Between Blackness and Monstrosity: Gendered Blackness in the *Cyborg* Comics

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Abstract:
This essay gives a racial and gendered analysis of the *Cyborg* comics, which depict the life of Vic Stone, African American superhero cyborg. The essay's entry into Victor Stone's Black cyborg positionality seeks to do four things: first, articulate, with the help of Richard Iton's notion of the Black fantastic, the unsettling and destabilizing nature of Blackness and cyborg-ness; second, provide a gendered analysis of the Black (male) cyborg that, in part, questions the destabilizing potential of yet another male superhero; third, put Stone's Blackness and cyborg-ness, which I alternatively describe as a transhumanness, in conversation with historical derogations and contemporary reappropriations of the notion of monstrosity; and four, highlight the salvific discourse surrounding Stone and speak to the temporal implications of being a Black cyborg.

> "You're asking the cyborg fugitive and the wild animal to be the welcoming committee? That's adorable."
> —Marissa Meyer, *Cress*

> "The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities."
> —Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows*

Birth of a Cyborg

1 The term *cyborg* is short for 'cybernetic organism,' and was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline. Used today to describe a being that is part human and part machine, it was originally used to describe being technologically altered to better cope with the conditions of outer space. Moving away from the astronautic context, a cyborg is now symbolic of the ways in which "technology is transforming and maybe even transcending the human" (Muhr 339). Cyborgs disrupt traditional categorical definitions of 'the human'; they, in a sense, unsettle homeostasis. The cyborg interrogates what qualifies as human, and to what end the human exists as human.

2 Conventional understandings of cyborgs, though, are complicated when, like DC comic book superhero Victor Stone, the cyborg is Black, understood here as extending beyond mere

epidermal hue. Victor Stone as Cyborg first appeared in the pages of a series called *The New Teen Titans*, back in 1980. A former Teen Titan and current Justice League member, Stone is a young African American born as a "*human computer*" (Sable et al. n.p.), his father used to say, with an IQ of 170. He was nearly killed in a laboratory explosion, only to have his life saved, and his body restored, through the use of advanced cybernetics. Stone being a *Black* cyborg is consequential: it modifies, disrupts, and complicates cyborg-ness, so to speak. In the context of contemporary policing and ontological invalidation of Black bodies via fatal police brutality—and Victor Stone himself being subject to gangs, drugs, and racism in Detroit—João Costa Vargas and Joy James say this about the Black cyborg:

> a black cyborg: a modified, improved human whose increased ethical, spiritual, and physical capabilities generate unusual strength, omniscience, and boundless love. In this narrative, the black cyborg is a "creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important social construction, a world-changing fiction."…[T]he black cyborg is able to overcome the brutality of imposed limits—the conditions of social and physical death. (Vargas and James 18)

Black cyborgs are superhuman insofar as that superhumanness rests on their Blackness. Contrary to discourses about Black inhumanity, pathological monstrosity, and subhumanity, the Black cyborg subverts those assumptions and exudes a more-than-human ethos. In this context, what Stone says about himself is even more telling: "There's more to being a cyborg than artificial limbs and sonic disruptors" (Sable et al. n.p.)—namely, his Blackness.

3 Vic Stone exists in corporeal paradox in more ways than one. He is both human and machine, yes, but his machinery, his 'Cyborg,' is also "his disability," says David F. Walker, the writer of the 2015 solo series of *Cyborg*. But Walker also says that "Cyborg isn't so much of persona as it merely is his state of being—the result of this devastating accident that almost took his life. The technology that is used to keep him alive makes him look more like a robot, gives him incredible strength, and allows him total access to the Internet by way of the computer implanted in his brain" (Clark n.p.). Stone is 'disabled' by his accident and machinery, yet this disability is in fact the acquisition of superhuman abilities. While Blackness is not a disability, it typically carries with it burdens and ontological circumscriptions (e.g. beliefs of Black subjects' intellectual inferiority, perceived innate criminality, licentiousness, undeservingness of life, Afro-pessimistic position of abjection, etc.) that 'disable' the subject. However, Vargas and James's characterization of Black cyborgs as superhuman marks Black cyborgs as

