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**abstract:**

The article analyzes development of a Black female superhero character in HBO's Watchmen (2019) series. Inspired by Adilifu Nama's "critically celebratory perspective" used to discuss Black superheroes, it focuses on how the show bridges the gender gap in representation of Black superheroes by introducing a strong female character in her thirties, how it deals with themes of racial discrimination, and how it offers a portent of racial utopia within the context of US history, culture, and politics. Furthermore, the analysis includes a reference to Alan Moore's original comic of the same title and argues that through the Afrofuturistic aesthetic, the show transforms the disappointing white male superhero narrative into a potential story of success of the Black female superhero, making Angela a rightful heir to Doctor Manhattan's superpower and perhaps someone who will be capable of making a change both in terms of a cultural and political change.

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## The Birth of a Black Female Superhero in "Watchmen" (2019)

The viewer's experience of watching HBO's *Watchmen* begins with a scene of two men involved in a horse chase, one wearing black (the chaser), the other white (the chased). When the former catches the latter, an upset crowd asks: "What have you done to our Sheriff?" The man in black explains that their sheriff is in fact a "scoundrel" who deserves everything he gets and proceeds to reveal his own face, which is immediately identified as that of Bass Reeves, "The Black Marshal of Oklahoma."[1] The marshal proudly points at his badge and the crowd cheers. Then the camera slowly moves away and we see that we are in a cinema, where the scene is currently being projected. Finally, the camera comes to rest on a young Black boy with his eyes glued to the screen. The boy seems to be in awe of the character he is watching and briskly says, "There will be no mob justice today. Trust in the law." The exact same words appear on the title card seconds after his statement, suggesting that he knows the film by heart.

This *mise en abyme* points to the significance of visual representation and the possibility of identifying with a character appearing on screen. As suggested by the boy's reaction, the Black sheriff is his hero, someone he marvels at and admires for his crusade for justice. Such crusades are the hallmark of superhero stories, which have their origin in the Superman comic book first published in 1938—the comic that gave America its most famous savior. From that time on, these stories have enjoyed widespread popularity, albeit in the last few decades they have crossed over to other media, with film being the most prominent in promulgating these narratives (especially those from Marvel and DC Comics).[2]

Despite often being dismissed as mere "entertainment for youth," superhero stories can provide certain insights into the

fabric of culture. As Kenneth Ghee explains, superheroes transmit cultural values and, therefore, beliefs regarding gender, race, and especially morality.[3] In order to further explain the appeal of superhero stories, Ghee uses a theory of Joseph Campbell's - the idea of culture bound mythology. Campbell states that mythological characters are sociologically linked "to a particular society or culture," meaning that "the archetypal theme may be timeless but the inflictions; person (*or person playing the role*), faces, language, time, place, protagonist, antagonist, environment, circumstances, etc. are truly culture bound."[4] Within American culture, the most prominent image of the hero is that of a white man with a beautifully toned body, whose physical strength and glorious deeds consolidate the patriarchal ideal.[5] By contrast, comic book authors usually have not evinced such generosity towards female characters in terms of power; as Jeffrey Brown remarks, "In comic books women have historically been damsels in distress, or at best plucky reporters," who, like the men, were highly sexualized.[6]

Superheroism is inextricably linked with the American vigilante tradition, i.e., the tradition of "organized, extralegal movements, the members of which take the law into their own hands." According to Richard Maxwell Brown, the American drive for such activities has its origins in the negotiation of law dynamics on the frontier.[7] Interestingly (considering the topic of this article), the prototype for the American vigilante hero in literature can be found in Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905) and its screen adaptation directed by D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).[8] As Chris Gavaler notes, even those heroes whose hearts seem to be governed by the highest of morals and best of intentions, are the ones who use authoritarian violence to achieve their goals and navigate the world through the simplistic understanding of the good/evil dichotomy. For this reason, "Behind every superhero, the Grand Dragon [the novel's hero who joins the Ku Klux Klan] continues a never-ending vigilante

battle."[9] Likewise, real-life vigilantism has historically been used as a way to uphold Black people's constructed social subordination, with lynching as perhaps its most ferocious example, and which it is claimed could still be influencing some of today's legal decisions.[10]

