Rethinking Racial Ontology through McDuffie's *Deathlok*

Sam Cowling, Denison University

forthcoming in *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*
[Penultimate draft; please cite published version]

§1. Introduction

The project of uncovering the myriad layers of presupposition, negotiation, and engagement with questions of race and racial identity in superhero comics is well under way in comics studies.[1] But, when looking backwards through the genre's history, engagement with works other than familiar critical and commercial touchstones proves crucial for charting the historical ties between superheroes and the representation of race. No less importantly, as Rifas notes, such work is, ideally, part of an "antiracist analysis [that] asks where these works stand in relation to struggles to end special privileges based on race and advance the well-being of all people."[2] To this end, Dwayne McDuffie's work on *Deathlok* in the nineties emerges as remarkable and distinctive for its interrogation of racial identity in the face of fantastical transformation.[3] In this series, McDuffie, along with Gregory Wright, Denys Cowan, and Jackson Guice, repurposed a cast-off seventies character to broach questions of race by tracing the fate of Michael Collins from his life as a black man through his metamorphosis into a monstrous brain-transplanted cyborg. So understood, *Deathlok* grapples with what Fawaz marks as "a central 'problem' of superhero stories: the negation of "bodily transformation."[4]

For those familiar with McDuffie's contributions to superhero comics and his pioneering role as a black comics creator, the sophistication of key moments in *Deathlok* might seem

---

[1] The breadth of work on this front is considerable, but contributions of particular relevance to what follows include Fawaz, Ramzi, *The New Mutants* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Bey, Marquis "Between Blackness and Monstrosity: Gendered Blackness in Cyborg Comics" *Gender Forum* (No. 58, 2016); Nama, Adilifu. *Super Black* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Rifas, Leonard, "Race and Comix" in *Multicultural Comics,* eds. Frederick Luis Aldama and Derek Parker Royal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 27-38. Although McDuffie's work is sometimes noted, his contributions through *Deathlok* have been left largely unexamined. On the distinct but related project of understanding black comics as a broader comic tradition, see Howard, Sheena, "Brief history of the black comic strip: Past and present" in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation,* eds. Howard, Sheena C. and Jackson, Ronald L. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 11-22. On the design and visual semiotics of black superheroes, although again without any discussion of Deathlok, see Davis, Blair, "Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros: The Visual Design of Black Comic Book Superheroes" in *The Blacker the Ink*, eds. Gateward, Frances and Jennings, John (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 193-212.

[2] Rifas, "Race and Comix," 28.

[3] In "Between Blackness and Monstrosity," Bey relies upon the distinctive context of "fantastic blackness" as a "generative outside" to analyze a different black cyborg character, Cyborg. Here, I rely upon talk of "fantastical transformation" primarily to signal its narrative distance—whether technological, magical, or inexplicable—from ordinary processes of physical transformation. And, where Bey offers a close reading of Cyborg that foregrounds cyborg status in understanding the racialization of Victor Stone, my project here partly reverses the order of analysis and, after a brief but close reading of *Deathlok*, investigates racialization as a broader phenomenon potentially illuminated by reflection on McDuffie's *Deathlok*.

[4] Fawaz, *The New Mutants,* 18.

unsurprising, but, as this essay argues, McDuffie's work on *Deathlok* also bears upon an under-appreciated philosophical challenge—one that falls squarely at the intersection of the philosophy of race and the philosophy of fiction.[5] After setting out this philosophical puzzle, I chronicle the history of Deathlok, foreground some critical episodes in McDuffie's *Deathlok,* and show that, once properly contextualized, McDuffie's *Deathlok* provides a means of articulating and advocating for a deflationary realist ontology of race.

§2. Philosophy of Race, Philosophy of Fiction, and *Deathlok*

Given the political and moral urgency of understanding race, philosophers who have attended to the topic, after a lengthy period of disciplinary neglect, have rightly prioritized the impact of race on issues most obviously connected to justice and human well-being.[6] Comparatively little philosophical attention has therefore been paid to the points at which the philosophy of race informs myriad other philosophical projects—in particular, contemporary work on the philosophy of fiction has grappled with questions of race at best sporadically.[7] So, despite a wealth of substantial engagement with issues of race and fiction within other disciplines, philosophers have lagged behind in connecting the philosophy of race with the philosophy of fiction.[8] In contrast, within comics studies alone, engagement with these questions has rapidly deepened our critical understanding of the superhero genre and, more broadly, our theoretical repertoire for understanding the presentation of race in narrative and pictorial terms.[9]

Once concerns in philosophy of race and the philosophy of fiction are brought together, however, a series of core questions emerge from the resulting intersection. Most notably, we find an analogue to what is arguably the central question in the philosophy of race. Rather than asking

---

[5] On McDuffie's contribution to comics, see Brown, Jeffry, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans (*Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000); Gavaler, Chris, *Superheroes (*New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 173-176; and Nama, *Super Black*, 29 and 93-98. On McDuffie and Erica Helen's *Icon,* see Carrington, Andre, "Drawn into Dialogue: Comic Book Culture and the Scene of Controversy in Milestone Media's Icon" in *The Blacker the Ink*, eds. Gateward, Frances and Jennings, John (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 153-170.

[6] Philosophical engagement with race has rapidly expanded in the last twenty years. On its metaphysical status, see Appiah, Kwame Anthony, "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race" in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism,* eds. Bell, L. and Blumenfeld, D. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995); Mallon, Ron, "Passing, Traveling and Reality: Social Constructionism and the Metaphysics of Race," *Nous* (No. 38(4), 2004), 644-673; Taylor, Paul, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction, (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Zack, Naomi, *Philosophy of Science and Race (*London: Routledge, 2002).

[7] Sporadic does not mean nonexistent, of course; see, e.g., Lott, Tommy, *The Invention of Race, (*London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999).

