Milestone's flagship title Icon. "They can be a little preachy sometimes", a fourteen year old told me when I noticed him reading an issue of Icon in a shopping mall's food court. "but it's really my favorite book right now. The characters are well done, and the art is usually first rate. And..." he looked around a little sheepishly to see if any non-fans were within earshot. "I like the stories where they show how Icon has affected normal people in Dakota, you know, inspired them." In his hands was a particularly
clear example of Icon's inspiration as a promotion of how readers might pursue masculine ideals built on well rounded self-improvement rather than the one-dimensional pursuit of hypermasculine power fantasies. Icon #32, "Learning to Fly", written by Greg Middleton and illustrated by Elim Mak, is really the story of Lenny, a Black youth from the same projects as Icon's partner Raquel (Rocket) Ervin. Lenny was with Raquel and the others on the night they tried to rob the house of Augustus Freeman, who, under pressure from Raquel, would later become Icon. Years after that first incident, Raquel arranges for Icon to meet and counsel Lenny who has had trouble staying on the "straight and narrow" since that fateful night.

"I told you, you changed my outlook", Lenny tells Icon as they stroll along the city's waterfront. "But now the funds ain't what they used to be, so me and my girl Susan been fighting. I found out she's seeing Caesar, down the block. He's not "on-the-straight-and-narrow". Of course we broke up, but... I don't know, man. The so-called right thing ain't so easy."

Icon tells Lenny a little about his own past experiences. Opportunities lost. Loves lost. "uh-huh. What's your point?" Lenny asks. "Life on Earth is too brief to let us lick our wounds". Icon explains. "only by confronting this sort of problem will you overcome it." "Ha! You can say that... you got everything going for you. I'll bet life never sneaks up on you. You told us to have faith in our abilities, but one rich man who can fly don't mean I can fly too" replies Lenny. "You know better than that", Icon responds. "There are enough hardships for each of us. I've had first hand experience. But we were discussing your abilities, and what you make of them. I can only encourage you to live up to your own potential." "Hey. I'm not going back to my old habits. if that's what you mean." A dejected Lenny says. "It's just... not easy... ya know."

A couple of pages later we see Lenny trying to live up to his own potential. A collage superimposed over Icon's masked face shows Lenny being all he can be (Figure 8.9). In a virtual one page self-help manual for readers, we see Lenny resisting the lures of gang life. excelling in school. caring for younger children, developing his body in the gym, playing wholesome sports, and even helping a little old lady with her groceries. "It ain't easy". Lenny narrates over the following pages. "Here I am. an upstanding, Icon-inspired, strong black man... but staying on the right track helps keep my mind off my problems". Eventually, Lenny is applauded as a hero when he helps Icon and Rocket save a little girl trapped in a burning building.
Back along the waterfront, Icon tells Lenny, "I'm proud of the way you've been handling yourself. Your community is looking up to you... for all the right reasons. I wouldn't hesitate to say that you are something of an 'Icon' yourself." "Listen, I got a date with a new lady", Lenny says. "So all I wanted to say was... thanks for being there." "You deserve all the credit." Icon smiles as he shakes Lenny's hand. Lenny smiles proudly. "Be good brother."

Despite the Milestone founders discussed preference (see Chapter 4) for avoiding the "ABC Wednesday After School Special" type of preachiness in their comic books, Icon stories such as the one recounted above veer dangerously close to this pattern. Other issues of Icon have dealt just as directly with issues of social responsibility. In Icon #7 Rocket must decide whether or not to keep her child after accidentally getting pregnant (she keeps the baby and becomes the first unwed, teenage, superhero mom). In Icon #18 Rocket and Icon debate the effects of selling out by endorsing corporate developers who will likely destroy low-income housing. Issue #11, "Hero Worship", is told from the perspective of Todd Loomis, a fourth grader who discovers a gang's gun warehouse one day while playing Icon. Todd struggles to warn the real Icon and eventually helps save both Icon and Rocket. The story ends with young Todd on a rooftop, hands heroically placed on his hips, a green shower curtain tied around his neck as an imitation Icon cape --looking very much like a more satisfied version of the young boy playing superhero in the BOCA advertisement mentioned in the first chapter. "I did it. I made it happen." Todd's thought bubbles reveal. "And I'm just a kid. I'm not Icon, or the Rocket, or anything like that. But you don't need to be Icon to be like Icon. All you got to do...is do it." That these stories can be fully recognized by many fans as "a little preachy sometimes" but still enjoyed as the strength of the Milestone books. I do not want to suggest here that the Milestone message is incredibly well-concealed propaganda that serves a specific agenda, rather I believe that it forthrightly admits --and is recurrently interpreted as-- an alternative to the traditional patriarchal masculine norm that has recently, in other comics and other mediums, become increasingly skewed towards absurd heights of hypermasculinity. That these books also consciously use Black heroes as simultaneously masculine and thoughtful characters further emphasizes the novel reconstruction of masculinity and ethnic identity based on less traditional notions of gender roles and limiting racist stereotypes.