Furthermore, because of the ubiquitous dominance of white cultural influences in the Western world, white people are more likely than Black people to find superhero characters they can identify with.[11] According to Adilifu Nama, despite the underrepresentation of Black superheroes in mainstream culture, their presence is particularly significant in terms of symbolism, meaning, and providing a commentary on race relations in America.[12] Moreover, it is not only their "superheroism" that creates such "metaphors for race relations in America."[13] It is also the realm within which they operate, meaning science fiction.[14]

As Nama suggests, this combination allows us to interpret Black superheroes as "Afrofuturistic metaphors for imagining race and Black racial identity in new and provocative ways."[15] Having said that, the aim of this article is to examine HBO's *Watchmen* as an example of Afrofuturism—a self-reflexive effort to both create a convincing Black female superhero and also reflect critically on the cultural dynamics that determine such efforts.

Afrofuturism is a term introduced by Mark Dery in 1994 to define "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture—and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."[16] Thus, Afrofuturism is a literary and cultural aesthetic mode that is used to "project black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences," making these experiences visible and understood, and to reclaim the history of the past, along with the history of the future; hence, it constitutes a useful tool for political critique.[17] Lisa Yaszek

observes that from the nineteenth century up to contemporary times, Afrofuturism has evolved throughout the years into a coherent mode aesthetically and in terms of its political message. She notes that the main concern of early Afrofuturists was "the question of whether or not there will be any future whatsoever for people of color," while contemporary ones preconceive that the issue of race will still be relevant in future civilizations.[18] According to Nama, Black superheroes are both the link between "Blackness" and the future, and an "escape from conventional representations of black racial identity;" some of the most prominent examples of such characters are, he lists, Black Lighting, Black Panther, Nick Fury, Steel, and Storm from DC and Marvel comics.[19]

The *Watchmen* series adeptly employs superheroes' and Afrofuturism's potential for conveying a political message. This article adopts what Nama has called "a critically celebratory perspective" in order to analyze the development of Angela Abar's character, focusing on: how the show bridges the gender gap in representations of Black superheroes by introducing a strong Black female character in her thirties, how it deals with themes of racial discrimination, and how it offers a portent of racial utopia.[20] Nevertheless, it does not aim to argue that the way the show deals with the issue of racism is in itself flawless; instead, the article focuses (though without excluding other possibilities) on the progressive aspects of



representations of Blackness and its depiction as a superpower which is unique because of its traumatic history and current (un)position in the power hierarchy.

The show is based on the comic book of the same title, written by Alan Moore, that originally depicted the anxiety surrounding a possible conflict between the US and the Soviet Union, and the possibility of a nuclear war arising from this tension.[21] The comic was widely acclaimed as a "'serious' exploration of philosophical, cultural, and political themes;" not only was it a critique of the aforementioned political tensions, but also of self-appointed saviors, superhero narratives, and the complexity of reality.[22] Although the series' story is set in the universe created by Moore and is an independent sequel to the comic, it touches upon different issues pervading US society over thirty years later. In the original comic race was definitely not a central issue, and as Brenton Stewart argues it "proved throughout the story to either be tagged-on characterization to flesh out background characters or else completely incidental."[23] Damon Lindelof, the show's creator, has explained his decision to choose race as its central theme in the following way:

> If we're going to do a modern retelling in 2019, we have to ask, "What is it like to be an American right now? What is the social anxiety?" At the time I was asking that question, and even more so today, it felt that the answer was race—a reckoning of the camouflaged history of America.[24]

By extension, the *Watchmen* series brings into focus the problem of covert hatred towards people of color and upgrades the issue to give it a status similar to that of the Cold War thirty years ago. The question is then, if one considers Watchmen to be a certain political statement about contemporary racial dynamics in the US, how relevant is its representation?