[8] See, e.g., Mafe, Diana, *Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018) and Carrington, Andrew, *Speculative Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[9] To point to just a few instances, see Nama, *Super Black*; Caron, Tim. "Black White and Read All Over: Representing Race in Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's *Incognegro*: A Graphic Mystery" in *Comics and the U.S. South*, eds. Costello, Brannon and Whitted, Qiana, J. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012) 138-160; Gardner, Jared. "Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim" in *Multicultural Comics,* eds. Aldama, Frederick Luis and Royal, Derek Parker (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 132-148.

how *humans* are racialized, we can ask: how are *fictional characters* racialized? For, just as readers' cognitive engagement with fiction projects moral, political, and gender categories into works and thereby marks characters as heroes, temptresses, and revolutionaries, our cognitive engagement with fiction regularly involves the projection of racial categories. Indeed, one can scarcely deny that authors regularly induce the racialization of fictional characters.[10] Readers can seek out racially diverse casts of characters. Critics can assess works by noting that characters typify or undermine racial stereotypes. Historians can examine trends in the appearance and prominence of characters of different races. Race is therefore an undeniable component of almost any engagement with fiction and this significance owes to our ingrained and seemingly irresistible practice of racializing fictional characters.

But what precisely are the mechanisms through which this racialization of fictional characters occurs and in what ways does it rely upon standing racial categories? No answer to this question can be provided without carefully attending to the philosophy of race. And, in recent years, philosophers have begun to turn their attention to understanding the factors that inform judgments about race across varying scenarios.[11] Although the racialization of fictional characters might initially seem straightforward or comparable to less tendentious ascriptions (e.g., the ascription of heights or fashion tastes to characters), the peculiarity of readers' projection of racial categories onto fictional characters requires special attention. Among the central insights of the philosophy of race is that, in marked contrast with the verdicts of essentialist race-thinking, racialization is astonishing in its multiplicity. The social construction of racial categories is irreducibly connected with numerous and diverse factors including superficial physical characteristics, political power, geographic location, population genetics, historically inherited social taxonomies, and economic marginalization, among many others.[12] An exhaustive explanation of why a given individual, at a specific time, among a specific group, in a particular place is racialized within a particular category therefore presupposes a staggering array of complexities.

---

[10] Efforts of literary critics to engage this question admit of no ready summary given the sprawling body of literature. Additionally, the fact that, given the myriad factors are implicated in racialization, how we project features such as the geographic, political, or economic onto characters bear upon this issue in absolutely critical ways that further expand the body of relevant literature. Some cues for the present project regarding how to analyze the projection of racial categories have been drawn from Nelson, Dana D., *The Word in Black and White: Reading "Race" in American Literature,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Tawil, Ezra, *The Making of Racial Sentiment: Slavery and the Birth of the Frontier Romance,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jerng, Mark C., *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[11] See Mills, Charles, "But What are You Really?" in *Blackness Visible,* eds. X and Y (Cornell University Press, 1998), 41-66; Glasgow, Joshua, *A Theory of Race* (London: Routledge, 2009), and Glasgow, Joshua, Julie Shulman, & Enrique Covarrubias, "The Ordinary Conception of Race in the United States and its Relation to Racial Attitudes: A New Approach," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 9(1-2), 2009: 15-38.

[12] On the puzzles that attend classifying a character like Marvel's Apocalypse as black, see Cunningham, Phillip, "The Absence of Black Supervillains in Mainstream Comics," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (No. 1, 2010), 51-62. On certain mechanisms for the construction of racial categories and its connection to antiracist analysis with comics, see Rifas, "Race and Comix," 28-29, 35.

Here, then, is a philosophical puzzle: How, in the face of this multiplicity, do readers so regularly and pervasively ascribe racial categories to fictional characters? Remarkably, this projection of racial categories seems unhindered even when fictions involve strange counterfactual scenarios, alternative world histories, or manifest scientific impossibilities. Given the profound complexity of racial taxonomies and the incredibility of fictional worlds, the persistent and vivid projection of racial taxonomies onto characters, across genres, stands out as a manifest phenomenon that requires clear and convincing explanation.

Our present concern is therefore to facilitate the philosophical project of understanding the importation of our racial categories into fiction and, in particular, the projection of race across what I'll call "fantastical transformation"—namely, those technologically or physical impossible metamorphoses we so often find in superhero comics and science fiction. [13] In doing so, we can take McDuffie's *Deathlok* as an illustrative case study.[14] Philosophers have a soft spot for outliers, but this might nevertheless seem a peculiar choice of example. First, it focuses on comics rather than the staple media of choice in the philosophy of fiction: novels, plays, and, to a lesser extent, film. Notice, however, that by focusing on the hybrid medium of comics, we are thereby positioned to consider both the pictorial and the textual mechanisms that underwrite the projection of racial categories.[15] This is, I think, reason enough to prefer focusing our sights on *Deathlok* rather than, say, *Hamlet*. A second concern is that *Deathlok* addresses the socially constructed identity of a cyborg subjected to a brain transplant and therefore represents a case of fantastical transformation so bizarre that it is arguably incapable of offering us any general insights into race. Note, however, that the complexity of this case is useful precisely because it requires us to attend to axes of complexity that might otherwise be elided. In particular, understanding racial identity in *Deathlok* can help elucidate the diversity of our racial concepts

---

[13] Other examples of comparably fantastical transformations include (but are hardly limited to) those of the Ultra-Humanite, the Brain, Robot-man, Martha (from *New X-Men*) Validus, Metallo, Jihad, Silvermane, Cloak, Swamp-Thing, Man-Thing, Tharok, Firestorm, Bushmaster, Arnim Zola, Psylocke, and Cyborg. For recent discussion, see Fawaz (2016: 18, 69) and Bey (2016). Notably, some of these cases invite revisions in our projection of racial categories (e.g., Man-Thing, Validus, and the Ultra-Humanite); in others, like those of Silvermane, Cloak, and Cyborg, there is little narrative pressure to scrutinize our unreflective projection of racial categories. See, for instance, Nama, *Super Black*, 81-88, on Cloak as representation of black identity within *Cloak and Dagger*.

