

# Capes, Culture, and Racial Representation in Children's Superhero Narratives: A Critical Race Content Analysis of DC Graphic Novels for Kids

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This article constructs a critical race content analysis of the DC Graphic Novel for Kids collection that features characters of color to examine how superhero narratives written towards elementary readers depict characters of color and address or avoid discussions of racism.

COOGAN (2009) DEFINED superheroes as characters who have a selfless, prosocial mission that is accomplished with superpowers and crystallized in an alter ego identity and accompanying attire (p. 30). The story of American superheroes cannot be told without the publisher DC and its evolving audience. During the latter 1930s and early 1940s, DC Comics assembled a catalog of superheroes that became the archetype of the genre itself: Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman. In the ensuing decades, DC Comics became one of the two biggest comic publishers in the United States. While the company introduced superheroes of color in the 1970s and developed those characters in following years, the aforementioned original pantheon of characters was influential in establishing the superhero archetype as a white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied character in the popular imagination (Hosein & Clement, 2017). As DC Comics' audience and market grew throughout the decades, the company's understanding of its readership expanded to include readers of color. Thanks to the push by "librarians, teachers, kids' book publishers, and people born after the year 2000," young comic readers in upper elementary and middle grades began to be viewed

as a lucrative audience for DC Comics over the past decade (Riesman, 2017, para 8).

Originally conceived as DC Zoom in 2018, the imprint was meant to create superhero narratives written for young audiences. In 2020, DC Zoom reorganized and bifurcated its products into two streams: DC Graphic Novels for Kids and DC Graphic Novels for Young Adults. The former is geared toward upper elementary students, while the latter is geared toward middle and high school audiences. Both lanes are committed to stories built on "forging connections, lending support to their audiences in their quests for self-realization and actualization, and most excellent hero stories" (Sondheimer, 2020, para 12). The DC Graphic Novels for Kids imprint redresses the original narrative exclusion of DC Comics by centering new, young heroes of color alongside white superheroes. Importantly, these younger heroes of color are written by comic writers of color, which marks a departure from the historical origins of some of the most popular superheroes of color.

We wondered what messages were being sent about race and racism within the DC Graphic Novels for Kids to young readers. In this article, we construct a critical race

content analysis of DC Graphic Novels for Kids that feature characters of color to engage in that inquiry. Our critical race content analysis is guided by two research questions: *How do DC Graphic Novels for Kids depict characters of color within superhero narratives? How do DC Graphic Novels for Kids address or avoid discussion of racism?*

In constructing a critical race content analysis framework for children's literature, Pérez Huber et al. (2023) call for an analysis that will "allow teachers, educators, families, and children the possibility to understand the discursive storylines being reproduced in the books they use in their classrooms and homes" (p. 4). Previous scholarship argues that teaching superhero comics in tandem with justice-minded pedagogies can transform classrooms into spaces where students name and challenge oppressive systems in order to reimagine new possibilities within their own worlds (Connors, 2013; Corson et al., 2020; Dallacqua & Low, 2019, 2021; Hines, 2021; Low, 2017; Low & Torres, 2022; Maldonado & Dehart, 2021; Miller, et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Astacio, et al., 2024; Torres, 2019, 2022; Torres & Tayne, 2017; Worlds & Miller, 2019). We come to this analysis as former English language arts teachers and current English teacher educators who advocate for superhero stories in classrooms. Christian is a cisgender, Black, female teacher educator, René is a cisgender, bilingual, Puerto Rican, queer, male teacher educator, and Cody is a cisgender, white, male, queer teacher educator.

### Race, Racism, and the Superhero Genre

Traditionally, mainstream popular superheroes have often worked as a literary representation of American values and power dynamics (Wanzo, 2015), including white supremacist ideals (Dando, 2023). Tensions and changes within superhero comic books frequently mirror larger sociopolitical shifts in the United States. Like the early days of children's literature (Larrick, 1965), the nascent era of superhero texts frequently positioned Black characters as stereotypical and without agency (Hosein & Clement, 2017; Singer, 2002; Wanzo, 2015). Readers of these comics, especially readers of color, were not idle in consuming superhero narratives. Indeed, implicit and explicit discussions and concerns about race relationships and racism have been a central part of superhero comic book engagement, often with readers leading the charge (Fawaz, 2016). Readers of the "Big Two" major comic book publishers Marvel and DC were introduced to the first roster of Black superheroes in the 1970s; however, these characters were written by white authors. In 2016, both Marvel and DC were criticized for a lack of writers of color in their writers' rooms (Boyer, 2016). While characters like Storm, Black Lightning, Black Panther, and Luke Cage are notewor-

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thy for their status as historic firsts of the major comic publishers, Black comic authors had long been creating and publishing original characters for smaller audiences (Gatewood & Jennings, 2015). Demands for representation on the pages to be coupled with authorial power within both Marvel and DC for readers of color have yielded some changes within the superhero publishing world over recent years with the hiring of more authors of color (Davis, 2017; Sage, 2018).

Similar to reading children's literature, the consumption and engagement with graphic novels cannot be severed from the sociopolitical contexts in which such actions take place. Some authors of American superhero narratives, including the roster produced by DC, have invited readers into contemporary conversations about sociopolitical movements and unrest since the post-Cold War era (Fawaz, 2016). This tradition of engagement continues to the modern day with DC Comics. For example, recent DC comics have critiqued the Trump presidency's anti-immigration politics (Abad-Santos, 2017; McMillan, 2019), supported the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 (Johnston, 2020; Polo, 2021), and addressed the rise in anti-Asian racism during COVID (Ching, 2021). In other words, the acts of writing, reading, and discussing comic books have historically been activities brimming with political purposes.