For the past few years, white supremacist groups have reemerged in the United States' public space.[25] Despite the hopes for American society to become a postracial one, the view that "the white race itself is now threatened with imminent extinction, doomed—unless white supremacists take action" still seems to be appealing and successful in motivating people to engage in disruptive behavior aimed at establishing a social dynamic based on the dominance of the white race.[26] According to a report compiled by the Center on Extremism, the main factors that contributed to the resurgence of white supremacist movements were Trump's candidacy and victory in the 2016 Presidential Election, along with the simultaneous emergence of the alt right, which perceived him to be an ally in promoting its message. Although the alt right is just a fraction of the many white supremacist groups, it explicitly connects their key segments, such as "traditional" white supremacists, neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, and others.

Most of the people who make up the ranks of such groups are men.[27] Michael Kimmel states that what attracts this particular gender to the movement is that it "offers American men the restoration of their masculinity."[28] Furthermore, within the alt right, there can be found certain misogynist subcultures, such as the manosphere (online groups and websites based on the belief that women have emasculated men, taking away their power and influence), incels ("involuntary celibates" – men who feel rejected by women), and the MGTOW movement ("men going their own way," who choose to cease any and all relationships with women, as they believe feminism has destroyed the society).[29]

HBO's *Watchmen* deals with the above matters by depicting an American society that at first seems to be postracial. However, as the story progresses, it turns out that there is an active underground white supremacist movement, the Kavalry, whose members hold high positions in the local political scene.

This is an alternative vision of the year 2019, in which police officers are obliged to wear masks that will ensure their anonymity, and the president, the office of which has been held for the past few terms by Robert Redford, has granted reparations to the victims of racist crimes. The main story is that of Angela Abar, a Black woman working as a detective in Tulsa Police Department. Angela uncovers her family roots and meets her grandfather—Will Reeves—who was the first masked hero, known as Hooded Justice. Reeves suffered racial discrimination in his younger years and devoted his life to fighting the Klan. Abar gets to experience his painful memories and by the same token, her ancestry. Simultaneously, she is trying to solve the murder of her boss and discovers that he has been involved with the Kavalry.

Angela's heritage plays a crucial role in her potential superheroism. In Episode 2, "Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship," she visits a heritage center to submit William Reeve's DNA sample and confirm her suspicions of their kinship. The person who guides her through the process is an on-screen guise of Henry Louis Gates, a real-life American scholar who hosted a program called *African American Lives*.[30] In the show, of which PBS has aired two seasons, genealogical and historical resources were used to trace the ancestry of many prominent African Americans, including Morgan Freeman, Whoopi Goldberg, and Oprah Winfrey. The two seasons resulted in *In Search of Our Roots* (2009), in which Gates emphasizes the importance of uncovering the stories of Black people's descendants and its potential for transforming our understanding of American history, to the extent of rewriting it.[31]

The *Watchmen* series applies Gates' methodology to rewrite the past of the superhero narrative, at least within the Watchmen universe. The convention of alternate history is often used within science fiction, a genre which manifests its political power in amply demonstrating that

"*these are human constructions, material and ideal, and things could be otherwise, could be made to be otherwise* [italics in the original]."[32] Considering all the atrocities of racism in the past (and present), rewriting history within Afrofuturistic fiction is one of the ways to hypothesize about answers to the "what if" question (and sometimes these answers are not necessarily the promise of a better world at all).[33] HBO's *Watchmen* applies this convention to destabilize the image of a hero within the mainstream; more specifically, the show uses a strategy of inserting "a new piece of information that imposes a different interpretation on previously described events," defined within the comic book genre as retroactive continuity or retconning.[34]