[14] Marc Singer rightly notes that "Race in contemporary comics proves to be anything but simplistic..." anticipating worries about fantastical transformation by engaging with characters in near-constant physical flux. See Singer, Marc. "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race" *African American Review*, (No. (36(1), 2002), 107–119, and, in particular, Singer's discussion of Chameleon Boy from *The Legion of Superheroes*.

[15] On the nature of hybrid mediums, see Levinson, Jerrold, "Hybrid Art Forms" *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (No. 18(4), 1984), 5-13. On the equal priority of text and image, see McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics, (*Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink: 1993) and Wartenberg, Thomas, "Wordy Pictures" in *The Art of Comics,* eds. Meskin, Aaron and Cook, Roy *(*London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 87-104. As noted below, the role of the pictorial in conveying racial identity resists easy analysis in comics, but, on the primacy of the pictorial in conveying black identity see Stromberg, Frederik, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003); and, outside of comics, see Harris, Michael D. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Pres, 2003).

and bring extant views about the ontology of race into somewhat sharper relief. A final, crucial reason why this particular case study proves an especially apt one: the work of Dwayne McDuffie has thus far received insufficient critical attention. What follows is intended to help deepen our critical engagement with his creative voice.[16] To this end, we can now turn to the peculiar history of *Deathlok*.[17]

§3. Racializing Moench and Buckler's *Deathlok: The Demolisher*

A product of close collaboration between Rich Buckler and Doug Moench, Deathlok first appeared in *Astonishing Tales #25* (August, 1974) and served as the lead character in a series of features that ran for eleven issues.[18] This arc traces the fate of Luther Manning, formerly a white army colonel, after his body is transformed into a grey, desiccated hulk with partially metallic features and a haunting red eye. The now-cyborg Manning squares off against Harlan Ryker, a rogue army general, and muddles through a vaguely defined, dystopian America while also contending with a range of other cyborgs and time-travelers. The teetering coherence of the narrative is undeniable, but often mitigated by non-standard "dual-tracked" narrative captions, which feature Manning's interior mental life in conflict with the commands of his "on-board computer."[19] While Buckler and Moench had grand plans for the character—an early interview hints towards a novel—this run in *Astonishing Tales* is perhaps most noteworthy for its inchoate storyline, embrace of science fiction over superhero genre tropes, and its inventive post-Steranko layouts.

When taken as a case study, Buckler and Moench's *Deathlok* provides an apt backdrop for understanding the role of pictorial cues in readers' projection of racial categories. Prior to Deathlok's pre-cyborg past being revealed in *Astonishing Tales* #27, there were only limited cues regarding how to "properly" racialize the character. The social context of the science fiction narrative was sufficiently alien and Deathlok's skintone could potentially be "coded" as the same

---

[16] McDuffie's *Deathlok* has not been entirely ignored especially given the heyday of cyborg studies following Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto." See Foster, Thomas. "The Souls of Cyber-Folk: Performativity, Virtual Embodiment, & Racial Histories" in *Cyberspace Textuality,* ed. Ryan, Marie-Laure (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 137-163; and Rivera, Lysa. "Approriate(d) Cyborgs: Diasporic Identities in Dwayne McDuffie's *Deathlok* Series" Foster and Rivera each draw heavily upon DuBois in spelling out McDuffie's allusion to "double consciousness." On cyborg superheroes, see Oehlert, M. "From Captain America to Wolverine: Cyborgs in Comic Books–Alternative Images of Cybernetic Heroes and Villains" in *The Cybercultures Reade*r, eds. Kennedy, B. M. and Bell, D. (London: Routledge, 2000), 219-232.

[17] Here, I simply set aside subsequent use of Deathlok, whether in the form of Collins, or in later iterations (e.g., Jack Truman and Henry Hayes). The most interesting of these is almost certainly Death Locket, a gender-swapped Deathlok. On gendered superheroic bodies, see Fawaz, *The New Mutants,* 69, and Taylor, Aaron, '"'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life': Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body," *The Journal of Popular Culture* (No. 40(2), 2007), 344- 360.

[18] Deathlok makes a sporadic series of appearances after this *Astonishing Tales* run and prior to McDuffie's *Deathlok.* Notably, the concluding arc of McDuffie and Wright's *Deathlok*—credited to Wright—features a return of Manning and a litany of time-travelling complexity.

[19] On "dual-tracked" narration in other works, see Gravett, Paul, *Comics Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 109.

washed-out grey color historically used to mark characters as black.[20] At the same time, the involuntary mutilation of Manning's body by the military, cloaked in the guise of medical science, brings to mind the anti-black, governmental racism of events like the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. The resulting curiosity about Deathlok's race extended to the editor of the series, Roy Thomas. Years later, Buckler recalled the following discussion:

> I remember, after a couple of issues saw print, Roy Thomas "hooked" me for a moment and asked: "Rich, is Deathlok black?" And I said, "No, but his wife is." He nodded, thought that one over, and then commented: "He's not exactly a super-hero, is he? The computer voice was confusing. I had a little trouble following it, but it's interesting and I like what you're doing. Keep it up."[21]

It is striking to learn that the editor of *Astonishing Tales* was uncertain about Deathlok's race, but, given the political force of racial identity, it is little surprise that Thomas and others were anxious to address this racial uncertainty. It is no less significant that Buckler's answer presupposes, not only that Deathlok *can* be racialized despite his fantastical cyborg status but that the implicit answer to Thomas' question is that Deathlok is white.

As a hybrid medium, comics afford a sprawling, diverse range of tools for racializing characters. As we've noted, some of these cues are straightforwardly pictorial as in the case of skin color. Others are textual: stereotypes in speech, explicit narration, and so on.[22] Still other cues for racializing characters resist categorization as wholly pictorial or wholly textual. Instead, these narrative cues track the social practices and structures that underwrite the construction of race in human life. These include the patterns of social engagement and the narrative trajectory of characters. Increasingly, the deployment of these tools and their political consequences has been subject to systematic scrutiny in comics studies.[23] But, as Howard (2013: 20) suggests, any comprehensive account of how racial identities are presented in a hybrid medium requires attending a nuanced range of normative and aesthetic considerations including, at a minimum, historically contextualized stereotypes, patterns of humor, and much more.

