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Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero

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Following in the footsteps of feminist scholarship there have, in recent years, been a number of studies which have begun to consider masculinity, particularly heterosexual masculinity, as a social construction. Masculinity, always regarded as a natural, stable gender identity, is in the process of being deconstructed on a variety of levels from social politics to pop psychology. Moreover, the masculinity of our media-generated heroes is increasingly recognized in much the same way that femininity has been understood, not as a real and unified subject position, but as a carefully orchestrated performance—or, in other words, as a masquerade. But if the heterosexual male is the site of gender and sexual privilege in North American culture, as he is per-ceived to be, then we might ask just what the masculine masquer-ade disguises? And how might black masculinity fit into the equation?

It is feasible that a clue to these questions lies in the very notion of the masquerade and the implication of an underlying, unstable level of gender identity. Indeed, the split personality implied by the concept of a masquerade seems to be one of the most archetypal metaphors for the masculine condition in Western culture. Whether in Jungian psychology or low-budget horror films, great literary works or modern comic books, mas-culinity has often explored its own duality. The male identity in the twentieth century is perceived in extremes: man or mouse, He-man or 98-pound weakling. At the one end is the hyper-mas-culine ideal with muscles, sex appeal, and social competence; at the other is the skinny, socially inept failure. But these two male extremes are not so far removed as they might seem. Warrior and wimp exist side by side, each defining the other in mutual oppo-sition. On the following pages I want to explore this concept of duality in masculinity—and more specifically *black* masculini-ty—as it is currently presented in one of Western culture's most rudimentary and instructional forms, the superhero comic book. At its most obvious and symbolic level, comic book masculinity characterizes for young readers a model of gender behavior that has traditionally struggled to incorporate both sides of the mas-querade, yet has recently slipped into the domain of the almost exclusively hypermasculine.

My particular interest in the comic book depiction of mas-culinity has developed in relation to an ongoing ethnographic project dealing with the emergence of Milestone Media Inc., a black-owned and controlled comic book publishing company launched in 1993, and the readers of its comics. An innovative twist on the almost uniformly white-bread universe of comic book characters, the Milestone line of comics offers a small vari-

ety of well-defined African American superheroes. Milestone is the brain-child and the legal property of three young black men who are experienced comic book and publishing veterans: Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, and Derek T. Dingle. As a creator-owned publishing company with a multicultural approach to comic book characters, Milestone occupies a unique position within the comic book industry. Other African American comics publishers exist, but as true independents the quality and distribution of their books are often limited by financial restrictions. Milestone, on the other hand, was able to strike a ground-breaking deal with industry giant DC Comics whereby DC would print and distribute the Milestone titles without interfering with content or ownership rights. This unique relationship allows Milestone to reach a much larger audience than any other African American comic book publisher has ever been able to[1]. Currently Milestone publishes three core series: *Icon* (see Fig. 1), featuring a super-powered "brother from another planet" who is also a staunch republican and fights injustice alongside his partner Rocket, a single, teenaged mother and Toni Morrison fan from the projects; *Hardware*, starring the character of Curtis Metcalf, a scientific super-genius who builds an incredible suit of armor to confront his racist employer and to fight crime; and *Static*, which tells the story of the slightly geeky but fun-loving teenager Virgil Hawkins, who battles supervillains and school yard bullies after he accidentally gains the power to control electricity.

The audience for comics is a truly multicultural one; in fact, it is more ethnically diverse than are the heroes the young people read about. Thus, my research is based not only on young black readers of Milestone, but on fans from diverse cultural backgrounds. I was interested in what fans thought of the books across racial lines rather than how the comics spoke directly to black audience members. Time and again,

when asked about the appeal of the Milestone titles, many of the comic book readers I interviewed would return to the way the characters acted as heroes and as men. "For me, it really isn't an issue of whether they're black or white," a twelve-year-old fan told me when I began my research; "I like Icon and Static and Hardware because they're tough guys, but not *too* tough, if you know what I mean." At the time, I did *not* know what he meant ("tough guys, but not *too* tough"?!?), but as I spoke with more comic book readers it became increasingly apparent that masculinity in contemporary comic books is understood according to the medium's quintessential depiction of masculine duality. Superhero comics have always relied on the notion that a superman exists inside every man, and while the readers are well aware of this most fundamental convention, they are also aware that several new and incredibly popular comics are erasing the ordinary man underneath in favor of an even more excessively powerful and one-dimensional masculine ideal. The young fans who count the Milestone books among their favorites do so because they offer an alternative to the extreme of hypermasculinity— or, as one reader put it, "With Milestone it isn't always the guy with the biggest arms that wins . . . . it's the guy with the biggest brain."

Comic Books and Masculinity

Before turning specifically to the reading of Milestone comic books, one must understand the traditional gender framework against which these new black superheroes are read. Classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man. In general, masculinity is defined by what it is not, namely "feminine," and all its associated traits—hard *not*

soft, strong *not* weak, reserved *not* emotional, active *not* passive.

One of the most obvious and central focal points for characterizing masculinity has been the male body. As an external signifier of masculinity, the body has come to represent all the conventions traditionally linked to assumptions of male superiority. "Of course," Susan Bordo has observed in her discussion of contemporary body images, "muscles have chiefly symbolized and continue to symbolize masculine power as physical strength, frequently operating as a means of coding the 'naturalness' of sexual difference" (*Unbearable* 193). The muscular body is a heavily inscribed sign: Nothing else so clearly marks an individual as a bearer of masculine power (I will be returning to the symbolic significance of muscles in relation to both black and comic book masculinity later). In fact, muscles are so adamantly read as a sign of masculinity that women who develop noticeable muscularity—e.g., professional body builders—are often accused of gender transgression, of being butch or too "manly," in much the same way that underdeveloped men are open to the criticism of being too feminine.

The status and the power of the hard male body is only achieved in contrast to those cultural identities represented as soft and vulnerable. This myth of idealized masculinity which is still incredibly pervasive remains dependent upon the symbolic split between masculinity and femininity, between the *hard* male and the *soft* Other. And in the misogynistic, homophobic, and racist view of this ideology, the despised Other that masculinity defines itself against conventionally includes not just women but also feminized men.

