Sister Night, Hooded Justice, and Racial Reckoning in *Watchmen*

**ABSTRACT**
The television series *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019) is a reflection on the trauma of racism and the means by which Black people have survived and subverted that trauma. I read the protagonist Angela Abar/Sister Night and her grandfather Will Reeves/Hooded Justice as revisionist Black superheroes who facilitate the remembrance of Black histories. As police officers and costumed crimefighters, these characters balance the identities of Blackness and the law and complicate symbols such as the police badge. I argue that Will’s critical function is that of chronotope, a symbolic embodiment of time and space, and Angela’s most important role is to learn from and transcend her grandfather’s legacy. As such, this article offers an Afrofuturist and feminist interpretation of this acclaimed series.

In an open letter addressed to “Fans of *Watchmen*,” Damon Lindelof introduces himself as “the unscrupulous bastard currently defiling something that you love.” ¹ The creator of the limited television series *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019), Lindelof acknowledges the implicit sacredness of his source material—Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s 1986–1987 canonical comic book series of the same name.² As Kathryn Frank points out, “Given this critical and popular

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² Although *Watchmen* was released as a maxiseries, it has long been rebranded as a graphic novel in which the original twelve issues appear as chapters. I use the novel version of the series, and all citations are taken from that version.

admiration, it is not surprising that reactions to proposed adaptations of (or additions to) the *Watchmen* universe have been largely negative.” A self-professed fan of the original twelve-issue narrative, Lindelof thus pitches his nine-episode show as a remix rather than an adaptation and promises a fresh and relevant story. Specifically, he replaces the 1985 Cold War backdrop of the original series with what he describes as “a reckoning happening in America as it relates to race.” Lindelof and his team of writers and directors, among whom “Hetero White Men like [him]self are in the minority,” set the narrative thirty-four years after the events of the comic book series, thus making the story contemporaneous with our own 2019. But in this alternate universe, Robert Redford is president of the United States, the Victims of Racial Violence Act (called Redfordations by its detractors) provides tax-exempt status to the survivors and descendants of survivors of specific racist atrocities, and a white supremacist group called the Seventh Kavalry is on the rise.

To say the show has been well received is an understatement. It dominated the 2020 Primetime Emmy Awards with twenty-six nominations and eleven wins, received an American Film Institute Television Programs of the Year award, and had “an average of 7.1 million viewers across HBO’s linear channels and streaming platforms.” It boasts a diverse creative team and ensemble cast, impressive cinematography and special effects, an original score by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, and the guidance of master storyteller and fanboy Lindelof, who built his reputation as a television visionary on *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010). For aficionados of the original *Watchmen*, the show has a similarly expansive narrative arc, legacy characters, Easter eggs, a companion HBO website called “Peteypedia” with additional in-universe materials (akin to the supplementary content at the end of each comic book issue), and recognizable visual cues such as the yellow block font of the title and the blood-stained smiley face.

But what sets this new *Watchmen* apart from its predecessor, which does not feature any women of color in significant roles, is its protagonist and the face of its marketing campaign: a Black female superhero. Angela Abar (Regina King), a police detective whose alter ego is Sister Night, serves as the main viewpoint of the show and the nexus for its social critique (see Figure 1).

5. Lindelof, “Dear Fans of Watchmen.”
7. Although the original HBO platform is no longer available, at the time of writing, the “Peteypedia” content could still be accessed via a second-party website: https://watchmen.fandom.com/wiki/Peteypedia.
Watchmen educates and challenges its viewers on race in America and reconstructs erased Black histories through Angela’s personal and family histories. On a pragmatic level, the series is a restorative project, bringing events such as the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 and figures like the nineteenth-century Black Deputy US Marshal Bass Reeves to mainstream awareness by way of science fiction television. But on a deeper level, the show is an extended reflection on the physical and psychological trauma of racism and the means by which Black people have survived and subverted that trauma. As such, Watchmen channels an Afrofuturist aesthetic and grapples with the “antinomy” framed by critic Mark Dery: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” The series answers this question by envisioning a radical future that is contingent on the reclamation of an effaced past.

I read Angela and her grandfather William “Will” Reeves, the pioneering masked vigilante Hooded Justice, as dialectical signs that bookend the last one hundred years of the Black experience in America and represent the legacies of that experience from one generation to the next. More precisely, I argue that Will functions as a vital chronotope that anchors a forgotten or rewritten past, much as Angela signifies a hopeful if unwritten future. In his seminal work The Dialogic Imagination, Mikhail Bakhtin introduces “the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to [mean] the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” Although Bakhtin grounds this concept in literature, particularly

the novel, it is relevant to other storytelling media, such as television. He further explains in his most quoted passage on the subject that “[i]n the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” In other words, time becomes tangible, fusing with space to produce a symbolic figure or object that captures narrative, chronology, and history. As Bakhtin puts it, “The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.” This definition of the chronotope as time made flesh, as a being forged in the crucible of history, informs my reading of both Will and Angela as superheroes that transcend time and space.