At the beginning of Episode 6, "This Extraordinary Being," viewers are again presented with a show-within-a-show called *American Hero Story*. Its plot revolves around the interrogation of Hooded Justice, who is asked to reveal his identity; when he takes off his hood, it seems only natural that he is a white man. Originally, Hooded Justice was part of a vigilante group formed in 1939 called the "Minutemen."[35] However, his identity was never revealed in the comics. *American Hero Story* reflects the implicit assumption that the superhuman hidden behind the mask is most probably a white guy—a premise that within the superhero genre is hardly surprising at all. HBO's *Watchmen* series plays with the idea of Hooded Justice's unknown identity and uses it to *rewrite* the story that lies behind the first masked adventurer, and therefore, the whole story of American superheroes' both past and future.

Notably, the events that led to the emergence of the series version of Hooded Justice were all acts of racism. The boy whose eyes were glued to the screen in the opening scene was in fact Will Reeves. His sense of awe at the cinematic experience was interrupted by a sudden violent attack by the Ku Klux Klan, aimed at the Black community of Tulsa. This racial outrage is based on an actual event—the Tulsa race massacre of 1921. The riot

occurred in a district known as the "Negro Wall Street of America" and it is estimated that around three hundred lives were claimed during the massacre, mostly those of African Americans. Tim Madigan ingloriously called this event "a metaphor for [...] the black experience in America in the century after the Civil War."[36]

Little Reeves not only manages to survive, but he also saves the life of a Black baby girl wrapped in the American flag. Inexorably, his further fate is also marked by racial discrimination. Inspired by his childhood hero, "The Black Marshal of Oklahoma," Will joins the police force. However, he quickly learns that the justice he seeks is unattainable within law enforcement, which is also a system riddled with racism to its core. One evening Reeves' fellow officers assault him and hang him from a tree with a thick rope around his neck in order to intimidate him. Beaten and defeated, he walks passed a dark alley and notices a white couple under attack. Without a second of thought, he puts on a sack, in which he was hanged, to mask himself and fights the hoodlums. The next day, he is labeled a "hero" by a newspaper, leading June (the baby girl he once saved and who is now his wife) to draw a conclusion, "You ain't gonna get justice with a badge, Will Reeves. You're gonna get it with that hood. And if you wanna stay a hero, town folk's gonna need to think one of their own's under it." And thus, Hooded Justice is born.

In order to give the appearance of being a white vigilante, Reeves puts on white makeup around the only visible part of his body—his eyes. Thus, he puts himself through a process of "whiting up" and subsumes himself to America's imagination of its hero, passing as its white savior.[37] Although the word "passing" in the context of race refers to people of (usually) Black ancestry, whose external features allow them to blend in with the white population, here it is used as a metaphor for the process of Hooded Justice's assimilation into the hero narrative.

As Marvin McAllister writes:

> For centuries, racial passers have silently proven that what you see is not what you get, thus exposing the unreliability of racial and legal categories predicated on drops of blood. However, the key word here is "silently," because a racial passer can never openly announce the contradictions and fallacies he or she has revealed in America's visually based, color-coded hierarchy.[38]

Hooded Justice could never reveal his Black identity, and indeed, even within HBO's *Watchmen* series' world it is known to very few people. Viewers, as sort of "omnipresent beings" who know about his "Blackness," are trusted with a secret; this secret status seems to be more revelatory in terms of the experience of viewing a superhero story, than in terms of conceptualizing a superhero as such. This is still a story of a man fighting for justice, but what this ploy undermines is the understanding of the process behind the making of the hero. In other words, Reeves and his costume reveal the above mentioned "contradictions and fallacies" in an insidious way, one that calls into question the audience's assumptions about America's mythological characters.

Furthermore, Reeves partial whiteface makeup and the process of putting it on results in his internal conflict—he strives to fight for justice, yet at the same time has to repress his Black identity. The conflict, defined by W. E. B. DuBois as "double consciousness," envenoms him deeply.[39] When one evening Will sees his son applying white coverage around his eyes, he flies into a rage and starts to vigorously rub the boy's face to remove the makeup. Right then and there, June decides to leave him saying, "I thought it would help you to get rid of [your anger]. But it didn't get rid of it. It just fed it." The idea of being at the service of the community and fighting for justice by playing by the white man's rules ultimately fails.