It is, I think, important to note that this standard of masculinity so vigorously reinforced in Western culture is largely focused on white masculinity and is at root a fascist ideology. In his 1977 exploration of masculinity and fascist ideology, *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit outlines the existence of two mutually exclusive body types

Fig. 1

observed by German fascists: The first was the upstanding, steel-hard, organized, machine-like body of the German master, and the second was the flaccid, soft, fluid body of the perennial Other. According to Theweleit the hard masculine ideal was the armored body—armored by muscles and by emotional rigidity, and marked by a vehement desire to eradicate the softness, the emotional liquidity of the feminine Other. But the emasculating (i.e., castrating) criticism of effeminacy was also routinely projected by the dominant onto those marked as Other, primarily by their cultural or religious backgrounds. Although the feared body of the Other was most directly modeled on the feminine it was, as we know from Nazi practices of extermination, also projected onto the body of the homosexual, the Jew,

and a long list of non-Aryan Others. While Nazi Germany may be an extreme example, the underlying rhetoric is far from alien to modern Western culture. Even today, for example, gay men are labeled as excessively feminine; Jewish men are characterized as meek, frail, and hen-pecked; and Asian men are derided in stereotype as skinny, weak, small, and humorously near-sighted. We must keep in mind that the standard phallic version of the masculine ideal is deeply grounded not just in misogynistic and homophobic ideology but also in thinly veiled racist terms.

But not all Others have been constructed as equal by the dominant masculinist ideology. While the gay man, the Jewish man, the Asian man (and many other "Others") have been burdened by the projection of castrated softness, the black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being *too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily. Ironically, much of the tension regarding the hypermasculine stereotype of black men is a logical cultural development for a group systematically denied full access to the socially constructed ideals of masculinity. In his discussion of the sexual politics of race, Kobena Mercer argues that black masculinity must be understood as a paradoxical position in relation to dominant gender ideals. As he puts it,

> Whereas prevailing definitions of masculinity imply power, control and authority, these attributes have been historically denied to black men since slavery. The centrally dominant role of the white male slave master in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plantation societies debarred black males from patriarchal privileges ascribed to the masculine role. For example, a slave could not fully assume the role of "father," as his children were legal property of the slave owner. In racial

Young fans who count the Milestone books among their favorites do so because they offer an alternative to the extreme of hyper-masculinity.

terms, black men and women alike were subordinated to the power of the white master in the hierarchical social relations of slavery, and for black men, as *objects* of oppression, this also canceled out their access to positions of power and prestige which in gender terms are regarded as the essence of masculinity in patriarchy. Shaped by this history, black masculinity is a highly contradictory formation of identity, as it is a *subordinated* masculinity. (142)

In 1990s North America the situation has not changed all that dramatically for a large majority of black men. Legally sanctioned institutions of slavery may no longer exist, but persistent racist fears and ideologies continue to economically, politically, and socially oppress black men. According to recent statistics (Goar A1), the unequal discrepancies between black and white America are as clear as ever. One-third of the 29 million black citizens in the U.S.A. live in poverty, and the average black American earns $6,700 less per year than the average white worker, and is twice as likely to be unemployed. One in every three black children is currently growing up without a father in the home, and perhaps most shockingly, although black Americans constitute only 12 percent of the nation's population, they represent 51 percent of the country's prison population. Yet society at large still presents a cultural ideal of masculinity that black men are expected to measure up to, at the same time that society denies a great many blacks access to legitimate means for achieving that ideal.

The history of the black male paradox—emasculated, but at the same time feared—is grounded in a long tradition of subjugation and resistance. bell hooks has described the black man's cultivation and embrace of a hypermasculine image as a logical response to antebellum and postbellum

views held by white supremacists, which characterized black men as feminine, a rhetoric that "insisted on depicting the black male as symbolically castrated, a female eunuch" ("Feminism" 131). The clearest, and most often cited, examples from the first half of this century are the boxing phenoms Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, both of whom personified black hypermasculinity as a means to resist the emasculation of racism, their prowess in the ring reinforced by widely circulated images of the two men shirtless and intimidatingly muscular. By the time of the Civil Rights era, the more overtly political and rebellious Black Panther movement articulated what Hunter and Davis refer to as "a radicalized Black manhood, throwing off the imagery of the emasculated and shuffling Black male dictated by racial caste" (23).

Even in contemporary Western culture, the most pervasive and influential images of black men are tied up in hypermasculine symbols. The two primary means to legitimate success for black males in popular culture, sports and music, ensure the replication of such ideals from the world of sports as Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, Bo Jackson, and Shaquille O'Neil, and from music such overtly masculine examples as L.L. Cool J, Snoop Doggy Dog, and Tupac Shakur—images that consistently associate black men with extremes of physicality and masculine posturing. Over the years, in diverse ways, black men have responded to their shared experience of cultural alienation by adopting "certain patriarchal values such as physical strength, sexual prowess and being in control as a means of survival against the repressive and violent system of subordination to which they were subjected" (Mercer 137).

Recently, Richard G. Majors's concept of the "cool pose" has proved an insightful term for understanding the dynamics of black masculinity as it has developed in response to unequal conditions in the modern urban environ-

ment. In a series of closely related works (listed at the end of this essay), Majors argues that black males have accepted the traditional values of masculinity but are so restricted by social and political factors that many of them have been deeply frustrated by their inability to enact these traditional masculine roles. "In brief," Majors explains, "cool pose originated as a coping mechanism for the 'invisibility,' frustration, discrimination, and educational and employment inequities faced by Black males. In response to these obstacles, many of these individuals have channeled their creative talents and energies into the construction of masculine symbols and into the use of conspicuous nonverbal behaviors (e.g., demeanors, gestures, clothing, hairstyles, walks, stances and handshakes)" (Majors, et al. 246). Majors includes in his examples of the cool pose such diverse behaviors as the use of humor, feigned emotional detachment, and specific stylistic expressions like the black athlete's inventive basketball dunking, football spiking, and endzone dancing, as well as black musical performers' aggressive posing and graceful yet strenuous dancing styles. A prime ingredient of the cool pose as a compensatory form of masculinity is an exaggerated style of toughness: "Symbolic displays of toughness defend his identity and gain him respect; they can also promote camaraderie and solidarity among black males" (Majors and Billson 30). Unfortunately, as Majors is always careful to point out, the ritualized hypermasculinity performed by many black men as a cool pose, particularly the preoccupation with enacting a tough persona, is rife with the negative potential to promote dangerous lifestyles (e.g., gang bangers, tough guys, drug dealers, street hustlers, and pimps) and to reinforce harmful stereotypes.

