

Under the Hood: *Watchmen* and the American Hero Story

by

Kristin Zachman

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To Committee Members:

Professor Paul Youngquist, English Department

Professor Karen Jacobs, English Department

Dr. Andrew Chapman, Philosophy Department

Dr. William Kuskin, English Department

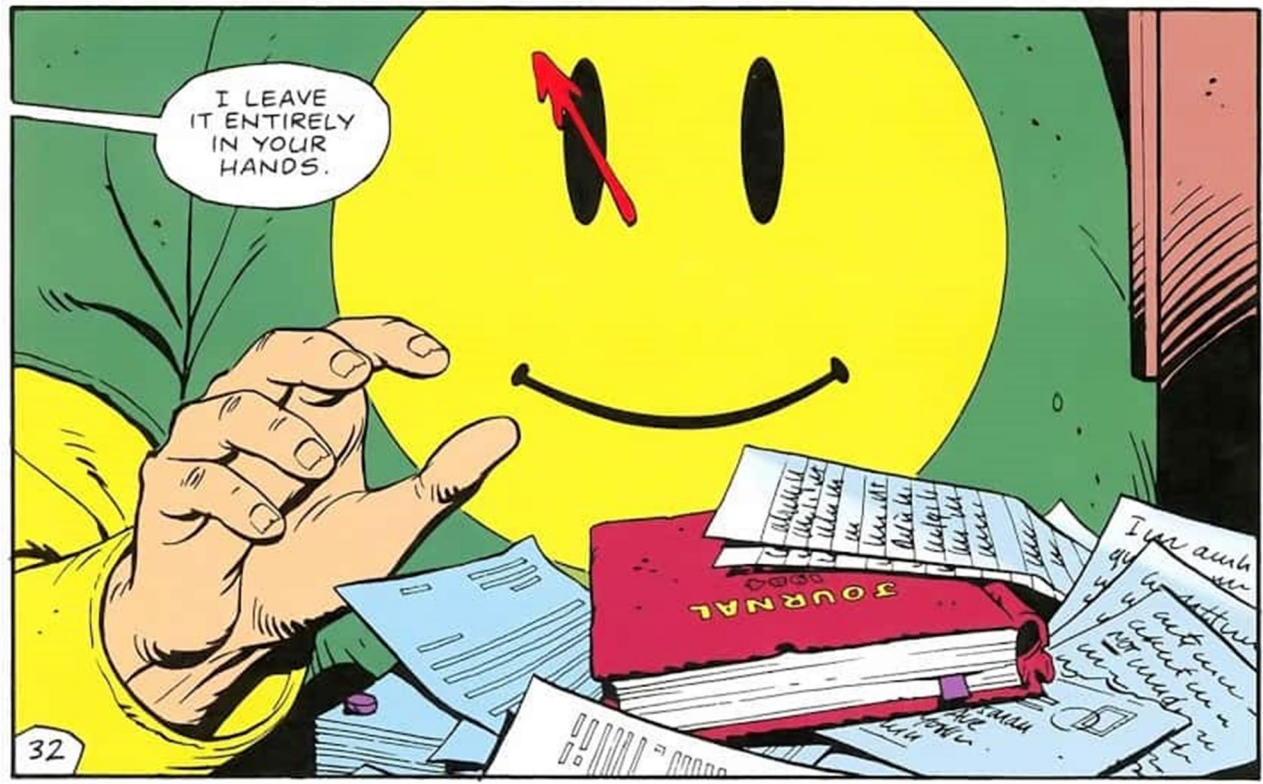


Fig. 1 The final frame of the *Watchmen* comic series (Moore, 414)

“Start off with the saddest thing you can think of and get the audience’s sympathies on your side. After that, believe me, it’s a walk.” (Moore, *Watchmen*, 35). The strategy suggested in Hollis Mason’s *Under the Hood* is taken up by Damon Lindelof, the executive producer of HBO’s television adaptation of *Watchmen*. The pilot episode drops viewers into the saddest memory American media could conjure, but it is not clear whether or not winning the favor of viewers was “a walk.” Instead of inhabiting the same space as the typical superhero mega franchises that hold such a domineering presence in popular culture and media, the adaptation is a whodunit of historical proportions. By investigating the connections between the cowboy hero and the Ku Klux Klan, Lindelof and his writing team shift Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ original critique of American superheroes into a more historically critical framework. The narrative sits between lasting impacts of America’s racist foundations and contemporary

society's attempts to move forward in a world where that patrimony is never reconciled. Where Moore and Gibbons' original comics scrutinize the superhero's authoritarian ideology, HBO's series questions America's capacity to recognize the ubiquitous nature of racism in politics, law enforcement, and representations in popular literature and media. With a premium-cable platform and Moore and Gibbons' subversive themes, HBO's *Watchmen* sets out to disrupt the cultural hegemony of whiteness and discern whether it is possible for American institutions to fully acknowledge the oppression of its Black citizens, and finally extend to them protection under the law.

In 1986, writer Moore and illustrator Gibbons began to publish their comic series, *Watchmen*, under the corporate arm of DC Comics. Their work both inhabits the literary tradition of pulp heroes and critiques the ideological framework out of which those heroes arise. Marking a shift away from the celebrations of superhero vigilantism toward other concerns, *Watchmen* investigates how free societies might fall from democratic grace into authoritarian nightmares. *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, published in the same year, question the superhero's authority to use force and operate outside of the law. Both comics are considered benchmarks of their form; their dark, moody aesthetics appropriated into the realm of glossy, colorful superheroes. Over one-hundred superhero films have flashed across the silver screen thus far in the twenty-first century. The popularity of the genre is backed by a still-booming comic industry and television adaptations of popular superhero storylines¹. Despite the efforts of Miller and Moore, the superhero continues to uphold the form's White-supremacist roots, heralding the exceptionalism of American heroes. In 2005, Christopher Nolan's adaptation of Miller's *The Dark Knight* departed from the typical superhero film by depicting Batman as a

¹ In 2021 alone, television and streaming platforms will host twenty-five different series that center on superhero characters.

brooding antihero rather than a morally and physically superior being; four years later, Zak Snyder released his motion picture adaptation of Moore's *Watchmen*. While Nolan's neo-noir superhero films trilogy with critical acclaim, Snyder's *Watchmen* elicited mixed reviews, many of which cite the authority and inadaptability of Moore and Gibbons' comics. Negative reviews of Snyder's adaptation led *Watchmen* to fall out of the filmic medium until October 2019, when HBO and executive producer Damon Lindelof released their nine-episode, Emmy-winning television adaptation.

HBO's *Watchmen* unveils the inherently racist legacy of American pulp heroes by subverting the origin story of masked vigilantes. The television series extends the comics' critique to implicate America's violent and racist history. HBO's *Watchmen* participates in the Black intellectual tradition of historical revisionism by depicting buried events like the Tulsa Massacre of 1921. The tragedy in Tulsa was brought down by the hands of the KKK and White citizens who slaughtered the Black citizens of Greenwood. The assailants looted and destroyed prosperous Black-owned businesses, destroying lives and legacies. Through the series, viewers must come to terms with the enduring influence of America's violently racist patrimony in contemporary politics, media representations, and law enforcement. Only when these truths are acknowledged, can change be made based on comprehensive and thoughtful confrontation of the country's past. This project will work in tandem with the *Watchmen* television series to outline how the history of the pulp hero perpetuates a long running, White-supremacist narrative which has permeated the American social, cultural and political consciousness for generations. HBO's *Watchmen* utilizes cowboy iconography, conspiratorial deception, and historical revisionism in order to achieve its aims. This project will then illustrate how the *Watchmen* HBO series achieves a heretical revision of the superhero narrative. HBO's historical revisionism is heretical

because it critiques the structural themes of pulp fiction heroes, exposing their White supremacist roots. In my conclusion, I will evaluate whether HBO's *Watchmen* achieves its goals as a materialistic, revisionist piece of pop culture, and whether this kind of media is an effective means to the anti-bias, anti-racist ends of revisionism.

Revisionist Heresy and Marxist Critical Race Theory

Lindelof and his writers utilize historical revisionism and heresy as tools to confront their viewers with racism in our recent history. While many scholars contend Critical Race Theory has eclipsed Marxism as a tool of cultural theory, Enakshi Dua contends that the core components of Marxism remain relevant, and may even be missing from many Critical Race Theories (62).

While Marxism focuses on class and capitalism, Critical Race Theorists zero in on race and racism, often “at the cost of an understanding of class, capitalism, and globalization” (Dua, 63).

Moore himself appreciates the materialistic approach of Marxism as a way to

“value the present and really get as much as we can out of each present moment; it would help if we understood how this moment has arisen, if we understood the past, if we understood how incredibly rich and savage and beautiful our history can be. There is informations [sic] in the past and if we can unearth them, I think we can use them to enrich our present.” (Sasaki)

In line with Moore's view, this project will be informed by a Critical Race Theory that incorporates the central concerns of Marxism to understand how historical revisionism addresses the issue of racial oppression through a critique of the whitewashing of American history and cultural thought.

Revisionist histories coincide with a materialist approach to Critical Race theory, where theorists examine racism through the eyes of “conquering nations [who] universally demonize their subjects to feel better about exploiting them [...] form[ing] appropriate collective attitudes to rationalize [the violence that] was done.” (Delgado, 22) ². *Watchmen* explores what Delgado and Stefancic term “The Empathetic Fallacy,” a fundamentally “free-market response” that encourages the minority victims of racism or oppression to verbally stand up for themselves (33). In HBO’s series, demands for reparations are finally satiated, but this material uplift upsets and radicalizes an undercurrent of racism that runs through American culture. Materialists believe that the social and political codification of racism requires the physical circumstances of minorities’ lives be repaired before racism can die off, but then, these ideologies must be rooted out of American systems. Addressing racism therefore requires broad programs of reform in both policy and social conception (Delgado, 34). As American media portrays “a shocking parade of Sambos, coons, sneaky Japanese, exotic Orientals and indolent, napping Mexicans,” it becomes difficult to imagine how an appeal to the empathy of Americans could be effective (ibid). In reality, empathy is in short supply and cultural change comes slowly, with plenty of pushback. Skewed, stereotypical representations of marginalized people are embedded in our cultural consciousness, concretized through media representations. These stereotypes flourish as a foil to pulp fiction’s pure, White American male hero figure. Historical revisionists believe racist conceptions can be disrupted only when a non-White experiences are revealed, respected, and assimilated into the historical record (Delgado, 26).

² Defined by Delgado and Stefancic in *Critical Race Theory* as works which reevaluate the historical record to replace “comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minority experiences” (25)

HBO's adaptation of *Watchmen* sidesteps the anti-capitalist concerns of the comic series to subvert the costumed adventurer in a different direction. The narrative falls within the tradition of Black heretical writings as defined by Anthony Bogues in *Theorizing Anti-Racism*. Bogues argues C.L.R. James and W.E.B Du Bois combatted historical erasure by theorizing and revising the predominant historical narrative and disturbing the exclusionary Western intellectual tradition (149). This is the vein through which Lindelof and his team rework the concerns of *Watchmen*. The show continues Moore's critique of the superhero genre to the point of heresy, turning the White-supremacist origins of the American pulp hero on their head. HBO's *Watchmen* reveals the inherent racism running through US government and law enforcement and attempts to reconcile the legacy of masked vigilantes by asserting an alternate history where the genesis of these heroes lies with Black lawmen in hoods, not White hooded vigilantes. Though contemporary Americans recognize the deplorable nature of slavery and the subsequent racial discrimination of US history, Bogues is right to argue that few concern themselves with how this patrimony impacts historical, social, and political knowledge. In 1986, Moore questioned the ways in which our ideological patrimony affects the circulation power. HBO's series, on the other hand, seems preoccupied with the way racist ideologies continue to impact the lives of Black Americans, following in the footsteps of James, Du Bois, and more contemporary writers and scholars like Ta-Nehesi Coates, Kodwo Eshun, Christina Sharpe, and Ibram X Kendi.

