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# Challenging "Stereotypes and Fixity": African American Comic Books in the Academic Archive

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# Comics and Critical Librarianship

Reframing the Narrative in Academic Libraries

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# Challenging “Stereotypes and Fixity”: African American Comic Books in the Academic Archive

Brian Flota

## Introduction

In the three months following its release, Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* film earned \$1.333 billion globally.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in less than a month, it became the highest-grossing film directed by an African American. Renewed interest in the character, stemming from actor Chadwick Boseman’s appearance as Black Panther in *Captain America: Civil War* was aided by Marvel Comics’ recruitment of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxane Gay to write and revitalize the franchise within its original medium: comic books.<sup>2</sup> One reason the success of the *Black Panther*

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- 1 Thanks to Cindy Jackson, Library Specialist for Comic Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University, for her research assistance. Lizzie Plaugic, “Black Panther Had the Biggest February Debut of All Time,” *The Verge*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/19/17027768/black-panther-box-office-record-february-debut-ryan-coogler>.
  - 2 Anthony and Joe Russo, directors, *Captain America: Civil War* (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2016), DVD.

movie and comics seems so surprising is that comic books and their affiliated properties have historically had, as Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo note, “a problem with diversity.”<sup>3</sup> As if to reiterate this unfortunate history, the Vice President of Sales at Marvel, David Gabriel, stated in a 2017 interview, “What we heard was that people didn’t want any more diversity.”<sup>4</sup> Even if the white supremacy that has dominated the 85-year-old history of American comic books and their readership is being contested today in ways it never had been before, the painful residues of this history still linger.

Given this context, I have been part of an effort at James Madison University (JMU) to develop a collection of Black comic books—those featuring Black characters and subject matter and/or Black creators (writers, pencillers, inkers, publishers, colorists, letterers, etc.)—for our library’s Special Collections. The effort is linked to and bolstered by our belief in the power of the *archive*, which Michel Foucault describes as “the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.”<sup>5</sup> However, given Jacques Derrida’s claim that “Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation,” it should be painfully obvious that “democratization” efforts in the United States has been woefully insufficient, given that African Americans have not been granted “the participation and access” to the *archive* that Derrida alludes to.<sup>6</sup> Since the *archive* available to researchers in the United States

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3 Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo, *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time: Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 97.

They add, “For many, this has been most obvious at the level of their content ... [C]omic books feature a disproportionate number of characters who are white men, and the representations of women and nonwhite characters are less than ideal.”

4 Milton Griep, “Marvel’s David Gabriel on the 2016 Market Shift,” *ICv2*, March 31, 2017, <https://icv2.com/articles/news/view/37152/marvels-david-gabriel-2016-market-shift>.

5 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse of Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 129. Here, I am distinguishing the concept of the archive—the sum of all bodies of knowledge maintained in known and unknown physical locations—from literal archives or from the Archives profession. For the remainder of this essay, this specific use of the term will be in italics to disambiguate it from these other usages.

6 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4fn.

has traditionally emanated from an explicitly Western and Anglocentric ontology, with "the law of what can be said" typically excluding, erasing, or silencing works by people of color, an *archive* of Black comic books can serve to challenge existing histories of comics as well as help us understand the complicated role libraries, especially academic ones, have played in the preservation of comics history.

Prior to 2005, with a few notable exceptions, as Jenny Robb observes, academic libraries "shunned the idea of spending precious financial, staff, or space resources on collecting, preserving, and cataloging comics and cartoons."<sup>7</sup> Their flimsy construction and acidic paper made them difficult to keep in circulating collections or to preserve in non-circulating ones.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, librarianship was, until the advent of Popular Culture Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, dominated by "anti-comics attitudes," inherited from the legacies of noted anti-comics crusader Frederic Wertham and the cultural theories of Theodor Adorno, which kept comics out of the *archive*.<sup>9</sup> Though dozens of academic Special Collections now have comic books, there are roughly seventeen libraries, as of May 2018, with collections of ten thousand or more comics in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Even within the relatively marginal universe of academic comic book collections, the contribution of African Americans to the medium, as creators or as subjects, has been largely unacknowledged. In addition to the collection at JMU, only Harvard University and Tulane University have ones devoted specifically to Black comics.<sup>11</sup> Duke University has gone through the effort to highlight comics in their collection "which feature African or African American characters."<sup>12</sup>

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7 Jenny Robb, "The Librarians and Archivists," in *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies*, eds. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2017), 71.

8 Christopher J. Steele, "'Why Don't They Read a Good Book Instead?': Librarians and Comic Books, 1949-1955," (master's paper, UNC Chapel Hill, 2005), 35, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/record/uuid:1c244507-4635-49b8-81c6-ccfc70c3758b>.

9 Robb, "The Librarians and Archivists," 72.

10 For a list of these institutions, see Appendix A.

11 See Harvard's "Black Hero Comics Collection, 1972-2003" online at <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/aleph/014348221/catalog>. Tulane's "Comics and Graphic Novels Collection, 1946-2015," which is housed in the university's Amistad Research Center, can be found at <http://amistadresearchcenter.tulane.edu/archon/?p=collections/controlcard&id=141>.

12 "Guide to the Comic Book and Graphic Novel Collection, 1938-2012," Duke University Libraries, updated March 2017, <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/comicbooks/>.