### Theoretical Framework and Methodology: A Critical Race Content Analysis

We conducted a critical race content analysis of the selected DC Graphic Novels for Kids titles using our research questions as guides. A critical race content analysis draws on two fields of scholarship important to the study of children's literature: the methodology of critical content analysis and theoretical insights of critical race theory in education. Beach et al. (2009) define critical content analysis as a "conceptual approach to understanding what a text is about, considering content from a particular theoretical perspective" (p. 130). Critical race theory originated in legal studies and was brought to educational contexts in foundational pieces by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Solorzano (1997) with the aim of understanding

how systems of power subjugated people of color. We also extend our analysis of graphic texts by drawing on critical content analysis of visual images (Short, 2017), which looks at how power operates and is illustrated throughout using images and written text.

Pérez Huber et al. (2023) reframe the tools of a critical content analysis with the conceptual concerns of critical race theory in education to construct a “critical race content analysis,” with the aim of “critically examining how race, class, gender, and other intersectionalities emerge in children’s books about People of Color” (p. 4). As Pérez Huber et al. (2023) argue: “CRT is a framework that can be used to frame the methodology of a Critical Content Analysis, where each theoretical tenet informs the methodological approach itself” (p. 14). From their theorizing, Pérez Huber et al. (2023) developed five guiding principles of a critical race content analysis informed by Solorzano’s (1997) previously cited principles: (1) centralizing racism and intersecting forms of oppression in the storylines of books about people of color; (2) uncovering ideologies of white supremacy that underlie racist storylines and literacy practices; (3) centralizing culturally authentic experiences of people of color in texts/images; (4) utilizing interdisciplinary knowledge to consider the sociohistorical, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the text; and (5) a commitment to social justice by challenging and transforming inequity in stories for children (p. 14).

The five tenets of critical race content analysis are meant to be foundational to the research approach, from constructing research questions to collecting and analyzing data (Pérez Huber et al., 2023). For instance, a focus on the role characters of color play in children’s literature shaped our first research question, while a concern with systemic racism drove the development of our second research question. Utilizing critical race content analysis as both a framework and methodology aids in highlighting the ways that racism and white supremacist structures are prevalent even in literature for children and how those ideologies can subconsciously inform how children interact with varied races and cultures. This framework grounds our commitment to social justice, shapes why we engaged in this project, and informs our implications as we want teachers across the K–12 spectrum to position superhero narratives as texts that can challenge harmful ideologies and curriculum within schools.

#### TEXT SELECTION

Our text selection was guided by two criteria: first, the book was published under the DC Graphic Novel for Kids banner; second, the book featured characters of color as primary or secondary characters. While we’re primarily concerned with superheroes of color, we also

recognize many primary and secondary characters who lack a superhero’s cowl play important roles in superhero narratives. We did not want to create a criterion that excluded these potential pivotal characters within our analysis. Extending from Short (2017)’s work on critical content analysis, Pérez Huber et al. (2023) remind us that researchers decide “which unit of analysis is most appropriate to explore raced and other intersectional representations” (p. 18). Several entries in the DC Graphic Novel for Kids series feature white superhero characters, including banner heroes like Batman and Superman. These titles did not make our analyzed texts if they did not include an important character of color, which we gauged as a character who spoke multiple times throughout the story and was relevant to the plot of the graphic novel.

We began our text selection process by reviewing the official book list of DC Graphic Novels for Kids on the DC website. We began eliminating titles that were published under DC Zoom since such titles do not fall under the new mission statement outlined by DC during the rollout of DC Graphic Novels for Kids (Sondheimer, 2020). Then we identified titles that featured a character of color on the cover of the book or identified a character of color within the synopsis provided online. We noted which titles clearly fit our criteria and which titles we needed to further read to see if they fit our boundaries. After either approving or discarding titles in the latter category, we finalized our text selection. Of the thirty-three available titles in the DC Graphic Novels for Kids series, we narrowed the list down to twenty titles using our criteria. Table 1 features the list of twenty books from the DC Graphic Novels for Kids series that are of concern in this critical race content analysis.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

In constructing a critical race content analysis framework, Pérez Huber et al. (2023) provide researchers with analytical questions to examine how “raced and intersectional identities are assigned, how dominant ideologies operate, how People of Color’s experiences are represented, whether a broader context is provided to situate those experiences, and the racialized meanings created from how the story is crafted itself” (p. 18). These guiding questions are not meant to be exhaustive and should be expanded depending on the unit of analysis. For instance, the concerns about roles characters of color play in the first tenet and story focalization that aligns with the fifth tenet (Pérez Huber et al., 2023) were important in our analysis and took on specific meanings in the context of a superhero story. We were concerned with which characters were focalized because they were superheroes and which characters were given narrative focus despite not being superheroes. We examined how these roles and focalization operated

