

The Blacker the Ink

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Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art

EDITED BY FRANCES GATEWARD AND JOHN JENNINGS

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Albert and Churie Thompson,
Franklin Gateward, and Lee and Roz Desser.

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Interestingly, we found from our many conversations with friends and colleagues that comic, comic book, and graphic novel readership is linked very closely to family. John would like to acknowledge his mother, Janie Lenoir, who purchased for John his first comics from the local stop-and-go. Little did either of them know that Thor and Spiderman comics would start a lifelong passion. Frances would like to thank her family—Dad, for taking her and her siblings to the Ft. Dix PX bookstore every Saturday for their weekly comic book fix; Mom, for never questioning or berating those reading choices; her sister, Cha, for introducing her to the medium through Richie Rich, Casper, and later Archie; her older brother Frank for expanding that interest to the world of caped crusaders; and Steven, for traveling to the cons and spending hours discussing issues of artists and story lines. Thanks to Sophie, a superhero in her own right, and David, for everything! We would also like to thank Leslie Mitchner at Rutgers, whose immediate enthusiasm was a big help in pushing this to its final stages, and Mekala Audain for her attention to detail and huge amount of assistance.

The Blacker the Ink

Introduction



The Sweeter the Christmas

FRANCES GATEWARD

AND JOHN JENNINGS

You have to have something to start with,
and where you start has nothing to do
with where you end up.

—Bill Foster

If you are an avid reader of superhero comics, then you most likely smiled or chuckled at the reference in the title of this introduction to *Luke Cage, Powerman*'s signature "expletive" of shock used in the Marvel Comics character's early adventures. Luke Cage, like many other of his contemporaries, was an attempt to capitalize on the Blaxploitation film boom of the 1970s. He was the first African American superhero to be featured in his own monthly comic book. Cage's "Sweet Christmas!" catchphrase was his equivalent to Superman's "Great Scott!" or The Mighty Thor's "By Odin's beard!" or Robin's "Holy —, Batman!" It was also an attempt of a white writer to create authentic street slang for a character that was born and raised in a space where he had most likely never visited. Even though the words were echoing from a pair of Black lips, a Black man's voice was not being heard. In reality, many of the Christmases the character would have experienced in the inner city would have been something far less "sweet" and far more foreboding. It was very difficult to negotiate the contrast between what was supposed to be an urban crime fighter and his costume of a

steel tiara and steel wristbands with matching chain-link belt, accessorized with a bright yellow butterfly-collared shirt and boots. The shirt, by the way, was either always opened to expose his Black body or perpetually ripped to shreds each issue. Luke Cage is unremarkable insofar as many of the characters created in this era can be seen, in retrospect and most likely at the time, as being at the very least problematic. Jonathan Gayles's groundbreaking documentary from California Newsreel, *White Scripts and Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books* (2012), deals with these issues head-on with interviews from Black male creators and scholars. Many of the men in the film openly express their love/hate relationship not only with Cage but also with The Black Panther, The Falcon, Black Lightning, and other Black male superheroes. So even though the catchphrase "Sweet Christmas" is now looked on as a well-intentioned faux pas, it and other racially centered missteps bring forth extremely interesting opportunities to explore the various modes and nuances of the representation of an underrepresented people via a historically misrepresented medium.

Comics traffic in stereotypes and fixity. It is one of the attributes at the heart of how the medium deals with representation. Comics abstract and simplify. Perhaps this adds to the negative connotation that comics have earned in our society. The use of pictures to tell stories is still seen as being juvenile even though we obviously live in a very image-driven and image-conscious world. The comics medium in its modern form has been defined as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." This definition, posited by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (9), also lays out several questions as well. Whose images are being juxtaposed? What information is being conveyed? Which aesthetics are being valued? And as for McCloud's notion of "the invisible," what else *besides* comics can be thought of as invisible?

McCloud uses his very flexible definition of comics to include Trajan's Column, the Bayeux Tapestry, and even hieroglyphics into the canon of antecedents for the modern form of comics. If this is the case, then Black people have been making comics and seeing themselves as subjects for comics for thousands of years. It is not hard to see that Ghanaian Andinkra stamps, the geometric patterns of the Ndebele, and the Igbos' Nsibidi symbols also can be classified as a type of comic. Comics, in some sense already abstract, can also become *even more* abstract. One need only look at the amazing collection by Andrei Molotiu called *Abstract Comics* to see this. Abstract comics are sequential narratives that are actually nonobjective and utilize the conventions of comics, such as panels, words balloons, gutters, and the like. Using this example, African American quilts, for instance, can be seen as comics panels. So it would seem that, if viewed through an informed gaze, Blackness and comics have been intertwined for many, many years. Proclaiming something to be invisible is still a way of seeing.

When the collection of scholarly essays in your hands was entitled *The Blacker the Ink*, we were making an attempt to start constructing ideas around “Blackness” as a type of medium and how that medium has been used for various effects concerning peoples of African descent. The way that comics convey information is customarily by ink on paper. These days, the “ink” can also be digital, but the underlying idea is still there. The story comes first and then is translated into pencil drawings. The drawings are then made darker and enhanced by the inker. The inker uses her or his skills to bring out clarity and depth and to add form to the drawings. The colorist then gets the images and adds tone, atmosphere, and hue to the story. The final step is to add the dialogue, speech balloons, and captions. This job belongs to the letterer. The comics medium works very simply. It is a cognitive process: when you begin to perceive or order images in a sequence, your mind projects a story on them in order to make sense of the arrangement. This phenomenon is called *closure*. It seems ironic that this medium that functions by closure is actually one of the most ingenious and open forms of communication ever created. It is the openness and mutability of ink and how it mediates images that originally helped formulate the title and the conceptual framing of this collection.

The ink used in comics is not only physically and formally perceived to be the neutral of black; it also is the reification of “Blackness” in the modern sense. If you think of the ink container as the Black body, it completes this metaphor. The container is merely a vessel for the flexible, mutable, liminal nature of ink. It is no wonder that Rorschach tests are made with it. Ink holds vitality, potential, unpredictability, and the very nature of creation within its affordances, as does any medium for that matter. It resists being codified, tamed, or caged—Luke Cage notwithstanding. Ink is unruly and hard to deal with as a medium. You can ask any artist who has cursed at its pliable nature when attempting to learn the secrets of how to work with it. When a drop of ink hits a white piece of paper, something happens. Is the white paper now blemished by the aesthetically displeasing dot, or is it made more interesting and nuanced? Is the spot truly a spot, or is it a hole into another space? Only when ink is applied and it dries does it become fixed. On the white Bristol board of the comics narrative, ink begins to take shape; as Gestalt theory’s notion of “forms” has it, it begins to pull out potential stories. It defines the whiteness of the page, and in turn, the whiteness of the page begins to define it. Both become *fixed*, and in that fixity the art becomes valuable because it is now “camera ready” and perfect to be printed, mass-marketed, and consumed by millions of comics fans around the world. Capitalism hides process. It is the process of the creation and the various executions of these narratives with which this collection is concerned.

The Blacker the Ink was assembled to use closure in a different fashion than in McCloud’s definition of the term. Whereas McCloud has a strictly textual definition of closure—the relationship between the reader and what is left out of

the text (63)—we use the term somewhat differently. The book was conceived and executed to actually deal with a complex array of notions around Blackness, agency, and identity in the comics medium. Black people read comics, make comics, and are also the subject of comics. The subject of Blackness is as vast and deep as the images afforded by the aforementioned qualities of ink. Even as this publication is in the process of being edited, a plethora of insightful, diverse narratives about Black people have been produced or rereleased. The poetic and surreal *Pop Gun War* (2003) by Farel Dalrymple uses the metaphorical power of comics in his testimony to the painful task of being human. Ho Che Anderson utilizes a different graphic and color palette for each period in the life of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., in his magnificent *King: A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2005). James Sturm and Rich Tommaso provide a look at the extraordinary career of the baseball great Satchel Paige while situating his life within the terrible career of Jim Crow in *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow* (2007). Craig Thompson's beautifully epic, yet problematic, historical romance narrative *Habibi* (2011) pushes the boundaries of the medium in both form and content. *Prince of Cats* (2012) by the illustrator and animator Ronald Wimberly recontextualizes the classic Shakespearean romance of *Romeo and Juliet*. And Max Brooks, along with the illustrator Caanan White, tells the exciting yet sad story of the 369th Infantry Regiment during the First World War—highly decorated for its battlefield heroics yet subject to intense discrimination back home—in *The Harlem Hellfighters* (2014). Blackness has a story, you see; and sometimes that story has one voice, and other times it has a collection of many voices. Comics can be made in solitude or created in intensively collaborative processes. It is this same idea that has created the notion of a “Black” identity. Blackness is a medium that Black people of the world have inherited and have added on to as the story has unfolded throughout history. The graphic, bold, instant gist of this story can be seen in the bright colors and unflinching line work of the modern comic. Comics, when created by a skillful and informed hand, can speak with the power of words and text combined. This power is many times more potent than either mediation can achieve on its own. In the United States, this power has been utilized mostly on the genre of the superhero. In fact, since the creation of the superhero in 1938, it has been a veritable index for the medium. This perception has played a great part in how comics have been severely limited in American popular culture. As a result, *The Blacker the Ink* seeks to broaden this perception of comics by having only a few chapters that deal with the genre of the superhero. It is not that the editors dislike superheroes. That could not be further from the truth. The intent is to illustrate that the Black experience in the comics medium is a diverse one and deserves as many approaches as possible to understand its complex and vital histories. The pieces centered on the superhero and modes of Black identity were chosen for how they deal with issues of performance around gender, race, and space in the comics medium. The genre of the superhero is very much

a white-male-dominated power fantasy that is itself very much based in ideas around physical performance and power in relation to the negotiation of identity. Because the Black body has historically been linked to physicality and not intelligence, the depictions of Black superheroes already have inherent issues built into the very conventions of the genre. It is very hard for white men to see Black people as heroic outside the sports arena.

