Fear of a Black Spider-Man: Race Bending and the Color-Line in Super Hero (Re)Casting

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Abstract

This paper tackles the way in which fans legitimize 'whiteness' in the pantheon of American fictional heroes. Using the 2010 internet meme calling for an African-American actor be cast as the next Spider-Man, and the replacement of Peter Parker with a character of Hispanic and African-American descent, I examine online arguments made by fans that Peter Parker and Spider-Man have been and therefore should remain white. Specifically, I am interested in the way in which fans legitimize the 'casting' choices of characters through the use of canon – the officially recognized history of a fictional universe – and dominant characterizations of Spider-Man as a hero.

Keywords: race; Spider-Man; heroism; canon; character

Introduction

In 2010, the rumored short list of white teen actors to play Peter Parker/Spider-Man in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) inspired columnist Marc Bernardin for the science fiction and technology website *io9.com* (owned by Gawker Media) to suggest a person of color be considered for the role. This led to a 'meme' – a viral idea often expressed as an image/text – calling for African-American actor Donald Glover to be cast. This went viral amongst social networks, forums and blogs. This included a Facebook group "Donald Glover 4 Spiderman!!" gaining over 11,900 fans within a week of the article's posting, and numerous commentaries on "geek" blogs and websites discussing whether Glover could or should be considered at all. Comic book fandom was immensely split on this issue of potentially casting a black Peter Parker. A year later, Marvel Comics killed off Peter Parker in their "Ultimate" line of comics and replaced him with the character Miles Morales who is Black and Hispanic (*Ultimate Spider-Man* #160 / *Ultimate Fallout #4*). The fans discourse around his replacement was complicated, divisive, and in many cases was

(and still is) heavily coded with racial unease as a person of color took on the mantle of Spider-Man. In addition to the hundreds of online discussions, mainstream news agencies and pundits even reported on it and offered commentary. For example, an anchor on Fox News called it "a radical left turn to extreme political correctness."[1] In addition, conservative pundit Glen Beck implied a conspiracy promoting Barack Obama, claiming that Morales "looks just like President Obama… a lot of this stuff is being done intentionally."[2]

The color-line is still staunchly defended in all aspects of social life (see: Dalmage, 2000). This includes fictional and virtual worlds (Denzin, 2001; Dietrich, 2013; Lee, 1999; Leonard, 2003; Mellinger, 1992). From a discursive stand point, however, its contemporary defense is heavily coded (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Many fans in online discussions claim that their desire to keep Spider-Man white is not racist. They argue that their position is not about race, but the essence of Spider-Man – his history and portrayal. Generally, arguments against a black Spider-Man rested on either of the two principles 1) Peter Parker was white in the comics; therefore, he should be white in the film, or 2) if Peter Parker were black, it would fundamentally remove the transformation of a geeky kid into a super powered hero. In the case of Spider-Man and other cultural icons, debates over *who could or could not, and should* or *should not* be a superhero, a sidekick, or support character are structured by a racial hierarchy and ideology.

This article investigates the controversy over the online campaign to recast Spider-Man with a Black actor. While many fans were favorable towards the recasting, I will pay special attention to those who opposed the idea. The idea of the color-line in fictional and virtual worlds are not limited to Spider-Man (Lee, 1999; Leonard, 2003; Mellinger, 1992; Yousman, 2003). In other science fiction, there have been similar online debates over the possibility of a Black or Asian actor cast as "The Doctor" in the long running British television program *Doctor Who* (also see: Orthia, 2013). What makes this controversy interesting is the way in which fans debate the merit of casting a Black actor as Spider-Man. Of sociological interest to me is the way in which such positions are legitimized (see: Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006). The study of affective fan discourses, as well as fan loathing, reveal a great deal about fan communities and identity (Gray, 2008; Hills, 2003; Proctor, 2013). However, debates regarding canon and character (and the way positions are legitimized) is deeply tied to how society frames issues such as race, gender, and sexuality. While a great deal has been written on race bending – the way in which media producers change the race or ethnicity of characters – this article specifically looks at how fans argue for and

1 *Fox News Watch*, Television Broadcast. August 6, 2011
2 *The Glen Beck Program,* Radio Broadcast. August 3, 2011

legitimize white normativity (Denzin, 2001; Lopez, 2012; Tierney, 2006). This allows us to look at fan/cult discourses as being part of broader cultural discussions regarding race and the color-line.