TABLE 1  
DC Graphic Novels for Kids Titles Analyzed

Title and Summary	Characters of Color
<i>Amethyst: Princess of Gemworld</i> by Shanon Hale, Dean Hale, and Asiah Fulmore: Amethyst is the princess of House Gemworld and has magical powers. After being sent to Earth for a week as punishment, she returns home to a monster-plagued Gemworld, and it is up to her to save her family and all of Gemworld.	<b>Civilians:</b> Autumn, a classmate and best friend to Amethyst. She accompanies Amethyst in her journey and asks important contextual questions for the reader to understand Gemworld. Citizens and royals from Gemworld shown in the background.
<i>AntiHero</i> by Kate Karyus Quinn, Demitiria Lunetta, and Maca Gil: Piper Pájaro and Sloane MacBrute are two 13-year-old classmates at East Gotham Middle School and polar opposites of each other. One night, both Gray and the Hummingbird come across a body-switching device that turns their lives upside down.	<b>Superheroes:</b> Piper Pájaro, also known as The Hummingbird. She strives to be taken seriously as a superhero. <b>Civilians:</b> Abuela and Uncle John are in Piper's family unit. Ben, Sloane's neighbor who becomes part of the group and aids both Piper and Sloane.
<i>Batman and Robin and Howard</i> by Jeffrey Brown and Silvana Brys: Damien Wayne (Robin) navigates fitting into a new school, tracking down a missing Batman, and deciding if his new classmate Howard is friend or foe.	<b>Civilians:</b> Howard, a young Black boy, is a classmate to the protagonist. There are other students of color in the book: Latasha who is Black, Javi is Latine, and Azumi who is Asian. Howard's family is Black and serves as a foundation for him to think through his issues with Damian.
<i>Diana and Nubia: Princesses of the Amazon</i> by Shannon Hale, Dean Hale, and Victoria Ying: Diana and Nubia, both young princesses, long for adolescent companionship on an island that is filled with adults. They make a wish and suddenly awaken to a very different Themyscira than they once inhabited.	<b>Superheroes:</b> Nubia, young Black Amazonian princess and twin sister to Diana. <b>Civilians:</b> Phillipus, a Black Amazonian, is introduced as a paramour to Hippolyta and as comforter to Nubia. There are other Amazonians of color in the background, but only Phillipus is named.
<i>Diana: Princess of the Amazons</i> by Shannon Hale, Dean Hale, and Victoria Ying: Diana, a young Amazonian princess, is tired of being the only kid on Themyscira. She creates her own friend out of clay and soon finds she has conjured up more than she bargained for.	<b>Civilians:</b> There is only one unnamed Amazonian of color in the background panels.
<i>DC Super Hero Girls: Midterms</i> by Amy Wolfram and Yancey Labat: Top-ranking student Karen Beecher (Bumblebee) finds herself in competition with overachieving student Lois Lane and intellectual villain Harley Quinn as they race for top spot in their class midterms.	<b>Superheroes:</b> Karen Beecher (Bumblebee) is a teenage Black superhero and one of the main protagonists. <b>Civilians:</b> Ms. Beecher, a Black woman and Karen's mom
<i>DC Super Hero Girls: Ghosting</i> by Amanda Deibert and Yancey Labat: Diana Prince (Wonder Woman) tackles how to successfully manage friendship, school life, and being a superhero.	<b>Superheroes:</b> Tatsu Yamashiro (Katana) is a teenage Japanese heroine. Jessica Cruz (Green Lantern) is a Mexican American and Honduran American teenage girl. <b>Civilians:</b> The gym team has unnamed girls of color. There is an unnamed Black librarian. <b>Villains:</b> Selina Kyle (Cat Woman), a teenage Black girl.
<i>Dear DC Super-Villains</i> by Michael Northrop and Gustavo Duarte: This book is an anthology that focuses on a different super-villain for each chapter. In the chapters, young kids are writing to the super-villains asking them questions about their motives and lives.	<b>Civilians:</b> The young kid writing to Katana is also Japanese, as he wears a Japanese flag and has books on his desk in Japanese (p. 116). A young Brown girl writes to Harley Quinn but she is not given a specific ethnicity (p. 45). <b>Villains:</b> Black Manta is David Hyde, a Black man. Katana is Tatsu Yamashiro, a Japanese woman.
<i>Flash Facts</i> by Mayim Bialik: This book is an anthology that focuses on a different superhero for each chapter. In the chapters, a superhero explains a scientific concept to the readers.	<b>Superheroes:</b> Cyborg, a Black man, is a main character in one story. One story focuses on Jessica Cruz, who is an Afro-Latina Green Lantern. One story focuses on Kid Flash, who is a Black teenager. <b>Civilians:</b> In a chapter focused on a white character, Flash, the characters talk about the science of hair and use a Black woman's hair to illustrate the point.
<i>Green Lantern Legacy</i> by Minh Le and Andie Tong: Tai Pham, a Vietnamese American teenager, is the newest member of the Green Lantern Corps after inheriting the jade ring from his late grandmother. As Tai learns the powers of a Green Lantern, he grapples with what it means to be a superhero, fulfill the legacy left by his grandmother, and defend his neighborhood from anti-Asian hate crimes and gentrification.	<b>Superheroes:</b> Tai Pham, a Vietnamese American teenage boy, who is the newest member of the Green Lantern Corps. Tai's Bà N□i, a former member of the Green Lantern Corps and a Vietnamese refugee. Tai inherits her jade ring after she passes away. Jon Steward, an African American man, and a member of the Green Lantern Corps. Part of the DC pantheon of superheroes. He is Tai's mentor. <b>Civilians:</b> The Phams, Tai's nuclear family. Serena, a teenage girl and one of Tai's best friends. Her race is ambiguous and never specified.
<i>Green Lantern Alliance</i> by Minh Le and Andie Tong: Tai Pham continues to maintain his responsibilities as the newest member of the Green Lantern Corps. Tai teams up with Irey, who is also Kid Flash, on saving their neighborhood from fires. The fires, Operation Scorched Earth, are orchestrated by Xander Griffin, a Yellow Lantern and Tai's nemesis from the previous book.	<b>Superheroes:</b> Tai Pham, Tai's Bà N□i, and Jon Steward are all back from the previous installment. Iris, daughter of Wally West and Linda Park. Has a twin brother named Jai. She has taken the mantle of Kid Flash and is depicted as a person of color, as her mom, Linda Park, is Korean American. She joins Tai's friend group. <b>Civilians:</b> The Phams, Tai's nuclear family. Serena, a teenage girl and one of Tai's best friends. Her race is ambiguous and never specified. Tai's unnamed English teacher. Her race is unspecified, but assumed Latinx, as her dialogue features the Spanish phrase "Ay." A family saved by Tai from a burning building. They are background characters of color, and their race is never specified.