Although the Milestone line of comic books are read by many fans as an alternative depiction
of masculinity in comparison to the Image books, and by others (particularly those from minority backgrounds) as "a thinking Black man's heroes". They are by no means the sole voices of change present in contemporary culture. Outside the superhero genre, several other comic book series including *The Sandman, The Books of Magic, American Splendor*, and *Maus* have offered much less hyperbolic models of masculinity. Unfortunately, unlike the Milestone books, most of the other revisionist types of comic books are classified as "Mature Reader" titles and are clearly not geared toward the traditional preadolescent consumer. Likewise, less hypermasculine images of Black men occasionally emerge through the cracks of popular culture. As bell hooks concludes in her chapter on reconstructing Black masculinity, "Changing representations of black men must be a collective task" (1992: 113). For true change to take place, for stereotypes (both imposed and internalized) to be broken, alternative representations of Blackness in relation to masculine ideals must come from not just comic books but also the realms of music, film, literature, education and politics.

One of the most often cited alternative visions of Black masculinity is put forth by Mitchell Duneier in *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* (1992), his acclaimed ethnography about the elderly Black men who frequent Valois, a Chicago diner. The men of Valois have constructed for themselves what Duneier describes as a "community of caring," a world apart from the conventional understanding of Black men caught up in masculine protests of violence, misogyny and social alienation. These elderly men are unconcerned --indeed, outright scornful of-- displays of masculine posturing. Instead, the men profiled in *Slim's Table* spend their days offering support, respect and love for each other in social and personal matters ranging from finances to sexual relationships. In relation to the issues I have been discussing in this chapter, Bordo accurately sums up the vision of masculinity revealed in Duneier's work when she writes, "the oppositions soft/hard, masculine/feminine have no purchase on their sense of manhood, which is tied to other qualities: sincerity, loyalty, honesty. Their world is not divided between the men and the wimps, but between those who live according to certain personal standards of decency and caring and those who try to "perform" and impress others. They are scornful of and somewhat embarrassed by the "cool pose" which has been adopted by many younger black men" (1993: 730). But whereas Duneier, Bordo and hooks see gentle, caring men of an older generation like those who bide their time at Valois as an ideal that might transform a younger disillusioned generation, today's youth are likely to find little

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purchase in this ideal. Although these older men have certainly lived their lives in resistance to racism and other social pressures, young men today --young Black men-- live in an environment where the standards of hard vs. soft and masculine vs. feminine are an intricate and unavoidable fact that they must come to terms with. It is here that I think Milestone's reworked image of heroic Black masculinity might prove uniquely helpful.

Unlike the communal response documented in Slim's Table, the Milestone books do not reject the properties of the "cool pose" and the dominant binary logic of our culture's key masculine/feminine gender distinction. Rather, it is a reworking that allows pervasive and popular conceptions of gender and race to be expanded by incorporating previously disassociated concepts of softness with hardness, of mind with body. Instead of merely championing the Clark Kent side of masculine duality as a legitimate role in and of itself, the Milestone books work to infuse gentler, more responsible and more cerebral qualities within the codes of dominant masculinity. As the Milestone principals are well aware, images of cool Black characters ("cool" as measured against existing definitions of what it means to be both Black and a man in Western culture), and preadolescent fantasies of superhuman abilities are undeniably ingrained in anyone who might pick up a comic book, and are powerful forms through which individuals must learn to negotiate their own lives. Rather than trying to ignore or eradicate the influential reality of existing norms of gender and race informed patterns of behavior, the Milestone books seem to work most effectively for many of their readers by providing alternatives from within the dominant modes of discourse, by maintaining many of the fundamental conventions of comic book heroism at the same time that they expand the traditional definitions of the medium. "They're still great superhero stories", a young boy explained while his older brother waited for him at the cash register, "but they're different, ya know, and not just because of the colour of their skin."
CONCLUSION

In the early 1970s the public service advertisement used by the Black Owned Communications Alliance asked "What's wrong with this picture?". A young Black boy looked in the mirror and saw only the pale imaginative reflection of a white superhero. Well, the child from that advertisement has grown up and the world of superheroes has changed. In the 1990s Milestone Media, and other Black comic book publishers, have replied to that decades old question by creating a variety of new heroes, a variety of African American superheroes. In fact, on the editorial page of the 20th issue of the company's flagship series *Icon* (December, 1994), Milestone reprinted a photograph (Figure 9.1) of Icon illustrator M.D. Bright standing next to a guy dressed in an Icon costume for a comics convention. This single image speaks volumes about the changes in heroic ideals that are currently taking place in the world of comics. Young boys, and grown men, can fantasize and read stories about superheroes of all colours. Though the dominance of white-bread costumed heroes is far from over, it is clearly on the decline. Likewise, young fans can now foresee a world of possibilities as comic book writers and illustrators regardless of their cultural background.