simultaneously 'disabled' and in possession of superhuman qualities. This paradoxical, but generative and insightful, state is expressed on the front cover of the first issue of the 2015 series of *Cyborg* on which Vic Stone stands powerfully in the foreground, part (Black) human, part machine—'disabled' in many ways—while in the background is the iconic image of Vitruvian Man, the 'perfect' human. Vic Stone, the underlying message says, is (or can be) archetypically human too, and Sarah Charles, Stone's ex-girlfriend, says as much. She tells Stone, "You are *not* a piece of machinery, Victor! You are a *human being*. Or am I the only one who realizes that?" (Walker n.p.). Her insistence on Stone's humanity, coupled with the front cover image, asserts the validity of Stone being human rather than *part* human. Stone's cyborgian Blackness, in his superhuman human-ness, interrogates the purported naturalness of the human and reveals what Sylvia Wynter calls the human as "meta-Darwinianly, a hybrid being, both *bios* and *logos* (or, as I have recently come to redefine it, *bios* and *mythoi*)" (McKittrick 16–17).[1] The front cover image and Charles' anthropo-reminder deconstructs and rearticulates what bodily perfection is, critiquing the whiteness and able-bodiedness of corporeal perfection, making the Black cyborg not merely archetypically human but archetypically superhuman.

4 This essay supplements the slowly-growing conversations concerning the intersections of race and technology, a conversation whose intellectual force is captured in Amiri Baraka's question in *Kawaida*: "What are the black purposes of space travel?" (Chaney 261). Since the term *cyborg*, as stated above, originally referred to the use of technology to better cope with space travel, Baraka can be read as asking, "What is the purpose of a Black cyborg?" Beginning the academic conversation about cyborgs is Donna Haraway's "The Cyborg Manifesto," which defines the fused embodiment of human and machine. Haraway argues for a way of thinking the body that moves away from traditional categories of embodied being and celebrates the restructuring of what the body is, can be, looks like, and says: questions of the cybernetic are, for Haraway, "a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears, and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange." By modeling "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and

[1] Wynter goes on to write, "Or, as Fanon says, phylogeny, ontogeny, *and* sociogeny, *together, define what it is to be human*. With this hypothesis, should it prove to be true, our system of knowledge as we have it *now*, goes. Because our present system of knowledge is based on the premise that the human is, like all purely biological species, a natural organism." This is all to say, simply, that the human is a very specific construct predicated on racial and gender and geographic biases, which Vic Stone, I assert—and which Blackness, Wynter asserts—troubles and interrogates.

personal self," Haraway's cyborg comes to represent, as Viviane Casimir explains, a "new 'ontological' space that anyone can occupy" (Haraway 163–164; Casimir 278). My entry into Victor Stone's specific Black cyborg positioning seeks to do four things: first, articulate, with the help of Richard Iton's notion of the Black fantastic, the unsettling and destabilizing nature of Blackness and cyborg-ness; second, provide a gendered analysis of the Black (male) cyborg that in part questions the destabilizing potential of yet another male superhero; third, put Stone's Blackness and cyborg-ness, which I alternatively describe as a transhumanness, in conversation with historical derogations and contemporary reappropriations of the notion of monstrosity; and four, highlight the salvific discourse surrounding Stone and speak to the temporal implications of being a Black cyborg.

Fantastic Blackness, Black Fantastic

5 A theorization that understands Blackness differently than mere skin color is helpful here in delving more deeply into Cyborg's corporeal significance. Blackness in this context is understood as what Richard Iton calls "fantastic." Iton himself was a child of Caribbean immigrants and moved between Montreal, Toronto, Baltimore, and Chicago, thus his work and understanding of (Diasporic) Blackness is inflected by "the different forms of knowing, the various identities, and the diverse methods of expression that inhabit the word 'blackness'" (Bascomb 148). And in the realm of the superhero different forms of knowing span galaxies, universes, and dimensions across time. The multiplicity of Blackness becomes even more multiplicitous when that Blackness is affixed to a superhero.

6 Iton's book *In Search of the Black Fantastic* casts the term "black fantastic" as, essentially, the productive and telling mess before the masterpiece. The Black fantastic sits in a liminal space, a space of productive chaos and possibility. Iton presents the outlaws, the marginalized, "the underground," and those "notions of being that are inevitably aligned within, in conversation with, against, and articulated beyond the boundaries of the modern" as fantastic. In other words, Iton says that "[t]he *black* in black fantastic, in this context, signifies both a generic category of underdeveloped possibilities and the particular 'always there' interpretations of these agonistic, postracial, and post-colonial visions and practices generated by subaltern populations" (Iton 16). Blackness as fantastic is the already outside, but an outside that is generative; an outside that is not vacuous but productively underdeveloped.