Given these conditions, this essay will combine a case study outlining the development of our collection of Black comic books at JMU with a critique of academic libraries' historically problematic approach to collecting comics, especially those by or about marginalized cultures, identities, and communities.<sup>13</sup> This is necessary for two reasons. Those who wish to develop similar collections in their libraries—academic or otherwise—might want to know about some of the challenges involved in such an undertaking and improve upon our process. Second, and more importantly, is the fact the three main developers of this collection—an Associate Professor of English, the Head of Special Collections, and a Humanities Librarian—are white. Though we adhere to anti-racist principles in the cultivation of this collection and the scholarship it can yield, we are also cognizant of the colonialist optics that emanate from our endeavor as white arbiters and accumulators of content related to or produced by historically marginalized groups. We are reflective of the systemic whiteness in higher education more generally and academic librarianship more specifically. Therefore, this essay will examine this dynamic and how, by utilizing the tenets of critical librarianship, we can work toward “dismantling whiteness from within,” with the recognition that mistakes will be made and errors in judgment will happen as part of the process.”<sup>14</sup>

## Why This Collection?

In 2016, a colleague in JMU's English Department, Mollie Godfrey, approached me about developing a collection of vintage African American comic books to support a course she was designing for Fall 2017: “African American Graphic

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- 13 A note about the distinction between “comic books” and “graphic novels” in our collection. In JMU Libraries' Special Collections, the overwhelming majority of our holdings are 10 ¼” x 6 ⅝” comic books, 16 to 100 pages in length, made of flimsy material and held together by two staples. Graphic novels and trades, which vary in size, are generally much longer, and made of sturdier stock, are typically housed in our circulating collection.
- 14 Nicole M. Joseph, Katherine M. Crowe, and Janiece Mackey, “Interrogating Whiteness in College and University Archival Spaces at Predominantly White Institutions,” in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento: Library Juice, 2017), 70.

Novels."<sup>15</sup> Godfrey approached me in part because in the previous year I donated approximately nine-thousand seven hundred comic books to the JMU Libraries, housed in Special Collections, and had expertise about the medium.<sup>16</sup> As part of Godfrey's proposed course, she designed a final project in which students would make use of vintage comic books as part of their primary source research. After consulting with Kate Morris, our Head of Special Collections, we collaborated on a university-level grant that would provide us with \$3,000 to purchase materials for this collection. Our proposal was accepted, and we began buying relevant single issues during the Summer of 2017. Over the next nine months, we used all of our budgeted funds. Key purchases included historically important single issues and first appearances of key comic book characters.<sup>17</sup> We also acquired runs of issues from key titles such as *Jungle Action* (1973, featuring early Black Panther stories), *Black Panther* (the 1977 and 2005 series), *Captain America and Falcon* (1971), and *Truth: Red, White and Black* (2003).<sup>18</sup> As of this writing we now have approximately one-thousand three hundred comics in this collection.

## Challenges

Developing this collection presents many challenges in terms of funding, time, and staffing. Our Special Collections budget is limited and space is at a premium. As a result, important books that command high prices are going to be difficult for us

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- 15 Lynn Eaton and Brian Flota, "Collaborative Collection Development and Community Outreach: Responding to Faculty Research," in *Collaborating for Impact: Special Collections and Liaison Librarian Partnerships*, eds. Kristen Totleben and Lori Birrell (Chicago: ACRL, 2016), 91–98. See Eaton and Flota for a description of other collection development efforts geared toward increasing our Special Collections' holdings of African American materials.
  - 16 "A Guide to the Bradley and Brian Flota Comic Book Collection, 1952–2008," JMU Libraries, updated April 2018, <https://www.lib.jmu.edu/special/manuscripts/sc0032bradleyandbrianflotacomical/>.
  - 17 See Appendix B for examples of historically-relevant African American comics purchased for JMU's collection.
  - 18 Consuela Francis, "American Truths: Blackness and the American Superhero," in Gateward and Jennings, *The Blacker the Ink*, 137–52. Francis discusses this seven-issue miniseries at length.

to acquire. Another challenge is finding affordable originals, especially titles from Milestone Comics (the first widely distributed Black-owned comic book publisher) from the 1990s. Because they have little financial value, many comic book shops no longer carry them. Furthermore, due to rules for procurement at JMU, ordering comics from online sources can be stymied by bureaucracy. Unlike the relative stability of ordering books that are in print, buying vintage comics can be a challenge, particularly if they are not available when funding is (or vice versa). When possible, purchasing discounted lots of relevant back issues can help us stretch out our budget. Comic books in the best condition also command the highest prices, and the prices can escalate quickly. Since we want our patrons to look at our comics, we often look for copies that are in “Good” or “Very Good” condition.

A project like this requires a huge time investment. Making use of resources such as scholarship on Black comics, *Cartoonists of Color Database*, *Marvel Database*, and *Grand Comics Database* to create “wish lists” of comic book issues with Black creators, characters, and content, to identify appearances of notable characters and comics with valuable historical content might take time away from a librarian’s other duties.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, creating resources to highlight the collection (such as online research guides) and make it accessible require a significant investment of time. Cataloging comic books is notoriously tricky, as traditional MARC records do not facilitate ways to highlight the important attributes of single issues.<sup>20</sup> As a result, I have created a LibGuide which highlights the collection and features a list of all the individual issues in the collection with notes about each issue’s importance (when necessary).<sup>21</sup> Developing better ways to discover our comic books and link them to metadata that includes story titles, artists, writers, characters, and the like is a huge time commitment that also involves the funding necessary to hire and train staff. Since we have comic books in several different collections, arranged archivally in some instances and with traditional LC call numbers for others, it can be difficult to keep track of them all. These are logistical issues that Special Collections is actively addressing.