TABLE 1 CONT.  
DC Graphic Novels for Kids Titles Analyzed

Title and Summary	Characters of Color
<p><i>Lois Lane and the Friendship Challenge</i> by Grace Ellis and Brittney L. Williams: Lois Lane is a young student on summer break who is excited about her future as a journalist. Along with her friends Kristen and Izzy, as well as mentor Henri, Lois must solve the mystery of stolen fireworks from her town.</p>	<p><b>Civilians:</b> Kristen and Izzy are drawn as characters of color. However, there are no signifiers to their racial/ethnic identities. Mrs. Ramirez, a secondary character, is drawn as Brown and given a Spanish last name. Henri, the only adult main character (she is in college), is Black.</p>
<p><i>Metropolis Grove</i> by Drew Brockington: Sonia Patel is the new kid in Metropolis Grove. She is also obsessed with Superman. In an effort to prove that Superman exists, she wanders through the forests at night until she meets Bizarro, a Superman clone that has been sighted in the area.</p>	<p><b>Civilians:</b> Sonia Patel, an American Indian teenage girl new to Metropolis Grove. Alex, a teenage girl from Metropolis Grove who befriends Sonia and welcomes her to the neighborhood. Depicted as a person of color but left ambiguous. Background characters in the form of Sonia's schoolmates.</p>
<p><i>Mystery of the Meanest Teacher</i> by Ryan North and Derek Charm: John Constantine is moved from his home of England to Salem, Massachusetts, to attend a boarding school. Upon entering the school, he must unravel the mystery of the school's history teacher, Ms. Kayla, being a witch.</p>	<p><b>Civilians:</b> The only main character of color is the titular teacher, Ms. Kayla, who is a Black female American history teacher. Constantine's "first and last best friend," Ben, is a Black boy who is included in three pages (pp. 24–25).</p> <p><b>Villains:</b> Ms. Kayla is a good witch who is possessed by a demon, which turns her evil (p. 110).</p>
<p><i>Super Sons: The Polarshield Project</i> by Ridley Pearson and Ile Gonzalez: Jon Kent and Ian Wayne are the respective sons of Superman and Batman. When a climate crisis results in the melting of the polar caps, thousands of people are forced to flee Gotham and Metropolis and relocate to Wyndemere. As tensions rise between the locals and the new residents, Jon and Ian team up in order to save the world and their parents.</p>	<p><b>Civilians:</b> Candace, an original character who becomes friends with Jon and Ian. Candace is in search of the truth about her identity and past. Mr. Perry White is Lois Lane's boss. Background characters from the various locations where the story takes place.</p> <p><b>Villains:</b> The Four Fingers, a group of four teenage girls of color in pursuit of Candace. Little is revealed about them in this volume.</p>
<p><i>Super Sons: The Fox Glove Mission</i> by Ridley Pearson and Ile Gonzalez: The investigation on who poisoned Lois Lane continues, and Jon, Ian, Tilly, and Candace come face to face with The Four Fingers. While Candace is in a solo journey to discover their powers and legacy, Jon and Ian continue to butt heads and prevent The Four Fingers from capturing Candace to prevent her from taking over the throne of Landis.</p>	<p><b>Civilians:</b> Candace, an original character who becomes friends with Jon and Ian. Candace is in search of the truth about her identity and past. She discovers she is a princess and the heir to the throne of Landis in the nation of Coleumbria. Mr. Perry White is Lois Lane's boss. Background characters from the various locations where the story takes place.</p> <p><b>Villains:</b> The Four Fingers, a group of four teenage girls of color from different districts of Landis in pursuit of Candace. They are trying to prevent Candace from becoming empress of Landis.</p>
<p><i>Super Sons: Escape to Landis</i> by Ridley Pearson and Ile Gonzalez: The Four Fingers have secured a sample of the virus that poisoned Lois Lane and escaped to Landis. Jon, Ian, Tilly, and Candace must prevent the Four Fingers from unleashing the virus on Landis and eradicate it, all the while helping Candace retake the throne, heal Lois Lane, and stop the climate crisis.</p>	<p><b>Civilians:</b> Candace, an original character who becomes friends with Jon and Ian. Candace is in search of the truth about her identity and past. She discovers she is a princess and the heir to the throne of Landis in the nation of Coleumbria. Mr. Perry White, who is Lois Lane's boss. The Council from Landis, a group of women of color who aid Candace. Kizuka and Archer, two warriors from Landis who aid Candace. Background characters from the various locations where the story takes place.</p> <p><b>Villains:</b> The Four Fingers, a group of four teenage girls of color from different districts of Landis in pursuit of Candace. They are trying to prevent Candace from becoming empress of Landis. Talia Al Ghul, who is Damian's mother.</p>
<p><i>Teen Titans Go!/DC Super Hero Girls: Exchange Students</i> by Amy Wolfram, Agnes Garbowska, and Silvana Brys: The Teen Titans and the DC Superhero girls team up and cross alternate universes not only to save the day but to get to know each other during their everyday lives and teenage shenanigans.</p>	<p><b>Superheroes:</b> Karen Beecher (Bumblebee), teenage Black girl; Victor Stone (Cyborg), teenage Black boy; Jessica Cruz (Green Lantern), biracial Mexican American and Honduran American.</p> <p><b>Civilians:</b> Ms. Beecher, a Black woman and Karen's mom</p> <p><b>Villains:</b> Selina Kyle, a Black woman, is Cat Woman.</p>
<p><i>We Found a Monster</i> by Kirk Scroggs: Casey loves drawing monsters in part because he sees monsters in his life, unlike many people. However, when he befriends Zandra, who also sees monsters, he begins to wonder if she's holding a secret.</p>	<p><b>Superheroes:</b> Zandra Rivas is a Brown girl (perhaps Afro-Latina), who is later revealed to be a Phantom.</p> <p><b>Civilians:</b> There is a minor character named Ms. Kindle, who is a Black art teacher.</p>
<p><i>Zatanna and the House of Secrets</i> by Matthew Cody and Yoshi Yoshitani: Zatanna and her father, Zatarra, live in a peculiar house known as the House of Secrets. As Zatanna explores the house, she discovers she comes from a long line of Caretakers, and, as the chosen Caretaker, she must rescue her father and rid the house of the Witch Queen.</p>	<p><b>Superheroes:</b> Zatanna, the Caretaker of the House of Secrets. Their race is not specified even though it is established as being of Romani and Italian descent in the DC mythos.</p> <p><b>Civilians:</b> Zatarra, Zatanna's father and magician. Benji, Zatanna's friend and neighbor, who is homeschooled. Zatanna often defends him from his bullies. Depicted as a person of color, Benji's race is never specified.</p>

