Unmasking History:

Superhero Tropes and Historical Reimagination in the *Watchmen* Franchise

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Submitted to the Department of English, Vanderbilt University,

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Major,

April 27, 2021

1. Introduction

Since the inception of Superman, superhero comics have generally been populated with the same type of character—chiefly white, morally unambiguous, costumed heroes. Superheroes typically possess powers that extend beyond human capabilities, resulting from anomalous situations or accidents. They fight for truth, justice, protection of the innocent, and the promotion of the "American Way." The comic book form existed before Superman, but Superman and the subsequent superhero comics published in the 1940s established the widespread popularity and tenets of the American superhero genre. Jonathan Culler defines genres as groups of norms and expectations that help readers assign functions to various elements in a work (Culler, 73). When superhero comics reached their height of popularity in the mid-1940s, they were part of a relatively easy-to-define genre: pages of action-packed, vividly colored graphic art accompanied a fantasy story that relied on a simple, formulaic plot featuring superheroes who typically possessed dual identities and operated independently of established policing agencies to defeat villains. Many superheroes participate in historical events. Captain America, for example, has been depicted punching Hitler, eradicating communism, investigating a secret evil organization led by Nixon and Kissinger, and fighting terrorism in the Middle East.

Against this backdrop, writer Alan Moore shocked readers and turned superhero tropes on their head with his ground-breaking graphic novel, *Watchmen*. The graphic novel, written by Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, presents a profound meditation on what a world with superheroes would *actually* look like. If masked heroes lived among us, would Nixon have gotten away with Watergate? Would the United States have won the Vietnam War? In other words, taking superheroes seriously means entertaining alternative histories. Moore and Gibbons explore such possibilities by presenting a 1980s universe that is, at once, similar and divergent

from our own. *Watchmen* possessed a historically significant role in the transition from serialized comics to the graphic novel, after which trade publishers, bookstores, and the press began to take graphic novels more seriously (Hobereck, 13). *Watchmen's* complex characters and mature story line were unlike anything previously seen in the superhero genre. The story questions what superheroes are for and whether the world be a better place with them. Beyond investigating alternate realities that include masked vigilantes, *Watchmen* includes many features that set it apart from comics of the superhero genre: overlapping plotlines, psychological realism, a self-consciously ironic relationship with the genre, and dark, flawed characters.

Years later, *Watchmen* was adapted through two different mediums—one film (2009) and one television show (2019). Zack Snyder's 2009 film adaptation of the graphic novel closely mimicked the 1980s alternate reality plot and went so far as to cinematically recreate particular frames and images from the original material. Ten years after the film and thirty years after the graphic novel, Damon Lindelof created his HBO television adaptation *Watchmen*, which is starkly different from the graphic novel and the film. The 2019 television series includes nine, hour-long episodes and has a complex relationship with its original source material. The show is set in present-day America, thirty years after the events of the original comic, primarily in Tulsa, Oklahoma. HBO's adaptation of the graphic novel maintains certain characters, themes, and symbols. But the show discards the Cold War premise of the original text and comments instead on modern-day America.

All three versions of *Watchmen* place their morally ambiguous crime-fighters, who do not share the appearance or psyche of Superman, in relation to historical events that are controversial, violent, and neglected by popular culture. Moore and Snyder's heroes promote violence against innocents in the midst of the Vietnam War, and Lindelof's heroes face brutal

racial crimes in Tulsa, Oklahoma. By grounding their heroes in this historical backdrop, the three *Watchmen* texts prompt a reckoning with historical violence and bigotry through the very genre that has long idealized America.

Watchmen has spawned a body of literary criticism; some scholarship focuses on the text in relation to philosophy, gender, and genre traditions. I am instead choosing to focus on history and the way that *Watchmen* re-stages superheroes with respect to dark, realistic historical events. In this thesis, I will analyze specific historical instances from the graphic novel, film, and television show to draw out how superheroes' interaction with history forces a consideration of trauma and violence that is otherwise unacknowledged. I will contrast *Watchmen's* characters and the artists' depiction of history with those of Superman to show ways in which *Watchmen* pushes against audience expectations. An understanding of the main characters, plot, and setting is essential to elicit how the authors challenge superhero stereotypes. In the first section I will introduce the central characters from *Watchmen* who are placed in the center of historically ambiguous and violent events. I will offer an explanation of why *Watchmen* is so unusual within its genre. Additionally, I will provide a brief plot synopsis and unpack the ways in which each author recreates history through life-like world building in their respective mediums.

I have selected two main historical events for analysis: the Vietnam War from the graphic novel and film and the 1921 Tulsa Massacre from the television show. These events illuminate the way that *Watchmen* subverts "superhero" ideals and interrogate how history is portrayed in popular media. In the second section, I will examine how the backdrop of the Vietnam War brings ideas of morality and justice to the fore. In the third section, I will focus on how the placement of Hooded Justice—an original *Watchmen* hero—in Tulsa, Oklahoma forces viewers to acknowledge another real, yet partially concealed, aspect of American history: the legacy of

slavery. I will bring the War in Vietnam and the Tulsa Massacre together in the fourth section through the analysis of Lindelof's main character, Angela Abar, also known as "Sister Night"—a hero whose origin story lies both in Vietnam and in Tulsa. In the final section, I argue that the treatment of time in the graphic novel and television show is essential to *Watchmen's* ability to challenge notions of American heroism.

2. Welcome to the *Watchmen* World

Watchmen was published as a 12-part series by DC Comics in 1986 before it was collected as a 12-section volume in 1987. The complex characters and mature story line were unlike anything previously seen in the superhero genre. *Watchmen* was published alongside two other graphic novels—Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Rises* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*—that brought widespread national attention to the form. Since the inception of the graphic novel, there has been scholarly dispute over whether the form, and whether *Watchmen*, should be classified as a work of literature. In 2005, *Time* magazine ranked *Watchmen* among their top 100 English-language novels since 1923. It was the only graphic novel represented in this ranking.

Watchmen presents an alternate 1985 world of retired masked heroes, vigilantes, and a semi-deity. In this alternative timeline, the U.S. won the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal was never revealed. The text engages with 1980s Cold War politics head on. In the beginning of each chapter, an image of a "Doomsday Clock" charts United State tensions with the Soviet Union. The Watchmen, comprising the Comedian, Dr. Manhattan, Nite Owl, Ozymandias, Rorschach, and Silk Spectre, have been disbanded after Nixon outlawed masked vigilantes because of rising public distrust with the Keene Act. In 1985, at the outset of the book, Rorschach conducts an underground investigation because he believes someone is out to kill all the previous Watchmen. Adrian Veidt/Ozymandias serves as a sort of villain of *Watchmen*. He

engineers a plot to purposefully kill millions of New York City residents in order to "save the world" and trick the U.S. and USSR into cooperation against a fictitious alien invasion. The story follows the moral struggles of superheroes and includes many features that set it apart from comics of the superhero genre including a dark, mature tone, complicated plotlines, and a meta relationship with the comic book genre.

Lindelof's television adaptation, like the original graphic novel, includes multi-layered plot lines, shifts in time, and is infused with socio-political controversy. Several key characters and points of conflict are necessary for understanding this thesis. Lindelof's *Watchmen* follows the story of Angela Abar, a Black policewoman who lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In this twenty-first century *Watchmen* universe, left-leaning Robert Redford has been president for the past thirty years, police officers wear masks to protect themselves from a hateful public, and an elusive Vietnamese woman named Lady Trieu reigns over most of America's science and technology industries. A white supremacist terrorist group called the Seventh Kavalry also wears masks modeled after Rorschach, a character from the original *Watchmen* graphic novel. Their racial crusade based on apathy for the police force and Redford's presidency threatens civil order. In the first episode, police chief, Judd Crawford, is murdered and Angela investigates his death. During her investigation Angela learns about her heritage and past and viewers learn about the bigotry, violence, and controversial historical events that underpin American history.

In the original graphic novel and in the subsequent adaptations, all the *Watchmen* authors attempted to create worlds that reflects real life. Moore aimed for his heroes to live in exactly the same world as ours and actually work out and follow through on the implications of the presence of superheroes (*Watchmen Absolute Edition*). In Moore's proposal of the Watchmen series, he said that "being realistic," a superhuman like Dr. Manhattan would be used for political ends. He

wrote that our world, inhabited by superheroes, would be completely different in several different spheres: “the world will look different, feel different atmospherically, and behave differently in given situations” (*Watchmen Absolute Edition*). In his plans, he even wrote about his prediction about the legal system, anticipating vague and uncertain legislation that would be difficult to apply. Moore further explained that there would be increased tension between political parties, paranoia with masked persons carrying out laws, and the potential formation of neurotic superhero groupies. In his plans, he also accounted for the technological reaction to superheroes in the real world. He believed that those with powers could provide vital help in scientific endeavors to speed up human discoveries.

Alan Moore long held antipathy for Hollywood and believed that *Watchmen* was “unfilmable.” In 2005, Moore told Entertainment Weekly “my book is a comic book, not a movie, not a novel. A comic book. It’s been made in a certain way and designed to be read in a certain way” (Jenson). However, in 2009 Zack Snyder attempted to recreate the graphic novel through film. The movie closely follows the original material; it includes similar characters, setting, and plot. However, at times the film reduces the graphic novel’s level of complexity and departs from the text, partially due to the artistic affordances of film. Additionally, the film was not nearly as revolutionary as the graphic novel, especially when received by a 2009 audience that was more accustomed to a dark portrayal of American history and heroes. When the movie was released, reviews ranged widely—some called the movie a masterpiece, while others referred to it as a muddled mess (Van Ness, 172). Moore said of Snyder’s film, “it spoon-feeds us, which has the effect of watering down our collective cultural imagination” (Boucher). The original graphic novel inspired strong feelings among many readers, so despite receiving visceral reactions to his adaptation, Snyder knew he was bound to disappoint some.