Given Buckler's unequivocal answer to Thomas, it is surprising that we find conspicuously little about the initial presentation of Deathlok that might cue the unambiguous projection of racial categories onto the character. His dialogue is in homogenized standard English. The science fiction narrative isn't especially distinctive. There are no unambiguous visual

---

[20] For some representative instances from the history of anti-black racism in comics, see Stromberg, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*.

[21] Buckler, Rich, interviewed by Daniel Best, *20th Century Danny Boy*, May, 2010, accessed: https://ohdannyboy.blogspot.com/2010/05/from-desk-of-rich-buckler-part-v.html

[22] (On the nuance of black identity and linguistic codes, see Bramlett, Frank, "Linguistic Codes and Character Identity in Afro Samurai" in *Linguistics and the Study of Comics,* ed. Bramlett, Frank, (London: Palgrave, 2012), 183-209.

[23] See, e.g., Caron, ""Black White and Read All Over"; Tyree, Tia C.M. "Contemporary representations of black females in newspaper comic strips" in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation,* eds. Howard, Sheena, and Jackson, Ronald L. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 45-64.

design choices that might be used to signal racial categories in superhero comics.[24] What, then, accounts for Buckler's certainty about how to racialize Deathlok? Presumably, this certainty owes to the inclusion of the flashback sequence in *Astonishing Tales #27*, where we are privy to Manning's previous life as a white man. Notice, however, that, if we are to follow Buckler in taking Manning's racial status to definitely settle Deathlok's racial status, we can do so only if we take on certain unacknowledged assumptions about the nature of race. Specifically, if Manning's whiteness somehow ensures Deathlok's whiteness, it is presumably only in virtue of assuming an incipient racial essentialism when projecting race into fiction. According to this incipient essentialism, racial categories have a hidden nature that obeys inviolable laws of transmission. Among other things, such laws ensure that racial status simply cannot be changed even in the face of fantastical transformation. So, even if the Thing or Hulk becomes orange or green via fantastical transformation, this incipient essentialism about race ensures that they nevertheless remain white in virtue of their previously white identities. This incipient essentialism apparently tracks at least *some* reader's judgements about racial identity in fantastical transformation—most notably, when Lois Lane "becomes black" in *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* #106 (November, 1970). For, in this and similar fictions, there is little temptation for reflective readers to revise their understanding of Lois' "true" racial identity, despite her briefly transformed appearance.

A striking consequence of this incipient essentialism is that it apparently requires us to suspend most everything we now know about the ways in which individuals are typically racialized—e.g., it simply ignores the outsized impact of superficial physical characteristics in shaping racial categorization. Indeed, the incipient essentialism assumed in Buckler's answer holds that the historical essence of an individual settles their racial identity and, as a consequence, racial categories can float free of standard racializing cues and patterns of social interaction. So, no matter what Deathlok's body or social conditions are, the incipient essentialist insists that one's racial identity is inviolable and immutable in the face of transformation.

Although we are rarely pressed to consider whether individuals might move between racial categories except through changing cultural contexts or large-scale social changes, the fantastical transformations that are commonplace in superhero and science fiction comics are, it seems, at least potentially instances of racial transformation. (This is, by no means to say, that racial transformation in fiction is commonplace, easily accomplished, or morally unproblematic. It is surely none of these things and perhaps only rarely possible and, even then, only in highly circumscribed ways.) Given that any viable philosophy of race ought to reject outmoded essentialisms, we now face a philosophical challenge: how can we make sense of the projection of race onto fictional characters without acquiescing to a worrisome essentialism? Put differently: is there a way to explain how Deathlok might (or might not) be white without relying upon the specious essentialist assumption that racial identity has inviolable and potentially imperceptible laws of transmission or inheritance? Before exploring a recent proposal within the metaphysics of race in Section Five, it will be useful to consider McDuffie's *Deathlok* and its markedly different means for grappling with race and fantastical transformation.

---

[24] On the visual design and resultant characterization of black superheroes, see Davis, Blair, "Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros: The Visual Design of Black Comic Book Superheroes."

§4. Thinking through Race in McDuffie's *Deathlok*

If the history of Deathlok were exhausted by Buckler and Moench's work, it would amount to little more than a useful case study regarding the racialization of a bizarre comic character. The history of Deathlok continues, however, with the revamping of the character by Dwayne McDuffie, Gregory Wright, and Jackson Guice in 1990, beginning with a four-part mini-series and followed by a self-titled series that ran for thirty-four issues. While McDuffie's broad and deep influence on comics has been increasingly recognized, this *Deathlok* run stands out as an episode in the history of superhero comics that is remarkable for its examination of fantastic transformation and black identity. McDuffie's work here is bolstered and its engagement with black identity is importantly deepened by the contributions of Denys Cowan.[25] With this context in view, we can now engage some key narrative elements of McDuffie's *Deathlok* and draw upon them to sharpen the above-noted challenge of understanding the projection of race in comics.[26]

McDuffie's rebooted *Deathlok* follows the plight of Michael Collins who serves as a stark counterpoint to Buckler and Moench's protagonist. Where Manning is a white soldier consistently commended for his military prowess, Collins is a black scientist and a self-described pacifist. Like Manning, Collins is forcibly transformed into a monstrous Deathlok cyborg, but, in Collins' case, this is done at the behest of executives running Roxxon, an arms corporation that operates under the guise of a medical technology firm. Visually, the new character design hews closely to Moench and Buckler's version with the same grey skin tone and asymmetric cyborg face, though minor features differ (e.g., a glowing yellow eye replaces the previous red one). Perhaps most notably, the American flag patch on the earlier version of the character is removed.