W.E.B. Du Bois adapted Marxism to evaluate the circumstances of racial oppression. Reconfiguring Marxist orthodoxy, he casts Black slaves as Black laborers, and outlines two distinct systems of labor in America: the first exploiting White labor, and second being racially based slave labor (Bogues, 164). Du Bois fervently refuted the social memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, and ultimately took issue with the entire narrative of American

Democracy. He aimed to vindicate Black people across the globe. By practicing historical revisionism, Du Bois attempts to merge the Black American population's "double-consciousness," a term he defined in *Strivings for the Negro People* written for *The Atlantic* in 1897. "Double-Consciousness" is the "two ness" that stems from racial oppression and devaluation of Black Americans at the hands of a society founded on White supremacy. The pain of this dual identity stems from the Black American's "wish to merge his double self... In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost." (DuBois). Black Americans are Americans with a qualification; their historical subjection sets them apart, regardless of their presence and contribution to this land preceding America's independent statehood. Du Bois inspired generations of Black intellectuals, including Ta Nehisi Coates, who echoes the pitfalls of this double-sided struggle in "The Case for Reparations," the work that inspired HBO's *Watchmen*.

Du Bois attempts at vindication consist of uncovering the roots of racist ideology to debunk popular notions of White supremacy and Black "savagery" that are readily found in American history, political policy, and media (Bogues, 158). Both Du Bois and Coates believe that in order for American society to become whole, it must first come to terms with its violent history and repair the mistakes made by its forefathers. Reconciliation is impossible unless the impacts of racial slavery are uncovered and rectified. For Du Bois, education and historical revisionism were the only means to achieve the goal of vindication. He asserted alternate accounts of history and reframed periods like the American Reconstruction Era through a lens of minority experience. The public conception of Reconstruction in much pulp literature and folk history was generally negative, considered a great American mistake. Reconstruction's failures are central to America's first feature-length film, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation* in 1919.

Instead of letting racist accounts of history lie, Du Bois and those who pick up his revisionist legacy disturb these foundational American narratives to vindicate those who have been oppressed under White supremacist institutions.

The past forty years have witnessed a rollback of the progressive legislation passed during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. This regression comes as no surprise to those who accept that the American republic was “erected on a foundation of White supremacy” and prefer not to “cover the sin of national plunder with the sin of national lying” (Coates). America’s aptitude for indoctrinating citizens in favor of the coverup saves face to preserve the myths of American exceptionalism and free-market idealism. Only historical revisionism can combat the lies fed to the American public. Du Bois’s revisionist project culminates in Ibram X. Kendi’s comprehensive 2016 account, *Stamped from the Beginning: A History of Racist Ideas in America*, which traces the evolution of racist ideas in society and public policy from the beginning of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to modern-day America. HBO’s *Watchmen* follows in these revisionists’ steps. The adaptation continues their project by uncovering the horrors to which Black Americans have been subjected, even after the abolition of racial slavery. The series also performs heresy on the superhero form by inverting the White/other dynamic these heroes rely on.

Turning on a Dime — A History of American Pulp Heroes

The American hero archetype was coined and codified into literary tradition through dime novels. These thrifty publications arrived on the American literary scene in 1860, when the country was on the precipice of Civil War (Simmons, *Dime Novels: The Rise of the American Hero*). The formulaic plots of these works were not met with critical acclaim but ranged in genre

from action stories with pirates and cowboys to early science-fiction, horror, and romances. Among the vast array of available genres, the highest demand was for stories that followed cowboy heroes on the Western frontier. The frontier mythology that accompanied cowboy heroes has persisted and continues to crop up in popular media to this day.

Colonizing, and therefore civilizing, the American frontier ideologically united America's citizens. This common cultural experience provided the opportunity for Americans to overcome the country's indigenous and immigrant foundations to oppose to the natives on the Western American frontier (Chambliss, 4). The frontier hero myth, which developed independently in the imagination of Americans from the historical conditions of the Western frontier, materialized through pulp fictions. This myth takes place in a symbolic environment and features a hero "from the Old World [on a] journey to the New World in the hope of rejuvenation [...] through which one might escape from time into space, from bounds into boundlessness, and from the works of corrupt and corrupting humanity to works of God in uncorrupted nature" (Mogen, 16). The ethos operates under an assumption that Americans are "a chosen people who have escaped from the terror of historical change to live in timeless harmony with nature" (ibid). The myth relies on violent tension between the "civilized" European and "savage" natives on the Western American frontier.

The frontier myth has been embedded into American hero narratives through the perpetual reworking of formulaic stories to fit shifting public concerns. Chris Galaver's "The Imperial Superhero" argues a parallel development occurs between colonialism and pulp fiction, the former continuously transferring its ideology onto the latter (108). In 1845, the phrase

Manifest Destiny³ was a term created by influential editor John L. O'Sullivan to describe a previously intangible phenomenon in the American ideological consciousness. The coining of this phrase marks an "attempt to explain America's thirst for expansion, and to present a defense for America's claim to new territories" (Lubbrage). The colonizer cowboy hero transferred the ideology of Manifest Destiny to frontier narratives. These narratives rely on divisions of racial difference to assert the superiority of American culture's hegemonic whiteness. Julian Chambliss attributes the early successes of dime novels to "Civil War soldiers [who] found the melodramatic stories a diversion from wartime fears" (3). During Southern Reconstruction, these melodramatic stories continued to flourish.

The Southern Reconstruction era lasted from 1863 to 1877 and was remembered as a time when the final flames of Confederacy were extinguished, and slavery was federally abolished. Three widely conceived versions of Civil War memory emerged during this time, explored in David Blight's book *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory*. First is a "reconciliationist vision," rooted in coping with the devastating reality of death and destruction in the wake of the war (Blight, 2). The second version of Civil War memory is the "White supremacist" delusion of subjection at the hand of cruel Northern oppressors. The people who ascribed to this view worked diligently to maintain racial segregation and White cultural and political control in the American South through terror and violence (ibid). Since the end of the Civil War, these two memories have often collided. The final recollection Blight identifies further segments the country's Civil War memory. He calls this the "emancipationist vision," a

³ The 19th century belief that the expansion of the United States through the American continents was not only justified, but inevitable. ("American History Through Literature 1820-1870." *Encyclopedia.com*, Encyclopedia.com, 9 Mar. 2021, www.encyclopedia.com/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/manifest-destiny.)

conception that accepted the complexities of Black Americans' experience of freedom in the wake of a war that aspired to reinvent the republic, hand down liberation, citizenship, and constitutional equality to newly freed slaves (3). These varied memories seem to correlate to the three American groups identified by Ibram X Kendi: assimilationists, segregationists, and anti-racists, respectively (5).

The revolutionary Reconstruction era embraced the dime novel and solidified the influence of Manifest Destiny on American pulp literature. The era's racist, segregationist ideology also gave birth to the terrorist organization known as the Ku Klux Klan. According to *Hooded Americanism* by David Chalmers, the Southern Restoration era was "rotten ripe" for vigilantism, as six ex-Confederate pals in Pulaski, Tennessee created the KKK in December of 1865 (Chalmers, 8). As folk legend goes, the KKK's initial intent was more merriment than terror, but it quickly became clear that their night-time escapades had unexpected effects on their communities. Word soon spread amongst freedmen in the area about the caped and hooded ghosts of confederate soldiers riding through the night (Chalmers, 9). The Klan's violent methods spread like wildfire across the disillusioned, post-war South as a means for White citizens to assert control over the newly freed Black population. In the eyes of former Confederates, the American hero myth found in dime novels had been tarnished, and drastic changes were threatening the supremacy of White citizens. In the face of all this, the Klan provided the perfect hero figure to right the wrongs of Reconstruction.

White men of all ranks in status joined the KKK's Invisible Empire, which infiltrated nine states by April of 1867 (Chalmers, 11). Each municipal group tended toward chaotic self-governance, some sects more brutal than others in their pursuit to "restore prewar white rule" (Chalmers, 19). Klansmen flaunted their power during daytime parades, night-rides, riots, and

through other acts of violence against free Black southerners and Republicans (Chalmers, 14). As the socio-political landscape changed, the Klan found itself in hot water. A sour public opinion in the face of the group's brutality led ex-Confederate Imperial Wizard⁴ General Nathan Bedford Forrest to virtually dissolve the order in 1869 (Chalmers, 19). Despite this apparent disbandment, in March of 1870, President Grant documented more than five thousand acts of White terrorism (Kendi, 249). Even though the Klan was no more, terror came down on Black Americans and Republicans under a slew of aliases, including Night Hawks, Kludds, and Cyclopes (Chalmers, 425). The KKK left a lasting legacy as self-proclaimed guards of American morality and virtue, forever ingrained into American folk history. Many ideological tenants of the Klan have been adopted by and reflected in American pulp hero archetypes, specifically masked vigilante characters.

Pulp Hero Evolutions

In the decade between 1880 and 1890, the newly emerging detective character, famous for his brawn, bravery, and penchant for disguises in a urban setting, began to compete with the cowboy hero for public favor (Chambliss, 6). By 1896, the vehicle for American hero stories made a shift as dime novel successes migrated to bi-weekly serials known as Libraries, or pulp magazines (Simmons). *Argosy Magazine* chose Western cowboy stories as the focus of the first all-fiction pulp publication in an effort to satiate public demand for "frontier themed adventures" (Simmons). Just as dime novels were known for their affordability, pulp magazines were named after the cheap wood pulp paper on which the pages were printed (Simmons). In these magazines, narratives were shortened and serialized to accommodate the anthological approach,

⁴ the title for the head of the KKK (Chalmers, 9)

the pages were enlarged, and the price was cut in half. These decisions created space for a variety of stories, each with a particular aptitude to explore concerns circulating among everyday Americans at the turn of the century. With the parallel development of pulp heroes, the frontier ethos, and the Ku Klux Klan, it comes as little surprise that at the turn of the century, author Thomas Dixon Jr. chose the Klan's Invisible Empire as the hero of his pulp novels.

Thomas Dixon Jr. was one of many Americans who romanticized the Klan, quoted justifying their vigilante terrorism as “guarding us from harm” (Kendi, 287). Dixon published a Reconstruction Trilogy: *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* in 1902, *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* in 1905, and *The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire* in 1907. His trilogy follows confederate protagonist Ben Cameron in the wake of the Civil War. These narratives were an attempt “to teach the North” about “the awful suffering of the white man during the dreadful Reconstruction period [...] and to demonstrate to the world that the white man must and shall be supreme” (Kendi, 287). Many Americans regarded the sentiments of Dixon's stories as historical fact. He centered his works around what Blight considers to be a White supremacist memory of southern oppression during Reconstruction. This view saw White southerners as doubly subjected to corrupt, incompetent northerners and Black legislators. These tyrants supposedly dominated, terrorized and disenfranchised White southerners until they were “redeemed by the might and virtue of the Ku Klux Klan” (Kendi, 290). Dixon portrayed “The Negro [as] a brute, and Reconstruction a tragedy beyond all bearing,” until Ben Cameron and the White knights of the Ku Klux Klan gallop in (Chalmers, 26). These characters are the first instances of masked vigilante heroes in American popular literature, reworking the frontier myth. Dixon draws on folk history's

conception of the Klan as redeemer of the South during Restoration to contribute his White supremacist narrative to pulp fiction history.