When Lindelof decided to take on the *Watchmen* world, he, too, knew that this project would be no easy feat. However, Lindelof sharply departed from Snyder's approach. Instead of creating a faithful adaptation, he aimed to replicate the "emotional sensation" and the spirit of the graphic novel ("Episode 1"). In creating his television show, *Watchmen*, Lindelof thought through many of the same questions that Moore asked himself. He sought to tell the 2019 story of America with masked heroes fighting crime and seeking justice in a realistic work. He similarly created another lifelike alternative America through characters who reflect human nature, warts and all. Each character in the original graphic novel represents a different complex psychological and philosophical profile. Lindelof continues under the tradition that *Watchmen* established, whereby superheroes age and their moral compass is not so straight. He described the TV series as a "remix" of the novel, taking in modern America. To develop a source of conflict for the show, Lindelof decided to use the twenty-first century version of the Cold War. He believed that similar to tensions mounting from a nuclear stand-off between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. are the tensions that stem from centuries of built-up systemic racism. When beginning to write, Lindelof thought:

> What's the equivalent now of impending nuclear war? What's creating the big cultural anxiety? For me, it's the anxiety of a reckoning. Not because there are white supremacists, but because I am complicit in white supremacy. Because I'm a white man, I've gotten to take this entirely different path through life. (Egner)

In an interview, Lindelof recalled writing the script for *Watchmen* around the same time as the violent 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where self-identified white supremacist groups gathered to fight against plans to remove a Confederate statue. Violence erupted between protesters and counter-protesters, leading the Virginia governor to declare a

state of emergency. Consequently, in the HBO adaptation of *Watchmen*, race is at the forefront of the show from the very first episode.

It is clear that the graphic novel and HBO television adaptation are similar in the writers' concern with portraying the real world during the time in which they were written. In addition to attentive portrayal of historical and political content, Moore and Lindelof also create lifelike worlds through the inclusion of realistic documents—expository materials—in their respective stories. For Moore, these documents take the shape of "back-matter": police reports, book excerpts, essays, psychological studies, external comic strips, advertisements, and the history of superheroes in the *Watchmen* universe at the end of each chapter. The back-matter portion of each chapter serves multiple purposes. The material transports readers into the *Watchmen* world and gives important insight into the psyche and histories of different characters. Effectively, these documents make readers feel as if they are holding artifacts in their hands (Van Ness, 31). The back-matter also elaborates on aspects of the story which are only touched upon in the main narrative, enhancing and enriching readers' experience. Commensurate with the creation of back-matter in the graphic novel, HBO created a *Watchmen* website called "Peteypedia." Peteypedia houses a digital archive of memos, research, legal briefs, interrogation scripts, and advertisements that one might find living in Lindelof's *Watchmen* world. The documents are presumably compiled by fictional FBI agent Dale Petey, a minor character in the television show. Peteypedia fills in some of the blanks for *Watchmen* viewers. And while the documents are not necessary to understand the show, they are useful in ameliorating fans' understanding of the events that transpired between the graphic novel and the 2019 adaption. Perhaps unafforded to Zack Snyder due to the film medium, Moore and Lindelof's inclusion of "real world" documents give audiences a real sense of atmosphere and understanding in the *Watchmen*

universe. By inviting viewers and readers to participate in meaning-making of the narrative through these faux-documents, the graphic novel and television show consequently give readers and viewers and opportunity to actively engage with history.

3. "Heroes" in Vietnam

In the graphic novel, Moore and Gibbons place their characters in the midst of a controversial historical conflict: the Vietnam War. This decision calls American morality and justice into question through the very genre—superhero comics—that typically glorifies the country's actions. The Vietnam War, which began in 1954, was a long and divisive conflict between North and South Vietnam. North Vietnam, the Viet Cong, was supported by China, the Soviet Union, and other communist allies. South Vietnam was primarily supported by the United States. The war represented an "us-versus-them" world that had been created by Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Notably, during the conflict there were high costs and casualties among both soldiers and innocent civilians. The war ended when Congress blocked any further U.S. military involvement in 1973 and shortly after, the North Vietnamese overtook South Vietnam. In a very different world, the *Watchmen* world, the United States wins the Vietnam War with help from Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian. This victory enables the United States to unify Vietnam and absorb it as a fifty-first state; it also paves the way for Nixon to serve for five terms as president. In this way, Moore turns the familiar comic book icon of Superman, "the noble and indomitable hero who defends truth and justice," on its head with the premise that if superheroes really existed, their powers would be made to advance the interests of the state in pursuit of geopolitical power (Paik, 27-28). The effect of Moore and Gibbons' placement and portrayal of heroes within their alternate Cold War timeline revises

archetypal superhero tropes and unveils America's troubled history of imperialism and violence in Vietnam.

While many comics placed their heroes in American wars, few placed heroes in the convoluted and contentious landscape of the War in Vietnam. One reason for this may be because comics were originally intended for children. Superhero comics long entertained children and adolescents with fanciful stories and showed what it meant to be moral and righteous (Romagnoli, 116). Superman, for example, urged Americans to buy war bonds during WWII and was depicted fighting the Nazis. In "Superman" Number 18, for example, the cover displays Superman flying through the air in patriotic garb with a caption that reads, "war savings bonds stamps do the job on the Japanazis!" (Fig. 1). And in "Superman" Number 17, he stands on top of the world holding miniature, squabbling Hitler and Hirohito (Fig. 2).

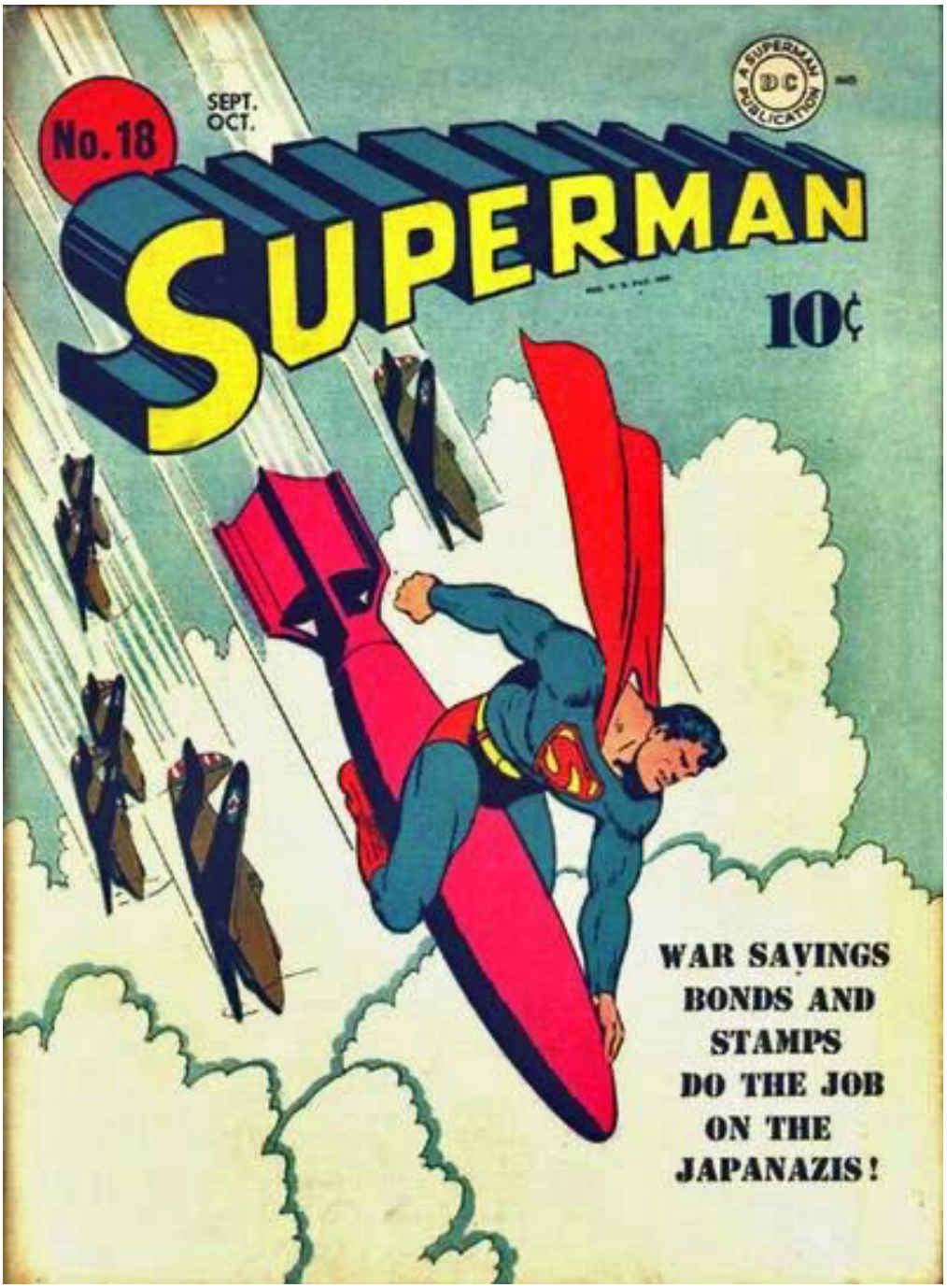

Fig. 1. Dramatic "bomb rodeo" World War II cover from: Ray, Fred. "Superman #18." *Superman*. DC Comics, 1942.

