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The Proverbial and Image Hangover: A Discussion between Comics Researchers

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I. Introduction

Recent popular scholarship has shown a particular interest in the comic book industry: rhetoric and semiotics scholars such as Janice Edwards and Carol Winkler have found it a rich area of study for visual ideographs, and scholars such as Nicki D. Philips and Staci Strobl have analysed its crime-telling tactics. However, debates by comics scholars like Albert Fu and Miriam Kent about the industry’s transformative efforts to incorporate diversity, particularly in the superhero genre, have become more common. Indie comics have always included diversity; indeed, some of the industry’s most celebrated indie works, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Sartrapi’s *Persepolis*, spotlighted minorities. However, the process of diversifying the superhero has become a formulaic hangover, which often starts out as a daring approach to a new issue but manifests as a recycling of old concepts that rely on clichés. This return of leftovers from a previous time is the comics industry’s hangover, and it is most clearly illustrated in the industry’s approach to diversification.

At this point, it is important to address the term “canon” with respect to the superhero genre, particularly insofar as the term has become a source of debate in current discussions on changes in superhero storylines. Normally, canon refers to the “official” story in a comic universe, and what is and is not canon is fiercely debated amongst fans. For starters, original characters are always considered canon, which provides a possible explanation for some fans’ aversions to these characters being killed off. However, as Albert S. Fu points out, “in comic books, ‘history’ is constantly being unwritten” (274). For example: “retcons,” which are stories created to facilitate dramatic plot shifts that are often presented as part of a “what if” scenario, are a fixture of the comics world. In relation to canon, retcons sometimes become so popular and enduring that they are eventually accepted as canon in their own right. They are often widely used to redraw lines, undo plot points, and, above all, offer different interpretations (Fu 274). In this respect, when considering the “official” characters of comic book superheroes, the comic term “legacy” (recently discussed by G. Willow Wilson) may be a suitable term (Cf. “So about that Whole Thing”).

Discussions about diversity in the superhero world have become louder over time, and
reached a fever pitch recently after Marvel’s vice president of sales, David Gabriel, singled out diversity and female characters as the reason for the company’s loss of sales (Shepherd n. p.). In this piece, I use Wilson’s term “legacy character” together with observations from a lengthy Tumblr post in which she responded to Gabriel’s comments and addressed some of the methods employed by the comics industry’s approach to diversity. In her post, she stressed the importance of “authenticity,” as opposed to “diversity,” when creating new characters that assume the superhero mantle, since authenticity suggests more focus on characters’ cultural makeup rather than token nods. Her post also critiqued the trope of killing off legacy characters as a flawed move because “it sets the character up for failure” (“So about that Whole Thing” n. p.). Wilson’s comments were in response to Gabriel’s statement that initiatives to include diversity in the superhero genre affected the industry’s sales negatively—specifically, Gabriel’s statement that “[w]hat we heard is that people didn’t want any more diversity ... I don’t know that that’s really true, but that’s what we saw in sales ... Any character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, anything that was not a core Marvel character, people were turning their noses up” (Cain n. p.). Wilson’s response about setting up diverse characters for failure was no doubt inspired by fans’ backlash to legacy characters, such as Spiderman’s canonically white Peter Parker, who have been killed off to facilitate replacements, such as Miles Morales, an Afro-Hispanic teenager. It is worth noting that the series that Wilson is best known for writing is the rebooted Ms. Marvel, which handled the legacy character’s role with delicacy. The new Ms. Marvel is the Pakistani-American self-described “Jersey Girl” Kamala Khan. Written by Wilson, who has converted to Islam, and co-created by a Pakistani-American, Sana Amanat, Ms. Marvel is currently one of Marvel’s top-selling superheroes. Notably, Carol Danvers, the first and only Ms. Marvel before Kamala, does not die when she passes on the mantle of Ms. Marvel to Kamala. The gesture is not only uplifting but also ceremonial, with Captain America present while Hindi music plays in the background (Wilson, “Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal”). Passing on the Ms. Marvel mantle is presented as the opposite of tragic insofar as it did not use a convenient death, but rather an upgrade, to propel the transition: Danvers takes on the role of Captain Marvel and moves on to star in a series very much like her previous one.