Pulp heroes have always tended to uphold a sense of White supremacy, even if less overtly than in Dixon's works. While pulp popularity increased, focus shifted away from the frontier setting, and toward advancements of industrialization and urbanization in American cities. The gap between the back-breaking, individualistic, character building work required to expand the American frontier and the public began to widen. This rift created a sense of concern about the way city life threatened American values which rely on rugged individualism (Chambliss, 2). The Industrial Revolution brought with it an influx of immigrants to American cities, inciting fear that American values were being lost in the shuffle of immigration and urbanization.

Edgar Rice Burroughs began to publish stories featuring John Carter, an aristocratic Virginian veteran of the Civil War transported to an alien world, in 1911 (Chambliss 7). The

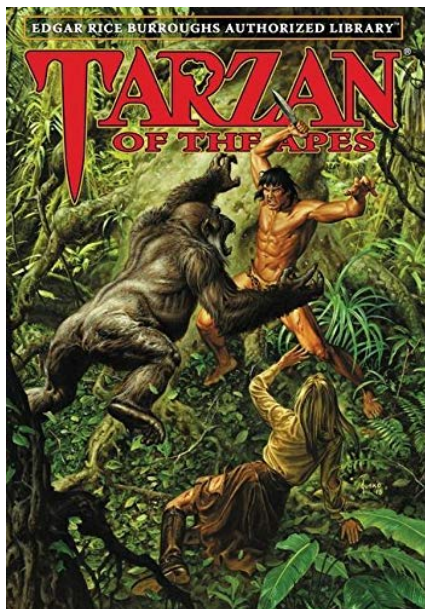


Fig. 2 1913 Cover of *Tarzan*

character's Anglo earthling origins give him an advantage over his Martian counterparts owing to the variation in gravity (Chambliss, 8). When Carter procreates with a Martian princess, the race mixing promises to “provide new vigor to Martian society” (ibid). A year later, Burroughs began to publish stories about Tarzan, an infantile White aristocrat orphaned in the jungle left to be raised by apes. With emphasis on his racial heredity, Tarzan grows to achieve

“physical prowess coupled with the innate moral compass and social values that come from being a member of the Anglo-Saxon race” (Chambliss, 9). Both of

these publications arose amidst waves of immigrants migrating to American cities who were not easily categorized as Black but rejected as White. The underlying anxieties of race mixing and themes of White supremacy are clear in these early twentieth-century hero stories which appeared alongside a growing White middle-class interest in Eugenics. Tarzan not only upholds White racial supremacy, but exploits fears of urban degeneration in American society. An instant classic, Tarzan remained iconic for ages and “inspired comic strips, merchandise, twenty-seven sequels, and forty-five motion pictures” (Kendi, 300). Themes of innate racial and moral superiority prove to be reliable sources of tension in pulp fiction. James Cameron’s 2009 film, *Avatar*, depicts a sort of Pocahontas adaptation on an alien planet, as an Earthling embodies an “avatar” of an extraterrestrial to save the indigenous population from the dangers of intergalactic colonization which originally brought the hero to their planet.

In 1932, Robert Howard starts to publish stories about Conan the Cimmerian, a character “representing a mixture of strong male archetypes” that rose quickly to prominence in popular culture (Chambliss, 11). Like Tarzan, Conan is uncivilized but pure, a natural aristocrat. These colonizer heroes appropriate elements of the racial other and lean on concepts of this otherness to maintain the sovereignty and superiority of the American empire (Galaver, “The Imperial Superhero”, 110). These narratives rework the cowboy hero's frontier mythology by centering on a young man in a foreign land who is left to find fortune and rise to meet various exotic challenges. This is the tactic of *Watchmen*'s Ozymandias, who appropriates the legacy of the Egyptian empire as the inspiration for his alter-ego and builds a commercial empire from the ground up. The praise garnered from these characters' successes stem from White supremacist ideology of exceptionalism paired with fetishization and appropriation of exotic cultures. While the venue of American pulp heroes continues to shift, the racist undercurrent remains.

Avenger detectives recodify the frontier myth and appropriate the cowboy hero into their cynical archetype. This character is a “tough individual, possessing skill and courage, testing himself against the environment and dangers created by this new kind of living” (Chambliss, 5). A metropolitan translation of rugged individualism, the avenger detective is preoccupied with protecting the lost souls of American cities from moral degradation and physical danger, like Rorschach in Moore and Gibbons’s *Watchmen*. Pinnacles of avenger detective narratives feature “pulp WASPish heroes who pursued evil doers using superior physical and mental abilities” (Chambliss, 14). By the advent of the Great Depression, popular hero fictions became uniform, following a precise formula where a lone, White male hero take on a fight against moral and societal corruption in the face of insurmountable evil. At their height, the cowboy and detective heroes served as the epitome of American heroism.

A more fantastic evolution was necessary to provide escapism and entertainment to a generation racked by economic depression. The Great Depression deflated notions of exceptionalism in American values and institutions. A shift from realism toward more supernatural stories of heroes with the strength to battle evil, protect American ideals, and never face defeat began in 1938 with the first publications of *Superman* (Chambliss, 17). The late ‘30s and early ‘40s are often referred to as the Golden Age of Comics. While comics ranged as widely in genre as the dime novels that preceded them, often lending space to women and minority authors, the superheroes in these works are direct descendants of early pulp heroes. New superhuman characters further distort the frontier myth and apply it to increasingly modern concerns of the mid-twentieth century. The scholar Peter Coogan identifies a number of key superhero characteristics, namely: mission, powers, and dual identity linked to recognizable

iconography and a codename. The two main archetypes for superheroes are the masked introvert, Batman, and the unmasked extrovert, Superman (Chambliss, 20).

The superhero is a cumulative conglomeration of American pulp heroes, ultimately both a production and reflection of the American empire's imperialist Manifest Destiny. Through these apparently low-brow publications, contemporary readers can look back and find popular creative responses to industrialization and the increasingly integrated environment of urban America. Through its many iterations, pulp hero fictions center on issues of race, masculinity, and values born out of the frontier experience and America's conceptually European background. While critics have done well to trace the imperialist thread running through frontier heroes, pulp magazine adventurers, and later superheroes, it is important to also unveil the folk mythology that influenced early dime adventures and aided in the synthesis of the frontier myth. Despite the continued evolution of the American hero story, a distinctly violent, racist thread is present through the pulp hero's connections to the Ku Klux Klan.

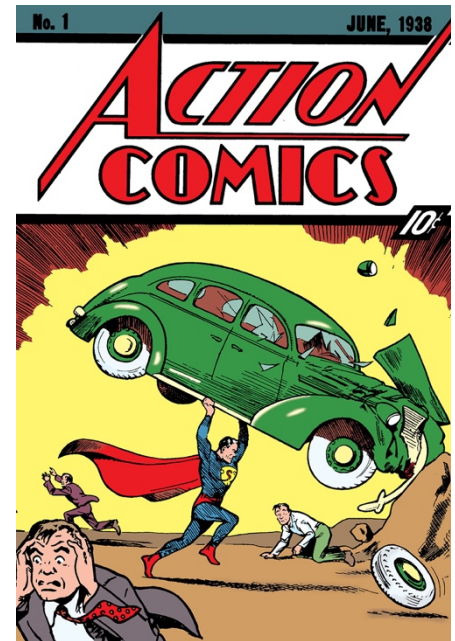


Fig. 3 The cover of Action Comics No. 1

The Birth of the American Superhero

Encouraged by the success of his novels, Dixon began to pursue a stage adaptation of *The Clansman*. While those plans never panned out, D.W. Griffith did adapt Dixon's work for the screen, incorporating themes and elements from the other narratives of the trilogy as well as Southern folk history (Chalmers, 28). D.W. Griffith's *The Birth Of A Nation* portrayed an acutely White supremacist memory of the Civil War and Southern Reconstruction, depicting the bustling slave trade industry as an asset, and the lives of the enslaved as ethically sound. Griffith exalted the South's Confederate heroes, rewriting American history using battleground photos as visual inspiration and a score that appropriates the diverse cultural makeup of America, weaving Negro

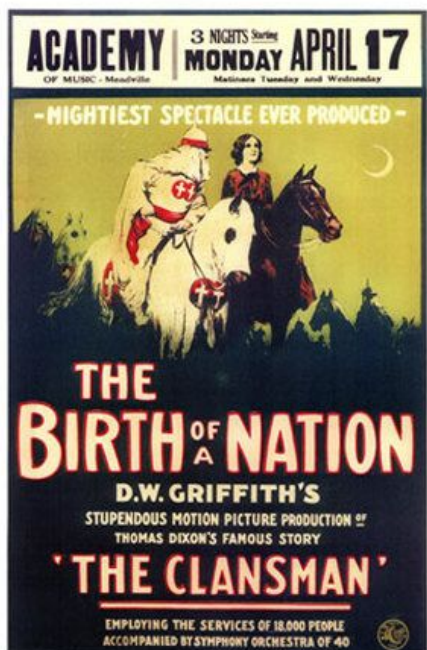


Fig 4 1919 Promotional Poster for Griffith's Film

spirituals and passages from classic literature together (Chalmers, 26). White hooded horsemen burst in at the film's climax to rescue a sacred White woman surrounded by savage, frenzied freedmen (Chalmers, 27). This plot line was not novel, featured in pulp fictions in the form of Mandingo stories and circulating among White supremacists to rationalize the violence they brought against black men and women (Kendi, 300). Released on February 8, 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* was the first ever feature-length studio film, imbedding White supremacy into Hollywood's blockbuster

legacy (Kendi, 305). Griffith's filmmaking methods shaped the creative techniques of the industry, as he used this new medium to deliver racist ideas to the masses.

The film's reception was explosive. Southern crowds received it with fanfare, more than happy to pay the unprecedented two-dollar admissions fee. Above the Mason-Dixon line, the

film was met with censorship, vandalism, and riots (Chalmers, 28). In Houston, a packed theater chants “Lynch him! Lynch him!” as the Klan apprehends its victim (Kendi, 306). *The Birth of a Nation* remained the highest grossing film for over two decades. Chalmers notes that by the Red Summer of 1919, the film had a gross profit of eighteen million dollars (27). In the year it was released, President Woodrow Wilson enjoyed *The Birth of a Nation* during the first-ever film screening at the White House. The President praised Griffith’s work as “writing history with lightening” and “all so terribly true,” despite the film’s fictional basis (Kendi, 305). The President’s praise did not quiet the shouts of outrage across the nation. Heavily populated cities like Boston and New York met the film with animosity and anger. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, reflected the outrage of the Black community, who regarded the film as “utterly disgust[ing]” (Cripps, 102). The NAACP wrote letters in efforts to censor key scenes of the film which convey racist sensibilities and historical distortions. Where protests successfully impeded the progress of Dixon’s stage adaptations, Griffith found supporters in high places who were vocal enough to drown out any lasting impacts of criticism.

The superhero archetype ultimately takes a lead from the masked vigilante heroes in *The Birth of a Nation*. The impact Griffith’s film had on American audiences was staggering. In Houston, where audience members enthusiastically chanted along with the film, over one hundred Black citizens were lynched in 1915 (Kendi, 306). This violence can be attributed to the resurgence of the KKK at the hands of Colonel William J. Simmons who, like Dixon, fondly remembered valorous Klansmen from his childhood (Chalmers, 28). Chris Galaver asserts that the Grand Dragon of *The Birth of a Nation* serves as the ultimate prototype for masked vigilante heroes (193). These characters “mythologiz[e] the recent past in terms of redemptive violence,”

through the rise of a “selfless hero, rescue[ing] an impotent and terrorized community through superheroic redemptive violence.” (Galaver, 194). The Klansmen, like the superhero, appropriate the avenger detective’s penchant for sleuthing and the cowboy’s fight for justice in a lawless or backward terrain.

