THE MACKSEY JOURNAL
Johns Hopkins University • Baltimore, MD

Volume 4 Article 32

2023

The Construction of Racism in Superhero Comics by European Scopic Regimes

Kita M.R. Barrientos

University of California San Diego

The Construction of Racism in Superhero Comics by European Scopic Regimes

Kita M.R. Barrientos

University of California San Diego

Abstract

The dominance of European scopic regimes in the creation of popular media perpetuates harmful racial stereotypes conceived during the Enlightenment. When studying the imagery of superhero comics from the United States, one can discern the influence of Eurocentric ideologies on character design and representation, particularly those beliefs that equate the observation of physiological attributes with an unseen "truth" about people of certain races and cultures. This paper analyzes the artistic construction of characters of color within the medium of comics through the filter of European scopic regimes to see how racial prejudice and stereotypes are sustained, unconsciously or not, by creators of a widely consumed and celebrated form of entertainment. It is important to study the impact of European scopic regimes on our visual culture as a means of not only understanding the origins of our own prejudices but as a way to prevent their violent perpetuation beyond the page.

Keywords: comics, Eurocentrism, racism, scopic regimes, visual media

Comic books have been a part of American entertainment since the 1930s, with the first edition of *Superman* published by Action Comics in 1938. Since then, the comics universe has expanded into an endless kaleidoscope of heroes, stories, and the colorful prints that showcase them. Today, comic books are a major aspect of contemporary culture and a definitive part of American pop culture in particular; their lasting legacy spreads to other media, including film and television as the Marvel Cinematic Universe entrenches itself within the early 21st century zeitgeist. The impact of these stories on the cultural makeup is powerfully indisputable and the images produced from comics can color the ways in which we consume and produce entertainment media. Choices made, consciously or not, regarding who these images display and how are more than just artistic whims – they can determine how people see a certain group or reinforce already established prejudices, sometimes to harmful extents. Therefore, I was led to the question of how race has come to be constructed in comics throughout the decades. Considering the superhero comic as an exclusively visual medium, I wished to study specifically how scopic regimes played a role in that construction. Coined by film theorist Christian Metz, the "scopic regime" describes the removal of a represented object from its visual representation. Extended beyond the pictorial, the scopic regime can be used to describe the privilege of physical sight in Western society and the conflation of image with truth. This privileging of vision in the Western world was cemented by Enlightenment ideology into scopic regimes that have long defined our perceptions of the world. Visual attributes among humans have been indexed and molded to create social concepts which become proliferated among visually significant media. Thus, illustrations of people of color in American superhero comics that perpetuate harmful racial stereotypes can be understood and explained by the influence of Western scopic ideologies on widely accepted social and cultural constructs. It is important to study and understand not only where such visually impactful prejudices come from but also how their illustrations upon widely consumed and influential media can perpetuate them beyond the page.

When constructing my argument, I will begin by establishing the widely accepted constructs of racial differentiation and the white European scopic regime conceived during the 18th century Enlightenment. Building off these ideas, I will then transition into comics, focusing on illustrations of racial caricatures and how the visual impact of these drawings perpetuates racist ideologies. Following this examination will be an exploration of the intersections of race and gender with consideration of the white male gaze's influence on the characterization of women of color. Lastly, I will discuss the issue of racial representation in comics with an emphasis on the relationship between the visible and the imagination.

While there are numerous instances within comics of distasteful racial representation through the decades, it would be unfair to paint the entirety of the comic medium with such a disparaging brush. It would also be reductive to present my argument without acknowledging the immense work done by many artists and writers over the years to correct the grievances which I am about to outline. Writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxane Gay have created a thoughtful representation of Black heroes in the *Black Panther* series and spin-offs. There is also Chinese artist Chu F. Hing who, in 1944, introduced The Green Turtle – the first (secretly) Asian-American superhero (Akhtar). These are but a few of the many creators whose powerful

work ought not to be ignored. My goal is simply to understand how representations which *are* harmful came to be so and the impact they have on those who consume them.

