A New Black Pantheon: *Kwezi* as Epic of African Postmodernity

In the opening scenes of the South African superhero comic *Kwezi*, the eponymous hero sneers at Gold City – at its relentless hustle, on its endless battles between police officers and criminal gangs – and delivers the verdict 'UNINSPIRED IF YOU ASK ME'. With this declamation of adolescent self-assertion, Kwezi casts himself as a brand of superhero new to the streets of the Afropolis, dispensing justice and dispelling villains in the style of his North American precursor Superman. By the end of the second episode, however, Kwezi has been humbled. A band of 'ethnic' superheroes has subdued him and enjoined him to take his place in a long tradition of indigenous superheroes, with their own mythologies and powers, who have long preceded him.

There is a moral to be extracted here concerning the acknowledgement of indigenous forms of African heroism that have been too readily discarded in favour of Western models. But it is not the moral I wish to extract. I am interested, rather, in what this battle – not just the battle between Kwezi and his fellow African superheroes, but the implicit battle between genres of Western-ness and genres of African-ness – suggests about the current state of black identity in South Africa.

The genre of the superhero comic has at this point in time made significant inroads into African popular culture. A recent special issue of *Journal of African Cultural Studies* dedicated

to the topic of the Afro-superhero attests to the coalescence of something like a genre with its own rules and tropes. In an essay collected in that issue, Duncan Omanga notes that 'with the digital media explosion in Africa and the increased ability to share content, there are potentially hundreds of creations of comic superheroes in Africa' (266). Far from being simple appropriations of American pop culture, Omanga argues, these narratives are complex syncretic forms in which a 'primordial' superhero figure drawn from African tradition is yoked to a narrative technique – the comic strip – imported from North American popular culture. While 'epics and tales of legendary exploits of powerful men and women able to subdue their communities' enemies' had long been a feature of African orality and folktales', writes Omanga, '[t]he transformation and appropriation' of these tales into comic superheroes 'requires, and imposed upon its creators, the need to draw from both tradition and modernity' (268). Omanga's insight is crucial, for it allows one to read the genre as a vital site in the forging of and experimentation with forms of African identity that overcome the classical anthropological divide between 'tradition' and 'modernity'.[1]

In this paper, I use Omanga's theory of the syncretic superhero as a starting point from which to examine the staging of black identity in post-apartheid South Africa. While the post-independence African novel has generally taken up the theme of postcolonial disillusionment, a wide variety of subgenres have come to serve as laboratories for forms of populist Africanity. The superhero comic book I will discuss below is invested neither in critique of the postcolonial order nor in articulating desires for political change; rather, its preoccupations are with the

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[1] See Harry Garuba, 'Animist Materialism'. Garuba argues that the opposition of tradition and modernity is an invention of the Western anthropological gaze and proposes instead what he calls an 'animist unconscious': 'I argue that the colonization, so to speak, of technology and the instruments and ideologies of the modern world by traditional culture is not wholly the result of a conscious nationalistic appropriation...It is, at a much deeper level, a manifestation of an *animist* unconscious, which operates through a process that involves what I describe as a continual *re-enchantment of the world'* (265)

vicissitudes and complexities of contemporary black identity.

Published between 2014 and 2015, *Kwezi* emerges at a moment in which the dominance and legitimacy of the African National Congress, the unchallenged regnant party of the first two decades of liberation, has fallen under a question mark. As the party of liberation has settled into the role of custodians of the *status quo*, beset by scandals of corruption and self-interest, it can no longer lay any claim to representing anything like a unified black voice. As a counter-development, however, the political landscape of the nation, insofar as it is meaningful, is dominated by black South Africa voices. Across the political spectrum, from the far left Economic Freedom Fighters to the centrist Democratic Alliance, political parties spearheaded by black South Africans offer alternate articulations of black identity in what has become a complex and fractured field of contestation.

Although it might be easy to dismiss the crude forms of myth-making suggested by the superhero genre, Mkize's strip stages a complex series of entanglements between some of the different forms of black identity suggested by the nation's fractured political landscape. The cartoonish, archetypal forms of the genre are deployed in such a way as to disaggregate contemporary black identity into a variety of different dispositions and suggest the contestations, divisions, and tensions within it. By synthesising the comic book superhero with the much older tradition of the African pantheon, *Kwezi* revives the question of the black hero – a fraught question implicit throughout African writing of the colonial and post-colonial eras – in a new environment of black political hegemony.

In my reading of *Kwezi,* I am concerned with several intertwined lines of argument. First, I place *Kwezi* in the context of a post-apartheid reformulation of black identity. I read the series as placing in contestation at least three forms of black identity emerging from this context:

'transformative', 'ethnic', and 'predatory'. Second, I argue that the strip – set in a moment of a profound re-organisation of black identity – is forced to engage with a different set of temporalities from the 'classic' American superhero. The genre's default temporality of being is placed under strain by a world of becoming in which black identity is in formation. Finally, I am interested in how the comic strip fits into the longer tradition of the African epic, in its creation of a world of black identities that do not function merely as the others of whiteness.