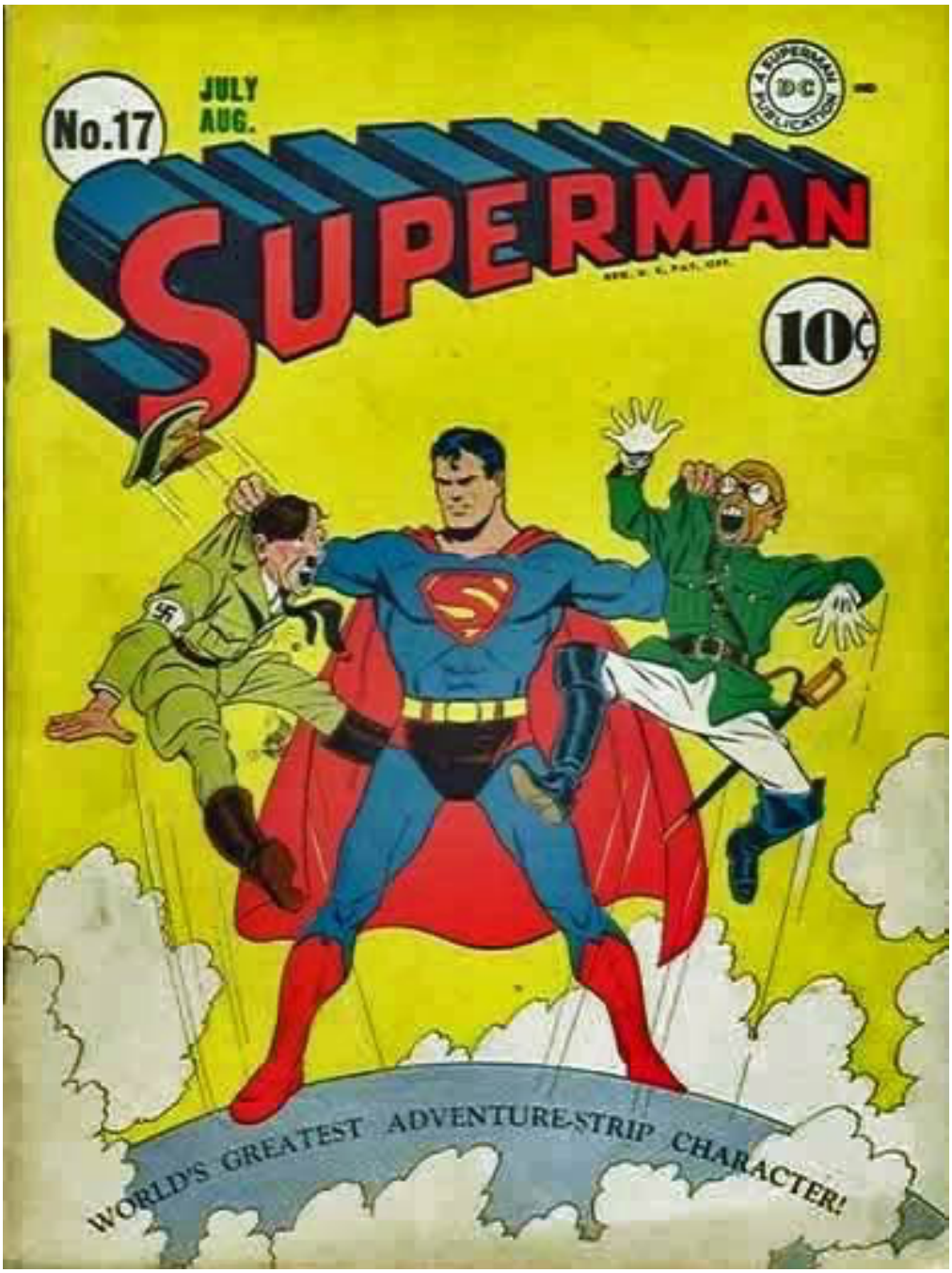

Fig. 2. “World’s Greatest Adventure-Strip Character” with Hitler and Hirohito from: Ray, Fred. “Superman #17.” *Superman*. DC Comics, 1942.

In both of these images, Superman plays an important role in fighting for America and there is no question of who is “good” and who is “evil.” In contrast with a clear-cut conflict portrayal, there was no explicit mainstream media narrative of the Vietnam War as there was during World

War I and World War II. As such, writers and illustrators often avoided depicting heroes in Vietnam. With his powers, Superman could have easily altered the outcome of the war in Vietnam, but comics kept him virtually out of the conflict. When public opinion turned against the Vietnam War after the Tet Offensive, DC Comics finally sent Superman to Vietnam on behalf of "patriotism" and "democracy" in "Superman" Number 216 "The Soldier of Steel." In response to servicemen's letters requesting his presence, Superman enlists in the war, receives a physical, flies overseas, deals with girlfriend troubles, but he does little to change the course of history. So even when placed in Vietnam, Superman remains on the sidelines. In contrast, *Watchmen* did not shy away from the violent and morally contentious aspects of war, nor did it avoid the question of how superheroes would actually affect the course of history. Unlike prior comic book portrayal of heroes winning wars on behalf of a noble cause—think Captain America punching Hitler in the face—*Watchmen* did something very different.

The characters that Moore and Gibbons send overseas to fight in Vietnam, Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian, bring the violent and morally corrupt nature of American combat to light. Dr. Manhattan is the only "powered" hero in *Watchmen*. His blue, glowing skin and ability to teleport, manipulate matter, change size, self-replicate, perceive time all at once, and destroy matter with the lift of a hand sets him apart from the other *Watchmen* characters. The Comedian is a nihilistic character with a strong build and inclination for violence. These two crime fighters are atypical of the superhero genre owing to their questionable personas and actions while fighting in a controversial war. Instead of glorifying Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian in combat in Vietnam, *Watchmen* unveils the brutality of the war and the crimes against humanity committed by American soldiers against Vietnamese civilians. Dr. Manhattan's gargantuan size and ability to obliterate an entire Vietnam landscape represent the completely unbalanced nature

of the Vietnam War. Additionally, his name ominously refers to the Manhattan project, which was an endeavor during WWII whereby 5,000 people in Los Alamos, New Mexico created, tested, and successfully deployed the atomic bomb. Its mention elicits imagery of mushroom clouds and mass destruction. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. used weapons that could destroy entire cities and landscapes against a small, decentralized agrarian jungle environment, destroying untold numbers of human lives and upending an entire society (Kolko, 6). The U.S. indiscriminately struck entire populations that included innocent civilians. While total war was not a new warfare strategy, it highlights the utter imbalance of power and arms between the U.S. and Vietnam. This strategy was not only morally dubious but counter-productive and immensely wasteful militarily.

The United States' reckless and abusive strategy is directly reflected in *Watchmen's* depiction of Dr. Manhattan fighting in Vietnam. In one panel, Moore and Gibbons show the turmoil which Dr. Manhattan inflicts upon the Vietnamese people and their land in order to end the war (Fig. 3).

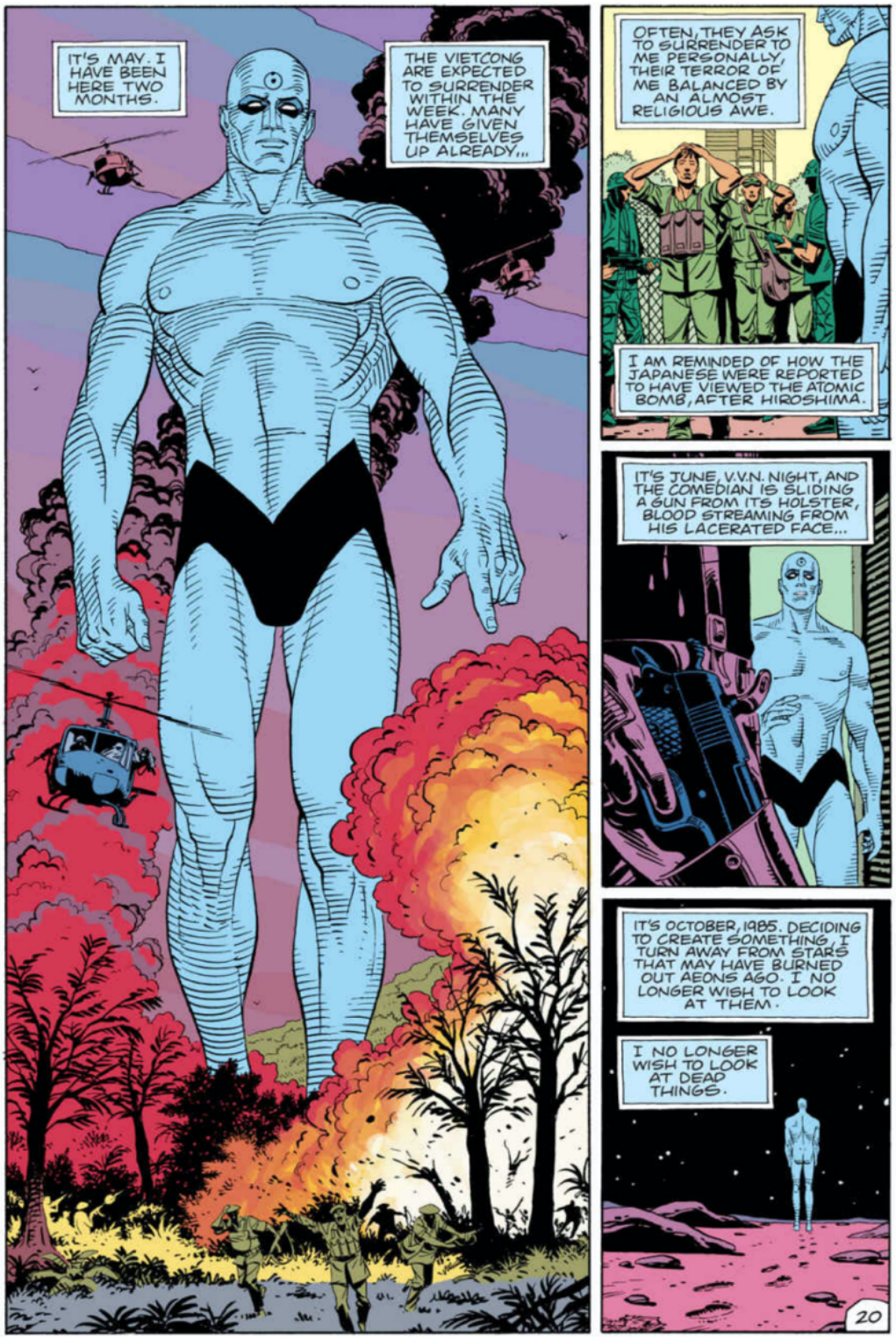

Fig. 3. Dr. Manhattan's remembers fighting in the Vietnam War from: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. Warner Books, 1987, p. 130.