The Western scopic regime finds its roots in European Enlightenment theory, where many ideas of racial differentiation were also conceived. When studying early conceptions of race, one can see the parallel development between such constructs and the scopic regime, as evidenced in the myriad ways subjective visuality determines racialized ideology. Dr. Calvin John Smiley, assistant professor of sociology at Hunter College - CUNY, discusses how the Enlightenment created the framework for our modern understanding of race by means of categorization and indexing. According to Smiley, "through pseudo-scientific observations and examinations, hierarchical racial differences were contrived" (Smiley) and subsequently used as foundations for national ideologies, including that of the United States. These scientific endeavors that Smiley mentions are the product of Enlightenment-based methodologies that placed heavy emphasis on the strength and purity of perception, especially visual. Retired sociology professor Chris Jenks addresses this focus by noting how classical theorists' exploration of the mind and pure rationality became intertwined with their belief in sight and symbology as the true understandings of the world. The implementation of "observation" as the primary tool of scientific study is a refinement of the "conventional 'ocularcentrism' abroad within the wider culture" (Jenks). The resulting acceptance of "observation" as unbiased by European theorists thus gave credence, in their mind, to their ideas on racial differentiation.

When speaking of observation in the context of racial indexing, European scientists were most concerned with distinct physical or phenotypic attributes in humans. Such emphasis on "phenotype" in regard to racial differences perpetuates notions of visually significant truth about other unseen attributes considered inferior through a Eurocentric lens. In Chris Jenks's article, he analyzes social and cultural developments from Enlightenment philosophy with particular emphasis on the emergence of positivism, defined as the system of belief that attaches rationality to scientific methods of proof or justification. He notes the result of positivism is that the "prime cultural value now becomes 'face-value'" (Jenks) – in other words: seeing is believing. This assertion of truth as provable by visual perception became heavily relied upon in scientific fields and used as justification for observed racial differences. If these observations remained just that, then race might only be an innocuous characteristic of humanity and nothing more. The deeper issue arises when constructed "truths" about race are then weaponized by one group to oppress another. Throughout history, racially charged displays of power transformed into potent visualizations have been used to instill fear in targeted populations. For instance, Smiley invokes the brutal treatment of Black convicts in American prisons, who were often "put on display through the use of corporeal [sic] punishment" (Smiley). These actions were meant to keep the population under control by white supremacist institutions. The use of display and visualization is especially powerful here; as Jenks notes, "the conscious manipulation of images" is an instrument in the "exercise and function of modern systems of power and social control." Though the example from Smiley is one of active violence against a group of people by another, efforts to control a population are not just physical. Media is a strong tool to control the spread of information and the construction of truth by powerful institutions. Though comics belong to entertainment as opposed to news media, they are not exempt from such calculated subjectivity.

Comics as a medium for storytelling rely almost exclusively on the visual presentation of crucial storytelling elements, including descriptive characterization. Many illustrated physical attributes of comic characters that conform to exaggerated racial stereotypes are rooted in the European scopic regime's equation of visual perceptions to deeper significant meaning. A racist caricature, for instance, relies on the understanding of the reader of certain visual cues that draw on the reader's previous experience. One example is the character of Fu Manchu from *The Hands of Shang-Chi, Master of Kung Fu*. Fu Manchu is Shang-Chi's father and the main antagonist of the series who is depicted with yellowed skin and sharply slanting facial features, and is often seen wearing Qing dynasty royal robes similar to the ones worn by white actor Boris Karloff in the film *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. This visual construction of the comic's villain is a clear example of phenotypical racism, which "relies on sensory – especially visual – signals" (Amin). In this case, such signals are greatly exaggerated and planted on Fu Manchu to indicate his position as antagonist. As mentioned, Fu Manchu's features ultimately serve as visual cues, meant to invoke within the reader previous knowledge gained through imagery. This process is known as "closure" – simply put, closure is the ability of the comics reader to latch onto visual cues and, by the addition of prior experience, fill in the gaps left by separated panels (McCloud). The evocative imagery in question is the "sickly yellowed Asians who populated four-colored publishing and other mediums of popular culture decades before Shang-Chi was conceived" (Lee) – faces of the so-called "Yellow Peril." The consequence of political acts by the United States government in the late 19th century, the Yellow Peril describes the attitude of white Americans toward immigrants from East Asia well into the 20th century. Posters and films depicting devious and merciless Asian immigrants with grossly exaggerated eye shapes and skin color proliferated throughout white America (Tchen and Yeats). With these vicious caricatures in mind, the function of the image of Fu Manchu on the page is to operate within the concept of closure to achieve the desired, frightening effect (see Figure 1). Though Fu Manchu himself may not explicitly act out the gaudy films of the 1930s, his visage is enough to suggest those images to the reader's imagination; closing the gap means creating a fully embodied and deeply offensive caricature.