In juxtaposing the BOCA advertisement discussed in the introduction (Figure 1.1) with the photograph of a grown man dressed as Icon reproduced here, I do not want to imply that new fantasies are now available to young Black comic book readers. To suggest this would, I think, be too literal minded a way of viewing the workings of fantasy. In fact, I think the BOCA advertisement was too literal minded in its representation of imaginative play (though I do understand the very real problems of misrepresentation they were trying to counter at the time). If cultural studies approach to audiences and fan groups has proven anything, it is that all people are uniquely adept at transcending
boundaries in their fantasies. In the imagination there are no rules. Even Freud observed in "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919) that in fantasy people can occupy any number of possible subject positions, individually or simultaneously. I am quite sure that the little boy in the advertisement would have had no real problem imagining himself as a superhero, no problem seeing his own idealized reflection cast back at him from the bathroom mirror.

What the new heroes from Milestone do offer readers is a wider range of fictions, a larger scope of formalized subject positions. Fantasies are typically a fairly personal practice, internally exercised, and usually too private a pleasure to share with others. Mass produced fictions, on the other hand, are collaborative, shared and very public versions of fantasy, especially for audience members who are active within the various subcultures of media fandom. As Ang has pointed out "We are not the originators of the public fantasies offered to us in fiction [instead, they are] offered ready-made to audiences" (Ang, 1996: 93). These public fantasies then are inextricably linked to the mass produced texts from which they emanate. This is not to say that public fantasy is restricted by the textual fictions. quite the contrary, audiences negotiate the texts in such diverse ways as to construct an almost infinite range of personalized interpretations. But the mass-produced fictions do provide a focal point around which which specific fantasies can emerge. More obviously than in any other medium, the fans and the creators interact in a collaborative sense in order to fine-tune the fictions and the public fantasies. Fans and creators have an open line of communication through personal contact at conventions as well as through letters, computer bulletin boards, chat lines, and a corporate system that allows fans to move into the ranks of the creators. The readers and the publishers often negotiate the comic book master narratives long before its conventions and its internal mythology are deemed satisfying. So Milestone's creation of new heroes is not a birth of new fantasies out of whole cloth, but it is an important formalization of an imaginary subject position around which public fantasies can flourish. Milestone's comic book universe is a formalized fiction that arose out of both the publishers' imaginations and the fans' desires.

Although the reader's identification with the fictional characters has been a recurring theme of the research I have presented here, it was never my primary focus. My goal was to explore comic book fandom as a subculture according to the principles of interpretation readers adopt in relation to the text. What I wanted to understand was how fans make sense of the comic book text. What I found
out after talking with dozens of fans and retailers was that for many fans the act of reading a comic book is far from a passive activity. That does not necessarily mean comic book fans are active resisters of hegemonic meanings, as several other audience ethnographers have found of the fan communities they studied. Rather, for the devoted comic book enthusiast interpretation is a complex process shaped by individual ways of negotiating genre conventions and intertextual information shared with, and about, the creators themselves.

The account I have offered here identifies six fundamentally interrelated principles and points of comparison that fans use to construct their understanding of the media texts, the superhero stories and the African American characters published by Milestone Media:

1. **Subcultural Modes of Evaluation**

The first principle of interpretation used by comic book fans is one that influences all of the other points of reception. Comic book fans relate to the texts according to very clearly defined subcultural modes of evaluation. The fans' interpretive practises are shaped by a particular set of critical strategies developed through participation in the world of comics fandom. strategies that shape the reception process in socially contingent ways. Although fan communities are often marginalized for their devotion to texts that the general populace considers trivial and immature, in truth it is this very devotion that creates a system whereby fans learn to evaluate texts in much the same way that connoisseurs of high culture do. For example, where in high culture an institutionally sanctioned art critic is able to demonstrate his cultural capital by distinguishing between a Rembrandt and a Da Vinci, many comic book fans like Jordan, the aspiring artist, can similarly verify their subcultural capital by discerning when a character is illustrated by Denys Cowan and when the same character is drawn by Humberto Ramos. Further, a fan like Jordan can also tell that the visual style of a Ramos is heavily influenced by Japanese Manga and that his narrative style is influenced by such industry legends as Jack Kirby. Borrowing the framework and the language first used by Bourdieu we see how the comic book fans' practises are similar to the cultural economy, in fact they represent what Fiske (1992) has called a "shadow cultural economy," one that directly mimics the established system.

