

# Students Contesting “Colormuteness” through Critical Inquiries into Comics

*In an era of “colorblind racism,” in which race and racism are often suppressed as topics of discussion in classrooms, this article explores how students used comics to invent workarounds for “colormuteness” in their school. Knowing comics are not generally taken seriously, students employed the medium to subversive ends.*

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Both comics and race are, in a sense, popular culture: comics in its history as a commercially mass produced art form, and race in its inextricable connection to social, political, and economic issues that affect the totality of the populace.

—*Damian Duffy*, conversation with author.

## When Race Talk Is Silenced Talk

Talking about how we talk about race and racism, as processes reborn in our everyday language and interactions, can lead to significant discomfort (Gadsden et al.; Tatum). As Paula M. L. Moya and Hazel Rose Markus write, “Even though race and ethnicity pervade every aspect of our daily lives, many of us become deeply uncomfortable whenever the conversation turns to those topics” (3). For many predominantly white Americans, and many ELA teachers, it may feel less difficult to discuss race through the lens of historical racism—a calamitous (but bounded) time we’ve overcome en route to a “post-racial” or “colorblind” era (Anagnostopoulos et al.; Bonilla-Silva; Gallagher; Watts; Wise). By locating racism in America’s past, post-race discourses seem designed to alleviate present white discomfort while doing nothing to diminish future white privilege. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, it’s “a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream” (*Between* 33) by centering whiteness and ignoring how racialized oppression is “reborn in new form[s]” (Alexander 21). Discussing race and racism as enduring phenomena that affect all facets of American life is a tougher pill for many to swallow. It is uncomfortable, indelicate, a refusal

of the colorblind society many wish to pretend into existence. Rather than colorblindness, a more apt term is Mica Pollock’s “colormuteness,” a discursive phenomenon in which race talk is suppressed, a pill lodged in the windpipe.

In schools, race talk is mutually constructed and negotiated by adults and students, though its parameters are typically enforced more rigidly by the former. Rules about when it is “appropriate” to talk about race need not be made explicit, but through continual interaction within hierarchies of power and discipline, communicative norms are learned and regulated. During the three years I researched the Comics Inquiry Community (CIC), an afterschool group of graphical readers and creators in Philadelphia, I observed certain discursive norms from the larger school context. For example, Alma, a Mexican American seventh grader, would preface race talk with variations of “I’m not trying to be racist.” Once, when I asked Alma if she saw Chican@ culture represented in the literature she was assigned to read, she told me, “Not to be racist, but the main culture I see are, like, whites.” I replied to Alma’s critique—one that has been levied by children’s and YA literature authors and scholars for decades—by saying, “You said ‘Not to

be racist.’ Do you think you were being racist?” Alma responded:

No, but sometimes people interpret wrong. There was this girl in my classroom that I said something—not to be, I don’t think, racist—but she thought of it as me being racist. She told the teacher, so we had a whole entire issue. So I just always try to explain something.

Alma’s response illustrates how she’s been conditioned to talk about race at school. Assuming her race talk will be misinterpreted, Alma opts to lace it with exculpatory language. In another instance, I asked Isaiah, a Black sixth grader, what he’d learned from a book about African American history. Isaiah responded, “Not to be racist, but, like, [I learned] how Black people got treated back then. . . . No offense.” As with Alma, I made a point of telling Isaiah what he’d said wasn’t offensive, but it stuck with me that he’d felt a need to load his speech with overtures to what he perceived were my own inclinations toward racial silencing, likely on account of my whiteness.

In Alma’s and Isaiah’s school, the student population during my final year of data collection identified as 44.6 percent Black, 35 percent Asian American, 20 percent Latin@, and 0.4 percent white, while the faculty was 100 percent white. Not surprisingly, discursive norms were enforced by the white teachers and administrators who adhered to an unofficial regimen of “colormuteness.” Throughout the years I spent as a literacy researcher at the school, I observed that race was a topic students were not encouraged to talk about in their classrooms. Whether teachers were unwilling or unprepared to discuss race, the result was that students’ race talk was suppressed.