Another trend in comics illustration and writing, which relies on a strong emphasis of physical features, is the use of visual exoticism to convey a character's disposition. Though this may seem an obvious element of fiction, it is in fact the result of the purposeful proposition by European scopic regimes that vision equates to truth. Along with his other features, Fu Manchu is illustrated and described with "cat-green eyes" (Lee). Not only is this another facet of his alien nature, but it is an example of the widely held belief that one's character can be found within their eyes. Jenks's discussion of ocularcentrism within the Western world includes its abstract conception as well as the literal privileging of the physical (white) eye and the "immaculate perception" (Jenks) that comes with it. Within a Eurocentric scopic regime, "alternative 'visions' or 'perspectives' can be rendered in the form of deviance or 'distortion'" (Jenks) – something that may be said of the diabolical Fu Manchu and his cat-like eyes. With eyes that view the world as that of a feline, he is portrayed with a similar predatory and mischievous nature, linked, of course, to his Asian origins; *his* view of the world is thus distinctly conveyed to the reader as a distortion from the norm.

The nature of the reader is of particular importance here because it introduces the critical function of the subjective gaze to one's interpretation of imagery. There are numerous ways to define the Gaze, but one offered by UC San Diego professor Norman Bryson involves an interception of one's vision upon an object by an invisible screen of social and cultural discourses – "a screen of signs" (Bryson) that mediates vision to become subjective visuality. Through the use of an expanded, abstract visual field, Bryson illuminates his conjecture that the Gaze is not something "intrinsically disastrous" (Bryson) upon itself as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan claims. But when it is combined with structures of power similar to how Jenks describes, the Gaze can prove to be a robust weapon of oppression. As Bryson notes, "the degree of terror" experienced by the Gaze "depends on how power is distributed within that construct once it is built, and on where one is made to stand inside it" (Bryson). Considering the creation of *Shang-Chi* by a white man *for* an audience of white men, it is that very Gaze that must be considered in interpreting the image of Fu Manchu. The scopic regime of patriarchal whiteness is what equates the features of slanted eyes and yellow skin in flowing robes to the supposed "truth" of Asian men possessing a devious nature and a desire for world domination.

For much of comics history, it has been the white male Gaze that has dominated the overall construction of characters. Even as we expand our scope to include gender, we can see how intersectional depictions of characters are subject to this Gaze. Descriptions of women of color within certain comics sometimes build upon debasing cliches that naturally rely on visual markers. One such woman is the daughter of Fu Manchu, Fah Lo Suee. Though it can be remarked upon that her features follow a similar pattern to her father's, her characterization also relies upon stereotypes that consider her gender. She is exoticized to the same extent but with a particular focus on her "piercingly hypnotic" eyes and "depraved and irresistible" stare (Lee). These descriptors, in their iconic comic boxes, frame the image of a dark-haired woman entwined with a snake, whose skintight dress is slit from knee to hip and has a window to an exposed bust. From the perspective of the white male, Fah Lo Suee becomes the highly sensualized Asian temptress. Again, it is emphasized that the nature of her stare is what conveys a sinister demeanor. Similar to the characterization of Fu Manchu through his eyes, she is defined through the act of her gaze, or more specifically, how her gaze appears to its object. This is a dual impact of the European scopic regime on her characterization: her outward gaze signifies an inner element of her being – depraved, sexual – while at the same time, she is being defined by how others interpret the mere act of her stare within the supporting visual signifiers of both her femaleness and Asianness.