In narrative terms, several critical differences between Collins and Manning stand out. First, McDuffie's characterization of Collins' life foregrounds his upper-middle class socio-economic status and his initial condition of suburban domestic "normalcy."[27] There is repeated mention of Collins' status and seniority within Roxxon's research division. Collins' wife, a PhD student, and his son are black. Their suburban home is spacious and well appointed. Given the typical portrayal of black superheroes as tethered to both urban settings and socio-economic precarity, this depiction of Collins as a successful, suburban, family man is an atypical

---

[25] Cowan contributed pencils on almost all of the first fifteen issues of the continuing *Deathlok* series and his broader contributions to the representation of black identity in superhero comics are difficult to overstate, especially given his contemporaneous contributions to album artwork—most notably, in GZA's *Liquid Swords*.

[26] McDuffie and Wright trade writer credits back and forth throughout arcs within the continuing series. Wright's issues are notably different in focus—often centered upon action set-pieces and the time-travelling roots of the Deathlok character. The apparent difference in authorial voice and McDuffie's discussion of his contribution in interviews is, I believe, reason to properly describe the main focus of the present piece as trained upon "McDuffie's" *Deathlok* rather than their shared contribution. In an interview McDuffie said: "None of it was in the pitch, but all of it was intentional. *Invisible Man* was, and still is, my favorite novel. I'd just read *The Souls of Black Folk* and was explicitly thinking about Skip Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*. *Godel, Escher, Bach* and Derrick Bell's dialogues about race and law sort of crashed in my head. Deathlok was a way of sharing some of my thoughts about all of this." McDuffie, Dwayne, interviewed by Evan Narcisse, "Race, Sci-Fi, and Comics: A Talk with Dwayne McDuffie," Mar 5, 2010, *The Atlantic.*

[27] On the role of the quotidian in comics, see Bramlett, Frank, "The Role of Culture in the Comics of the Quotidian" *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (No. 6(3), 2015), 246-259.

presentation of black domestic life in superhero comics.[28] Second, while Manning's transformation into Deathlok involves the mutilation of his original human body, Collins' transformation into Deathlok is even more baroque. His fantastical transformation involves the removal of his brain from his original body and its implantation into an entirely different cyborg body.[29] By leaving Collins' body intact, McDuffie and Wright preserve the narrative possibility of Collins' restoring his ordinary human life via a "simple" brain transplant, which is a narrative possibility foreclosed for Manning's Deathlok. Consequently, a central narrative component of McDuffie's *Deathlok* hinges on Collins' continuing efforts to retrieve his original body—the locus of the previous social interactions that racialized him as black—which is held in stasis by Roxxon.

Cowan's layouts in *Deathlok #1* (Vol. 2) amplify the horrifying physical control Roxxon exerts over Collins' body. Most strikingly, as Collins' recounts his past, Cowan chooses to juxtapose two panels—one with Ryker, the Roxxon CEO, holding Collins' body in a stasis tube, the other with Collins' son, Nick, throwing out a pile of trash. Wright, who colored the issue, pointedly chooses the same tone for both objects and, along with Cowans' musculature-like linework on the trash, signals that these are each to be conceived of as raw, material commodities equally admitting of possibilities for ownership or disposal.

[Image One: McDuffie's body in stasis and Deathlok observing his son.]

McDuffie's *Deathlok* presents a black man dispossessed of his own body and charts the precarity and collapse of his comfortable socio-economic condition. At the outset of *Deathlok,* Collins speaks out against the use of Roxxon technology for military ends and, as a result, is singled out as an unwilling test subject.[30] Collins is then taken from his life and family and, after having his brain transplanted, he is deployed as a soldier in Central America. While Roxxon continues business without incident, subsequent issues trace the domestic fallout of Collins' disappearance. His wife is forced to drop out of school. Later, while pregnant with Collins' second child, she is forced to wait tables and move in with her sister after her home is foreclosed. In a country engaged in mass incarceration with little consideration of its broader social costs, it's difficult not to interpret Collins' narrative as a parable of the harms of anti-black racism and, in particular, a governmental and corporate agenda of mass incarceration.

A crucial visual choice that manifests the tension between Collins' cyborg condition and his estrangement from his black body is the inconstant presentation of Collins' in "cyberspace." As Foster (1999) notes, considerable action unfolds in this context throughout the series and,

---

[28] On the typical presentation of black superheroes as urban rather than suburban, see Cunningham, "The Absence of Black Supervillains in Mainstream Comics." For discussion of black identity across the superhero genre, see Fawaz, *The New Mutants,* 189, and Singer, Marc, "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race."

[29] The metaphysical puzzles of personal identity are further compounded in *Deathlok* #19 (Vol. 2) with the return of a cyborg featuring the brain of John Kelly, the original source of the body of Collins' Deathlok cyborg.

[30] On the destruction of black bodies for militaristic ends in comics, see Fawaz, *The New Mutants,* 272, and Francis, Conseula, "American Truths: Blackness and the American Superhero" in *The Blacker the Ink*, eds. Gateward, Frances and Jennings, John, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 137-152.

when Cowan depicts Collins' within this environment in *Deathlok #4* (Vol. 2), Collins' original black body is enshrouded by floating cyborg technology with his original biological body underneath. Here, Cowan amplifies the tension in Collins' interrogation of his own racial identity and his bodily conditions while McDuffie signals the status of cyberspace as a window into Collins' inner mental life. Subsequently, Collins' onboard computer responds to a query regarding how things "look" in cyberspace as follows: "Syntax error. 'Looks' is inappropriate description of organic brain's subjective interpretation of non-visual data." The presumption here is that Collins' internal mental representation fails to track facts about genuine appearances, but, instead, echoes Collins' tacit self-conception which presents itself as an image of the body of which he has been dispossessed.