Take, for example, the fact that when in the fall of 2011 DC Comics decided to relaunch its entire line of monthly comics, it did so by ending over seventy years of continuity and beginning the entire roster of characters over with fifty-two new books under the general heading “The New 52.” To put things into perspective, DC Comics is second only to Marvel as the largest publisher of comics in the United States. It is owned by Warner Bros., and its superheroes include some of the most recognizable in the industry. This list of characters includes Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, The Flash, and Aquaman. The relaunch was an attempt to secure the future of the publisher by supplying it with fresh readers. Much to the chagrin of comics retailers, “The New 52” planned to capture the interest of younger readers by simultaneously selling the online versions. Five of the fifty-two comics featured a Black character in the titular role: *Batwing*, *Static Shock*, *Mister Terrific*, *Voodoo*, and *The Fury of Firestorm: The Nuclear Men*. Three of these titles—*Fury of the Firestorm*, *Static Shock*, and *Mr. Terrific*—were canceled after just eight issues due to low sales. Some few months later, *Voodoo* followed suit. No “replacement” series featured a Black superhero. Only *Batwing* is still making his presence felt, with twenty-five issues as of this writing. However, *Batwing*, whose alter ego is a former child soldier from the Democratic Republic of Congo, is basically “The Batman of Africa” and works under Batman’s supervision. The other books in “The New 52” were in some ways more problematic. *Firestorm* is about two high-school teens, one Black and one white, who join together in one body. That body is racially coded as white. *Static Shock* was a remnant of Milestone Media, the first multicultural comics imprint featuring diverse characters. *Voodoo* is the story of an exotic dancer of mixed-race heritage who is also part alien and turns into a dragon-like monster. *Voodoo* was bought from Jim Lee, formerly of Image Comics and now publisher of DC Comics. *Mister Terrific* was the most progressive of these offerings, about an Olympics-level athlete whose primary superpower is his incredible intellect, which he showcases via his fourteen PhDs in various fields. However, despite the fact that only 10 percent of “The New 52” featured Black superheroes, it is fair to say that Black images in the comics have come a long way.

The first images of Black people in comics were loosely based on the stereotypes generated in blackface minstrelsy, stereotypes mired in the notion of fixity. These images dominated the mid-1930s until the mid-1940s. Characters such as Whitewash and Ebony White depicted Black Americans as dim-witted buffoons who needed the white male either to save them or to guide them in

their lives. Whitewash appeared in the *Young Allies* comics from Marvel in the first half of the 1940s. He was a friend of Bucky Barnes, the spunky sidekick of Captain America. Whitewash's "superpower" seemed to be centered on speaking broken English and having the constant capacity for being captured and subsequently tied to various types of explosive devices. He was in constant need of rescue. Ebony White, the sidekick to The Spirit, created by Will Eisner, was a collection of stereotypes reified in a sometimes childish and animalistic form.

Such depictions were challenged by alternative works. In 1947, Orrin C. Evans, a Black news reporter from Philadelphia, along with his brothers, created *All-Negro Comics*, the first comics anthology featuring Black characters. Even during this time, Black creators were playing around with the various modes of representation afforded via the comics medium. The collection featured action, romance, and comedy within its first issue. A subsequent issue was never to be. Once suppliers learned what Evans was doing, they refused to sell paper and ink to the newsman. Nevertheless, *All-Negro Comics* demonstrates what Black writers and artists can produce when allowed agency, access, and freedom of expression. Even within this first collection of comics, Black people were attempting not only to show the potential of comics but also to destabilize Blackness as an identity. So, to build on the Black-comics scholar Bill Foster's words of wisdom, this is where Black people started. Where have they ended up regarding comics?

In 1993, a Chicago-born surrealist artist and cartoonist named Turtel Onli posed a question relating to the "ages" of comics. The Golden Age of American comics runs from the 1930s into the late 1940s; the Silver Age goes from about 1956 to 1970; the Bronze Age of Comics is from 1970 to 1985; the Modern Age runs from 1985 to the present day. Onli's question was a simple one: "Where does the Black Age of Comics fall?" From that one query, an entire movement was spawned. Onli began to seek out comics created by Black people that featured Black characters. Once he found titles such as *Brotherman* (1990, from Black-owned Big City Comics out of Irving, Texas), *Heru, Son of Ausar* (published in 1993 by ANIA, a consortium of four small Black presses), and a handful of others, Onli began to distribute these books around the country from the trunk of his car, much as the independent filmmaker/novelist Oscar Micheaux did with his books and films decades before, during the period of the "race film." Onli used his position as an art teacher in Chicago's Kenwood Academy to launch the first Black Age of Comics Convention, turning the trunk of his car into a space of resistance. Now, on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the Black Age of Comics, you can see the results of Orrin C. Evans's vision that started more than sixty years ago. Black images in comics now have an entire subculture and community connected to them. They have their own conventions, their own heroes and villains, their own superstar creators, their own awards ceremonies, and their own history. There are hundreds of Black creators of comics operating outside of the mainstream, making their own stories and

their own futures with this amazing medium. However, even with all of this innovation and history, the notions of a Black superhero, a Black-comics publisher, and a Black-comics collector are still foreign concepts to many people.

The Blacker the Ink showcases scholarly work that examines these concepts with rigor, innovation, acumen, and reverence to the form of comics and sequential art. Our aim was to choose a wide breadth of topics that dealt with not only the formal aspects of comics but also the audience, execution, and content of various stories relating to or created by people of African descent. One thing is true when it comes to the politics around representation concerning Black people: no aspect of it can be taken for granted. There simply are not enough images of Black people in the mainstream not to be critical of the way they are constructed and portrayed. The Black image has had a very troubled history in the United States; so have comics, for that matter. In a sense, this collection seeks to investigate those histories and where those narratives overlap, create conflicts, and accent each other. The various explorations of Black identity in this volume are, again, an attempt to recontextualize the images connected to the Black body and its depictions in the comics medium while also offering alternative methodologies of dislodging Blackness as a monolithic identity.

The book is organized thematically, grouped under what we are calling “panels.” We have four panels in tribute to the tradition of comics in the funny pages of newspapers, but we also wish to think outside the boxes, to expand not just the content and themes but the very form itself. It is also our intention both to intervene in existing scholarship on “Black comics”—comics and graphic novels made by Black artists and also comics that feature Black characters—and to expand the canon of what constitutes worthwhile objects of study within the broad area of Black comics. We make no claim to cover all artists or comics. We are ourselves aware of certain lacunae, but no one book can cover an entire field of study. Those who feel strongly that we have neglected a favorite book and/or missed the opportunity to discuss a significant artist are encouraged to get on board with us and produce the kind of scholarship that is worthy of your subject. And that is what we hope we have gathered together here.

We begin, then, with panel 1, “Black Is a Dangerous Color.” Chapter 1, written by Daniel F. Yezbick, returns us to a time when Black indeed was looked on with suspicion and mistrust. For that matter, however, so were all comic books. In “No Sweat!: EC Comics, Cold War Censorship, and the Troublesome Colors of ‘Judgment Day!’,” the time is the 1950s during that period just after the so-called Golden Age of comics but before the Silver Age. It is the age when Fredric Wertham’s zealously polemical anti-comic-book study *Seduction of the Innocent* appeared, the US Senate held hearings on comics’ alleged impact on juvenile delinquency, and the resulting formation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) put a damper on thematic explorations of various social issues as well as depictions of violence, sexuality, and depravity. Oddly, to our contemporary eyes, positive depictions of African Americans came under fire. They certainly

did, as Yezbick ably rehearses, in the case of “Judgment Day!,” coauthored by Al Feldstein and illustrated by Joe Orlando, which had originally appeared in the March–April 1953 issue of *Weird Fantasy* (#18). At the time of publication, the story received the kind of recognition rarely given to comics. But a year later, the Comics Code Authority was established, and an attempt to republish the story in 1955 met with resistance by CCA head Charles F. Murphy. The battle cry was sounded by EC publisher Bill Gaines, whose books had already come under close scrutiny. Gaines won the day, and “Judgment Day!” was reprinted without alterations in *Incredible Science Fiction* #33 in November 1955. Unfortunately, it was the last comic book that EC ever published. But the story does not end there. Yezbick goes on to perform a close reading of the text (something previous work on “Judgment Day!” does not do) in order to uncover what it was about this short work that provoked the CCA but that also makes it a rare and pioneering attempt to redress images of African Americans in comic books.

From African Americans, we turn to Africa itself. Perhaps less familiar to many readers of academic books on the subject of comics and to comics readers themselves are books created by Black African writers and artists. Sally McWilliams, the author of “Sex in Yop City: Ivorian Femininity and Masculinity in About and Oubrierie’s *Aya*,” the subject of chapter 2, performs a great service to the field in introducing this work to so many of us. The writer Marguerite About and the illustrator Clément Oubrierie have given us a graphic novel dealing with the bittersweet complexities of contemporary West Africa. *Aya* refuses the usual Western media’s reductive iterations of an Africa always mired in diseases, disasters, and death. Instead, the graphic novel engages us with humorous depictions of gender constructions, sexual politics, and neocolonial class hierarchies in a progressive, urban West African locale. The series, originally published in France from 2005 to 2010 and recently translated into English, is set in the Côte d’Ivoire in the 1970s and focuses almost exclusively on middle-class characters.