Angela experiences her grandfather's life firsthand after taking a pill called "Nostalgia," an encapsulated version of Reeve's own memories. The name of the pill is significant in itself and considering Will's past, it seems counterintuitive. After taking a hefty dose, Angela indulges in what could be described as "restorative nostalgia"—a certain rebuilding of the past, a return to origins.[40] However, the show's "Nostalgia" is not to be understood as a traditional longing, but rather as a warning of the dangers of racism. It is a way of transmitting awareness of generational trauma, or taking it even further, a *cultural* trauma, understood as "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion."[41] Therefore, Angela's "nostalgic" angle becomes her superpower—after immersing herself in Will's memories she has knowledge and understanding, yet unlike him, she is not corrupted by anger. The above is illustrated in the following dialogue between William and June after some cadets graduate:

> Will: I know what you're thinking
> June: What am I thinking?
> Will: I've joined the enemy. The police in this city smother our people under their shoes. Lieutenant Battle is a Tom, and now I am a Tom, too. They just hired me for publicity and besides all that you're worried about me.
> June: They gave you a gun and a stick. That's what I'm worried about. What you're gonna do with them… Because you are an angry, angry man, William Reeves.
> Will/Angela: I'm not angry.

At the moment the last words are said, Angela takes William's place in the nostalgic vision. Then Reeves reappears and the exchange continues:

> June: It's okay. Most of us are.
> Will: I'm young. I'm healthy. I got the job I always wanted.

> What have I got to be angry about?
> Her: Folks were murdered right in front of you. Right in front of you. The whole town. All of them, your mother and your father.
> Will: That was a long time ago. I don't wanna live in the past.
> Her: And that, Will Reeves, is why you are so goddamned angry.

The switch in characters during the conversation mentioned earlier reminds the viewer that what they are seeing is actually a certain figment of Angela's imagination but it also makes the negation of her anger more powerful, and for that matter, more credible. Also, as Angela's experience and Will's past merge, she incorporates his memories, yet not his fierce anger (although she does empathize with it), into her own consciousness.

Furthermore, Angela's gradual transformation into a superhero is symbolized by the makeup she wears. By analogy with Reeve's white coverage around his eyes, Abar uses black spray paint for the same area. This serves two purposes: first, it is a reappropriation of blackface—the theatrical makeup used to impersonate African Americans, and which, according to Michael Rogin, in its original use by white people "acquires power by being shown to be put on; blackface connects white power over black to personal mobility and self-expression."[42] Second, the transition from white to black makeup reduces the cognitive dissonance created by a double consciousness, and facilitates the integration of identity.[43] In other words, Angela as a potential superhero has greater maturity and a stronger self.



The cover of the movie little Angela picks up at the video arcade which directly corresponds with the poster for the blaxploitation film *Velvet Smooth*.

Interestingly, Angela's identity as Sister Night, her detective alter-ego, is also inspired by a film character, which is yet another example of the importance of representation. In Episode 7, "An Almost Religious Awe," ten-year-old Angela visits a video arcade and picks up a movie that has a Black female character toting a gun on its cover, titled *Sister Night*. A few moments later she loses her parents. When Angela is left an orphan in the US's "fifty-first state" (Vietnam), her estranged grandmother comes to take care of her. Trying to bond with her, June asks, "Lots of movies out there... Why are you carrying around this one?," to which Angela responds "She looks like me." Interestingly, the movie's cover reminds one of the blaxploitation movie *Velvet Smooth* and Angela's fascination with it is not accidental.[44] Blaxploitation cinema is regarded as foundational ground for Black superhero narratives, especially because it offered fantastic characters originating from the reality of urban blackness and glorified Black identity (albeit whilst reinforcing certain stereotypes), which, according to Nama, made the genre "fundamentally about black superheroes."[45]