The panel spans the size of three conventional panels vertically collapsed together, allowing for his body to tower over miniscule Vietnamese fighters. The tiny figures at the bottoms of the Vietnam panel, nearly unnoticeable, look as if they are screaming, with their hands flailing in the air. The figures at the bottom of the page, as well as the helicopter in the foreground, provide readers with a point of reference to understand just how gargantuan Dr. Manhattan is. His body consumes the left side of the page and forces readers to readjust the way that they understand visual cues. This deviation from the typical three-by-three panel structure is important because as readers become comfortable with the fixed nine-panel page structure, they are more likely to notice deviations from the norm and evaluate the meaning of those deviations as they occur (Van Ness, 81). Dr. Manhattan stands up strong, glowing in blue with muscles protruding, and merely points his finger in the direction of the land to obliterate everything in sight. Orange and red smoke gathers around the silhouette of burnt, charred trees and the sky purple with smog and pollution. The juxtaposition between the flowing smoke of Vietnam and the adjacent black panel depicting Manhattan alone on Mars provides sharp contrast between mayhem and serenity. This imagery gives American readers a glimpse into what it means to fight in a war—complete destruction. In a stylized blue speech box Dr. Manhattan narrates, “the Vietcong are expected to surrender within the week. Many have given themselves up already…” (*Watchmen*, 130). His words and thoughts are contained within light blue bubbles and boxes, surrounded by a white border. These text balloons appear cold and detached. Dr. Manhattan’s words and the stylization of his textbox contribute to just how disconnected Dr. Manhattan is from the horror he has inflicted. This artistic decision is further proof of Dr. Manhattan’s otherworldliness and inability to connect with humanity. Dr. Manhattan is thus a metaphor for the U.S. military strategy of complete destruction without consideration of human life. Similar to the way that Dr. Manhattan

views mortals, the U.S. did not care for the people of Vietnam or for the country itself. Vietnam represented only geopolitical value for Americans. Unlike superhero archetypes, where the hero fights against a villain, Dr. Manhattan is a political tool used by the U.S. to insert itself with disproportionate force into conflict.

Zack Snyder's film adaptation, *Watchmen*, also subverts superhero tropes through the depiction of brutal mass violence. In a scene cognate with Moore and Gibbon's panel depicting Dr. Manhattan, viewers see Viet Cong fighters shooting out towards the camera. But Snyder, filming in 2009, an era accustomed to skepticism about the war, throws even more emphasis on the brutality of the scene. One man slowly lowers his gun and looks upwards with terror and awe. The camera flips to an over-the-shoulder shot so that the viewers now see what the Viet Cong fighters see: a colossal, blue Dr. Manhattan walking towards them in slow-motion with a smokey orange sky and fire rising from a burnt landscape. The sun looms behind Dr. Manhattan's head like a halo, and the Viet Cong fighters pivot towards the camera in an attempt to run away (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Dr. Manhattan destroys Viet Cong fighters and Vietnam landscape from: *Watchmen*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009, 38:52-39:20.

Triumphant music—Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries"—plays in the background of this scene, recalling Francis Coppola's famous use of the piece in his film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Snyder's film similarly portrays the madness of the war in Vietnam in this scene with sounds of helicopter blades and missiles playing over the epic, soaring orchestral sounds of Wagner's music. Highly advanced U.S. weapons blow up virtually defenseless villagers. It appears as if members from two different centuries are fighting against each other. Snyder's use of triumphant operatic music in this scene alludes to Coppola's sardonic portrayal of wanton destruction. While violence in Vietnam may not startle twenty-first century viewers, Snyder compensates with extra gore: Dr. Manhattan lifts his arm in slow-motion and points towards the Viet Cong fighters, each of whom gets obliterated in an incredibly gory fashion, with skin and guts and blood flying in the air. As Dr. Manhattan advances, two fighter jets fly overhead leave parallel lines of smoke behind. This spectacle may remind viewers of U.S. Navy squadron flight demonstrations where jets choreograph a flight and leave artistic lines of smoke in their trail. Typically, these demonstrations are staged as a show of appreciation for the U.S. military, often at large sporting events or air shows. In *Watchmen*, however, the fighter jets, heroic music, and slow-motion filming is instead unsettling, especially when juxtaposed with Dr. Manhattan's gruesome obliteration of the Viet Cong.

Like Moore and Gibbons, Snyder defies viewers' expectations of an American superhero at war. The idea of America as a vanguard international player who "saves" Vietnam from communism is not present in the *Watchmen* world. Rather, *Watchmen's* depiction of Vietnam and its specific artistic devices—whether that be word-balloon narration or music—causes discomfort and forces readers and viewers to cope with a more realistic rendering of that which popular representations of war often conceal. It is the modern-day equivalent, one could say, of

Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," a classical World War I poem in which the patriotic idea that it is sweet to die for one's country is set against the agony, brutality, and trauma of warfare. By 2009 no one was surprised to see the Vietnam War treated in a critical manner. But it is important to note that the use of the superhero genre—a genre descended from comics for children—destabilizes viewer expectations. Moore, Gibbons, and Snyder thus de-idealize history and American heroism through the placement of heroes in Vietnam.

Along with Dr. Manhattan, Moore and Gibbons send another character who represents the intrinsically criminal nature of the war in Vietnam and calls attention to the crimes against humanity committed against innocent civilians at the hands of American soldiers. Edward Blake, who goes by the alias of "the Comedian" is a nihilistic, violent paramilitary operative who once fought in the original Minutemen, a masked crime-fighting group founded in the 1940s. In Vietnam, the Comedian is illustrated wearing a red, white, and blue star-printed uniform that mimics the garb of an archetypal American superhero (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Dr. Manhattan remembers the Comedian's sinister face in Vietnam from: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. Warner Books, 1987, p. 129.

His self-ironizing name "acknowledges the disconnect between the red-white-and-blue optimism he projects to the world and the violent reality of his actions" (Regalado, 211). The Comedian's shoulder-pad-adorned large muscles make him look like a football player for America's team. By dressing the Comedian in patriotic colors and in the style of a very American uniform, readers

are reminded of classical heroes, such as Superman and Captain America. However, in the two panels following Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian's meeting in Vietnam, readers see the Comedian roasting enemy combatants with a flame thrower (Fig. 5). From one panel to the next, the Comedian's smirk grows wider, the panel's focus zooms closer in on his face, and his eyes become redder. The Comedian evidently takes pleasure in the act of violence. Combined with the American stylization of the Comedian's uniform in the preceding panels, his sadism forces readers to reckon with their country's actions. Portrayals of war fought by "noble" Americans often do not include brutal violence and a convoluted definition of good and evil. In the panels that feature the sinister smile of the Comedian as he burns Vietcong enemies, Dr. Manhattan narrates: "As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I also realize that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding. Blake's different. He understands perfectly…" (*Watchmen*, 129). The narration and illustration in these panels both show *and* tell that which America typically blocks from popular memory: morally questionable political decisions that lead to violence and even the darkness at the heart of the American identity.

The Comedian unveils even more of the dark underbelly of American identity and military engagement in both the graphic novel and the movie when he drunkenly shoots and kills a young Vietnamese woman who is pregnant with his child (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7).

Fig. 6. Dr. Manhattan watches the Comedian shoot Liao Lin in a bar in Vietnam from: *Watchmen*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009, 39:50-41:50.

Fig. 7. The Comedian violently engages with Liao Lin, an innocent civilian, while in Vietnam from: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. Warner Books, 1987, p. 129.

In Snyder's film, a pregnant woman named Liao Lin approaches the Comedian in a bar while caressing her stomach and says, "the war is over now, we must talk about this baby," to which

the Comedian responds, “there’s nothing to talk about. See, I’m leaving. I’m going to forget about you and your horrible sweaty little piece of shit country. Get the f**k out of here!” (*Watchmen*). After Liao Lin slashes the Comedian’s face with a bottle, he shoots her while Dr. Manhattan stands idly by, declining to stop the horrific violence. A classic American hero like Superman would never be depicted deliberately killing innocents or idly onlooking violence. In this way, *Watchmen* upends the principles of heroic self-sacrifice for the greater good. Immediately, the scene in Vietnam cuts to a scene of a casket lowered into the ground at an honorary American funeral for the Comedian that takes place years later. This abrupt transition reminds viewers of the funeral which Liao Lin would never receive.

This scene from the graphic novel and film reminds viewers of American crimes against humanity against Vietnamese civilians during the war, crimes that are often omitted from classrooms and from popular culture. The My Lai massacre, for example, was one of the most horrific acts of violence committed against unarmed civilians during the Vietnam War. U.S. soldiers slaughtered over 500 people, raped women and girls, burnt villages to the ground, and U.S. officers covered up much of the carnage for almost a year. The Comedian’s actions in the bar and the My Lai massacre were not anomalous events. During the Vietnam War, the rape of women, murder of civilians, and complete destruction of villages were commonplace. The Comedian thus subverts viewer expectations of a noble, American war hero by not only enthusiastically and violently executing government instructions, but also by unveiling the moral depravity that epitomizes real American behavior in Vietnam. Unlike pre-existing war comics, Moore and Gibbons clearly do not shy away from the realities of war. Through their far-from-heroic heroes, *Watchmen* acknowledges the shock, horror, injustice, and madness of an American war.

4. Heroes and Race in Tulsa, Oklahoma

In the television adaptation of *Watchmen*, Damon Lindelof similarly places atypical American heroes in a moment of occluded history. As a result, he shows the ways in which America not only fails to address traumatic historical events but actively attempts to erase pieces of the past from our records and collective memory. In the graphic novel, Moore and Gibbons portrayed Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian fighting Vietnam without acknowledging the Vietnamese people. Similarly, Lindelof takes the idea of "othering" bodies based on cultural or racial differences and places it at the center of his show. However, thirty years after Moore and Gibbons wrote their graphic novel, our world—and Lindelof's *Watchmen* world—look very different.

Lindelof places twenty-first century race relations and unusual heroes, such as Hooded Justice, at the forefront of his show. Hooded Justice was a hero originally from Moore and Gibbons' graphic novel. He was part of a 1940's crime-fighting group that preceded the *Watchmen* called the "Minutemen." Hooded Justice is the one vigilante crime fighter who never unveiled his true identity, not even to the fellow Minutemen. People believed that Hooded Justice was a white man, however, Lindelof reimagined him as an old Black man living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The first episode of the television series, "It's Summer and We're Running Out of Time," opens with Hooded Justice's origin story—the traumatic experience of the 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma race riots. In typical mysterious *Watchmen* fashion, viewers do not know that this scene is actually his origin story until much later in the series.