7 Near the end of the text, Iton suggests the close similarity between the effects of Blackness and the effects of the fantastic. He writes:

> If we think of the fantastic as a genre that destabilizes, at least momentarily, our understanding of the distinctions between the reasonable and the unreasonable, and reason itself, the proper and improper, and propriety itself, by bringing into the field of play those potentials we have forgotten, or did not believe accessible or feasible, I would suggest its effects are not at all that dissimilar from those of blackness. (Iton 289–290)

The fantastic, like Blackness, interrogates and destabilizes notions of propriety and reason. These Enlightenment-esque virtues, if you will, promote stability, but Blackness and the fantastic undermine their stability, throwing into question identity itself as a fixed categorical identifier of entities.

8 So if we think of Blackness (and cyborg-ness) as disrupting of a stable identity—indeed, identity as such—what might it mean that Vic Stone is one of the very few characters in the DC universe without an alter ego? "Superman has Clark Kent, Batman has Bruce Wayne, Green Lantern can be Hal Jordan, John Stewart, Guy Gardner, or someone else—they have these secret identities and personas that Vic simply doesn't have," says David F. Walker, so how might Stone's being the only Black superhero in the above string of heroes matter to his lacking an alter ego (Clark n.p.)? Fantastic Black subjects, or what Fred Moten would call "the undercommons" (Harney and Moten 9)[2] arguably do not need an alter ego because their very 'ego' (the 'I' or the 'self') is itself 'alter.' Blackness as fantastic and undercommon, as an "anoriginal lawlessness" (Moten 223), marks a pre-being that inhabits the alter ego itself insofar as it is always alter to itself.

9 This para-self that is Back fantastic-ness disrupts quantifiable, structured, policeable, and hegemonically limned understandings of classifiable selves. But ironically, breaking down these borders—Iton's sense of putting "all space into play"—has the potential to create a productive

[2] In Jack Halberstam's preface to the text, he writes: "the undercommons is not a realm where we rebel and we create critique; it is not a place where we "take arms against a sea of troubles/and by opposing end them." The undercommons is a space and time which is always here. Our goal – and the 'we' is always the right mode of address here – is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed. Moten and Harney refuse the logic that stages refusal as inactivity, as the absence of a plan and as a mode of stalling real politics. Moten and Harney tell us to listen to the noise we make and to refuse the offers we receive to shape that noise into 'music.'" The undercommons is what Moten has called elsewhere the "minor key" subjectivity; it is the underlying subversive "lower frequencies," to purloin the words of Ellison's protagonist.

tension. If alter egos rely on masks to obscure the (white) subjects behind them, then considering that "The mask destabilizes but hardly obliterates subordination," as Iton says, shows the distinct nature of alter ego-less Black superheroes (Iton 211). Foregoing the mask and supplanting it with one's revealed/revealing Blackness—a Blackness, by its nature, that is un-masking—obliterates rather than merely destabilizes subordination because Blackness rejects the tenets of subordination, viz. fixity and Law. The fantastic unsettles one's very understanding of 'the Law' since the Law is the political (and social) means by which subjects are fixed and statically situated in the world. "[T]he public sphere, and civil society," Iton says, "depend[s] on the exclusion of blacks and other nonwhites from meaningful participation and their ongoing reconstitution as raw material for the naturalization of modern arrangements" (Iton 17). This, I would argue, is precisely because inclusion of Black and nonwhite bodies would fundamentally unsettle and destabilize civil, i.e. fixed, society.

10 But what of the cyborg? The cyborg too unsettles civil society and traditional understandings of the public sphere. For Vic Stone, then, his existence as a cyborg is also related to his Blackness/fantastic-ness. Even the language used to describe the cyborg in Donna Haraway's interview with Nicholas Gane cites the fantastic. "There is a kind of fantastic hope," she says, "that runs through the manifesto [her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"]" (Gane 152). This "fantastic hope" Haraway cites "is a fantastic contagion moving through ready transmission routes" (Orr 273). The destabilization that Black/fantastic-ness causes is infectious, a contagion needing to be quarantined by governant Law (whiteness), yet it inspires hope in that it, like the technological thinking of cyborg identity, points to the not-yet or the to come. Indeed, hope rests on destabilization because hope for a future that is not present, an unknown future, requires the demolition of the current order of things. Herein lies the unfixing characteristic of Black/fantastic-ness.

11 And this unfixing and demolition of stasis is located in Vic Stone's body. Stone is the site of unfixing; he is the locus of unsettled Law. That he becomes 70 percent machine disrupts the organic-ness of his body, the homeostasis and equilibrium, one could say, of his corporeal self; that his Blackness clashes with traditional superhero lore and iconography unsettles the governed narrative of racialized superheroes. Stone evades the literal meaning of his very name and becomes anything but solidified, hardened, and concrete ('settled' cement)—he shifts, detonates,

and unsettles. Via his cyborg identity and his Blackness (as fantastic), Vic Stone disturbs space, time, and thought. But how might Stone's *gendered* Black cyborg-ness factor into this theorization?