The concept of time is central to the Watchmen universe, which uses watches, clocks, calendars, photographs, memories, and other temporal markers as key thematic content. But nowhere is the fused concept of time and space more poignant than in Will Reeves. He easily personifies aging and the passage of time, initially appearing as a seven-year-old boy and reappearing as a 105-year-old man in a wheelchair. He also relies on banned capsule pills called Nostalgia that literally encapsulate his memories, and he physically transposes the Tulsa of 1921 into the present day. Part of his purpose is to pass on his knowledge and experience to Angela, whom he meets for the first time in 2019, and to give her present-day battles against the Seventh Kavalry historical context and meaning. The series intimates that Angela is not just Will’s granddaughter but also his figurative double and heir. When Angela sees a life-sized holographic photograph of Will as a young boy in the Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage, she kneels in front of him so that her face is superimposed over his and their features blend to become one person. And when she takes her grandfather’s pills, she effectively becomes him and relives his memories and his trauma. Her story is thus his story, and their shared narrative in turn points to broader national histories and a shared chronotopic function. If Will is time-space incarnate, then Angela (his flesh and blood) is his legacy.

In the Watchmen comics, the identity of Hooded Justice is never revealed, although he is presumed to be white, a fact that the show acknowledges.
One of the series’ subplots is the second season premiere of a melodramatic docudrama called *American Hero Story: Minutemen*, a television show within a television show. Advertised in HBO’s *Watchmen* as “the most important television event of the new millennium,” season 2 of *American Hero Story* focuses on Hooded Justice, who is cast as a white man. But *Watchmen* reimagines Hooded Justice as Angela’s forebear and an important signifier of Black history. He is a survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre, the first in-universe masked superhero on record, and one of the first Black police officers. He is also a bisexual man who comes of age at the height of Jim Crow and sodomy laws and who lives publicly as a heterosexual family man but secretly takes a white male lover. Certainly, Angela and Will, whose secret identities are multilayered and intersectional, embody the double consciousness of African American identity in compelling ways. Most notably, these characters balance the seemingly oppositional identities of Blackness and the law. Law enforcement has been a means of controlling and terrorizing Black bodies since its inception, a fact that remains blatant in the disproportionate deaths and incarceration of Black people at the hands of police and ongoing protests against police racism and brutality. *Watchmen* portrays Black heroes who fight racial injustice by appropriating the historically white male identity of the law and the symbol of the police badge, which carries the same ironic weight in the television series that the yellow smiley face button carries in the comic books.

Like Will, Angela is a revisionist superhero who, in the spirit of the original *Watchmen*, complicates extant superhero models, including those of *Watchmen* itself. She is a Black woman born and raised in Vietnam (the fifty-first state in the *Watchmen* universe), a bakery-owning wife and mother, and a secret police detective whose official costumed persona is a blaxploitation-inspired nun. She is also the keeper of one of the biggest secrets of her time—namely, that her Black husband, Calvin “Cal” Abar, is the long-vanished superman Jon Osterman/Dr. Manhattan in disguise. Her final identity as the new *superman*, who gains the powers of Dr. Manhattan after he dies, is the pièce de résistance of the series and situates her as the primary symbol of the “reckoning” that Lindelof describes. Despite the ambiguity of Angela’s deification, I read her as a culmination of Black superheroism because she is both Dr. Manhattan’s successor and Hooded Justice’s descendant. There is the promise of superpowers for Angela, but there is also a power grounded in flesh, blood, and memory. In the fourth issue of the comic books, a newscaster announces Dr. Manhattan’s miraculous arrival to the world: “The superman exists, and he’s American.” This comment is revisited at the end of the issue by Milton Glass, Jon’s former supervisor, who takes credit for the sentence but says he was misquoted: “What I said was ‘God exists and he’s American.’” In the television series, one must adapt these claims and all their implications by the last scene of the final episode when Angela, having ostensibly ingested her husband’s deity-like powers, prepares

to walk on water. If the superman and/or God still exists in this *Watchmen* universe, then she is African American.

**WATCH OVER THIS BOY**

An important pedagogical tool and a means of leveraging shock value in this speculative television show is the subtle blend of fact and fiction. True events are mixed in with the alternate timeline and history of *Watchmen*, challenging the viewer to tell or at least learn the difference. Some aspects—humans living on the Jupiter moon Europa or baby squid raining down from the sky—are easy to spot as science fiction. Features such as a Redford presidency and a cameo by critical race scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., who is Redford’s secretary of the treasury, convey familiarity by placing real people in fictional roles. Other details are not only factual but disturbingly so. The most profound example is the opening of the pilot, which announces its setting as “Tulsa 1921.” Filmed in pink sepia tones that evoke a bygone era even as the scenes belie anything rosy, the prologue shows a Black community under attack. The cinematography reinforces the ironic tenor that runs through the series. Rose-colored footage does not connote optimism, the bright colors and affected narration of *American Hero Story: Minutemen* misconstrue the real Hooded Justice, and black-and-white footage is really about shades of gray.

Through the eyes of a young Black boy, the viewer witnesses smoke billowing from burning buildings; Black bodies lying in the street; biplanes circling above the carnage; and white men (some in Ku Klux Klan robes but most not) brandishing torches, looting stores, and shooting at human targets.

![Figure 2. The Tulsa Race Massacre recreated in *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019).](image-url)
A discarded newspaper features a partially readable headline, “To Lynch a Negro.” Another young boy, still wearing his pajamas, stands in the middle of the chaotic street holding a limp baby in his arms. Their small forms are rendered even smaller against the backdrop of a hooded Klansman on a white horse who yells “Get ‘em!” This tableau, a boy holding an infant, reappears when the boy who is our main lens into this world awakens from the bomb explosion that has knocked him unconscious. He finds a crying baby, wrapped in an American flag and lying in the grass, and picks her up. They are the sole survivors of their respective families.