It is not my intention to blame educators for the climate of “colormuteness” in American schools, but to describe a complicated discursive phenomenon as I have observed it. Educators operate within the same ever-evolving discourses as others, and can neither be saddled with culpability for the existence of these discourses nor assigned sole responsibility for correcting them. Because there is not much societal consensus about race talk it is quite fraught, and navigating that “fraughtness” is extremely difficult (Buehler et al.). Thus, while

I believe teachers must learn to “talk through the racial dilemmas that arise in classrooms” (Thomas 36), and develop greater metalinguistic awareness of race talk, it isn’t the point of this article. Rather, my purpose is to share how students in the Comics Inquiry Community invented workarounds for the suppression of race talk in their school. By examining transcript data, I argue that *graphica* provided students with a range of opportunities for dislodging the bitter pill of “colormuteness.”

## Race Talk and *Graphica*

I don’t remember when exactly I read my first comic book, but I do remember exactly how liberated and subversive I felt as a result.

—Edward Said, “Introduction: Homage to Joe Sacco”

Over the past decade, researchers representing multiple disciplines have argued that comics are not taken as *seriously* as they should be (Beaty; Carter; Connors; Griffith; Groensteen). I too have engaged in this appeal for the medium’s legitimacy (Low, “Spaces”), and yet I find myself at an impasse. To be clear, I do rejoice in the critical acclaim that auteurs such as Marjane Satrapi, Kyle Baker, Alison Bechdel, and Gene Luen Yang have received, and I applauded the news that National Book Award recipient Ta-Nehisi Coates would write a yearlong arc of *Black Panther* for Marvel in 2016–17. Further, as a new literacies scholar, I am committed to valuing the ways people make meaning meaningful and meaningfully, including through their engagements with popular media such as comics and manga. However—and this is a contradiction I cannot easily reconcile—I believe that much of the medium’s power comes from its historically depreciated position. Despite being extremely popular, comics, like hip-hop, are still marginal in most official spaces. In schools, comics have often been regarded as frivolous pulp, a sort of “fugitive reading competing with [and] obstructing [official] literacy” (Hatfield and Svonkin 431). In my research site this was certainly the case. I once overheard an ELA teacher referring to her students’ graphic novels as “baby books.” Similarly, the school’s principal expressed concerns about the appropriateness of comics, saying that “students should be able to talk

about something intelligent, not street or pop culture,” and suggesting that students would be “better served by additional test preparation than by comic books.” As Anne Haas Dyson writes, comics, which are “so central to many [young people’s] social and imaginative lives, are ideologically unsettling to many adults” (3). Attitudes about comics reflect traditional anxieties about what “counts” as academically or socially valuable (Clark; Lapp et al.). Indeed, the word *comics* (like *funnies*) implies a built-in levity that is seen as incongruous with the no-nonsense gravity of contemporary ELA curriculums.

The notion that comics are equated with lightness belies the weighty social critiques that are frequently borne out through the medium, and it may be that the exclusion of comics from academic spaces imbues comics with power to be employed in subversive ways. Perhaps it’s *because* comics aren’t “taken seriously enough” that the medium has empowered many writers, readers, and artists to engage in critical discourses unsanctioned in other forms. Like hip-hop, comics may be employed to critique the power structures that undervalue them. Coates explains that as a youth, “comic books provided something beyond escapism. Indeed, aside from hip-hop, comics were my earliest influences” (“The Return”). He adds that, “[I]f you’re a young man in West Baltimore and all around you is a considerable amount of powerlessness, you’ll probably have an attraction to people with power. I could lose myself for long periods of time with comic books” (Korhonen et al.).

In examining the affordances of hip-hop, David E. Kirkland describes the “cypha” (or circle of people engaging in lyrical improvisation) as “a ceremonial ring for contesting silence” (23). I am interested in ways that comics serve a similar function for students who employ the medium in subversive ways, specifically to talk about race at school. As Charles Hatfield and Craig Svonkin write, comics “encourage the development of critical and political literacy, serving a countercultural function that rebuffs adult efforts to shape children’s memories, identities, and tastes” (434). Students know if their teachers don’t pay much mind to comics, making the medium well-suited for pivoting into forbidden realms. It did not take me

long to come to this realization myself. During the earliest meetings of the CIC, several of the group’s founding members began sharing their observations of comics culture with regard to race. Jamir, a self-described “comics junkie,” told me comics was a fringe interest for Black people. Other students substantiated Jamir’s claim, saying they believed themselves to be the only Black people in Philadelphia who liked comic books and manga. It is not important whether their impressions were *accurate*, but that race and comics became a living conversation topic. Race was being talked about at school, and comics provided an opening for conversations that did not ordinarily occur there.