Comic book fans can actually gain the respect of their peers if they excel at evaluating the texts. Thomas, for example, became a highly respected fan due to his mastery of storylines and the
ever-changing market value of resale comic books. He recalls with pride the times when younger fans would actively seek him out to ask his interpretations of a particular story or his advice on which comics would be worth collecting. Of prime importance to the fans are such defining characteristics as the popularity or skill of the artist and/or the writer, recognition of the actual or the potential market value of a book, and historical knowledge about the industry, the genre, the character or the creators. Moreover, this semi-formalized system of evaluation is an example of how the fans and the publishers feed off each other. The publishers capitalized on early preferences within the fan community by promoting individual creators, in turn creator recognition became essential for the fan's understanding of the books, and finally the star system constructed by both the fans and the publishers resulted in a market where popular creators, like those at Milestone, could leave the big companies and achieve success as independents. The most heralded incident of this kind was the departure of several extremely popular creators from Marvel, including Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld, and Jim Lee who, between them, were responsible for the three best selling comic books of all time. Thanks to their large fan followings these artists were able to successfully produce their own books under the aegis of Image Comics, quickly becoming the third largest publishing concern behind long-time industry giants Marvel and DC Comics.

The cultural economy of comic book fandom provides the central frame of reference for interpreting individual works, particularly new comics like those produced by Milestone. In addition to forming understandings based on one's familiarity with the individual publishers, writers and artists, the fan-based interpretations are also premised on how a text relates to other books that it can logically be associated with (e.g. a new female superhero title is measured against other female superhero books), how it is situated within specific genre traditions, and how it relates to the dominant trends and market leading books being published at the same time.

2. Recognition of Milestone's Corporate and Creative Identity

The second and more distinctive principle that fans utilize when interpreting the Milestone titles is based on their awareness of Milestone's corporate and creative identity. Many of the fans understand the texts as they understand the publisher. In other words, their reading is contingent upon their recognition of Milestone as a Black owned and controlled company. When Milestone first
emerged on the comics scene in 1993 it was met with a great deal of media attention, attention that focused on the novelty of Black writers and artists joining together to create Black superheroes. This preoccupation with the ethnicity of Milestone and its characters influenced readers to the point where Milestone came to be regarded as the Black comic book company. For some comic book fans, this perception of Milestone as the Black comic book company was an incentive to follow the various titles they publish. Todd, for instance, very consciously became a Milestone fan because the characters are, for the most part, African American. Todd, who described himself as seeking out forms of entertainment that fit with his emerging sense of ethnic heritage, welcomed the Milestone project as chance to read about heroic Black characters and to support a Black-owned business. For fans like Todd, the Milestone line of comics are favored because they provide both personal pleasures and political progress.

On the other hand, with Milestone’s designation by many fans as the Black comic book company came the burden of racial representation on a political level. So despite Milestone’s careful attempts to position themselves as non-political, as a new comics line that just happens to be Black, many readers assumed that by virtue of the company’s much lauded ethnicity the stories and the characters must be overwritten by an ideological agenda. Of course Milestone never denied that their endeavors were inspired by an interest in racial politics and media representation of African Americans, but they did try to down play these points in favor of promoting their new universe as good old fashioned superhero entertainment. Still, the perception of fans, and of many comic book readers who have never become Milestone fans, is that the Milestone line is inherently political and their interpretations are shaped by this belief. The retailer who I cited earlier for declaring that he did not stock many Milestone comics “because it’s a Black thing” was not alone in his perception. In some cases this assumption of ideological intent is what attracts fans to the books, and in other cases it is what keeps some comic book fans away.

3. Recognition of the Debate Between Milestone and other African American Comic Book Publishers

The third principle used by fans for negotiating their understanding of the Milestone titles is closely related to the first principle. Coupled with an awareness of Milestone’s corporate and creative
identity as a Black publishing company is the reader's understanding of Milestone's position in relation to other African American comic book companies such as Ania. The consortium of independent African American comic book publishers known as Ania charged that the books produced by Milestone were not authentic Black comics. The characters, they argued, were nothing more than superheroes in black-face. This brief debate, which flourished just as the Milestone line of comics was first being published, revolved around the companies' different beliefs on exactly what constitutes authenticity in Black media representation. Expressing an essentialist view grounded in biological and cultural absolutes, Ania argued that because Milestone had entered into a printing and distribution partnership with mainstream publisher DC Comics their books could only be white-washed versions of true African American work; Ania saw the Milestone characters as a type of "chocolate-dip Superman." Milestone, on the other hand, argued that their stories reflected a greater diversity of modern Black life and catered to a multi-cultural group of readers, rather than considering the African American audience as a one-dimensional monolith. This debate between Ania and Milestone is grounded in the long disputed rhetoric of the "Black Aesthetic" and is representative of the overall ideological divide in Black nationalism based on the oppositional strategies of trying to integrate with dominant culture and the desire to separate from it.

Because this very public disagreement between Milestone and Ania often overshadowed the interesting work being done by both of the companies some readers considered the books in relation to each other. In particular many fans felt the Milestone titles were much more desirable as comic book fantasy fare in comparison to the books published by Ania. The Ania titles were seen as being too political-minded, of wearing their agenda on their sleeve, of falling too far outside of the acceptable norm of standard superhero stories. For many of the fans the perception of Milestone's books as quality superhero comics in the classical mold, and as relatively non-political, was reinforced when the books were measured against the often heavy handed messages of some of the more extreme underground African American publications.