Lindelof subverts audience expectations of a typical superhero show within the first five minutes of the show with Hooded Justice's origin story. He throws viewers directly into the violence of the Tulsa massacre. The audience hears wailing screams and whipping gun shots as a

camera follows a Black mother, father, and a young son who are attempting to escape the violence. Lindelof reminds us of the material on which the show is based by using the same bold, yellow-colored font from the cover page of the graphic novel to ground viewers in this setting (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. *Watchmen* premier opens with violence from 1921 Tulsa Massacre from: "It's Summer and We're Running Out of Time." *Watchmen*, written by Damon Lindelof, directed by Nicole Kassell, HBO, 2019, 2:23.

The shaking filmography of the scene places viewers right in the middle of the chaos. In the scene white men throw Molotov cocktails into stores, men wearing white, hooded KKK robes surround and beat Black civilians, cars crash, Black women and children are thrown down to the ground, and looting and shooting ensues all over the streets. Viewers eventually learn that the boy who experienced this action-packed, violent, unnerving scene is young Will Reeves, a man who grows up to serve as the vigilante fighter named Hooded Justice. He managed to escape from the Tulsa Massacre and found a baby crying alone in a field. Lindelof shows young Hooded Justice holding the baby who is wrapped in a red, white, and blue quilt, while his home,

enveloped in flames, burns in the background. The disturbing, violent scene and the baby's patriotic-colored blanket forces viewers to come face-to-face with a horrific piece of American history. Immediately following the scene of the Tulsa Massacre, viewers are jolted from 1921 into 2019 with the rap song "Crushed Up," by Future, booming from the screen.

By placing Hooded Justice's origin story—the Tulsa Massacre from 1921—adjacent to a scene from the twenty-first century, the show suggests that events from the past are still with us in a very tangible way. Additionally, by ascribing the Tulsa Massacre to Hooded Justice's origin story, Lindelof subverts audience's expectations of the typical American hero origin. Hooded Justice, who becomes the inspiration for the Minutemen, was not born on planet Krypton like Superman, nor was he injected with experimental "super serum," like Captain America. Rather, Will Reeve's decision to pursue vigilantism was a direct product of real-world racial violence.

Importantly, none of the racial violence that Lindelof pulls from history for his show is embellished or fabricated. The Tulsa Massacre was a real and largely forgotten event from American history (especially for white Americans). White civilians and KKK members killed as many as 300 Black Tulsans, leaving thousands homeless, and ransacked an entire neighborhood that had been known as the Black Wall Street. One of the main reasons Lindelof used the Tulsa Massacre as a grounding event in his show is because it was not reported in mainstream news channels at the time, and it has subsequently been omitted from popular culture. In fact, this event often does not even make it into history books (Chang). Professor Scott Ellsworth, a lead scholar for the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, writes that "for 50 years, the story was actively suppressed in Tulsa, and it was deliberately kept out of the white newspapers… the story of the massacre indicts white America, which is why it was buried for so long" (Chang). While the graphic novel and television show both place heroes in a society struggling with unresolved

trauma, Lindelof's *Watchmen* includes Blackness as the root of the story as well as its underlying purpose. In doing so, Lindelof deconstructs superhero tropes in a different fashion than does the original graphic novel.

Years after the Tulsa Massacre, Hooded Justice's origin story continues and Lindelof continues to thwart viewers' expectations. Will Reeves and his wife, June Abar, relocate to Harlem where he serves as a New York City Police Department officer. In the 1930s, the NYPD was only beginning to integrate, and Will Reeves faced overt discrimination. In episode 6, Will Reeves is on his way home from work at night and is ambushed by three white police officers who drag him to a tree where they string him up with a rope. Viewers are placed directly into the perspective of Reeves; as he loses his breath and vision becomes blurred, so too does the viewers' vision grow hazy, and the screen becomes blurred. At a moment of extreme, borderline life-taking, suffocation, the white officers cut down the rope and say, "you keep your Black nose out of white folks' business n***** or next time, we won't cut you down." This harrowing display of racial violence forces American viewers to come face-to-face with the culture upon which their country was founded. Similar to the Tulsa Massacre scene, Lindelof places viewers directly in the shoes of a Black man trying to navigate a landscape filled with bigotry, hatred, and violence, one that white America has long attempted to keep out of mainstream media. After this disturbing event, Will Reeves leaves the noose around his neck and becomes a crime fighter under the alias of "Hooded Justice" (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. Hooded Justice is interrogated in an imaginary television show called, “American Hero Story” from: “This Extraordinary Being.” *Watchmen*, written by Damon Lindelof, directed by Nicole Kassell, HBO, 2019, 2:16.

One of Lindelof’s main heroes of the show is a hero who wears a noose, and in this way, viewers are constantly reminded of the legacy of slavery and racial violence.

Lindelof, again, plays with viewers’ preconceived notions of the white, stereotypical American hero when he reveals that Hooded Justice is, in fact, a Black man. In the original graphic novel, Hooded Justice is only a minor character. In the back matter of a few chapters, Moore and Gibbons hint that he may be a strong, white Russian man in a secret homosexual relationship with Captain Metropolis. His costume hides everything besides the skin just below his eyes (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10. Close-up image of Hooded Justice from the original graphic novel from: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. Warner Books, 1987, p. 49.

Lindelof deftly inserts new information into these gaps left by Moore and Gibbons. He jolts viewers out of their comfort zones by revealing that Hooded Justice only looks white because Will Reeves paints the portion of his face that is visible in his costume with white paint (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11. Will Reeves looks into the mirror while dressing for masked combat from: "This Extraordinary Being." *Watchmen*, written by Damon Lindelof, directed by Nicole Kassell, HBO, 2019, 26:20.

Will Reeves' use of paint to play another race harkens back to the minstrel show, a nineteenth century American form of entertainment steeped in centuries of racism. Instead of using blackface to entertain white audiences and denigrate Black people, Will Reeves has no choice but to use the paint to fit in and be accepted as a hero. In a flashback to Reeves' first time dressing as Hooded Justice, his wife looks at him in the mirror and says, "you ain't gonna get justice with a badge, Will Reeves, you're going to get it with that hood. And if you want to stay a hero, townsfolk gotta think one of their own is under it" ("This Extraordinary Being"). Without the paint, Will Reeves' heroics would go unacknowledged due to the color of his skin. Thus, Lindelof not only portrays Black actors in roles from which they have often been excluded, but he also forces audiences to wonder *why* it is difficult to believe that Hooded Justice and other

heroes from America's past could have been Black. Hooded Justice's persona, background, and origin story—one more tragic than the one Moore and Gibbons suggest—provokes discomfort as viewers wrestle with their long-held conceptions of American superheroes.

Lindelof doubly subverts stereotypical superhero tropes when he shows the audience glimpses into Will Reeve's homoerotic relationship with Captain Metropolis. Moore and Gibbons only give slight hints into the possibility that Hooded Justice might be gay. In the show, Hooded Justice is not only a Black man disguised as a white man, but he is also a husband in an illicit homosexual relationship with Captain Metropolis. The show goes so far as to depict a sexual encounter between the two almost as if were an extravagant scene from a dramatic film. The scene is hidden from public view in what seems to be a gay speakeasy, but the moment is nevertheless presented in wholly positive, even ecstatic terms. Few comic book or movie superheroes are part of the LGBTQ+ community, and even fewer—if any—fall under the category of "mainstream." By creating a hero who is doubly marginalized, Lindelof does what no mainstream superhero comic or movie has dared to do before: he creates the first gay, Black superhero.

While Hooded Justice's childhood and appearance have complex roots, his philosophy and sense of morality is more straightforward, one with which audiences are quite familiar. Hooded Justice is practically the only *Watchmen* character who fights purely for justice. Lindelof suggests this both explicitly, when Will Reeves says it aloud, and implicitly, when he draws parallels between Hooded Justice and Superman. Hooded Justice and Superman originate very loosely from similar incidents. At one point a newspaper vendor even shows Will Reeves a copy of *Action Comics #1*, the first issue of a comic book that shows Superman. The vendor says that the comic is about "a boy, a baby, his father put him on a rocket ship and sent him to earth just

before his planet exploded" ("This Extraordinary Being"). Clark Kent must flee his doomed planet, Krypton, leaving his parents and life behind. When Will Reeves hears about *Action Comics #1*, he has a flashback to the Tulsa Massacre and remembers his father placing him in a wooden box to be safely driven out of the city. Similar to Superman, Will Reeves fled from his home and was forced leave his parents behind. However, the incendiary reason behind Will Reeves' need to flee does not come from a fantastical exploding planet, rather, it comes from an American act of brutal, racial violence.

Superman and Hooded Justice also share the commonality of inspiring other heroes. *Watchmen* episode 7 opens with a TV show within the TV show called "American Hero Story." In "American Hero Story," which is a fantastical homage to the Minutemen, detectives interrogate Hooded Justice. One detective says, "Hooded Justice, it all started with you, you're the alpha pal. It was your idea to put on that mask and fight crime. As fellow enforcers of the law, I have to tell you it is quite an honor to sit across from you." Hooded Justice, as the show and graphic novel suggest, was the first superhero of the *Watchmen* universe. Similarly, Superman was the first hero in the DC universe. By drawing such parallels between the first gay, Black superhero and the pinnacle of the white, American mainstream superhero world, Lindelof challenges us to question the heroes who preceded Hooded Justice and think about the ways in which minorities have been excluded from the genre.

By placing heroes in the context of controversial, realistic historical events, Lindelof not only subverts superhero stereotypes but he also interrogates America's inadequacy in dealing with trauma. In episode 2 of the show, the show's protagonist, Angela Abar goes to the Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage, a museum in Tulsa to investigate who Will Reeves—

now an old man in a wheelchair—really is. The Greenwood Center exists in reality, with a memorial dedicated to the lives lost during the Tulsa Massacre in front (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12. The Black Wall Street Memorial was dedicated to the Greenwood Cultural Center during the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre and stands as a symbol of Black entrepreneurship and excellence from: "Black Wall Street." *Greenwood Cultural Center*. 2020, https://greenwoodculturalcenter.com/black-wall-street.