The viewer might be forgiven for wondering if these raw images of bigotry and hate in the prologue are fantastical. Lindelof himself expresses embarrassment at only recently learning of the Tulsa Race Massacre, which Alfred Brophy calls “the worst and most deadly American race riot of the twentieth century.” Also known as the Tulsa Race Riot, the massacre involved the destruction of an affluent Black community called Greenwood in downtown Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the murder of “between one and three hundred” people by a white mob on May 31 and June 1 of 1921. The attack was triggered by an alleged and later disproven sexual assault of a white woman by a Black man named Dick Rowland. The so-called assault and Rowland’s subsequent arrest were sensationalized by local newspapers and led to the threat of his lynching and a confrontation between Blacks and whites that culminated in the massacre. Ronni Michelle Greenwood explains why this infamous event is remarkably obscure: “While Black Tulsans quietly passed the story of the riot from one generation to the next, White Tulsans systematically erased the riot from their collective memory. Not a single known copy exists of either of the two newspaper articles believed to have incited White Tulsans to attempt to lynch Rowland. Oklahoma history textbooks omitted or misrepresented the riot.”

In *Watchmen*, the riot is recreated in graphic detail, right down to the lost newspaper headline. The mise-en-scène of the Tulsa Race Massacre is intended to grip the viewer, not with fantasy but with dark truths that call for exposure and justice even a century later. No white individual was ever prosecuted for their participation in the massacre, and no Black individual was ever compensated for their loss. *Watchmen* deviates from and indicts history by enacting the reparations that have been petitioned for but never approved. The focal point of the opening vignette is the young boy who survives the massacre and grows up to fight injustice in his own way. By the end of the pilot, it becomes clear that the boy is Will Reeves. Before Will is smuggled out of town, his father scrawls a hasty note that reads “watch over this boy,” which he puts in Will’s pocket. The paper on which the note is written is itself a piece of fact-based

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history, a German leaflet encouraging Black World War I soldiers to desert because of the racism they endure in their own country. The next time Will appears on-screen, almost a century later in the narrative chronology, he still carries that creased and weathered note in his pocket. The note is an artifact, like the partially charred newspaper and the damaged sign of the Dreamland Theatre that later appear in the present-day Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage. These are physical manifestations of a lost time and space, much like Will himself. But where the note and the newspaper are objects, Will is a living embodiment of history who captures not just a single event but a lifetime of events.

When Will first meets Angela and tries to explain his mission, he puts it this way: “There is a vast and insidious conspiracy at play here in Tulsa. If I told you about it, your head would explode. So I have to give it to you in pieces.” He is alluding to the 2019 events that unfold over the course of the series—the secret white supremacist plot of the Tulsa police chief Judd Crawford, Oklahoma senator Joe Keene, and the Seventh Kavalry to kill Dr. Manhattan and steal his powers and the counterplan by a Vietnamese trillionaire named Lady Trieu to do the same. Furthermore, he is echoing the words he spoke as Hooded Justice at a New York press conference in 1939 after discovering a white supremacist plot by a group called Cyclops (a predecessor to the Seventh Kavalry) to turn Blacks against one another using mind control. But the conspiracy that Will intimates is also about the “vast and insidious conspiracy” to forget. His warning to Angela is a warning to the viewer as well, about the devastating and suppressed nature of specific national histories where race and racism are concerned.

It is no coincidence that when Angela takes all of Will’s Nostalgia pills in one go, their collective impact almost kills her. The pills, which allow Angela to become Will and live what he lived, fill in the “pieces” that he alluded to and induct the viewer into his past, which is chronicled in episode 6. Here, Angela is also time-space incarnate, flesh for Will’s memories and a means for his stories to be told. She is integral to how the viewer sees and feels the past, and her raw emotions stand in for those of both Will and the viewer. Filmed in the style of a film noir and complemented by wistful jazz ballads, this black-and-white flashback episode follows the young Will in his hardboiled role as a New York policeman dealing with syndicated crime and police corruption in the 1930s and 1940s. The low-key lighting and dramatic silhouettes heighten the suspense as the camera cuts back and forth between Will and Angela, who experiences her grandfather’s frustrations as a newly minted officer and literally walks in his shoes (see Figure 3). Like the sepia imagery of the Tulsa Race Massacre, which sometimes intrudes on the black-and-white palette of Will’s New York memories, the stylized film noir setting

21. *Watchmen* includes the Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage as a version of the Greenwood Cultural Center that exists in Tulsa. In the *Watchmen* version, visitors can see holographic images of victims and survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre and test their DNA to see if they qualify for reparations. When Angela visits the center to check her grandfather’s DNA after gaining a sample from a coffee cup, the interactive kiosk (voiced by Henry Louis Gates Jr.) features actual photographs of Greenwood before and after the massacre.
evokes a *nostalgia* that is immediately proven hollow—a mask for deep-seated racial divides, even in cosmopolitan New York.