The trend towards including diverse characters in the superhero genre is a welcome change to the superhero archetype of the traditionally white, hyper-masculine, cisgender, male. However, the mad rush to create intersectional characters points to a troubling series of hangovers. For starters, many of these “diverse” characters have not been developed by diverse creative teams. There has not been a concerted effort in the comics industry to include greater diversity at the creative level by hiring more writers who are representative of the demographics included in current comic storylines, and so
many of the most controversial intersectional characters have been written by white cisgender males. Take, for instance, the latest *Ironman* reboot, which includes the African-American teenager Riri Williams, a gifted fifteen-year-old MIT student. Created by veteran comics writer Brian Michael Bendis, Williams was first introduced with a controversial cover that fans argued sexualised the fifteen-year-old character (Carissimo n. p.). Similarly, her new name, Ironheart, rankled others for its connection to a previous Japanese porn-parody of *Ironman* (Pulliam-Moore n. p.). However, most devastatingly, Riri Williams took on the mantle of Ironman after its canonised character, Tony Stark, was killed off—a move that was also heavily criticised by fans. Considering Gabriel’s remarks about diverse characters negatively affecting sales, it is possible that the new *Ironman* series’ sales were affected by fans reactions to Stark’s death. In this respect, the success of the new *Ms. Marvel* series prompts the question: is it possible that *Ironman* could have benefitted from not killing off Tony Stark?

Riri Williams’s debut has unfortunately—and unforgivably—been subject to racist and sexist backlash. Even fans who were eager to have a high-profile African-American female superhero expressed dismay that her creative team was all-white (Gaudette n. p.). As previously stated, many comic book creators are white, cisgender, heterosexual males and, while that should not and does not bar anyone from creating diverse characters, the industry’s executives have yet to acknowledge that creative teams with diverse representations have all created distinct characters that were well received by readers. The best example of this is the aforementioned new Ms. Marvel. Wilson herself has commented on the lack of diversity amongst comic creators (Gilly 9) and, in her Tumblr post, she may have stumbled onto the best remedy for moving out of the comics industry’s hungover approach to writing diverse characters. Comics readerships are growing more heterogeneous, and indie comics and webcomics are finding increasing success, so mainstream comics can no longer address the issue of diversity with soft passes if they intend to remain relevant in the coming years. At this stage, incorporating diversity—specifically by creating believable and complex characters—is a necessary means by which to attract and maintain readership, especially as prominent writers like Margaret Atwood and Ta-Nehisi Coates venture into comics and possibly bring their fan bases with them. With respect to Williams’ storyline, Bendis reinforces negative stereotypes associated with African-American communities by killing off her stepfather in a drive-by shooting and making her biological father conspicuously absent from her life—all without addressing how these absences shaped her identity. It is important to ask whether an African-American writer would have felt similarly compelled to write off two fathers in a character’s debut issue. This question is entwined with the need to question how authentic a character like Riri Williams is.

The creative team for Miles Morales (mentioned above as the character who has taken on the mantle of Spiderman following Peter Parker’s death) included Marvel’s editor-in-chief...
Axel Alonso, who has mixed Mexican and English heritage. However, it is worth noting that Bendis also wrote Miles Morales’ character, whom he used as a mouthpiece for his views on race relations. In one notable scene, the biracial Morales complains about being pegged as “The Black Spiderman” and sulks about his race defining him. Again, this raises the question: How authentic is this character to the experiences and perspectives of Afro-Hispanic people? Would it even occur to a minority writer to address biracialism by having a character sulk at the mention of being the first “Black Spiderman”? What is the point of introducing diverse characters who do not want their identities to be part of what defines them? In the absence of this recognition of the importance of identity, how are these characters engaging with what makes them diverse? Racialised people do not confront their races just once by paying lip service to their ethnic constructions and then ignoring them for the rest of their lives; rather, their ethnic makeup comes with cultural aspects, such as family dynamics, traditions, and social mores. Moreover, they are shaped by a sense of DuBoisian double-consciousness: an awareness of how they stand out from the majority white societies in which they live. When shaping identity for a racialised character, writers must avoid tokenising and instead must work to detail the ongoing encounters and negotiations that occur within the majority societies in which their characters live. In the debut issue of “Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal,” Kamala Khan struggles with her identity as the new Ms. Marvel who has no role models apart from her blonde predecessor, Carol Danvers. The issue is so pressing to her that, in her first few transformations, she becomes a blonde woman with white skin. It is not until she negotiates a third space (to use Homi K. Bhabha’s term from The Location of Culture) as an immigrant, Pakistani-American, Muslim superhero that she is able to come into her own, lose the blonde hair, and transform to her dark hair and skin again. In this sense, Kamala’s identity crisis is acknowledged, real, and resolved with a happy ending; it functions as a coming-of-age story that might resonate simultaneously with teenagers in a broad sense and minorities more specifically. Fans were happy with the outcome, and Kamala was praised as a success story. Furthermore, her debut in October, 2014, landed Marvel Comics with the #1 comic bestseller that month (“Top 100 Comics and Graphic Novels” n. p.).