within the unique genre features of superhero narratives by coding data around inquiries like: “Who gets to save people?” and “Who gets saved by superheroes?” These codes were aligned with our first research question. This example demonstrates how we took the analytical attentiveness of the questions Pérez Huber et al. (2023) outlined and framed them within the specifics of the superhero genre (Coogan, 2009). Table 2 further outlines how we revised the questions generated by Pérez Huber et al. (2020) to fit the superhero genre as part of our analysis.

We conducted our analysis of the DC Graphic Novels for Kids with the analytical questions in mind. We were a team of three with twenty titles to read. Each title was read by at least two members of the team. Our readings were informed by the analytical questions outlined in Table 2. We coded the books individually before coming together to discuss each text as a group. During discussions, we shared codes and discussed how they responded to the amended questions outlined in a critical race content analysis. For example, we used codes like “moral of the story” and “teaching lessons” to describe how some characters of color acted within a narrative. We reread the texts with the codes in mind to check against initial findings and revise when necessary, which helped verify and establish trustworthiness across the codes. To illustrate, previously mentioned codes were used in a reread of characters of color. We drew on specific quotes and illustrations to reach a consensus on how to describe the purpose of a character’s role as a “moral lesson.” Then we compared codes across texts to construct themes based on relationships

and commonalities. We used our research question to refine our theme construction throughout the process. Our second research question helped us understand the tension between racialized behaviors of some characters and the seemingly color-evasive approach many narratives took, to name one example of that refinement. We also returned to the core tenets of a critical race content analysis as guidelines for solidifying our themes. For instance, one theme we were developing related to statements characters made that reflected their worldview. Our theoretical framework’s focus on dominant ideology helped us describe ways of knowing that were present in some titles without any interrogation from the characters.

### Findings

Our critical race content analysis of DC Graphic Novels for Kids was concerned with examining how these titles depict characters of color within superhero narratives and analyzing how they address or avoid discussion of race and racism. Themes from our first research question are segmented into three categories that align with the role(s) characters of color play within the DC Graphic Novels for Kids series: superheroes, citizens, and villains. Then, we discuss two themes developed that answer our second research question.

#### SUPERHERO CHARACTERS OF COLOR: STRIVING TO BE OR WORKING WITH ESTABLISHED HEROES

Despite featuring superhero characters of color, the status of canonical adult white superheroes looms large in the

TABLE 2  
Data Analysis Questions for Coding

Analytical Question Prompts (Pérez Huber et al., 2020)	Analytical Question Prompts for Superhero Narratives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What identities or characteristics are assigned by race, class, gender, immigrations status, language, etc.?</li> <li>• What roles do characters of color play (i.e. central, tangential, hierarchical)? In what ways does the story become raced or not?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are characters of color assigned race-specific identities, characteristics, or traits within the text?</li> <li>• How do characters of color play heroic roles, if at all? How do characters of color play roles in need of saving, if at all?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the dominant ideologies and how do they operate (e.g. white supremacy, patriarchy, cultural deficits, other forms of power)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do dominant ideologies (i.e., racism, white supremacy, discrimination) operate within the superhero world?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are the realities and/or experiences of people of color represented or not (cultural authenticity vs. generalizations, simplifications)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do superhero characters of color represent authentic experiences and/or realities of people of color, if at all?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a context to situate race and/or its intersections (historical, political, social, geographic, temporal, etc.) or not?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the superhero narrative provide context for understanding how race and racism operate in the superhero world?</li> <li>• Are there intersections between the development of superhero identities/powers and context for understanding how race and racism operate?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the focalization of the story constructed?</li> <li>• How does power operate within the narrative devices of the story (i.e., vantage point, story closure, assumptions)?</li> <li>• Who has power? Who has agency?</li> <li>• How are dominant ideologies/deficit perspectives challenged? How does resistance emerge?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does being a superhero or being a civilian shape the focalization of the story’s construction?</li> <li>• What narrative devices are utilized to illustrate how power operates, if at all?</li> <li>• How does being a superhero or being a civilian shape who has power and agency?</li> <li>• How do superheroes characters challenge or resist dominant ideologies in the narrative, if at all?</li> </ul>

narratives. For instance, within the DC Superhero Girls stories, Wonder Woman serves as the epitome of what a superhero and leader should be. Wonder Woman serves as the prominent leader within the series. The superheroines of color, which include Bumblebee, a Black girl; Katana, a Japanese girl (later a villain in different series); and Green Lantern, a Mexican and Honduran American girl, all serve as support roles to Wonder Woman. They comfort and affirm her when she struggles with her leadership capabilities, yet each one of those heroines—not Wonder Woman—often finds a solution to dealing with the villain of the story. The only instance where Wonder Woman is shown as an equal to a superhero of color is in *Diana and Nubia: Princesses of the Amazon*, in which Nubia, a young Black Amazon and twin sister to Wonder Woman, is illustrated as being as equal and capable a leader as her white counterpart.