As a literacy researcher, I wanted to understand what students’ engagements with *graphica* revealed about how they constructed and performed raced identities at school. While there is a body of scholarship that explores how race is represented in comics (Gateward and Jennings; Howard and Jackson II; Nama; Strömberg), few have attended to the role comics play in our understandings of race. In the following sections, I share transcripts depicting how students operationalized comics to talk about race. For, in spite of documenting numerous instances of race talk suppression during the years I spent at their school, I also found that when members of the CIC talked comics, they were more likely to talk, write, and create art that invoked race and racism. My data highlight two primary ways in which students used comics as a springboard to race talk. The first was as readers and critics. In this capacity, students held critical discussions about the content of the comics they read and commented on visual and textual representations of race and racism therein. These conversations occasionally extended into discussions of socioracial phenomena, such as police violence and systemic poverty. The second approach was by creating their own representations of race and racism as a corrective for the under- and

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misrepresentation of nonwhite characters in literature, including comics.

### “I’ve Never Seen a Black Superhero”

In 2011, Marvel made headlines by killing off Peter Parker and replacing him with Miles Morales, an 11-year-old biracial (Afro-Latino) character from Brooklyn. Since the launch of *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*, Miles has proven especially popular with readers who feel underrepresented in superhero comics. As Laurence Maslon and Michael

Kantor write, the “world of comic books was perhaps the slowest genre to recognize Blacks in any meaningful form” (169). It is thus not particularly surprising that many readers of color identify with Miles (Cavna; Low, “Waiting”; McWilliams). Indeed, when I asked CIC members which actor they imagined playing him in a hypothetical movie adaptation, several Black students enthusiastically re-

sponded, “ME!” One described Miles’s appeal: “He’s like me . . . a genius . . . the smart one. . . . He’s a new legacy!” Due to the popularity of comic books featuring Miles and the claims the character makes on readers’ identities, the series became a site of conversation about race in the CIC.

One afternoon, Kyrie, a Black student and longtime member of the CIC, approached some of his friends as they sat reading comics. Glancing at Raman’s open book, Kyrie noticed Miles Morales and blurted, “Wait. Spider-Man’s not Black!” Conversations at the table abruptly stopped and a new one began. I include a section of transcript here:

**Kyrie:** Wait! Spider-Man’s not Black!

**Raman:** He is.

**Alexi:** That’s the Ultimate Spider-Man!

**Kyrie:** No, the Amazing Spider-Man was white.

**Alexi:** The Amazing Spider-Man died!

**Kyrie:** Yeah? But there can’t be another Spider-Man ‘cause he ain’t turned Black!

**Alma:** Read the story, will you?

**Raman:** He died and then this kid, Miles Morales, he actually got bit by the spider, which gave him, like . . . it gave him the same powers as—

**Kyrie:** Abilities, you mean?

**Raman:** Yes. The same abilities as the original Spider-Man, but he also gained more abilities—

**Alexi:** He can turn invisible.

**Raman:** —Like invisibility and venom shot.

**Kyrie:** So is that what the new Spider-Man is now? The Black guy? Honestly, I’ve never seen a Black superhero.

Although it surprises me that Kyrie went three years without noticing Miles Morales, his shock that a Black Spider-Man could even *exist* is nevertheless powerful. When Kyrie claims that he has “never seen a Black superhero,” he means it. And although it isn’t technically accurate that there are *no* Black characters in mainstream comics, there is an acknowledged dearth of representation in the industry. That a teenage comics reader could say that he knows of no Black superheroes substantiates the problem. As Olivia Cole writes:

White men are Superman . . . . Our imagination and subconscious are so saturated with white supremacist notions of goodness, beauty, and heroism, that when confronted head-on with an image of a Black man who is brilliant and kind and normal and who saves the day, we transform into robotic versions of ourselves: *Does . . . not . . . compute. Hero . . . must . . . be . . . white.*

Nearly all the iconic characters in Marvel’s and DC’s stables—and that headline billion-dollar movie franchises and adorn countless pieces of branded merchandise—are white and male (Yang). Certainly there are exceptions, and Kyrie’s schoolmates began to name them. Tyler, a biracial (Black and Filipino American) sixth grader, brought several characters to Kyrie’s attention, naming Falcon, Nick Fury, and Storm, but seemed perturbed by his own checklist approach.

Over the next several weeks, Tyler began conducting a mini-research project on Black superheroes in mainstream comics. For several weeks, he

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came into the library and selected his reference materials: either a hardbound *Marvel Encyclopedia* or websites about Black characters in comics. Tyler and I had several conversations in which he shared his research findings. Interestingly, the history of racial omission and silence in comics inspired Tyler to speak on the subject of race. Rather than bemoaning a history of underrepresentation, Tyler used the medium's history to discuss race in a school space that rarely made room for such talk to occur.