In chapter 3, “A Postcolony in Pieces: Black Faces, White Masks, and Queer Potentials in *Unknown Soldier*,” Patrick F. Walter takes us to contemporary Africa, to war-torn Uganda. *Unknown Soldier*, originally introduced by DC in 1966, is here reimaged by the writer Joshua Dysart (who is not African American) for a series that appeared in 2008. A frightening cover image—of a man with a completely bandaged face—stands in for the way both the main character and the country itself are torn apart and mended, stitched together but always in danger of collapsing into chaos and nothingness. The lead character, Dr. Moses Lwanga, is African by birth, African American by culture by dint of a long stay in the United States, and a returnee to his native land. The violence of the book is notable, and its themes are often difficult ones, such as the manipulation and degradation of the child soldiers of Joseph Kony and his Lord’s Resistance Army. Thus, the comic book series was published by Vertigo,

an imprint of DC that features more adult-minded and challenging books. No less challenging is Walter's intense analysis of the series, a deep and detailed reading of both the story and the art.

The second panel, "Black in Black and White and Color," takes us back in time to a period when there were no Black writers in the comic book world and Black characters, when present (and only rarely at that), were imaged in a typically racist manner. But we are gratefully reminded of a kind of Golden Age of Black authorship of comic strips, especially in the Black press of the 1930s–1950s. One essay discusses the work of a Black artist who was concerned with different aspects of Black life but always with an eye toward normalizing Blacks' desires, deeds, and comic devices. We are then introduced to a single-panel artist at work in a white-oriented magazine, followed by a discussion of what is certainly the most influential and controversial comic creation by a Black artist, *The Boondocks*.

A little background: The *Pittsburgh Courier* was the most influential and significant of the Black newspapers. By the late 1940s, the weekly publication could boast of having editions in fourteen major cities and a readership of over one million. It was modeled after mainstream newspapers, with its various sections of hard news, celebrity gossip, soft news, and the funny pages, where the comics lived. Of course, there were a couple of differences between the *Courier* and the vast majority of mainstream, which is to say white, publications. The *Courier* carried the stories of the United States' racial terror—of lynching, of Jim Crow laws, and of other indignities and outrages against Blacks. And on the funny pages, it carried the works of Black artists, including at least one notable woman. The *Courier* was host to a number of Black artists who had differing attitudes toward the racial components of their strips. William Holloway, the creator of *Sunnyboy* (sometimes called *Sunnyboy Sam*), and Bobby Thomas, the creator of *Bucky*, wrote gag comics, typically devoid of any particular racial component save that the characters were Black. *Society Sue*, by Samuel Milai, made race a more central concern, albeit in an atypical way in that the central focus is on a suddenly wealthy family. The comedy mostly concerns the working-class father's friction with the upwardly mobile Sue and her mother. Later in the series, a more nuanced image of Black culture appears as Sue's relationship with her boyfriend, Joe, gradually takes over. He introduces her to something more like Harlem street culture. We also get a glimpse of the prewar strip *Torchy Brown in "Dixie to Harlem,"* written by Zelda Jackson (Jackie) Ormes. But perhaps the most interesting of all the Black artists was Oliver Harrington. His *Dark Laughter* is the exception to the general tone of prewar *Courier* comics. *Dark Laughter* is a one-panel gag comic that Harrington continued to draw for most of the rest of his long career. Its main character, Bootsie, was born as Harrington's version of Harlem seen from below, or eye level, rather—life as lived by urban, working-class African Americans. This, of course, was a unique contribution to comics art, especially when we realize that Harrington

has drawn an African American subculture. There are no white people at all in *Dark Laughter* until much, much later in its run, though there are sometimes references to them. Harrington shows a community of outsiders, who occupy a culturally distinct space. Things changed as World War II began, with the Black press under suspicion for possible sedition, and so became more overtly prowar. The funny pages of the *Courier* were no exception.

If *Dark Laughter* was an often caustic look at Black life, the work of Jackie Ormes was both a fantasy and a recognition of the aspirations held by many African Americans, especially women. Chapter 4, “Fashion in the Funny Papers: Cartoonist Jackie Ormes’s American Look,” by Nancy Goldstein (the acknowledged authority on Ormes), traces the life and career of the first African American woman newspaper cartoonist. She was a one-woman juggernaut of creativity: the author of four different strips throughout her career, two of which ran simultaneously in the *Courier*; a fashion designer; and overall a businesswoman of rare perspicacity. As Goldstein notes, at a time when images of African Americans in mainstream newspaper comics portrayed only derogatory stereotypes, Jackie Ormes defied the norm with her smart, beautiful women and children. It was gratifying for readers to turn to the pages of the Black press to see photographs and illustrations depicting attractive Black people, images not seen in the mainstream media. Ormes’s characters, with their humorous but revealing names, such as Torchy, Candy, Ginger, and Patty-Jo, dressed in upscale attire as they commented on all manner of contemporary topics. Ormes gave to Black readers, especially women, a combination of down-home realism and a touch of fantasy.

And then there is *The Boondocks*. If figures such as Jackie Ormes require something like an archaeology of African American sequential or single-panel artists to assure their place in this evolving history, Aaron McGruder requires no such fieldwork—as the creator of the most controversial comic series ever by an African American artist (and probably any newspaper comic when you get right down to it). In chapter 5, Robin R. Means Coleman and William Lafi Youmans discuss the use of Black Nationalism in the discourse (and humor) for the character of Huey. Their essay, “Graphic Remix: The Lateral Appropriation of Black Nationalism in Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks*,” is an in-depth examination of how both the character and his creator appropriate Black Nationalism as a rhetoric and style. The concept of “lateral appropriation” is important here, the idea that one marginal group takes up the cultural or social capital of another marginal group. Huey spouts the slogans and ideals of Black Nationalism but at a time when it is a thing of the past, a nostalgic image for those who lived through it and a humorous (if still serious) one coming from the mouth of a ten-year-old boy.

There is little doubt that Huey would despise much of what passes for Black superheroes in mainstream comics. Yet the authors represented in panel 3, “Black Tights,” boldly go where only an important few have gone before.

Building on the work of Jeffrey A. Brown, the author of *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, frequently cited in these essays, and Adilifu Nama's *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, contributors Conseula Francis, Andre Carrington, Reynaldo Anderson, and Blair Davis cast a critical eye on popular superheroes such as Captain America, Icon, and Luke Cage, among others. The authors in this section read closely and set their essays within richly drawn contexts.

First up in this section is Conseula Francis. Her essay, "American Truths: Blackness and the American Superhero," takes a perceptive look at the controversial miniseries *Truth: Red, White & Black*. This seven-issue series from 2003 reimagined the origin of the famed World War II fighting hero Captain America. *Truth* takes its controversial idea from the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, in which, over the course of forty years beginning in 1932, the US Public Health Service conducted an experiment on 399 Black men in the late stages of syphilis, without their knowledge, in an effort to study the effects of nontreatment. Written by the late Robert Morales with art by the influential Kyle Baker (the subject of chapter 12), *Truth* posits that the "Super Soldier" serum that eventually created Captain America was first experimented on unknowing Black soldiers. Francis also links these experiments to Nazi experiments on Jews in the concentration camps. This textual reading of the series reveals many insights into and issues in the American comic book, its fans, and its treatment of race.

With chapter 7, "Drawn into Dialogue: Comic Book Culture and the Scene of Controversy in Milestone Media's *Icon*," Andre Carrington examines the case of Milestone Media, a Black-owned company publishing comics about multi-racial superheroes, carrying the well-known imprint of DC Comics. Carrington focuses most closely on the superhero Icon, who first appeared in 1993, the creation of the African American writer Dwayne McDuffie, one of the founders of Milestone, and the artist M. D. Bright. Carrington notes how the comic combined the figure of the superhero with the concerns of Black women, youth, and others living in urban America. In particular, he looks at the issue of teen pregnancy and abortion in a recurring story line in the comic that features a pregnant Rocket—Raquel Ervin, Icon's sidekick. The parallel stories of the alien superhero Icon and the very down-to-earth Rocket, whose superpowers come courtesy of a special belt, bring a new dimension, so to speak, to the superhero genre. Though the issue of teen pregnancy and abortion may have been unusual or controversial within the form, the comic's nomination for three Eisner Awards and its being honored three times with a Parents Choice Award testify to the skill, sensitivity, and artistry of the creators and the differing intentions of Milestone Media.

Chapter 8, "Critical Afrofuturism: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric, Sequential Art, and Postapocalyptic Black Identity," takes us on an important tour of a number of theoretical issues within the fields of Pan-African and cultural studies and draws heavily on science fiction studies as well. Author Reynaldo Anderson

positions his work on Afrofuturism against the Eurocentric tendencies of so many comic books, even progressive ones, and marshals his wide-ranging critical readings to explore the perhaps little-known comic *Ramzees* (1997), a publication of Ghattostone publications of Kansas City. *Ramzees* attempts to promote African cultural motifs in a postapocalyptic future United States. In this instance, it is the publisher, Michael R. Brown, who created an independent comic book imprint and with *Ramzees* secured national distribution. In this sense, *Ramzees* looks forward to the publication of graphic novels that bypass mainstream comic presses in favor of more freedom but sometimes less market penetration. According to Anderson, the appearance of *Ramzees* is emblematic of the political/cultural period of the mid-1990s in the United States, which experienced the emergence of the neosoul genre, globalization, and African-diasporic mobilization in the Million Man and Million Woman March.

A close reading of the visual motifs that characterize images in comic books forms the basis of chapter 9, “Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros: The Visual Design of Black Comic Book Superheroes,” by Blair Davis. Davis’s keen and sharp-eyed analysis of Black superheroes sets aside issues of characterization and narrative in favor of examining visual design, a somewhat neglected element of comics scholarship. Davis focuses on the visual elements that have proven common in the design of Black superheroes, how those particular elements function as signs that have larger symbolic meaning. Luke Cage, Black Lightning, Storm, Vixen, and Cyborg are the objects of his focus, with some particularly significant teasing out of underlying meanings in the way female characters are costumed.

