Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics, edited by Sean Guynes and Martin Lund

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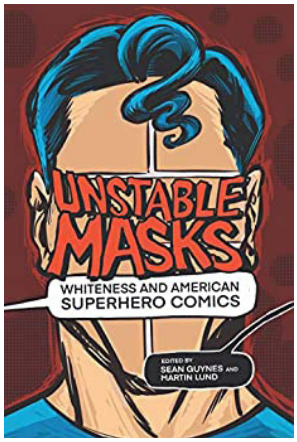

Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics, edited by Sean Guynes and Martin Lund, sets out to discuss the interstitial relationship between whiteness, American culture, and comic book superheroes, considering the complex intersections of identity, representation, narrative, production and consumption, and historical and cultural contexts for the production of American superhero comics. In this powerful and timely collection of scholarship, contributors from a variety of backgrounds explore the production, audience, and reception of superhero comic books as a means to engage with questions of what it means to be American and to be heroic, how deeply the superhero figure remains imbricated within the discourses of whiteness in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the great power and great responsibility of actively working to dismantle predominantly white cultural constructions of heroism.

Unstable Masks is divided into three sections, grouped by theme; each section focuses on a particular way of reading or historicizing the relationship of whiteness to the American superhero comics genre, and the sections build upon each other in a thoughtful and wide-ranging sequence. Frederick Luis Aldama's Foreword, "Unmasking Whiteness: Re-Spacing the Speculative in Superhero Comics," emphasizes the importance of speculative genres such as superhero narratives in shaking up complacent spaces and exploring questions of freedom and shared experiences, providing an overall context for the discussion to come; in their Introduction, "Not to Interpret, but to Abolish: Whiteness Studies and American Superhero Comics," Sean Guynes and Martin Lund bring together comics scholarship, critical race studies and whiteness studies, the election of American President Donald Trump and the question of American "greatness," and the Black Lives Matter movement to vividly demonstrate the critical importance of this discussion at this present cultural moment. Guynes and Lund invoke Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to explore masks as an ongoing metaphor (reflected in the title *Unstable Masks*): the identity nonwhite people

must successfully perform in a white-dominated society becomes connected to the masks and performative identities of the superhero, examples of which will be examined in the following chapters.

The first section, "Outlining Superheroic Whiteness," contains essays that work together to think about whiteness as inherent to, and also problematic for, American superhero comics; the essays in this section explore comparisons and constructions of characters across time and storylines in order to establish an overall sense of what "whiteness" means in relation to comics. Osvaldo Oyola's essay "Marked for Failure: Whiteness, Innocence, and Power in Defining Captain America" performs a comparative reading of two versions of Captain America, Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson, to conclude that Sam is set up for failure in the role due to his inability to harness the symbolic whiteness of "Captain America," suggesting that Sam Wilson's story challenges readers to acknowledge the deep antiblackness inherent in American cultural systems, including the comics industry itself. In "The Whiteness of the Whale and the Darkness of the Dinosaur: The Africanist Presence in Superhero Comics from Black Lightning to Moon Girl," Eric Berlatsky and Sika Dagbovie-Mullins read the first *Black Lightning* series (1977–1978) alongside the more contemporary *Moon Girl* and *Devil Dinosaur* (2016–2017) to conclude that even in supposedly postracial characterizations, stereotypes of primitivism, hypersexuality, and criminality persist, which serve to define heroism by contrast, aligning the superhero with whiteness. Jeremy M. Carnes continues this discussion of the savage/civilized binary, and its role as a tactic of settler colonialism, in "'The Original Enchantment': Whiteness, Indigeneity, and Representational Logics in *The New Mutants*," and Olivia Hicks's contribution "Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: The Racial Politics of *Cloak and Dagger*" examines a specific example of the constructed nature of whiteness in the context of Reagan's America, demonstrating the ways in which the idealized white femininity of the character Dagger showcases the form of American whiteness that has historically profited from yet also disavowed black labor. Following this close historical reading with an expansion into crossovers and status-changing comics events, Shamika Ann Mitchell argues in "Worlds Collide: Whiteness, Integration, and Diversity in the DC/Milestone Crossover" that even in an event meant to highlight diversity, in which DC's heroes combine forces with the racially diverse superheroes of the Milestone universe, whiteness and white heroes remain centered and prioritized. Finally, José Alaniz concludes this section with "Whiteness and Superheroes in the Comix/Codices of Enrique Chagoya," reading the politicized art of Enrique Chagoya in terms of Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "border consciousness," the space of ambivalence created by a clash of cultures; in Chagoya's art, Alaniz suggests, the repurposed superhero might function as a symbol of empowerment but also an implement for critique of both a dominant white culture and hypermasculinity.