In comparison, adult superheroes of color such as Jon Stewart, a Black man, and Tai's grandmother in *Green Lantern: Alliance* and *Green Lantern: Legacy* are perceived more as mentors and guides to help young heroes as opposed to being ideals to aspire to. Jon Stewart and Tai's Bà Nôi prompt Tai to find his reason for being a hero. At the beginning of *Green Lantern: Alliance*, readers are presented with a series of flashbacks of Tai's Bà Nôi enjoying a conversation with Superman about missing their respective homes, and then another flashback scene with The Flash, where they reminisce about their childhoods through food. Through these exchanges, we see intergenerational and human connections that seek understanding and collaboration rather than presenting established heroes as the ideal superhero.

#### CITIZEN CHARACTERS OF COLOR: MORAL LESSONS AND NARRATIVE TOKENS

Across the analyzed narratives, the citizens of color characters that appeared within these texts acted into two categories: they operated as didactic, moral lessons to a white character or they existed as a token, only appearing when the story centralized a superhero of color. The character-as-didacticism is illustrated in varied examples from Howard in *Batman, Robin, and Howard* as Howard's intellect and deductive skills serve more of a sidekick role to Damien as he is on a quest to locate his father, Batman. Though Howard often outsmarts Damien and excels in multiple ways, he is used as a plot device to further the story of Damien's experience at a new school. His racialized presence does not shape the story in any way, nor is it a topic between him and Damien.

Other citizens of color characters serve as ornamental background characters, which is a form of narrative tokenism. When there is a centralized story about a

superhero of color, the story itself contains more citizens and background characters of color. Instances of this are apparent in the graphic novel *DC Superhero Girls: Midterms* and *DC Superhero Girls: Ghosting*. Citizens of color characters are mostly present when the story centers Black superheroine Bumblebee or Japanese antihero Katana, and those characters are nonexistent in other iterations of the DC Superhero girls adventures. Tokenizing characters of color by using them as diversity support props showcases the insidious ways that people of color are included in narratives as an afterthought to appeal to a broader audience rather than from the onset. This positioning suggests a racial hierarchy of who matters in storytelling.

#### VILLAIN CHARACTERS OF COLOR: BLANK BACKGROUNDS AND MISSING MOTIVATIONS

Villain characters of color appear most prominently in *Dear DC Super-Villains*. One plot centers Tatsu Yamashiro, a Japanese woman, as Katana. The overall story involves a group of young kids writing to the titular villains to trick them into being captured by DC superheroes. Katana's villain identity is explicitly tied to Japan, as she wears a Japanese flag and speaks Japanese throughout the chapter and is first introduced with a stylized version of the Japanese flag behind her. The young kid writing to Katana is also Japanese, which is indicated by him wearing a Japanese flag and having books on his desk in Japanese. In this sense, Katana represents a trend in the early American comics of explicitly marking a character of color not from America to their origin country in ways that can be overt and potentially othering: Katana is named after and uses a Japanese weapon and is a samurai. She is a villain whose identity is inseparable from Japan. The potential problematic nature of this representation could be alleviated if paired with a Japanese superhero, but the narrative offers none. Having a character of color watered down to a simplistic representative set of objects dehumanizes them and reifies their positionality as an afterthought.

Original villain characters of color are also introduced vis-a-vis original main characters of color as evidenced in the *Super Sons* series. Candace, an original character, is prominently featured in the covers of the *Super Sons* trilogy and is one of three protagonists alongside Jon and Ian. Candace's and The Four Fingers' fictional cultural background is based on The Candaces of Meroe, the queens who ruled the Kingdom of Kush in c. 284–314, which corresponds to modern-day Sudan. Candace's storyline often involves her traveling alone to Landis to learn about her legacy while being supported by Jon, Ian, and Tilly by keeping the villainous Four Fingers away. The Four Fingers is a group of four young women from different districts from Landis trying to prevent

Candace from reclaiming the throne. This group of characters comprises the core villains to Candace's plotline into becoming a hero, as they seek to "see a Landis unified by strength. Five Fingers of the Foxglove, a single hand" (Pearson & Gonzalez, p. 108). In this instance, we see villains of color created within the sociopolitical contexts of Landis and Candace's development. However, this is not explored further. In the end, Candace's heroism leads her to reclaiming her legacy as empress and leading Landis to victory. Again, readers are left with villains of color on the page without a nuanced understanding of their backgrounds and motivations.