The Return of Blackness

In her 1973 survey of African writing, *The Black Interpreters,* Nadine Gordimer sketches a portrait of the black hero who differs from the hero of the modern European novel in his capacity for affirmation. While the modern European hero, she writes, is characterised by his saying 'no' to the world,

> [t]he African hero...despite his disaffection and bitterness, is a man who says yes and yes and yes. He wants the white man's skills and political systems, his philosophies and his arts, his transistor radios, his whisky and his malaria prophylaxis; he also wants his own African ancestral tradition, language, philosophy, arts, skills, custom and manners. His is a firm and courageous "yes" in the face of the difficulty and opposition likely to be met with in the attempt to bring together, in Africa, for Africa, the best of both worlds. [9]

In a 2015 essay, Hlonipha Mokoena takes up this figure 'caught between two world views and two irreconcilable ideological demands' (176) to elaborate him for a South Africa some two decades after the advent of majority black rule. '[T]he African hero,' she elaborates, 'is not just

saying yes to 'the white man's skills and political systems but ... he is saying yes to an existence that is no longer a Manichean contest between what is "European" and what is "African"'.

In taking up the image of the African hero as a leitmotif of her essay, Mokoena signals that the struggle to formulate black identity has not been resolved by the advent of political liberation. Indeed, for Mokoena the task of recreating a fully habitable black identity after centuries of its erasure in politics, in history, and in literature, requires a more complex imagining of blackness than those put forth by the liberation struggle. To this end, Mokoena is interested in the body of black writing 'that is not merely an affirmation of black humanity in the face of Western negation of the same': writing that conceives of the African subject as 'an *interpreter* of life rather than an affirmation of political ideologies or discourses' (my italics, 176-7). In placing the trope of interpretation at the centre of post-apartheid blackness, Mokoena makes blackness the subject of a drama of contestation.

What is the nature of this drama? The South African 'post-liberation' moment is distinctive in two ways: it arrived significantly later than other national liberations; and it was the outcome not of revolution, state overthrow, or colonial withdrawal, but of a negotiated settlement between a settler class and an indigenous population. Premised on a notion of inclusivity rather than black nationalism, it employed a rhetoric of non-racialism that would, so the story went, create a 'rainbow nation'. Left out of this rainbow nation was an uncomfortable fact: that the political settlement that ended white rule left untouched much of the institutional and economic power of the former rulers. It is unsurprising, then, that the rainbow nation euphoria of the early post-apartheid years has given way, some fifteen years on, to the fractious obduracy of what many now call the 'post-transition' period. A variety of oppositional social movements have reclaimed blackness as a mode of identification. Radical student protests, reinvigorated land

reclamation movements, and the rise of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a party deploying an anti-colonial black nationalist identity politics: all these constitute rebukes to a non-racial 'rainbow nation' ideology and implicit calls to bring the question of black identity to centre stage. In parallel to this, yet in many ways in tension with it, an ascendant black middle class has also articulated forms of blackness unbound from the legacy of political struggle.

In analysing this return of blackness, it is important that blackness is viewed not as a pre-modern or irrational mode of identification, but, to the contrary, as a key site for the articulation of modernity. For the sociologist Xolela Mangcu, the dominant strain of non-racialism set in place when the African National Congress marched to victory in 1994 has obscured sophisticated undercurrents of race consciousness in black political thought.[2] The contradiction facing the various conceptions of race consciousness forged under apartheid rule was that of how to fashion an idea of blackness that rejected the biological fantasies of race created by apartheid thought: to find 'a way of rejecting apartheid tribal identities and ethnic concepts...in favour of a common, political definition of "black"' (10). Perhaps the most sophisticated – although by no means the only – version of political blackness is to be found in Black Consciousness, which, under the intellectual guidance of Steve Biko in the 1970s, redefined blackness as a political condition rather than a biological essence. In this way, as Ronit Frenkel puts it, it repurposed apartheid's racial taxonomy as a force for liberation.

In a longer view, Black Consciousness – building on older movements such as pan-Africanism, and operating in parallel with the Négritude of the Francophone South – laid the groundwork for a conception of black identity as a site for the articulation of alternate modernities that reject simple assimilation into the European model. Mangcu distils this logic

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[2] Phil Bonner has remarked that the alternation between non-racial modernity and race consciousness has been a 'recurrent trope' in South African resistance history (qtd in Mngcu 7).

when he argues that 'opposite to racist racialism (apartheid) has been assumed to be a non-racial individuality. But ... we do not have to accept the symmetric logic of the Kantian ideal of the disembodied individual as the alternative to group identity' (12). It is a short step from here to a rejection of 'negative concepts such as non-racialism or even anti-racism' (16), and a call for an identity that is not, as Joel Ntshekizhe has put it, a 'plethora of negatives'.

The return of blackness in 'post-transition' South Africa is, however, a return with a difference. While the various historical manifestations of black identity – from pan-Africanism to Black Consciousness – were able to define themselves through an overarching narrative of resistance to white domination, they have been revived in a democratic world in which most political and a substantial degree of economic power rests in black hands. Black identity thus finds itself internally conflicted. Indeed, despite the hyper-politicised form in which blackness has re-entered the public sphere, this is in fact a moment in which political struggle is no longer the primary factor informing all black identities. In the absence of a single overarching metanarrative of 'emancipationist redemption' (Mokoena's phrase) blackness has drawn upon multiple different temporalities of being. The conscientised engagement of Black Consciousness is accompanied by an array of less overtly political black identities. New formations of middle class blackness – Afropolitanity, universal blackness, and the pejorative identities signalled by 'coconut' and 'black diamond' (signifying an embrace of, respectively, cultural and economic whiteness) – contend with older modes of pan-Africanity as well as that seemingly archaic mode rejected by political blackness, ethnicity. Behind all this lies the promise of a post-Fanonian identity – that is, a notion of a self-sufficient blackness not dialogically constructed in relation to whiteness.[3]