The Gaze can be effective even in the most contained imagery – the example of Fah Lo Suee is only a single page spread but is dense with significant visual markers. When operating in the realm of comics, another example of contained but conspicuous imagery comes to mind: the iconic comic book cover. Often featuring the main protagonist in some striking position, comic covers are bold eye-catchers meant to draw the attention of anyone canvassing a store's stock. Certain comic collectors may even choose their comics on the cover art alone. A couple of distinctive examples are the cover images of superheroines Black Panther (Shuri) of Marvel and Vixen of DC, illustrated by Edgar Delgado and Joshua Middleton, respectively. These heroines are both known for their African roots as well as their animal-centric set of powers. Professor of popular culture Jeffrey Brown points out that while these traits are not

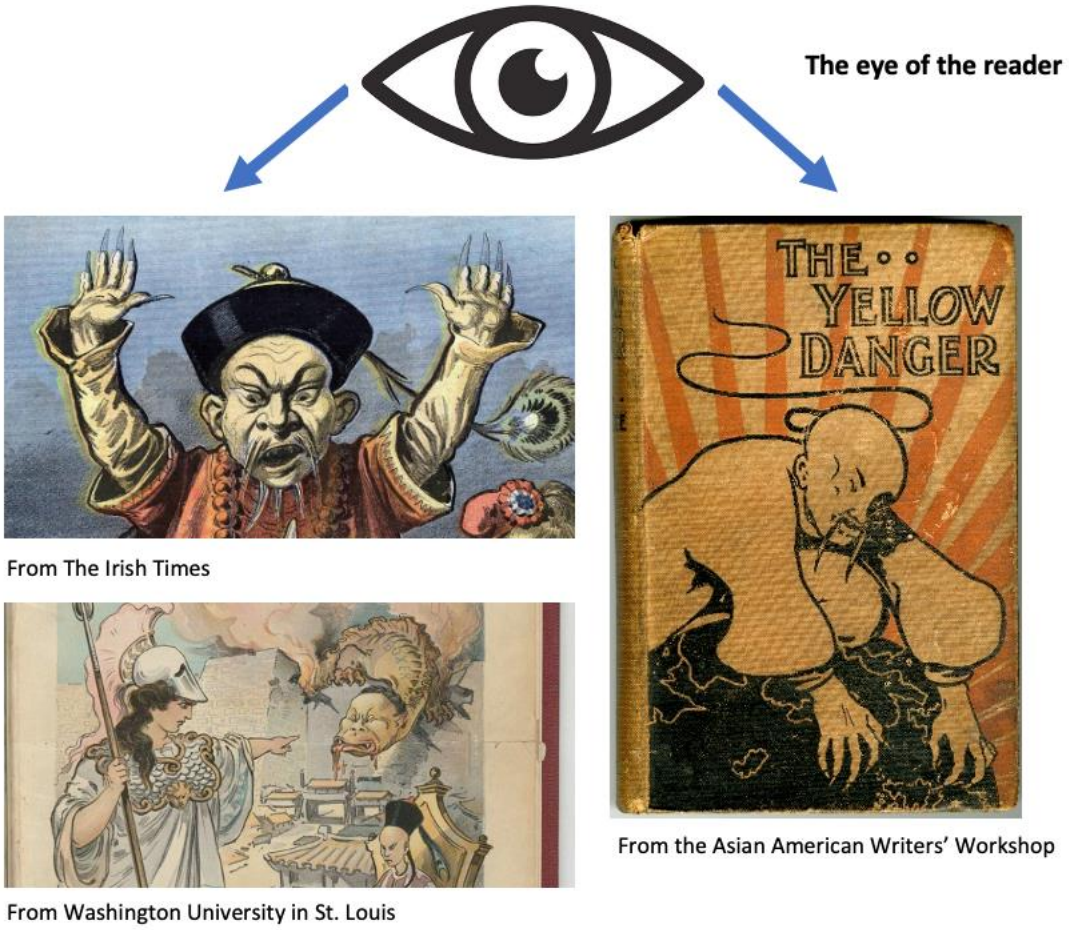
problematic elements of their characters in and of themselves, when considered in the context of stereotypes regarding women of color, they can become reinforcements of such notions. Historically, ethnic minorities have been "treated as exotic spectacles" (Brown) or akin to animals. In his article, Calvin Smiley uses the example of Ota Benga, a Mbuti man put on display within the Bronx Zoo in 1906 for the viewing pleasure of its white visitors (Smiley). This trope is stretched to an extreme when concerning Black women, who were often "characterized as more primitive, and therefore more sexually intensive" (Brown). The prejudices that conceptualize Black women as sexually charged beasts become the aforementioned "screen of signs" between the typical comics reader and the objects of Black Panther and Vixen upon their covers. In at least one edition each, the women are laid out in relaxed positions upon a natural background with one arm slung around the body of a large jungle cat (see figure 2). The women's tight clothing (and in Vixen's case an exposed bust) underscores the sexualized element of their presentation. As mentioned by Brown, "the power of exoticism is still a dominant trope played out on the body of the female Other, especially in visual mediums" (Brown), which is particularly apparent in the cases of Black Panther and Vixen. The impact of these images as features is significant because the images of these women found upon their covers is notably