When the Man Meets the System

> "Cyborg: man inside the MACHINE!"
> - Front cover of *Cyborg #1*

12 Returning again to the image on the front cover of *Cyborg #1*, it is important not to extrapolate Vitruvian man's 'perfection' to cover 'human' perfection as well, as that would erase female and trans subjects, and to an extent dehumanize all but white male bodies as representative of humanity. While Vic Stone's presence critiques the whiteness (and 'humanness') of the perfect human body, it still presents the archetypal human as male. In this section I wish to walk the fine line between holding (cisgendered) maleness accountable for its systemic exclusion of the feminine while also reckoning with the arguably gendered plight of Black masculine criminalization and weaponization (Mutua xvi–xvii).[3] Black maleness is posed as the epitome of superhuman-ness yet still subject to circumscriptive assumptions of its unindividuated and criminal essence.

13 Even in the comic book world Black subjects are susceptible to race-based interactions and assumptions. As the city is being destroyed by Ron, Stone's former best friend who was arrested, "found religion" (presumably a Black Nationalist/Nation of Islam sect of religiosity based on the religious garb in which Ron is illustrated), and was eventually infused with the same cyborgian hardware as Stone, Stone is thought to be the perpetrator. When Stone figures out the suspect motives behind the military's plan to use his hardware, he threatens to take it all to the media. However, military commander Mr. Orr notes that "the footage from Ron's attack on this lab is enough to have you taken into custody for an act of terrorism. Think the public is

[3] Mutua writes, "…at times black men were oppressed by gender in addition to race….black men, like black women, had unique experiences of gendered racism….Is the racialized gendered oppression that black men face exemplified in racial profiling, sexism? Or is it simply a product of racism?" These questions make interesting points about the possibility of a gendered racism betiding Black men as well. However, I wish to also note that this is not to say that Black men have it 'just as bad' as Black women, an assertion I find to be absurd. We see Black women profiled and killed by police as well, in comparable numbers. This is meant only to raise the question of a specificity in Black masculinity when it comes to things like the weaponization of Black male bodies and the implied violence inherent in them.

really going to be able to tell the difference between two black cyborgs?" (Sable et al. n.p.). Orr is drawing on the age-old racist discourse that "all Black people look the same," thus Ron will be indistinguishable from Vic. As well, though, it draws on the discourse surrounding purported Black criminality. If all Black men look alike, in the context of the criminalization of Black masculine subjects all *violent* Black men are not only alike but the same.

14 The violence ascribed to Black masculinity is also internalized. Stone is not simply violent because of race-based ascriptions; he is also ontologically reduced to violence by virtue of him being a military weapon. Stone describes people like himself and Ron as "living weapons" (Sable et al. n.p.); his very being, in large part, is a means of violence. And this corporeal weaponization, amidst turmoil, is turned inward—Vic Stone becomes "A man at *war* with himself" (Sable et al. n.p.). But might this be more subversive that one might first think? If 'himself' is 70 percent machine—70 percent rigid, structural, state-imposed steel—perhaps warring with himself is Stone warring with fixity and stability; perhaps it is him doing the destabilizing work his Blackness and cyborg-ness call for. But since he is a cyborg on the basis of his machinery—though admittedly being a cyborg is not equivalent to being machine since cyborg-ness implies a human, biological base—it is arguable that his Blackness is doing the destabilizing work that other normative cyborgs could not. And perhaps this distinction is made evident when Stone thanks Sarah Charles, his ex-girlfriend with whom he is still very much in love and who is part of the research team that maintains his metallic structure. When Charles asks why Stone thanks her, he replies, "For caring more about the *man* than the machine. For being *you*" (Walker n.p.). The 'man' is separate from the machine because the man, not the machine (again, different from the 'cyborg'), is driven by the destabilizing, subversive Blackness. The machine is the hegemonic structure; the man is bringing the structure down.