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[3] These new formations of blackness are in part responses to the question posed by David Scott. The 'narrative poetics of liberationist...self-consciousness', writes Scott, were 'a way of linking a past of intolerable subjection

Achille Mbembe elaborates on the ramifications of this new openness. In the essay 'African Modes of Self-Writing', Mbembe describes contemporary black identity as finding issue in two major philosophical currents. In what he calls the Marxist nationalist current of thought, 'the history of Africa can be reduced to a series of phenomena of subjection' resulting in the African subject's 'difficulty in representing himself as the subject of free will and liberated from domination'. This current – related, I think, to a modern rather than postmodern moment – finds no expression in the work I will examine, and I will not elaborate upon it here.[4] More germane to my reading of *Kwezi* is the second current Mbembe outlines. This emerges from the conceptual untethering of blackness from the experience of oppression and that sees 'African identity as an identity in formation':

> From this point of view, the world itself no longer constitutes a threat. On the contrary, it becomes a vast network of affinities. There is no ultimate African identity. There is an identity that is in process and that, in contrast to unanimist mythologies, draws its sustenance from Africans' ethnic and linguistic differences, as well as from traditions inherited from colonial history.

Thus, says Mbembe, 'If African identity used to be constructed on the basis of European fictions, other narrative systems might construct it differently, the essential point being that in the future everyone can imagine and choose what makes him or her an African'. Because the latter version of blackness is not symbolically or materially dependent on whiteness – neither defined by the white world nor tied to a narrative of emancipation from it – it allows for a large degree of narrative openness.

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through a present of possible action to a promised future of total overcoming (x). But 'what if the futures imagined by the figuration of that past had now been effectively foreclosed by both political and conceptual transformations?'
[4] For instances of this, see Afropessimist thought, exemplified in the writings of Frank Wilderson III

What I want to note here is the inherent contentiousness in this open notion of identity. While the Marxist-Nationalist narrative of blackness is premised on the centrality of suffering and oppression to black identity, this second current – which deeply informs the drama of identity staged in *Kwezi* – can be aligned with both older Afrocentric forms of pan-Africanism, and with newer, more globally-focused forms Afropolitanism that are as open to Western, 'Kantian' modes of subjectivity as they are to African forms. The debates here have been heated and are well summarised by Stephanie Bosch Santana. On the one hand, Afropolitanism – based, in the words of Mbembe, on 'refusing on principle any form of victim identity' ('Afropolitanism', 28) and a fluid worldliness that distinguished it from an 'institutionalised and ossified' pan-Africanism – has functioned as a conceptual counterweight to Afro-pessimism. On the other hand, however, Afropolitanism has increasingly come to stand for 'empty style and culture commodification'. Indeed, Santana, quoting two vocal critics of the idea, Emma Dabiri and Binyavanga Wainaini, notes the way that (an admittedly reductive and aestheticised version of) Afropolitan identity has readily entered the 'product driven' world of the 'international jetset'.

I am not interested here in adjudicating for the superior form of blackness, but rather in how these multiple modes of blackness are produced, circulate, and come into contestation with one another. In what follows, I want to show that *Kwezi* offers a staging of this multiplicity within contemporary South African blackness, as an aspirational Afromodernity comes into conflict with forces that radically question it.

Staging Black Multiplicity

It must be noted that *Kwezi* is first and foremost a comic strip aimed at children. This is not to say that it is simple or simplistic (narrative never is), but it is to concede that the strip

makes no claims to offering a critical social anatomy. Nonetheless, it is a work with clear pedagogical intent and, in its representations of black identity, aims to intervene in the social sphere. Here are Mkize's own words on his creation: 'I believe we need social commentary', says Mkize in an interview, 'storytelling that speaks to us in a progressive light. We are a people coming into our own and it's time for us then to claim our own standard. My work speaks to African excellence. It embodies how we ought to relate to each other. I want my audiences to see themselves in the works – as grand, majestic beings worthy of being referred to' *(Mail and Guardian).* With its earnest exhortations to a vaguely defined 'African excellence', this is for the most part standard Africanist fare. But it also contains a suggestive focus on intersubjective relationality: in Mkize's telling, the superhero is not simply a figurative archetype of 'African excellence': he (or she – one of *Kwezi's* superheroes is a woman) also acts to model an ethics of looking and of relation. This representational ethics is visible in Mkize's extensive corpus of black portraiture.[5] These quasi-realist portraits isolate their subjects and focus on the eyes as a locus of expressive individuality. In the medium of the comic book, these subtle nuances of individuality are amplified into iconic statements of difference. Indeed, in *Kwezi* Mkize is not interested in singular figures of potency ('selves worthy of being referred to') so much as in the relations between them. Through this focus on interrelation, Mkize turns the superhero comic strip into a vehicle that explores black identity a surprisingly sophisticated way.

The series is still in its infancy (at the time of writing, three issues have been released), yet its direction is clearly apparent.[6] The title character, a young black man who has come to the big city from the provinces, mysteriously comes into possession of supernatural powers. Callow

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[5] See Mkize's personal website: https://loyisomkize.carbonmade.com/

[6] As I make final revisions to this article (February 2017), a second 'special edition' containing issues 4 - 7 has been released. Although it has arrived too late for me to able to consider this new installment in the body of the text, I note relevant developments in footnotes.

and showy, Kwezi uses these powers to advance his social media presence. As a counterpoint to Kwezi's immaturity, the series introduces a trio of fully developed 'ethnic' superheroes who tame Kwezi's unruly narcissism, attempting to lead him to a sense of responsibility and purpose based on his African ancestry. At the point at which the series ends, Kwezi has just grudgingly made the journey back to his home village, for the first time seemingly consenting to his placement within a network of familial (and tribal) identifications.