Chapter 10, Kinohi Nishikawa’s “*Daddy Cool*: Donald Goines’s ‘Visual Novel,’” inaugurates panel 4, “Graphic Blackness.” In this section, the authors cover and perhaps uncover stories and art devoted to portrayals of African Americans in history and myth through the form of what has come to be known as the graphic novel. Appropriately, then, Nishikawa looks at the first graphic novel to have appeared under an African American author’s name. *Daddy Cool* began life as a novel published by Donald Goines in 1974. Goines, a career criminal and drug addict who took up writing during one of his prison sentences, was shot to death in 1974. From 1969 through 1974, he published sixteen novels that today’s publicity material acclaims as blood-soaked and almost unbearably authentic portraits of the roughest aspects of the Black experience. Yet as Nishikawa points out, *Daddy Cool* draws from the same arsenal of Blaxploitation stereotypes that are often linked to post-civil-rights superheroes’ hypermasculinity and a penchant for violence. And the setting of stories amid urban crime scenarios appears to succumb to the kind of ideological particularity that has yoked visual stereotypes of race to notions of inner-city violence and criminality. As for the graphic novel, despite the attribution to Goines, *Daddy Cool* was written by Don Glut, a comics veteran and fringe Hollywood scriptwriter, and illustrated by Alfredo Alcalá, a Filipino comics artist who specialized

in spectacular images of masculine brawn and female eroticism. Neither man had known Goines, and each had only Goines's 1974 novel of the same name on which to base his adaptation. Yet for Nishikawa, it is worth examining the way in which the novel's adaptation into a graphic novel may allow it to lay claim to the uneasy title as the first Black graphic novel.

Chapter 11 takes as its subject a graphic novel devoted to a Black folk legend, though one would perhaps be hard-pressed to call him a hero exactly. *Stagger Lee* (2006), written by Derek McCulloch and illustrated by Shepherd Hendrix, is at its core a villain's story of origins, notes Qiana Whitted, in "The Blues Tragicomic: Constructing the Black Folk Subject in *Stagger Lee*." Using the notion of "blues comics," Whitted sees *Stagger Lee* integrating the formal and aesthetic structures of sequential art with the existential lament and intertextual dialogue of African American blues music. Though the subjects of blues comics may be accused of murder, Whitted argues that the authors are less interested in exonerating these men than they are in questioning notions of Black deviance and uncovering the racialized networks of power that contribute to their actions. As in the adaptation of Goines's *Daddy Cool*, *Stagger Lee* runs the risk of imaging the Black male as hyperviolent and brutal. But the dialogic and intertextual structure of the book problematizes simple readings of surface detail.

Another figure out of history—a history at once better known and more fraught with peril in the telling than that of Stagger Lee—forms the subject of chapter 12, "Provocation through Polyphony: Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*," Craig Fischer's learned disquisition on one of the most extraordinary comic book series / graphic novels of the contemporary era. *Graphic novel* is truly the best term for the book, which is almost wholly wordless. Whether it was the subject matter—a historically accurate story of the famous leader of an 1831 slave rebellion—or the wordless nature of the panels, Baker decided not to approach Marvel or DC with his idea and published it himself under the imprint Kyle Baker Publishing. Strong reviews and word-of-mouth led to its being reprinted in graphic novel form by the famed art-book publisher Harry N. Abrams. Fischer examines the book from multiple viewpoints, but the bulk of the essay is devoted to an intense and intensive reading of the novel as a comic book *per se*—that is to say, a graphic novel with a focus on the graphics.

In chapter 13, we turn to another graphic novel of African American life, courtesy of Hershini Bhana Young and her essay, "Performance Geography: Making Space in Jeremy Love's *Bayou*, Volume 1." Young looks at this extraordinary graphic novel, a 2010 Eisner Award nominee for the Best Digital Comic, through a number of lenses, including the notion of "performative geography," slavery, and also the blues. Thus, *Bayou* bears resemblance to the stories told in *Nat Turner* and *Stagger Lee* and has something of their polyphonic nature as well. *Bayou* contains relatively little dialogue, concentrating for many panels on landscape—the swamp, the sky, and makeshift little towns. Perhaps some of its art and artistry may be owed to its origins as a webcomic, the most successful of

DC's zudacomics.com venture. If Kyle Baker was reluctant to take *Nat Turner* to DC, perhaps DC, in turn, was reluctant, at least initially, to issue *Bayou*, a story set in Mississippi in the 1930s and replete with all the horrors of lynching and Jim Crow nightmares, in print form. But it eventually did, and so what began as an experiment in new media entered the realm of the African American graphic novel—something of a new medium itself given its short history.

In chapter 14, “A Secret History of Miscegenation: *Jimmy Corrigan* and the Columbian Exposition of 1893,” by James J. Ziegler, we are confronted by the case of a non-African American artist who has come to understand the centrality of race to the American experience in its erasure. Though it is often hard to describe or encapsulate the work of the artist Chris Ware, his *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* has a narrative and artistic drive that makes it one of the most lauded books in the comics medium, with awards ranging from a Harvey Award, an Eisner Award, and an American Book Award to recognition from *Time* magazine as one of the ten best graphic novels in the English language. What is at stake for our purposes here is the way in which *Jimmy Corrigan* critiques heroic public histories that narrate US national identity as if it were free from the vexations of race. In telling the story of Jimmy Corrigan—sadly, far from the smartest kid on Earth—Ware weaves a companion narrative, that of Jimmy's great-grandfather and the Columbian Exposition of 1893, which stands in the novel as a paradigmatic instance of how the disavowal of interracial identity has been a defining feature of US national culture. A story of miscegenation that took place during the Columbian Exposition (also called the Chicago World's Fair), *Jimmy Corrigan*, as Zeigler demonstrates, was controversial even at the time for completely ignoring the contributions to and even the very presence of African Americans in the American national character. The hidden secret of miscegenation at the heart of the novel is the way the Corriganes, like the United States itself, define their whiteness.

Chapter 15, “It's a Hero? Black Comics and Satirizing Subjection,” by Rebecca Wanzo, closes our effort to survey the terrain of Black sequential art. She deals with two types of comics here, types we have previously looked at: comic strips and Black superheroes; and she focuses on texts we similarly have dealt with. Yet her perspective toward these texts is vastly different. She proposes the notion of a counterideal that arose in the 1990s at the time of the creation of these texts. Thus, she examines the characters of Raquel Ervin from *Icon* and of Huey Freeman from *The Boondocks* as launching satirical barbs: both satirize what it means that their bodies and speech cannot or should not be imagined in discourses of citizenship, that they should not exist in the genre they inhabit. Wanzo performs a sleight-of-hand on the concept of critical race theory and bends it to her use in what she calls “critical race humor,” to demonstrate how the creators of both comics address the erasure of Black bodies in citizenship discourse.

So, what of *Luke Cage*, *Powerman* and his yuletide battle cry? Today, Cage enjoys a more modern-day vocabulary, mission, and appearance. He has become one of Marvel Comics' A-list characters and has even led an incarnation of *The Avengers*, Marvel's multimillion-dollar superhero team. In fact, Cage is now set to lead *The Mighty Avengers*. This is Marvel/Disney's new attempt to diversify its offerings by putting together an Avengers team that is composed almost solely of persons of color. The first Black superhero to have his own title has also been reimagined in other alternative titles such as *Earth X* and *Cage: Noir*, in which he becomes more like the legend of Stagger Lee. He has even survived a "thugged out" gangsta version of himself written by Brian Azarello and illustrated by the comics legend Richard Corben. The character was once *the* representative of the Black American in the superhero genre. He has now become something much more. Like Blackness, Luke Cage has seen fit to become flexible despite his superpowered, steel-hard skin. His exploits are now global, important, nuanced, relevant, and yes, sweet. This volume is a testimony to the amazing potential of the comics medium, its extremely fascinating histories while dealing with race, and its even more promising possible futures.

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Chapter 11

The Blues Tragicomic



Constructing the Black Folk Subject in *Stagger Lee*

QIANA WHITTED

The graphic novel *Stagger Lee*, written by Derek McCulloch and illustrated by Shepherd Hendrix, is at its core a villain's story of origins. The opening pages seek to unmask the late-nineteenth-century African American outlaw figure, immortalized in blues songs and prison toasts for killing a man in a St. Louis saloon during an argument over his Stetson hat. McCulloch and Hendrix flesh out the legend by moving in and out of history—backward across landscapes of American racial segregation and political corruption; forward through the cultural discourse of Stagger Lee blues from nearly every decade and popular musical genre of the past century. Yet, even as a clearer portrait of “Stack Lee” Shelton begins to materialize in the comic, the larger narrative tensions between blackness, nation, and manhood coalesce to productively obscure and entangle the meanings of “that bad man” in a society where difference of any kind is vilified. What results is a comic that visually and verbally deconstructs the reality from which Stagger Lees emerge, a worldview in which death and devastation are inevitable and, as James Baldwin's poem suggests, the assurances of “truth, justice, and the American Way” are not (14).

This chapter evaluates the emergence of black folk subjectivity in *Stagger Lee* by situating it at the forefront of a developing trend in twenty-first-century

comics, one that integrates the formal and aesthetic structures of sequential art with the existential lament and the intertextual dialogue of African American blues music. Often these “blues comics” call forth the past through images of violence and racial terror, yet their storytelling processes are keenly dialogic, rewriting historical narratives and placing cultural artifacts under fresh scrutiny in a way that speaks to contemporary realities. Some focus explicitly on elements of blues performance, but most embody the blues *as a way of being*, combining the hard-edged wisdom of the singers Robert Johnson and Bessie Smith with a pastiche of trickster tales, pulp westerns, and the antiheroics of comics made popular by Alan Moore and Frank Miller. Blues comics, like all blues narratives, confront racial trauma with a sadness that is, to quote Langston Hughes, “not softened with tears, but hardened with laughter” (86). They deal with tragicomic figures that are not regarded as models of virtue, but are nevertheless valued for the manner in which they provide “a symbolic assault on the system” (Roberts 190).