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- 19 See <http://cartoonistsofcolor.com/>, [http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Marvel\\_Database](http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Marvel_Database), and <http://www.comics.org> respectively.
- 20 See Liz Adams and Rich Murray’s essay, “Apocalyptic Comics, Women Detectives, and the Many Faces of Batgirl” in Chapter 9 of this collection for more information about the challenges of cataloging comic books.
- 21 For more information about the challenges of cataloging comic books, see Liz Adams and Rich Murray’s essay “Apocalyptic Comics, Women Detectives, and the Many Faces of Batgirl” in this collection.

## Moving Forward

We plan to purchase more comics for the collection and conduct more outreach to bring awareness to it. Mollie Godfrey, Kate Morris, and I were awarded another university-level grant in 2018 for \$4,000 to purchase more comics for the collection and to bring in University of Iowa American Studies Professor Deborah Whaley, the author of *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*, to give a public talk and to lead a workshop for JMU faculty and students on exciting ways to use Black comic books in scholarship, research, and in the classroom. We also hope that these outreach efforts can attract the interest of donors who have relevant materials they might donate to our collection. Finding additional funding to grow the collection would be ideal, but this can be tricky when resources are stretched thin.

There is a need for collections like this one in academic libraries. Though the specific issues in our collection of Black comic books can be found in many other academic library comic collections, collating them this way draws attention to the reasons a collection like this is so anomalous. First, the lack of substantial comic book collections in academic libraries is a testament to the marginalization comics have been subjected to historically. Second, American comic books have largely excluded African Americans as creators and subjects. A collection like this draws specific attention to the comics African Americans have created or been featured in. It can also serve to build an *archive* with which to support a growing body of scholarship on Black comics. Third, it renders visible and contests the assumed, privileged, "invisible" whiteness of comic books. Not coincidentally, the overwhelming whiteness of American comic books historically and thematically dovetails with the systemic whiteness found in academic librarianship. These three interrelated factors will be unpacked throughout the rest of this essay, and I will argue why a collection like this is both necessary *and* problematic in academic libraries today.

### "A Corrupting Agent of Mass Culture"<sup>22</sup>

Following a succession of popular and critically-acclaimed titles published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, graphic novels began making their way into public

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22 Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 136.

libraries.<sup>23</sup> After the “speculation boom” comic book market crash of 1993, publishers began to see the marketability of graphic novels, particularly in bookstores, as a way to expand their market.<sup>24</sup> Though the 1980s and 1990s saw the average age of comic book fans increase substantially over and beyond its traditional children and youth markets, the 2000s saw the form returning to younger audiences, especially manga and young adult titles.<sup>25</sup> However, academic libraries were slow to develop graphic novel collections. Why? “Graphic novels carry one unfortunate bit of baggage that makes them a hard sell to many university faculty,” Liorah Golomb observes: “they are, essentially, long comic books.”<sup>26</sup> Academic librarians soon realized that patrons like having them in their collection. As Bryan D. Fagan and Jody Condit Fagan note, “At the academic library where the authors created a core comic book collection, 72 percent of the collection circulated in its first six months.”<sup>27</sup> Today, the library profession’s acceptance of the graphic novel is a given, as even academic libraries have largely relented. Comic books, however, are another story.

Other than a few notable examples, comic books have never really found a home in public or academic libraries. Comic books are “flimsy, difficult to store, and easily stolen.”<sup>28</sup> They are also tangled up in a century-long discussion about

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- 23 Amy Kiste Nyberg, “How Librarians Learned to Love the Graphic Novel,” in *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives: Essays on Readers, Research, History and Cataloging*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 31–32. This list of popular and acclaimed titles includes *The Dark Knight Returns* (1987), *Watchmen* (1987), *Batman: Year One* (1988), *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989), *V for Vendetta* (1989), *Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes* (1991), and, most importantly, *Maus* (1986 & 1991), which became the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize. Each of these now-canonized comics and graphic novels were written and/or illustrated by white males.
- 24 Beaty and Woo, *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time*, 74–75. For an understanding of the “speculation era” (roughly 1990–1994) of US comic book history, see chapter 7.
- 25 Allen Ellis and Doug Highsmith, “About Face: Comic Books in Library Literature,” *Serials Review* 26, no. 2 (2000): 34; Beaty and Woo, *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time*, 100–5.
- 26 Liorah Anne Golomb, “So Many Options, So Little Money: Building a Selective Collection for the Academic Library,” in Weiner, *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries*, 101.
- 27 Bryan D. Fagan and Jody Condit Fagan, *Comic Book Collections for Libraries* (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2011), 59.
- 28 Fagan and Fagan, 4.

what constitutes "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture. (Not surprisingly, these two terms emanate from the racist, debunked 18th and 19th century science of phrenology.)<sup>29</sup> Bart Beaty observes that during the first two decades of American comic books, "*Wilson Library Bulletin* maintained its anti-comic-books position, rooted as it was in the journal's anti-mass-culture stance. Noting that the best thing that could be said for comics was that they could not be proven to be definitively harmful, the *Bulletin* called comic books 'appalling,' 'odious,' 'abominable,' and 'virulent' before again concluding that the surest way to control comics reading was to expose children to good books."<sup>30</sup> The profession's concern about the potentially destructive effects of comic books during these years severely damaged their reputation, especially as a medium to collect in libraries.