Literature

Comic books and graphic novels are an under-researched area in the field of sociology, despite their longstanding significance in American popular culture (Brienza, 2010; Lopes, 2006, 2009). Alternatively, there is a great deal of research on the relationship between race and how fictional characters are created, marketed, and consumed in American popular culture. For instance, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) examined minority underrepresentation in prime time television programs. When cast at all, Dennis (2009) found minorities are more likely to be cast in subordinate roles in children's programs. Not limited to television, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found less than 9% of 3,400 children's' books were about African-Americans, Asians, Latinos, or Native Americans.[3] Also, video games (a medium with strong ties to comic books), sees an overrepresentation of white male protagonists (Dietrich, 2013; Williams, et al, 2009). As such, a study of comic book superheroes offer additional insight into race, representation, and what such images mean to both its fans and society (Wolk, 2008). Notably, a sociological study of comic book fans' responses not only helps us understand their position on race bending, but if offers insight into how a specific – "geek" – subculture legitimizes whiteness as a norm. Moreover, it allows us to connect this subculture more broadly to the way race operates in society.

Central to the Spider-Man controversy is the naturalization or normalization of "whiteness" in popular culture. Race is articulated in society, so as to reproduce difference and domination (Hall, 1996). Writing on the Spider-Man issue, Drew Mcweeny (2010) on the movie website *HitFix* noted that a major problem in popular culture is that, "The default hero in most fiction is a white, heterosexual male." This, of course, is not a singular case. The normalization of "white" as the color of "mainstream" comic book protagonists has a history within the medium of comics and graphic novels, as well as in film, literature, television, and video games (Dietrich, 2013; Hughey, 2010, 2012a; Nama, 2010). By mainstream, I mean it in two interrelated ways. The first, is that of whiteness. The second is well-known to the general public.

[3] Cooperative Children's Book Center. 'Children's Books by and About People of Color'. Retrieved November 13, 2012 (http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/pcstats.asp).

Despite the creation of numerous heroes of color, it is still Caucasian "looking" aliens (Superman), mutants (most of the X-Men) and talented humans (Batman) that are *mainstream* heroes. Secondly, I use it refer to what is popular or commonly known. There is no doubt that comic books, graphic novels, science fiction and popular culture has strived for racial inclusion in recent years. In D.C. Comics there is: John Stewart (Green Lantern), David Zavimbe (Batwing), John Henry Irons (Steel), and Victor Stone (Cyborg). In Marvel Comics, there is Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel), Misty Knight, and James Rhodes (War Machine). However, in most cases heroes such as Luke Cage (Power Man) or Sam Wilson (Falcon) would be considered to be lesser known (or considered sidekicks). As Berger (2005) points out, "white" is a signifier of normativity in American culture. This impacts the construction of the white "mainstream," as well as notions of race (and diversity) within marginalized groups, subcultures and counter-cultures (Byrne, 2006; Kinney, 1993; Perry, 2001; Thornton, 1996).

The dominance of white (typically male) protagonists across most of popular culture is obvious, as is the racialized framing of "non-white" protagonists (Brown, 1999; Hughey, 2010). While the notion of whiteness as a norm is obvious to observers and researchers of popular culture, what is interesting to me is the uproar that occurs when characters are re-cast or re-interpreted with different skin colors. In other words, some cases of race bending are more legitimate than others to fans. This raises interesting questions in regards to the uneven anger when race bending occurs. It begs the question: why does the skin color of some fictional characters matter more than others? Moreover, is "geek" culture is really different from the broader American culture when it comes to the issue of race?

Methods

This paper will analyze fan discussions and debates concerning the casting of a black Spider-Man. Wetherell and Potter (1992) argue that discourse in the form of meaning, narrative and explanations play a role in the legitimization of racial inequality. As such, I have examined online comments from fans on the potential casting of Donald Glover. I will also briefly discuss the replacement of Peter Parker with Miles Morales a year later. Specifically, this analysis will emphasize comments and posts from sci-fi or "geek" culture oriented websites *Comicbookmovie.com* and *i09.com*.[4] The original article on *i09* hat proposed an

[4] Although I am not an active poster or registered user in this community, I could be considered an "insider" to comic/geek culture as well as a "lurker" on such sites.

actor other than a "white guy" to play Peter Parker had 230 original comments and 866 separate replies between May 28, 2010 and June 4, 2010. An article on *Comicbookmovie.com* discussing Donald Glover being given a chance to audition for the role had 288 comments. I will examine online discussion during this time period to explore the logic, rhetoric and ideologies deployed by fans to legitimize their positions.