While McDuffie's *Deathlok* frequently engages an extended metaphor of racial oppression, a later arc of the series investigates potential tensions between black and African identity by inserting Collins and his family into a Wakandan conflict between T'Challa and Moses Magnum. This brief arc, replete with callbacks to Don McGregor's watershed run on *Jungle Action*, explores the nature of black identity, while, at the same time, offering some subtle meta-textual remarks on what a character like Black Panther means for black comic readers. We find, for instance, the following exchange between Deathlok and T'Challa in *Deathlok* #23 (Vol. 2):

> Deathlok: "My humanity can't be destroyed. Not by this metal shell I'm trapped in. Nor by anything else. The same's true of your [Wakandan] people."
>
> Black Panther: "That has been the case so far. I'm very proud of the way my people have adjusted to such massive change."
>
> Deathlok: "When you became an Avenger, it was a matter of pride for a whole generation of African-Americans. You see me as a metaphor. I see you as a personal hero."

Here and elsewhere, narrative cues invite us to project the racial category, *black,* onto Deathlok. In keeping with McGregor's "Panther's Rage" in *Jungle Action* all of the characters, apart from Venomm, are black. More generally, the thematic concerns of the comic prove largely unintelligible unless Collins' Deathlok can be racialized as black by the reader. (Moreover, Collins' describes himself as black in subsequent issues.) However, there are countervailing narrative cues that demand the recognition of a more complex racial identity. In turn, this complex identity requires the reader to understand Collins' black identity as contested by the nature of his fantastically transformed body.

The pressure to acknowledge the complex racial identity of Collins' Deathlok is a product of the same kind of fantastical transformation that Manning was subject to. But, where essentialist race-thinking might lead some to view Manning's Deathlok as white *because* Manning's body was white, Collins' tie to his original body is severed in all but narrative terms. Collins' brain has been transplanted into a monstrous cyborg, part of which belonged, not to Collins, but to a white man. How, then, can we coherently racialize the resulting cyborg body as black? For incipient essentialists, the fact that Collins' Deathlok is black might be held to follow from the fact that his brain is black. There is, however, little plausibility in holding brains to be the apt objects of racialization even after we set aside the concerning assumption that intrinsic biological structure

provides a means for grounding ascriptions of race. The apparent tensions in identifying as black, even while his brain inhabits a once-white cyborg body, drives McDuffie to explore Collins' complex racial identity in fairly remarkable ways.

In the second issue of *Deathlok's* initial arc, "The Souls of Cyber-Folk," we find Deathlok and Misty Knight engaged in a lengthy dialogue regarding black identity and its interaction with their cyborg identity. This dialogue unfolds with a series of layered allusions that tether racial identity to a fictional cyborg or "netter" identity, which Misty describes as a "term of derision co-opted by some of the more politically minded members of our little demographic." Since Misty Knight has a cyborg arm, while Deathlok is standardly drawn as a hulking, desiccated grey figure with a robotic eye, he pointedly asks her "You passin' or something?" only to be told that her cyborg identity has had deep social consequences—specifically, her firing after the receipt of her cyborg limb. In contrast to other scenes, Cowan's visual choices here present an appreciably more intimate rendering of Collins, marked by a seemingly different physical stature.

[Image Two: Collins' Deathlok in dialogue with Misty Knight]

Rather than towering over Misty, he is, at once, apparently ordinary in size and able to sit comfortably in the armchair in her living room. The resulting image conveys a kind of candid, near-confessional dialogue, quite distant from the more familiar heroic posturing sprinkled throughout other issues. The conversation subsequently turns to the ways in which shared identity circumscribes discussion of the experiences of complex racial self-understanding.

> Deathlok: "Hey, who's this?" *[Deathlok holds up a photo of Colleen Wing.]*
>
> Misty Knight: "Colleen Wing. She's my partner, but I'd rather keep her out of this. This is cyborg business."
>
> Deathlok: "Don't trust her?"
>
> Misty Knight: "I trust her more than I trust myself. She's like a sister to me. It's just that this cyborg stuff is… Look, this is embarrassing. Can we skip it?"
>
> Deathlok: "No need. Before I became… This *thing*, I was a black man. In college, my best buddy was white but as close as we were, there were places our friendship couldn't go."
>
> Misty Knight: "Yeah, I been there. Some people accuse me of being more comfortable with mutants and cyborgs than I am with my own people. Whoever they're supposed to be. It's like being trapped between two worlds. At *least* two." (*Deathlok* #3, Vol. 2, 14).

Deathlok then quotes from memory DuBois' "The Souls of Black Folk" and confides that "When I was human, I was pretty assimilated myself. The only black at work. One of only two families in my neighborhood. And, other than the occasional cutting little reminder, I was pretty

comfortable in my illusion. I don't ever plan to get that comfortable as a cyborg."[31] (*Ibid*.) In what marks the conclusion of this remarkable exchange, Misty Knight says "For now, I think I'm content to pass. But then, I've got the option."[32]

There is much that is remarkable about this exchange. McDuffie's ability to convey the uneasy relation between embodied identities and the tensions among them emerges as especially noteworthy. While Deathlok simultaneously imparts that he is partly estranged from his black identity—remarking that, "before I became… this thing, I was a black man" and speaking retrospectively about his time as a human—his experiences are manifestly those of a black man. Indeed, the poignancy of his recitation of DuBois owes, in part, to McDuffie's continued efforts to present Deathlok as both black and, at the same time, something else as well. In subsequent issues, Collins' Deathlok is explicit in this regard. When explaining the challenges that come with black identity in America in *Deathlok #26*, Collins' son, Nick, responds: "You mean 'cause we're black." To which Collins answers in the affirmative: "That's right. The way it is ain't right. But we have to deal with it as it is." So, while the fantastical character of the "netter" identity is unmoored from the actual hierarchies of power that structure racial identity in our non-fictional world, it figuratively doubles here in a range of ways as a *multiple* racial identity.[33] Most notably, it serves here as an overlapping, intersecting identity that informs the lived experiences of Deathlok and Misty Knight.