Griffith’s Klansmen in *The Birth of a Nation* certainly are “central in the establishment of the hero formula” (Galaver, 194). These men of status and character are forced to operate outside of the law, which has failed to uphold their racist ideals—ideals upon which the country was founded. The secret dual identity of the Klan precedes the superheroes. Their transformations are efficient and speedy, like the one that happens in Clark Kent’s phone booth, changing them into “an alternative, consistent, and single heroic identity,” (Galaver, 196). Physical transformation and iconography are key components of the Klan’s mystique, as well as the superhero’s; both groups have two distinct and recognizable identities. Through the twentieth century, the Klan’s public influence ebbed and flowed while their fictitious superhero stand-ins carried the “authoritarian mission, imposing moral order on urban chaos,” into the future (Galaver, 198).

Superheroes ultimately appropriate the Klan’s secret identity and moral high ground in response to urban denigration, particularly in their intentions to “aid those victimized by a blind, though well-intentioned state” (Galaver, 198). Both the Klan and the superhero, who act as agents of law and order, take violent measures into their own hands, robbing their victims of basic rights to life or a fair trial. As the twentieth century progressed, the luster of vocal White supremacy faded, and the KKK shrunk away from the public eye. Their fictional counterpart, the superhero, never fell out of the American cultural consciousness. Moore describes his characters in *Watchmen* using “glorified, Klan-style brutality,” and claims too that “costumed heroes are direct descendants of the Ku Klux Klan” (Galaver, 203). *Watchmen*’s fictitious Keene Act

outlawed masked vigilantism and reflects real-life anti-masking laws passed in efforts to combat Klan activity, leading to the surge of Klansmen in the ranks of police departments across the nation (Chalmers, 34).

In spite of parallels between the superhero and Dixon and Griffith's narratives, commonalities have gone largely unnoticed and been effectively forgotten over time. In contemporary culture, a more diverse cast of superhero characters have emerged in attempts to distance the superhero from the genre's racist origins, instead aligning these heroes with progressive and even anti-discriminatory agendas (Galaver, 204). In Alan Moore's view, regardless of this "smattering of non-white characters (and non-white creators) [... superhero narratives] are still very much white supremacist dreams of the master race," (Sasaki). Unfortunately, Galaver tends to agree that superheroes are masked vigilantes who hold themselves above the law, often using violence as a means to achieve their apparently just ends (204). The foundational characteristic of the superhero genre is Klannish violence and attempts to bring variety to the superhero disguises rather than erases these roots. Ultimately, no amount of diversification will erase the malevolent history of the masked vigilante hero.

Alan Moore's Revolutionary Comics

Alan Moore, a revolutionary anarchist, has secured his place among the ranks of comic book giants; his works are cherished among comic lovers as quintessential examples of the form. According to Maggie Grey, Alan Moore sees the comic form as a perfect vehicle for "disseminating information [...] leading to subversion [which] facilitates the dynamic contrast of anarchism and fascism" (40). Moore is widely considered "the doyenne of the superhero comic," according to Fred Francis's article for *Comparative American Studies* (290). In other words,

Moore is perceived as the most prominent or respected figure in his field, ushering comics out of childhood and into self-reflexive adulthood. This maturation comes with Moore's attempts to realize the unhappy fantasy of American superheroes. He saw great political aptitude in comics, an effective medium for combating the hegemony of Western culture. Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* subverts the superhero genre, with its examination of the legitimacy of violence by world superpowers in the face of mounting Cold War tensions.

Despite his revered position in the realm of comics, Moore's British background is often mentioned in contrast to the American setting of *Watchmen*. As an international author, Moore is interested in disrupting what has been called "the 'distinctively American monomyth' of the hero" and the Eurocentric hegemony this monomyth perpetuates (Francis, 290). Moore views the American monomyth as a reflection of the self-perception of America's rightful role as enforcer on the world stage. According to Fred Francis, the American hero monomyth unfolds as

"A community in harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity." (291)

While Frank Miller's *Dark Knight* challenged the American hero construct from inside American culture, Moore reworked these heroic American constructs from across the Atlantic.

Adrian Veidt, the Neo-Liberal celebrity and supposed villain of Moore's *Watchmen*, embodies the contradictions of the American monomyth. Working in the fallen paradise of Cold War America, Veidt certainly sets out to save humanity from the ineptitude of State government. Ozymandias, Veidt's choice of namesake, reveals an interest in old world mythology. The inspiration for Veidt's powers is not American, but Egyptian. By making these choices, Moore

“move[s] the superhero beyond national borders, but without wholly undoing the national tradition within which he must artificially place his work.” (Francis, 296). The same tactic is used in HBO’s *Watchmen*; Angela Abar is born in Vietnam two years before Doctor Manhattan won the war for America (“Its Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice,” *Watchmen*). One way Moore “cross[es] the borders of nationality and cultural legitimacy” is through incorporation of popular literary works and music from international artists and writers like Percy B. Shelley, William Blake, Friedrich Nietzsche, John Cale, and Bob Dylan (Francis, 298). Moore’s work is situated in a postmodern literary tradition that blurs the line between low culture comics and high literature by using a plethora of intertextual references to popular culture, art, and history.

The Cold War and the 1980s posed new fiscal and philosophical challenges for authors to wrestle with. The economic and cultural hegemony of Reagan and Thatcher’s New Right and emerging Neoliberalism⁵ troubled Moore’s works, as Maggie Grey explores in her article ‘*A fistful of dead roses...*’. According to Grey, *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen* are Moore’s most direct meditations on political extremism and the slippery slope to authoritarianism. Moore saw the potential for “his creative work [to contribute] to wider political activism, as propaganda for an alternative world view and a means of changing cultural consciousness” (Grey, 31).

Watchmen critiques the ideals of Neo-Liberalism and the legitimacy of State violence from Moore’s anti-fascist point of view. Moore reveals his view of the dangerous impact of superheroes across artistic media in an interview with Raphael Sasaki for *Folha De São Paulo*:

“Mass-market superhero movies seem to be abetting an audience who do not wish to relinquish their grip on (a) their relatively reassuring childhoods, or (b) the relatively reassuring 20th century [...] save for a smattering of non-white characters (and non-white

⁵ I understand Neoliberalism to signify “the policy of supporting a large amount of freedom for markets, with little governmental control or spending, and low taxes” (Cambridge Dictionary).

creators) these books and these iconic characters are still very much white supremacist dreams of the master race. In fact, I think a good argument could be made for D.W.

Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* as the first American superhero movie, and the point of origin for all those capes and masks." (Sasaki)

Watchmen exposes underlying issues of corruption and authoritarian rationalizations in superhero narratives. Moore is concerned not only with political ideologies and trends of his time, but also with the racist ideologies and archetypes upon which the pulp hero and subsequent superhero character were conceived. The American monomyth, born out of the frontier myth, perpetuates and glorifies a racist authoritarianism, and Moore does not believe this patrimony can be amended by the appropriation or involvement of non-White creators and characters into the superhero canon.

Watchmen Comics Introduction and Overview

The original *Watchmen* comics are set in an alternate American 1980s. In this parallel universe, real-life heroes under the guise of costumed adventurers materialize in 1938, with the first masked vigilante: Hooded Justice. Their appearance altered the course of Nixon's presidency and the outcome of the Vietnam War. While these masked vigilantes had no powers beyond brains or brawn, a science experiment gone horribly wrong endowed Jon Osterman (alias: Doctor Manhattan) with superhuman abilities akin to those of Boethius's timeless God⁶. Manhattan led the American military to victory in Vietnam, causing a rise in Cold War tensions.

⁶ Boethius squares the issues of humanity's free will and God's foreknowledge by illustrating the timelessness of God. By this, Boethius conceives God is a being who experiences all of time in one simultaneous present. This means that Doctor Manhattan also has the ability to access and be present in all of his experiences simultaneously.

The comics follow low-level street vigilante, Walter Kovaks (alias: Rorschach) as he investigates the murder of The Comedian. Rorschach sets out on a mission to warn his former peers, Dan Dreiberg (alias: Nite Owl); Doctor Manhattan and his girlfriend, Laurie Juspezyk (alias: Silk Spectre); and Adrian Veidt (alias: Ozymandias), of a plot against them. The mentally ill Rorschach records developments in his journal. At his arctic stronghold, Ozymandias reveals a scheme to save humanity from impending nuclear genocide by conducting a false alien attack. The success of his plan hinges on the sworn secrecy of the other heroes. Rorschach's rigid moral philosophy bars him from compromise and leads Doctor Manhattan to silence him by way of vaporization. When Ozymandias, the supposed savior, claims "I DID IT" (Moore, 401), Doctor Manhattan assures him "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (Moore, 409). Rorschach's journal is depicted in the final frame of the comic sitting atop a pile of mail in the offices of *The New Frontiersman*, full of accusations against Ozymandias waiting to be revealed.⁷

Growing Pains— The Discomfort of Adaptation

Authorship in HBO's *Watchmen* is complicated because of the show's sizable writing crew and general anxieties around authorial ownership of literature adapted to film, but problems also stem from the particularly strong opinions Moore has about corporate authorship and copyright, as Jackson Ayers explores in his article for the *Journal of Modern Literature*. Moore launched allegorical attacks against comic moguls DC and Marvel who control "80% of the American comics market and hold scores of lucrative copyrights" (Ayers, 147). Battles with DC over the rights to *Watchmen* soured Moore's opinion of the corporate comic world (Sasaki). DC Comics is owned by Time-Warner, the parent company of HBO. This corporate provenance adds

⁷ See Fig. 1

a layer of friction between Alan Moore and HBO's 2019 *Watchmen* adaptation. Moore's contract with DC Comics stipulated the rights to *Watchmen* should return to him when "the work went out of print" (Ayers, 147). Unfortunately, Moore realized that "*Watchmen* was never going to be allowed to go out of print." (Ayers, 144). Instead, his project continues to get repackaged into special collectors' editions, new narratives,⁸ and moving-image adaptations. Moore sees his works, specifically *Watchmen*, as "stolen from [him]" by corporate overlords (Sasaki). For him, the most sinister blow comes as corporations "deny those creators compensations through royalties, and even the dignity of authorial attribution" (148). Because of the battles he lost over the series, Moore vowed to never acknowledge or interact with any adaptations of the narrative he helped to create. All of the typical complications with adaptation plague HBO's *Watchmen*, but Moore's qualms add an undeniable layer to the discomfort.

Damon Lindelof and the "Good White Liberal"

Executive producer Damon Lindelof found success writing for episodic television before he secured his first position as a joint showrunner on *Lost*, an ABC series that ran from 2003-2010. Between television projects, he served as co-producer and writer on the movies *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, *Prometheus*, and *Tomorrow Land*. In 2013, Lindelof returned to television with a three-season adaptation of Tom Perrotta's novel *The Leftovers* on HBO. Years later, HBO courted Lindelof to create a television adaptation of *Watchmen*. With the looming threat that the network would take its offer to someone else, the executive producer felt compelled to take on the project. His praise of the original *Watchmen* as "The greatest piece of popular fiction ever produced" is featured on the back of DC Comics' 2013 collected edition. Lindelof either found

⁸ See *Before Watchmen* and *Doomsday Clock*

the courage or was provided enough compensation to tune out Moore's very available and vocal denouncement of adaptations of his works. In an interview, Lindelof claims to be "channeling the spirit of Alan Moore to tell Alan Moore 'Fuck you, I'm doing it anyway.'" (Miller). In any case, Lindelof won the enthusiastic support of *Watchmen*'s other creator, Dave Gibbons, who acted as consulting producer and played an important role in the reinterpretation of *Watchmen*'s narrative themes.