In one Althusserian scene, Will attempts to stop an older white man from firebombing a Jewish delicatessen by crying out “Hey!” The man looks up, replies “hey yourself,” and proceeds to smash a Molotov cocktail through the shop window before strolling casually away. Will follows and yells “Stop in the name of the law!” The man laughs over his shoulder and says “I thought they only said that in the pictures.” The man’s dismissal of Will and refusal to stop or even properly turn around signal his power and Will’s lack of power. Although Will is a police officer and thus a stand-in for what Louis Althusser calls the repressive State Apparatus, which enforces ideologies, Will has not been granted that agency as a Black man.\(^\text{22}\)

Althusser memorably illustrates the process of interpellation—that is, ideological subject formation—by way of a similar exchange: “I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject.*”\(^\text{23}\)

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23. Althusser, 118.
Althusser’s example, the individual turns around and thus completes the process of interpellation. In *Watchmen*, the “hailed individual” refuses to acknowledge Will’s authority as a police officer because Will is a Black man. In Marxist terms, Will is still a member of the proletariat and the process of interpellation is reversed. Instead of Will hailing the man, it is the man who hails Will (“hey yourself”). The man is the true agent of the repressive State Apparatus and the pervasive ruling ideology of white supremacism, which Will is forced to face again and again.

Will’s next Nostalgia memory is his fellow officers feigning solidarity while immediately releasing the arsonist he arrested. Those officers then nearly lynch Will in a jarring point-of-view scene accompanied by the sentimental original composition “The Way It Used to Be,” which again complicates the very nostalgia it evokes. With a sultry female voice crooning to the accompaniment of a big band orchestra, the camera forces the viewer to see through Will’s eyes as he is hooded, is hoisted off the ground, and begins to lose consciousness. The music becomes muffled and distant as the camera blurs and the headlights of the squad car below multiply and blend together. The screen goes dark until suddenly Will is dropped back to the ground. The hood is removed, the rope is cut, and he is told to “keep [his] Black nose out of white folks’ business.” This horrific experience triggers Will’s transformation into Hooded Justice. He stops a mugging that same night while wearing the hood and noose from his would-be executioners and later refines this costume and its symbolism (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Hooded Justice (Jovan Adepo) in *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019).
But when the camera first returns to Will after the lynching, it is not Will but Angela who lies on the ground bleeding, coughing, and gasping for air. These periodic visuals of Angela-as-Will are important reminders that she, too, is living this history in all its corporeality. If Will’s past is Angela’s past in an ancestral sense, then her ingestion of his pills (despite the warning that one should never take another person’s Nostalgia) renders their shared history more literal. In the final episode, the elderly Will asks Angela, “You take my pills?” She sighs, flashes back to the lynching, and answers with profound sadness, “I did.” “Ah,” responds Will, “now you know everything. My origin story.” Angela’s inheritance of Will’s story is premised on her firsthand experience of his trauma. Her path to “know[ing] everything”—namely, swallowing his pills—is later mirrored by her swallowing the contents of a raw egg to gain Dr. Manhattan’s omniscience. In keeping with these acts of consumption, Angela’s evolution as a superhero remains grounded in her physical body and her humanity.

THE NUN WITH THE MOTHERF*$*ING GUN
When the viewer first sees Angela on-screen, she is not wearing her Sister Night costume but rather her everyday persona, which is written in white chalk on the blackboard behind her: “Mrs. Angela Abar: Baker.” It is career day and Angela, dressed in jeans and a bright turquoise vest (a visual contrast to her alter ego), is doing a baking demonstration for her son Topher’s elementary school class (see Figure 5). Her lesson to the class is that egg whites have strong walls but “they won’t stay that way if just even a little bit of yolk gets mixed in with the whites.” To complete her demonstration, Angela mixes three yolks together in a bowl, blending them into a yellow curve that forms a smiley face with two unbroken yolks. The baking demonstration is another visual nod to the iconic Watchmen smiley face and another metaphor for race relations. Angela builds on the latter inference when she explains to the children that she is a survivor of the White Night, a Seventh Kavalry terrorist attack on off-duty Tulsa police officers that took place on Christmas.
Eve and left most of the force dead. She concludes with the deadpan observation that “making cakes and cookies was better than getting shot so [she] quit the police force and opened up a bakery.” But the viewer soon learns that Angela’s baker role is merely a cover for her true and ongoing identity as a masked police detective and that her bakery is a front where she keeps her Sister Night gear.

The origin of her disguise is explained in episode 7, which includes flashbacks to Angela’s childhood in 1980s Vietnam. As with the flashbacks to Will’s childhood and young adulthood, these scenes fill in the backstory for Angela and simultaneously reiterate the parallels between her and her grandfather. Like him, she is orphaned at a young age when her parents are murdered, in this case by a suicide bomber. And like him, she is inspired to be a police officer by her belief in justice as well as by a cinematic Black hero that represents justice. As I discuss in the next section, the child Will idolizes the Black US Marshal Bass Reeves, whom he sees portrayed in the 1921 silent film Trust in the Law! Similarly, the child Angela treasures a 1977 blaxploitation film called Sister Night because the heroine on the cover “looks like [her].” After the White Night, the adult Angela adopts Sister Night as her alter ego.

Angela’s performance of Sister Night channels recognizable blaxploitation tropes that have subversive potential, such as wit, agility, strength, and martial arts. She fulfills Stephane Dunn’s description of the blaxploitation heroine as “a sexy, streetwise, tough woman who shows no fear, takes on powerful whites and men, and, according to the genre’s expectations, wins.” Much of what the viewer needs to know about this aspect of Sister Night is established in the pilot. Upon being summoned to the police station via pager (since technology is limited and strictly regulated in this alternate universe), Angela swings by her bakery and suits up. These shots are extreme close-ups of her zipping up black leather, selecting a weaponized rosary from a utility drawer, clipping her star-shaped police badge to her belt, and pulling up her hood. She speeds off in an unmarked black Buick Grand National with tinted windows to the soundtrack of her own fast-paced electronic theme song, “Nun with a Motherf*cking Gun.” Only when she arrives at the station, a usual suspect stashed in her trunk, does the viewer get a full look at her costume: a white turtleneck underneath a V-necked black leather suit and flared coat, a hooded black cowl and mask, knee-high leather boots, and black face paint that is an inversion of Hooded Justice’s white face paint.

