

# In Conversation...

## *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* and *Miles Morales: Shock Waves*

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Books are transnational through their stories and also through the ways corporations market and franchise characters and story concepts. Marvel's Miles Morales is one example of the layering of transnationalism.

**TRANSNATIONAL STORIES** provoke us to question why geopolitical borders exist. Books that contain the stories can be explained through capitalistic and imperial lenses, but stories, thoughts, and the lives that generate them are forever shifting. Take, for example, stories created within the Marvel Universe. Here, in this corporate empire, characters were created decades ago to thrill comic book readers in the United States. The stories soon shifted beyond that, inspired by creativity but sustained through profit. The characters left the borders of the comics and moved into novels, video games, toys and collectibles, costumes, television shows, graphic novels, easy readers, and movies while at the same time expanding from U.S. to global markets.

Recently, Marvel Entertainment licensed to Scholastic a multiyear Original Graphic Novel program aimed at middle-grade readers and published through Scholastic's Graphix Media Line. This venture was built off the success of novelized versions of the books for middle-grade and young adult readers. In this strategic move, Scholastic provides Marvel with access to marginalized readers who aren't always welcome in comic book spaces, but who have buying power and who enjoy reading stories of superheroes (Salkowitz, 2020). Writing

in *Forbes*, Salkowitz (2020) hinted at the economics of this venture.

The deal represents a major move in the comics publishing market, estimated at just over \$1 billion in 2018 according to industry site ICv2. That market is divided up between trade books sold mostly through bookstores—a segment dominated by Scholastic with its multi-million copy print-runs of top-selling young reader titles from Dav Pilkey, Raina Telgemeier and others—and periodical comics sold through comic shops, where Marvel is top dog at about 40% share.

Marvel Press, the prose-producing arm of Marvel Entertainment, began in 2003 and started publishing with Disney Books in 2009 when Disney purchased Marvel Entertainment. The books they print are based on Marvel characters but do not necessarily remain loyal to the canon. Marvel also developed a prose line with Scholastic that began in 2020 with Nic Stone writing *Shuri: A Black Panther Novel*. The books are “informed by the comics but aren't beholden to them. Our goal is to have the best authors tell the best stories for young readers everywhere” (Reid, 2019).

Miles Morales is a dynamic part of this venture who entered the Ultimate Universe in 2011 after the death of Peter Parker, the original Spider-Man. The Ultimate Universe is a parallel Marvel Universe that reconceptualizes Marvel characters by bringing them back to life, giving them new powers and new storylines. Here, inspired by the election of Barack Obama, the character Miles, who is biracial Black American and Puerto Rican, became the first Black Spider-Man and the second Latinx to wear the mask. Moving beyond Marvel's old, racially bordered constrictions, Spider-Man/Miles integrates new cultural and political dynamics into the Universe. The character is fully anchored in and owned by Marvel, but he's transcending its space. Each story remains faithful to the essentials, but there is much variance in Miles's backstory. While this can challenge readers who go back and forth between the various lines, Miles does maintain appeal throughout Marvel's product lines.

In the movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, Miles Morales has the name of his acquaintance, Jason Reynolds, listed in his phone directory. Outside that universe, Jason Reynolds is the author of *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* (2017), a novel from Marvel Press. On the book's cover, Miles assumes the traditional Spider-Man pose sans costume, with his brown face centered beneath his name. Only the pose and the mask that covers his head hint at Spider-Man. His brown skin does not, and the authors must work to reconcile this new racialized character with the previously established white version and all the privilege and power thus granted.

Throughout the novel, Miles is conflicted by the voice that repeats, "You're just like me." Like his father? His uncle? His cousin? Perhaps like any one of the men who felt that "when the world is breaking your back, it gets a whole lot easier to break some laws" (p. 206). The world was breaking Miles's back, chipping away through tiny aggressions every single day. Like when Mr. Chamberlin, his history teacher, insists that slavery was one of the best things ever for those enslaved. He witnesses bullies his own age taking shoes from younger guys in the neighborhood. What good are superpowers when they don't help his parents pay rent *and* keep him in school? White supremacy is never named in the novel, but it is layered in all the Mr. Chamberlins, in the Mississippi dust that drove Sip from his home, and in a system that drives these Black men who simply want to feed their families to turn to lives bordering on crime—all the things that render him and other BIPOC people powerless.