An inordinate number of people are required to produce a television series, but it remains true that "the showrunner is the person that [the studios] blame or credit" (Woscoboinik, 2). With this in mind, it makes sense that Lindelof, the executive producer and showrunner for the HBO series, would oversee the writing and production of each episode. This position as overseer results in an echoing of his personal political ideas, just as Moore's are echoed in the comic series. Lindelof's politics, however, are not as readily available as Moore's. A self-proclaimed "good white liberal," Lindelof straddles the center, even if he does tilt slightly left (King). He seems conflicted, voicing support of reparations being paid to Black Americans while simultaneously declaring "there is no defeating White supremacy – it's not going away" (Miller). It is interesting for the creator of a show with the goal of anti-bias, anti-racist representation to write off White supremacy as something that will persist regardless of historical revisionism, equitable media representation, or reparations. The moderate quality of Lindelof's politics are echoed in the show, whose depictions seem to conflict around class-based oppression and the portrayal of police as both assailants and victims of violence.

In interviews Lindelof has given about the series, he cites Ta Nehisi Coates's "The Case for Reparations" as the main influence on his narrative. Lindelof considers *The Atlantic* article "very popular to read [...] especially if you [are] a white liberal" (Miller). Coates's work, like

both iterations of *Watchmen*, is told through a delineated timeline. Re-evaluating American history from the advent of slaves being brought to Virginia in 1619, Coates traces how White-supremacist ideas have morphed to perpetually oppress and plunder Black lives and property. “The Case for Reparations” follows the story of Clyde Ross from his birth in 1923 and his Mississippi boyhood, through his lifetime of success and hardship in the face of American racism. Born in the Jim Crow south, Ross witnessed his parents wrongfully stripped of possessions and property by authorities. Later in life, he found himself equally discriminated against in the face of redlining in Chicago. Ross has confronted lifelong trials of American racism, never finding protection from these ills under the law. “The Case for Reparations” also provided Lindelof’s first encounter with the Tulsa Massacre of 1921, an event the executive producer sees as “a superhero origin in some way [...] It felt like the destruction of a world,” (King). It was in the aftermath of these realizations found through “The Case for Reparations” that HBO approached Lindelof about making the series.

Damon Lindelof understands Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchmen* as a story “about a history that has been kind of [sic] hidden and camouflaged” and the “pain and trauma that is sort of [sic] buried in the American consciousness” (King). He took on HBO’s project to tell a story that would rewrite the history of America, inspired by struggles explored by Coates. With the help of Dave Gibbons, Lindelof guided his writer’s room, but Cord Jefferson took the lead as head writer. Unfortunately, interview requests with Jefferson have gone without response, and information on him beyond what shows he has been a part of is either nonexistent or buried too deep in the internet to recover readily. Lindelof notes in interviews about the experience of making this show that “of twelve writers, only four were white men.” While Moore makes a point to count out the number of White men who participated in crafting the narrative, he lends

no space for delving into the more nuanced identity of the other writers (Love). Regardless of Lindelof's anti-racist aims and aspirations, certain "difficult truths [he] faced in the writer's room" failed to make an impact deep enough to lend space in his interviews to the men and women who took the lead on narrative construction.

While one clearly should not credit Lindelof with all of the work that goes into creating a television show, his oeuvre can be considered a body of artistic work that progresses thematically from one to the next. Emily Woscoboinik claims that a distinct, "consistent interior meaning" exists throughout Lindelof's productions. The first consistent theme she identifies is the "idea of science versus faith, especially in the face of traumatic events." (Woscobonik, 13). In *Watchmen* there are a number of possible traumas the characters are reeling from. Is it Veidt's dropping of the inter-dimensional psychic squid on New York, known as the D.I.E. in the HBO series? Could the inciting trauma be the White (k)Night terrorist attack against police officers in Tulsa? Or is the driving pain located in more nuanced systemic and generational traumas that stem from the fallout of the Transatlantic Slave Trade? The D.I.E. serves as uncanny evidence of life forms from outer space, and therefore fulfills the second interior theme of Lindelof's works: a mystical element (Woscoboinik, 14). In *Lost*, certain storylines find resolution while other storylines are left open ended. In HBO's *Watchmen*, the final frame cuts seconds short of absolute certainty. Lindelof's endings never come to a full conclusion. Together, these characteristics seem to indicate a particularly "Lindelofian" quality that penetrates his works.

Watchmen's thematic shift from concerns around authoritarian potential in superpower governments to a more specific investigation of American history may seem out of line from the original narrative but become less so when considering Moore's interview with Raphael Sasaki. If Moore considers comic heroes as representations of "white supremacist dreams of a master

race” this shift seems less out of the blue (Sasaki). Like Alan Moore, Lindelof’s goal is to elevate public conception of popular artistic mediums to that of high-concept art with revolutionary potential to educate the masses through entertainment. Like Du Bois, he seems certain that education is the first step to reconciliation. Regardless, questions about how and when repressed traumas are appropriated into our collective cultural memories, and whether or not Lindelof’s *Watchmen* is as successful in its aims as Moore’s original comics persist.

HBO’s *Watchmen* Introduction

“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice” opens with a silent film that inverts the frontier myth and sets out the intentions of the series. Thus begins the series’ historical revisionism. The film is followed by a historical re-enactment of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre, portraying the violence and destruction White citizens and the Ku Klux Klan brought down around the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, also known as Black Wall Street. *Watchmen* then lurches forward to 2019 to follow police detective Angela Abar⁹ (alias: Sister Night) as she investigates the murder of her friend, Police Chief Judd Crawford.¹⁰ Unbeknownst to her, a White supremacist organization aims to start a race war in Tulsa. These domestic terrorists named themselves the Seventh Kalvary (7K), after General Custer, and appropriate the masks, ideology, and conspiracy theories of Rorschach. The narrative takes place in the midst of conspiratorial circumstances. The 7K see law enforcement as complicit in the issue of reparations to the descendants of the 1921 Massacre and slaughtered the entire Tulsa PD three years prior to the action of the series— that is, the entire Tulsa PD apart from Angela Abar, her

⁹ Played in the series by Regina King

¹⁰ Played in the series by Don Johnson

husband Cal,¹¹ and Senior Detective Judd Crawford. In the wake of the attack, Senator Joe Keene Jr.¹² passes an emergency bill to protect police officers through face coverings to conceal police identities. As Abar tries to solve the mystery around Judd's death, she finds herself stuck between two different plots to kidnap Doctor Manhattan (alias: Cal Abar). Manhattan has been spending his time on Earth disguised in a Black body and conspiring to give Will Reeves¹³ (alias: Hooded Justice) the justice he always deserved. Ultimately the show uncovers a conspiracy of American racial violence and oppression which pervades every facet of life in the United States, from media representations and narratives to law enforcement and politics. In contrast to the original *Watchmen* comics, the whodunit is effectively solved in episode one, when Reeves tells Angela about the skeletons in Crawford's closet, setting her out on a mission to understand our collective history.

Alan Moore's approach is to retell stock hero narratives based on "information that is buried in history" (Sasaki, 114). By reevaluating commonplace narratives, HBO's *Watchmen* utilizes revisionism to unveil the insidious and pervasive nature of White supremacy in politics and law enforcement through Senator Keene Jr. and Police Chief Judd Crawford. The series also rewrites the genesis of masked vigilantes through the legacies of Oscar Micheaux and Bass Reeves, two real-life heroes in American history. It is from these converging legacies that Hooded Justice is born. Using the revisionist methods of Black intellectuals, HBO's *Watchmen* attempts to vindicate vigilante heroes by taking the legacy away from the Crawfords and Keenes and re-imagining its genesis with Will Reeves.

¹¹ Played in the series by Yahya Abdul-Mateen II

¹² Played in the series by James Wolk

¹³ Played in the series by Louis Gossett Jr.

White Hats and White Hoods— Crawford, Keene, and KKK

“There’s plenty of good reasons for a man to hide a Klan robe in his closet, I just can’t think of any,” (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*). Senator Joe Keene Jr. and Judd Crawford directly implicate the history of the American pulp hero in HBO’s *Watchmen*. The Police Chief and the Senator are both draped in cowboy iconography. An affiliation with Cyclops, the 7K’s parent organization which Laurie Blake considers to be “at least kissing cousins” with the Klan, is also common among the two men (*Peteypedia*, Contents:// File 6, MEMO: What Has One Eye and Loves Evil Plans?). Cyclops is a direct reference to the KKK, as groups under that name have operated throughout the twentieth century in the name of White supremacy (Chalmers, 355). Through these characters, *Watchmen* unveils a vast and insidious conspiracy against Black Americans that undermines the operations of law enforcement, conservative media, and politics.

Crawford embodies White supremacy that runs through American law enforcement and the white hat cowboy hero. His cowboy persona comes full circle with a successful stint in the rodeo circuit (*Peteypedia*, Contents:// File 2, CLIPPING: “Tulsa Police Chief Feared Slain”). These traits are a callback to the roots of the American pulp hero, and his sinister motives make clear the racist undertones of these characters. Senator Joe Keene Jr., or “Senator Giddy-up” as he’s referred to on a conservative radio talk show (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice,” *Watchmen*), is a dynasty politician. Keene aims to reclaim White supremacist political control over a country that has swung too far from its roots toward an apologist and inclusive future. Where Crawford is a symbol of the racial oppressions and violence at the core of law enforcement, Keene embodies the way White supremacists cast themselves as the rightful leaders of our country and our world. When strips down in the final episode to assume the powers of Doctor Manhattan, he starts with his cowboy boots, and yells “Yee-Haw! Let’s get

blue!” (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*). Both Crawford and Keene embody the underlying racism of American politics and law enforcement. The slow revelation of their motives demonstrates how White supremacy has continued to hide in plain sight, masquerading behind various conservative and “law and order” agendas.

Judd Crawford’s presence in the show is short lived, but his white Stetson makes a lasting impression. Despite his relationship with the Abar family, Judd was leader of Tulsa’s faction of Cyclops. The Sheriff seems a kind, progressive, and reasonable man, yet his secret identity is not of a masked vigilante, but a White supremacist. Unfortunately, “men who end up hanging from trees with secret compartments in their closets tend to think of themselves as good guys” (“She Was Killed by Space Junk,” *Watchmen*). Crawford infiltrated the Tulsa police department after the passing of the Victims of Racial Violence Act in 2004 in order to help restore racial balance in his hometown (*Peteypedia*, Contents:// File 2, LEGAL: The Road to Reparations). This retaliation reflects real-life outrage and pushback in response to progressive legislation calling for forced equity in America.

As evidenced in the *Peteypedia* web database¹⁴ file titled “Four Letters” the roots of White supremacy run as deep in the Crawford family as does the legacy of law enforcement. Addressed to Crawford’s father in 1955, the letter makes the incestuous nature of White supremacy in politics and law enforcement clear. The file crops up in the reference materials for “Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship,” an episode by the same name of the painting seen in Crawford’s home. According to the “Four Letters,” the painting was gifted by the late Senator

¹⁴ *Peteypedia* is a web database compiled by fictional FBI Agent Dale Petey that serves as a referential resource for the events that occur within the series. The database exists in the diegesis of the series and is accessible at www.hbo.com/peteypedia. There is a File corresponding to each episode full of supplemental material, not unlike the materials at the end of each comic issue of Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchmen* comics.

John Keene to Dale Dixon Crawford, along with a note detailing his duty to uphold White supremacist rule. Words like “legacy” and “custody” are used with “sober deliberateness,” as these gifts are a “totem of responsibility [that is] inherited” (*Peteypedia*, Contents:// File 3, EVIDENCE: Four Letters). The painting’s presence in the Crawford home reiterates Judd’s place as villainous protector of White supremacy within the Tulsa PD.