15 But it remains that the cyborg, insofar as it is implicitly codified as male in science fiction discourse, but also the liberated female in Haraway's cyborgian sense, is still, as Haraway says, the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (Haraway 152). By this logic, cyborgs of all stripes are mired in a particular system, thus bestowing upon the (Black) cyborg its subversive potential. "Without the system that they try to escape," argues Sara Louise Muhr, "they would not be these tough and capable beings….cyborgs are constructed as superior beings because of, and thus thanks to, the oppressive system that they try to escape"

(Muhr 340–341). But I part from this characterization because it assumes whiteness and not the anoriginal, "undercommon" Blackness I add via Vic Stone. While the qualifier-less (white) cyborg needs a system to make its biological critique, the Black cyborg, at least in part, does not need the prevailing system to be its rebellious self because Blackness is itself that which critiques, subverts, and is the messy, cosmic stuff that precedes system-ness. However, that Vic Stone is a Black *male* cyborg, in a sense, maintains part of the (patriarchal) system, belying the subversive power of his Black/cyborg-ness. The narrative might be much different and much more cyborgian if the protagonist of this comic book series was LeTonya Charles, a.k.a. Cyborgirl.

16 Cyborgirl is Villainy Inc.'s female villain version of Cyborg. Unlike Stone, Cyborgirl is said to have been "the cause of all her own troubles. She became a Tar [an addictive illegal substance] druggie, which destroyed much of her body" ("Cyborgirl" n.p.). It is questionable, first of all, whether Charles was truly "the cause of her *own* troubles" considering the real-life historical phenomenon of Reagan's racialized 'War on Drugs' and the systematic relegation of a disproportionate number of people of Color to impoverished, violent, drug-filled areas. This aside, Cyborgirl is also Black, has many of the same abilities as Cyborg, and is perhaps more subversive because she conveys, with an added radicalizing Blackness, Haraway's cyborg, which describes the cyborg as a metaphor for the liberated woman. In Muhr's words, "[Haraway] calls on readers to use technology to resist the conventional models that shape us as human beings in a patriarchal society" (Muhr 340). Hence, Cyborgirl would more readily dismantle the 'system' that exists within (as mechanical, rigid steel) and without (the hegemonic white patriarchal order). She is even less metal—"I'm *not* like you. For one thing, I'm not completely covered in metal" (Sable et al. n.p.), she says—which signifies less of a connection or complicity in patriarchal, hegemonic, rigid structures.

17 In readers' first experience with Cyborgirl in the Teen Titans Spotlight issue of *Cyborg*, Cyborgirl yells at Mr. Orr, "Don't *tell* me I'm a token," to which Orr responds, "On the contrary, *Cyborgirl*, I think you're absolutely essential….Hell, if revenge isn't good enough motivation for you, think of it like this: kill him and you can take the 'irl' off your name" (Sable et al. n.p.). Vic Stone's existence as a male cyborg stands in Cyborgirl's way as *The* Cyborg. Orr sees the 'girlness' of Cyborgirl as an impediment, which may initially simply index an underlying misogyny. However, that Orr represents white, militarized, patriarchal maleness implies that

Cyborgirl's girlness is only a problem because Orr wants to subsume her under his control and whim, therefore necessitating that she not be a 'girl,' i.e. disruptive of the (patriarchal) system. Exterminating Cyborg does not mean that Cyborgirl can take over as herself, but that she can become the next Cyborg, losing her identity as Cyborgirl and fitting neatly into the patriarchal order.

18 The attempt to subsume Cyborgirl and collapse her specificity as Cybor*girl* (though she is far beyond girlhood) is an attempt to quell her disruptive force. Indeed, if she were granted permission to be Black *and* cyborg *and* female she would pose too much of a disintegrative threat to the white/male/human order. In essence, to invite her to be all of herself would be to invite the demise of the hegemonic structure.

What Came First, the Blackness or the Monster?

> "Call me crazy, but I had this vision
> one day that I'll walk among you a regular civilian."
> - Eminem, "The Monster"
>
> "Man, machine or monster?"
> - Back cover of *Teen Titans Spotlight: Cyborg*

19 Blackness, since its epidermal solidification and construction as an axiomatic signifier of all that is perverse, has been tied to notions of monstrosity. Notions of the monstrous have long operated racially as a means by which colonial forces differentiate the civilized from the barbaric, the human from the nonhuman. Indeed, "*Human* and *black* have been constructed as oxymoronic for at least half a millennium in the West (and longer elsewhere)," thus Blackness automatically denoted nonhumanness or monstrousness (James 68). The monstrous and those who are deemed monsters were characterized by sheer bodily alterity—accounts of 'monsters' in history ranged from headless monopods to one-eyed giants to fanged cannibals, and these accounts "disseminated lurid tales of monstrous bodies that promised by the very nature of their physicality to confound any efforts to perceive humanness in the monstrous form" (Johnson 182). Tales of the monstrous work to classify, to divide and stigmatize, and determine who in fact deserves the status of 'human.' Racialized understandings of the monstrous act as ways to exhume from Black bodies an inherent antithesis to the prevailing order of things; Blackness-as-

monstrous does the work of deciding, with epidermal certainty of subcutaneous truth, the political, moral, and ideological perversity of undesired subjects.