The "cool pose" that is so important to the understanding of black masculinity in contemporary Western culture is, in essence, another metaphori-

cal mask: "For some black males," Majors and Billson write, "cool pose represents a fundamental structuring of the psyche—the cool mask belies the rage held in check beneath the surface. . . . black males have learned to use posing and posturing to communicate power, toughness, detachment, and style" (8). Of course, the concept of black culture's employment of a mask is not a new one. James Baldwin's novels were about the complexity and effectiveness of masking as a defensive strategy, and psychoanalytic accounts of the black position such as Frantz Fanon's much cited *Black Skin, White Masks* (1970) have formalized the concept. What is interesting, though, about the cool pose as a mask of masculinity is that by its very definition—a mask of a mask—it becomes a location of exaggerated masculine signifiers. Hence, both by projection of the dominant white society's fears, and the black male's embrace and over-compensating performance of extreme masculine values, many black males (consciously or unconsciously) are perceived as relatively *too* masculine. While the cool pose can, and often does, embody attitudes beyond those of toughness and fearlessness, attitudes that suggest alternative forms of masculinity that might exercise a genuine control over traditional masculine features of symbolic physicality as power, it is the trope of toughness and bodily presence—as reductionist and potentially harmful a stereotype as this is—that is most commonly associated with popular images of black masculinity in the modern world.

Throughout history, white society's fear of the black man has been grounded in notions of masculine physicality and sexuality. While muscles act as a visible signifier of masculine power as physical strength, Bordo points out that "they have often been suffused with racial meanings as well (as in numerous film representations of sweating, glistening bodies belonging to black slaves and prizefighters)" (*Unbearable* 195). Under the racial and class biases of our culture, and compounded by the hypermasculinization of the cool pose, muscles, as a signifier of "natural" power, have been strongly linked with the black male body. So strong is the association, Kobena Mercer argues, that classical racism "involved a logic of dehumanization, in which African peoples were defined as having *bodies but not minds*" (138). The dehumanizing aspect of this myth, a myth that Mercer claims many black men do not want demystified because it in some ways (e.g., strength, sexual prowess) raises them above the status of white men, is that, while an emphasis on the body as brute force is a marker of the difference between male and female, it is also a key symbol in the division between nature and culture. As much as the body has been related with the "virtues" of masculinity, it has also been associated via racial and class prejudices with the insensitive, the unintelligent, and the animalistic. Moreover, the more one's identity is linked to a hypermasculine persona based on the body, the more uncultured and uncivilized, the more bestial, one is considered to be. Following the binary logic of the male/female, nature/culture, uncivilized/civilized, body/mind dynamic, blacks have historically and symbolically been represented as pure body and little mind.

Because of this racist ideological paradox, blacks in Western culture have been forced to shoulder the burdens of the body itself. In contemporary culture black men are often seen more as beasts, as rapists, as gangsters, as crack-heads, and as muggers—literally as bodies out of control—than they are as fathers, as scholars, as statesmen, and as leaders. It is perhaps this split between the mind and the body that marks one of the greatest threats of (self-)destruction facing blacks today. Like Majors, who shows concern for the negative consequences of the cool pose as a lifestyle choice in an urban environment of unequal opportunity, bell hooks writes that she "continue[s] to think about the meaning of healing

the split between mind and body in relationship to black identity, living in a culture where *racist colonization has deemed black folks more body than mind*. Such thinking lies at the core of all the stereotypes of blackness (many of which are embraced by black people) which suggest we are 'naturally, inherently' more in touch with our bodies, less alienated than other groups in this society" ("Feminism" 129). Recognizing the ruinous consequences of this perceived split between black men's bodies and minds, Mercer, Majors, hooks, and numerous other black scholars and cultural critics see the need to develop new models of black masculinity, models that counter the dominant stereotypes not by reforming the hypermasculine image of the black male into an image of refinement, restraint, and desexualization, but by incorporating the associated properties of the mind (e.g., intelligence, control, wisdom) into the popular presentation of black male identity. It is here that the Milestone comic books seem to work for many readers as a promising alternative form of black masculinity specifically, and Western masculinity in general, particularly when read against the most pervasive form of comic book masculinity offered by other comic book publishers.

With its reliance on duality and performative masquerade, the popular image of black masculinity seems to parallel comic book conventions of masculinity. Certainly superhero comics are one of our culture's clearest illustrations of hypermasculinity and male duality premised on the fear of the unmasculine Other. Since the genre's inception with the launch of Superman in 1938, the main ingredient of the formula has been the dual identity of the hero. While the superhero body represents in vividly graphic detail the muscularity, the confidence, the power that personifies the ideal of phallic masculinity, the alter ego—the identity that must be kept a secret— depicts the softness, the powerlessness,

the insecurity associated with the feminized man. As his very name makes clear, Superman is the ultimate masculine ideal of the twentieth century. He can fly faster than the speed of light, cause tidal waves with a puff of breath, see through walls, hear the merest whisper from hundreds of miles away, and squeeze a lump of coal in his bare hands with enough pressure to create a diamond. He is intelligent, kind, handsome, and an ever vigilant defender of truth, justice, and the American way. Superman, however, has never been complete without Clark Kent, his other self. Emphasizing just how exceptional a masculine ideal Superman is, Clark Kent represents an exaggeratedly ordinary man. He is shy, clumsy, insecure, cowardly, and easily bullied by others. In short, whereas Superman is associated with all of the social attributes prized in men, Clark Kent represents those traditionally associated with femininity and thus feared as unmasculine. In his study of the masculine myth in popular culture, Antony Easthope claims that "stories like Superman force a boy to choose between a better self that is masculine and only masculine and another everyday self that seems feminine" (28).

Yet, despite the derisively castrated portrayal of Clark Kent, it is this failure-prone side of the character that facilitates reader identification with the fantasy of Superman. This archetype of the Clark Kent who can transform in a moment of crisis into a virtual super man is a fantasy played out over and over again in superhero comic books. "Though the world may mock Peter Parker, the timid teenager," declares the cover of *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1963), "it will soon marvel at the awesome might of Spider-man!" Spoiled playboy Bruce Wayne becomes Batman. Shy scientist David Banner transforms into the monstrous Hulk when he gets angry. Young Billy Batson becomes the world's mightiest mortal, Captain Marvel, merely by uttering the acronym "SHAZAM." Scrawny Steve Rogers becomes the

invincible Captain America after drink-
ing an experimental growth serum.
The list is endless, for nearly every
comic book hero is a variation on the
wimp/warrior theme of duality. The
story of superheroes has always been a
wish-fulfilling fantasy for young men.
Even comic book advertisements, such
as the legendary Charles Atlas "98-
pound weakling" ad, often revolve
around the male daydream that, if we
could just find the right word, the right
experimental drug, the right radioac-
tive waste, then we too might instantly
become paragons of masculinity. For
young comic book fans the superhero
offers an immediate and highly visible
example of the hypermasculine ideal.
The polarized attributes coded as
desirable/undesirable, masculine/fem-
inine are simplified in the four-color
world of the comics' pages to the exter-
nal trappings of idealized masculinity.
Even more than the flashy, colorful,
and always skin-tight costumes that
distinguish comic book heroes, their
ever present muscles immediately
mark the characters not just as heroes
but as *real* men.