One might read *Kwezi* as a moral parable of the gravity of ancestral identity as compared to the weightless superficiality of self-adulatory Afropolitan modernity. But, once it becomes clear that the narrative focus is on the interrelation of characters rather than on a sole hero figure, one might adopt the more fruitful approach of viewing the narrative as a stage upon which the multiplicity of black identity is performed. Its gallery of superheroes constitutes an array of possible black identities the post-apartheid era, and the forcefulness with which they impose themselves upon Kwezi allows the narrative to explore and navigate the competing claims they make on the modern black subject. Rather than the asymmetry of the single superhero in a world of humans, *Kwezi* stages a contestation between multiple heroic forms and possibilities. Its narrative drama – at least thus far – is concentrated not in the battle between superhero and villain, but in these moments of ideological struggle between superheroes.

Gold City

At the most basic narrative level, *Kwezi* stands in the moralistic tradition of the 'Jim Comes to Joburg' fable, in which, in Mark Gevisser's words, a 'decent country boy' arrives in the city 'to enter a world of sin and possibility' (140). Yet the granting of superpowers changes the trope's dynamic force: the urban arrivant is no longer impotent against the grind of the big city,

but possesses the power to intervene in it to his liking. His dilemma is now *how* he should intervene in it (echoes of Spiderman: 'With great power comes great responsibility). The question of to what end the superhero should use his power – something of a non-question in the original genre, or at least an already answered one – becomes the central motivator of Kwezi's narrative. In this sense, the superhero serves as a vehicle for questions of the nature of black identity against the backdrop of the emergence of black political and economic power.

The field for this exercise of power is 'Gold City'. The name refers to Johannesburg, South Africa's economic hub (nicknamed *eGoli*, place of gold). But little evidence of the city's origins as a callous mining town built on the back of cheap black labour is to be found here. Gold City is a neutralised Johannesburg. Its clean edges and airy glass facades allow for none of the shadows, murkiness, and decay that have marked Johannesburg literature since H.C. Bosman. Mkize's clean lines suggest an underlying matrix from which urban strife is an ungainly departure, a kind of cartographic injunction to order buried in the comic's representational style.

{Figure 1: Gold City}

Such is the series' desire to neutralise Johannesburg that we are presented with none of the iconic landmarks of the Johannesburg skyline (Hillbrow and Brixton towers, Ponte City), which appear only fleetingly in social media renditions of the city. An even more telling absence are the mine dumps bearing witness to Johannesburg's extractive economy. Meanwhile, the efficient but characterless depiction of less familiar structures (such as the Carlton Hotel above) means that Gold City loses Johannesburg's distinct urban personality – its extremes, its chaotic grittiness – and becomes instead a space of generic urban modernity. The most interesting aspect of Gold City is the way – as I will discuss later – that rurality transgresses into its space.

Gold City is a space of a kind of insouciant Afropolitanism: of the easy production, consumption, and circulation of identities in a neutral space of media-saturated urban modernity. Severed from its extractive history, Gold City becomes merely a space of rootless capital. While this neutralised city allows the black subject to be cast in an agentive relationship to 'modern' space and place, it does not solve the question of black modernity. The neutral lines of Gold City still cast black people as inheritors of modernity, rather than creators of it. It is as if to say, We have modernity – but is it ours?

Transformative Blackness

Kwezi embodies exactly the kind of ahistorical and consumable Afromodernity one would imagine taking root in Gold City. Kwezi dresses in high-tops, blue jeans, and a leather jacket slung over a yellow t-shirt, the latter emblazoned with an image of Africa suggesting a branded, consumable African identity. His hair is pulled into short dreads and faded on the sides in a readily identifiable image of streetwise black hipness. He bears no explicit markers of ethnic identity. Hooked up to social media, street savvy, fashionable, a consumer of media, he suggests an aspirant Afropolitanism.[7]

In a now-classic structuralist reading of the *Superman* comic series, Umberto Eco is drawn to the bifurcated narrative temporality of the American superhero. One the one hand, says Eco, the superhero is the descendent of the mythic hero; on the other, he exists in the modern world. These two identities move him in different temporal directions: 'The mythic character embodies a law, or a universal demand, and, therefore, must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us; the character of a novel wants, rather, to be a man like anyone else, and

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[7] Kwezi's name is missing the orthographically correct 'h' that would make it the Zulu / Xhosa *khwezi*, or star – a sign perhaps of his distance from his ethnic roots.

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what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us' (15). Hence the 'disintegration of temporality' (19) in the strangely non-sequential narrative of the Superman comics: their development of what Eco calls an 'oneiric climate' in which 'what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy' (17). Under no condition can the story lay down an 'irreversible premise', such as marriage, which would send Superman one step closer to his death (18).