different from their presentations within the comics themselves – Brown noting that Shuri's character in her stories is far from a one-dimensional object of sexual desire. If we think again of Bryson's argument, we see how these covers appear as a suspension of subject (male reader) and object (character image) cut by the Gaze within a structure of power. Suspending the image of these Black female characters on the cover – in a vacuum outside of their stories – transforms them into objects for consumers of a visual medium. Without knowledge of a story, readers rely on the first impression gathered from the cover they see on the shelf; as the first image of any comic, the cover is a strong emblem of whatever is contained inside. Irit Rogoff, professor of visual culture at Goldsmiths, University of London, argues that the study of scopic regimes helps us to articulate the "continuous displacement of meaning in the field of vision and the visible" (Rogoff) or, in other words, the placement of abstract ideals or fantasies within images as a means of conceptualizing them. Though Brown argues that the *content* of *Black Panther* and *Vixen* does not push romanticism or sexualization, it is the first image of the characters that strongly influences the conceptualization of the character. Even if the characters themselves are written with complexity and agency, they are undercut by their contrasting depictions on the cover. Before the story is even read, the white male Gaze will characterize Shuri or Vixen within harmful sexually animalistic stereotypes and carry this conception into the comic.

Thus far, the major concern regarding the representation of marginalized identities in comics has been the troubling imagery present in the form of stereotypes or caricatures. But harmful representation within comics is not the only culprit of cultural oppression. *Lack* of representation for marginalized communities within popular comics is itself a form of violence as it presents a noticeable visual absence that influences the perceived realm of truth and possibility for people of color. Although the prevailing demographic of comics consumers is those aged 18 - 34 (Watson), children and young adults are still part of the comics readership – an impressionable group for whom new information and entertainment media are highly influential. Therefore, what is made visually available to young readers is crucial. Any absence