All of this raises the question of whether it is necessary to introduce diverse characters into already-established comic book titles. Arguably, Kamala Khan is a convincing character who is fundamentally different from her predecessor and stands on her own. The reader is privy to her relationship with her loving but overbearing Pakistani family, her participation in cultural events like Mehendis (a South Asian pre-wedding ceremony), and her religion. As a result, she demonstrates authenticity through interactions with her community. But it is also worth noting that the character of Kamala Khan could have sustained the storyline of an entirely new superhero rather than continuing the storyline of Ms. Marvel. With this in mind, a possible way out of the murky haze of approaching diversity in comics is
through the creation of new superheroes rather than the shoe-horning of new alter egos into older, well-established superhero titles. There is no question that existing titles carry significantly more popularity and influence than new, unknown characters. However, there are ways to establish new characters in a mold that gives them star power and room to grow authentically—or, at the very least, represent diversity. Marvel has already done so with two Muslim X-Men characters: Sooraya Qadir as Dust in New X-Men, and Monet St. Croix, also known as M.

Dust is a highly orientalised character who lacks authenticity to an extreme. Her niqab seems to be the sum of all her parts, and her superpowers involve her ability to transform into lethal sand particles that flay her opponents to death. In Dust’s debut scene, she is unconscious and at the mercy of Wolverine, who thus functions as her White Saviour. Plot and character elements such as these are simply negative reinforcements of stereotypes about Muslims. Dust was originally created by Grant Morrison and Ethan van Scriver, who wrote her debut in “New X-Men #133.” She was later written by Christina Weir and Nunzio DeFelippis. Even though the character is ostensibly a full-practicing Muslim, there has never been a Muslim present in any creative team that has produced her. Thus, Dust’s Afghan culture has not been spotlighted in storylines that feature her, and her niqab merely adds an exotic and sensational visual element to her, rather than engaging in any true way with Islam and Muslims.

Monet St. Croix is more secular in her appearance, and her Muslim identity has been written with sensitivity after her “coming out” as a Muslim in “X-Men #23: The Burning World.” In this issue, which was written by Wilson, Monet is depicted as a “lapsed” Muslim who expresses her penchant for alcohol—which is forbidden in Islam. In a moment of crisis, Monet finds her faith renewed and recites an Islamic prayer to help herself find the courage to climb out of rubble that buried her (Wilson, “The Burning World”). Her renewal of faith and her revelation that she is a Muslim is told to the reader through a childhood memory of her parents squabbling over religion. In the memory, her caftan-clad Algerian mother teaches her an essential Islamic prayer, the Surah Fatiha, while her French father interrupts to discuss his disdain for religion (Wilson, “The Burning World”). This is a clear example of how diversity can be constructed in a character through their individualized development and reflection, as opposed to stereotypical representations that pay only lip service to complex identities. Monet’s childhood memory allows the issue to explore her biracialism by illustrating how her parents, who come from two very different cultures, quibble about religion. Her identity is not addressed through her own questions about whether and to what extent race defines her vis-à-vis white society, but rather is engaged as an inevitable part of her identity and family history. It is also important to note the subtlety and detail that Wilson uses to communicate Monet’s biracialism; indeed, it serves in stark contrast to Morales’ acknowledgement of his biracialism when he hears himself referred to as “[t]he first Black
Spiderman” on TV and complains about the distinction. Morales’ conversation and ensuing scenes are token because they make no effort to meaningfully engage how and why biracialism is relevant (or, per Morales’ view, irrelevant) to his identity. The mere fact that he has questioned its significance and not engaged the reader into his experiences, memories, and cultural milieu contributes to his character’s lack of depth. From this, it is clear that Morales is there to look like a diverse inclusion in the Spiderman world without really exploring what diversity looks like for characters. In this sense, when diversity holds no meaning for a character’s construction, perhaps Spiderman would have been better off staying as white Peter Parker.