The “Four Letters” file creates a firm link between the lawmen of the Crawford family and the political Keene dynasty. Once the conspiracy of White supremacy is unearthed, the nature of Judd’s return to Tulsa and his rise to police chief is revealed to be a ploy. Crawford tactfully carries out his duty “to never betray [his] birthright” (*Peteypedia*, Contents://File 3, EVIDENCE: Four Letters). His motives are so well concealed behind his suave, well-dressed persona, they go unrealized by members of the police force and Tulsa community. Swift retaliations against the 7K painted Crawford as an enemy of the organization, his racism transformed not only to appease, but to deceive the public. This is not unlike the stratagem of David Duke, who rebranded the Klan in order to attract more middle-class conservatives to the organization during their violent reign in the 1970’s (Chambliss, 422). Just as the Klan rebranded through time, so have other forms of Neo-Nazism and American White supremacy. While the 7K seemed to be extinguished, they were simply “hibernating” (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice,” *Watchmen*); in other words, they were standing down and standing by.

If Judd Crawford embodies the racism of the cowboy hero and law enforcement, then Senator Joe Keene Jr. represents those who craft political policy to further encode White supremacy into the American legislative system. In 1977, Keene Sr. passed the Keene Act to outlaw masked vigilantism. This fictional bill reflects real world anti-masking laws that ushered White supremacists onto police forces across the country in order for them to sustain law and

order favorable to White citizens (Chalmers, 135). In 2017, Senator Joe Keene Jr. orchestrated a terrorist attack to “start a little culture war” between the 7K and police with a plan to “control both sides of it, [so that Keene] can come riding up on a white horse into the White House. (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*). The White (k)Night created a state of exception which allowed Keene Jr. to pass his own emergency amendment to “get cops in masks” and increase tension between law enforcement and White supremacist terrorists (ibid). Like Crawford, Keene Jr. distances himself from the organization of which he is a part of by orchestrating a false kidnapping operation. During the attempt, a member of the 7K declares Keene Jr. a “race traitor” who has “declared open war against the Seventh Kalvary” (“She Was Killed by Space Junk,” *Watchmen*). As convincing as these displays may be, this rising presidential candidate was born into a legacy of White supremacy, expected to maintain the stronghold of American culture.

When Senator Joe Keene Jr. takes office, Veidt’s conspiracy is revealed to him and, subsequently, the upper ranks of Cyclops. In light of this revelation, the organization becomes determined to serve retribution to the “black filth,” liberals, “whores,” and “race traitors” who have subjected them (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice,” *Watchmen*). The 7K speech echoes the diction of *Watchmen* comics narrator, Rorschach. During their White (k)Night retaliation against reparations, they stumbled on another secret. Reflecting the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, Keene Jr. sees Doctor Manhattan as “delivered unto us right there in Oklahoma” (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*). Keene Jr. sets his sights on capturing Doctor Manhattan to rewrite reality in a way that serves Cyclops’s racist agenda and become “the most powerful man alive” (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*). Finally, the group has a real opportunity to “take some power back”; in their view, “the scales have tipped way too far, and it is extremely difficult to be a White man in America right now” (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*). These

ideas of reverse racism in mind, Keene resolves to “try being a blue [man] instead” (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*). His villain speech echoes rhetoric spouted across conservative American media. One does not need to venture to alt-right outlets to find these lines of thought. An hour with one of news media’s most popular talking heads, Tucker Carlson, will offer much of the same condemnations of our culture that “made us say sorry over and over again... for the alleged sins of those who died decades before we were born, sorry for the color of our skin” (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*). It begs the question whether these figures are even “trying to disguise [their] voice” (“See How They Fly,” *Watchmen*) or if the American public is too far indoctrinated to notice the undercurrent of White supremacist ideology trickling out of their televisions.

Racial divide looms heavy in *Watchmen*; not because of our particular cultural moment, or a growing recognition of the past, but because this is the patrimony of all Americans. Crawford and Keene represent the history and legacy of White colonizer heroes in pulp fictions preceding the superhero. As the political landscape moves toward seemingly progressive politics, these characters highlight fixtures of racism in the highest levels of our government and law enforcement. While the 7K may have been in on a liberal conspiracy, the QAnons of the real world seem to lack the understanding that in America, the only true conspiracy is the perversity of White supremacy. The continued repression of American history makes each of us complicit in the perpetuation of racist ideas and policies. Our society inherits this White supremacy as it trickles down from generation to generation, constantly adapting it to fit the changing social landscape. In the same way, racial oppression has been codified and camouflaged in American pulp hero stories.

Oscar Micheaux v. D.W. Griffith

HBO's pilot episode opens with a silent film in black and white. *Trust In The Law!* is a fictitious film directed by director Oscar Micheaux (*Peteypedia*, Contents:// File 1, RESEARCH: "Trust in the Law"). Micheaux, in actual fact, is the first African American filmmaker. His prolific filmic legacy challenged the depiction of Black characters onscreen. His fictional film, *Trust In The Law!* premiered at the historical Williams Dreamland Theater, a Black owned business in Greenwood, only a week before the 1921 massacre. Particularly unnerved by Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation*, Micheaux's response was to establish his production company and launch a thirty-year filmmaking career. *Within our Gates*, one of Micheaux's forty-six films, served as a direct response to Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation* (Siomopolus, 111). *Within Our Gates* is an essential work of Black intellectual revisionism, completely subverting the themes of *The Birth of A Nation*.

Trust in the Law makes clear the heretical quality of the series from its first moments onscreen. The minute-long sequence frames the aim of the series by inverting classic cowboy iconography, condemning the white hat in favor of a black hood. According to HBO's *Peteypedia* web database, *Trust In the Law!* is considered recovered from history: "Once thought lost, this masterpiece of silent cinema returns to us in restored form" (*Peteypedia*, Contents:// File 1, RESEARCH: "Trust in the Law"). The man in Klan white is captured by a man with a black cloak and hood, the white hat sheriff revealed to be a cattle-thieving scoundrel. All the more surprising, however, is the identity of his captor. As townspeople spill out from the frontier chapel, the hooded man denounces the corrupt sheriff's right to enforce the law before revealing his identity: Bass Reeves, the Black Marshall of Oklahoma. The sequence introduces the audience to a real-life hero they have likely never met. A slow pan to the left reveals the sole

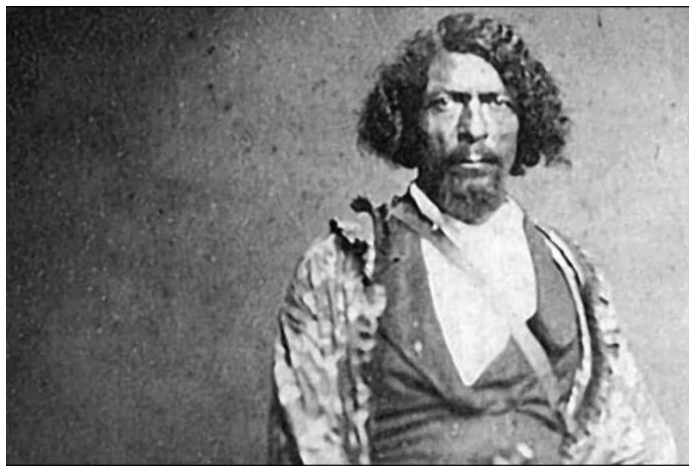
audience member, a young Black boy. When the townspeople want to lynch the corrupt sheriff, the boy echoes Reeves's line: "No mob justice today. TRUST IN THE LAW!" This film reworks the White supremacist undercurrent of popular narratives by reversing the racial roles of heroes and villains, just as Micheaux does in *Within Our Gates*.

In the way *Trust In The Law!* inverts the white hat/black hat dynamic of the frontier myth, *Within Our Gates* inverts the racist storyline of Griffith's film. Instead of a White woman's chastity coming under threat by a savage Black man, *Within our Gates* portrays the attempted rape of a Black woman by a White man. This racial reversal is the same as viewers see in the fictional *Trust In The Law!* but it is not the only tool Micheaux employed against Griffith. While Griffith's simple production called attention to White heroism and Black wickedness, Micheaux's film is more complex. Instead of favoring the palatable and lethargic good/bad binary, he "present[s] a larger social vision of many different, competing political positions within both white and African American society" (Siomopolus, 112). *Within Our Gates* is cited in HBO's Greenwood Center flyer as "a retort to *The Birth of a Nation* [...] that takes direct aim at Griffith's toxic opus at a time when [Griffith's] film was inspiring people to join the KKK and commit acts of racist violence" (*Peteypedia*, Contents:// File 1, RESEARCH: "Trust in the Law"). Micheaux's complex storytelling required spectators to be truly engaged in the content and experience, rather than easily anticipate the next predictable outcome as in Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation*.

While *Trust In The Law!* is a fictitious production, the legacy of Bass Reeves is not. The Black Marshall of Oklahoma is a singular, real-life embodiment of the cowboy hero stories. He was born into slavery in 1838, in Crawford county, Arkansas. Reeves grew up in Texas, and escaped his master during the Civil War. Years later, he was recruited as a US Deputy Marshall

by the famed Hanging Judge Parker (Maher, 115). The legacy of Bass Reeves has been appropriated into the frontier mythology that has influenced and permeated American pulp fictions. Myths about Bass Reeves were circulated to such a high degree that Daniel Maher argues his adventures served as the inspiration for many post-Civil War cowboy hero stories, even the Lone Ranger (124). Much of Bass Reeves's mythology is featured in the Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage's flyer for *Trust In the Law!* found on the *Peteypedia* web database.

Fig. 5 Bass Reeves (1838-1910) The flyer cites Reeves as “a historical do-



gooder” who “put down roots in the 75,000 square mile expanse of vast and lawless land called Indian Territory [... and] in the process, Reeves picked up their languages and customs and earned their respect and trust,” (*Peteypedia*,

Contents:// File 1, RESEARCH: “Trust in

the Law”). Bass Reeves allegedly apprehended over three thousand criminals during his thirty-two-year service, including his own son (Maher, 119). He was known for using alternate personas, disguises, masks, and hoods to protect his identity and intimidate his foes. He was referred to as “The Black Marshal” a super heroic code name, and in the Greenwood Center flyer, HBO claims that he is the original inspiration for masked vigilante heroes, not Griffith's Klansmen.

By relocating the inspiration for Hooded Justice, the first masked vigilante hero, with Bass Reeves instead of the KKK, HBO's *Watchmen* transforms the superhero form. As the short film depicts, it is the man masquerading as cowboy hero who subjects and penalizes the racial

other. How might the understanding of masked vigilantism change if the archetype's genesis is born not out of authoritarian oppression, but strategic self-protection against those authorities? Ultimately, Will Reeves hangs Judd Crawford in a heretical act against his heroic idol because he realizes that Black people in American cannot, in fact, trust in a law that was never meant to protect them.

Hooded Justice— An American Hero Story

Hooded Justice's origin story is one of violence and destruction particular to American culture. In the streets outside the Dreamland Theater, Black citizens lay dead as White citizens and the KKK loot, destroy, and burn prosperous Black owned businesses. In the wake of the massacre, only eighteen casualties were reported. A current internet search puts the total number of casualties at thirty-eight, but this stands disputed. Mass graves have been uncovered in and around the Greenwood area as recently as October 2020, as oral histories from survivors help to locate burial sites. Once unearthed, coffins stacked atop each other are revealed, pushing the death toll closer to three hundred rather than thirty-eight (Brown). In reality, most Americans were ignorant to the history of the Tulsa Massacre of 1921 until the re-enactment in *Watchmen's* pilot. This entry point, which "directly calls out American historians" (King, personal interview), serves as a major piece of revisionism in the series and brings the violence against Black Wall Street into the wider American cultural consciousness. While the events that transpired are appalling enough, equally so is the coverup and lack of repercussions from local, state, or national government nearly one hundred years later.