of main superheroes of color creates a visual precedent for possibility, quite literally determining how children of color perceive themselves. When it comes to understanding the influence of the visual on the imagination, Rogoff notes how the "space" between the eye and its object(s) – her equivalent of Bryson's screen of signs – impacts the "quality of thought." Mental activity and the ability to fully realize a concept as a result of visual consumption are mediated heavily by this subjective space (Rogoff), and so when the mind's eye comes to the act of creation, it is with the guidance of what is visually available as well as social and cultural signs that help define such imagery. Connected to the medium of comics, Rogoff's analysis means that what is not visibly represented in superhero stories cannot be so easily imagined in the mind of a child who is perhaps searching for a model icon. University of Cincinnati professor Kenneth Ghee studies the question of representation for young Black children. When considering the ever-important pretend play of a child, he states that "a Black child should be able to imagine a positive superhero archetype and icon from their own race or culture instead of always having to look to another culture for their pretend play and idolism" (Ghee). If there is, as Rogoff suggests, a deep connection between the visual and the imagined, then without the prevalence of culturally rooted Black superheroes, Black children will be barred from the ability to envision a hero who looks like them. The issue of representation here is not misrepresentation but a complete lack – a kind of aggression in and of itself when contemplating the established connection by white European scopic regimes between the visible and truth. Lack of representation presents a visual picture of a world in the mind of a child, taken as fact, where people of color cannot be heroes; a young Black child is led to believe that they cannot be the feature of admiration or fiercely face their adversities to prevail. And even when there are mainstream superheroes who are Black, Ghee notes that some are Black in color only and that they are not significantly emblematic of their culture through other attributes (Ghee). These superheroes are often written by white authors for whom the core of Blackness perhaps lies only skin deep. As another example of phenotypical racism, the prevalence of superficially Black heroes seems to indicate that, to some, the pure visual of Blackness is enough to represent a culturally significant Black hero.

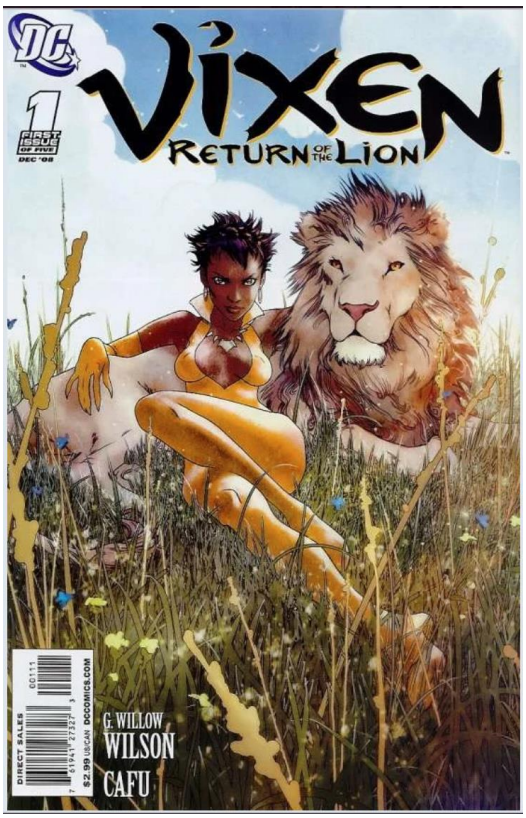
From the striking pages of a magazine comic to the bright screens of Marvel's latest blockbuster, superheroes rarely fail to dazzle and inspire. They are an influential part of our culture and history, which is why a diverse portrayal of them is crucial to making space for all who wish to enjoy their adventures. Well into the 21st century, comics are still a popular industry, but it still can find itself plagued by insidious ideologies from centuries past. If writers and artists are not considerate of such prejudices, they may perpetuate the visual ills of oppressive scopic regimes in the creation of their characters and worlds. Therefore, it is important to further study the influence of Eurocentric scopic regimes on comic books, so that we may not only understand the severe impact of visual prejudice but also find ways to address and rectify it. It is possible that more in-depth intersectional studies can be carried out, such as the overlap between European scopic regimes and gender, sexuality, or critical race theory. There are also other scopic regimes not mentioned in this analysis that must also be addressed in regard to comics, including those that exclude people with certain disabilities from enjoying superhero stories to the fullest extent. More studies will be needed on such concepts in order to apply them to the creation and critical reception of comics in the future.