Methodologically, this approach might be described as "virtual ethnography," "netnography," or "cyberethnography" of a community of commentators, posters, and talkbackers (Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2009; Robinson & Schulz, 2009). While racism is prevalent on the Internet, looking at comments on specific issues can be useful (Daniels, 2009a, 2009b). For instance, Hughey (2012b) has examined online comments in regards to "Birther" claims against President Obama's citizenship status. Such research can reveal the way in which hegemonic white identity is sustained. However, Hughey and Daniels (2013) note moderation by website operators (such as deleting vulgar and racist comments) makes coding and quantifying responses problematic. This raises questions as to how representative such comments are within the fan community. This is why I have tried to read online discussions with the goal of examining how fans have discursively tried to legitimize their positions instead of quantifying their responses.

This approach is also informed by the specific characteristics of the community. The reasoning for this approach is that fans posting 1) are typically regular readers or active posters on "geek" culture oriented sites 2) in turn, the posters are likely to have above average knowledge of comic book canon and character histories. In other words, they are very much members of the "geek" subculture (Brown, 1997; Fine & Kleinman, 1979; Force, 2009; Pustz, 1999; Woo, 2012). While there is a fair amount of "trolling" (provoking negative responses) and outright racist comments, the vast majority of posters try to legitimize their positions in ways typical of "geek" debates – by referencing canon, or using other examples in popular culture. As Stevens (2011, p. 607) discovered in a letter feud regarding Captain America comics, "The discussants used argument, humor, symbolism, emotional appeals, and even threats to bolster their positions." Brown (1997) argues that this reflects the culture of comic book fandom – a subculture with its own norms and its own symbolic economy (also see: Becker, 1982). This not unlike other subcultures in which conversational display of knowledge is an important component of identity and authenticity (Force, 2009; Woo, 2012). More broadly, Johnston et. al. (2006) note that social and cultural capital is in general an important component of legitimization. Therefore, knowledge of superhero canon and character histories across media formats is a form of capital that is employed when arguing, debating and legitimizing positions.

Key to my analysis is the language used to pre-empt the potential critique of racism. Many user comments can be described as color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In other cases, comments appear to be driven by fear of a threat – against white identity or heritage (Byrne, 2006; Perry, 2001). Therefore, the way in which claims, counterclaims and appeals to authority are used is key to unraveling the way in which some fans legitimize a white Peter Parker (Doane, 2006). Thus, I have tried to "map" the positions of fans to "represent the full range of discursive positions" (Clarke, 2005, p. xxxvi). This also allows me to situate and contextualize user comments within broader narratives about race (see Table 1).

[table 1 here]

I will focus on two appeals against this potential re-casting. The first is that of canon, and the second is of character. Canon is the official or popularly recognized history of a fictional universe. Most fan criticism against casting an African-American Spider-Man is based on an obsession with canon. This position claims that Peter Parker was white in classic Spider-Man stories, and therefore should always be white. In other words, "history" and "facts" matter to this community. However, such an obsession is also linked to ideas and stereotypes of who the canonical Peter Parker is (or his characterization). As such, discussions concerning the racial identity or characterization of Peter Parker/Spider-Man will be analyzed as well.

In examining the "character" argument, I will pay attention to assumptions and racial stereotypes. There was no shortage of descriptions on the websites I studied of how a black Peter Parker would be substantially different from a white Peter Parker. This second fan criticism is tied to the idea that the character of Spider-Man is strongly tied to his racial identity. Moreover, I will address the relative lack of controversy over the race bending of other characters.

Canon - "Its not a race thing! It's a fact!"[5]

Spider-Man made his first appearance in a 1962 issue of *Amazing Fantasy* (Issue #15). Stan Lee and Steve Ditko created a teenager struggling with adolescence who accidentally becomes a costumed crime fighter following a bite from a radioactive spider. It has been argued that the success of Spider-Man in large part

[5] User comment on *New York Magazine*'s article: http://www.vulture.com/2010/05/internet_campaign_pushing_for.html#comments <accessed September 12, 2011>

has to do with the characterization of Peter Parker. He had the insecurities and problems typical of teenagers, which in turn made Spider-Man resonate with his fan base (Wright, 2001). Despite, five decades of comics, video games, movies and television programs, several key aspects of Spider-Man that has remained constant throughout the years. For example: his relationship with Mary Jane Watson (and Gwen Stacy), his work as a photographer, and enemies such as Doctor Octopus, the Green Goblin, the Lizard, and Venom.