I bring up *Superman* – rather than the rich history of superhero comics for which *Superman* serves as fodder for rewriting and reinventing[8] – because it is towards this archetypal American model that Kwezi's aspirations are directed. Crime stopping is his 'ticket to the big time'. His exploits are a self-conscious imitation of Superman's: as we first meet him, he is thwarting a cash transit heist. In the process, he finds time to take a selfie and gloat to police. Meanwhile, he busies himself on social media, follows news reports of his exploits, frequents trendy cafes, and participates in the image-fuelled life of a young urbanite. While the temporality he inhabits – with its tension between the everyday and the mythic – is that of Superman, there are obvious ways in which Kwezi departs from his hero. If the Superman series creates an oneiric temporality – a temporality without decisive developments or progressions – *Kwezi* is overtly a narrative of formation. Kwezi is jolted out of this temporality by a series of 'real world' situations in which his choices have the potential to definitively alter his self. As a consequence, while the classic superhero's nature is fixed, Kwezi's identity is (indeed is forced to be) malleable, his mythic potential not yet developed. *Kwezi,* at least in its current three published episodes, obeys the linear, developmental temporality of the *Bildungsroman*. Kwezi must learn

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[8] In particular, there exists a large body of black re-envisionings of the superhero. See Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes*

and develop, his initial immaturity set aside for a weighty maturity. In this sense Kwezi is not a superhero proper but only a potential superhero.[9]

Indeed, unlike the classic American superhero (Superman, Batman, Spiderman, etc.), Kwezi lacks a unique identity that would isolate and distinguish him from normal men. Not only is he able to 'pass' without adopting an alter ego; his superpowers themselves are indistinct and involve such capacities as brute strength and flight rather than individualised forms of supernatural agency. Kwezi's fellow superheroes, by contrast, are marked with strong identities taken from the repertoire of ethnic identity. Mohau is a stallion-riding Sotho mountain man; Khoi carries a bow and arrow and runs barefoot; Azania wears the outfit worn by Shaka's mother in the BBC series *Shaka Zulu*. This ethnic trio – their superpowers extrapolations of their ethnic 'essences' – act as psychopomps to Kwezi, introducing him to his 'true' heritage and purpose.

To the urban concept of identity as brand the narrative counterposes a rural concept of identity as ethnicity and tradition. These ethnic superheroes upstage the urban Afropolitan blackness erected in the opening scenes of the narrative. I call them psychopomps, suggesting spiritual guidance, but guide might be the wrong term: after Kwezi refuses to heed their initial call for him to recognise his true nature, they beat, sedate, and kidnap him, removing him from Gold City to their redoubt in the Drakensburg.

{**Fig. 2: Kwezi subdued**}

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[9] Brown summarises comics historian Mike Benton (1993) on the four main superhero conventions: '(1) the hero must wear some form of distinguishable costume that sets him or her apart from ordinary people; (2) the protagonist must possess some form of superpower, be it of alien origin (e.g., Superman, the Martian Man-Hunter), granted by the gods (e.g.,Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel), induced by science (e.g., Captain America, the Hulk), or developed through years of self-improvement (e.g., Batman, the Green Arrow); (3) the character hides behind the guise of a dual or secret identity; and (4) the superhero must be motivated by an altruistic, unwavering moral desire to fight against evil.' Kwezi, when we meet him, possesses only number 2, a superpower, and that only indistinctly.

What is the function of this ethnic trio? In an interview, Mkize states the problem explicitly: 'I have often to reconcile my dilemma – that of acknowledging my indigenous core make-up and culture with the Western culture that inhabits my everyday life'. One could certainly read the trio in the pedagogical role of reproaching Kwezi for his lack of responsible identity and proffering ethnicity as a superior mode of being. Yet I suspect, as Mkize's words indicate, that this plot rather speaks to the intensity of the tension between urban and rural within some modern black identities, of the continued potency of those claims of ethnic blackness upon the urban escapee who attempts to sever himself from his rural background.

It is noteworthy that Kwezi does not actually inhabit the city but lives in a shack on its outskirts. This informal 'township' space is strangely bereft of social life. Its symbolic role becomes clear when Mohau, the stallion-riding Sotho superhero, arrives on Kwezi's doorstep bearing the news of his true origins. The township is merely the staging ground for Kwezi's psychomachia: the space from which multiple blacknesses – urban, rural, postmodern, traditional – can make claims upon him.

{Fig 3: Kwezi's psychomachia}

Kwezi's occupation of a space from which he is forced to adjudicate between the various claims made upon his identity is a marker of a certain transformative capacity: as the series ends on its third episode, Kwezi arrives in his home village, greeting his headscarf-wearing mother in Xhosa. That this signifies an embrace of his ancestral identity seems unlikely – Kwezi's non-ethnic urban identity is of course graphically fixed in his appearance – but it is a force potentially constitutive of his character. In this sense, Kwezi is a model of what I will call transformative blackness: that is, of a black identity that seems open to multiple possibilities of development and transformation.

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Ethnic Blackness

In its curatorial sweep of ethnic identities, the narrative intervenes in the battle of what the Comaroffs dub 'ID-ology', and in so doing asserts 'the ontological primacy of identity' (82, 88). Indeed, the terminus and cure proposed for the temporal open-endedness of Johannesburg is *identity*. Whether this 'healthy' identity should itself be ethnic is unclear, but Kwezi is certainly admonished for his turn to individualised identity – his 'brand' – and guided instead towards an identity rooted in deep time and imbued with purpose.

For all its association with custom and tradition, the power of ethnicity stems from its ability to naturalise identity by connecting it with a mythic 'deep time'. The Comaroffs contextualise the emergence of post-apartheid ethnicity as follows: 'with the rise of neoliberalism', they note, 'assertions of identity have replaced most other kinds of collective action in pursuit of power, interest, rights, and recognition' (79). This because 'within the domain of identity, ethnic consciousness, being vested in a fusion of blood and culture, is archetypically taken to be the most basic, most "primordial"' (79). In contrast to this 'primordial' conception of ethnicity, the Comaroffs outline a view of ethnicity as a form of 'instrumentalism' that 'sees it as a social construct wrought in reaction to threats against the self-determination, integrity or interests of persons who imagine themselves to have a common, culturally rooted destiny' (80). For this reason, ethnicity tends to take root in 'colonial encounters' and 'urban agglomerations' (80). Because ethnicity is fundamentally relational – that is, its content depends on forms of difference in which it is embedded – it is in 'a perpetual process of becoming, never fully realised, always demanding to fulfil itself' (81).