This link between masculinity and
muscles is an important association for
comic book heroes (and in a parallel
form an important association within
the stereotyping of black men). Yet, by
focusing on the external trappings of
masculinity characterized by the mus-
culature of the superhero's body,
young readers may run the risk of over
internalizing these rather one-dimen-
sional gender symbols. In his insightful
ethnography of a southern California
gym, Alan Klein discusses body-
builders as men who have overidenti-
fied with what he calls comic book
masculinity. "Comic book depictions of
masculinity are so obviously exagger-
ated," Klein claims, "that they repre-
sent fiction twice over, as genre and as
gender representation" (267).
"Moreover," Klein continues, "the
reader is set up to be simultaneously
impressed by the superhero and dis-
missive of the alter ego, a situation that
underscores the overvalued place of

hypermasculinity for readers of this
genre of comic books" (268). Klein
argues that for many bodybuilders the
obsessive quest for ever larger, more
imposing, more powerful-looking
physiques is very similar to the comic
book readers' fantasy of negating the
soft, fearful, feminine side that they so
despise in themselves. Superhero
comics clearly split masculinity into
two distinct camps, stressing the super-
hero side as the ideal to be aspired to;
but unlike the fascist ideology of phal-
lic masculinity as mutually exclusive of
the softer, feminized Other, comic book
masculinity is ultimately premised on
the *inclusion* of the devalued side.
Even if Clark Kent and Peter Parker
exist primarily to reinforce the reader's
fantasy of self-transformation and to
emphasize the masculine ideal of
Superman and Spider-man, they are
still portrayed as parts of the characters
that are essential to their identities as a
whole.

Rather than overtly condemning
comic book depictions of masculinity,
Klein reserves his criticism for societal
constructions that lead readers to value
and identify with the hypermasculine
rather than other potentially radical,
liberating, or transgressive gender
traits. In fact, Klein recognizes that,
"insofar as these comic book constructs
are part of childhood socialization,
their dualism could be functional, even
therapeutic, were one to acknowledge
the positive attributes of the super-
hero's alter ego and the dialectical rela-
tionship between wimp and warrior";
after all, "both male and female co-
exist within the Superman/Clark Kent
figure" (267-68). Unfortunately, the
potential that Klein sees as possible in
the superhero's co-dependant
male/female-identified personae, were
it not for our overvaluation of the pure-
ly masculine side, is presently even
more disparaged in the extremely pop-
ular line of Image comics.

Since Image's inception in the early
1990s it has become the fastest growing
comics publisher in the history of the
medium, and is currently second only

to the industry giant Marvel in monthly sales. As might be predicted of a company formed by popular artists rather than writers, Image's success can be credited to their flashy artwork, depicting excesses of costumed heroism and constant large-scale battles. The Image books are identifiable by a distinctive in-house style of portraying the heroic body. As eager participants in the "Bad Girl" trend, Image women are uniformly illustrated as impossibly sexy, silicone-injected, and scantily clad babes wielding phallically obvious swords. Even more pronounced than the unrealizable physical extremes of the Image women are the incredibly exaggerated representations of the male hero's body as a mass of veiny muscles. The Image trademarks of buxom cheesecake women and massive beefcake men are well-illustrated in a typical cover for one of the company's cross-over specials, featuring Prophet and Avengelyne (see Fig. 2). The male's hulking form dwarfs the dominatrix-like superheroine; indeed his bulging arms alone are bigger than her entire body. And these two characters are among Image's most modest.

With the Image books, the already reductive aspects of comic book masculinity are reduced even further into the realm of the purely symbolic. Image's very name suggests the extremes that their stylized portrayals of masculinity have taken as pure form, as pure *image*. Image provides hypermasculine ideals that are more excessively muscular than Superman or Batman ever dreamed of being. The Image heroes set a new standard of hypermasculinity. In fact, Image has frequently done away with the superhero's mild-mannered alter ego all together. Whereas the classic superhero comic book may have asked "boys to identify with Superman as a supermasculine ideal by rejecting the Clark Kent side of themselves" (Easthope 29), the Image books have made that rejection unnecessary. Clark Kent, it seems, no longer exists. By downplaying, or completely erasing, the hero's secret identity, the Image books mark an extreme

Fig. 2

shift to the side of hypermasculinity as an ideal not even tempered in a token way by a softer, more humane side.

Scott Bukatman has likened the Image hero to Klein's bodybuilders, who value the hypermuscular body for its ability to communicate masculinity without an act—via the obvious over-presence of masculine signifiers. The body's presence becomes, in effect, its own text. Bukatman insightfully notes, "In these postmodern times of emphatic surfaces and lost historicities, origin tales are no longer stressed: the hyperbolically muscular heroes of Image Comics are nothing more or less than what they look like; the marked body has become an undetermined sign as issues of identity recede into the background. Most of these heroes seem to have no secret identities at all, which is just as well [since] some have purple

skin and are the size of small neighbor-hoods" (101). The feminine side of the equation has been so successfully sub-limated that it ceases to exist. Even the limited two-dimensional depiction of masculinity that superhero comics have represented ever since Superman emerged in 1938 has now begun to skew toward a more macho, more one-dimensional depiction. If the hyper-masculine identity of the masked superhero has traditionally stood as a utilizable, imaginative fantasy mas-querade of idealized masculinity, then with the Image style of hero the mas-querade has come to be all there is, an entity unto itself. The external trapping of masculinity, the message seems to be, is all one really needs to be a man.

It is in relation to this hypermascu-line style of superhero books, either Image's own titles or the many imita-tions they have inspired, that many readers interpret the Milestone books. Compared to Image, the Milestone comic books offer readers an alterna-tive model of masculinity, a model that is all the more progressive because it is incorporated within the dynamics of contemporary black masculinity.

"A brain . . . and a plan"

If comic book superheroes represent an acceptable, albeit obviously extreme, model of hypermasculinity, and if the black male body is already culturally ascribed as a site of hyper-masculinity, then the combination of the two—a black male superhero—runs the risk of being read as an over-abundance, and potentially threaten-ing, cluster of masculine signifiers. In fact, prior to the emergence of Milestone, the dominating image of black superheroism was the often embarrassing image of characters inspired by the brief popularity of blax-ploitation films in the mid-1970s. Such comic book heroes as Luke Cage, Black Panther, Black Lightning, and Black

Goliath emerged during the blaxploita-tion era and were often characterized in their origins, costumes, street lan-guage, and anti-establishment attitudes as more overtly macho than their white-bread counterparts. In many ways the Milestone characters have functioned for fans as a redressing of these earlier stereotypes, providing a much needed alternative to the jive-talking heroes of yesterday, as well as on occasion spoofing the blaxploitation heritage and placing it in an acceptable historical context.