The second section, "Reaching toward Whiteness," expands the discussion by delving into the instability and contingency of whiteness, noting the ongoing and precarious negotiations of who gets to be considered white in America; essays in this section investigate the ways in which comics frame whiteness in relation to other articulations of race and ethnicity. Esther De Dauw's "Seeing

White: Normalization and Domesticity in Vision's Cyborg Identity" focuses on the cyborg hero Vision, noting that the cyborg can perform white masculinity successfully, but the performance is always a construction, an active suppression of Otherness, that ultimately leads to failure and even potential villainy, which in turn suggests that only whiteness can achieve the truly moral lifestyle. In ""Beware the Fanatic!": Jewishness, Whiteness, and Civil Rights in *X-Men* (1963–1970)," Martin Lund carries this investigation of morality and whiteness into early *X-Men* comics, concluding that these stories do attempt to engage with civil rights issues, particularly in Lee and Kirby's awareness of the struggles of Jewish-American life, but follow a liberal assimilationist line rather than a radical one, fail to truly empathize with the oppressed, and ultimately read as a negotiation between different shades of whiteness. Similarly, Neil Shyminsky examines the storylines of "Decimation" (2006) and "Avengers vs. X-Men" (2012) to argue in "Mutation, Racialization, Decimation: The X-Men as White Men" that the X-Men remain privileged—predominantly white, wealthy or with access to wealthy mentorship, and physically attractive according to American cultural ideals—and remain indebted to a social order that privileges whiteness; if the X-Men or other mutants do attempt to reject the white American hegemony, Shyminksy observes, then they are necessarily figured as villains within the storyline. Finally, Sean Guynes, in "White Plasticity and Black Possibility in Darwyn Cooke's DC: *The New Frontier*," offers a detailed and eloquent reading of Cooke's work as a form of critical nostalgia that attempts to re-envision the past and think through questions of DC Comics's racial legacy, potentially opening up more possibilities for the black superhero, but simultaneously emphasizing the fundamental whiteness of existing superhero comics and characters.

The final section, "Whiteness by a Different Color," links discussions of apprehension, negotiation, and acceptance to one of the most well-known superhero tropes: the secret identity. Essays in this section examine the secret identity in terms of fluidity and invisibility, as connected to whiteness and the privileges that being white can afford. Yvonne Chireau's "White or Indian? Whiteness and Becoming the White Indian Comics Superhero" draws attention to the numerous white comics characters who become "White Indian" superheroes, arguing that these heroes reinforce white supremacy tropes by appropriating the Native American identity part of their transmutation into saviors. Continuing the discussion of cultural appropriation, Matthew Pustz examines the complicated legacy of white martial arts superheroes in "A True Son of K'un-Lun": The Awkward Racial Politics of White Martial Arts Superheroes in the 1970s," focusing on the characters of Iron Fist and Richard Dragon in the context of the 1970s explosion of interest in the martial arts in America to demonstrate the ways in which whiteness implicitly bestows flexibility, adaptability, hyper-competence, and true understanding, in contrast to a flattened and generic portrayal of Asian characters. Eric Sobel's "The Whitest There Is at What I Do: Japanese Identity and the Unmarked Hero in *Wolverine* (1982)" carries this examination into Wolverine's complex relationship with Japanese culture, observing that Chris Claremont and Frank Miller's Wolverine is shown to more successfully embody qualities of an *imagined* Japan than any Japanese characters; while the storyline attempts to portray Wolverine as simply a worthy man who takes on non–culturally specific qualities of virtue, regardless of race, he is nevertheless always a white

man in perfect health, morally and physically exceptional, making his connection to marginalized identities difficult to defend. Finally, in "The Dark Knight: Whiteness, Appropriation, Colonization, and Batman in the New 52 Era," Jeffrey A. Brown concludes that the New 52 Batman comics, in particular Grant Morrison's *Batman Incorporated*, offer a surface-level depiction of superhero diversity at a global level, but in fact perpetuate an ideology of white privilege through Bruce Wayne's appropriation of exotic skills and Batman's neocolonial approach to enlisting foreign heroes to serve as supporting characters in his personal vendetta, ending the section overall with a fitting critique of the way in which this narrative mirrors DC's—and by extension the American capitalist—corporate attitude toward these foreign heroes, simply abandoning them once they had served their purpose for the wealthy white American hero.

Noah Berlatsky, in the Afterword "Empowerment for Some, or Tentacle Sex for All," connects the films *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Black Panther* (2018) to Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy to offer a poignant overview of the ways in which "superness" (259), like whiteness, has always been dependent on a world in which some people are more equal than others, and to suggest that if whiteness can be decentered and detached from superpowered heroes, then perhaps empowerment will be possible for everyone. This ending note of hope is precisely why Unstable Masks is an important and powerful book: wide-ranging in terms of texts and time periods, but eloquently connected to the present cultural moment in America (and beyond), and profoundly significant for thinking through how we might reconceptualize the heroes we construct for our future.

Kristin Noone is an English instructor and Writing Center faculty at Irvine Valley College; her research explores medievalism, adaptation, heterotemporalities, fantasy, and romance. In 2018 and 2019 she received the National Popular Culture Association's Two-Year College Faculty Award, as well as the Kathleen Gilles Seidel Award, administered by the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, for travel and research support in Australia. She is the editor of the essay collections *Terry Pratchett's Ethical Worlds* (2020) and *Welsh Mythology and Folklore in Popular Culture* (2011), and has published on subjects from Neil Gaiman's many Beowulfs to depictions of witchcraft in Terry Pratchett's Discworld to Arthurian references in *World of Warcraft*. She is currently working on a book-length study of *Star Trek* tie-in novels as sites of cross-media and cross-genre contact.