### Critical Redesign: Kamala Khan to the Rescue

As CIC facilitator, I was interested to learn that in 2014, Marvel planned to launch a new ongoing series, *Ms. Marvel*, following the adventures of Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Pakistani American from New Jersey. When *Ms. Marvel* #1 debuted I'd been operating the CIC for two-plus years. I felt strongly about the issue and thought its depictions of cultural hybridity would be relatable to students and lead to meaningful dialogues. Several weeks after providing copies to CIC members, I sat down with three sixth graders, Tyler, Desiree, and Nellie, to hear what they thought.

**David:** So what did you think? What stood out for you?

**Desiree:** Zoe said that the girl Kamala, because she was Muslim . . . they said she smelled like curry a lot.

**Tyler:** That's racist. You should never say that about people because . . . Say if somebody thinks that about you. You'll get mad if somebody makes fun of you. If someone makes fun of you—wait, wait, wait, I'mma try and say this right. If you make fun of somebody you'll think it's funny, but when somebody makes fun of you, it's like, it will hurt your feelings and then you wouldn't like it at all. But that's when you're just gonna be sad.

**David:** So when you say something like that about a person, what you're almost saying is that the only thing they can be in this world is—

**Desiree:** Curry.

**David:** Like, all of their hopes and dreams?

**Desiree:** Curry.

**Tyler:** Yeah, the things that you like, if you're nice or not nice, it doesn't matter because you just—

**Desiree:** Smell like curry.

**David:** So tell me—

**Tyler:** That's kind of rude, because say if somebody says "You smell like trash—"

**Desiree:** Tyler, you smell like fried chicken. Your hopes and dreams are fried chicken.

**Tyler:** Wait a minute!

**Desiree:** You all find a perfect place, you smell like curry, and your hopes and dreams are curry [laughs].

There are several relevant themes in this short section of dialogue. Significantly, the first comments Desiree and Tyler make about *Ms. Marvel* pertain to issues of racism. The topic clearly has salience to them regardless of whether they are encouraged to discuss it in school. It is likewise significant that Desiree and Tyler equate religious and cultural stereotyping with racial stereotyping, in terms of referring to Islamophobic insults as "racist." It's likely that Desiree and Tyler co-articulate various forms of oppression under the umbrella of race to "specify a coalition based on a similarity of treatment within the U.S." (Bow 32), and thus, use the word *racist* to surface shared histories of marginalization. Theirs is an overlapping narration of race and racism that positions experiences of oppression and privilege across indices of ethnicity.

When Desiree, who is Black, facetiously tells Tyler that he "smells like fried chicken" and that his "hopes and dreams are fried chicken," she demonstrates knowledge of the dangers of racial stereotyping, echoing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's insight that stereotypes "make one story become the only story," and flatten one's hopes, dreams, experiences, and possibilities. Certainly, Desiree is also having a bit of fun at Tyler's expense, whom she believes too earnest in his assessment of racialized joke-telling. Beneath the surface of her words, though, Desiree shows meta-awareness of race talk, using a "pulp" text as an entry-point for constructing a critique of stereotyping in her own life. Here, comics serve as a "vacuum into which [Desiree's] identity and awareness are pulled" (McCloud 36), and the medium

FIGURE 1 *Ms. Marvel* vol. 3 #1 (2014) 11.4.  
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provides her multiple points of access for individual and communal meaning-making (Mackey). Further, Desiree engages in what has been, during her school experience, unsanctioned talk. She operationalizes the interplay of gravity and levity in comics to negotiate discursive terrains, moving beyond the “silence and evasion” that often characterize literary discussions of race at her school (Thomas).

Nellie, a Vietnamese American student who was sitting beside Tyler and Desiree and reading *Ms. Marvel*, joins the conversation, having caught up to the dialogue Desiree and Tyler were referencing.

**Nellie:** Is this what you meant? “Smell like curry”?

**Desiree:** Yeah.

**Tyler:** That’s racist.

**Desiree:** Yeah.

**David:** What do you all think? Do you think the author of the book who wrote that line is being racist or do you think she’s . . . ?