The heroic badman whose misdeeds generate such vicarious triumph has been central to representations of black history in recent American comics. Rob Vollmar and Pablo G. Callejo’s *Bluesman* (2006)—“a twelve bar graphic narrative in the key of life and death” (title page)—tells the story of a struggling black musician who is wanted for murder in the Jim Crow South, while the guitarist Robert Johnson suffers the loss of his soul for his uncommon musical talent in the manga series *Me and the Devil Blues* (2008) by Akira Hiramoto. The title character of Jeremy Love’s *Bayou* (2009–2011) is a swamp monster that plays the Delta blues with a crafty Br’er Rabbit and lives in fear of a white bossman along the Mississippi River.¹ *The Original Johnson* (2010) by Trevor Von Eeden is a graphic novel biography of the controversial heavyweight-boxing champion Jack Johnson and the racial politics of his athleticism. Even Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner* (2008) draws on a blues aesthetic to memorialize the title character as a tragic “action hero” in his account of the 1831 Virginia slave uprising.

These works join *Stagger Lee* in an evolving subgenre that is particularly adept at probing the moral ambiguities of racial suffering and survival and that does so in a manner that exploits the visual and verbal codes that are unique to the comics form. Iconic figures such as Nat Turner and Stagger Lee are accused of murder, deception, or other forms of wrongdoing; some are demonized merely for defying the status quo. I argue, however, that blues comics are less interested in exonerating these men than they are in questioning notions of black deviance and uncovering the racialized networks of power that contribute to their actions. My reading of *Stagger Lee* demonstrates how McCulloch and Hendrix draw specifically on multivocal narratives, compensatory satire, and fragmented, metafictional structures to embody a participatory musical aesthetic, a kind of “call-and-response” sequencing that challenges Lee Shelton’s hyperbolized status as villain. I further posit the adaptation of Old West comics as one interpretive model for the heroic black badman and conclude with an

analysis of the ways in which *Stagger Lee* and other blues comics seek to develop new frames of reference—new origin stories—that more effectively contextualize acts of African American social and moral resistance.

The Stagger Lee Songbook as “Evidence”

In an analysis of the graphic novel *Watchmen* (1987), Iain Thomson asserts that writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons enact a “masterful deconstruction of the hero” through acts of *rereading* and retrospection (102). The suspenseful plot, which focuses on a group of retired superheroes who are being murdered amid the chaos of the 1980s nuclear standoff between Russia and the United States, upsets traditional representations of costumed heroes by depicting crusaders who are insecure, recklessly self-absorbed, and deeply human. In Thomson’s reading, the psychoanalytic unraveling that distinguishes *Watchmen* is achieved through multiple layers of text and image that take advantage of the reader’s assumptions and adhere to a moral logic that disintegrates upon reflection. As a result, the rereading that *Watchmen* initiates extends beyond visual cues and symbols to the larger questions that Moore and Gibbons raise about the unintended consequences of heroism in our modern world. Thomson explains: “When rereading uncanny works, we find ourselves no longer at home in our first reading; we realize that the first reading was not a ‘reading’ properly so-called, since (we now realize) we had not yet understood the text on that first reading, although we assumed, of course, that we did understand it, and so we learn (or at least are encouraged to learn) to become more reflective about the course that we had been following with unreflective self-assurance” (104). The task that Thomson refers to in his study as “retroactive defamiliarization” (103) also has its counterpart in the subversive practices of African American storytelling traditions. Among the array of rhetorical strategies that distinguish early folk tales, slave narratives, and black literary fiction is the syncretic mediation of African and Euro-American cultural forms and practices that use indirection, as well as intertextual revision and wordplay, to argue against white supremacy. Such strategies are commonly associated with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s formulation of “signifyin(g)” as the black vernacular processes of revision and repetition “with a signal difference” (xxiv). Consider how the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs are crafted in the sentimental traditional to make an antislavery appeal or the ways in which the racial subversions of the post-Reconstruction writings of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt are cloaked in the vernacular language and archetypes of the local color genre. Modern African American literature further exploits this creative and political tension in texts by Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison that, to use Thomson’s phrase, “must be reread in order to be read” (104). Their works adapt and modify existing discursive models in order to argue for alternative modes of blackness, to fill in historical gaps and silences,

and to upset flawed social and cultural standardizations that account only for the experiences of white Americans.

In *Stagger Lee*, multiple plots attempt to reconstruct and to retroactively defamiliarize the infamous story of “Stack Lee” Shelton, whose deadly quarrel with Billy Lyons in 1895 has become the subject of dozens of blues songs (as well as county, soul, and rock iterations) in which the badman is called Stagolee, Stack o’ Lee, Stackalee, and Stagger Lee. Historians and cultural critics have investigated the details surrounding the incident and reveal, for instance, that the Stetson hat that is often cited as the impetus for the argument belies the criminal activity in which both were engaged through their political affiliations—with Shelton buying votes for the Democratic Party and Lyons, like most blacks at the time, supporting the party of Lincoln. Lost, too, in the larger-than-life image of Stagger Lee slugging it out with the devil is the fact that Shelton died of tuberculosis in prison in 1912.

What remains of the abridged version of Shelton’s life, however, is what Cecil Brown describes as a countercultural paradigm of black masculine power, the “Stagolee paradigm” of violent racial and socioeconomic resistance that undermines an oppressive system (14). When this paradigm is placed within the framework of the comics medium, a form commonly associated with superheroes and the “myth of idealized masculinity,” new cultural and ethical tensions begin to surface. Brown astutely articulates the questions that could be said to confront readers on the first page of McCulloch and Hendrix’s comic: “We Americans love our folk heroes and the ballads made about their lives. Yet we are reluctant to admit that many of those heroes come from the lowest levels of society. Like the ‘Frankie and Albert’ ballad, ‘Stagolee’ may have originated with a pianist in a bordello. The ‘hero’ of the ballad was a pimp, and the ‘heroic deed’ was the murder of a defenseless black man. How much of this can we really applaud?” (12). As a result, the hero in *Stagger Lee* embodies more than just the superhero genre’s familiar “wimp/warrior theme of duality” but emerges as a figure whose unapologetic brutality seems to reinforce problematic notions of blackness as inherently depraved and, as Jeffrey A. Brown states, who risks “being read as an overabundance, and potentially threatening, cluster of masculine signifiers” (32, 34). Yet it is the very assumptions fueling the hyperbolic villainy of the Stagolee paradigm that furnish McCulloch and Hendrix’s graphic novel—and blues comics, more generally—with their compelling, signifying power. The complex narrative encourages the reader to go beyond the conjecture of a “first reading,” while each iteration of the Stagger Lee blues suggests a rereading of what the folk hero can represent. This approach is what Michael Chaney, in his analysis of Ho Che Anderson’s *King*, refers to as “visual signifyin’” which results in a recasting of the historical record “not as monolithic or monologic but as dynamic, dialogic units of communication available for recombination and interpretation” (199).

So while it is true, as the graphic novel’s narrator explains, that “the Stagger Lee songbook was never called into evidence” during Shelton’s 1896 trial, the

countless songs that seek to imagine Stagger Lee and to re-create the incident that took place in Bill Curtis's saloon are the means through which readers are compelled to reevaluate their unreflective self-assurance about the black subject (McCulloch and Hendrix 76). We discover that “most of the time, Stag shoots Billy . . . but every once in a while, he gets shot. Sometimes he's brought to justice . . . sometimes not. Sometimes Stag dies and burns in hell . . . sometimes he decides the place could use new management” (25). Each variation of the song from Mississippi John Hurt, Floyd Price, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and others decenters our understanding of what Stagger Lee means across time and in relation to different audiences. Consider, for instance, the comic's instructive comparison between the accounts of Stagger Lee's death as performed by black and white singers: “When this verse is sung by a white artist, ‘we’ are all glad to see him die. When sung by an African-American, ‘they’ are glad” (47; see fig. 11.1). Feet dangle between the images of Hurt and Guthrie, edging over the panel borders like a bridge that connects the two realities. With this inclusion of the body on the surface of the page, the audience that circles around the

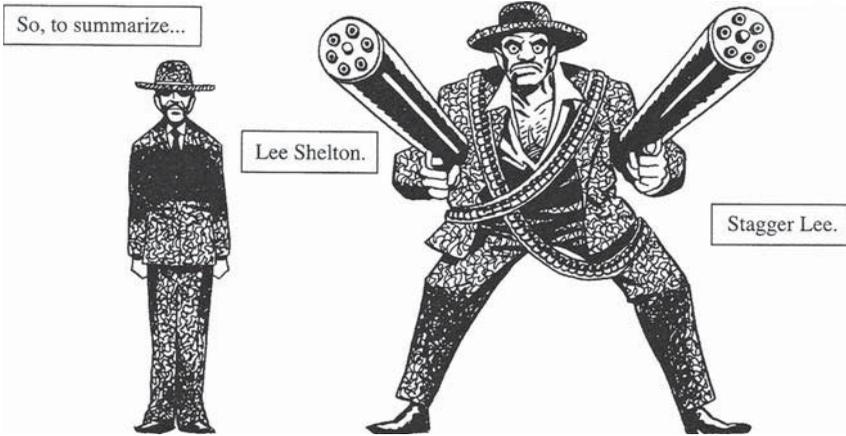


11.1 Stagger Lee's death is related by black and white singers; for the white singer, “we” are glad to see him die; for the black singer, “they” are glad.

blues and folk music performers become bystanders whose faces replicate the spectatorship of twentieth-century lynching photographs—the grim, mournful expressions of the black listeners are juxtaposed against the grinning white ones. In another example, McCulloch and Hendrix allow readers to draw their own conclusions about the song’s somewhat interchangeable depictions of the devil and a Jim Crow sheriff (105).