A key critique against the casting of Glover and a black Peter Parker is tied to the issue of "canon," or what is "official" and "normal" in the Marvel comic book universe. A poster on *i09*, was straight forward in his comment, "Peter Parker is white on the comics. Peter Parker must be white on the movies. Period." This was perhaps the most common argument made by those opposed to Donald Glover's casting as Spider-Man. Another user posted, "I'm sorry, but comics that have history and legacy about their characters should not be up for your social experimentation."

Key to their argumentation was the way in which commenters attempt to pre-empt the accusation of racism by claiming that it is not about race and their assertion of color-blindness while making their argument. These posters use canon as means of maintaining Peter Parker's whiteness. What is interesting about the appeal to canon is the claim that their position was not racial in inspiration. A post on *i09* argued, "I don't think it's necessarily racist for people to be apprehensive about the idea of a black actor playing Spider-man. I think it's about wanting the representation of the character in the film to closely resemble the image of the character you have in your mind [sic]." It was additionally brought up by several commenters as to whether or not the re-casting would just stop with Peter Parker. On *Comicbookmovie*, one poster noted: "Black Peter Parker is an awful idea. Think about it: you change him, but where do you stop? Are Aunt May and Uncle Ben black too? What about Gwen/ Mary Jane?" Another user suggested that "I'd be interested to see Spiderman as black, but have Mary Jane staying white."[6]

Fear of a "black" Marvel universe notwithstanding, other users emphasized canon in other ways. For instance, many acknowledge the re-imaginings of superhero origins – across a variety of media within comic books, film and television over the years. Correspondingly, commenters have also argued against race bending and racial re-casting in all cases. For instance, a poster on *Comicbookmovie* point out that: "Changing the race of a character never works no matter which way it goes. I hate the white washing

[6] This is an interesting comment that is not elaborated on by the poster and those responding. However it raises interesting questions regarding the connection between race bending and gender.

Hollywood does to the adaptions of Manga and Anime, and a white Shaft would be disgrace." A user on *i09* made a similar comment noting the importance of the source material, "The closer things look to their source material, the more likely I am to enjoy it. Don't shit all over my childhood by casting Will Smith as a role iconically played by a white guy."

The reliance on canon, however, aggresively debated within geek culture by fans of comic books, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and other science fiction (Hills, 2003; Proctor, 2013). This is especially the case in comic books, where "history" is constantly being re-written. Continuity problems have long plagued comic book "universes." For example, in 1985, DC Comics released a 12 part series called "Crisis on Infinite Earths" in order to simplify and make consistent their 50 year history. In 2011, DC Comics essentially re-booted many of their monthly superhero books following the universe collapsing events of the "Flashpoint" storyline to create the New 52. Another strategy is the implementation of "retroactive continuity" changes (retcon). Rather than re-booting an entire series or creating a new universe, a retcon is an attempt to add new stories (within the mainstream narrative) to resolve contradictions within canon. This can have the effect of resolving long standing errors, but in turn create new contradictions and anger fans. An example of retconning is Marvel Comics' 2002 story, *Truth: Red, White and Black*, that reveals the government's use of African American soldiers as test subjects to re-create the formula used to turn Steve Rogers into Captain America. This six-part series was not only inspired by the very real Tuskegee Experiments, but was a conscious attempt to bring Marvel's fictional history in line with "real" history. Jennifer Ryan argues that *Truth* works toward "reclaiming lost histories—and, through them, unrepresented lives" (Williams et al., 2009, p. 90). In other words, *Truth*, like other alterations to canon is an attempt to reconcile fiction (to an extent) with "history."

In other words, retconning and changes to canon are quite common. This was noted by commentators and posters who favorable toward a black Spider-Man. An *i09* poster regarding history and legacy argued, "But its ok for comics to play with their own history and legacy? Isn't that what reboots and retcons are all about?" For example, there are more radical attempts to make stories more realistic beyond inserting people of color into white mainstream history. The most notable re-imaging was the creation of the "Ultimate Marvel" imprint in 2000 to update characters and stories created in the 1960s – 1970s. This involved re-situating Cold War era hero origins and backgrounds in a contemporary context. Importantly, these stories, including the replacement of Peter Parker with Miles Morales, are meant to be a separate "world" (Earth 1610) than that of the mainstream (Earth 616) continuity that most fans are familiar with. Despite this being a different "world," there artists and writers seek to maintain the essence

of these characters. In other words, they are not erasing or changing the stories that most fans are familiar with. They are creating an "alternate reality" in which artists and writers may have more freedom to create (without relying on decades of canon) new stories involving or inspired by the "classic" heroes. While Ultimate Marvel has not been without controversy amongst fans, the greatest one was the re-casting of Spider-Man.