However, Angela's Black heritage is only one part of the equation. The other is her relationship with Doctor Manhattan, the only real superhero (as he is the only one with actual superpowers) in Moore's comic. Originally, Doctor Manhattan was in fact a white man, named Jon Osterman, who gained superpowers as a result of a nuclear accident. The accident has altered the way he experiences reality, making him a posthuman being, "a god who is beyond human understanding."[46] His body is no longer subject to any natural law and he has acquired the

ability to mentally control every particle in the universe, independently of its origin, time, and space. As Brent Fishbaugh suggests, Jon is the epitome of "the ultimate scientist," who "loses touch with real life and the application of knowledge beyond the theoretical" and disassociates from the human race.[47] Matthew Levy and Heather Mathews connect his detachment to his increasing nakedness throughout the story, and describe his character development as a process of "crucifixion and ascension," imitating Christian iconography.[48] And like any icon, Jon was used by the US government for various operations, first against the Soviet Union, then as a potent weapon in the Vietnam war. As George Dvorsky puts it,

> Disturbingly, Manhattan does as he's told. He is indifferent to the nature of his powers and the horrors he can unleash; like the bomb itself—or any technology for that matter—Dr. Manhattan is largely neutral. It's those who choose to unleash his awful powers who make the moral judgments.[49]

With all the power in the world, Doctor Manhattan becomes a failed superhero—an individual who is detached from humanity and even abandons it, leaving the Earth for Mars.

In HBO's series, Doctor Manhattan is rehumanized through his devoted love for Angela. For the most part, his true identity is not revealed; until Episode 7, he is known to the viewers as Cal Abar, Angela's husband. He assumed this body and identity after meeting Angela, at her suggestion. At some point he also decided to suppress both his powers and memories in order to become an ordinary man. This transformation diminishes the significance of his whiteness/blueness, and accordingly, mitigates both his "superiority" as a white person in American society and as a posthuman among humans. Hence, Doctor Manhattan passes for Black, thereby elevating the status of Blackness within HBO's *Watchmen* narrative—the most powerful character gives up his white social status. Despite the fact that he no longer

utilizes his abilities, Doctor Manhattan becomes the target of a white supremacist group, the Seventh Kavalry, which is on a quest to harness his powers and "restore the balance in America," and also the target of one Lady Trieu, who wants to save the world. Angela brings Doctor Manhattan's former guise back and, interestingly, he keeps Cal's facial features. Unfortunately, this does not prevent events from unfolding, and eventually he meets his end. However, before that happens, there is a tantalizing hint that he has managed to transfer his powers to Angela.

As with Dvorsky's observation above, Jon is also somewhat indifferent towards his powers in the series; he does not use them in any significant way (in terms of their impact on humanity), and as William Reeves notes in his last conversation with Angela, "He was a good man. I'm sorry he's gone. But considering what he could do... He could've done more." Thus, again, Doctor Manhattan is a disappointing god, one who does not make any use of his omnipotence but becomes an empty symbol of power—empty in a sense that it is a power without guidance. Both the Kavalry and Lady Trieu pursue this power to fulfill their own agendas. Though prima facie Lady Trieu's reasons seem to be noble (saving the world), she is too narcissistic to be a good fit for fulfilling such a task. Of all the characters, the most suitable to bear the burden of this responsibility is Angela—a Black woman in her late thirties who neither displays any pretensions towards power nor aspires to fight for justice like the (failed) superheroes, yet who at the same time has the history and social position as both a woman and a Black person to, it would seem, responsibly and appropriately use the gift she may have received.