In the show, the museum is dedicated not only to mourning and honoring the lives lost during the Tulsa massacre, but it is also a museum that processes DNA to identify the descendants of Tulsa massacre victims and determine their eligibility for "redfordations." Redfordations are reparations for the victims of the massacre and their descendants, a policy founded by President Robert Redford, who in the *Watchmen* world, served seven presidential terms. Here, Lindelof plays out a scenario of what would happen if, under the leadership of a left-leaning President, the U.S. actually issued reparations in the form of tax breaks to victims of racial violence. In the

show, the result is blowback—an upsurge of racial discrimination and violence. Outside the museum, white protestors yell about the unfairness of redfordations. Legislation over how the U.S. can apologize for slavery and its legacy in the form of compensation to slaves' descendants is currently being debated. Lindelof does not shy away from present-day political controversies. *Watchmen*'s demonstration outside the museum may mirror the kind of pushback that may occur if America attempts to address past racial violence. The show's demonstration may also be a reflection of the kind of real-life pushback that occurred after the election of America's first Black president.

Inside the museum, Lindelof depicts another way in which *Watchmen's* American government attempts to apologize for the country's wrongs. When Angela walks into the museum, a hologram of Henry Louis Gates—real-life author, historian, documentarian, Harvard professor, and a preeminent voice on race in America—introduces himself: "Hello, I'm United States Treasury Secretary Henry Louis Gates Jr. If you like, you can call me Skip" ("The White Night"). Angela Abar follows the hologram recording's instructions to process a sample of Will Reeves' DNA. Later, when she discovers that Will Reeves was not only a victim of the Tulsa Massacre, but he is also her grandfather, she is in shock. The hologram of Henry Louis Gates pops up again and says to Angela, "on behalf of the United States government, President Redford offers his condolences for the trauma you or your family has suffered" ("The White Night"). (Ironically, real-life Henry Louis Gates has published an op-ed article in the *New York Times* that actually questions the efficacy of reparations). This uncomfortable scene, in which a robotic hologram with a pre-recorded speech apologizes for the legacy of trauma, mimics some of the virtue-signaling attempts by white America to right its wrongs. Additionally, this scene calls into question why a Black man has been coopted into representing white America's

apology. Lindelof may be critiquing the shortcomings of white Americans who attempt to become a Black ally without doing the crucial work of educating oneself to understand the kinds of privilege that shape a white world view. By including a real museum and real public figure, viewers are reminded that this *Watchmen* world—one filled with covert and overt racism—is not very different from our own. The development of an institution built to memorialize and educate about the past is an important step in acknowledging a more complete version of America's history. However, the music, pictures, and ambiance of the Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage feels off-putting. The holograms of figures who endured the Tulsa Massacre appear jovial, and museum goers stroll around pointing and smiling at artifacts. The heritage center in the *Watchmen* world, built to preserve African American heritage and promote positive images of the Black community, feels more like a band-aid for centuries of racial violence and bigotry that is still very apparent in the fabric of twenty-first century America.

5. The Black Heroine in History

The superhero origin story, an almost mythological occurrence seemingly the result of chance, explains *how* superheroes gain their powers and *why* they decide to fight crime. Superman's origin derives from the destruction of planet Krypton due to natural cataclysm. Other infamous origin stories involve worlds destroyed, parents murdered, and genes accidentally mutated. *Watchmen* instead creates its heroes' origin stories—a coveted aspect of the superhero genre—around controversial historical events that force audiences to reckon with acts of American violence. Similar to the unsettling dynamic that Lindelof sets up in the Tulsa heritage museum, he provokes audience discomfort through his characters and their origin stories. The origin story of Sister Night (Angela Abar) is starkly different from that of Superman,

yet similar to that of Hooded Justice. Her origin involves acts of racially charged exploitation and violence that challenge notions of American idealism.

Sister Night's origin story brings together the historical conflict from the graphic novel—the Vietnam War—with the racially-charged conflict explored in television show. As with scenes from Will Reeves' childhood that viewers come to discover as the origin story for Hooded Justice, viewers are similarly unaware that episode 7's opening scene is Sister Night's origin story. Viewers learn in this episode that Dr. Manhattan's intervention in Vietnam—as instructed by President Nixon—leads to an easily ensured victory for the United States by 1971. Shortly afterwards, Vietnam becomes the 51st state and Saigon becomes a major tourist attraction. In 1987, Angela is a child living with her parents in Saigon celebrating "VVN Day," a day commemorating the American victory that "liberated" Vietnam. Playing in the background of this scene is James Brown's song "Living in America" (1985). James Brown was a legendary Black singer who practically invented funk and was known as the "Godfather of Soul." The song was famously featured in *Rocky IV*—a US vs. USSR-themed boxing film starring Sylvester Stallone—when Apollo Creed entered the ring. The lyrics paint a picture of joyous freedom that comes with living in the U.S., a life that lies in stark contrast with that of the former Soviet Union. It makes sense that this song, written by a Black man and imbued with Cold-War-conflict themes, plays during an episode that bridges together the graphic novel and television show. In this childhood scene, young Angela grabs a VHS tape titled, "Sister Night: the nun with the mother**king gun" off a rotating book stand in a convenience story (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13. Young Angela Abar sees "Sister Night" VHS tape in a store in Vietnam from "An Almost Religious Awe." *Watchmen*, written by Damon Lindelof, directed by Nicole Kassell, HBO, 2019, 3:05.

She proceeds to the streets of Saigon where many celebrating VVN day carry blue lanterns and wear blue Dr. Manhattan masks. A puppeteer even plays out the Vietnam War violence in a playful, child-friendly way. When she shows her parents the tape, her father—who is smiling and wearing a military uniform—responds that she is too young to view it and she must return the tape. As Angela crosses the street to return the tape, a suicide bomber bicycles into the crowd where her parents stand and screams, "Death to the invaders!" before obliterating everything around him. Angela consequently loses her parents and grows up as an orphan. Later in life, she becomes a police officer and masked crime-fighter, just like her grandfather.

Her childhood experience that led to her decision to fight crime shines light upon the lasting legacy of war and the visceral response many have to the outcome of conflict years into the future. The trauma of war cannot be contained and does not merely end when peace is

declared. That a suicide bomber orphaned *Watchmen*'s central character shows the viewer that international sentiment towards American international policy is deeply divided. While some Vietnam citizens in the *Watchmen* world are content being American citizens and readily celebrate VVN day, others are incensed by the American occupation and even commit acts of domestic terror. By grounding its protagonist's youth in this scene, *Watchmen* not only shows the horrors of war, but also grapples with how we deal with the lasting legacy of violence.

Angela Abar's inspiration to become a hero—the death of her parents and the discovery of a Black superhero tape—also forces audiences to contemplate why race has been so absent from the superhero genre. In episode 7 after losing her parents on VVN day, young Angela Abar meets her grandmother, June Abar, and brings her Sister Night VHS tape. Over lunch, June asks of the tape: "lots of movies out there, why are you carrying around this one?" Angela responds, "because she looks like me" ("An Almost Religious Awe"). Here, the main character explicitly confronts a problem with superhero genre, which has a "long history of excluding, trivializing, or 'tokening' minorities to create numerous minority superheroes who are marked purely for their race" (Singer, 107). Angela seeks out one of the few available Black hero movies and immediately identifies with the main character. Before Marvel Comic's film *Black Panther*—released in 2018, a shockingly recent date—superheroes were almost always white. While Marvel and DC attempted to promote diverse representation in the 1970s, they failed because Black characters too closely reproduced limited stereotypes found in the blaxploitation films of the era. "Like most other forms of North American mass media in the twentieth century, comic books have more or less managed to erase all evidence of cultural diversity" (Brown, 3). Unlike past attempts to portray the Black, female heroine, Lindelof successfully creates a character who is complex and pushes against stereotypes. Angela Abar grows up to be strong, funny, brave,

sarcastic, loving, skilled, intelligent, and tough. Long have Black female superheroes been an anomaly. The few that exist such as Nubia, Storm, Monica Rambeau, and Vixen, have never fully entered mainstream popular media. One of the many problematic reasons for this phenomenon may be the fact that comic writers, artists, editors and other members of creative teams are predominantly white males (Romagnoli, 133). And when writers do include Black, female heroes, they are often reduced to singular defining qualities and relegated to the background of their story. Storm, one of the few recognizable Black female heroes, appears in the X-men as a Kenyan goddess with the ability to control weather. While she eschews many stereotypes that were common of Black comic book characters in the 1970s through the 1990s, she does not understand her abilities until a white man explains them to her. This demeaning imperialistic approach to female superheroes was common throughout comic book history. Lindelof's novel layered and multifaceted approach to Angela's character is starkly unlike historical portrayals of Black female characters in superhero comics and film. And the show suggests that representation has consequences because only after Angela encounters an image of a crime-fighting Black superheroine does she feel inspired to fight for justice.

Lindelof goes one step further in challenging the racially exclusive history of the genre by daringly creating a romantic relationship between Angela and the all-powerful Dr. Manhattan, who now resides in the body of a mortal, Black man. In a flashback from episode 7, viewers learn that Dr. Manhattan fell in love with Angela Abar and took mortal form for their relationship to endure. For most of the television show, Dr. Manhattan has been inhabited the body of Cal Abar, a Black, stay-at-home father, whose wife fights crime in a mask. From this dynamic, viewers must first deal with shock over the fact that Dr. Manhattan has been right before their eyes for most of the show in the form of a Black man, rather than a glowing, blue

man. Second, viewers must think about what it means that the only truly super-powered *Watchmen* character—a semi-deity—is a Black man who subordinates himself to the development of a Black woman's story. In the season finale, Dr. Manhattan is destroyed but he leaves behind Angela an egg which contains his god-like powers for her to consume and acquire. Interestingly, Angela sees the immense difficulties of living a life with such powers, but still decides to consume the egg. At the very end of the finale, viewers see Angela's foot suspended above water to test if she can defy the laws of gravity. *Watchmen* does not suggest that one person should hold god-like powers. However, the show's ending asks viewers to imagine what the world might look with greater and more diverse representation—with strong Black heroines possessing the power to write history.