Miles Morales made his first appearance in a 2011 issue of *Ultimate Fallout* (Issue #4). Created by Brian Michael Bendis and Sara Pichelli, Morales gains his powers from a radioactive spider created by Peter Parker's nemesis Norman Osborne (the Green Goblin) shortly before Parker and Osbornes' deaths. Not unlike the original Spider-Man, Morales is young and insecure after gaining his powers. Following, the very public death of Spider-Man, Miles meets Peter's friends and allies, and takes on the identity to honor the fallen hero. Since the creation of Morales, he has been regarded very positively by readers of *Ultimate Spider-Man*. In a 2011 *Comicbookmovie* review of Donald Glover's stand-up comedy act (in which he mentions the Spider-Man controversy), the debate over his potential casting was re-opened on the website. As one commentator noted, "If you want a black Spidey go right ahead just don't name him Peter Parker. Peter Parker is and will always be Caucasian in the 616." Here, the poster appears to be fine with Miles Morales appearing in an Ultimate universe film, but not a mainstream film. In fact, Ultimate Marvel was often cited by those for, or were indifferent to casting a Black Spider-Man. This indicates a spectrum of different positions regarding race bending and Spider-Man.

A common example of race bending brought up by commentators was how Marvel super-spy Nick Fury was changed from white to black in the Ultimate universe. In the 2000s, the graying Caucasian hero was re-imagined to look like Samuel Jackson (who would in turn play the character in later film adaptations). As one poster on *i09* noted "did anyone cry out in pain when they saw Samuel Jackson as Nick Fury in Spiderman. Did it hurt the story? who the hell cares?" However, in a separate comment, a user addressed this critique by stating, "Nick Fury is one thing but Spiderman is one Superhero that holds ICON status." Interestingly, another user against a black Spider-Man on *i09* pointed out, "Now, I think Samuel Jackson as Nick Fury, was just plain awesome. He's a bad ass Nick Fury. But, I've never really cared about Nick Fury."

In fact, Spider-Man creator Stan Lee and fans have noted that a re-imagining of Peter Parker/Spider-Man as black would not be the first instance of a comic book character's skin color changing (Marshall, 2010). Outside of the Marvel Ultimate continuity, famous examples include the 1960s Batman television program in which Julie Newmar was replaced by Eartha Kitt in the role of Catwoman. Other

examples include Billy Dee Williams playing Harvey Dent in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and Michael Clarke Duncan playing the Kingpin in *Daredevil*. Many of these other examples were brought up by commenters as well. However, as the posters mentioned above noted, these characters might not be iconic or mainstream enough to created outrage.

The question, therefore, is how far race bending deviates from both the societal acceptance of story and character. For instance, Harvey Dent has since been portrayed by white actors in films where his alter-ego Two-Face was a major antagonist for Batman. As such, we need to ask how much does race really affect canon? It *has* been argued by many number fans on i09.com and Comicbookmovie.com that the race of Peter Parker is irrelevant to the story of a teenage boy in New York being bitten by a radioactive spider and gaining super powers. Comic book historian Steve Kistler pointed out, "There is nothing in the comic or the origin of the character that has to do with what ethnicity [Peter Parker] is, the color of his skin, or his background… only that he's a kid from Queens" (quoted in Marshall 2010). Moreover, in a MTV interview with Stan Lee on the potential casting of Glover, he states that it "shouldn't be a racial issue" (Marshall, 2010). Nonetheless, the potential casting of a Black Spider-Man in a movie or in the comics became a concern.

Character - "The dude is your prototypical emo white nerd, his hobbies are photography and science"[7]

Given the malleable history of comic book heroes, the fixation with canon does not seem to be sufficient in understanding the obsession with keeping Spider-Man white. Continuity and canon are vital to fandom. However, according to Proctor (2013) it can also threaten the fans' "ontological security." This is why canon is selectively applied. When Spider-Man is marketed and re-interpreted for foreign markets there is no uproar. He has already been re-interpreted in other countries with support from Marvel. For example, India and Japan respectively have Peter Parker analogs Pavitr Prabhakar and Yu Komori becoming Spider-Men.[8] Moreover, in an alternate Marvel future, the Spider-Man of 2099 (Miguel O'Hara) has Hispanic heritage. These are examples that supporters of Donald Glover playing Spider-Man have

[7] Quoted from: http://popwatch.ew.com/2010/06/01/donald-glover-spider-man/

8 In the United States, the Japanese "Manga" Spider-Man has made appearances in video games and in-turn influenced the artwork of the *Spectacular Spider-Man* on the CW Network (2008-2009).

referenced. As one poster remarked, “An Indian Spider-Man: he's already canon! The idea isn't new! So a reboot film can use what's already been established, without it being token. Win-win, in my opinion.”