20 Recently, however, the figure of the monster has been reclaimed by Black subjects and used to capitalize on notions of difference. The monster is articulated with the difference of positivity-in-perversity as it signifies superior abnormality. Often seen most pervasively in athletics and hip-hop—arenas dominated by Black subjects—the monster (and its derivatives, among which are the beast and the alien/Martian) is redeployed as a desirable characterization insofar as it denotes the subject's otherworldliness and ability to do things mere humans cannot. The monster for those Black subjects that affiliate themselves (or are affiliated) with it has come to act as a site of immense agency, usurping the externally imposed limits onto Blackness and demonstrating inhuman autonomy via their Blackness. Vic Stone says himself, as he is ignored by his father and the research team, that "It's better to be the monster in the room that everyone fears or pitties than to be the thing they *don't even see*" (Walker n.p.). To be monstrous grants him at least some agency and is to that extent desirable. To be a monster grants Stone agency through visibility, and the feeling of invisibility has long been a trope in the African American literary canon. For Stone, then, he would rather take on the monstrous identity only as it allows him to be seen, not so he can tout otherworldly skill, because by virtue of his being a Black cyborg he is already ontologically a beast, a monster, a Martian.

21 Adjacent to racial resonances of the monstrous are gendered ones as well, transphobic uses of the monster also drawing upon notions of physical monstrosity (i.e. uncategorizable bodies) to buttress the naturalization of binary sex and gender. As with the monstrous history of Blackness, monstrous identificatory assaults on bodies that fall outside of traditional gender categories attempted to dehumanize nonnormative gendered bodies, invalidating their claim to humanity and thus validating mistreatment and extermination of them. So too have trans and nonnormatively embodied subjects reclaimed the figure of the monster despite the monster's transphobic and injurious history. "It is precisely the monster's ambivalent ability to speak to oppression and negative affect," says transgender and queer studies scholar Anson Koch-Rein, "that appeals to trans* people reclaiming the monster for their own voices." The 'monster' used to derogate trans subjects is reappropriated as "a site of agency that negotiates a queerly complex relationship to nature, origin narratives, and language" ("Keywords" 135).

22 Vic Stone lies at the intersection of these historical discourses. As a Black cyborg—part human and part machine—Stone can be read as trans, as "across, beyond, or over" the fixity of the human (and subsequent racial, gendered, sexual, etc. identities predicated on humanness). Stone sees himself as thoroughly something else, as monstrous. In his words, "None of them know what it's like *to be a monster*" (Sable et al. n.p.). For Stone, his monstrousness is rooted fundamentally in his identity as a cyborg. If human subjects' epistemic anchor is their being-in-the-world as humans, then becoming a cyborg uprooted Stone's very understanding of the world. He then undergoes a radical reformation of embodied knowledge, and it is this epistemological rewiring, so to speak, that marks Stone's body-technology as one of thinking. And as Donna Haraway says in an interview, "almost any serious knowledge project is a thinking technology insofar as it re-does its participants. It reaches into you and you aren't the same afterwards. Technologies rearrange the world for purposes, but go beyond function and purpose to something open, something not yet" (Gane 154).

23 Here, then, we also see the connection between Stone's body-as-cyborg (i.e. trans/human) and (his) Blackness. Blackness as fantastic, in its openness and unfixing for the not-yet-known, maps seamlessly onto Haraway's above mentioned thinking technology. As well, if Stone's thinking technology and its fundamental rearrangement of the world rests intimately in his being a cyborg, then his transhumanness is linked quite closely with his Blackness. One might ask: is Victor Stone a Black cyborg, or is it, like Iton's Black fantastic, a redundant formulation? Does Blackness automatically denote transhummaness, i.e. a fundamental epistemological rearrangement of the world on the basis of one's being-raced and cyborged-in-the-world? After all, "Monsters can and do change shape," according to Jackie Orr (Orr 277). In changing their own shape, does not the shape of the world alter as well?

24 "The name's Stone," Cyborg soliloquizes, "Vic Stone. A.K.A. Cyborg. As in, part man, part machine. I've alternately considered the name and what it describes as a *blessing* and a *curse*" (Sable et al. n.p.). Within his name, his cyborg identity, lies a paradoxical site of inhabitation. This paradoxical site is a constant struggle for Stone, a state of constant crisis, and thus a site of violence due to its conflagration of a stable subjectivity. It is perhaps this constant state of identificatory violence that characterizes Stone's specific Black cyborg-ness as monstrous insofar as the monstrous, in the context of a Black subject, defines a Black habitus as tolerance for and necessity of "a fundamental familiar violence [and] multiple subjections"

(Sharpe 2). The 'curse' of this state of fundamental violence 'blesses' him by being the very constitutive foundation for his subjectivity as Black/cyborg. Without the violence and monstrosity of his existence as a Black cyborg Vic Stone as such would cease to exist.