**Tyler:** It’s just trying to show how people say it.

**Desiree:** Or like, if she’s Islam, it’s probably the stuff that people said about her.

**David:** Mmm, that’s a good thought. The author of *Ms. Marvel* is Muslim.

**Nellie:** After reading this, Zoe is starting to remind me of this wrestler Summer Rae.

**Desiree:** She’s kind of like a phony. The way she talks.

**David:** I want you guys to really pay attention to that character, Zoe. I wanna know what you guys think about her.

I am reminded of Gretchen Schwarz’s claim that comics “promote discussion in more lively and immediate ways than most [school texts], and they offer points of view often unexpressed in the usual curriculum resources” (2). Similar to Miles becoming an instrument for CIC members to perform Black masculinities, Zoe served as an analogue for whiteness. If race talk in general was unsanctioned in the school, whiteness was perhaps the most silenced topic of all. In three years, I never observed teachers or administrators refer to their identities as white people, nor did I hear students talk *about* whiteness. In the final section of transcript, I examine the significance of a comics character who provided a means to discuss and contest elements of white hegemony. Not coincidentally, this is where students’ critiques begin to transition from deconstruction to critical redesign.

**David:** Do you think Zoe, when she imagines a superhero . . . that she imagines a superhero could be a Brown Muslim girl?

**Desiree:** No. Because most of the superheroes are Caucasian and there isn’t—

**Tyler:** Or African American.

**Desiree:** Or African American. A lot of them aren’t, like . . . You have Asian people, Islamic people . . . There isn’t a lot of them.

**David:** So what would help people to be able to imagine that superheroes could look like anybody?

**Desiree:** Make more different race kinds of people. Or just have a mix of superheroes from all over the world. We should create a comic book with Islamic people. Yeah. I think we should make our own comic book about a different race, or a group of them.

**David:** Now, Nellie. You just finished *Ms. Marvel* #1. What'd you think? Did it make you think about superheroes differently at all?

**Nellie:** Girl superheroes, yeah.

**David:** How so?

**Nellie:** Girl superheroes . . . Kamala's the only one.

**Tyler:** I'm just gonna say one thing. You guys don't really pay attention to other comics. Like Kitty from X-Men, she's a girl.

**Desiree:** But what race is she?

**Tyler:** She's . . . Caucasian.

**Desiree:** Okay!

**Tyler:** But you were talking about GIRL superheroes. It's different about girl superheroes. But like Kitty, Storm, Rogue . . . there's a lot of woman superheroes.

**Desiree:** But is there a lot of different ethnicities? You gotta imagine that, Tyler. There's no Islam.

**Tyler:** Storm. Storm.

**Desiree:** What is she?

**Tyler:** She's probably Muslim because—

**Desiree:** She's Muslim?

**Tyler:** Probably.

**Desiree:** Let's make an Asian character, too.

**Tyler:** She's not Asian. There's no Asian.

**Desiree:** You should make one.

**Tyler:** That's weird that there's no Asian superheroes. It's always just Caucasian and African American.

**Desiree:** Oh, there's a lot of African Americans. But rarely that you see that in a *comic* book!

**Tyler:** Wait. We should sign a petition that we should—

**Desiree:** Make a comic!

**David:** Desiree, you're saying that if you don't see the kind of representation in comic books that you want to see, you make your own?

**Desiree:** I'm gonna make different race comic book characters.

**Nellie:** Yeah!

**Tyler:** I just noticed that I never draw comics but I can name stuff. And I can think about the stories and everything but I just can't draw.

**David:** Well, it takes all kinds. You know, some people who make comics are writers and some are illustrators.

**Desiree:** I'll text you my Facebook so we can talk about new characters.

**Nellie:** We'll do a group chat.

**Desiree:** Yeah, group chat.

**David:** Can you share next week what you talk about in your group chat about these new characters?

**Desiree:** What race do you think we should . . . ?

**Nellie:** It should be your race, Mexican, and Asian. And what else? Whatever you—

**Desiree:** Mr. Dave, do you think we should make multiple, well like, three comic book characters each? From our own race and ethnicity?

**Tyler:** I think there's a Create-a-Superhero, there's like a website.

**David:** You can make any kind of hero that you want.

**Desiree:** And we're gonna make a comic, well, like these three characters to represent the Comics Inquiry Community.

**David:** Yeah, I think that's very important.

**Tyler:** I can always name a couple characters who are Asian or African American, but the world's not like that.

**Desiree:** No, it's diverse.

In this segment, Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler discuss the history of representation in comics and decide to remake it to suit their desires. One point over which Tyler and Desiree disagree is the representation of Black characters in comic books. Tyler maintains that there *are* Black superheroes—referencing

his earlier inquiry into the topic—while Desiree argues that comics are not as diverse as the community in which they live and attend school. Ultimately, it is the theme of co-articulation that allows them to forge ahead. While Tyler holds to his belief that Black characters are not invisible in comic books, Desiree convinces him to admit that it’s “weird that there’s no Asian superheroes.” Even though he can “name a couple of characters who are Asian or African American, the world’s not like that.”