The above suggests that much of the tension may not be as much about a black Spider-Man, but of a black Peter Parker. Nonetheless, the fluidity of other fictional characters’ race (or the lack thereof) demonstrates the discursive and complex nature of race in popular culture. As Omi and Winant (1994) argue race and racism are not a given; rather such categories are socially created and frequently contested. In fact, a racial group’s relative position (and degree of assimilation) within the American racial hierarchy is often described as “whitening” and “blackening” (for example Koshy, 2001; Padín, 2005; Rivero, 2002). This can be seen in literature, film, television, video games and of course comic books.

As W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out, the "problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois, 1997, p. 45). More specifically, this line is the black/white divide. This is a distinction is not only of historical significance, but one of continued economic, political and social consequence. Despite the growing recognition of multi-racial identities, this binarism continues to be the central to American race/ethnic relations (Bobo, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Brown et al. 2003; Lee & Bean, 2007). As scholars have pointed out the “whitening” and “blackening” is a part of racial discourses in mass media. For instance, Asians and Latinos struggle with these “two extremes along a spectrum with a preferred pole” (also: Padín, 2005; Wu, 2003, p. 292). This means the color-line may be better characterized as black/non-black (Alba & Nee, 2005; Gans, 1999; Lee & Bean, 2007).

Dalmage (2000) notes that racial borders continue to be patrolled in such a way that real and symbolic violence remain common place. For example, the claim by Fox News and Glenn Beck that Marvel Comics is involved in a left-wing political conspiracy by creating a black Spider-Man is an example of violent rhetoric frequently appears when the color-line is challenged. While media pundits and fans debating comic books may appear to be a minor issue, similar claims of a left-wing conspiracy are made of affirmative action, diversity, and political correctness. In other words, the controversy is not just about canon, or perhaps even just about Peter Parker being white. It is specifically about casting of an African-American in an iconic role. It is not a black Spider-Man that is most scary. Rather it is a black Peter Parker, which challenges the color-line far more. As such, the case of Spider-Man provides insight into the way racial borders are patrolled in popular culture (just as they are in real life).

Comic book scholar Peter Coogan (2009) argues that superheroes can be defined through their mission, powers, and identity. When it comes to the history of heroism in Western literature (and media),

whiteness is certainly a part of heroism. For example, in colonial America "whiteness" was often juxtaposed against the savagery of the Indians and the wilderness (which would often steal away white victims) (Babb, 1998; Swain, Hillel, & Sweeney, 2009). In fact, anticolonial movements in popular fiction (which are arguably heroic acts) were often depicted not only as threats against Western security, but through white protagonists battling "dark skinned" savages (Wright, 2001, p. 37). This motif is particularly common in later American western stories, as well as in Orientalist stories in the British Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In such stories, we often see seemingly "non-white" protagonists and heroines discover that they have white European blood in the story's climax – a discovery that legitimizes them as heroes.

When characters of color were not faceless villains, they were frequently relegated to being side-kicks such as Tonto for the Lone Ranger or Kato for the Green Hornet.[9] In the case of heroes, they became "regional" heroes such as Zorro in the American Southwest, or Asian action heroes from Asia (not American or Asian-American). Like other heroes of color, black superheroes, they are marked by their "blackness" both visually and in name. They are typically urban heroes such as Luke Cage or from fictional African countries such as Black Panther (see: Singer, 2002, p. 107). While writers and their characters such as Isaiah Bradley and Luke Cage attempt to challenge such characterizations, there is no doubt that a racial hierarchy still constrains them (Bould, 2007; Wanzo, 2009). In other words, there is the "containment" of minority heroes whose "hero" status can challenge the racial status quo (see: Kim, 2004; Madison, 1999).