The strongest and loudest anti-comics voice in the early history of comic books was Fredric Wertham. His concerns about comic books have been written about extensively, but it is worth noting that some of Wertham's most salient criticisms pertained to issues of racism. In *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Wertham argues, "While the white people in jungle books are blonde and athletic and shapely, the idea conveyed about the natives is that there are fleeting transitions between apes and humans. I have repeatedly found in my studies that this characterization of colored peoples as subhuman, in conjunction with depiction of forceful heroes as blond Nordic supermen, has made a deep—and I believe lasting—impression on young children."<sup>31</sup> Wertham, in other writings, described American segregation *and* comic books as public health crises, in part because the comics "taught race hatred to children."<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, these astute observations were drowned out by the hysteria of Wertham's larger critique about comic books. His attacks on the medium had a profound influence on the collection development policies of librarians, especially academic librarians. By 1975, Randall Scott claims comics "had been virtually ignored by the library profession."<sup>33</sup> Writing in 1984, he adds, "In most communities, however, if you want to read or refer to a comic book, you have to buy it. Library service does not extend to

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29 Robert Hendrickson, *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*, 3rd ed. (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 346.

30 Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, 163.

31 Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, rev. ed. (Laurel, NY: Main Road, 2004), 32–33.

32 Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, 125.

33 Randall W. Scott, "A Practicing Comic-Book Librarian Surveys His Collection and His Craft," *Serials Review* 24, no. 1 (1998): 50, Academic Search Complete.

comic books, period.”<sup>34</sup> While the advent of the graphic novel and its subsequent embrace by libraries over the last twenty years has significantly altered this dynamic, the lasting perception of comic books as sub-intellectual amongst the professoriate, to recall Golomb’s observation, continues to systemically limit their numbers in academic libraries.

## The Unbearable Whiteness of Superbeings

To say that American comic books have historically had “a problem with diversity,” as Beaty and Woo point out, is quite an understatement. Prior to the launch of Milestone Comics in 1993—the first widely-distributed, Black-owned comic book company to publish comics by Black writers and artists whose pages were populated mainly by Black heroes—there was relatively little Black content in mainstream comics and very few Black comics creators.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the most recognizable early Black characters (Black Panther, Storm, Vixen, Deathlok, Cyborg, Falcon, Luke Cage, Blade the Vampire Hunter, Black Goliath, and John Stewart) were created by white writers and artists.<sup>36</sup> Even worse, in the thirty years of American comic book history, representations of African Americans were almost uniformly informed by racist stereotypes. As Leonard Rifas points out, “Racism was built into the foundations of entire once-popular genres, especially jungle comics (in which white ‘jungle lords’ sometimes punched the faces of African challengers to maintain order in their realms).”<sup>37</sup> During this period, there were few positive portrayals of African Americans in mainstream comic books that

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- 34 Randall W. Scott, “The Comics Alternative,” *Collection Building* 6, no. 2 (1984): 23.
- 35 As if to reinforce Beaty and Woo’s point about historically white comics creators producing comic books for “a similar audience,” this audience ultimately rejected Milestone Comics, and they ceased producing comics in 1997.
- 36 Billy Graham inked *Hero for Hire* #1 (the first appearance of Luke Cage) but is not given credit for creating the character. See Jonathan Gayles’ 2012 documentary *White Scripts and Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books* for a deeper understanding of how this dynamic has affected black male comics readers.
- 37 Leonard Rifas, “Race and Comix,” in *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 28.

were not profiles of notable people.<sup>38</sup> Exceptions include a six-page story that appears in *World's Finest Comics* #17 (1945, DC) about the discrimination faced by Black soldiers returning home from World War II, *All-Negro Comics* #1 (1947, All-Negro), an anti-Communist tract titled *Is This Tomorrow* (1947, Catechetical Guild) in which two working class black men are the victims of "the Red plan [to pit] White against Black," *Negro Romance* #1–3 (1950, Fawcett), *Weird Science* #18 (1954, EC), and *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* #1 (1963, Marvel).<sup>39</sup>

Before Milestone Comics, few African American comic book creators made headway in the profession. In the 1940s and 1950s, several artists whose work regularly appeared in comic books included Matt Baker, Warren Broderick, Tom Feelings, Alfonso Greene, Alvin Hollingsworth, Cal Massey, and Orrin C. Evans.<sup>40</sup> Following the self-censorship of mainstream comics in the aftermath of Wertham's testimony during the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings on April 19, 1954, the late 1950s and 1960s were even more bleak for Black comic book creators.<sup>41</sup> One notable exception was Bertram Fitzgerald, who, beginning in 1966, published *Golden Legacy Illustrated History Magazine*, a series of profiles of notable figures from the African diaspora. The free speech- and radically-minded underground comix scene of the 1960s and 1970s saw several