A common method of white, cisgender, heterosexual male writers’ diversification approaches has been to confront racial conflict head-on as opposed to in nuanced and subtle ways, like Wilson does through Kamala Khan’s and Monet St. Croix’s stories. Bendis’ use of racial conflict and “othering” with Morales’s forced declaration that he wanted to be “The Spiderman” as opposed to “The First Black Spiderman” is an example of this approach. However, writers have featured racial conflict and “othering” in ways that have been more convincing, despite suffering from their own unique pitfalls. Geoff Johns, a writer for DC comics (now DC’s Chief Operating Officer), was the writer for the Muslim Green Lantern, Simon Baz. Johns’ writing shows shortcomings related to his knowledge of both Islam and Lebanese culture (Baz is Lebanese-American). For example: one of the first scenes in Baz’s story features mosque-attendees wiping off a sign on their defiled mosque that read “You idol worship” (Johns “The Green Lantern”). Islam is an Abrahamic faith that adheres to a strict interpretation of monotheism, much like Judaism, and eschews pictures and idols in their holy places of worship. In addition, an official interrogating Baz assumes his name is common in Lebanon, even though it is neither an Arabic nor Muslim name. However, despite these shortcomings and Baz’s generally offensive characterization (e.g., Simon is a low-level car thief who has the unfortunate luck of unknowingly stealing a van that contains a bomb), Johns creates a story that criticises Muslim-hate and illustrates the problems Muslims—particularly Muslim men—face in the U.S. in a post-9/11 climate. His story highlights the concerted efforts of the state to surveil Muslims, the victimisation of Muslims through pre-emptive security measures, and the torture that Muslims are vulnerable to in off-shore penal colonies. It also showcases the systematic forms of discrimination Muslims face. These aspects of Johns’ story suggest that his effort is, overall, well-intentioned. While not as emotive as Wilson’s work with Ms. Marvel, Johns paints a sympathetic portrait of an outsider who is bullied primarily for his cultural and religious background, which is evident in early scenes of him defending his hijabi sister from being attacked. Baz is misunderstood from the start by law enforcement officials as well as his own colleagues in the Justice League. After he is chased and interrogated for being a suspected terrorist, he is anointed with Green Lantern powers only to find
he must deal with both law enforcement hunting him and a suspicious Justice League fighting him. This effectively communicates the complexity of American identity and the othering that minority groups have faced at times in U.S. history. While the emphasis is on American identity as opposed to Muslim identity, and Baz is relegated to the position of “alternative” Green Lantern while the other Green Lanterns are suspended in an intergalactic prison, the story offers a powerful tale of an outsider. It illustrates the double-standard required of a member of a hated group in society who must overcompensate to prove his or her loyalty. In this instance, the use of a Muslim character serves to do more than just “exotify” a character or comic world for shock value, as is the case with Dust in the X-Men universe. Unlike some of Bendis’ plot choices, Johns’ piece engages with race and religion to communicate a sense of outrage over the character’s treatment by society. Such an engagement is exemplary of an original approach to superhero diversification because it takes up issues facing a racialised character’s community in ways that are relatable to all readers.

In what follows, I interview comics researcher and writer Ryan Clement on current diversity trends in the comics industry. Clement weighs in on new superheroes like Riri Williams, the comic book canon, and Wilson’s Tumblr post addressing diversity in the comics industry.