25 But perhaps herein lies an even deeper paradox: if Stone's Blackness and cyborg-ness constitute his monstrousness, and to be a monster is itself to fall outside of a normative classifiable human being, Cyborg *transes* two of his most fundamental identities; Cyborg is transhuman *and* transBlack. But further still, this trans-monstrousness, so to speak, is itself Stone's enactment of Blackness if Blackness is considered "anoriginal lawlessness," the unfixing of stability ("Do Black Lives Matter?"). So to the question posed in the heading for this section, the answer is neither and both—Blackness ushered in, via itself, the monstrous, and by virtue of its monstrousness—its unclassifiable humanity—it brought with it Blackness.

Black Salvific Futures

> "I may get in trouble for saying this, but superheroes are the modern equivalent to the gods of ancient mythology. These are power fantasies and morality tales that are meant to help us better understand the way we live our lives, and give us an escape from both the mundane and horrific that we face on a daily basis. A great superhero comic is brimming with the same things we deal with, only exaggerated to the most wild of extremes."
> - David F. Walker

26 If Vic Stone's name, his identity, is Cyborg, and identities are "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past," but a cyborg connotes the not-yet or the radical break from a historically rooted organic body, then for Vic Stone to be a cyborg is for him to be simultaneously rooted in history and a futuristic entity (Hall 225). Stone stretches back and forward through time, becoming simultaneously historically rooted and unknown future.

27 In a telling panel in *Teen Titans Spotlight: Cyborg*, Vic and his best friend-turned-evil cyborg Ron are drawn on opposite ends of the panel, charging toward one another in mid-air as the ground crumbles beneath them. The image recalls the final scene in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in which the protagonist, Milkman, and his best friend-turned-militant Black radical Guitar leap off a cliff toward one another. A novel characterized thematically by biblical

allusions, mythologies, African American folklore and the history of slavery, Black ancestral and cultural roots, and the 20th century Civil Rights Movement, *Song of Solomon* as a literary imagistic reference point for these two futuristic Black cyborgs situates them squarely in the past and the future. The links to Blackness, ancestry, and a book very much about reckoning with the past places the *Cyborg* panel in literary and cultural history, while at the same time the futuristic bodies of Vic and Ron, not to mention the link to *Song of Solomon*'s unsettled futuristic last line describing the leaping scene—"If you surrender to the wind you can ride it"—locates them in an uncertain, precarious, and unknown future.

28 Vic Stone as Cyborg is both tied to the past through the signification of trauma supervening on his Blackness in an American context and projected into the future via the futuristic connotations of his technological makeup as well as the very 'presence' of Cyborg 2.0, his future self come back to erase his (own) memory. The futurity of the cyborg is definitionally linked to it because the cyborg marks "the end of [human] time and space as conventionally understood and relied on," and what is this marking of an end if not a revolution (James 63)? Indeed, "the cyborg glimpses the possibilities of permanent revolution" (James 61). As a cyborg, whose very existence as such implies revolution, Stone becomes a rebel intellectual, that is, an outlaw (literally outside the Law, i.e. impositions of fixed sovereignty) *thinking* technology. The rebel intellectual, at base, is cyborg; the rebel intellectual is, by its nature, "individual and collective, in overt and covert rebellion, alive because everyone has now become mechanized in its rebellion, with the spiritual force of freedom driving it—biological, mechanical, divine" (James 61). It is this last descriptor, divinity, that works again paradoxically. Contrary to a god that seeks to impose order onto mortal subjects, Cyborg is paradoxically divine, both a divine *blessing* ("Authoritative declaration of divine favour and countenance, by God or one speaking in his [*sic*] name") and a spiritual *curse* ("An utterance consigning**…**(a person or thing) to spiritual and temporal evil, the vengeance of the deity, the blasting of malignant fate, etc.") ("Blessing, N."). There is something deeply divine about Cyborg, his transtemporality and transhumanness, his para-ontology via his Blackness, his cognitive and physical superiority (one might say omniscience and omnipotence). And even in this divinity Cyborg is still fundamentally tied to humanity, god and mortal. Perhaps it is no coincidence that David F. Walker, comic book writer for the solo series of *Cyborg*, says, "superheroes are the modern equivalent to the gods of ancient mythology" (Barksdale). Cyborg is deeply god-like, his temporal multiplicity echoing

the Christian god's declaration in Revelation 1:8: "'I am the Alpha [beginning] and the Omega [end],' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'"