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- 38 Examples include *Wonder Woman* #13 (DC/National, with a profile of Sojourner Truth), *Negro Heroes* #1–2 (1947–48, Parents Magazine Institute), *Jackie Robinson* #1–6 (1950–52, Fawcett), *Larry Doby: Baseball Hero* (1950, Fawcett), *Roy Campanella: Baseball Hero* (1950, Fawcett), *Baseball Thrills* #1 (1951, Ziff-Davis, with a profile of pitcher Don Newcombe), *Thrilling True Stories of the Baseball* (1952, Fawcett; the "Giants" issue features a profile of Willie Mays), *The Amazing Willie Mays* (1954, Famous Funnies), and *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1956, Fellowship Reconciliation).
- 39 Catechetical Guild Educational Society, *Is This Tomorrow* (St. Paul, MN: Catechetical Guild Educational Society, 1947), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/IsThisTomorrowAmericaUnderCommunismCatecheticalGuild>; Roy Thomas, *Stan Lee's Amazing Marvel Universe* (New York: Sterling, 2006), 54. *Sgt. Fury* #1 features the first appearance of a recurring black character, the soldier Gabriel Jones, who was represented as white in the issue because the company that printed it thought the colorist, Stan Goldberg, made a mistake by including a black soldier.
- 40 Bill Schelly, *American Comic Book Chronicles: The 1950s* (Raleigh: TwoMorrows, 2013), 68–69.
- 41 Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, 155.

Black creators produce their own titles, including Richard “Grass” Green (*Super Soul Comix*), Ovid P. Adams (*The Adventures of Black Eldridge the Panther*), Tom Floyd (*Blackman*), Larry Fuller (*Ebon*), and Ira Harmon (*Super Bitch*). The slow but steady mainstreaming of Black characters in American comic books in the 1970s and 1980s opened doors for comics creators such as Wayne Howard,<sup>42</sup> Billy Graham, Arvell Jones, Keith Pollard, Christopher Priest, Kyle Baker, Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Paris Cullins, Ron Wilson, Mark D. Bright, Chuck Patton, and Larry Stroman. Attesting to the historically patriarchal nature of the comic book world, it is worth noting that it was not until 2009 that DC Comics hired a black female writer (Felicia Henderson), and Marvel would not hire its first black female writers until 2016, with Roxane Gay and Yona Harvey.<sup>43</sup>

Since the launch of Milestone Comics, Black comics creators and content have become more commonplace. In fact, the bulk of scholarly books on Black comics published from 2013–2017, like *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics & Sequential Art*, and *Encyclopedia of Black Comics*, focus on Black comics of the post-Milestone era.<sup>44</sup> Recent turns by notable comic book industry outsiders such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, Amandla Stenberg, Reginald Hudlin, John Ridley, Rashida Jones, and Erika Alexander represent a far cry from the days of the “jungle comics.”<sup>45</sup> That being said, the history of white supremacy in Ameri-

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42 Howard’s book *Midnight Tales #1* (1972, Charlton) became the first mainstream comic to boast a “Created By” credit.

43 Rich Johnston, “How Marvel Goes from No Black Female Writers Ever, To Three, With Just One Comic,” *Bleeding Cool*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2016/07/28/how-marvel-goes-from-no-black-female-writers-ever-to-three-with-just-one-comic/>. Jackie Ormes (who Deborah Whaley writes about in her book) is generally cited as the first black female comics artist, though she worked exclusively on comic strips.

44 *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, eds. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, eds. Frances Gateward and John Jennings (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); and Sheena C. Howard, *Encyclopedia of Black Comics* (Golden, CO.: Fulcrum, 2017).

45 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Black Panther* (2016); Roxane Gay, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*; Amandla Stenberg, *Niobe: She is Life*; Reginald Hudlin, *Black Panther* (2005); John Ridley, *The American Way*; Rashida Jones, *Frenemy of the State*; and Erika Alexandra, *Concrete Park*.

can comic books is overwhelming and undeniable. Gateward and Jennings point out that when DC Comics launched "The New 52" in 2011, only five of the fifty-two comics featured a Black title character, and three of these were canceled after eight issues.<sup>46</sup> There is a tinge of resignation in their observation that "despite the fact that only 10 percent of 'The New 52' features Black superheroes, it is fair to say that Black images in the comics have come a long way."<sup>47</sup> We must also recall the words of Marvel executive David Gabriel that appear in the first paragraph of this essay. In an era where the President of the United States vows to "Make America Great Again" and Marvel Comics thought it a sound idea to make a comic book arc wherein Captain America is revealed to be an agent of Hydra (a secret organization inspired by and affiliated with the Nazis), developing a comic book collection that highlights "Black images," to use Gateward and Jennings' words, and the contributions of Black comic book creators continues to be of vital importance.

## The Unbearable Whiteness of Being a Librarian

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that the three main contributors to JMU Libraries' effort to collect Black comic books are white. This did not happen in a vacuum. Let us start by examining who populates academia. According to the National Center of Education Statistics, in Fall 2016, 76 percent of all faculty in post-secondary institutions identified as white, while only 6 percent identified as African American.<sup>48</sup> Within academic and research libraries, the numbers are starker: 85.8 percent identify as Caucasian, 4.4 percent African American.<sup>49</sup>

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46 Frances Gateward and John Jennings, "Introduction: The Sweeter the Christmas," in *The Blacker the Ink*, 5.

47 Gateward and Jennings, "Introduction," 5.

48 National Center of Education Statistics, "Characteristics of Postsecondary Faculty," *The Condition of Education*, May 2018, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_csc.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_csc.asp). At the ranks of lecturer, instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor.