Other versions of the tale emphasize the perspective of the women who love Stagger Lee (Ma Rainey), the badman’s struggle to come to terms with the consequences of gambling and other losses (Furry Lewis), and the contemplation of guilt over the murder (Frank Hutchison). McCulloch’s acknowledgments list these songs along with dozens more that he says served as his soundtrack during the writing and Hendrix’s illustration of the graphic novel. *Stagger Lee* is, itself, a new addition to this playlist of blues songs, ballads, and toasts, not only by virtue of the comic’s visual signifying but also through an original composition that McCulloch wrote for the fictitious piano player named Hercules Moffatt in the story. Romantic troubles move Hercules to give voice to the first versions of Stagger Lee blues during Shelton’s trial (54–55, 83). In an interview, McCulloch explains, “I took lines and ideas from early versions, rearranged and reworded as necessary, and added whatever new lines I needed, . . . very much the same process as the early oral mutations of the song.” So when McCulloch places his character at the piano to sing, “If your man come home, he’ll have to pay. / Oh that bad man, cruel man, mean man, Stagolee,” his words simultaneously initiate and revise the century-old Stagger Lee songbook (McCulloch and Hendrix 83). This new version enlarges what McCulloch refers to as the legend’s “elasticity” in blending history and myth (McCulloch); it also encourages another rereading of the social contexts that mold Stagger Lee’s iconic image.

The explications of the songs are further shaped by the irreverent and wry narrative voice of *Stagger Lee*, which suggests the same kind of dialogue with the reader that the bluesman does with his listeners. Invoking a conversational tone, the narrator raises rhetorical questions and educates the audience on the legend’s instructive discrepancies. At times, the voice draws on amusing empirical data to offer a composite portrait of Stagger Lee (for example, a pie graph that charts the number of references to the Stetson hat [129]), and in other instances, it supports the nonlinear visual layers that symbolize Stagger Lee’s many faces. One panel, for example, showcases the title character’s dual identity with a sedate and realistically drawn Lee Shelton standing alongside a grimacing Stagger Lee, his imposing body brandishing a large phallic-shaped weapon in each hand (27; see fig. 11.2). The stark, “near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” of the visual pairing reveals the extent to which Shelton’s hypermasculine physical frame becomes a projection of social fears about black men who have been “systematically denied full access to the socially constructed ideals of masculinity” (7, 149). Likewise, Hendrix is especially masterful in using the chaotic, swirling line pattern to denote Stagger Lee’s presence, whether the figure with the hat is a white or black



11.2 Lee Shelton versus Stagger Lee: sedate and realistic compared to the imposing brandishing of large phallic-like weapons.

person, large or small, wielding a weapon or cowering in fear Lee's imprint even appears on his money (26) and the satchel in his hand (36). Billy Lyons, in contrast, is known by the even, grid line pattern on his hat and suit. And yet these distinctions are not uncomplicated. In response to the query "Who's the Bully?" the narrator notes the way Stagger Lee songs actually blend the exploits of Shelton Lee and his victim into a new archetype (74). So the visual coding that recasts the protagonist and antagonist from song to song also helps to ensure that the abstract connotations that are associated with Stagger Lee and Billy Lyons are reiterated even when the physical circumstances have changed.

However, the comic's representation of the different Stagger Lees are intended not merely to illustrate the legend's musical evolution but to foreground the fragmented, polyphonous quality of the reality surrounding Shelton Lee and his community. Multiple songs exploit the gaps, variations, and inconsistencies in the story in an effort to instruct readers about the social and historical context of black folk life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other words, the comic's participatory reading extends to stories of suffering and transcendence that go beyond the circumstances surrounding Billy Lyons's death. *Stagger Lee* fictionalizes the perspective of the Lyons family, the love story of a blues musician, the experiences of Shelton's attorney and law clerk, and even a glimpse into the title character himself as a child in the South. As the stories cut abruptly back and forth from scene to scene and across time, the comic generates a call-and-response sequencing through word and image, a dialogue between the narrator, reader, and the social construct known as "Stagger Lee" (whose artificiality is often reinforced by his intermittent appeals directly to the reader).

A similar strategy unfolds in comics such as *Nat Turner* and *Bluesman* that generate a verbal and visual conversation between the historical events and

documentation of the period. Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* contains virtually no dialogue but takes its narrative structure mainly from the lawyer Thomas Gray's 1831 account, "The Confessions of Nat Turner." In spite of the unbroken historical account that makes up the "Confessions," Baker's design and artwork furnish Turner's character with new dimension, refuting and rereading Gray's nefarious image of the rebel leader. Baker locates him within a larger community of enslaved men and women, emphasizing Turner's experience as a son, husband, and father. Deep shadows anchor the intensity of the black characters' facial expressions in the eyes of sharply angled faces. Their looks of outrage and vulnerability, the furtive glances, and the dawning realizations suggest a depth unacknowledged by the bland, indifferent gaze of the white enslavers. The tensions between Baker's and Gray's interpretations of the revolt helps to complicate what readers may initially assume is merely a straightforward adaptation of an authorized history.

Bluesman contains the original story of Lem Taylor, but in a manner similar to *Stagger Lee* and *Nat Turner*, Rob Vollmar and Pablo G. Callejo frame the first volume of this three-part series with excerpts from a scholarly article on itinerant bluesmen in the South. The narrative also uses music as a structural metaphor for telling Lem's tale, with the three volumes divided into twelve parts (or "bars" of a traditional blues song) and charcoal sketches that bring to mind woodcut illustrations of a folk past. The quoted excerpts quickly establish the context of the story as the traveling bluesmen are described as liminal figures that have escaped "a life of hard labor and uniform squalid poverty" of the South by making a living off their music (6). At the same time, their outsider status makes them "an easy target on whom to pin the negative attributes uniformly assigned to all members of their race by the Anglo dominated society which surrounded them" (6). And indeed, the plot is set in motion once Lem is falsely accused of murdering a white man and becomes the target of a lynch mob. As with *Stagger Lee*, the physical presence of historical documents and cultural artifacts in *Bluesman* help to frame the visual and verbal call of a "first reading" about blackness and masculinity, a call whose authority is challenged, revised, or affirmed in the comic's sequential response.

Comics, then, emerge as an art form that is well suited to the participatory demands of blues narratives. The complexity of these stories is also illustrative of a growing comics readership that, as Charles Hatfield maintains, is increasingly "experienced, playful, and tolerant of discontinuity" (66). In an interview, McCulloch cites Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* as influencing his thinking about experimental narrative structures, specifically praising "their commitment to creating, as accurately as possible, a sense of time and place; their willingness to escape conventional narrative constraints and let, for example, each section of the story be as long or as short as it needed to be; and their trust in the sophistication of their audience and its ability to negotiate the complexities of the story." Such sophistication is further demonstrated by the

way the story fragments in *Stagger Lee* appear to invoke the improvisational practice of musical performance and to mimic the interpretive process of decoding the subtext, symbolism, and depth of emotion in song. Furnished with this sequential songbook as evidence, the reader is better equipped to reconsider other blues moments in the comic: to evaluate Lee Shelton's social and political maneuvers in a system that favors his disenfranchisement; to sympathize with the sorrow of Hercules Moffatt, who is in love with a woman he cannot marry; or to see in the stories of Shelton's legal counsel, Nathan Dryden and Justin Troup, the struggle of a middle-class African American community to maintain its dignity and respect.

The Black “Heroic Badman” of Blues Comics

The blues aesthetic is manifested on the comics page in other ways that are central to the transgressions of the Stagger Lee legend, notably through the image of the defiant outsider “who represented forces that whites found disreputable or downright threatening” (C. Brown 207). Stagger Lee transforms the well-known trickster figure into what James C. Cobb refers to as the “heroic badman” through his association with murder, prostitution, gambling, and political corruption (169). Like Br'er Rabbit tales, the lore surrounding Stagger Lee is less concerned with the possession of material rewards than with empowerment, manipulation, and self-preservation (Levine 109). But as a heroic badman, Stagger Lee further symbolizes a modern “rejection of white values whether codified by law or sanctified by the church” through his ability to defy the sheriff and commandeer the devil's place in hell (Cobb 169). Also known as the “ba-ad nigger,” this image of Stagger Lee models the public perception of black men such as the boxer Jack Johnson, the political activist Bobby Seale, and the rapper Tupac Shakur as well as fictional characters such as Sterling Brown's Slim Greer, Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, and Marvel Comics' Luke Cage. Regardless of their status, these male figures “welcomed and often instigated direct confrontations with white society's stereotype of the Negro's role and place in American life” (William H. Wiggins, Jr., qtd. in C. Brown 150).

In *Stagger Lee*, McCulloch and Hendrix reconstitute this image and its social and cultural subversions, in part, through conventions commonly employed by comics about the American West. The relationship is evident in the title's use of an antique typeface associated with vintage newspaper print and Old West “Wanted” posters; the artwork's deep brown color is reminiscent of late-nineteenth-century sepia-toned photographs. The effect is not one that McCulloch had originally intended when scripting the graphic novel (St. Louis in 1895 was hardly a frontier town), but the impression results nevertheless from the collaboration of writing, illustration, coloring, and lettering on the comic. The Comicraft design and lettering team included John Roshell, who implemented the typeface and font styles, while Jimmy Betancourt and Richard

Starkings—whose previous work included Don Hudson’s *Gunpowder Girl and the Outlaw Squaw*—helped make the case for the nuance and texture of the sepia color (McCulloch). With these design elements in place, the narrative’s milieu of gunfights, saloons, hangings, and Stetson hats is, at times, more readily associated with the American frontier than with the industrialized cityscapes of St. Louis.