Like Walter Kovacs/Rorschach of the original Watchmen, whose black-and-white inkblot mask signals an uncompromising sense of morality, Sister Night’s black-and-white costume and her modeling of a religious figure point to a personal moral code. Angela articulates this code to Topher, whom she and Cal adopted, along with Topher’s sisters, after their parents were murdered on the White Night: “You and me, Topher, we don’t do lollipops and rainbows, because we know those are pretty colors that just hide what the

24. Angela’s fascination with this film conveys the importance of representation, which Angela herself signifies as the protagonist and promotional figure for Watchmen.

world really is. Black and white.” Incidentally, Rorschach’s absolutist philosophy is echoed not only by Angela but by members of the Seventh Kavalry, who have adopted him as an ideal and wear his mask as their trademark. But where the Seventh Kavalry’s extremism reflects white supremacy, Angela’s “black and white” views are shaped by a cynicism bred in personal tragedy and a disappointment in higher powers that neglect and abuse the disenfranchised. She proceeds to beat a confession out of her suspect in an interrogation room and later attacks a Seventh Kavalry hideout in a high-octane shootout followed by a raw fistfight. These present-day scenes reenact the Nostalgia scene in which Hooded Justice invades a Cyclops hideout and beats up its members and the later scene in which he assassinates their leaders (including the deli arsonist) and steals their mesmerism technology.26 That Angela doesn’t play by the rules in her pursuit of justice further aligns her with Will, who similarly complicates the notion of a so-called good cop versus a bad one and expectations of what an American superhero should look like.

Will’s alter ego, forged in the crucible of hurt and hate, becomes so popular that he starts a trend of costumed adventurers and joins a superhero team called the Minutemen. But his public approval as a vigilante hinges on his anonymity and his presumed whiteness. His lover and fellow Minuteman, Nelson Gardner/Captain Metropolis, reminds him that he can never take off his mask: “What they can’t know of course is your secret. Some of them aren’t as tolerant as I am. You’ll have to be sure you’re covered up. Wear the makeup and hood at all times.” This scene inevitably recalls W. E. B. Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness as well as the writing of Frantz Fanon, whose aptly titled Black Skin, White Masks explores the premise of Blackness in a white supremacist world.27 Fanon describes the occupation of a Black body as a discorporation: “In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity.”28 Will’s disguise, which includes the application of eye makeup to appear white beneath his hood, is precisely a self-negation imposed by what Fanon calls “the white world.”

Ironically, Gardner pronounces a permanent and comprehensive mask upon Will as they lie in postcoital nakedness, and Gardner, who fetishizes Will’s Black body, then suggests that they both wear their masks “on the next go-round.” Of course, Gardner’s mask, a domino mask in the style of Zorro and the Lone Ranger, only obscures the area around his eyes. Like the rest of the Minutemen, his racial identity is on full display and his disguise does not call for the physical and psychological erasure that Will must sustain. Admittedly, Angela’s blaxploitation alter ego does not require this negation either, which reiterates her role as a next generation Black superhero. Her

26. These scenes are also reminiscent of Marvel’s Black Panther fighting the Ku Klux Klan in the Jungle Action series (1972–1976).
28. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 83.
name declares her racial identity—Sister speaks to her nun costume and her ethnicity while Night further suggests Blackness. And despite the familiar ritual of covering her body and face, her hands are always visible, and she does not, as Hooded Justice was forced to do, camouflage her dark skin. But her world is hardly without bigotry, and her Blackness and femaleness mean that she, too, is an unconventional superhero. Sister Night certainly subverts the iconography of classic superheroes like Superman as well as revisionist superheroes like Rorschach in the original Watchmen. Angela’s and Will’s respective origin stories, which involve violent assaults by white supremacists, are also rare and powerful commentaries on race relations, national histories, and generational trauma.

If the portraits of Will’s experiences as a Black man in America over the course of the twentieth century seem extreme, they are intended to be, not in the interest of hyperbole but in the interest of fact. Tulsa’s Greenwood district really was burned to the ground, and its residents really were murdered with impunity. The integration of police departments, much like the integration of everything else, really was met with resistance, hostility, and death threats. Thousands of Black men, women, and children really were lynched across the country, again with impunity, from Reconstruction to World War II. One need only look at the actual photographs of Greenwood in the aftermath of the riot or a single lynching postcard to appreciate that Watchmen can hardly do justice to the facts. What the series does do is encourage the viewer to acknowledge these ugly truths, if only through the lens of popular culture, and recognize real and fictional Black heroes at the same time. It is here that Will and Angela’s shared chronotopic function is key to the storytelling of the show and its reclamation of Black histories. These characters collapse time and space, allowing events to not just be represented but reexperienced. Angela’s shock and horror at Will’s painful memories from a lifetime ago are really an affective signal to the viewer, as are the sepia flashes of the Tulsa Race Massacre and the black-and-white shots of Will’s life in New York superimposed over the soft bright colors of Angela’s Saigon memories and the gritty palette of present-day Tulsa. Chronology is no longer linear, and the past and present become layered, even interchangeable, just as Will/Hooded Justice and Angela/Sister Night become mutual personifications of past, present, and future, as well as markers of Black trauma and Black heroism.