Yet, even today, black superheroes seem to oversignify masculinity to the point of being repositioned for the gen-eral public as humorous characters. Recently, white comic book super-heroes have been seriously and faith-fully adapted for such successful fea-ture films as the *Batman* series (1989, 1992, and 1995), *The Mask* (1994), and *The Crow* (1994); unfortunately the same can not be said for black super-heroes. Instead of the grim, serious neo-noir success of other comic books turned into films, the only black entries in this ever expanding movie genre have been the comedies *Meteor Man* (1993) and *Blank Man* (1994). Rather than legitimate super-powered heroes, Meteor Man and Blank Man, as enact-ed by Robert Townsend and Damon Wayans respectively, are bumbling spoofs. Although well-intentioned films, with ultimate true heroism from the comedic protagonists, they are overwritten by the image of the black-costumed hero as a failure, as a buf-foon incapable of exercising real power. Even the short-lived television series *Mantis* (1994), starring Carl Lumbly as a crippled black scientist who fights crime with the aid of his exo-skeleton-reinforced Mantis cos-tume, was done on such a low budget that it was considered a comedy by most comic book readers, when in fact it was meant as serious science fiction drama.

Many of Milestone's most popular characters embody the difficult task of playing it straight as black superheroes

at the same time that they emphasize the hero's intelligence as one of his most significant attributes, without diminishing the masculine power fantasy so important to fans of the genre. In comparison to the typical Image hero, Milestone heroes are much more realistically depicted, both narratively and in portrayal of the muscular male body: Compare the over-inflated body of Image's Prophet (in Fig. 2) with the portrait of a relatively skinny Static, Milestone's electricity-wielding teenaged superhero, on the cover of *Static* #1 (see Fig. 3). "I really like the Milestone titles for what they're not—namely, Image books," a thirteen-year-old African American comics fan claimed while organizing his purchases just outside the dealers' hall of a local comic book convention. "Static and Hardware and even Icon are a lot more realistic, not so cartoony. I mean . . . I know they're comic books, but come on, look at those guys [in the Image books], they're fucking *huge*! At least the characters at Milestone look like they could fit through a doorway." I should point out that some of the readers I have studied relate to the Milestone books primarily as an alternative to or a variation on the theme of black superheroes as presented in the earlier blaxploitation style comics of the 1970s and/or the contemporary Afrocentrist and more politically extreme books personified by the ANIA publications. But the reading formation I am primarily concerned with here is the way in which many fans, both black and white, understand the Milestone line as it stands in relation to the dominant Image style's emphasis on hyper-masculine/hypermuscular bodies and underdeveloped narratives, featuring what one comics dealer called "brainless brawl after brainless brawl."

What Milestone comic books do is put the mind back in the body, the Clark Kent back in the Superman. That Milestone does this so often with black superheroes also allows them to develop the image of powerful black men as much more than mere hypermasculine brutes—"tough, but not *too* tough."

Fig. 3
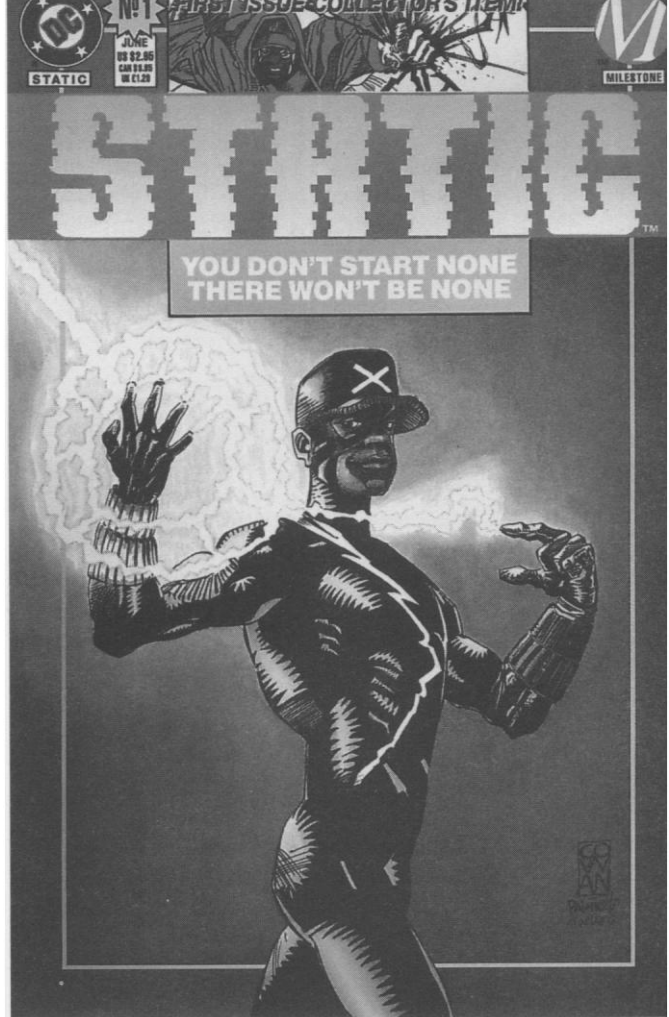
When the conclusion to Milestone's third cross-over event, "The Long Hot Summer," was published, many of the readers I spoke with were eager to point out that the surprisingly peaceful resolution to an amusement park riot was indicative of the company's approach to brains-over-brawn. "Man, just when you thought everything was going to get really, *really* bloody," two fans in their early twenties explained, "Wise Son [leader of The Blood Syndicate, Milestone's multicultural super-gang] gets to the park's communication systems and simply talks people out of hurting each other . . . basically shames them into being responsible for their actions." Likewise, a senior university student was able to recall, almost word for word, his favorite bit of dialogue from *Hardware* #9, a series featuring a black scientific genius who

dons his self-constructed super armor to fight crime: "Hardware is fighting this Alva Technologies-created female version of himself called Technique," the student recalled, "when he loses his jet pack and is falling from thousands of feet up. He grabs his pack and tries to fix it while he's falling, thinking, 'So here's where I find out if I'm the genius that my I.Q. tells me I am.' When the pack works again, moments before becoming street pizza, he says, and this is a great line, 'Worked like a charm! Who says those tests are culturally biased?' "

As one especially enthusiastic and thoughtful black fan in his late teens remarked, "It's nice to see cool brothers in the comics who can *think* their way out of a rough spot. You know, Icon's a lawyer; Hardware's an all-purpose science super-genius; and Static, well, he's just a high school kid, but he's the coolest and, I think, the smartest of all them. Yeah, I'd stack Static up against any other superhero any day. He's the man." Other readers seemed to agree: "Oh yeah Static, he's got the best sense of humor, and the thing is everybody thinks he's just this kid with wimpy lightning powers, but he's the smart one, always putting down guys bigger than him by being smarter."