But the comic makes even more substantial choices that appear to align the Stagger Lee legend with cowboy motifs that developed as the song made its way through Oklahoma and Indian Territories out West (C. Brown 135). For one thing, McCulloch’s account of Lee Shelton minimizes his primary occupation as an urban pimp who lived and worked in the red-light district of St. Louis on Sixth Street. While a secondary story in Sarah “Mama Babe” Connors’s *Castle Club* foregrounds the fictional relationship between the former prostitute Evelyn Prescott and the bordello’s pianist, Hercules Moffatt, Shelton’s association with the commercial sex industry is merely implied, as is his own personal relationship with a woman who, “in some versions, works far beyond the call of love to raise his bail” (McCulloch and Hendrix 120). (In contrast, the Stagger Lee that appears in Jeremy Love’s *Bayou* is an aloof northern “dandy” whose sexual exploits as a pimp are matched only by his cruelty and ruthlessness with a razor [170].) More prominently featured in *Stagger Lee*, however, is Shelton’s involvement with the political rivalries of St. Louis’s black social clubs during a transitional moment in history when black voters began shifting their allegiances from the Republicans to the Democratic Party in the interest of policy and profit (C. Brown 79–81). Shelton’s affiliation with the Democrats further reinforces his dissatisfaction with the status quo, his refusal to be bound by tradition. McCulloch’s creative choices, therefore, affirm the image of Stagger Lee as a loner, a vigilante who follows his own codes of respect and retributive justice on the margins of a law-abiding society.

On the surface, then, the comics and pulp magazines of the Old West contain a format that works well with Stagger Lee’s tale. The American cowboy of western comics reached his popularity during the early 1950s, and to the extent that he was “among the most socially responsible of all comic-book types,” this archetype even managed to survive many of the restrictions of the 1954 Comics Code (Savage 69). The most popular titles were drawn from family film and television personalities of the day, such as Roy Rogers, the Lone Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy, and Davy Crockett. These and other western comics feature incorruptible heroes who are often governed not by the military, law enforcement, or a federal agency but, as William Savage notes, by their own sense of duty to their country and its societal values (72). Ironically enough, the first African American character with his own comic book was a cowboy hero called Lobo, written and drawn by Tony Tallarico in 1965 for Dell Comics (Watson). Although *Lobo* was canceled after two issues, its opening pages reminded readers that “cowboys

came in all shapes, sizes, and temperaments . . . and they created all sorts of legends. Some were good, some were bad and some were indifferent” (Tallarico 1). The social subtext of this former Union soldier traveling the American plains as “A Fugitive on the Side of the Law!” becomes even more provocative when the cowboy is a black man who declares, “I didn’t kill the boss and I won’t hang for it. If I’m a lobo, it was forced on me” (16). Indeed, the cowboy archetype is composed of variations that can extend beyond the genre’s predilection for clear-cut moral distinctions to encompass characters such as the “masked Western hero,” the “loveable rogue,” and the noble or “reformed outlaw” (Horn 201–202). In the case of this last figure, the hero engages in acts that only *appear* to be criminal—such as killing to protect others—and the story often follows his attempts to escape or correct the record.

Against even the broadest standards of Old West comics, however, it is still quite easy to imagine Stagger Lee as the villain. Vanity and pride lead him to cold-blooded murder. He is uninterested in law or order. His crimes are neither “lovable” nor selflessly committed in the interest of people in need. But as McCulloch and Hendrix demonstrate, the songs that memorialize the legend of Stagger Lee are not meant to function as morality tales. Nearly every character in *Stagger Lee* is flawed and vulnerable, while national institutions and figures of established authority are corrupted by racial prejudice, greed, and abuses of power. (Baldwin’s “Stagolee Wonders” boasts a similar rejection of American moral exceptionalism, saying, “I’ve *seen* some stars / I *got* some stripes” [16].) In this context, Lee Shelton’s remorseless black badman is endowed with a unique kind of cultural heroism. John W. Roberts explains: “To be called a ‘badman’ simply meant that one was willing to act against established social, moral, and legal codes that restricted the lives of blacks with full awareness of the consequences of those actions. Certainly, his actions did not always elicit approval, but they were understandable under the circumstances which both his admirers and detractors probably shared” (190). The prologue of *Stagger Lee* visually articulates this moral tension with shocked silence; a hush falls over the crowd at Bill Curtis’s saloon in the wake of the gunshot that sets the story in motion. In the two-page spread of startled faces, the reader sees only Lee Shelton’s back, the smoke rising from his gun, and his hand breaking through the panel frame to retrieve his Stetson from the bleeding man’s grasp (see fig. 11.3). Shelton’s words, delivered coldly and without looking back, underscore the senseless nature of his crime: “Nigger, I told you. I told you not to touch my hat” (McCullough and Hendrix 11). Such a futile, reckless act hardly seems to demonstrate a full awareness of the consequences.

Yet in keeping with the graphic novel’s adaptation of the western genre conventions, *Stagger Lee* returns repeatedly to this and other hats as a visual code, like the call-and-response sequences of blues songs, that helps to facilitate a reconsideration of the black badman. Cecil Brown notes that during the 1890s,



11.3 Lee shoots a man over an argument regarding his hat; his hand enters the panel to retrieve the Stetson from the bleeding man's grasp.

particularly in a large urban area such as St. Louis, “the Stetson was the archetypal western hat” (100). Although the one that Shelton may have worn would not have been a cowboy hat, the virility suggested by its wide brim was often juxtaposed with the smaller derby hat that Lyons wore. The act of knocking off another man’s hat, Brown continues, compromises this virility as a “sign of castration” (101)—a sign well supported in *Stagger Lee* by the recurring images of the men’s hats being snatched, slammed, and crushed amid insults (McCullough and Hendrix 43, 116, 133–134) and even by the slumped figure of Lyons, collapsed on the floor with his crumpled derby askew (10–11).

However, it is a secondary story line that takes place in Shelton’s childhood home in Texas that generates an especially productive rereading of the hat’s symbolic significance. The fictional account of a fishing trip between Shelton and an elderly black man named Zell Baxley is interspersed throughout the first

section of the graphic novel in a setting that resembles the pastoral “Garden of the West” from Golden Age western comics (Horn 178). When Zell cautions the naïve youth that “everything goes away someday,” the elder’s wide-brimmed cowboy hat nearly fills the panel, obscuring everything except Shelton’s eyes (McCulloch and Hendrix 15). Later in the story, these same eyes watch in horror as two local white deputies humiliate Zell for using a restricted outhouse. They force the black man to remove his feces with his hands and place it into his “brand-new Stetson” (57).

McCulloch and Hendrix use the racialized emasculation of the story’s only genuine cowboy, Zell Baxley, to visualize the sense of helplessness that an adult Lee Shelton rebuffs at any cost. So when Shelton divulges to his lawyer, Nathan Dryden, “Aw, I didn’t kill him over no hat . . . the man didn’t have no respect” (66), the deeper significance of his misdirected rage becomes clear. The Stetson hat, like the .44 Smith & Wesson, invokes a larger power struggle over dignity, manhood, and justice. For Dryden, a black military veteran and well-established attorney in the city, such indignities take shape in the way he holds his own hat in the presence of white men who will not even shake his hand (58), or when overcome by alcohol and drug addiction, he waves his gun and, recalling Lee Shelton, shouts, “I’m the man of the house! The man!” (102). All of these men are connected by the “fantastic tightrope” to which James Baldwin refers, by the kind of blues experience that transforms Lee Sheltons into Stagger Lees:

You’ve seen these black men and women, these boys and girls; you’ve seen them in the streets. But I know what happened to them at the factory, at work, at home, on the subway, what they go through in a day, and the way they sort of ride with it. And it’s very, very tricky. It’s kind of a fantastic tightrope. They may be very self-controlled, very civilized; I like to think of myself as being very civilized and self-controlled, but I know that I’m not. And I know that some improbable Wednesday, for no reason whatever, the elevator man or the doorman, the policeman or the landlord, or some little boy from the Bronx will say something and it will be the wrong day to say it, the wrong moment to have it said to me; and God knows what will happen. I have seen it all. I have seen it all, I have seen that much. What the blues are describing comes out of all this. (Baldwin, “Uses” 59)

Stagger Lee, the heroic black badman, is the embodiment of this “improbable Wednesday.” According to some versions of the legend, he was so *bad* that when confronted by the law, he declared, “You may be the sheriff, and you may be white, but you ain’t Stagolee. Now deal with that.” His direct challenge to moral authority may brand him as the antagonist in a Roy Rogers comic (or in a *Lobo* story line), but through the context that McCulloch and Hendrix establish—particularly through characters such as Zell Baxley and Nathan Dryden or

visual codes such as the hat and gun—Stagger Lee and his blues songs emerge as the “manifestations of the feeling that, within the circumstances with which they operate, to assert any power at all is a triumph” (Levine 418).

It is important to note one final distinction between the black outlaw and his white counterpart that qualifies the impact of such triumphant assertions of power. Cobb clarifies: “For black audiences the outlaw story or song might prove cathartic and vicariously inspirational, but the pleasure, the sense of release, was wholly temporary, *and the return to reality was swift and inevitable*” (169, emphasis added). The same might be said of the slave trickster’s vicarious rewards or of the catharsis evoked by the bluesman’s performance, that the social transformations brought about by the heroic badman are generally short-lived. Roberts also notes that black outlaws are generally “limited by the folk perceptions of their own possibilities” (189). With this in mind, blues comics often favor the inspirational impact of the badman’s transgressions over any material improvements. Nat Turner’s rebellion, for instance, actually heightened whites’ fears in its aftermath and brought about harsh legislative restrictions on the ability of enslaved blacks to read, travel, and assemble as a group. Yet Baker’s comic closes on the promising image of a young black child who has found a copy of Turner’s “Confessions,” and holding it to her chest, she fades into the darkness in a series of reflective moment-to-moment panel transitions (94).