4. Genre Conventions and Innovations

The fourth, and perhaps the most obvious of the principles of interpretation and points of comparison, is how the texts relate to specific genre traditions and formulaic elements. This evaluative
principle is one applied by fans to all superhero comic books, particularly books that are clearly identified as variations on the standard formula. Like all genres, the superhero comic is governed by a combination of conventions that have formalized over the years and the necessity of moderate variations that keep the genre fresh and appealing for new audience members. Fans understand the Milestone characters as one of these variations on the stock figure of the conventional costumed hero. For example, Will, who defined Milestone's "classic" formulaic superhero stories as an important element in their appeal for him, recognized the characters' place within the overall lexicon of comic book characters. For Will, as for many other Milestone fans, the uniqueness of characters like Icon, hardware and Static was not simply that they are Black but that they are Black characters clearly aligned with the established conventions of the genre. Rather than radically diverging from the key elements of the time-honored formula, or simply repeating exactly what has come before, the Milestone characters are seen as mixing an appropriate amount of innovation with established conventions. As Eric, the rather vehement defender of Icon as a legitimate variation on the classic Superman typology argued, "Ike's not so different that you can't understand him. There ain't nothing wrong with having a Black Superman. Hell, it's about time they got around to having one. having him be like Superman is good, having him be Black just makes the whole character fresher."

This recognition of the Milestone heroes' place in genre history is shared by both the creators and the fans. For those involved in the world of comic books, either as creators or as fans, there is a widespread and deeply ingrained familiarity with the basic tenets of the superhero genre. Fans expect certain generic elements from the stories they read, such as costumes and powers and a basic fight between good and evil. Likewise, the creators use these formalized conventions to construct an immediately recognizable story pattern or to expand on the basic reading of the formula, for example by including subtle sexual references about characters who run around in skin-tight rubber costumes. Moreover, this level of familiarity has lead the comics medium to be incredibly self-referential. Both the fans and the creators revel in such genre homage as Milestone's month of tribute covers (see Figures 7.2 and 7.3 in chapter seven), where each series featured a cover illustration imitative of a famous scene from the Golden Age of comics. This precedent for self-referentiality in the comics medium facilitates the fans' understanding of individual works as they relate to the whole. Stories are constantly rewriting, reworking, reinventing, criticizing, glorifying or paying homage to
the historical traditions of the genre.

It is within this self-reflexive vein that the Milestone comic books are read. Specific characters are understood in relation to their closest precedent, for example Icon is often compared to Superman, Hardware is compared to the likes of Batman and Iron-Man, and Static is compared to the early Spider-Man not to mention the countless other fun-loving teenage superhero characters who have existed in the over sixty years of comic book history. Thus fans are apt to consider the influence of other comics in their interpretation of specific stories or situations, much in the way that Will altered his understanding of the awkward friendship between Icon and Hardware in the Milestone Universe once he began to think of it as analogous to the legendary camaraderie of Superman and Batman in the DC Universe. More generally, the entire line of Milestone comic books are read as self-reflexive variations on the classic superhero world because the ethnicity of the characters (and of the creators) is included in the otherwise conventional mix. In other words, many readers interpret the Milestone books as a natural development of the genre that brings into question the Aryan bias of the medium.

5. Awareness of Genre History and Blaxploitation Formula

The fifth point of comparison used by comic book fans for interpreting the titles published by Milestone is based on how they compare to the typical blaxploitation comics from an earlier era. This is a comparison specific to the Milestone books, and again is negotiated by both the creators' and the fans' awareness of genre history. For fans like Todd who are very familiar with the medium's prevailing representation of Black characters, the new heroes published by Milestone are understood as a rectification of the one-dimensional blaxploitation comics of the 1970s. Through reprints, back issues, and the occasional guest appearances such infamous landmark Black characters as Luke Cage, the Black Panther and Black Lightning have continued to overshadow the representation of Black comic book superheroes. The image of jive-talking, ghetto-based heroes stuck in the 1970s was the dominant comic book portrayal of Black heroism until Milestone reworked those dated stereotypes in the early 1990s.