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The urban context is key to my argument: *Kwezi* is interested in how ethnicity intrudes into a putatively non-ethnic urban space. The Comaroffs' distinction between primordialism and instrumentalism explains some of the traction of the ethnic superhero within the milieu of Gold City. At first the ethnic superhero seems to present his or her ethnicity not as becoming but as a fixed identity immune to the transformative temporalities of post-apartheid capitalism. Because he appears in isolation from the communities within which ethnicity is created and enforced, the ethnic superhero can present a distilled and graspable version of ethnicity that resolves the latter's contradictory logics of identity and becoming. Mohau is a prime example: wrapped in an impeccably-knotted traditional Seanamarena maize-patterned blanket (signifying royalty) donning a Sotho hat, and staring auratically down from on high, he seems the embodiment of ethnic plenitude. (Let us leave to one side the fact that his horse is a European import to an idealised precolonial Sotho culture).

{Figs. 4 & 5: Mohau confronts Kwezi and pursues him through Gold City}

But there is another story going on with regards to ethnicity. Just as the strip seems to be indulging in romantic imagery of pristine ethnicity, a scene in which Mohau pursues Kwezi on horseback up the vertices of a Johannesburg skyscraper upends it, conveying something of the metamorphic salience of ethnic identity within the postmodern world of the Afropolitan city. Rural identity does not merely dissolve in Gold City but takes on new forms.

Mohau, Azania, and Khoi's possession of superpowers that are extrapolations of their ethnic 'essences' is in sharp contrast to the indistinctiveness of Kwezi's superpowers. This tips us off to the fact that there is something more going on than simply an uncritical employment of ethnic authenticity. Ethnicity here is not simply a commodification intended to leverage group advantage in a neoliberal economy (as per the Comaroffs) nor a colonial discourse intended to

defuse racial solidarity (as per an earlier critique of ethnicity). It is rather the excess to or other of Afropolitan identity: a residual form of black identity making claims upon the postmodern black subject. Kwezi's self-congratulatory deployment of his powers, in which each feat is immediately uploaded to social media, is a form of identity as entrepreneurship. By contrast, his entrance into ethnic time pulls him into a form of identity as custom: a long project in which he is merely one link. This is apparent in the origins myth provided for Kwezi: he is the manifestation of a race of 'star people' who appear at times of strife and chaos (*khwezi* is Zulu / Xhosa for star). Thus, contra his pretensions to self-creation, Kwezi is told that he is 'THE RESULT OF A BLOODLINE THAT HAS PERSEVERED THROUGH THE AGES' (2.3). Blood fixes Kwezi to a deep identity from which he has become unmoored.

{**Fig 6: The deep time of the ethnic superhero**}

This cosmic time yields another identity that is neither urban Afropolitan nor rural ethnic: an idea of blackness as part of a universal political project. (There is something here of Biko's idea of Africa giving the world its human face). This access to deep time pulls Kwezi out of the individualised time of Afropolitan urbanity and binds him to a political project that is not simply the project of the nation but spans the long history of human existence. The cosmic time of the ethnic superhero runs on a non-reproductive plane and as such does not open itself to the possibility of disruption. In this sense it acts as a balm to Kwezi's fevered urban temporality of media fame, of the news headline, the Twitter feed, Facebook: a world of ceaseless reproductions of the self. The bifurcated temporality of Superman (everyday | mythic) is experienced by Kwezi in the form of an identity crisis. His internal antagonism is embedded in the dual significations of his name, Kwezi / star: ephemeral celebrity and celestial timelessness.

Predatory blackness

It is against and in reaction to the villain that the strip's curation of ethnic and Afropolitan black identities comes fully into focus. Bull-necked, cigar smoking, and of enormous physical proportions, Mr Mpisi is the stereotype of unconstrained acquisitiveness, a black diamond par excellence.

{Fig 7: Mr Mpisi}

Mr Mpisi introduces a new temporality to the mix. If the young Kwezi inhabits Virilio's 'dromosphere' and the trio of ethnic psychopomps inhabit the deep time of ethnicity, Mr Mpisi inhabits the time of entrepreneurial capital. While Kwezi is at some level connected to his roots in Xhosa culture, Mr Mpisi bears no signs of ethnic identity, only crude markings of a blackness embodied by phenotypical sterotypes: a strikingly flat nose and thick lips.

We meet Mr Mpisi ensconced in the dark leather and wainscoting of his corporate offices, where we find the literalisation of Kwezi's claims that Gold City is a 'jungle'. Not only are his office walls bedecked with hunting trophies; in the final frames of the series, Mpisi reveals his superpower, transforming into a giant hyena and hunting down a lion on his own private game reserve. In a text that writes whiteness out almost entirely, the lion is the nearest symbol of the regnant economic order of post-apartheid South Africa (still dominated by the white community). When Mpisi turns to his audience of admiring lackeys, prey in hand, to proclaim 'ALL HAIL THE NEW KING' (3.12), he signals his intentions of overthrowing this order.