Angela Abar's relationship with another character, Chief of Police, Judd Crawford, similarly unsettles viewers and forces a reconsideration of long-established racial stereotypes in television and superhero narratives. Judd Crawford, a white man, is a new character that Lindelof invented in his television show. As Tulsa's Chief of Police, he is the one cop in the *Watchmen* world who shows his real face to the public and does not wear a mask to conceal his identity. Crawford and Angela act like family and they appear to be on the same team. He carries the confident, "old-timer" demeanor that is typical of police procedural dramas. Police procedurals, a ubiquitous aspect of American popular television, are typically binary tales that follow predictable conflict-resolution sequences. In the classic procedural drama, Angela would play the "heroine cop"—usually at the center of the show who solves the crime—and Judd Crawford would play the "superior officer"—a tenured head of unit who does not entertain new or inexperienced characters. After leaning on traditions of the police procedural drama and establishing that Crawford is Angela's ally and mentor, Lindelof completely subverts viewer

expectations. Judd Crawford is found dead, hanged on a tree, and Angela, seeking his murderer, visits the Crawford's house to investigate. During her investigation, Angela pushes a trap door in Judd Crawford's closet where she discovers a KKK robe with a police badge pinned on it. Discovering that Crawford was a closeted white supremacist completely shakes Angela and viewers alike. Viewers eventually learn that Judd Crawford was a descendent, and perhaps a present member, of "cyclops," a racist organization that goes back several decades. This scene incriminates the leader of the police force, a position typically associated with a heroic job description. Because *Watchmen* takes place in a world not unlike our own, the show prompts viewers to reflect on the American justice system. Not only does Lindelof shock viewers, but he also challenges audiences to contemplate the backgrounds and moral agendas of those who hold power.

Angela's numerous relationships in *Watchmen* subvert superhero conventions not only because of their racial novelty, but also because of their unique gender portrayals. While women have long been featured in the superhero genre, playing a variety of roles such as the helpless victim and powerful heroine, their roles have often been hypersexualized. The female hero is typically dressed in revealing attire that draws attention to an unrealistic, sexualized figure. In the television show, Lindelof pushes against a long history of over-sexualized female heroes and proposes a new kind of heroine. Angela's relationship with Lady Trieu, a Vietnamese character created by Lindelof, is a new kind of intersectional superhero dynamic. Angela Abar and Lady Trieu are the types of characters who have long been relegated to the background of superhero comics owing to their race and gender. But in the *Watchmen* world, they are given complex and significant roles.

Lady Trieu's Vietnamese heritage connects the modern-day television show narrative with the Vietnam conflict from the original graphic novel. Just as Angela is a descendant of the generational trauma in Tulsa, Lady Trieu is a victim of generational trauma in Vietnam. She is named after a female Vietnamese warrior from the third century who resisted Chinese invaders and serves as inspiration for national defiance against foreign domination (Nam-Hau). Her name represents a sort of Vietnamese Joan of Arc, "a woman of strength, courage, and conviction" (Nam-Hau). In the show, Lady Trieu is a trillionaire and the CEO of Trieu Industries, a company that revolutionized medicine, energy, and technology world-wide. She is elusive and reclusive; mystery surrounds her persona throughout most of the *Watchmen* series. Her persona is unique to the superhero genre which often overlooked females and cultural minorities in mainstream depictions.

Through Angela's relationship with Lady Trieu, Lindelof also complicates the traditional superhero-supervillain trope. Lindelof leans into traditional superhero story arcs by including an epic battle at the end of his television show. During *Watchmen's* final scene, Lady Trieu and the Seventh Kavalry—the masked, white supremacy terrorist group—attempt to destroy and absorb Dr. Manhattan's powers. Successfully absorbing Dr. Manhattan's powers would have vast implications for the fate of the world. The Seventh Kavalry plays the obvious role of the villain. And similar to typical superhero narratives, where the villain loses and the hero saves the day, the Seventh Kavalry is unsuccessful in their goals when Lady Trieu anticipates their plot and thwarts it. However, Lady Trieu is no typical hero. Unhappy with the state of mankind, she *also* seeks control over Dr. Manhattan's powers to "fix the world." She is not quite a villain, nor is she a hero. She may be defined as an "anti-villain" who is guided by narcissism, exceptional intelligence, or maybe even desire for power. Regardless, Lindelof does not allow for an obvious

notion of "good versus evil." Instead, he places characters with complicated moral agendas in conflict with each one another. Ultimately, those who overtly try to gain Dr. Manhattan's power are destroyed by their attempts.

While *Watchmen* holds a skeptical view towards power and never advocates that it should be left in one person's hands, there is a sense of hope after Angela consumes the egg and acquires Manhattan's god-like capabilities. She is clearly in control, ready, and convinced that she can take on Dr. Manhattan's powers. Viewers must contemplate what it means that a Black, female superhero could hold the greatest power in the world. And while Lindelof offers no direct answers, he poses necessary questions to spur dialogue: Why has no mainstream comic ever depicted a Black female hero with such power? What would history look like if it were written by the Black woman? If power were proportionately distributed among capable people of different backgrounds, what would our future look like?

6. Time in *Watchmen*

The treatment of time in all three *Watchmen* texts is essential to its ability to challenge the notion of American heroism through history. The graphic novel and television show subvert viewer expectations of a linear timeline and offer audiences only pieces of a puzzle from the past, present, and future. In doing so, *Watchmen* "center(s) the question of determinism, and the past's relationship to the future in their creative retellings of history" (Simek). These texts imply that the future cannot change without looking anew at the past. Moore and Gibbons begin Watchmen in the middle of the story, or in *media res* (Van Ness, 79). The graphic novel opens with Rorschach's investigation of the death of a man who turns out to be the Comedian, but initially readers do not know who he is, how he died, when he died, or what the Comedian's death means for the entire plot and individual sub-plots. Moore and Gibbons use varying panel

size, placement, and inclusion of flashbacks, memories, and dreams that force readers to experience a kind of simultaneity, where the past and future feel temporally and spatially close to the present; sometimes it feels as if the present moment has dilated to include both the past and future. Similarly, the television show opens with a confusing time sequence. Lindelof's show opens in the midst of a startling event, in the 1921 Tulsa Massacre, an act of white supremacist terrorism against a flourishing Black community. Viewers do not know why this scene is significant until much later in the show—and many presumably do not realize it is grounded in historical fact. However, in both the graphic novel and television show, a non-linear treatment of time makes the events from the past feel temporally close to the present. And both events radically shape what happens to each character and their descendants well into the future.

Dr. Manhattan's perception of reality is a symbol the way that the entire franchise deals with time. Dr. Manhattan does not perceive time moment by moment, as humans do. Among his unique powers is his ability to experience the past, present, and future all at once. He knows and experiences all of time at once and describes this sensation as forever "standing still" (Moore and Gibbons, 147). His perception is comparable to the way that readers and viewers experience the graphic novel and the television show (though only after they have finished the narratives). Viewers and readers are constantly thrown back and forth through different time periods, destabilizing notions about the ability to neatly confine moments to distinct categories of past, present, and future (Van Ness, 79). The show includes scenes completely out of sequence and the audience must work to piece together how each scene, each episode, and the show as a whole, fits into the *Watchmen* universe.

One way that the television show challenges predictable notions of time is by placing scenes from the past adjacent to scenes from the present. Viewers are thus encouraged to

recognize and meditate over the similarities and differences between two periods. One poignant example of this strategy is Lindelof's placement of the show's opening scene—the 1921 Tulsa Massacre—directly next to a scene from 2019. As detailed in a previous section of this thesis, the opening scene in Tulsa places viewers directly in the midst of a violent and chaotic display of white supremacist terrorism. Following this scene, viewers are jolted into 2019 Tulsa, where a Black cop pulls over a white man who is speeding on an empty highway. The cop spots a black and white Rorschach mask, the costume for the Seventh Kavalry terrorist group, in the driver's glove compartment. Feeling like his life might be threatened, the cop returns to his car and calls into the station and asks for his gun to be "released"—in this alternative timeline, firearms are physically restricted from police until authorized. Before the cop can access his weapon, the white man puts on the mask, takes out a gun, and murders the Black cop sitting in his car. Jarringly, Lindelof inverts the sadly prevalent situation in which a white cop abuses power and subjects Black civilians to unnecessary and unlawful violence. The reversal underscores that even when a Black man holds a position of power and security, such as that of a law-enforcer, he is still not safe in the twenty-first century. In both the 1921 scene and 2019 scene racially charged domestic terror is obvious and prevalent.

Both scenes of racial violence shock and disgust audiences. Although the Tulsa Massacre and the murder of an innocent Black individual are both underreported and often under-acknowledged, the 2019 scene may feel more disturbing to some. The darkness and quiet that fills the empty highway preceding the policeman's murder creates an insidious atmosphere. Additionally, the scene from 2019 is much closer in time to present-day viewers. The Tulsa Massacre may seem unreal owing to the historical distance, but by placing these two scenes next to one another, Lindelof reminds viewers that the past is very much among us in the present.

In the film, Zack Snyder also forces viewers to contemplate how time functions in the *Watchmen* world. He explicitly calls attention to Moore and Gibbons' manipulation of time in the opening credits. The opening credits of the film include a montage of iconic moments drawn from American history with real figures and fictional superheroes inserted into each image. They depict the transition of superhero groups against a backdrop of violence and turbulent political history. In one moment, Snyder depicts the famous VJ Day photo from Time Square that was featured in *Life* magazine. Instead of including a Navy sailor, he inserts a female masked hero named Silhouette who embraces and kisses a female stranger. Here, Snyder inserts queerness—which long only existed in the shadows of the public eye—into one of the most famous images of all time. As we have seen, the HBO series makes a similar move in its treatment of Hooded Justice's same-sex relationships. In another instance, Snyder's montage shows Neil Armstrong landing on the moon, with the reflection of Dr. Manhattan glowing in his helmet visor. It also includes the assassination of John F. Kennedy with the Comedian restraining a sniper on the grassy knoll. Snyder manipulates time by depicting each historical moment in slow motion, punctuated by the sound of a flash bulb. The film's five-minute montage introduces each *Watchmen* character and captures American culture and history from the 40s to the 80s, setting the stage for an alternate superhero universe. Accompanying the montage is Bob Dylan's song, "The Times They Are a-Changin," an anthem that possesses universal messages in its lyrics.