In a medium that revolves around creators and fans that are perhaps more self-consciously aware of the historical developments of the superhero genre than the participants in any other
popular genre of entertainment are, it was inevitable that Milestone would explicitly address the
blaxploitation period. The clearest example of this breaking with comics blaxploitation past was
worked out through the humorous portrayal of Buck Wild in the pages of *Icon*. Taking the bull by
the horns, Milestone made it clear that while their characters owed a great deal to the industry's earlier
attempts to create Black superheroes, it was time to move beyond this narrow and dated character
type. In testament to the interplay between the creators and the readers, it was at the fans' insistence
that the blaxploitation era be addressed so literally within the pages of Milestone comic books. It was
the fans' repeated questions about the blaxploitation-Milestone relationship that prompted them to
symbolically declare the official end of an era to the existing form of Black representation in comic
books. Yet, even this salve was not enough, and the fans demanded Buck's return until the creators at
Milestone finally laid the character, and the stereotype, to rest... complete with a eulogy delivered by
*Icon*. Even before Milestone expressly included reference to the blaxploitation era through such self-
parodying characters as Buck Wild and Lysistra Jones, the fans understood the books as a conscious
attempt to rework the dominant industry stereotypes. No matter how much the Milestone stories may
avoid direct references to racial representation, the readers are nonetheless persistently conscious of
the previous stereotypes against which they continually measure the Milestone universe. Moreover,
these updated Black superheroes are welcomed by fans as a much needed new ideal at the same time
that they are appreciated for not ignoring the genre precedents that are so important to the fans'
pleasure in the medium.

6. In Comparison to Current Trends in the Other Popular Comics

The final means of interpretation, and the most important strategy for the majority of
contemporary comic book fans, is based on how the Milestone books compare to the highly visible
line of Image comics. The Milestone stories are understood in contrast to the flashy, market
dominating comic books released by the various studios which fall under the publishing umbrella of
Image Comics. Because Image is an artist-based publishing company their comics are generally
identifiable by their exaggeratedly stylized form of illustration. The Image comics have become a
major force in the industry, a force known for their exaggerated vision of conventional gender types.
Superhero comic books have always depicted for young readers a basic personification of
masculinity as a fantasy of power based on the external trappings of what it means to be a man in Western culture. The conventional duality of the Superman/Clark Kent myth which has always been an important element of the superhero story illustrates a basic longing for such signs of masculinity as strength, muscles, respect and confidence. But in many recent comics, primarily those published by Image, the dual nature of the fantasy has been all but erased. The He-man has done away with the common man from which he arises, the mask of muscles has obliterated the masquerader underneath. Moreover, following Image's lead dozens of other publishers, both new companies and previously established ones, have begun to flood the market with similar comic books featuring exceedingly macho, and exceedingly muscular, costumed super men.

It is in comparison to these dominant hypermasculine images produced by Image and the Image-like publishers that many fans have formed an understanding of the Milestone characters as an alternative masculine ideal. As "tough, but not too tough" as one young fan told me. Or as Ted, the young fan at a local Toronto comicon explained the difference, "Static and Hardware and even Icon are a lot more realistic, not so cartoony. I mean... I know they're comic books but come on, look at those guys [in the Image books]. their fucking huge! At least the characters at Milestone look like they could fit through a doorway." The Milestone model is an ideal that reverses the most prevalent contemporary superhero model of hypermasculinity by emphasizing brains over brawn. This reversal is especially powerful and progressive because it is written on the body of Black men who have historically been aligned with the unthinking, bestial side of Western culture's Nature versus Civilization dichotomy. Because the Milestone heroes have been cast in the mold of the most conventional superhero characters of times past, despite the obvious innovation of their recognizable ethnicity, they are regarded as new heroes tempered by the social responsibilities written into the most classic version of the superhero formula. For many fans the Milestone universe offers a novel (Black) masculine ideal for comic books, one that stresses compassion and intelligence rather than physical force.

Milestone's fans are passionate and devoted. Unfortunately they are not the largest segment of the comic book fans out there. The Milestone project has been a struggle since its inception, the company's attempt to carve out a significant niche of the market has been an uphill battle. It has been a struggle hampered by the criticism of other African American comics publishers and by the
mainstream audience's perception that Milestone is a superhero universe featuring only Black characters. Black politics, Black problems, and is intended only for Black readers. The Milestone project can also be considered a struggle in a more general sense as the creators and the fans negotiate the fictional characters as well as the intentions and the meanings of the narratives. For example when Milestone first introduced their flagship character, Icon, he immediately became a greatly contested figure. As a staunch republican and an upper-middle class Black lawyer, Icon's personality became a point of some controversy. The writers defended the character in editorial pages and during interviews for fanzines. They also gave Icon a side-kick from the projects in order to temper his conservative ideological leanings. Still some readers questioned Icon's politics, his behavior and his motivations. Fans of Icon wrote in with support and suggestions about how a conservative Black superhero could and should act. In short, the debate helped both the creators and the fans to sharpen their perception of what Icon is all about, they forced each other to think about the nature of the character and the role of costumed heroism when it comes in a different skin colour. Likewise the overriding heritage of the blaxploitation type of comic book characters was a subject broached by both the creators and the fans. When Milestone introduced Buck Wild as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on those old norms, the fans latched onto the character as an important part of the Milestone equation. With Buck Wild the fans saw the publishers providing them with a link to the past and reference point for contextualizing why new heroes are needed. In fact the character proved so popular, such an ideal access point for fans to understand the creators' viewpoint, that the readers literally demanded his return.