#### TENSIONS BETWEEN RACIALIZING CHARACTERIZATION AND COLOR-EVASIVE NARRATIVES

A tension exists between narratives that ignore discussions of race and racism and literary moves that work as racialized characterization. Markers of racial identities are largely visual rather than dialogic across the DC Graphic Novels for Kids titles we analyzed. Racial and ethnic identities are implied via the coloring of characters with additional markers used to add specificity, such as last names (e.g., Sonia Patel from *Metropolis Grove*, Piper Pájaro from *Anti/Hero*, Zandra Rivas from *We Found a Monster*, Jessica Cruz from *Flash Facts*), hairstyles (e.g., Nubia in *Diana and Nubia: Princesses of the Amazon*), clothing (e.g., Nani from *Metropolis Grove*, Katana from *Dear DC Super-Villains*), or food (e.g., Piper Pájaro from *Anti/Hero*). Some characters are denied contextual information that would add specific details to their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. For instance, Piper Pájaro, Zandra Rivas, and Jessica Cruz are never provided narrative information to inform readers of their unique cultural identities. The titular character in *Zatanna and the House of Secrets* is drawn with brown skin but provides no background information for readers to identify her racial and ethnic identities. The only exception to this trend is the protagonist of *Green Lantern: Legacy*, Tai Pham, whose Vietnamese American identity is explicitly stated and a central part of the novel's plot, as his grandmother was a Vietnamese refugee who gained her powers while leaving her home country during the Vietnam War.

Overall, DC Graphic Novels for Kids tells stories about characters of color with a "color-evasive" approach (Annamma et al., 2017). Save for the aforementioned *Green Lantern: Legacy*, the titles in DC Graphic Novels for Kids do not include explicit dialogue about race, racial identity, or racism. These stories largely position racial identity as incidental to the narrative instead of the organizing sociopolitical force that race and racism are. This approach is notable considering that several of the titles such as *Diana and Nubia: Princesses of the Amazon*, *DC Superhero Girls*,

and *Lois Lane and the Friendship Challenge* all organize their stories around gender identity. Being a young woman is a fact explicitly noted in the listed titles, yet "young woman" is a social category positioned without a racial dimension in the stories. Lois Lane, an adolescent white character, strives to be a journalist in *Lois Lane and the Friendship Challenge*. Lois is given a type of mentorship from Henri, a young Black woman in college. Their relationship rests on the idea of being a "woman in the industry," but the story doesn't consider how Lois's white racial identity provides a set of privileges that are denied to Henri. These examples speak to the graphic novel series' ability to explicitly name one identity without considering how that identity is constructed across social, cultural, and racial differences.

Notably, the only dialogue relating to systemic oppression comes from Ms. Kayla, a Black history teacher, who acts as the titular educator in *The Mystery of the Meanest Teacher*. Ms. Kayla, under the influence of magical possession, curses a "centuries old prejudice" (North & Charm, 2021, p. 137). Yet the prejudice she derides is intolerance aimed at witches from demons. Throughout the DC Graphic Novels for Kids series, the mere explicit mention of prejudice is relating to a fantastical identity, not one rooted in our reality, and the prejudice comes from a demon, another mythical being. Prejudice existing as an intrastruggle between magical beings continues the trend of color-evasive narratives, as it suggests the only time prejudice occurs is between beings who are not human. In other words, *othering* only occurs within the fantastical realm, not the world and social systems that are based on our own reality.

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**Save for the aforementioned *Green Lantern: Legacy*, the titles in DC Graphic Novels for Kids do not include explicit dialogue about race, racial identity or racism. These stories largely position racial identity as incidental to the narrative instead of the organizing sociopolitical force that race and racism are.**

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#### REIFYING DOMINANT IDEOLOGIES WITHOUT NARRATIVE QUESTIONING OR COMMENTARY

Several of the titles we analyzed deploy beliefs that are birthed from dominant sociopolitical identities. These beliefs exist within the narrative without any interruption from the characters or narration; these beliefs animate the worlds the superheroes inhabit but are never noted by

superheroes, citizens, or villains. Disturbingly, these are beliefs that further malign people of color and buttress white supremacist logic.

Eurocentric epistemologies are embodied in educational institutions and presented as factual in some of the titles. For instance, in the graphic novel *Flash Facts*, several superheroes work to teach students in the narratives, who serve as a substitute for young readers, about scientific phenomena ranging from marine biology to astrophysics. Scientific knowledge is presented on the pages as an objective set of facts removed from sociocultural, historical, and political dimensions. *Flash Facts* relies on an Enlightenment-era version of science that divorces knowledge from situational reality, which reinforces Eurocentric conceptualizations of science that dominate our culture. Similarly, in *The Mystery of the Meanest Teacher*, the titular history teacher embarks on a long lesson on the founding of the United States. During this narrative, the role of settler colonialism is never mentioned and Native communities are neglected. Again, the young fictional characters are left inheriting stories and knowledge founded on white supremacist logics through educational institutions like schools and science centers.

We also found that dominant racialized beliefs about accomplishments and the body are embedded within the narratives without critical interrogation. Bumblebee, in *Superhero Girls: Midterms*, must demonstrate her competence by working twice as hard as Lois, which reflects the realities young Black women face compared to their white counterparts. Yet the narrative does not question the systemic nature of this reality. Instead, the narrative positions Bumblebee as a hero for overcoming hurdles. Bumblebee the individual is placed on a pedestal for overcoming institutional barriers, but the very institutions and ideologies that structure those barriers are never commented on by Bumblebee, Lois, or any other character in the story. A body-switching incident between Piper, a Latina character, and Sloane, a non-Hispanic white female character, in *Anti/Hero* perpetuates a racialized bifurcation of physical and intellectual strengths. With switched bodies, the Latina character becomes smarter and more reliant on brain power, while the non-Hispanic white character finds her physical strength and bodily potential increased. This plot device perpetuates a racist myth rooted in settler colonialism that positions nonwhite bodies as more physically powerful and less prone to pain, while white bodies are seen as more intellectual. The narrative could provide young readers a chance to examine this body switch but instead continues the plot without any questioning from the characters.