49 Hui-Fen Chang, "Ethnic and Racial Diversity in Academic and Research Libraries: Past, Present, and Future," in *ACRL 2013 Proceedings*, 183, [http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/Chang\\_Ethnic.pdf](http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/Chang_Ethnic.pdf).

Sadly, these numbers have changed little over the last three decades.<sup>50</sup> As Hui-Fen Chang observes, “The past and present states of racial and ethnic representations in academic librarianship indicate a lack of progress in recruiting librarians of color in the workforce.”<sup>51</sup> When compared with the demographics of the United States, the lack of ethnic diversity within both academia and academic libraries is jarring. As of 2016, those identifying as white accounted for 62 percent of the population, and those who identify as black 12.3 percent.<sup>52</sup> This is the systemic backdrop from which this collection development project emerged. If the “Modern Capitalist Academic Library” (MCAL) is so invested in the ideal of diversity, then we as a profession are failing miserably.<sup>53</sup> A statement such as this needs to be unpacked, especially as it relates to the concept of diversity.

Within the context of librarianship, diversity can be broadly defined as, according to Lisa Hussey, “the catchall term for issues related to and programs focused on differences.”<sup>54</sup> All too often, though, diversity in MCAL praxis is trivial, uncritical, and perceived to be universally understood when it really is not.<sup>55</sup> In fact, this facile acceptance of an unquestioning practice of diversity within the academic library is deleterious. David James Hudson observes, “the hegemony of the diversity paradigm and its logic of inclusion severely limits the depth of anti-racist critique conceivable within the field; that it effectively obscures particular operations of systems of racial subordination; and that it thereby extends funda-

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50 Chang, 183. Chang notes, “When viewed [sic] across time, the percentage of racial and ethnic representation has shown slight increases. Between 1981 and 2011, the overall minority representation has only increased from 10 percent to 14.2 percent.”

51 Chang, 192.

52 United States Census Bureau, “ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates: 2012–2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates,” American Fact Finder, [https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/16\\_5YR/DP05](https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/16_5YR/DP05).

53 Stephen Bales, *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach* (Sacramento: Library Juice, 2015), 1.

54 Lisa Hussey, “The Diversity Discussion: What Are We Saying?” *Progressive Librarian* no. 34–35 (2010): 4.

55 Hussey, 4. Hussey explains, “diversity is simultaneously a nebulous, vague, and extensive idea. It can imply difference regarding uncomfortable concepts, such as race, religion, ethnic heritage, and sexual orientation; but it can also refer to more benign differences, including variety in musical tastes and hobbies.”

mental logics that sustain (and thus remains complicit with) such systems."<sup>56</sup> At its most glib, this approach to diversity, one that does not consider the anti-racist critique that Hudson alludes to, perpetuates what Nancy Leong refers to as "racial capitalism," or rather "the way white people and predominantly white institutions derive value from nonwhiteness."<sup>57</sup> Stephen Bales puts it more bluntly: "The institutionalization of Diversity measures within capitalist systems, however, operates to harvest the 'racial capital' from minority group members, exploiting dominated portions of capitalist society in the same way they have been for centuries, as commodities."<sup>58</sup> Regardless of the intentions of librarians and their administrators, efforts to diversify collections and programming, for example, fall within the purview of this "institutionalization of Diversity measures." Furthermore, it is practically compulsory for librarians of color to serve on diversity-related committees within their libraries, universities, or both, resulting in the significant investment of unpaid, unseen, and unrewarded emotional labor.<sup>59</sup> As a result, these measures extend and sustain systems of racial subordination.

For the development of this collection of Black comic books at my institution, we have been rewarded within the strictures of racial capitalism. JMU, an historically white institution, lists "Diversity" as one of its six values in its current Strategic Plan.<sup>60</sup> Our library's values statement stresses that diversity is "essential"

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56 David James Hudson, "On 'Diversity' as Anti-Racism in Library and Information Studies: A Critique," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 11.

57 Nancy Leong, "Racial Capitalism," *Harvard Law Review* 126, no. 8 (2013), 2154.

58 Bales, *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship*, 34.

59 Jennifer Vinopal (@jvinopal), "@AprilHathcock we're bringing ppl from underrepresented identity groups into profession at same rate they are leaving. Attrition a problem+," Twitter, August 18, 2015, 7:53 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jvinopal/status/633652864087404544>. According to Jennifer Vinopal, this dynamic is leading to the attrition of librarians from underrepresented groups from the profession.

60 "JMU's Strategic Plan," James Madison University, <https://www.jmu.edu/jmuplans/about/>; "2017–18 Statistical Summary," James Madison University, <http://www.jmu.edu/oir/oir-research/statsum/2017-18/2017-18toc.shtml>, accessed December 2, 2018. See Tables 2–7 ("Headcount: Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity") and 4–6 ("Faculty: Full-Time by College–Tenure Status–Sex Ethnicity") of the "2017–18 Statistical Summary" to get a sense of the student and faculty body at JMU.

for engaging “in the lifelong pursuit of knowledge.”<sup>61</sup> We have been the recipients of thousands of dollars’ worth of money from institutional grants recognizing innovations in curricular development and outreach as it relates to the broad theme of diversity to develop this collection. Subsequently, these successes have been included in our annual reports, included in tenure and promotion documents, and in other forms of professionally-validated documentation, such as conference presentations, newsletter articles, and even this very article.