However, this seemingly fair-minded transition of power can also be seen as yet another case of racial exclusion. While glorifying Blackness and nostalgically reviving a past of Black heroism, the show vilifies Lady Trieu, a character of Vietnamese

descent. For Aaron Bady, the way the show has negotiated the power imbalance is somewhat disappointing—the potential for annihilating the traditional power structure has been missed.[50]

Pointing to the Fanonian distinction between violence replicating trauma and that which possibly liberates from it, Bady argues that *Watchmen* could have done more, that Angela did not have to accept the offered power, and that Lady Trieu (whose name is inspired by a legendary Vietnamese female warrior Bà Trieu, who resisted Chinese occupation in the third century) could have been more of an influential voice. It has been argued that despite the show's awareness of white supremacy it fails to acknowledge the ascendancy of American imperialism, and that the Vietnamese characters lack depth; as Viet Nguyen puts it, "Their actions are consequential but inexplicable, their motivations rootless."[51] Additionally, Leslie Lee blames the series for a "startling lack of imagination about how to address race in a world of superheroes," and its insufficient resistance in fighting white supremacy.[52]

With all its flaws, HBO's *Watchmen* is essentially a series about the process of creating a Black Female superhero. The show employs the Afrofuturistic aesthetic to depict the issue of white supremacist movements in the contemporary US and to present an alternative to the existing reality by analyzing the power relations in a more abstract way. By adopting Alan Moore's comic, which criticized superhero figures and the transmuting power of its main character, the show further emphasizes the lack of an actual hero capable of making a change both in terms of cultural representation and political impact. Angela Abar, a Black woman in her late thirties, seems to have the potential to fill this void. This impression of Angela as being the rightful heir to Doctor Manhattan's superpower is created by her combination of heritage, strength of character, and lack of pretentiousness. Nevertheless, it is not clearly stated that she indeed possesses the god-like powers of her husband,

which leaves room to muse on what kind of hero Angela could be and whether there is any need for one at all.

Therefore, the plot (and especially the ending of the show) raises hopes for a racial utopia and at the same time refuses to provide a definite answer to the question of what it would look like and whether it is actually possible. Mark Tabone suggests that such a refusal to formulate any explicit vision of a utopia has two purposes: the first one being to avoid a failure to imagine a supposedly better future and a possibility of reproducing hurtful patterns within its frame, and the second one being to put emphasis on utopian desires themselves.[53] *Watchmen* focuses mostly either on the past or an alternative present, giving both an Afrofuturistic twist by interpolating the theme of the superhero. Afrofuturism and reimagining Black people's role throughout the course of history allow the power imbalance to be negotiated on speculative grounds, disposing of the disappointing white hero tradition, and pointing to current political issues that require intervention. Nevertheless, the show still perpetuates some of the ideas about power, and does not offer any particularly revolutionary solution to the power imbalance but operates within its current rules– the presented dynamic is more of a shift in power than its transcendence. With this shift, HBO's *Watchmen* clearly articulates that the future is female; or more precisely–Black Female.

**The author is a student of the MA Program at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw.** **The article was originally written for the Research Proseminar „Race in American Film" taught by Prof. Agnieszka Graff in the Spring of 2020. The publication effort was partly funded by the ZIP and PIK programs.**

1 Although the movie is fictional, Bass Reeves is a real historical figure. He was a former slave and a deputy, whose area of influence included Oklahoma Territory. Reeves was

said to be highly efficient in fighting criminals and perceived as being endowed with "superhuman strength." See: https://www.nps.gov/fosm/learn/historyculture/bass_reeves.htm.

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4 Ibid., p. 226.

5 Jeffrey A. Brown, "Panthers and vixens: Black super heroines, sexuality, and stereotypes in contemporary comic books" in: *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, edited by Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson, (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013).

6 Ibid. p. 134.

7 Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 95-96.

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9 Ibid.

10 David Jacobs, Jason T. Carmichael, and Stephanie L. Kent, "Vigilantism, Current Racial Threat, and Death Sentences," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 4 (August 2005): 656–77, https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240507000406.

11 Ghee, p. 227.

12 Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

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