As a proxy for mixed or multi-racial identity, this "netter" identity can afford or preclude possibilities of passing and variously circumscribes or activates the social mechanisms of race. Perhaps most strikingly, Deathlok's remarks seem to point to the fact that, after embodying this cyborg identity, his previous "assimilation" and subsequent comfort with "my illusion" has been brought into stark relief. His expressed refusal to accept any comparable illusion while living as a cyborg might naturally be read as his persistence in recovering his human body, but it can also be taken as a pointed refusal to conform to the normative expectations of American racial hierarchy—a refusal prompted by his experience embodying and reflecting on his black-cyborg identity. Following through on McDuffie's metaphor, we find a kind of model for how to think through the layered nuance of racial identity. No less significantly, McDuffie presents a black identity that is not "crowded out" by Deathlok's cyborg identity, given the critical respects in which Collins views the world through the lens of his lived black experience.

Appreciating the complexity of Deathlok's identity requires a framework for understanding the projection of race that avoids any monolithic racial essentialism. In bringing this narrative into contact with the philosophy of race, we can usefully articulate the resulting philosophical challenge: how can we develop a metaphysics of race that renders intelligible the

---

[31] On the broader role of double consciousness as shaping narratives in superhero comics with black characters, see Osvado Oyola, "Black Lightning Always Strikes Twice!: Double-Consciousness as a Superpower," *The Middle Space*, 2013, https://themiddlespaces.com/2013/10/22/black-lightning-always-strikes-twice-double-consciousness-as-a-super-power/

[32] On the visual and political dimensions of racial passing in comics, see Caron "Black White and Read All Over" and Oyola, "Black Lightning Always Strikes Twice!"

[33] On some of the complexities in formulating an account of mixed identity, see Haslanger, Sally. "You Mixed? Racial Identity without Racial Biology" in *Adoption Matters*, eds. Witt, Charlotte, and Haslanger, Sally (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 265-289.

overlapping identities that issue from both Collins' past experience of being racialized as a black man and from his present, fantastically transformed condition?

§5. Rethinking *Deathlok*

In exploring how McDuffie's *Deathlok* engages with the issue of how race is projected into fiction, an abiding narrative tension in McDuffie's *Deathlok* emerged: the fraught relationship between Collins' blackness and his estrangement from his presumptive racial identity. The question for the philosophy of race is, then, whether we can reconcile this tension while making good on the profound and equally legitimate senses in which Collins' is and is not black within McDuffie's *Deathlok.* This section explores the prospects for a recent and influential conception of the metaphysics of race—the deflationary realism set out in Hardimon, *Rethinking Race: The Case for Deflationary Realism*—which is uniquely suited to the present task. In contrast with recent monistic views about race, which hold that our race-thinking is properly understood via a single race concept (though, importantly, not one that mandates objectionable essentialism), Hardimon's account defends the necessity of distinguishing and relying upon a multiplicity of core race concepts for understanding race and racialization.[34]

Hardimon's deflationary realism aims to accommodate the moral and political concerns of a rival ontology of race—normative racial eliminativism—that recommend the elimination of race from our discourse in light of the endemic harms of race-thinking. But, unlike normative eliminativisms, Hardimon's deflationary realism recognizes a plurality of core racial concepts, some of which are empty and pernicious, while others warrant sustained attention and, in some cases, admit of useful deployment. Perhaps most importantly, Hardimon denies that there is any worldly correlate of the *racialist* concept of race—a conception that involves various essentialist theses about racial "natures" and a normative commitment to a moral and psychological hierarchy of human beings. As Hardimon puts it: "If there is one thing that people ought to know about race, it is that there are no racialist races."[35]

Hardimon's departure from eliminativism consists, in large measure, in his view that multiple race concepts, each of which is importantly distinct from the racialist conception, are critical for understanding racialization. These include a *minimalist* concept of race, which is without normative content, hierarchical structure, or essentialist commitments. This minimalist concept of race takes races to be "distinguished by differences in patterns of visible physical features (skin color, hair texture, nose shape, and so on) corresponding to differences in

---

[34]As a methodological objection, one might question whether we can genuinely improve our understanding of race by attending to cases of fantastical transformation involving brain transplants and cyborg bodies. In upholding the methodological value of examining such cases, it is noteworthy that recent philosophical work has relied upon some fantastical scenarios to investigate patterns of racial cognition and categorization. Mills in "But What are You Really?" offers a series of exotic scenarios aimed at understanding criteria for racial identity, some of which involve a satirical "Schuyler Machine" that transforms appearance. Glasgow consider a series of "twin Earth"-style thought experiments regarding racial categorization in *A Theory of Race.*

[35] Hardimon, Michael, *Rethinking Race: The Case for Deflationary Realism,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 15.

geographical ancestry."[36] An additional race concept that Hardimon argues is indispensable for understanding the social world and remediating the consequences of racialist race-thinking, is what Hardimon calls *socialrace*, which is a critical, emancipatory social rather than biological kind. For Hardimon, the socialrace concept distinguishes a "social group that is taken or thought to be a biological group of a particular kind, namely a racialist race."[37] Roughly put, socialraces are groups distinguished by the mistaken application of the racialist race concept and subsequently treated in hierarchical terms in virtue of the normative consequences of the errant racialist race concept.

Hardimon's deflationary realism inherits the complexities one would expect from a philosophical view that "splits" rather than "lumps" our understanding of race. But, in attempting to capture the complexities of racial identity across fantastical transformation, Hardimon's view proves more fruitful than any monistic account on which race-thinking is univocal. In light of its narrative contours, McDuffie's *Deathlok* proves implausibly puzzling if we deny that Deathlok is black. Additionally, we owe some account of the narrative aspects of Deathlok that signal that Collins' Deathlok is not *just* or *only* or *always* black. For essentialist realists about race, this is explained by the fact that race is projected into fiction in accord with the lawful dynamics of race and so, just as Manning's Deathlok is white because Manning was once white, Collins' Deathlok is black because Collins was once black. But brains simply are not some magical loci of racial essence. More generally, race tracks no hidden biological nature. As Hardimon notes "No one has a racialist race, since the concept is empty." How, then, can we make sense of Collins' complex racial identity?