Given this background, it is not surprising that changes to other characters' biography and race did not have the same level of controversy as Spider-Man (a character that is more mainstream and popular). In fact, it appears that race and specifically blackness plays a major role in challenging the legitimacy of a non-white Spider-Man. A popular argument against Peter Parker's race being changed is that being black would make him less of nerd. One commenter on the original *i09* article argued that, "As long as Glover plays it as a white guy (i.e. no "Yo yo yo" stuff... black guys speak in full sentences now. I should know), then do it [sic]." Another poster remarked, "it's very simple, a black man would never put up with the BS that peter parker puts up with. and he wouldn't be in the mess' that peter parker always finds himself in." Here, the belief that a black teenager can't speak in full sentences, be emo, or be a nerd

9 While non-white characters have historically been portrayed as villains, they are less frequently portrayed as super villains (Cunningham, 2010).

is informed by the way in which "blackness" and black masculinity is represented in society. Consequently, this plays a role in the construction and definition of heroism for heroes of color.[10]

Interestingly, when disputing the "character" argument, posters who favored re-casting often appealed to canon. On *io9*, someone noted that: "Peter Parker happens to be white. He's not a 'white character.' His whiteness doesn't define who he is." Another person on the same site put it more simply: "Unless spiders are racist he can still get bit just the same. Would that change much?" More significantly, posters noted that for other characters it is *not* (or at least less of) a racial issue. There have been are a number of changes to backgrounds of characters – including their race. In addition to the replacement of Peter Parker and Nick Fury, in the Ultimate universe, Tony Stark's mother is made Hispanic and his full name is revealed to be Antonio (instead of Anthony). Furthermore, when the debate over why one case of race bending is racist and another is not, often arguments come back to the issue of canon. On *Comicbookmovie*, a commenter noted that, "changing something like Blade or Shaft, which being black is a fundamental part of their character, does nothing to Peter Parker." On *i09*, a poster sarcastically noted, "Arnold Schwarzenegger as Luke Cage. What? It doesn't work the other way, too?"

In addition, some posters noted the inconsistent outrage when non-white characters are re-cast as white. For instance, someone on *i09*, pointed out: "Surprising to see this is considered more offensive than casting a white, American actor as, say, a Persian Prince who then plays the role with an East-London accent. Or a British Indian actor playing an Iraqi for six years with a 'indefinably Arab-ish sort of' accent. Or Peter Sellers as Fu Manchu [sic]."[11] However, in response the above post, someone asked: "If casting white actors in the Last Airbender movie was racist, then why isn't it racist against white people to cast a black actor as Spiderman? [sic]." In response to this poster, someone replied, "Ok just for clarification, the cast of The Last Airbender was 'race bended' and that's racism because the character was originally Asian in the cartoon. Now I'm being told that by not being ok with a black spiderman, even though the original was white, is also being racist?"

In the case of Spider-Man, the association of "nerd" identity (and related skills) to whiteness, is often directly contrasted against black identity (Kendall, 2011). As Brown (1999) notes contemporary

10 This can perhaps be compared to controversies over the casting of a Black Santa Claus. Not only do discussions of whether or not Santa Claus can or cannot be Black parallel that of Spider-Man, but there is research that indicates children are more likely to believe a white Santa Claus is real versus one who is non-white (Copenhaver-Johnson, Bowman, & Johnson, 2007; Springwood, 2009).

11 The poster is referring to Jake Gyllenhaal playing the tile role in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010) and Naveen Andrews' portrayal of Sayid Jarrah on the television program *LOST*.

African-American comic book writers grapple with stereotypes of black "hyper"-masculinity. Given the way in which "whiteness," "blackness" and masculinity are constructed and represented in culture and society, black heroes are frequently characterized as one-dimensional fierce strong warriors favoring brawn over intellect. As such, it is not surprising fans believe that making Peter Parker black would have consequences for his character and perhaps his romantic relationships. On *i09* "The only thing I'd worry about is MJ. Her personality just wouldn't fit in a black skin."

Conclusion: Political Correctness in Comic Books and Real Life

As mentioned in preceding sections of this article, comic book publishers *have* increased diversity and there were many fans on the websites I studied that supported Glover's chance to audition for the role. While discourses both for and against race bending reveal a great deal about fan affect and emotion, their positions parallel broader societal discourses concerning race. For instance, on *RottenTomatoes.com*, a commenter complained "…let's face it...if word got out that Tom Cruise was up for the role of Luke Cage, Al Sharpton would be marching on Washington before I finished this rant. This ultra PC, super-sensitve society we live in creates so much resentment amongst its citizens and stories like this (whether you agree or don't) are the reason why [sic]." On *i09*, one commentator asked "Why does the casting of movies HAVE to be diverse?" While explicitly political comments such as this were less prevalent, it was certainly a sentiment that lay beneath other criticisms. Here, the re-casting of a new minority superhero matches workplace complaints of a new hire being 1) unqualified or 2) does not belong/fit.