As an example of the preferred Milestone brains-over-brawn style, several fans chose one of Static's earliest adventures as among their favorites. The story entitled "Pounding the Pavement," written by Robert L. Washington and Dwayne McDuffie, appeared in the August 1993 issue *Static* #3. The tale features the first appearance of a powerful new villain, Tarmack, in Milestone's fictional setting of Dakota City. As the characters in the book point out, Tarmack looks and acts like a black version of the evil, liquid-metal T2000 from the popular movie *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1992). Essentially he is a shape-shifting mass of, *well*, tarmac. Usually configured in the shape of a large and muscular black male body, Tarmack can transform himself into liquified

states or change his appendages into whatever weapons he desires, including knives, hammers, and anvils. One of Virgil (Static) Hawkins's friends describes Tarmack as "a six-foot blob of silly putty that turns into Riddock Bowe whenever it wants to." The problem is that Tarmack has his sights set on making a name for himself as the guy who takes down Static. He first tries to challenge Static to a fight by destroying a local high school hangout; unfortunately Static, who was tied up washing dishes at his part-time job in a nearby burger franchise, arrives too late to fight but in time to rescue bystanders trapped in the building's rubble.

At school the next day, while Virgil is asking his friends to describe Tarmack, word comes that "the guy who trashed Akkad's is at the playground calling Static out!" Tarmack taunts Static's masculinity, calling him a coward unless he shows up to fight. "STATIC! Are you deaf, or just afraid?" While tearing up all the rides at the playground, Tarmack bellows, "Hidin' behind yo' ugly *momma* won't help, boy!" Making up an excuse about having asthma and the excitement being too much for him, Virgil sneaks off to change into his Static costume and returns to confront Tarmack with his usual wit. "Hey, Hatrack," Static calls, "let's work this out over coffee, some cappuccino for *me* . . . a nice cup of silt for *you*." They proceed to battle for a while with neither gaining the upper hand; then, when Static proves more concerned about the safety of innocent bystanders than with the contest, Tarmack dares Static to show up at a deserted parking lot at midnight in order to decide who's tougher.

Riding the subway home after school, Virgil and his friends debate what will happen in the final showdown between Static and Tarmack. "I think the high n' mighty Static is gonna get his ass handed to him," argues Larry. "Tarmack has all the *Terminator 2* moves! Hammerhands, spike hands whatever! He can melt whatever he

touches!" "Well, I think Static's gonna kick butt!" Virgil argues back, a little defensive, a little nervous. "I think you're both wrong," interrupts Frieda, the only one of Virgil's friends who knows his secret identity. "Static's too smart to fall for such an obvious trap."

"That guy's too *dumb* to set such an obvious trap, or any trap. Static'll fade 'im," Virgil counters good naturedly. "You think ol' stinky goo head is out of Static's league?" "He's older! And Bigger! Static should leave him to Icon!" Frieda warns. "Listen," Virgil confides to Frieda under his breath, "I know it's dangerous. I'm not buying into this anymore than you. But I've got two things he doesn't. A brain . . . and a plan."

Later that night, in the Avalon mall parking lot, a lone and angry Tarmack bellows, "STATIC! It's ten after midnight! If you're hidin', you best come out *now*!" Tarmack spins around just in time to see a trenchcoat-clad figure surf to the ground on electrical currents. "That's better! Turn around! I want to see your face when you die!" Tarmack screams as he winds up a massive hammerhand punch. "Have it your way toyboy . . . wha!?" As Tarmack delivers his blow, the body bursts in a spray of water. Tarmack is left soaked, clutching a deflated plastic clown. "What the @#&* is this?"

"KAWARIM!!!" the real Static replies from the shadows as he shoots a powerful charge of electricity through Tarmack. "Ancient Ninja art of misdirection. All you need is something some idiot could mistake for you and . . . some idiot. Guess which one you are." Angrier than ever, Tarmack chases Static across the parking lot. Suddenly, Static turns and uses his electromagnetic powers to wrap a wire fence around Tarmack. "How do I do it, you may ask. How do I stay one jump ahead of you?" Static taunts. "How you want to *die*, is all I'm askin'!" Tarmack yells, as his body begins to liquify and escape through the links in the fence. "It's easy. You're a moron." Static continues in a fake

British accent, "Also, I was here early. Several hours, in fact. Been shoppin'. "

"What're you dumpin' into meeee!?" screams Tarmack as Static throws several canisters into the now completely liquid villain. "Old aerosol cans," Static explains. "Got 'em on sale. Freon, don't you know. Amazing what you can find in a bargain bin, huh. Wanna see what else I got?" All Tarmack can do is howl in pain and frustration as Static hurls flashbulbs and dry ice onto the quickly solidifying form lying on the ground. "Sheesh! I gotta get a better class of supervillain," Static scoffs as he spells out his plan for Tarmack. "See, I figured your liquid body and all that heat went hand in hand. So if you went through some changes, you'd burn up."

"Ssllowwinn' downnn . . . brrr . . . ," Tarmac gasps. "Brrr? You actually say brrr? I don't be-*lie*-ve it!" Static jokes as he pours a canister of freezing liquid oxygen over the now defeated Tarmack. And as a final insult, Static climbs aboard a steamroller from a nearby construction site and proceeds literally to flatten Tarmack. "You are sorely in need of a name change, dude. That 'Mack' thing is *so* '70s. . . . *I* know what . . . how about I paint a stripe down your middle and . . . Presto! Ta-da! 'I-75, the Living Interstate'!"