29 In this transtemporality, Stone becomes messianic, his limbs severed and replaced with mechanical parts in order for him to save (his) humanity. Stone's father, Silas, uses him as an experiment. Silas is propositioned by the government to sell his research, which he initially refuses but ultimately agrees to after Stone is nearly killed in the explosion. One of the governmental lab technicians then tells Silas "with your research, and our resources, you'll be helping your country…and saving your son." Silas's cybernetics, when imbued into his son's body, not only save his son from death but also, by virtue of the syntactic construction of the sentence, save the country as well. Helping—saving—his country is contingent upon saving his son, which necessitates making Stone a cyborg, a thinking technology, trans(non)human. And again, in another scene with Mr. Orr and Vic Stone, Stone's mechanical parts are touted as salvific steel. "Your father sold the hardware to *us* [the military], Stone," Orr says. "It was part of the price he paid for *saving your life*" (Walker n.p.). Stone's cybernetic hardware is what *saved* him. Or more, it saved *his life*, implying that Stone's life is separate and distinct from his cyborg identity. But that Stone *becomes* a cyborg makes him the site of salvation, thus making Vic "Cyborg" Stone a savior of himself and those he protects. He is surrounded by a team of Titans who act as disciples of sorts, and he must wrestle with his nega-self, an anti-Christ-like villain in Cyborg 2.0, and a close friend, Ron, who ultimately rejects him in Judas-like fashion.

30 Cyborg's divine relationship with time also stems from his Blackness. When Cyborg 2.0, Stone's ten-years-in-the-future self, comes back in time with evil versions of the Teen Titans to "beat your present self within an inch of your life" and erase his memory so as not to stop the incipient cyborg army from rising, the connection between the past, memory, and Blackness is made apparent. Mr. Orr, cutthroat commander of a black-ops government organization that specializes in military intelligence and combat enhancements, makes a racially specific comment to Cyborg 2.0 after Cyborg 2.0 wonders how he still exists in the past. Orr says, "Like Martin Luther King Jr.—you're a fan of his, right?—I have a dream. No, not that all men are created equal. If anything, Vic, you were created to be *more* than equal. No, my dream is to take wounded soldiers and use your cybernetics to make them walk again." Cyborg 2.0 replies, "More like *march*. In the future you create an *army* of men like me" (Walker n.p.). Cyborg's time travel is not only ten years into the future/past but back to the mid-20th century Civil Rights era with

King. The cybernetic army that marches in the future is made akin to the marching of King's civil rights followers, a moment saturated with Blackness asserting and fighting for its humanity. But Orr repeats this historical moment with a difference: he wants Vic, and thus his Blackness and cyborg-ness, to be *more* than equal, and only then can he save, not humans, but cyborg *trans*humans. Cyborg 2.0 is also salvific, but his role is to save superhumans, cyborgs, rather than mere humans, and in this sense he—his Blackness and his cyborg-ness—must be more than equal. In being superhuman (divine, one could say) he must also be superBlack.

31 S.T.A.R. Lab, the lab that conducted the cybernetic research to turn Victor Stone into Cyborg, is where 'Cyborg' was born. But it is also where Victor Stone *died* (Sable et al. n.p.). The death of the man gave way to the (re)birth of a more divine entity. Stone was resurrected—or, the 'Stone' was moved aside to make way for the new divine messianic being—and became Cyborg.

32 *Cyborg* adds to the contemporary fervor over superheroes. Anything relating to superheroes is considered big money these days, and Cyborg joins the cast of heroes satiating the public's superhuman appetite. Indeed, "From *Ant-Man* taking home the number one box office slot to the recent destruction of Marvel Comics' multiverse, millions of people are watching, reading, downloading and subscribing to anything related to comic books," and it all points to profound racial, gender, and human instabilities present in contemporary culture, for which the superhero world serves as a testing ground (Clark n.p.). Victor Stone, Cyborg, raises fundamental questions about the racialized connotations of humanity, gendered implications of male transhumans, the monstrosity of (trans)humanity, and the implicit divinity and futurity of cybernetic superheroes. With the cultural obsession with superheroes, then, these questions make an indelible impact on readers and viewers because, as exaggerated but nonetheless images of us all, superheroes and what they do, stand for, and look like say much more about us than we often think.

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