McCulloch and Hendrix take a different approach, one that affirms Cobbs’s observations while being in accord with the “realistic, unsentimentalized portrait of Stackolee” from blues songs and ballads (Roberts 182). Behind the fantastic image of a badman with a Stetson hat, the social realities of Lee Shelton’s life remain tragic and wretchedly mundane. In the graphic novel, Stagger Lee may laugh about the way singers and songwriters have portrayed him or acknowledge the irony of his rebirth as a hippie folk hero, a 1970s pimp, and a gangster thug. But behind bars, an unsmiling Lee Shelton is drawn with sober and contemplative expressions beneath heavy brows. As the Stagger Lee songbook flourishes, Lee Shelton’s psyche begins to waste away. He is erased from the narrative of his own exploits until, in a nightmare, the ghost of Billy Lyons breaks the news: “Even your name ain’t your own no more” (McCullough and Hendrix 166). This last section of the comic, appropriately titled “The Ghost,” exposes Stagger Lee as a complete simulation, a construct that may well embody black social and judicial anxieties but offers little consolation to Lee Shelton behind bars. Curled up in anguish, he presses a pillow over his ears to deafen the sound of a bluesman singing in a nearby cell (fig. 11.4). In this last image of Shelton, the jagged word balloon above him reads, “Make him stop! MAKE HIM STOP! Make him stop! Make him stop!” (218).

Interestingly, Shelton’s disintegration is juxtaposed with the woman who arguably serves as his female counterpart in the comic: Evelyn Prescott. In an effort to abandon a life of prostitution, she develops an elaborate ploy to marry



11.4 In jail, Lee Shelton presses a pillow over his head in anguish as a bluesman sings in a nearby cell.

into high society—with the help of Mama Babe Connors—by re-creating herself as different women named Thelma, Evelyn, and Jean-Alice (194). Fragments of these multiple identities surface in her unexpected relationship with Hercules, as she is associated with both the middle-class respectability of the church and the worldly experience of the red-light district. Yet, as with Shelton, the ease with which Evelyn might be judged for her crimes is hindered by a fuller reconsideration of the circumstances that shaped her condition—which Hercules discovers when he learns how Mama Babe rescued her as a child from a southern brothel. Her longing to “be whole again” (195) is paralleled in the fractured image of Lee Shelton that emerges in the comic; he too is haunted by names that have been broken “in little bits and pieces” (194). As a result, the verbal and visual rereading of characters such as Shelton and Evelyn Prescott effectively complicates the image of black deviance and cruelty that is assumed in the Stagger Lee legend, and just as importantly, it underscores the existential crisis that is central to blues comics.

Origin Stories: Blues Comics as “Usable History”

Perhaps one of the strangest scenes in *Stagger Lee* occurs after the attorney Nathan Dryden has died and his clerk, Justin Troup, is compelled to take over Shelton’s defense. In a letter of instructions left behind, Dryden recounts a West African fable about the relative nature and responsibilities of power through the archdivinity of the Yoruba people, Obatala. Mistaken for a thief in the story, Obatala is imprisoned until another deity (or *orisha*), named Shango, realizes the error and releases him several weeks later. When Shango claims ignorance of the events that occurred, Obatala asserts, “Can a ruler be said to truly rule if he does not know what his servants do with the authority he has given them?”

(McCullough and Hendrix 164). When applied to Lee's situation, the ancestral tale reminds readers of how often and how flagrantly due process has been denied to the descendants of Africans in America; in seeking justice even for a man like Stagger Lee, the story affirms the rights of humanity in a broader sense. Dryden thoughtfully concludes the tale by telling his clerk, "Of course, Lee is not blameless as Obatala was, but Justin, please remember. He is being judged by men who have no understanding of the conditions that brought him to their prison" (164). Might these Yoruban deities be Lee Shelton's West African forefathers, providing yet another "version" of the Stagger Lee blues?

Covering less than four pages, the brief scene provides yet another instance in which the ancillary plots of *Stagger Lee* contribute to the narrative's larger message. Obatala's tale, like the account of Zell Baxley's fishing trip, deepens the reader's awareness of the people, places, and ideas that led to Stagger Lee's creation. And this variation of the character's origin story precedes even the twelve bars of a blues song. What is especially fascinating about the story Dryden tells is the manner in which Hendrix illustrates the telling, seamlessly connecting the plains of Oyo, Nigeria, to a St. Louis courtroom in an effort to provide a different perspective on Shelton's treatment and, by extension, the treatment of black people and other oppressed communities. Dryden, whose appearance in this scene is merely as a projection of his letter, speaks directly to Justin, yet his gaze extends outside the page to readers who may also benefit from his words. "I know you disapprove of Lee and strongly presume his guilt," he states, "I understand that, but hope that you can summon the professional dispassion necessary to give him a full and vigorous defense" (161). In the next panel, Dryden has been relocated across the Atlantic Ocean, outside of history, where Obatala's story takes place.

That Dryden's advice relies on a West African source is significant, of course, in affirming cultural continuity between black Americans and their African ancestry. Dryden is mindful of just how fragile this connection is when he prefaces the tale of the Yoruba people by telling Justin, "They may be your people and may be mine, but how are we to ever know?" (162). Through panels that bridge reality and myth as well as space and time, the figure of Obatala is portrayed with a large oval head shaped like an African mask, wide blank eyes, and fists swinging confidently by his side. Although the orisha who is the primary subject of the tale is known for representing a sense of moral authority as spotless as his white robes, Shango, the thunder god, is more readily associated with the power and virility suggested by the Stagger Lee paradigm. Yet questions of morality and justice, as shaped by hierarchies of power and societal norms and perceptions, are as essential to the Stagger Lee legend as they are to Obatala's story—a point that McCulloch highlights in his decision to include the story in his script. As Dryden makes clear, both figures are susceptible to the whims of the irrational and the absurd, whether through Eshu, the



11.5 Dryden relates a West African story to his clerk, Justin Troup, in order to affirm cultural continuity between black Americans and their African ancestry and to convince Justin to treat Lee with a full and vigorous defense.

trickster god, or through the arbitrary restrictions of the black codes in late-nineteenth-century America. While the Zell Baxley incident situates the heroic outlaw's origins within a singular moment of trauma—a familiar technique in a medium known for orphaned and wounded heroes—the myth of Obatala's imprisonment suggests a metaphor for understanding trauma and injustice in a systemic way.

An analogous strategy is utilized by Kyle Baker in the first section of *Nat Turner*, in which he departs from Thomas Gray's "Confessions" to imagine a richer and more detailed origin story that begins with Turner's mother being captured by enslavers in Africa and experiencing the horrors of the Middle Passage. Baker documents the wide-ranging, premeditated acts of violence that sustain the institution of slavery with as much detail as he does the 1831 insurrection—not only the transatlantic slave trade but the separation of families, grisly whippings, maiming, and rape. Alternatively, Love's *Bayou* places Baker's gritty realism in concert with realms of fantasy, retroactively defamiliarizing black folk culture through a parallel world that is inhabited by the characters of Uncle Remus tales and other magical creatures. Love's approach to remapping the South in *Bayou* relies on the same porous boundaries between myth, music, and history that allow an African American man from the nineteenth century to share the same page as a West African creation god in *Stagger Lee*. All of these comics imaginatively construct new sources of knowledge to

counter the sanctioned presumptions and oversimplifications that impede a full understanding of the past.

The blues comic's deep fascination with black folk origins, with the formative traumas and tensions of black subjects, may also indicate an effort to challenge the manner in which such images have fared within the comics industry in years past. Chaney maintains that recent comic book writers and artists who represent African American experience are endeavoring "to discover or invent a usable history by repurposing inflexible items or images from an archive founded upon black exclusion and misrepresentation" (199). This assertion can also be expanded to include the "archive" of comic books that have tended to depict blackness as a sign of the aberrant Other. Often, in the industry's early years during the Great Depression and the Second World War, nonwhites were exploited to express the depths of depravity and malevolence and ridiculed as spectacles of difference. The comic book historian Bradford Wright observes, "Whatever the comic book industry generally implied about tolerance in its call for national unity was overwhelmed by its consistently demeaning portrayals of nonwhite races" (54). Mainstream genres of the 1940s and early 1950s, from jungle comics to detective serials, typically offered crude images and undecipherable dialogue to connote the physical appearance, speech, movement, culture, and identity of all people of African descent. The risks that *Stagger Lee* and other blues comics take in humanizing figures that are known for acts of villainy are compounded, then, by the extent to which all black men and women in comics are portrayed as having an inherent capacity for vice. Nevertheless, it is also a testament to the pliable and dynamic interplay of comics as an artistic medium that the form that once affirmed such stereotypes can also be used to dismantle them. Blues comics take advantage of the medium's flexibility to engender antiracist rereadings that extend not only to the social and cultural contexts in which the stories take place but also to the exclusionary comic book elements that the stories seek to displace.

Ultimately, what is being unmasked in *Stagger Lee* is more than just the ruthlessness and conceit of an outlaw but is also the mutually dependent consequences of his real and imagined crimes. Although Stagger Lee's life began as Lee Shelton, his story persists as an open signifier that mirrors the shared experience of those who continually sing him into existence in juke joints, in saloons, on street corners, and even on the pages of a graphic novel. As James Baldwin once stated, "People who have no experience supposed that if a man is a thief, he is a thief; but, in fact, that isn't the most important thing about him. The most important thing about him is that he is a man and, furthermore, that if he's a thief or a murderer or whatever he is, *you* could also be and you would know this, anyone would know this who had really dared to live" ("Uses" 64–65). Comics such as *Stagger Lee* explore this existential daring, often in ways that value the blues as a tragicomic ethos, as a cultural resource, and as a dynamic narrative framework for understanding black folk subjectivity.

Note

- 1 Love is drawing on the Br'er Rabbit folktales that came down from African culture and then slave stories. The character in the comic is referred to variously as "Rabbit," "Bruh Rabbit," "Brer Rabbit," and "Mistuh Rabbit."

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