II. Interview with Ryan Clement*

Safiyya Hosein (SH): Brian Michael Bendis is a veteran of comics writing and is known for writing popular characters. This article discusses diversified superheroes like his character Miles Morales (Spiderman) and Riri Williams (Ironheart). What are your thoughts on these characters? And what are your thoughts specifically on killing off legacy characters like Peter Parker and Tony Stark?

Ryan Clement (RC): Unfortunately, I have not yet had a chance to read Bendis’ Ironman or Spiderman, so I can’t really comment on his personal skills as a writer. That said, I do know that Marvel has been trying to diversify its ranks as of late with a degree of mixed results. David Gabriel, Marvel’s VP of sales, recently took a lot of heat for blaming Marvel’s ongoing sales slump on the diversity approach, although some would argue he was simply exasperated that Marvel’s efforts to be more diverse weren’t as rewarding [as expected]. I would argue there are many contributing factors to this, such as: too many titles, higher costs, an over-saturation of “event” comics and spin-off titles, and stronger competition, etc., that have contributed to Marvel’s decline. Marvel did get a lot of good press for its recent foray into diversity. For example, the new Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, was well-received critically. That said, Khan didn’t really replace Carol Danvers—Danvers in fact got a promotion of sorts to Captain Marvel—so a long-time reader of Ms. Marvel was less likely to be insulted by the replacement of their beloved character. Furthermore, while Khan borrowed the Ms. Marvel title, her powers and character were distinct
from Danvers, and she was much stronger as an original character. Riri Williams has basically the same powers and abilities as Ironman, although she’s only fifteen, while her comic is still titled *Ironman*—which seems almost pejorative towards the woman in the suit—despite her going by the name Ironheart. To make matters worse, Tony Stark—spoiler alert—is killed at the end of “Civil War II” soon after Williams’ debut, meaning that Williams is, for better or worse (really worse), positioned as his replacement. That means that Williams is not only up against the skepticism about another token minority character inserted into a beloved franchise, but her emergence precipitates the death of what is now arguably Marvel’s most popular character. That other most popular Marvel character—whose face was associated with the logo until they replaced it with Ironman—is, of course, Spiderman. There have been other Spidermans over the years, but Peter Parker is still the original and most well-known. *Spiderman* after all was a ground-breaking comic in the 1960s that really put Marvel on the map, and he’s been such a popular character for so long. He was also the first successful teenage superhero who wasn’t someone’s sidekick, and the obvious forerunner for characters like Kamala Khan. The problem though is that too many characters running around at the same time gets confusing for readers who haven’t been following along and then you end up with titles competing with each other. Like with Stark and Williams, killing off Parker to allow for Morales can make for dramatic storytelling, but it’s very short-sighted. Associating the death of a beloved character with the seemingly forced arrival of a diverse character sets that character up for failure. While shocking fans can certainly sell comics in the short term, in the long term it’s liable to turn them off the franchise for good. It makes me think Marvel’s recent woes have more to do with making terrible decisions with their characters than with comics readers being opposed to diversity. Marvel has a long history of success with diverse characters in the past—*Black Panther* and *Luke Cage* spring to mind—but it does a much better job with them when the characters are original, well-written by someone who understands the culture in question, and are given the chance to succeed on their own and not at the expense of a decades-long icon. Unfortunately, Marvel seems more concerned with pulling the rug out from under readers than with telling compelling stories, which suggests the House of Ideas may have in fact run out of them.

SH: There is a debate about canon in the superhero world. One argument is that canon isn’t fixed but rather fluid, due in large part to the use of retconning. Do you follow any suggestions or guidelines that you think would be helpful for readers and analysts when approaching superheroes and canon?