{Fig 8: Mr Mpisi's transformation}

Mpisi is one of those members of the newly free bourgeoisie described by Fanon who finds in liberation an opportunity to occupy the position formerly held by the oppressor. His

hunting performance is in effect an enactment of his potency within an exploitative economic order. In satisfying his 'animal' desire severed from a larger social project, Mpisi occupies the opposite pole from the ethnic superhero.

Striking here is how different Mkize's troping of animality is to that in other Johannesburg science fiction. In Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* – works both authored from a white subject position – a relation to animality opens up the potential for more fluid forms of identity and being. In Mkize's work, by contrast, animality is rendered profoundly phobic: in an echo of the colonial animalisation of blackness, it is the pure expression of the law of the jungle. Unlike the transformations undergone by the protagonists of *Zoo City* and *District 9*, Mr Mpisi's becoming-animal is not a transformation but an expression of a debased inner self.

The hyena is particularly symbolic. A recurrent figure in African discourse, its most well-known appearance is in Djibril Diop Mambéty's film *Hyènes,* where economic necessity turns the inhabitants of a Senegalese village into hyenas, willing to prey off and sacrifice their most vulnerable member for financial gain: the communal ethos of African village life turned predatory. Indeed, the hyena signifies a specifically African form of predation. Mr Mpisi's ascent of the financial ladder is not individualistic so much as animalistic and pack-like: he requires the submission of others to his own desires and in so doing accumulates a claque of admiring lackeys. As in *Hyènes*, communal being assumes the hierarchical form of the food chain, in which the strong scavenge upon the weak.

In its troping of Mpisi's modus operandi as the law of the jungle, the narrative places him in a particularly close relationship to the land. Indeed, the most curious aspect of Mpisi's demonization lies in his connection to his private game reserve. Because Mpisi's land is

'ancestral', his villainy lies not in his 'right' to the land but rather in the nature of his relationship to it. It is a relationship of ownership rather presence. Mpisi has acquired the land through business purchases, and, crucially, he has populated it with wild game rather than people. In the process, it comes to resemble the *terra nullius* favoured by the colonial imagination (the 'game reserve' seems a quintessentially Eurogenic spatial form). Land, in this imagination, is finite and connected to money: it can be ideologically possessed, partitioned, and controlled.[10]

In this light, ethnicity is proffered as the anti-Mpisi. Mpisi stands for a predatory embrace of a post-apartheid order in which a new black elite takes up the conceptual and economic architecture of their erstwhile oppressors. Ethnicity, by contrast, is a reaction formation directing the energies released by democracy towards a stable, non-acquisitive form of being that reinstates an autochthonic relationship to the land that is one of custodianship rather than ownership.

The Epic of Black Postmodernity

Kwezi's ambition is the creation of an African epic for a postmodern age – an epic that does not attempt to distil Africanness into a single essence but rather infuses the diverse strands of contemporary black life with the potency of heroic identity. This is not an aesthetics that taps into the libidinal charge of Afro-modernity. My reading *Kwezi* has nothing to do with what Richard Iton calls the 'black fantastic', an aesthetics that proceeds from the 'historical and definitional exteriority of blackness and the fantastic to well-ordered systems of thought' (qtd in Reed, 353). Mkize eschews Afrofuturism in favour of an aesthetics that is far more engaged with

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[10] I take some of these ideas about land from a talk given by Juliette Leeb-du Toit, 'Mediated Difference in South African Art and Photography: Deciphering Imagery of Blackness', at the *Black Portraitures* conference held in Johannesburg, 2016.

the pasts and presents of blackness; indeed, *Kwezi* tropes blackness as central to a long history that extends backwards to deep time and forwards to the Afropolitan dromosphere.

While one could take issue with *Kwezi* for its recycling of pristine, unentangled forms of black identity, this would be to miss the point. In its forging of a world of heroic (and villainous) black selves, Mkize's work synthesises the conservative and self-consciously backward-looking world of the black pantheon (as in, say, the writings of Credo Mutwa), and the long history of the struggle to formulate an indigenous African modernity. While the former has an ambiguous relationship with liberation politics (in its quest to recover and re-member an integral pre-colonial Africanity often enunciating a black separatism that sat easily with apartheid) the latter is generally tied to the history of anti-colonialism. Indeed, Mkize's narrative contains ideological echoes of Pixley ka Seme's seminal essay, 'The Regeneration of Africa' – an ur-text of pan-Africanism published in 1906. Writes Seme:

> By this term regeneration I wish to be understood to mean the entrance into a new life, embracing the diverse phases of a higher, complex existence. The basic factor which assures their regeneration resides in the awakened race-consciousness. This gives them a clear perception of their elemental needs and of their undeveloped powers. It therefore must lead them to the attainment of that higher and advanced standard of life... Agencies of a social, economic and religious advance tell of a new spirit which, acting as a leavening ferment, shall raise the anxious and aspiring mass to the level of their ancient glory.

The restorative temporality of Seme's speech – in which progress to the future involves the re-activation of an ancient and glorious past – has much in common with the temporal drama of

Kwezi. Indeed, while I have left pan-Africanism to one side as I have focused on other identities – Afropolitanism, ethnicity, black capitalism – I think it is ultimately the restorative horizon of pan-Africanism that enfolds the strip's staging of black identity. Most obviously, Pan-Africanism's central tenet – in the words of its founding figure, Henry Sylvester-Williams, to 're-establish the dignity of Africans in a world that has hitherto conceded them none' – is reiterated in Mkize's desire to create a world of subjects 'worthy of being referred to'.