The historical reenactment serves as a most formative piece of Hooded Justice's origin story. As Lindelof says, "the Tulsa Massacre, even though it was built on this incredible, horrible

taking of treasure and destruction of an African American utopia [...] felt like a superhero origin in some way. It felt like Krypton [...] It felt like the destruction of a world” (King, Noel). The trauma of 1921’s Tulsa Massacre will haunt Will Reeves for the rest of his life, just as the destruction of Krypton alters the course of Superman’s.¹⁵ Both characters’ parents sacrifice themselves in attempts to send their child far away from the destruction of their home, hopefully to find a better life. The little boy watches Greenwood burn, orphaned and alone, left to create his identity. When he chooses the name Will Reeves, he accepts the complexity of his hero’s legacy. William S. Reeves was the name of Bass’s master, and under his son, Col. George Reeves, Bass was forced to fight for the Confederacy before his escape (Augustyn). In choosing his name, Will Reeves acknowledges his patrimony and attempts to carry his hero’s mission of trust in the law, accepting the truth without trimming the uglier edges.

Reeves’s mission to emulate his hero takes him to New York, where he enlists in the police department and faces the brutal discrimination at the hands of his fellow officers on the force. Unbeknownst to Reeves, his brothers in blue put on a different uniform by night. Reeves brings in a perp who is quickly intercepted by a White officer with a quick flash of a hand signal to the booking agent. Later that night, the same officer proves the incestuous nature between Klannish violence and American law enforcement. A car full of off duty policemen pulls up, and when Reeves refuses a ride, he experiences a flashback to the violence of Tulsa. The officers abduct and lynch Reeves, cutting him down in the final moments of consciousness with a warning to keep his “Black nose out of White folks’ business,” (“This Extraordinary Being,” *Watchmen*). In this moment Reeves’s eyes open to the untrustworthy, White supremacist reality

¹⁵ To solidify the bond between the two characters, Reeves is later seen flipping through an edition of *Action Comics #1*, where Superman made his debut (“This Extraordinary Being,” *Watchmen*)

of law and order in America, which protects and serves only a particular group, subjecting the others.

The violence of this attack is the final piece of Hooded Justice's origin story. Walking home in a rage, noose around his neck, hood in his roped hands, Reeves hears a scream. Tossing the hood back over his face, he viciously beats the muggers to save a couple who look eerily like Bruce Wayne's parents. This is the genesis of Hooded Justice, because for the first time, justice against evil is attainable. Reeves paints his eyes under the hood in order to pass as a White man, because "a Black man in a mask is scary" ("This Extraordinary Being," *Watchmen*). As Hooded Justice, Reeves pursues his investigation into Cyclops which was impossible to do inside of the police force. The conspiracy he uncovers connects the NYPD to Cyclops. These discoveries give Reeves the opportunity to seek vengeance for the death of his parents and destruction of his home at the hands of White supremacists.

Reeves's hero legacy is encroached upon by Nelson Gardner (alias: Capitan Metropolis) of the Minutemen organization. This crime fighting group of costumed adventurers was inspired by Hooded Justice's acts of vigilantism and is the focus of in-world television series *American Hero Story: Minutemen*. Gardner insinuates a mutual benefit is to be had between Reeves and the budding organization, as the presence of Hooded Justice would validate the group. In return, Gardner pledges the group's help in Hooded Justice's investigations. To Reeves and his growing folder of newspaper clippings highlighting US Nazism and violence toward minorities, the prospect seems to have untold value. In light of contemporary 1938 race relations, Gardner asks Reeves to maintain the secrecy of his identity, as some Minutemen are "not so progressive about these things" ("This Extraordinary Being," *Watchmen*). The deal proves to be a lemon. Reeves is never allowed to present his case against Cyclops to the media. Instead, at a press conference, the

campaign against the villain known as Moloch is announced, sponsored by National Bank. This diversion suggests the role of law enforcement and masked vigilantism is to maintain the capitalist status quo, rather than protect and serve the people. When Reeves infiltrates the Cyclops warehouse, Gardner refuses to bring the Minutemen to his aid, instead suggesting Reeves “solve Black unrest” on his own (“This Extraordinary Being,” *Watchmen*). Reeves has joined yet another organization that promised to uplift him, when really, the end goal was appropriation of his credibility, identity, and legacy. The link between police and White supremacy is solidified when he storms the Cyclops warehouse, as officers in full uniform participate in schemes to keep Black Americans down.

Though rumors circulated about the identity and disappearance of Hooded Justice, the presence of new heroes led his legacy to fade into the background, forgotten by history. Reeves works at a movie theater and shows films that represent, celebrate, and uplift Black citizens of Harlem, complete with regular showings of *Trust In The Law!* to ensure these stories stay alive (*Peteypedia*, Contents:// File 6, MEMO: The Will of Nelson Gardner). In 2009, when Doctor Manhattan wants to form an alliance, Reeves finally gets an opportunity for retribution. With the mesmerism technology he found in the warehouse, Reeves gives Cyclops leader Sheriff Judd Crawford a taste of his own medicine. In the end, Hooded Justice opts for the tactics of the mob as to eradicate White supremacy, as he left Judd Crawford hanging from a tree.

The influence and application of revisionist histories runs through the entirety of HBO’s *Watchmen*. From the short film opening the series, to the historical re-enactment that graphically depicts violence at the hand of domestic terrorists, the fictional hero legacy of Will Reeves that has been distorted by American media, and the issue of reparations to those impacted by acts of violence, *Watchmen* uncovers the White supremacy that runs through American culture and tests

out possible solutions. The show rejects the notion that Americans have no responsibility to our patrimony. While the anti-racist ideology in Will Reeves's story would suggest Americans have a responsibility to learn more complete accounts of the past in order to shape a better future, Crawford and Keene would argue that Americans have a responsibility to uphold the White supremacist foundations upon which the country was built. Unfortunately, larger forces like global capitalism and media representation are also at work, further subjecting and exploiting the status-quo, feeding off of generational trauma and civil unrest.

Coming to Grips— Sister Knight

The audience learns of Will Reeves's legacy through the eyes of his granddaughter, Detective Angela Abar, after she consumes an entire bottle of his pharmaceutically codified memories called Nostalgia.¹⁶ Reeves was concerned if he told Angela everything himself, her "head would explode," so instead he attempts to give it to her "in pieces" ("Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship," *Watchmen*). Abar's childhood is not unlike her grandfather's. She is orphaned by a terrorist attack at a young age, she looks to a film star and the Vietnam Police force as inspiration, and her alias, Sister Night echoes the visual styling of Hooded Justice. In other ways, she is not like her grandfather; she paints her eyes behind the mask Black rather than bothering to pass as White. She was born in Saigon two years prior to it becoming a US State, an international identity, like Veidt. This identity creates tension around the death of her parents, who were targeted because of their role in America's occupation of Vietnam. For Abar, *Watchmen* involves a coming to terms with the ubiquitous nature of racism. The Victims of Racial Violence Act led her to move to Oklahoma and take advantage of material uplift through

¹⁶ See *Peteypedia* CONTENTS:// File 5, MEDIA: NOSTALGIA (2007).

reparations. Unfortunately, as Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning* illustrates, singular solutions to such multi-faceted issues are insufficient. Though her material circumstances have improved, Detective Abar still must cope with generational trauma of her family's past. Through that reconciliation, she realizes American White supremacy runs far deeper than a few radical wingnuts in Rorschach masks. Crawford's hidden Klan robe is a shock to Abar, but her fellow detectives are not so surprised. Unfortunately for the Abar family, the threats of venture capitalism and organized White supremacy are far more pressing than the secret identity of one "White man in Oklahoma" ("She Was Killed by Space Junk," *Watchmen*).

Both Lady Trieu and the 7K aim to capture Doctor Manhattan, to absorb his power. While the motivation of the 7K has been made clear, Trieu's aim is the same as many contemporary Neoliberals who champion diversity within American institutions without addressing the oppressive structure of those institutions. Her progenitor, Adrian Veidt, contends that "anyone who seeks to attain the power of a god must be prevented at all costs from attaining it" because he believes "that girl will not rest until she has us all prostrate before her, kissing her tiny blue feet," before adding that "it takes [a narcissist with a God complex] to know one" ("See How They Fly," *Watchmen*). Manhattan's eternal nature gave him insight into his end, and so he created a contingency plan to put all of his powers in the hands of Detective Abar. Manhattan leaves a final message to Angela with his accomplice, Will Reeves. The message is a popular utilitarian notion: "you can't make an omelet without breaking a couple of eggs." This final sentiment not only echoes the rationalizations Ozymandias provides for his attack on New York and the philosophy of utilitarianism which lays the groundwork for Lindelof's Neoliberal politics, but it also serves to remind Angela of the God egg Manhattan created for her. While she wrestles to reconcile generational racism, the viewer cannot know what happens once trauma is

resolved. The moment she takes measures into her own hands and consumes the God egg, the series cuts short. *Watchmen*'s viewers are left to draw their own conclusions about what may change in America now that Cyclops has been vaporized, the most powerful being in the Universe is destroyed, and the powers of God are put into the hands of a Black woman. *Watchmen* is not a speculative fiction as much as a call to action, to reconciliation and recognition of the insidious, persistent nature of America's foundational racism.

Watchmen's Case Against American Culture

HBO's *Watchmen*, while set in an alternate reality, is a premonitory critique of American culture. Following the re-enactment of Tulsa's 1921 Massacre, the audience encounters something familiar: a police shooting. Though this incident involves a Black officer and a White detainee, it is still the Black man who catches the bullets. The assailant is a member of the 7K, an organization akin to our Proud Boys or Q-Anons. The 7K appropriated their villainous iconography from Rorschach, the same character that Republican Senator Ted Cruz claimed to be one of his top five favorite superheroes. These groups are radicalized by the American government's efforts to repair the damage done by racial slavery and generations of race-based violence. Once the government attempts at equity, and extends its protections to Black citizens in good faith, White supremacists are prepared to turn against the law they claim to hold so dear. This inclination was made clear during the January 6th, 2021, Capitol Insurrection at the hands of White supremacist conspiracy theorists and militia groups, when flag-toting members of the Blue Lives Matter group beat a Capitol police officer nearly to death. White supremacist rhetoric circulates nightly on mainstream news media through talking heads like Tucker Carlson, who question whether White supremacy is even real, and echo Keene's concerns around reverse

racism. These sentiments expressed by Crawford and Keene are not only present in American media, but incredibly popular through programs like Carlson's. None of this should come as a surprise, as this rhetoric always has been present and popular through American history. HBO's *Watchmen* is materialist in the way that it re-evaluates the historical record, but it comes dangerously close to simply appropriating the struggles of Black Americans at the hands of our oppressive systems into the new, Neoliberal hegemony of US culture which the original comics rebelled against.

The end of *Watchmen* brings about a lot of questions. Why would Adrian Veidt, the Neoliberal White savior, be the character who saves the day, and how does this reflect the way this story is told under the supervision of Damon Lindelof? Why put an eternal being into a Black body, then destroy him? What would happen if powers of God are in the hands of a Black woman? Can the material solutions of Neoliberalism create effective solutions to problems created and perpetuated by Western imperialism and capitalism? Is it enough to eliminate economic strife for a few Black Americans for to disappear? Does putting Black heroes into a White-supremacist form advance the efforts of anti-racism? Can the show's creators effectively pit Black heroes against the Klan to help society evolve into an egalitarian utopia? Is it possible to reconcile with the class oppression as well as racial oppression in America, or are we destined to focus either on one or the other? Lindelof leaves the answers to these questions "entirely in [the viewer's] hands" (Moore, 414).