There’s no precise moment when the conversation pivots from deconstruction to reconstruction; several turns embody the valence of critical redesign. Throughout her disagreement with Tyler about underrepresentation, Desiree expresses a desire to contest “entrenched patterns of exclusion” in comics (Kennedy) by creating their own corrective texts to represent the diversity of their community. In effect, Desiree argues for the importance of making comics that represent “different kinds of people . . . A mix of superheroes from all over the world.” She passes the baton to her friends, wondering who they should include in the comics they create. Desiree seems to share Juliet Kahn’s belief that “comic[s] writers ought to be capable of delivering both visible diversity and more profound representations of identity,” and that the point of creating such characters is “disruption . . . making change that cannot be ignored by those who wish they could.”

Korina Jocson writes that what begins as one student’s personal project can morph into “a highly social activity where language, race, class, gender, and experience merge, a place for imaging selves, constructing texts, acquiring new literacies, and evoking possibilities for social change” (171). The transcript sees three students working to imagine inclusive story-worlds that represent the diversity of their experiences. This is no small task, as historically, “comic characters [have been] a White man’s land” (Pierce 50) and continue to be so (Asselin et al.). Luckily, these students do not lack for motivation. In their efforts to take seriously the topic of race in comics, Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler locate themselves in conversations that have affected the adult world of publishing and media for years. In 2014, Gene Demby posed the question “Who gets to be a superhero?” and explored race and identity as they pertain to comics. Whereas Demby detailed his concerns for *NPR*, these students are actively involved in

designing solutions. The three negotiate authorship roles, assign themselves tasks, and plan their next moves. Desiree suggests creating three characters apiece, representing a variety of backgrounds, and echoing Jeffrey A. Brown’s plea that “It’s about time we got some new heroes around here” (xv).

## Conclusion

Talking about race in 21st-century American schools may or may not lead to systemic change, but silencing race does less to maintain post-racial harmony than it does to maintain an archaic order of racial inequity. Earlier, I wrote that I was interested in understanding how students used comics to contest “colormuteness” in their school. Through a review of three years of data, I found they employed comics in a number of ways to engage in unsanctioned race talk. In some cases, race in comics served as the topic of discussion, while in others, comics were a platform for initiating conversations *about* socioracial phenomena. Still, in other cases, race-and-comics became a prompt for the necessity of critical redesign. Across these cases, I identified six interrelated subsets of race talk that emerged from students’ engagements with comics:

1. Students expressing their understandings of race by making intertextual references to and from comics.
2. Students critiquing authors for racial misrepresentation/stereotyping in comics.
3. Students critiquing authors for racial exclusion (absence and underrepresentation) in comics.
4. Students critiquing the racist speech/actions/appearances of characters in comics.
5. Students responding to the content of comics to initiate conversations of socioracial phenomena.
6. Students making connections to their own racial identities in responding to comics.

Within and across these subsets, students demonstrated many ways of mobilizing their knowledge and experiences of race, racism, and identity. Despite attending a school in which race talk was sanitized, students employed comics to contest “colormuteness.”

Informed in part by the transcripts I’ve shared, I argue that the comics medium, which balances upon a dialectic of levity and gravity and forms

the backbone of an enormously popular fan culture, provided fertile ground for students to work through post-racial silencing, and toward more productive discourses. Largely because comics have not traditionally been taken seriously in schools, the medium affords students a ripe terrain for critically surveying—and ultimately subverting—the “conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown” regarding race in American schools (Chute 456). 

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## Students Contesting “Colormuteness” through Critical Inquiries into Comics

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### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Stereotyped images create false ideals that real people can’t hope to live up to, foster low self-esteem for those who don’t fit in, and restrict people’s ideas of what they’re capable of. In this lesson, students explore representations of race, class, ethnicity, and gender by analyzing comics over a two-week period and then reenvisioning them with a “comic character makeover.” This activity leads to greater awareness of stereotypes in the media and urges students to form more realistic visions of these images as they perform their makeovers. <http://bit.ly/1wglDec>