Figure 1. A demonstration of "closure" as defined by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*



The above graphic demonstrates the concept of closure, by which readers complete an image's meaning by using prior experience prompted by visual cues. The visual characterization of Fu Manchu employs the features of past anti-Asian imagery to invoke within the reader a sense of antagonistic dread, which perpetuates the racial prejudices of white Americans against Asian immigrants. Closure is defined by Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics*), the character of Fu Manchu is discussed by Peter Lee ("Grasping for Identity"), and the "screen of signs" provided by the Yellow Peril imagery is an example of the concept as defined by Norman Bryson ("The Gaze in the Expanded Field").

Figure 2. Covers of *Black Panther* and *Vixen*



From Marvel From DC Database

Examples of superheroines of color depicted in sexualized positions.

Bibliography

Amin, A. (2010). The Remainders of Race. Theory, Culture & Society, 27(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409350361.

Benton, Mike. *The Comic Book in America: an Illustrated History*. Taylor Pub., 1989.

"Black Panther (2009) #1: Comic Issues." *Marvel*, Marvel, https://www.marvel.com/comics/issue/23657/black_panther_2009_1.

Brown, Jeffrey A. "Panthers and Vixens: Black Superheroines, Sexuality, and Stereotypes in Contemporary Comic Books." *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, edited by Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 127-140.

Bryson, Norman. "The Gaze in the Expanded Field." *Vision and Visuality*, edited by Hal Foster, Bay Press, 1988, pp. 87-114.

"Fu Manchu: Zheng Zu." *Les Ailes Immortelles*, 2 Mar. 2021, https://www.les-ailes-immortelles.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=28462.

Ghee, Kenneth. "'Will the Real Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?!': A Critical Analysis of the Mythological and Cultural Significance of Black Superheroes." *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, edited by Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 200-212.

Jenks, Chris. "The Centrality of the Eye in Western Culture: An Introduction." *Visual Culture*, edited by Chris Jenks, Routledge, London, UK, 2002, pp. 1–24.

Knüsel, Ariane. "The Chinese Dragon and the Yellow Peril: The Evolution of Western Media Portrayals of China since Opium Wars." *East Asian Languages and Cultures*, 2 Sept. 2022, https://ealc.wustl.edu/events/chinese-dragon-and-yellow-peril-evolution-western-media-portrayals-china-opium-wars.

Lee, Peter, "Grasping for Identity: The Hands of Shang-Chi, Master of Kung Fu." *Comic Books and American Cultural History: an Anthology*, edited by Mattew Pustz, Continuum, 2013, 120-136.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Kitchen Sink Press, Inc., 1993.

Rogoff, Irit. "Studying Visual Culture." *The Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, Routledge, 1998, 24-36.

Smiley, Calvin John. "Display, Performance, and Re-Imagining the Black Body," in *The Black Index* (eds.) Bridget Cooks & Sarah Watson. Munich, Germany: Hirmer Publishers and University of Chicago Press. pp. 62-73.

Tchen, John Kuo Wei, and Dylan Yeats. “Yellow Peril: 19th-Century Scapegoating.” *Asian American Writers' Workshop*, 7 Oct. 2021, https://aaww.org/yellow-peril-scapegoating/.

“Vixen: Return of the Lion/Covers.” *DC Database,* FANDOM, https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Vixen:_Return_of_the_Lion/Covers.

Watson, Amy. “Frequency of Reading Comic Books by Age U.S. 2018.” *Statista*, 14 Mar. 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/943127/comic-book-reading-frequency-by-age-us/.

Wing-Fai, Leung. “Perceptions of the East – Yellow Peril: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear.” *The Irish Times*, The Irish Times, 16 Aug. 2014, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/perceptions-of-the-east-yellow-peril-an-archive-of-anti-asian-fear-1.1895696.