In other words, comic book fan culture is not very different from the broader American culture when it comes to race. In both fiction and non-fiction, race certainly plays a role in whether or not people believe someone is qualified for a job or belongs in a position. Moss and Tilly (2001) argued that employers presume that young Black males lack the "soft skills" needed for the work place. Not only does this affect hiring, but it affects placement and promotions as well (Maume, 1999). Given the criticisms from online commentators, it appears that while African-American heroes may be fast and strong, they do not have the additional "soft skills" or characteristics to become an "iconic" super hero. Affirmative action and diversity initiatives have attempted to resolve many of these problems. However, as Harper & Reskin (2005) have pointed out, diversity initiatives "may or may not seek to provide access to members of

protected groups." Rather, there is an emphasis on membership rather integration. This is perhaps why superhero teams tend to reflect social and culture "diversity" despite maintaining a glass ceiling in which typically white men lead (such as the X-Men, Avengers, Justice League). Therefore, the acceptance of some super heroes of color, yet the denial of re-casting top tier heroes as non-white parallels the way in which 'diversity' can protect, rather than challenge the racial status quo (Collins, 2011, p. 1).

As for the issue of canon, the idea that Spider-Man/Peter Parker has always been white and should always remain so is a more complex issue. This colorless "history" is rarely questioned for both popular fiction and nonfiction. However, when it is questioned – that is when race is brought into the picture – the response not only downplays the importance of race, but accuses the accuser of being the real racist.[12] Arguments about fictional history parallel that of debates over "real" history curricula. Examples of this can be seen in the Texas history textbook controversy. In 2009-2010, The Texas State Board of Education revised their curriculum with a focus on what they deemed to be the key figures and events in American history. The narrative presented garnered a great deal of controversy, because it largely excluded the achievements and struggles of non-white Americans. Such moves by politicians parallel the fan reaction (or fear) that their history and very being is being re-written or attacked (Carroll, 2011; Perry, 2002).[13]

In some ways, the fear of a new canon may not be unfound. Both Earth-616 and Ultimate Marvel are typically combined with the original stories in other media such as movies, television programs and video games. Perhaps, there is fear that this change (despite being outside of the mainstream continuity) will become the new understanding of canon. While Miles Morales is not the Spider-Man of Disney XD's *Ultimate Spider-Man* cartoon, his costume appears in Activision's *Spider-Man: The Edge of Time* video game (although the game describes it simply as not being worn by Peter Parker and does not mention Miles Morales by name). However, this concern and its corresponding fear that reveals the continued significance of the color-line in the so-called post-racial America.

While change is possible and real, it is also arguable that such changes are not as radical as conservative critics claim. Online critic John Babos (2011) writing for *Inside Pulse* points out that Marvel went the "safe" route by placing Miles Morales in the Ultimate universe. As journalist Leonard Pitts (2011)

[12] This can perhaps be compared to debates over the Confederate Flag, Southern culture, and the history of slavery (see: Holyfield, Moltz, & Bradley, 2009).

[13] As Frankenberg (1993, p. 60) has pointed out "this fear needs careful analysis, both because of its prevalence and because it is an inversion of reality"

and other journalists have commented, "The 'real' Spider-Man remains Peter Parker." Thus, in many ways, the re-casting of Spider-Man in the Ultimate Universe is not unlike that of Captain America and *Truth* – in which the "real" Captain American remains Steve Rogers. Just as David Zavimbe (Batwing) is the Batman of Africa, he is not challenging the Bruce Wayne's status as Batman.

In conclusion, what we see is that the color-line is defended in both fictional and virtual worlds. While many fans supported and were intrigued by the idea of a black Spider-Man/ Peter Parker, those who were against the idea used language that parallel other discourses concerning affirmative action and history curricula. In such cases, discussants claim that the are not racist, nor are their positions. Yet, embedded in this color-blindness is a very explicit notion of *who could or could not, and should* or *should not* that in turn reproduces a racial hierarchy. As such, an analysis of online comic fans' positions reveals not only their attitudes regarding race bending. Rather, it is a microcosm of broader societal attitudes regarding racial progress.

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