TRUST IN THE LAW!
The first time Will appears on-screen in episode 1, he is a little boy watching a silent film called Trust in the Law! in the empty Dreamland Theatre while his mother plays dramatic accompanying music on a nearby piano. Again, the viewer (like Angela) must become Will since the initial scene of this pilot episode is the film he is watching. Our gaze is his gaze. An iris shot opens on a white man in a white hat on a galloping white horse in a black-and-white

29. For reproductions of these photographs accompanied by analysis, see Brophy, Reconstructing the Dreamland. Brophy’s third chapter, “Picturing the Riot,” offers a photo essay, which “documents both the stark racial violence and some of the uses to which the images were put.” Brophy, 64.
picture. The man in white is being chased by another man on horseback, the latter wearing a black hood and cape and riding a black horse. The man in black lassos the man in white and drags him off his horse, much to the shock of a white crowd that comes bursting out of a small country church. Intertitles convey the dialogue as the piano rises and falls. After explaining that the man in white, the local sheriff, is a cattle thief who “does not deserve to wear the badge,” the man in black dramatically throws off his hood and reveals himself to be Bass Reeves, “the Black Marshal of Oklahoma.” He points proudly to the star-shaped US Marshal badge on his chest, which triggers visible appreciation from the onlookers (see Figure 6).

This fictional silent film, which is credited to the director Oscar Micheaux on a movie poster, lays the foundation for Will and Angela, even as it pays homage to Reeves and Micheaux, two very real Black pioneers. The lens of Black spectatorship is important here since the viewer sees this race film through the young Will’s eyes.30 Even more poignantly, Will is watching the film in a Black-owned theater. In her discussion of Chicago’s early Black theaters, Jacqueline Stewart writes that they “not only welcomed Black moviegoers but also tried to construct an experience of race pride while

exhibiting mainstream and, on occasion, Black-produced film.”31 And Cara Caddoo describes “colored theaters” across the United States in the early twentieth century as “coveted monuments of racial progress.”32 These descriptions encapsulate Greenwood’s Dreamland Theatre, which catered to Black audiences and both symbolized and facilitated race pride and progress. Will’s rapt gaze on the screen, and his repetition of the dialogue by heart, speaks to a cinematic pleasure that is grounded in Black heroism. If mainstream cinema, in its often bleak and troubling portraits of Blackness, yielded a range of resistant Black viewing strategies, then race films afforded a more celebratory experience.33 As Caddoo puts it, “Race films asserted black rights to American citizenship and equal treatment under the law.”34 Angela’s attraction to Sister Night is analogous to Will’s fascination with Trust in the Law! Even though the two films are separated by more than half a century, both films are Black productions with seemingly invincible Black heroes who represent justice.

Will models his identity on Reeves, taking his hero’s last name and becoming a lawman and a masked vigilante. The fact that the white sheriff in Trust in the Law! is corrupt reflects not only the corruption of the present-day Tulsa police chief Crawford but the corruption of Will’s NYPD colleagues and the documented complicity of the Tulsa police department in the 1921 massacre. As Chris Messer and Patricia Bell point out, “Police practices and actions contributed to the progression of the riot. Some of these actions included deputizing White civilians, providing guns to White citizens, and doing little to disperse the White mob in the first place.”35 The role of badges as a misleading symbol of law and order further comes across in Brophy’s observation that “many of the people doing the burning were wearing deputy police badges.”36 Watchmen interrogates this history of police brutality, particularly through Bass Reeves, a legitimate lawman with a legitimate badge, whose catchphrase in the silent film is “trust in the law.” There is sharp irony in Reeves delivering this line on a projection screen in Tulsa’s Black district as it is destroyed by those who falsely represent the law. The line carries the same sting in the current climate, reminding viewers that in the wake of George Floyd and so many others like him, Black people still have little reason to trust the police. The show’s focus on systemic racism within law enforcement adds another dimension to the title Watchmen, which is explained on the last page of the comic book series via a Latin quotation by Roman satirist Juvenal: “Quis custodiet ipsos custodes,” or “Who watches the watchmen?”37 Will’s answer to this

34. Caddoo, Envisioning Freedom, 173.
37. Moore and Gibbons, Watchmen, IV: 34.
question lies in his identity as a masked vigilante who polices the police, a fact that remains salient in 2019, where the Tulsa police department has claimed this motto but added an ironic rejoinder: “Nos custodimus,” or “We watch.”

When the elderly Will confronts and kills Crawford by hypnotizing him (with Cyclops technology) into lynching himself, Crawford’s star-shaped badge falls to the grass. The camera zooms in on the badge and the drop of blood that splashes across its front in a re-creation of the blood-stained smiley face button belonging to Edward Blake/the Comedian in the comics. Like the sheriff in *Trust in the Law!* Crawford “does not deserve to wear the badge.” A literal closet racist, Crawford keeps his grandfather’s Klan hood and robe on permanent display in a hidden compartment in his closet, along with his grandfather’s star-shaped sheriff’s badge. Despite his public mask of anti-racism, Crawford’s true ethos and inheritance is bigotry. His explanation for keeping the Klan robe is that “it’s [his] legacy,” another tangible birthright that allows the past to bleed into the present. Crawford’s murder is Will’s last act of vigilantism and a means of delivering justice to not only Crawford but his predecessors, those who have destroyed Black lives over time and space.