Static #3 ends with the humiliating defeat of Tarmack and the arrival of Holocaust, a bigger and badder villain for Static to deal with in the next issue. On one level it is tempting to develop the case that this issue of *Static* critiques an outdated model of black masculinity. After all, apparently inspired by Tarmack's one-dimensional macho posturing, Static goes so far as to declare "That 'Mack' thing is *so* '70s." But for the Milestone fans who pointed to this specific book as a favorite, it is the story's difference from the current hypermasculine and "brainless" Image comics that makes it important. The message of "Pounding the Pavement" is clear: Brains win out over brawn. Nor is this message an isolated incident. *Static* storylines have repeatedly

portrayed the teenaged hero as victorious because of his quick thinking. Numerous bragging and swaggering supervillains have faced Static, most of whom are clearly more powerful than he, and boastfully macho about their intentions to beat him up. Yet time and again Static outthinks the baddies. Other examples cited by readers include Static's capture of a super-powered car thief, Joyride, by pretending to lose a drag race and thus playing on the villain's ego and tricking him into stepping out of his car, whereby he loses all his powers, or Static's continual outsmarting of the recurring villain Hotstreak, who is too stupid to realize that the new hammer he wields so proudly is made of metal and thus can be controlled by Static's electrical currents. Static's form of intelligent victories is clearly read by some Milestone readers as a positive alternative to the standard formula found in the market-dominating Image-type books. "You'd never really see an Image hero winning a fight by being funny and smart enough to know dry ice and aerosol cans could knock out a serious bad guy," a thirteen-year-old *Static* fan explained. "In other comic books they're much more likely to just keep on pounding each other until the good guy rips the villain's head off, or something crazy like that."

By emphasizing brains-over-brawn as a fundamental problem-solving technique in many of their stories, Milestone comic books suggest acceptable variations of the masculine ideal for their readers. Rather than espousing the reductionist hypermasculine might-makes-right norm of the Image books, Milestone's series continually depict heroism as a matter of intelligence first and power second—that, in fact, intelligence is the greatest power of them all. For black readers, and for non-black readers sensitive to minority concerns, the alternative depiction of *black* masculinity bearing the attributes of both mind and body is, as one fan declared, "progressive, realistic, radical, and a much needed reworking of

the African American image in the media." Although it is clear how the Static tale recounted here stresses the reincorporation of "a brain . . . and a plan" as more significant than muscles and brute force, its typical comic book, superheroish narrative might seem to undercut any claims made about its representing new forms of masculine ideals. It is, after all, still a relatively straightforward comic book story about two super-powered, costumed characters fighting it out. But when carried to its extreme, Milestone's narrative style, which is interpreted by many readers as antithetical to the dominant hypermasculine Image style, offers alternative models.

The most apparent revisionist models presented are usually within the pages of Milestone's flagship title *Icon.* Unfairly derided by several other African American publishers as nothing more than a chocolate-dip Superman, this popular series follows the adventure of Icon (aka Augustus Freeman IV), an alien with enormous powers (yes, much like Superman's) who has lived in the form of a black man since crashing on a slave plantation over 150 years ago, and his teenaged sidekick Rocket (aka Raquel Irvin), who can fly and redirect vast amounts of energy thanks to the alien technology of her power belt. Together, with Icon's enormous powers and straight-arrow persona and Rocket's passion and social conscience, the series is Milestone's most emblematic affirmation of black heroism. "They can be a little preachy sometimes," a fourteen-year-old told me when I noticed him reading an issue of *Icon* in a shopping mall's food court, "but it's really my favorite book right now. The characters are well done, and the art is usually first-rate. And . . ."—he looked around a little sheepishly—"I like the stories where they show how Icon has affected normal people in Dakota. You know, inspired them." In his hands was a particularly clear example of Icon's inspiration as a promotion of how readers might pursue masculine

ideals built on well-rounded self-improvement rather than the one-dimensional pursuit of hypermasculine power fantasies. *Icon* #32, "Learning to Fly," written by Greg Middleton and illustrated by Elim Mak, is really the story of Lenny, a black youth from the same projects as Icon's partner Raquel (Rocket) Ervin. Lenny was with Raquel and the others on the night they tried to rob the house of Augustus Freeman, who, under pressure from Raquel, would later become Icon. Years after that first incident, Raquel arranges for Icon to meet and counsel Lenny, who has had trouble staying on the "straight and narrow" since that fateful night.

"I told you, you changed my *outlook*," Lenny tells Icon as they stroll along the city's waterfront. "But now the funds ain't what they used to be, so me and my girl Susan been fighting. I found out she's seeing Caesar, down the block. He's *not* 'on-the-straight-and-narrow.' Of course we broke up, but . . . I don't know, man. The so-called *right thing* ain't so easy."

Icon tells Lenny a little about his own past experiences: opportunities lost, loves lost. "*Uh-huh*. What's your point?" Lenny asks. "Life on Earth is too brief to let us lick our wounds," Icon explains. "Only by confronting this sort of problem will you overcome it." "Ha! You can say that . . . you got *everything* going for you. I'll bet life never sneaks up on *you*. You told us to have faith in our abilities, but one rich man who can fly don't mean I can fly too," replies Lenny. "You know better than that," Icon responds. "There are enough hardships for each of us. I've had first hand experience. But we were discussing *your* abilities, and what *you* make of them. I can only encourage you to live up to your own potential." "Hey, I'm not going back to my old habits, if that's what you mean," a dejected Lenny says. "It's just . . . not easy . . . ya know?"

A couple of pages later we see Lenny trying to live up to his own potential. A collage superimposed over Icon's masked face shows Lenny being all he can be (see Fig. 4), a virtual one-

Fig. 4
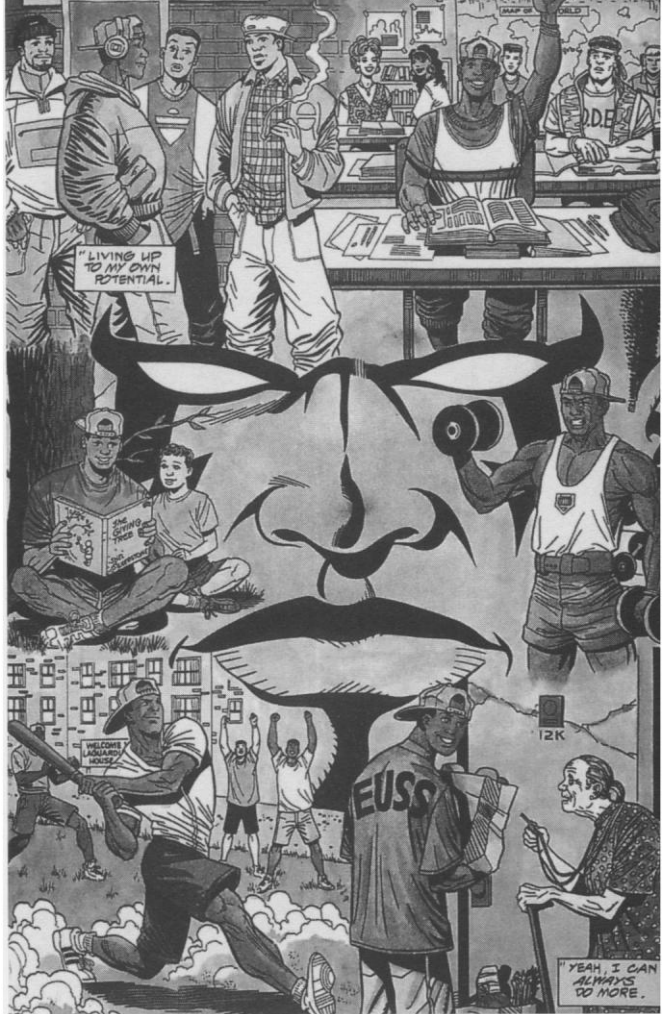
page self-help manual for readers. We see Lenny resisting the lures of gang life, excelling in school, caring for younger children, developing his body in the gym, playing wholesome sports, and even helping a little old lady with her groceries. "It ain't easy," Lenny narrates over the following pages. "Here I am, an upstanding, Icon inspired, strong black man . . . but staying on the right track helps keep my mind off my problems." Eventually, Lenny is applauded as a hero when he helps Icon and Rocket save a little girl trapped in a burning building.