A notable by-product of this 'restorative' blackness is the insignificance of white people (and indeed South Africans of ethnicities other than black African) in the world of *Kwezi*.[11] This is not merely a lack of focus on or indifference to whiteness, but a wilful peripheralisation of it. By eliding whiteness, this world strips the colonial encounter of its determinative force – a force which conventionally relegates the black experience to a sidebar of Western history – and renders the incursion of Europeans into Africa a mere blip in its history. It is a temporality that brings to mind Ngugi's dictum that, in the scheme of Africa's history, the time of colonialism is short.

This 'deep-African' aesthetics permeates the narrative in other ways. For instance, all three 'ethnic' superheroes point towards spaces of unsubjugated blackness: Mohau is a Mosotho (Lesotho was never colonised); Azania is of course the 'decolonised' name for South Africa; and Khoi belongs to a people that can claim a deep history on the Southern tip of Africa that far preceded the era of colonisation and that has to some degree persisted in the most precarious form on the boundaries of the modern nation-state. In addition, a notable absence amongst the

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[11] I count two white characters in the background of the first three issues, one granted an inconsequential speech bubble. There are other elisions too: first, of the complex social worlds out of which so many of these identities arise. This can be explained by the genre itself, which requires the creation of stark archetypes. Second, the elision of hybrid identities – always a risk when referring to ethnic types, which rely on an essentialism that has little room for intermixture. (It seems possible, though, that Kwezi's best friend Zane is mixed race).

varieties of black identity is that of party political affiliations. The timescale of national liberation politics and its progressive, historical time is squeezed out of the frame. Instead, in the idea of a 'star people' who emerge at times of global strife, there is something of the idea of Africa as harbour of the world's humanity. (Seme: 'The regeneration of Africa means that a new and unique civilization is soon to be added to the world... The most essential departure of this new civilization is that it shall be thoroughly spiritual and humanistic – indeed a regeneration moral and eternal!'). I highlight this elision of national time not to detract from the work, but to illuminate its attempt to create an epic of African identity that construes blackness not as the dialogic other of whiteness, but as constructed from within the diverse and competing forms of modern black identity.

Seen in this way, *Kwezi* can be placed in a line of epics of black modernity that stretch back at least to Thomas Mofolo's novel *Chaka* (written 1910, published 1925). Kirk Sides has argued that Chaka is an epic of black modernity that shifts our attention away from the colonial encounter as the moment of its origin and allows us to instead read an African modernity originating from within the complex histories of black Africa: in this case, with rise of the Zulu Kingdom under Shaka Zulu and the consequent reorganising of tribal society in the *Mfecane*. *Chaka,* Sides argues, is a narrative that posits 'an alternative moment of modernity – one outside European colonial contact – as formative to southern Africa' (Sides 4). I read *Kwezi* as a postmodern reinstantiation of the kind of epic of African modernity inaugurated by *Chaka*. I say postmodern rather than modern, firstly because the narrative explicitly critiques the 'modernity' of Kwezi himself, and secondly because, unlike *Chaka*, *Kwezi* seems uninterested in creating any kind of originary moment of black modernity. More than this: it questions the validity of any moment of rupture that definitively separates modern from traditional.

One could of course read these very qualities as constitutive of a narrative of modernity. But there is also a deeper sense in which the narrative is postmodern. In placing these radically incommensurate temporalities side-by-side as options for contemporary blackness while jettisoning the more immediate context of South Africa's apartheid history and liberation struggle, the narrative elaborates a form of blackness in which the telos of emancipation is substituted with a cyclical time in which identities, dispositions, and types jostle for primacy. Indeed, perhaps the narrative's seeming embrace, in the personal trajectory of Kwezi, of that quintessentially modern act of 'becoming' is illusory. The dilemma faced by Kwezi in navigating his identity is perhaps better viewed not as marking Kwezi's distance from superhero status, but as a defining element of the superhero as such: a particular weakness, a moral or character flaw that the hero must confront and overcome. That the trio of 'ethnic' superheroes have to remind Kwezi of his 'other identity' and prompt him towards fidelity to kin, blood, and tribe points not so much to 'becoming' as to an experimentation with an alternative mode of being.

What *Kwezi* is perhaps ultimately after is not a 'modern' ethics of becoming but a postmodern ontology, an alternate mode of being capable of incorporating the tensions that beset modern black subjectivity. This new ontology, however, is deferred. While the strip aspires to a world of being, it is forced to reckon with forms of becoming that are the necessary prelude to enter this world. In this sense, *Kwezi* seems less in the line of Omanga's syncretic Afro-superheroes – who already inhabit a new, hybrid ontology in parallel to that of the American superhero – and rather part of a more internally troubled world over which the American superhero casts a rivalrous shadow. At this point, whether Kwezi remains urban or returns to his roots, whether he pursues personal aggrandisement or takes up the mantle of the star people and dedicates himself to the project of overcoming strife (a global project? a national project? or a

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local, urban one?) is to a large extent an open question. Unlike *Superman,* that fully-fledged

creation of an already realised American global hegemony, *Kwezi* plots a path to an as-yet-

undefined end of black identity – at which point the black superhero could presumably finally

gain entrance to the oneiric world of the superhero proper, in which strife consists in the civic

work of thwarting villains rather than the historical work of forging identity.[12]

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[12] At the end of issue 6, Kwezi does transform into a recognisable superhero, noble and uniformed. His superhero identity is not overtly ethnic: he wears a sleek black and gold outfit. It seems likely that, at this juncture, the narrative of *Bildung* will give way to a more conventional superhero temporality, and that *Kwezi* will be able to be more easily read alongside Omanga's syncretic Afro-superhero.

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