Dylan was a deft choice for the opening credits not only because Moore and Gibbons make references to his lyrics in their text, but also because this song's lyrics are all about perception. Leaning on folk music traditions, Dylan asks listeners to admit that the world has and will irrevocably change. The opening sequences and music reminds readers that *Watchmen* is set in a bygone era and times have certainly changed between the publication of the graphic novel

and the release of the film. Snyder thus acknowledges that his film's resonance likely will differ from that of the graphic novel; it may even lack some of the earlier works power to startle. Nonetheless, this opening montage has a hypnotic, nostalgic effect. By including masked heroes and parodying famous historical moments, Snyder speaks to the twisted and sometimes unpleasant history that Americans inhabit. This opening montage puts the concepts of time and history in the forefront of the film. And similar to how Dr. Manhattan perceives time, viewers are forced to experience decades of history all at once.

In both the graphic novel and the show, the symbol of a ticking clock works toward similar ends. The clock motif, which pervades both works, calls attention to the importance of the experience of time in *Watchmen*. In the graphic novel, Moore and Gibbons open each chapter with the image of a clock which appears against a black background. Blood drips further down the page over the clock image as each chapter unfolds. While the clock symbol possesses multi-faceted meanings, it distinctly evokes the ticking of a doomsday clock. Following the Manhattan Project, a group of scientists from the University of Chicago created the "Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock," which to this day aims to gauge the likelihood of human-made global catastrophe. This effort to communicate the danger and imminence of a potential nuclear war permeates throughout the graphic novel. The clock image creates a tense atmosphere of impending doom—humanity is only moments away from self-destruction.

In the television show, the clock also implies a threatening force. In *Watchmen* episode 1, after a member of the Seventh Kavalry murders a cop, the masked white supremacists send a video to the Tulsa police force. In the video, the group delivers a speech that mimics Rorschach's rhetoric from the graphic novel, but with explicitly racist, time-pressing sentiments:

> …cop carcass on the highway last night, soon your accumulated Black filth will be hosed away, and the streets of Tulsa will turn into extended gutters overflowing with liberal tears (…) we all the Seventh Kavalry. We will never compromise. Do not stand between us and our mission or there will be more dead cops. There are so many deserving of retribution and there is so little time. And that time is near… tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. ("It's Summer and We're Running Out of Time")

The Seventh Kavalry continues to chant tick-tock in a volume that crescendos. Both the graphic novel's clock imagery and the Seventh Kavalry's ominous chant prompt fright and concern over the future. And in this way, artists of both works send the message that our actions on a day-to-day basis have deep effects on how history will unfold.

By collapsing the past, present, and future and constantly calling attention to the concept of time through the symbol of the ticking clock, *Watchmen* forces audiences to think about their own situatedness in history. Synchrony—a moment or 'state' along a continuum that accounts for when one is able to remember the past or think about the future in the present—is the very thing that forces readers to deal with historical events and their implications for the future (Van Ness, 77). With story-worlds based on non-unified configurations of time and space, viewers are constantly reminded that their actions have consequences and that they themselves are agents of history.

7. Conclusion

The endings of all three *Watchmen* texts imply a skeptical attitude towards where we get official history. On the last page of the graphic novel, a radical far right newspaper called *The New Frontiersman* receives Rorschach's journal. Rorschach's journal contains much of the main plot of the *Watchmen* novel; he unearths the death of the Comedian and discovers a plan to

"save" humanity via engineering a fake alien attack and killing millions to bring humanity together behind a common, extraterrestrial enemy. Releasing the contents of Rorschach's journal could ultimately change the course of human history. A disheveled employee named Seymour reaches into the "Crank File," a messy basket of potential stories to run, and picks up the journal. He asks the editor which piece he should run in the magazine and the editor responds, "go on just run whichever you want, I leave it entirely in your hands" (Fig. 14).

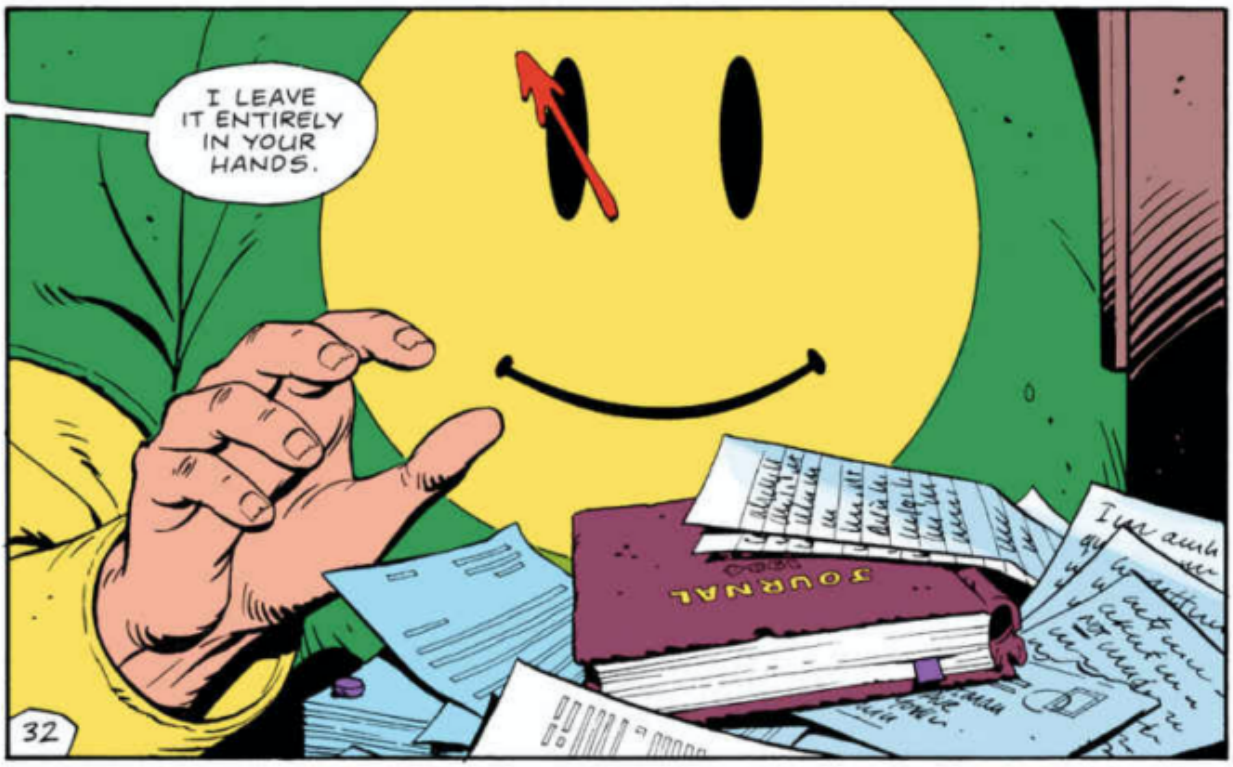

Fig. 14. Seymour is told to run any story he wishes as he reaches towards Rorschach's journal in the last panel of *Watchmen* from: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. Warner Books, 1987, p. 414.

Similarly, Snyder's film ends with the same editor telling Seymour to "run whatever you like, I leave it entirely in your hands" (*Watchmen*). The film pans over from Seymour's line of vision into the Crank File where a brown, tattered journal comes into focus. In the graphic novel and in the film, it is a man with a ketchup stain on his shirt working for an extremist magazine who

ultimately decides if and how the world will learn about life-altering news. Readers and viewers are thus forced to contemplate who writes history and how we learn history. At the end of the HBO television show, Lindelof asks a similar question of his viewers but adds a spin. Angela asks Dr. Manhattan what she should do with his powers and all of his memories once they are gone. He responds, "I leave it entirely in your hands" ("See How They Fly"). The *Watchmen* character who possesses the ability to essentially determine history thus becomes a Black woman who has experienced first-hand and generational trauma. While history has long been written by the victors—primarily white men—Lindelof proposes a new historical account through a new lens. All three texts cast a doubtful eye on historical accounts, but the show goes one step further and forces viewers to re-imagine our world if those who were subjugated had power to tell their stories. Essentially then, *Watchmen* ends by asking viewers what they will do after watching the television show.

The question still remains, was *Watchmen* successful in rethinking history, reaching divergent audiences, and bridging the racial superhero gap? Regina King, the actress who played Angela Abar, offers some insight on this question. On February 13, 2021 she hosted *Saturday Night Live* and in the opening monologue King shared:

> I had a pretty wild career. If you're Black, you probably know me from being in like some of your favorite movies. And if you're white, you probably know me from *Watchmen*… or this monologue right now. And I'm not complaining, I kind of like it that way. Whenever Black fame gets too crazy for me, I just go to the nearest white town and I'm a regular old suspicious shopper again. ("Opening Monologue")

King's monologue implies that *Watchmen*, like *Saturday Night Live*, predominantly attracts a white, educated viewership. Given the likelihood that *Watchmen* did not attract a diverse

audience with different education levels, I am left wondering whether the show sparked meaningful conversation among disparate groups and achieved its goal of re-imagining superheroes and history. All three *Watchmen* texts reveal the social, cultural, and political dynamics that underpin the superhero genre. But does exposure of problematic traditions matter if reception is limited? While *Watchmen* may cater to a white audience, the show represents an important step for the entire superhero genre. Superheroes serve as a shared cultural mirror. And Lindelof contributes to the slowly growing body of works in the superhero genre that give underrepresented audiences a possibility to see themselves in mainstream media. There are still many stories to be told, stories that demonstrate the multiplicity of Black experiences. And while *Watchmen* does not offer solutions, the show may be a model for critical, artistic discourse about race and historical re-imagination for the future.

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