RC: “Canon” is always a tricky question and, as someone who’s doing a Ph.D. in English literature, I’m always very hesitant to throw a word like “canon” around. There’s really two uses of the word—one meaning all the major works in a genre and the other meaning whereby stories
are a part of the larger shared universe. In English lit of course, “canon”—in the first sense—used to be all the rage, until it became apparent that certain texts which were being recognized as canon—i.e., great masterpieces that everyone fancies becoming acquainted with—were being written only by certain groups of people to the exclusion of others. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t read Shakespeare, Milton, and Dickens, but we need to recognise that some voices have an easier shot at getting heard than others. When we’re talking comics—or more specifically superhero comics—certainly there are key works in the genre which I think anyone interested in the genre should read, particularly ones that represented pivotal shifts in how comics were made. I’m a believer in a fluid canon rather than a fixed one because you must allow room for a genre to evolve over time—gaining new entries as new revolutions take place, losing obsolete ones as they become irrelevant. In terms of the second sense of the word, the shared universe canon, comics has had a long field day with this over the past few decades. But I worry that over-indulgence has worn away the novelty of the shared universe and has in some cases handicapped stories from being strong on their own. If Batman’s spending all his time with the Justice League, for example, what the hell’s happening in Gotham, the city he swore to protect? Don’t get me wrong, shared universes can be a beautiful thing, but they really work best when used sparingly and not in the face of logic. In terms of tips for readers or analysts approaching this second meaning of “canon,” I would suggest focusing on individual characters and their arcs before trying to unravel the myriad plot twists of major crossover events.

SH: Finally, this article has dealt heavily with the approaches to diversification that the comics world has taken lately, particularly with the superhero genre, and has asserted that some of these approaches have been formulaic—resulting in a hangover-effect in the industry. G. Willow Wilson declared recently in a Tumblr post that emphasis should be placed on authenticity rather than diversity. What are your thoughts on developing an authentic approach to superhero characterisation rather than a diversified approach?

RC: Certainly, comics have a long history of taking formulaic approaches to diversity, and I wouldn’t say it’s only a recent issue, although it may have taken on more importance recently as more and more diverse cultures are reading the same comics, and comics are getting less isolated from other media forms. My question is: Must a diversified approach be inauthentic? Any decent writer knows that no matter what character you write—be they a white, cisgender female European; a brown, transgender male Peruvian; or a purple, multi-gender alien Skrull—must be true to the culture they come from, or your character becomes a caricature. I don’t buy for a minute that we, as readers, must have the same identification as our favourite characters to love them—people love Chewbacca for example, yet so few of us are wookies—but it can help to see characters like yourself in the comic panels. That said, there is no reason why a well-written character of any
race, gender, religion, etc., shouldn’t be able to find an audience. I think the big issue right now is market saturation. There are so many superhero comics right now that it becomes difficult to do anything new, particularly if your characters are tied up in a decades-long shared universe that has already seen and moved past infinitely more crises than you can count. In fact, I often find the most compelling comics writing comes from writers who can flourish in their own universes without worrying about what external crisis is about to steamroll over their main plotline. Saga, while not a superhero comic, is still one of the hottest comics out there. It features a diverse cast (technically, they’re all aliens) but they physically resemble diverse peoples here on Earth—and a complex universe. But everything in the universe serves the main thread of one storyline told through one title. The superhero genre may feel overdone, but it’s been popular for so long for a reason. Who doesn’t fantasise about how their life would change if they suddenly had amazing powers? And there is still a lot of room left to explore. “Diversity” characters can and do work, but only when they’re given the same respect as any other characters. Instead of executives deciding that we need another minority character here attached to this brand, we need writers who know how to write, and artists who know how to draw, to create the compelling characters that tell stories we want to read.

*Questions and responses have been edited for clarity and concision.

III. Conclusion

While attempts to diversify pivotal characters in the superhero world are a step in the right direction in terms of incorporating more inclusivity, without sincerity the good intentions behind these attempts are ostensibly wasted. Ryan Clement’s suggestion that the comics industry’s push for diversity amongst superheroes is possibly a result of recent superhero movies attracting a wider demographic is a practical insight. His suggestion that any well-written character can universally appeal to audiences is an effective answer to addressing authenticity. The best approach moving forward for the comics industry should be to treat diversity with greater care than is currently involved in the production of these new narratives. By hiring more diverse contributors to their teams and recognising diversity as something that is central to peoples’ experiences, rather than an exotic or token sentiment that can be marketable, perhaps the comics industry can finally move away from its superhero hangovers and create characters that resonate with fans.

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