It is in this sense, as negotiators of meaning, that I would consider the Milestone audience to be active. Of course many of them are active in more tangible and material ways, ways that are more akin to the media poachers that Jenkins (1992) describes who piece together their own videos from the television programs they adore, or the slash fiction writers that Bacon-Smith (1992) discusses who create their own homosexual love stories for Star Trek's Kirk and Spock. Many Milestone fans do make their own drawings of the characters, some try writing their own stories, and others have even built their own action figures from the bits and pieces of old models. Some of these homemade, Milestone-inspired, works are submitted to fanzines, and the best of them are occasionally reprinted in the magazine's pages. But these extreme forms of activity are not the normal pattern. What is much
more common is the fans' use of associated knowledge and subcultural principles to negotiate an interpretation of the comics text. The Milestone fans, like most comic book fans, are active within the limited range of interpretive possibilities provided by the creators and all of the influential dynamics that surround the text.

In the case of comic book fans, as I suspect it is with the fans of other media texts as well, the process of reception is much more collaborative (at least in a symbolic sense) than the bulk of previous audience studies have contended. The rift which has developed in cultural studies' view of media audiences has become polarized between seeing the text as a conveyor of meaning that hegemonically situates the reader within acceptable social norms, and the opposing view which sees audiences as active resistors who can, and do, construct any sort of meaning they want from the text, especially counter-hegemonic interpretations. The ideological and political framework of the researchers would seem to have taken them into extremes that are most likely over-statements of the actual cases of media consumption. Well intentioned desires to expose the dangers of cultural hegemony, or to bear witness to the ingenuity and resistance embodied in the common consumer, have lead to a skewed understanding of how audiences relate to media texts. Unlike these extremes, comic book fandom can best be understood as neither wholly complacent nor essentially resistant. Despite being one of the most active and well organized fan communities to exist in modern times, comic book fandom should be considered an arena where the producers and the consumers of mass media meet to mutually construct meanings across a wide range of possible variables.

This study has been not just about a fan culture but also about boys' culture. I feel that it is important to point this out, although by this time it should be more than obvious, because it is an influential variable when it come to the process of reception. The media subject has been comic books, and much more specifically it has been Milestone comic books, but the fan group has been young boys from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In other words, although the African American identity of the Milestone publishers and characters situates them within the confines of a disadvantaged group in relation to media representations, the fans discussed here are generally mainstream, culturally mixed, and boys. As I pointed out earlier, a majority of the most widely recognized audience studies conducted within the last fifteen to twenty years have concentrated on fan communities composed primarily of women. The impetus for many of these studies was to
demonstrate through ethnographic methods how real women use media texts to construct pleasures which are not evidence of their textual subordination but rather demonstrate their resistance to ideological impositions. Male fan cultures have typically been ignored on the premise that the popular media serves the existing patriarchy and thus men must simply be reading along with the text. For many of the Milestone fans this is simply not the case. The readings constructed by Milestone fans may not be active in the sense of their being "oppositional" (although I have doubts about how oppositional writing slash fiction really is even for women's groups), but in their negotiation of meaning the Milestone fans demonstrate that they do not just passively accept dominant messages. Even when it comes to self-serving notions of masculinity being based in physical power, many of the young readers who count the Milestone comics among their favorites actively sought out alternatives that countered the dominant hypermasculine rhetoric being fed to them by a majority of comic book publishers. This is not to say that all boys who read comic books, or even all boys who read Milestone comic books, seek out alternative models of masculinity. It is to say that some young men navigate gender roles in ways that are not always as readily apparent as are others. Dominant forms of masculinity to not always dominate.

Naturally I would like to add a caveat at this point about the dangers of over-generalization. An incredible number of comic book fans do in truth eagerly accept the excessively masculine model of gender behavior that is presented to them. But the fact that at least some young male comic book readers express a dissatisfaction with this current ideal suggest that a great deal more work needs to be done on how masculine fan groups really relate to media texts. It is an error to assume that male fans merely read along with media texts, even those media texts that have traditionally been identified as men's genres and would seem best able to satisfy traditionally misogynistic fantasies. Moreover it is an error that perpetuates an unequal consideration of the genders and may prove as limiting to our understanding of women as it does to our understanding of men.

The world of comics is a particularly unique medium. There are other fan groups that are every bit as devoted to their preferred media texts as comic book fans are, and many even have regional and national conventions as well as fanzines and computer networks, but very few have as large a network of specialty stores where participants can meet on a weekly or even a daily basis. Yet, perhaps most important is that no other mass entertainment industry has ties which are as closely knit
between the producers and the consumers as the comic book industry does. The ties do exist between the fans and the producers in other mediums but they are not as clear nor as well developed. In fact the world of comics might not be so much unique as it is an exaggeration of the dynamics that either exist or are possible in other systems of mass produced entertainment. It would be logical to assume that fans of other media forms might eventually be able to establish networks which could directly affect the construction of the text and its meaning in much the same way comic book fans do. For example, television viewers may exercise a subtle control over the production of texts in ways that go beyond the statistical guidelines of Nielsen's ratings and textual poaching. Viewers may actually be influencing the producers, the writers and even the actors through personal contact, written correspondence and in other ways that have yet to be explored. It would seem that one of the ways for cultural studies to expand its consideration of media audiences beyond the purview of idiosyncratic enclaves, a limitation that the discipline has imposed on itself to satisfy ideological dictates, would be to consider how the audience influences the texts to achieve a mutually satisfying content. Rather than blind compliance or active resistance we can begin to understand the audience's relationship with mass produced media texts and their creators as a type of continuum where meaning and content are negotiated within a given and mutually acceptable range of possibilities.
APPENDIX