In the faux Micheaux film, Bass Reeves refuses to “string up” the white sheriff at the crowd’s behest, declaring, “There will be no mob justice today. Trust in the law!” But Will does “string up” Crawford in a virtual reenactment of that scene and his own lynching, reminding the viewer that Black people were often at the mercy of mob justice and rarely received the protection of the law. Unable to operate with the integrity of law enforcement on his side, Will becomes his alter ego, Hooded Justice, to reclaim that integrity outside the law, using the very vigilantism practiced by the Hooded Order and other such hate groups. If the morality of Will’s (and Angela’s) actions is questionable, then it is precisely to draw attention to the ambiguity of concepts such as law, order, and justice in a white supremacist state. Like its comic book predecessor, HBO’s *Watchmen* complicates what Superman memorably called “truth, justice, and the American way.” Indeed, an explicit comparison between Superman and Hooded Justice suggests that they are analogous—pioneering superheroes with remarkable strength who first appeared in 1938—and yet they occupy vastly different Americas.

As a chronotope, Will preserves the past but also marks the evolution of time and space, especially in the context of Black history. He is the little boy whose world is destroyed in the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. He is the

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38. This revelation recreates an early scene in the comic book *Watchmen* where Rorschach discovers the Comedian’s disguise in a secret closet compartment.


40. In the comic books, Minuteman Hollis Mason/Nite Owl writes a tell-all autobiography about his escapades as a masked adventurer in which he credits Hooded Justice and Superman as his personal inspirations. In HBO’s *Watchmen*, the Will of 1938 has a friendly exchange with a newsstand vendor who is reading the first issue of *Action Comics*. Will asks, “What’s it about?” The man replies, “A boy, a baby. His father puts him in a rocket ship and sends him to Earth just before his planet explodes.” The parallels between Hooded Justice and Superman are blatant here as the scene cuts to flashbacks of the Tulsa Race Massacre and Will being placed in a crate by his father and secreted out of Greenwood right before it is destroyed.
policeman who is inducted by Lieutenant Samuel Battle, New York’s first Black police officer, in 1938. Like Bass Reeves, Battle is a real historical figure that Watchmen brings back from obscurity. Eventually, Will is the wheelchair-bound centenarian who reappears in the Tulsa of 2019 to “tell [Angela] where [she] came from.” He carries not just his father’s note, which Angela accidentally burns in her bakery, but also his mother’s spirit with him, her sepia figure forever playing the piano in his memories. Even the Dreamland Theatre, which was burned down by the mob in 1921, reappears in the present day as a simulacrum of the original, and Will and Angela meet there in the final episode.

He says to Angela, “I was sitting in this same exact spot almost a hundred years ago.” By this point, Angela has seen the “vast and insidious conspiracy” played out to its conclusion, and she has lived her grandfather’s experiences through his Nostalgia pills. She is the next generation of a masked or hooded justice and another Black incarnation of the law, a fact made even more remarkable by her identity as a Black woman and her implicit ascension to superman.

Versions of “superman” already appear in the show—the Action Comics Superman, Hooded Justice, Dr. Manhattan, and even the name “Abar,” a gesture to “the First Black Superman.” But Angela is the next incarnation, one who speaks to the current historic moment and the “reckoning” taking place. Writing in the 1980s, at the dawn of the so-called Dark or Modern Age of comics that produced Watchmen, Jeffrey Lang and Patrick Trimble concluded that “[t]he Man of Tomorrow, the all-purpose hero, is dead.” Dr. Manhattan was the cynical alternative to that Golden Age American hero—a superman who, as a Seventh Kavalry member puts it, “had all the power in the world [but was] still too lazy or too stupid to do anything with it.” Or who, in Will’s softer critique, “was a good man” but “could have done more.” In HBO’s Watchmen, this superman is also dead. In the current moment, revisionist versions of archetypical heroes are more popular than ever. Aside from the seemingly infinite output of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and to a lesser extent DC Entertainment, one can point to superhero universes outside the Big Two, such as The Boys (Amazon Prime Video, 2019–) and The Umbrella Academy (Netflix, 2019–). But not one of these examples puts a Black woman at the center of the story and then imagines her as a literal superhero with the same power and agency as the Man of Steel or Dr. Manhattan. And yet, considering movements such as Black

**Footnotes:**

41. The wheelchair is another form of disguise since Will can and does walk by the end of the series.

42. Angela’s surname is a possible nod to the blaxploitation film *Abar: The First Black Superman* (Frank Packard, 1977).