What is significant about the justice that Miles provides through his persona, Spider-Man, is that it provides no restitution for the sins of the past. He is a masked and unidentified crusader. He can aid those in

imminent physical danger, but he has no redress for the forces of imperialism or systemic oppression.

In this novel, even in the midst of such oppression, Morales maintains his youth; Reynolds manages not to adultify the young hero. Miles's father, who is aware of his son's superpower, asks him quite simply, "Who's gonna save you?" (p. 7). This is a very real question from a father who is cognizant of his own limited social capital. Through this question, he is trying to make his son aware of the limitations of his power, regardless of his superhuman abilities. Miles processes all this and confides to his friend Ganke, "To have the time to be a superhero, you gotta have the rest of your life laid out. You can't be out there saving the world when your neighborhood ain't even straight. I just gotta be real about it" (p. 44). Time, however, isn't the only luxury this young superhero of color needs.

Ganke Lee is Miles's Korean American BFF and he is aware of Miles's alternate identity. While Lee's character lacks strong development in this installment, he is a good sounding board for Miles and shares in Miles's few moments of joy such as dancing in the subway and acting goofy in their dorm room. He and Miles both struggle to distill their thoughts into a *sijo*, a traditional Korean poetry form, as a technique to reposition a cultural practice that informs readers of the young men's search for self-definition.

I do wonder, though, in this search for identity how much of Miles's Puerto Rican or even AfroLatinx identity is erased. Certainly, not every dual-heritage child needs to be presented in literature as conflicted because their culture is both a combination and a recreation of their parents'. I, as a Black woman, pick up on strong elements of Black culture in the text and recognize some instances of Puerto Rican influence, but is the food and the Spanglish enough? Perhaps when discussing why Miles took his mother's family name and not his father's (p. 20), the explanation could have reflected that Puerto Ricans hyphenate last names.

In this version, Miles Morales is grounded in his family, his father's Black heritage, and his school. He is navigating the borders of his new identity, self-expression, and new superpowers on his own. Who indeed will save him?

Justin A. Reynolds (no relation to Jason), a Black male, is the author of *Miles Morales: Shock Waves* (2021). This graphic novel is illustrated by Pablo Leon, who was born in Guatemala and now lives in Los Angeles. My comments here are based upon an advance copy.

"Shock waves" refers to the earthquakes that began devastating Puerto Rico in 2019. Miles, having been raised in cultures that maintain strong connections to community, is moved to cross-border activism when he participates in a fundraiser for the islands.

Reynolds positions the United States as an economic empire through Serval Industries, a company that wants to back Miles's relief effort in order to gain access to a rare mineral found in Puerto Rico. Miles uncovers the plot while trying to help a friend find her father, who happens to work for Serval Industries. Her interests are in saving her father, while Miles/Spider-Man's are in saving her father *and* Puerto Rico. Justin Reynolds uses Spider-Man's story to display the familial, corporate, and economic ties between the United States and Puerto Rico.

Miles Morales, in this graphic novel, is a bit more confident of his call to action, as exhibited in the artwork on the cover. Miles is shown in full stride and unmasked, with a very determined look on his brown face. Spider-Man is his shadow. Still, in this story the young hero has horrible aim with his web-shooter and is terrible with time management, often falling asleep in class. He is, after all, still a middle school student!

In one of the story's subplots, Miles is struggling to create artwork for an art contest that's part of the fundraiser for Puerto Rico. He's distracted from it while fighting the bad guys, but when he's finally able to settle into his work, he ponders, "Maybe I've been approaching the art thing all wrong. Maybe instead of just focusing on *how* I'm drawing, I should think about *why* I'm drawing... What if my art represented the stories that have shaped my life? The stories of my family's life?... What if I create with my mind and my heart?" (p. 111). It's interesting that both books rely on art as a tool to create community and developing that particular talent

seems to transcend others that Miles/Spider-Man wants to develop. Mrs. Blaufuse, the English teacher in Jason Reynolds's book (and real life), tells her students, "Poetry is about community—it's not just about expression but also about being a witness to that expression" (p. 58). Art truly transcends borders.

As corporate empires based in the United States find new ways to extend their reach beyond racial, geographic, and political boundaries that have dominated children's literature, scholars must do the work of centering discourse in ways that critically examine expressions of power and privilege. Here, in the example of Miles Morales, "these authors and illustrators engage in public pedagogy by repositioning the experiences of protagonists of color within popular discourses" (Durand & Jiménez-García, 2018). This repositioning has the ability to disrupt borders but left unchecked will only extend them. ▣



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