Back along the waterfront, Icon tells Lenny, "I'm proud of the way you've been handling yourself. Your community is looking up to you . . . for all the right reasons. I wouldn't hesitate to say that you are something of an 'Icon' yourself." "Listen, I got a date

with a new lady," Lenny says. "So all I wanted to say was . . . thanks for being there." "You deserve all the credit," Icon smiles as he shakes Lenny's hand. Lenny smiles proudly. "Be good, brother."

Despite the fact that Milestone's founders have discussed their preference for avoiding the "ABC Wednesday After School Special" type of preachiness in their comic books, Icon stories such as the one recounted above veer dangerously close to this pattern. Other issues of *Icon* have dealt just as directly with issues of social responsibility, from a child's hero worship to teenage pregnancy. That these stories can be fully recognized by many fans as "a little preachy sometimes" but still enjoyed is the strength of the Milestone books. I do not want to suggest here that the Milestone message is incredibly well-concealed propaganda that serves a specific agenda; rather, I believe that it forthrightly admits—and is recurringly interpreted as—an alternative to the traditional patriarchal masculine norm that has recently, in other comics and other media, become increasingly skewed toward absurd heights of hypermasculinity. That these books also so consciously use black heroes as simultaneously masculine and thoughtful characters further emphasizes the novel reconstruction of masculinity and ethnic identity based on less traditional notions of gender roles and limiting racial stereotypes.

Although the Milestone line of comic books is read by many fans as an alternative depiction of masculinity in comparison to the Image books, and by others (particularly those from minority backgrounds) as portraying "thinking black man's heroes," the books are by no means the sole voices of change present in contemporary culture. Outside the superhero genre, several other comic book series, including *The Sandman, The Books of Magic, American Splendor*, and *Maus*, have offered much less hyperbolic models of masculinity. Unfortunately, unlike the Milestone books, most of the other revisionist types of comic books are classified as "Mature Reader" titles and are clearly not geared toward the traditional, pre-adolescent consumer. Likewise, less hypermasculine, less "cool pose"-informed images of black men occasionally emerge through the cracks of popular culture. As bell hooks concludes in her chapter on reconstructing black masculinity, "Changing representations of black men must be a collective task" (*Black* 113). For true change to take place, for stereotypes (both imposed and internalized) to be broken, alternative representations of blackness in relation to masculine ideals must come not just from comic books but also from the realms of music, film, literature, education, and politics.

One of the most often cited alternative visions of black masculinity is put forth by Mitchell Duneier in *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* (1992), his acclaimed ethnography about the elderly black men who frequent Valois, a Chicago diner. The men of Valois have constructed for themselves what Duneier describes as a "community of caring." A world apart from the conventional understanding of black men caught up in masculine protests of violence, misogyny, and social alienation, these elderly men are unconcerned about—indeed, outrightly scornful of—displays of masculine posturing. Instead, the men profiled in *Slim's Table* spend their days offering support, respect, and love for each other in social and personal matters ranging from finances to sexual relationships. In relation to the issues I have been discussing in this essay, Bordo accurately sums up the vision of masculinity revealed in Duneier's work when she writes, "The oppositions soft/hard, masculine/feminine have no purchase on their sense of manhood, which is tied to other qualities: sincerity, loyalty, honesty. Their world is not divided between the men and the wimps, but between those who live according to certain personal

standards of decency and caring and those who try to 'perform' and impress others. They are scornful of and somewhat embarrassed by the 'cool pose' which has been adopted by many younger black men" ("Reading" 730). But whereas Duneier, Bordo, and hooks see gentle, caring men of an older generation like those who bide their time at Valois as an ideal that might transform a younger, disillusioned generation, today's youth are likely to find little purchase in this ideal. Although these older men have certainly lived their lives in resistance to racism and other social pressures, young men today—young *black* men— live in an environment in which the standards of hard vs. soft and masculine vs. feminine are an intricate and unavoidable fact with which they must come to terms. It is here that I think Milestone's reworked image of heroic black masculinity might prove uniquely helpful.

Unlike the communal response documented in *Slim's Table*, the Milestone books do not reject the properties of the "cool pose" and the dominant binary logic of our culture's key masculine/feminine gender distinction. Rather, their *reworking* allows pervasive and popular conceptions of gender and race to be expanded by incorporating previously disassociated concepts of softness *with* hardness, of

mind *with* body. Instead of merely championing the Clark Kent side of masculine duality as a legitimate role in and of itself, the Milestone books work to infuse gentler, more responsible, and more cerebral qualities within the codes of dominant masculinity. As the Milestone principals are well aware, images of cool black characters ("cool" as measured against existing definitions of what it means to be both black and a man in Western culture) and pre-adolescent fantasies of superhuman abilities are undeniably ingrained in anyone who might pick up a comic book, and are powerful forms through which individuals must learn to negotiate their own lives. Rather than trying to ignore or eradicate the influential reality of existing norms of gender- and race-informed patterns of behavior, the Milestone books seem to work most effectively for many of their readers by providing alternatives from within the dominant modes of discourse, by maintaining many of the fundamental conventions of comic book heroism at the same time that they expand the traditional definitions of the medium. "They're still great superhero stories," a young boy explained while his older brother waited for him at the cash register, "but they're different, *ya know*, and not just because of the color of their skin."

Note

1. Despite Milestone's award-winning stories and art, and their wide-spread distribution arrangement, the company's line of comic books continues to struggle for a sufficiently large audience of readers within the highly competitive comics market. As of this writing, Milestone's future is unclear. Disappointing sales and a weakened financial base may prove more fatal to Milestone than any supervillain.

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