44. Since the release of HBO’s Watchmen, there have been subsequent films and series that showcase Black female superheroes, including *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (Ryan Coogler, 2022), *The Power* (Amazon Prime Video, 2023–), and *The Marvels* (Nia DaCosta, 2023). But these examples do not centralize the Black female superhero in the same way as Watchmen, in which Sister Night is the promotional face of the series and the overt protagonist. Even Coogler’s *Wakanda Forever* falls short in this regard, simply because Shuri was not intended to be the protagonist. The sudden death of actor Chadwick Boseman prompted a script overhaul in which Shuri became the Black Panther. But Boseman’s death haunts the film, rendering it more of an homage to his character T’Challa than a platform for Shuri.
Lives Matter, #SayHerName, #BringBackOurGirls, #MeToo, and Time’s Up, and #BringBackOurGirls, a Black woman in this symbolic role seems not only fitting but overdue.45

A WOMAN, A LOVER, A FRIEND
The love story between Angela and Cal/Dr. Manhattan is an important thread that runs through the series and culminates in the last two episodes. In his description of their relationship, Lindelof explains that he wanted “Doctor Manhattan, a man with the power of God, [to] be in service of Angela's story as opposed to the other way around.”46 Cal’s initial appearance on-screen, like Angela’s first shot, establishes his cover identity. Dressed in nondescript clothing, he helps their young daughter hose down the front walkway of their house after a baby squid shower. Cal’s role as placid stay-at-home husband and father reinforces his raison d’être, a character who “exists in service of Angela’s story.” Only after his cover is blown and the Seventh Kavalry are outside their door does Angela wake him up from his amnesiac state (by bashing in his skull with a hammer to remove his hydrogen symbol, which is a ring embedded in his forehead). Angela killing Cal to resurrect Dr. Manhattan foreshadows Dr. Manhattan’s actual murder by Lady Trieu. Cal warns Angela upon their first encounter, a meet cute in Saigon, that their relationship will end “tragically.” In fulfillment of the Seventh Kavalry’s ominous chant “tick tock,” Dr. Manhattan’s time finally runs out. But the show relies on a double layer of misdirection to sustain the twist of its finale. Both Keene and Lady Trieu attempt to absorb Dr. Manhattan’s energy and both fail and consequently die. That Angela is the one to succeed, not with grand technology and spectators, but with the simple and solitary act of eating an egg, speaks to the subtlety of her deification.

Like the consumption of Will’s pills, which allows her to become Will, Angela’s consumption of Dr. Manhattan’s egg is a parallel act that allows her to become Dr. Manhattan. The context for the egg is laid (no pun intended) in episode 8, which is appropriately titled “A God Walks into Abar.” Dr. Manhattan explains that he can “transfer his atomic components into some sort of organic material [and] if someone were to consume it, they would inherit [his] powers.” Angela then picks up the chicken egg that he conjures out of thin air: “So, you can put them in this egg, and if I ate it, I could walk on water?” He affirms this fact, which is ostensibly realized in the finale. The last shot of Angela, like the first one, is sans mask. As Will says to his granddaughter in the rebuilt Dreamland Theatre, “You can’t heal under a mask, Angela. Wounds need air.” The implication is that the time for masks is over. She stands on the edge of her backyard pool, cracks open the egg that Dr. Manhattan strategically left for her, swallows its contents, rolls up her pantlegs, and steps out onto the water. The camera cuts to the credits just as her right foot touches the surface and Spooky Tooth’s cover of the Beatles’ “I Am the Walrus” cues up.

45. For a series of essays on Black spectatorship, and the ways in which some of these movements have impacted popular culture, see Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, ed., Watching While Black Rebooted! The Television and Digitality of Black Audiences (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2024).
One could easily question this ending, which is ambiguous, even coy. The viewer does not see Angela walk on water. But she is already a superhero, so this transition is as much an amplification as it is a rebirth. Both Will and Dr. Manhattan have chronotopic significance and both choose Angela as their successor. The Bakhtinian concept of time and space “fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” and a corporal incarnation of “time, plot and history” are realized in her.\(^{47}\) Again, the premise of flesh and blood is important—namely, Angela’s identity as Will’s biological descendant, the neurological fusing of his memories with hers through Nostalgia, and her inheritance of Dr. Manhattan’s powers by way of “organic material.” Despite Dr. Manhattan’s time running out, his time is miraculously protracted in Angela. Similarly, Will, whose advanced age means that his time is also limited, lives on literally (in terms of DNA) and figuratively (in terms of Black superheroism) in his granddaughter. She is thus the legacy for these respective Black male superheroes but also, in her own right, “the Nun with the Motherf*cking Gun” and a new hero for the future. The lyrics of “I Am the Walrus” tell the viewer, “I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.” This line is fitting in light of the journey that the viewer has just undertaken—one that encourages visceral empathy, identification with Black heroes, and a sense of shared histories. At the same time, the song hints that “he,” whether Dr. Manhattan or Will, is now she.

In her analysis of Dana Franklin, the time-traveling Black female protagonist of Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel Kindred, Caitlin O’Neill writes that “Dana’s body becomes a literal bridge between the past, present, and future. Even when Dana finally returns to the present, her empty sleeve and phantom pains remind her that she cannot escape the material reality of the past.”\(^{48}\) Butler’s novel famously begins with the amputation of Dana’s left arm, which is crushed in a wall when she time jumps from the antebellum past back to the 1970s present. O’Neill concludes, “It is impossible to walk into the future without carrying the past with us, this is especially so for black women and gender diverse people for whom the past has very present and real consequences.”\(^{49}\) Angela, like Dana, bridges time and space with her physical body and carries the past in order to “walk into the future,” which also means walking on water in this twenty-first-century Afrofuturist series. The kind of superman she will be is left up to the viewer’s imagination, particularly since Lindelof has repeatedly expressed that his story is complete and another season (at least by him) is unlikely. In this light, the final shot and all that it portends is poetic. The viewer must have not just imagination, but a little faith.

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47. Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 84.
49. O’Neill, 72.