This project was designed to study how young male comic book fans make sense of the illustrated texts they read, in particular the relatively new line of superhero comic books published by Milestone Media. Since one of the central premises of my dissertation is that the relationship between producers and consumers of popular texts must be taken into account, it was necessary that I move beyond traditional audience-only research. Thus, though the emphasis of this study is on the comic book fans themselves, informants also included industry professionals (most notably the creators of Milestone), casual comic book readers, parents of young fans, comic store owners and employees, and individuals involved with the fan press at a semi-professional level.

A) Ages

The respondents --not including parents and industry professionals-- ranged from five to thirty-three years of age, with a median age of thirteen years. The age and ethnicity range encompassed by the fans I spoke with closely parallels the general distribution found in comics fandom at large (see Parsons, 1991). The age range was much greater in the total sample than it was with the key informants. Information from parents and industry professionals is used in the study but is not included among the fan statistics provided here.

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B) Ethnicity

In total I had detailed discussions, or semi-formal interviews, with 128 male comic book fans. Of the 128 fans 64 (50%) were White, 41 (32%) were Black, 18 (14%) were West Asian, and 5 (4%) were Hispanic or East Asian.

**Ethnicity of Total Sample**

![Ethnicity of Total Sample](image)

Of the 128 fans who constituted the overall sample there were 25 young fans who were particularly helpful. This core group of twenty five local fans introduced me to other enthusiasts, provided a wealth of technical information about the comics subculture, and feedback on my research. In this sub-group of the overall sample, 14 (56%) were White, 8 (32%) were Black, and 3 (12%) were East Asian. All of these particularly helpful informants were between twelve and eighteen years old.

**Ethnicity of Key Informants**

![Ethnicity of Key Informants](image)
C) Reading Habits

The bulk of people I spoke with over the course of this study counted themselves as serious comic books fans (purchasing at least two comic books per week). In fact, many of the fans considered the quality of comics an individual buys each week to be as strong an indication of their commitment to the medium as was frequent participation in fandom activities such as attending comicons. Most regular comic book series are published on a monthly basis but publisher stagger their release so that can offer a variety of titles each week. An average comic book specialty store will stock twenty to forty new issues each week. Excluding special promotions, informants' estimates of their own purchasing practices ranged from six to thirty-five new comics a month. Due to fluctuations in the fans' disposable income, availability of comics and delays in printing the amount of comics purchased by an individual fan may vary considerably week to week. The consensus of the retailers in the Toronto area is that a serious fan will purchase between three and six comic books each week, on average.

D) Ethnography and Popular Culture

I say that this study offers an "ethnographic based examination" of comic book fandom because I find myself hard pressed to consider any qualitative research of media audiences as true ethnography in the sense of a whole way of life. As such, this project is more closely aligned with the field of cultural studies than that of classic ethnography. Rather than an descriptive study of a culture with a specific interest in speaking for the Other, or voicing "the Native's point of view" (Geertz, 1983), I consider qualitative audience studies such as this one to be a legitimate use of ethnographic methods in order to expand our understanding of how real people interact with the specific complexities of our own culture. I avoid the term "ethnography" per se to describe my research because I agree with the numerous commentators (e.g. Morris 1988, Nightingale 1989, and Evans 1990) who point out that "much that goes by the name of ethnography in cultural studies is far from the detailed, participant-observation of anthropological inquiry" (Bird. 1992: 253). Moreover, I
further agree with Elizabeth Bird who goes on to argue that traditional ethnography encompasses "a range of methods that are or could be used to study audiences" (253). While I believe that media consumption must be understood as an interrelated process, I am also a firm believer in the value of the qualitative approach and ethnographic methods to flesh out that process. To quote Mukerji and Schudson (1991) when they paraphrased and updated Geertz in their discussion of the influence of anthropology on modern culture studies: "Here popular culture is taken to be a society thinking out loud about itself" (26). Perhaps, more specifically, we can think of comic books as one of the utterances by which society talks to and about itself.
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NOTE: I have not included the references for individual comic books here in the list of works cited. The issue number and the date accompanies all of the comic books mentioned in the body of this text. Those series or storylines which have been discussed as graphic novel reprints have been included in this list, as they are officially categorized by the Library of Congress as books, and are available through the same distribution systems as are "real" books.


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