On the other hand, on-campus diversity apparatuses have provided us with the means to start a collection of underrepresented materials from and about a culture that has been underrepresented in academic library collections. It is far from ideal that the selectors and arbiters of this collection do not culturally represent that group, yet this is hardly surprising. As N.D.B. Connolly astutely observes, “*Who* gets to become an archivist, *how* archives get organized, and even what *counts* as an archive have a profound racial impact on what endures as valued historical research.”<sup>62</sup> Given the history and contemporary demographic breakdown of academic libraries in the United States, the *who* Connolly speaks of is most often going to be white. However, by interrogating the legacy of white supremacy in our collections, we can address the *how* and the “what *counts*” Connolly discusses. By providing counter-narratives to hegemonic discourse, in this instance, comic books with Black creators, characters, and cultural content, we both highlight the contributions of African Americans to the medium as well as shine a light on its white supremacy. Remember Foucault: the *archive* is “the law of what can be said.”<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

Invisibility is a frequently used superpower in comic books. War Machine, Invisible Woman, and the Martian Manhunter are a few of the characters with this ability. To help us think about how the notion of invisibility is deployed by the comic book industry, let us consider the following passage from Gateward and Jennings:

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- 61 “Guiding Statements,” JMU Libraries, <https://www.lib.jmu.edu/guiding-statements/>, accessed December 2, 2018.
- 62 N.D.B. Connolly, “A Black Power Method,” *Public Books*, June 15, 2016, <http://www.publicbooks.org/a-black-power-method/>.
- 63 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse of Language*, 129.

The comics medium in its modern form has been defined as 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.' This definition, posited by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, also lays out several questions as well. Whose images are being juxtaposed? What information is being conveyed? Which aesthetics are being valued? And as for McCloud's notion of 'the invisible,' what else *besides* comics can be thought of as invisible?<sup>64</sup>

Whiteness. The invisibility of whiteness seeps into power dynamics, legal codes, and into the assumptions people make about anything ranging from morality and values to one's taste in music and fashion. Invisibility is at work within the comic book industry, one that for 85 years has obscured its white male-dominated domain while it stared us right in the eyes. It is also at work in academic libraries: it informs who gets hired to be a librarian and what materials fill our collections. Even the collection development efforts of librarians have tended to focus on comic books or graphic novels written and illustrated by white authors. There are only five Black graphic novels profiled in Stephen Weiner's *The 101 Best Graphic Novels*.<sup>65</sup> *The Complete Persepolis* by the Iranian-born Marjane Satrapi is the only title out of eleven listed in Alicia Holston's essay "A Librarian's Guide to the History of Graphic Novels" not produced by white men.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, of the thirty-one North American comics creators highlighted in Fagan and Fagan's *Comic Book Collections for Libraries*, only four are not white men.<sup>67</sup>

Our collection of Black comic books offers possibilities for researchers and users to render the systemic whiteness of the medium visible. Since there are few collections like ours, it can provide access to a body of work that has remained

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64 Gateward and Jennings, "Introduction," 2.

65 Ho Che Anderson's *King: A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Kyle Baker's *Why I Hate Saturn*, the reprint volume of Denny O'Neill and Neal Adams' 1971–2 run on *Green Lantern*, in which John Stewart is introduced, and two super-team reprint collections featuring Storm and Cyborg.

66 Alicia Holston, "A Librarian's Guide to the History of Graphic Novels," in Weiner, *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries*, 12–16.

67 Jim Lee, Joe Quesada, George Pérez, and Stan Sakai. They also profile two Japanese manga artists: Osamu Tezuka and Rumiko Takahashi, who is the only female comics creator they profile.

hidden or willfully excluded from the *archive*: it must now be said. The invisibility of whiteness is so powerful that Gateward and Jennings have to state the obvious in their introduction to *The Blacker the Ink*: “Black people read comics, make comics, and are also the subject of comics.”<sup>68</sup> The invisibility of whiteness thereby renders the contributions and realities of “the Other” invisible as well. It is our hope that this collection of comic books can chisel away at this corrosive form of invisibility.

There are valuable opportunities available for comic book lovers, students, and researchers with this collection. But, first, we should not ignore the fact there are significant challenges ahead. Though academic librarians regularly extol the virtues of access, physical access to our collections remains a challenge, especially for community members. Kate Morris, our Head of Special Collections, regularly tweets about the challenge of simply making it to our reading room, which is often a mile from the nearest free parking spot.<sup>69</sup> As N.D.B. Connolly notes, “Brick and mortar archives stand in racially segregated parts of town. In the most concrete ways possible, racial politics determine how we locate the past.”<sup>70</sup> This poses immediate challenges, especially for members of Harrisonburg’s Black community. This is but another legacy of racism and ableism systemically built into academic libraries. As this essay demonstrates, this work will not be easy. April Hathcock, in a blog post directed to white librarian allies, writes, “you’re going to have to get down and dirty” in order to “[do] the work.”<sup>71</sup> It is our obligation to get “down and dirty,” even if, as Hathcock reminds us, “You’re gonna screw up.”<sup>72</sup> This work is worth it.