In my view, the reality of racial oppression in America stems from the issue of double consciousness. While the evidence for racial subjection exists all around, it seems an impossible reality for many White Americans to grapple with. In every way, American culture has tried to diminish the reality of race-based bigotry, and it seems to have been effective. Though many

viewers were shocked by the re-enactment of the Tulsa Massacre, others knew the story quite well, and the likelihood of such awareness attaches to the shade of one's skin. Damon Lindelof wanted to make a series about the violent legacy of White supremacy, and it has infiltrated all facets of American life; but this conspiracy still comes a surprise to the White portion of the population. Is it enough to educate Americans about these issues? Ibram X Kendi would argue it is not, as W.E.B. Du Bois struggled to educate and vindicate the Black population throughout his existence. The answers may lie the viewer's hand, but was the series radical enough to call those viewers to action? It seems Lindelof, like Veidt, created his project to save humanity, but White saviors have not yet delivered the change America needs to bring equitable treatment for all citizens. While Black Americans in *Watchmen* are uplifted through direct reparations payments, representation seems to be the currency with which we repay Black Americans in reality.

It may be possible to educate Americans about the past through mass entertainment, but it is unclear whether that education will lead to legislative or social action. The summer of 2020 saw nationwide protests at the outrage of racial violence. The crimes that caused this outrage have not all seen justice served, but the vocal outrage is now much quieter. While representation certainly matters, it does not afford Black Americans protection under or from the law. W.E.B. Du Bois' campaign to educate Americans on the inaccuracy of racial ideas proves that it is irresponsible to simply leave the information in the audience's hands. While proof of imbalances exist all around, Americans are conditioned to see things through a particular lens at home, on tv, and in school. As Regina King reflected, omissions and distortions of the American historical record are "choices," and change will not come until different choices are made. Unfortunately, if the current sociocultural climate is an indicator, the education solution suggested by the series seems to draw on materialism, but fall into idealism. This increase in Black representation in

media has not proved an effective means to shield minority Americans from violence at the hands of the American State, which affords them little protection under the law.

Fig 6 The final frame of HBO's Watchmen



Appendix A—An Interview with Regina King

KZ: Many people have been calling the series the “Black *Watchmen*”. Is this an oversimplification? How does the revisionism of the show play into its themes?

RK: I guess when you’re talking about revisionist history, especially how it applies to America and how things are left out or changed in the educating of America— in that context, I would say neither Black *Watchmen* nor Female *Watchmen* would be applicable. The themes touched on in *Watchmen* are a commentary that actually represents America, what America is, what America has become, what America has been— Black and female are American.

KZ: Your character’s name is Angela Abar, and her last name is an acronym for the “anti-bias, anti-racist” approach in education—

RK: Right, the last name is actually a tongue in cheek joke, it was originally going to be Angela Abraham, after Abraham Lincoln. It’s a bit of a subversion, if you will.

KZ: *Watchmen* also asks its audience to imagine what it could look like if we are able to unearth and confront the realities of forgotten pasts. A lot of the newspaper clippings and events are real historical events. Yet Lindelof’s response to the original comics’ idea that “Nothing ever ends” is that he doesn’t believe there is any beating white supremacy. This is an interesting stance to take while making the show that he did. I wonder where you stand on how further revision in popular culture can help us to create a better future?

RK: Yeah, I think it does in some ways. Art influences human thought and behavior so strongly. If I consider how a song makes me feel, especially a song that may have been unique, or that I heard during a particular time in my life, the lyric in that song can either be like a bomb or bring up emotions that I might have been feeling in that moment. Or the lyric could be a lyric that makes me consider a different perspective I may not have considered because I was in my

emotions about something. I do feel that art does play a really big part— art and time—in correcting what was revised.

KZ: I feel like most people weren't aware of Tulsa, and it is such a strong decision to have that be the opening. That sequence certainly did touch people and elicit a strong emotional response.

RK: Oh absolutely, that was the point. I think *Watchmen* was very unique, in that it was a piece with so many different genres, but the entry point is a reenactment of history. Usually when you are going to touch on topics like the Tulsa Massacre, stories like that are given to us with a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine to go down. Even if they set it up in a way where you don't see it coming and even if you don't know what the story is going to be, you still are easing into it. In *Watchmen*, there are several genres going on, but Damon didn't ease into it.

KZ: It seems that is a theme of Damon's works, he drops the viewers directly into trauma. In *Lost* and *The Leftovers*, you can see a similar structure.

RK: I would say that is just part of what makes Damon great, but also because the themes of *Watchmen* are so present, so ingrained in our country. I think it is pretty... I don't know, *ballsy*... for your entry point to so directly call out American historians.

KZ: Alan Moore sees superhero narratives as an example of the tendency to create a comforting majoritarian record of American history. I think Damon's entry point says to his audience: Look, we're not going to participate in a coddling version of history, we're going to look at the way things have really happened, even in very recent history.

RK: I actually never read the original comics, because Damon really wanted me not to since my character was not informed by one of the original characters, but I do know Alan Moore's style of writing totally just has so much to do with the writer Damon is today.

KZ: One last question: the American pulp hero has been informed by and derived from the Cowboy hero archetype, but Angela draws her inspiration from a blaxploitation film hero. I'm

curious if you think this differentiation between the colonizer cowboy hero and the celebratory blaxploitation hero is an important one to make.

RK: Right— yeah, thats something I wasn't aware of. I think it is interesting, and I think again that possibly... reflects a lot, a LOT of societal... I dont want to say *choices*... but... *choices* I have to say. I guess the best way to explain what thought came to my mind with you bringing this to my attention is that most people, when we dream, our dreams feel like they can possibly become true because we've seen someone that looks like us, that has a similar background to us, having achieved it before we have. When you look at when we have celebrated or talked about Black Americans that have made these tremendous accomplishments, TONS and tons, and tons, and tons of scientists and inventors and things like that, are left out. We don't know about them, so what we do know, what we do see is in cinema— which brings me back to one of the first questions you were asking. When it comes to art, to films, those were the films we're seeing with people in it that look like us— and of course we're going to gravitate toward those characters. Angela doesn't have another example of a strong woman, a black woman. The thing that is more interesting is she was thirsting for that nourishment—to nourish that thing inside that explains who you are. She hadn't even seen the film, I mean sure eventually, but as a little girl it was just this Black woman on the cover of a VHS, the strongest thing that looks like her that's not wearing a police uniform.

KZ: That admiration is confirmed when her grandmother tells her “You don't fuck with Sister Night”.

RK: Yes, that must have been so powerful when that is all she has. So, while that is fiction, you can apply it to Black children across the country throughout history not having a lot of images or being exposed to examples of their true greatness. During Black History Month, we talk about Dr King and Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks, and depending on what part of the country, you might talk about Marcus Garvey or you may talk about Dr. Charles Drew and that is it. There are so many more doctors and inventors of things we use even to this day, in this moment that we would not have had if a black inventor hadn't invented it. Even as we're speaking now, I know they exist, but I can't tell you the names off the top of my head, I'd have to go downstairs to the

books that have them, and even with google— if you don't know their names you cant google them.

So, there you have it; in the words of Regina King herself, revisionism is important in order to incorporate these legacies into the larger fabric of American history. While representation within the same oppressive system that may not eradicate the roots of that system, it does uplift those who lacked representation before.



Fig. 7 Regina King photographed by Gerano Molina for the Los Angeles Times

Appendix B: A Brief Analysis of Episode Titles

Episode One— “It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice”

The episode name is drawn from the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!* Judd Crawford and his wife attend an all-black production of the musical in the episode. The song is sung by the Curly, hero of the musical, and the character which Judd claims to have portrayed in his youth. The whole quote from the song is as follows: “ Pore Jud is daid, Pore Jud Fry is daid, All gather ‘round his cawfin now and cry, He looks asleep, It’s a shame that he won’t keep, But it’s summer and we’re running out of ice” (MacRae). The choice to name the episode this way foreshadows Judd’s death; and Judd’s claim to have played the hero, Curly, further proves the inversion of the American hero, as Judd Crawford is most certainly a villain.

Episode Two— “Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship”

A reference to the 1834 George Catlin painting of the same name. A counterfeit of the work is hanging in Judd Crawford’s family home, seen at his wake. The painting is the subject of *Peteypedia’s* Contents://File 3, EVIDENCE: Four Letters, and was counterfeited by George Catlin himself, an authentic replica. The painting depicts a Comanche battle strategy in what some argue to be an intrusive, appropriating rather than reverent depiction of indigenous people. In “Four Letters” it is made clear that the paintings is a token passed from generation to generation as a reminder of the duty to uphold White supremacy.

Episode Three— “She Was Killed by Space Junk”

This is the episode that Laurie Blake is introduced, and the title anticipates that introduction. The title is taken from a Devo song, Laurie mentions taking a liking to the band in the original comic series, and even asks her in home AI assistant to “play devo” before Senator Keene shows up unannounced. The title may be taken literally, as Laurie is very nearly squashed by Angela Abar’s car which falls from the sky in the episode’s close. On the other hand, considering her previous relationship to supposedly Mars-bound Doctor Manhattan, the title could be an allusion to her bitter feelings over that relationship. Ultimately, though, it seems that like the title of episode one, this title is premonitory. However, the predicted event does not

come at the end of this episode, but at the end of the series, when Veidt rains frozen squids down to kill Lady Trieu.

Episode Four— “If You Don’t Like My Story Write Your Own”

This episode’s title is a line from 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. The novel follows a Nigerian wrestling champion as his life is increasingly impacted by British imperialism and colonialism in the 19th century. Cal Abar can be seen reading the novel, which his wife decides to ruin for him. Outside of the implications the narrative has on HBO’s *Watchmen*, the title can tie into the series in other ways. The title could allude to Veidt who is orchestrating an elaborate escape plan from his prison planet, or to Abar, who is on the path to discovery about the various branches of her family tree.

Episode Five— “Little Fear of Lightning”

This episode title is from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea* by Jules Verne. The full quote reads, “If there were no thunder, men would have little fear of lightening.” In this episode, the audience learns the origin story of Looking Glass, the paranoid superhero who was in Hoboken when Veidt dropped his squid on 11/2. Over the course of the episode, Wade comes to find out that the squid was not an alien attack, but an orchestrated hoax put on by Veidt.

Episode Six – “This Extraordinary Being”

This title is drawn from the original *Watchmen* comic series, where a snippet of *Under the Hood* by Hollis Mason is featured. The passage covers the supermarket stick-up featured on the in-world television series *American Hero Story: Minutemen*, wherein the author details an account Hooded Justice, “this extraordinary being had crashed in through the window of the supermarket” (Moore, 40).

Episode Seven— “An Almost Religious Awe”

This is another draw from the original *Watchmen* comics, Issue #4, when Doctor Manhattan recalls his time during the Vietnam War. He explains, “The Vietcong are expected to surrender within the week. Often, they ask to surrender to me personally, their terror balanced by an almost religious awe” (Moore, 130).

Episode Eight – “A God Walks into Abar”

A reference to popular “A guy walks into a bar” jokes. The joke structure was used by Joy Williams in her work *Ninety-Nine Stories of God* which used it to explore different religions. Like the first episode, the title foreshadows as well. This time, the foreshadowing is of Doctor Manhattan’s relationship with Angela Abar.

Episode Nine – “See How They Fly”

A line from The Beatles 1967 song, “I am the Walrus”. The song, which is deemed nonsensical by some, structures some of its lyrics around police officers: “see how they run like pigs from a gun” “Mister City, policeman sitting, pretty little policemen in a row”. While at a base level, it is easy to draw these parallels between police and the song, but a different reading is more compelling to me. The series asks its American audience to stomach the realities of our country’s foundations and reconcile them. Before the end of the season, Angela the God egg that Doctor Manhattan made which would transfer his powers to whoever ate it. The symbol on Manhattan’s forehead resembles a monad, a symbol of the atom, of the oneness of the universe. Perhaps the lines about the policemen are relevant, but I would argue “I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together” is far more so.

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