If we are deflationary realists, the polysemy of our racial concepts affords an ideal means for understanding Collins' Deathlok. First, since the minimalist concept of race is one that concerns human beings, the now-cyborg Collins is simply outside its scope of application: Deathlok is no longer human and so Deathlok no longer has a minimal race. Second, when we consider the apt projection of our socialrace concept, Deathlok is black. His forced transformation by Roxxon is a product of racial inequality, since his body is, in a very literal sense, captured and withheld from him by arms manufacturers. Given America's grim history of systemic anti-black racism, his origin is a pointed microcosm of slavery, oppression, and violence. But Deathlok does not have a black socialrace solely because of these harms. He is also racialized by those around him as a black man. Most pointedly, in the Wakanda arc, we find Moses Magnum, one of Marvel's more notable black supervillains, remark to Deathlok that "[A]s an African-American I thought you would understand what I'm trying to do, Mr. Collins."[38](*Deathlok* #24, Vol. 2, 20) Subsequently, in Deathlok #25 (Vol. 2), Deathlok is rebuked by Moses Magnum mid-battle:

---

[36] Hardimon, *Rethinking Race,* 3. This abbreviated summary elides critical discussion of a fourth race concept, which Hardimon calls the *populationist* concept of race. Roughly speaking, if such a concept tracks anything in the world, it is the scientifically informed presentation of the minimalist concept. Hardimon takes its applicability to humans to hinge on empirical issues in biology, but it plays no role in the present discussion.

[37] Hardimon, *Rethinking Race,* 131.

[38] The depiction of Magnum throughout this final McDuffie arc is marked by an interesting visual choice: he is costumed with all but his mouth revealed. Given the rhetoric of Magnum interrogating Deathlok's black identity, one might expect a depiction that magnifies stereotypically black design features, but, to the

[Image three: Deathlok and Moses Magnum in combat.]

> Moses Magnum: "Deathlok! How dare you… How dare you destroy this opportunity for your people."
>
> Deathlok: "Opportunity? You ain't hardly Marcus Garvey, my brother. Seems to me, for all your talk you're just trying to get yours."
>
> Moses Magnum: "You are a traitor to your race!!"

Race isn't simple. And, when we turn to a character like Deathlok, questions of racial identity reach a byzantine level of complexity. However, the resources of a deflationary realist view of race afford us the means to render cases of fantastical transformation intelligible via the distinction between racialist, minimal, and socialrace race concepts.

On this deflationary realist ontology of race, while Deathlok has no minimalist race, there is an uncontestable sense, born out in the narrative in *Deathlok*, in which he is black—namely, with respect to his socialrace. This is a concept separable from any biological constraints while simultaneously shaped by the pernicious racialist concept, and its discrepancy with minimalist race is what yields Collin's complex multiple racial identity.[39] Conversely, the deflationary realist's socialrace concept provides a resource for explaining Buckler's commitment to the whiteness of Manning's Deathlok without an untenable essentialism, since Manning's socialrace need not track any biological reality. For the deflationary realist, socialrace and minimalist race stand in no competition with one another, but each is apparently required in order to adequately think through Deathlok's distinctive and multiple racial identity. McDuffie's Deathlok therefore illuminates an axis of racial complexity removed from ordinary life but manifest when we attend to how humans racialize fictional worlds—even ones marked by fantastical transformation—in accord with the actual one.

Where does this leave us with respect to the broader philosophical challenge presented at the outset—namely, understanding the projection of racial categories within fiction? To be sure, our best ontology of race is one that, above all, must make sense of the actual world and the patterns of oppression and marginalization manifested within it. At the same time, narrative worlds are means to explore actual cases as well as merely hypothetical ones that might illuminate the murky limits of our racial and other concepts. Provided that narrative worlds meet a threshold of coherence and elicit fairly robust judgments about racialization, I take it that they

---

contrary, Magnum and Deathlok, when juxtaposed, appear quite similar in design, each laden with metal and draped in primary colors. It is worth noting, however, that the synergy between McDuffie and Cowan is absent in this later arc with Cowan having left the book after *Deathlok* #17 (Vol. 2). Each issue is drawn by a different penciler: Kevin Kobasic, Walter McDaniel, Grant Miehm, Chris Wozniak,

[39] This squares with the contention in Bey, "Between Blackness and Monstrosity," that "to be a monster is itself to fall outside of a normative classifiable human being" and so profoundly complicates Cyborg's comparable, though importantly different narrative ascription of blackness.

can constitute meaningful thought experiments for evaluating competing ontologies of race.[40] And, as I've argued here, given the coherence of ascribing a kind of multiple racial identity to Collins' Deathlok, we find support for a pluralistic rather than monistic ontology of race. Indeed, it looks like the fully developed resources of Hardimon's deflationary realism provide a sophisticated and powerful tool for understanding patterns of racialization, not just in the actual world, but also within comics and other narrative worlds. Perhaps most distinctively, Hardimon's pluralism provides a framework for the substantive interpretation of claims that an individual *both is and is not* within a given racial category, where other accounts of racialization often leave this intuitive but opaque claim unanalyzed.

As we train our attention on racialization within comics, there is a suggestive way of narrowing the general question about the projection of racial categories in fiction into one specifically concerned with comics. This medium-specific question asks: how does the hybrid deployment of the textual and the pictorial within comics limit or expand the possibilities for racializing characters? Put differently: how exactly does the *hybridity* of comics impact the racialization of characters and what is distinctive about the projection of race within comics that sets it apart from purely textual or purely pictorial works? For those interested in bringing together the philosophy of race and fiction within the medium of comics, evaluating the utility of theories like Hardimon's against the backdrop of works like McDuffie's *Deathlok* is a necessary element of an expansive and on-going concern.[41]

---

[40] On the methodology of comics as philosophical thought experiments, see Gavaler, Chris, and Goldberg, Nathanial, *Superhero Thought Experiments: Comic Book Philosophy* (Des Mois: University of Iowa Press, 2019).

[41] For comments, thanks to Noah Berlatsky, Wesley Cray, Sika Dagbovie-Mullins, John McHugh, Stephanie Kays, and anonymous referees at *Inks.*