The title for this essay is drawn from Gateward and Jennings’ introduction. To reiterate, they declare, “Comics traffic in stereotypes and fixity.”<sup>73</sup> The “trafficking” they describe can be the basis for many future scholarly projects.

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68 Gateward and Jennings, “Introduction,” 4.

69 Kate Morris (@katem0), “Issues of access—I think about this often in terms of how difficult it is for community members to navigate parking and just physically getting to our reading room,” Twitter, May 27, 2018, 7:58 a.m., <https://twitter.com/katem0/status/1000753061596483588>.

70 Connolly, “A Black Power Method.”

71 April Hathcock, “You’re Gonna Screw Up,” *At the Intersection: Blog About the Intersection of Libraries, Law, Feminism, and Diversity* (blog), April 13, 2016, <https://aprilhathcock.wordpress.com/2016/04/13/youre-gonna-screw-up/>.

72 Hathcock.

73 Gateward and Jennings, “Introduction,” 2.

For much of the history of American comic books, Black characters and content have been created by white artists and writers. Researchers can meaningfully trace "stereotypes and fixity" across time by looking to this *archive* of comics. Furthermore, over the years, black comic book creators have taken over creative duties for characters such as Black Panther, Luke Cage, and Black Lightning. Present and future researchers can demonstrate how Black comics creators have reclaimed and remixed these characters and subverted the stereotypes they were initially supplied with. Examinations of how whiteness permeates the popular culture, especially in the advertising and "Letters to the Editor" columns of comic books, offer exciting possibilities as well. Given the slow but steady impact of comic books on contemporary popular culture, collections like this one are not only timely but vital.

## Appendix A: Institutions with known comic book collections of >10,000 items, May 2018

- Bowling Green State University, Link: <http://libguides.bgsu.edu/comics>
  - Over 50,000 comic books
- Duke University, <https://guides.library.duke.edu/comics>
  - Over 67,000 comic books
- Indiana University—Bloomington, <http://www.indiana.edu/~liblilty/dbs/comic.shtml>
  - Approximately 60,000 comic books
- James Madison University, <https://guides.lib.jmu.edu/comics>
  - Approximately 11,000 comic books
- Michigan State University, <https://lib.msu.edu/comics/>
  - Over 300,000 items in their Comic Art Collection
- Northern Illinois University, <http://libguides.niu.edu/rarebooks/comics>
- Northwestern University, [https://www.northwestern.edu/magazine/fall2010/campuslife/collections\\_comic\\_marvel.html](https://www.northwestern.edu/magazine/fall2010/campuslife/collections_comic_marvel.html)
  - More than 11,000 comic books
- Ohio State University, <https://cartoons.osu.edu/about-us/>
  - More than 60,000 serials (including comic books)
- Portland State University, <https://library.pdx.edu/research/dark-horse-comics/>
  - Collection includes the Dark Horse Comics archive
- San Diego State University, <http://libguides.sdsu.edu/c.php?g=409672&p=2790924>
  - More than 50,000 comic books
- University of California, Riverside, <https://library.ucr.edu/collections/comic-books-collection>
  - More than 75,000 comic books
- University of Florida, <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/belknap/comics/comics.htm>
  - Approximately 15,000 comic books
- University of the Sciences, <http://guides.library.usciences.edu/comics>
  - Over 20,000 comic books
- Virginia Commonwealth University, <https://www.library.vcu.edu/research/special-collections/cabell/comics/>
  - 175,000 items in their Comic Arts Collection, including 125,000 comic books
- Washington University in St. Louis, <http://archon.wulib.wustl.edu/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=346&q=>

The author notes that there are doubtless more collections of this size or greater that need processing or lack a web presence. This list does not include those institutions with large circulating trade and graphic novel collections, like Columbia University.

## Appendix B: Historically-relevant Black and African American Comics in JMU Libraries

Title & publication details	Relevance of work	Further reading
<i>Weird Science</i> #18 (1953, EC Comics)	Features a (then-controversial) story about a black male astronaut	Daniel F. Yezbick, "No Sweat!: EC Comics, Cold War Censorship, and the Troublesome Colors of 'Judgment Day!'" in Gateward and John Jennings, <i>The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics &amp; Sequential Art</i> (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 19–44
<i>Fantastic Four</i> #52 (1966, Marvel)	First appearance of Black Panther, Marvel's first black superhero	
<i>Captain America</i> #117 (1969, Marvel)	First appearance of Falcon, Marvel's first African American superhero	
<i>Hero for Hire</i> #1 (1972, Marvel)	First appearance of Luke Cage, the first African American superhero with their own title	
<i>Wonder Woman</i> #204 (1973, DC)	First appearance of Nubia	Deborah Whaley, "African Goddesses, Mixed-Race Wonders, and Baadasssss Women: Black Women as 'Signs' of African in US Comics," in <i>Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime</i> (University of Washington Press, 2015).
<i>Black Lightning</i> #1 (1977, DC)	First appearance of Black Lightning, the first black DC superhero with their own title	
<i>All-New Collector's Edition</i> #C-56 (1978, DC)	An oversized comic featuring a "battle" between Superman and Muhammad Ali	Dwain C. Pruitt discusses the "battle" between Superman and Muhammad Ali in his essay "The Comics that Hate Produced: Representing the African-American Muslim in DC Comics," featured in A. David Lewis and Martin Lund's <i>Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam, and Representation</i> (Ilex Foundation, 2017), 88–109.

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