Finally, dominant ideologies about geography, place, and race manifest in some DC Graphic Novels for

Kids without critical questioning. In both *Anti/Hero* and *Super Sons*, neighborhoods that are understood to be predominantly Black and Hispanic are called “dangerous” by characters in the texts. These comments are made by characters in passing but are never unpacked or interrupted by any character within the story. These scenes offer potential for challenging dominant racist beliefs about geography and neighborhoods for young readers, but the narrative opts to progress forward without an invitation for examination. Potential for conversations about place and race are also lost in *Green Lantern: Legacy*. The novel does discuss how gentrification is harming neighborhoods, which is further developed by the venture capitalist-inspired antagonist. Yet the book does not offer insight into how racism fuels gentrification. The scenes that address gentrification avoid explicit conversations about racism and any mentioning of race; the story opts to discuss gentrification in a color-evasive manner. Similarly but to a lesser degree, one panel in *Lois Lane and the Friendship Challenge* implies a gentrifying neighborhood, but the idea is contained to the singular panel in the graphic novel. These narratives echo rather than challenge dominant ideologies that shape common understandings of location and race.

### Discussion and Implications

The DC Graphic Novels for Kids titles we’ve outlined and analyzed could be valuable additions in elementary English language arts curricula, especially given the historic and ongoing neglect of characters of color in children’s literature broadly (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2019; Larrick, 1965; Myers, 2014). Despite the way some characters of color are positioned in the titles, especially the citizens of color, the superhero characters of color in the DC Graphic Novels for Kids series offer examples of agentive youth of color such as the eponymous protagonist of *Green Lantern: Legacy*, Nubia in *Diana and Nubia: Princesses of the Amazon*, and Bumblebee in *DC Superhero Girls: Midterms*. The inclusion of these titles in classroom libraries sends a message that youth of color do get to wear the mantle of superheroes and are capable of saving the day, which is an important message that speaks back to the overwhelming whiteness of the superhero genre and canon (Dando, 2023; Wanzo, 2015). We firmly believe that texts must be coupled with thoughtful pedagogy.

Teachers need to be intentional in how they discuss superhero characters of color with students, especially in titles with established, mostly white superhero characters. Across the DC Superhero Girls and Green Lantern series, the inclusion of canonical heroes from the DC pantheon potentially casts a shadow over the young

heroes and their intended audience, one that carries implications concerning racial and intergenerational power dynamics. These texts illustrate the harmful ways that people of color often carry the labor of identifying issues and finding solutions while their white counterparts are often given the credit for saving the day. However, that is not to say the examples found in these two series illustrate binary power dynamics, but rather how superhero narratives can offer counterstories that recenter superheroes of color as sources of knowledge that collaborate with community members as illustrated in the Green Lantern series. Teachers should push students to think beyond individualized acts of heroism within a text (Miller, et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Astacio, et al., 2024). We believe the following questions can be helpful with that aim: How do family members, community members, and friends help the superhero in the story? How do characters work together in the story? What does it mean to be a “hero” in this book?

Teachers can also interrogate ideologies of race and racism through citizen characters of color with students. As noted earlier, citizen characters of color typically do not get their own background stories within the narratives; readers learn very little about these characters outside of their relationship to the character in which they impart a lesson on. The characters of color serve as morals, lessons, and pathways to advance the white characters, which echoes the ideology of people of color being the beacon of innate moral goodness similar to the literary and media tropes aimed at Black and Indigenous characters (Gardner, 2020; Reese, 2018). Teachers may prompt students to consider what information is given and what information is missing about the citizens in the story in order to read deeper into characters that the narrative positions as background décor.

Villain characters of color are informative too. Cunningham (2010) argues the tendency to not write complex Black comic supervillains is “no more progressive than the tokenism” that has plagued Black superhero characters (p. 59). This argument can be extended to the supervillains of color in our analysis. The blank backgrounds and missing motivations of villains of color suggest that these characters exist solely to be defeated by the protagonist and little more. Teachers can ask students to consider the “why” behind these supervillains’ actions. For instance, a question like “How would this villain explain their actions?” can prompt perspective-taking that blurs the guiding moral binary of good and bad in the DC Graphic Novels for Kids series.

Lastly, teachers can critique dominant ideologies in the texts and center race in the readings of seemingly color-evasive narratives with students. We’ve identified areas where the books’ potential for challenging harmful beliefs goes unfulfilled. Teachers can take up these shortcomings and prompt analysis with their students by having students question deficit views of “dangerous” neighborhoods and combat colonial narratives of America’s founding, to name just two instances from our findings. Teachers could bring in additional picture books, informational texts, or multimodal pieces that speak back to the dominant ideologies embedded in the graphic novel pages. Given the color-evasive approach to several titles in the series, Low’s (2017) approach to challenging “colormuteness” in graphic novels could be illustrative to building such pedagogies.

Future studies can consider how the spectrum of DC superheroes aimed at childhood and adolescent readers approaches conversations about race and racism. The lack of narrative discussion of race and racism in the series is especially notable when juxtaposed with the series’ adolescent equivalent, DC Graphic Novels for Young Adults. Several titles in the Young Adults collection feature explicit character dialogue that addresses race and racism. As mentioned earlier, recent mainstay DC Comics titles explicitly address contemporary instances of racism. DC Comics titles invite readers into conversations about racism when the intended audience is adult and adolescent readers, but abandon this aim when publishing for children audiences, which can reify a common inaccurate belief that young children are too young to discuss, notice, and analyze race and racism (Children’s Community School, 2018). Empirical research has demonstrated how elementary students can engage in conversations about race, racism, and contemporary sociopolitical issues through the superhero genre (Torres, 2022; Torres & Tayne, 2017). Future studies should attend to practices teachers can develop that foster critical engagement and antiracist stances when teaching the DC Graphic Novels for Kids series. ▣

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