

Racializing Discourses in Comic Books:  
An examination of Marvel Comics *The Punisher* (2014)

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## Abstract

This study examines *The Punisher* (2014), Issues 1 through 12. I ask what are the ways that hegemonic racialized representations are presented to readers of the comic? And how are the themes of crime and national identity represented in a way that reinforces racialized views? In my examination of the comic I have come across a number of themes. What I focus on are the ways that the comic book contributes to a racialized discourse through looking at how the characters are represented by the clothing they wear, the languages they speak, and the spaces they occupy. I also look at how war references are used when talked about marking racialized characters as foreign invaders and non-racialized characters as sentinels of justice. Continuing the discussion on the racialization of crime I contrast the stated motivations for committing crime for racialized and non-racialized characters. I discovered that overall, through my analysis *The Punisher* (2014) stands out as a popculture site of racialized discourse

Keywords: Racialization, Comic Books, Crime, Discourse, Nationality, The Punisher.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

I have always been aware of comic books, at least as long as I can remember. Who could forget the techno colour reruns of the 1960's "Spider Man" swinging across the television screen, or "The Marvel Super Heroes" television show. When I was really young I didn't collect comic books. It was not until 1992 (when I was 15) that I first saw the red, die cut, wrap around cover featuring the art of John Romita Jr. The image was unlike anything I had seen before. The bright red background contrasting the black clothing of the figure with the die cut giving me a peak at what lay beyond the cover. The character, firing two automatic weapons, seemed larger than life. I wanted to know more; who was the angry man with a gun in each hand? Who was he shooting at? *The Punisher Warzone* (1992) was the first comic I purchased.

I soon after established an account at my local comic book store to set aside new issues for me so I wouldn't miss a single monthly instalment. That Christmas I told my mother that I wanted the "Comic Book Collectors Beginner Set" from the Sears wish book. I still have those comics today. Comics introduced me to a new world of heroes, with tales and stories I never imagined. I have been reading and collecting comics since this time with few and only brief breaks, due to relocation. Today, I make a weekly pilgrimage to my local comic book shop, where I know the clerks by name, and they in turn know mine. We swap tales of our weekly adventures and recommend comics to each other. Comics for me have become more than just reading material, but a ritual which involves social interaction. It is through these interactions that I can clearly see that two readings of the same comic book do not necessarily lead to the same conclusions by the readers.

The immersive wonder and mystery from reading comics is still present today, but now when I read comics I see much more. What has lead me to this project is recognizing that comic books are another way the media is able to continue to perpetuate hegemonic representations of social inequity, but comics are also a tool that can be used to challenge these same representation of social inequity. By examining *The Punisher* (2014), I ask what are the ways that hegemonic racialized representations are presented to readers of the comic? And how are the themes of crime and national identity represented in ways that reinforce racialized views?

My research includes a review of the relevant literature as well as an outline of Following the literature review is a problem statement detailing racialization in comic books and how crime and national identity can be the vehicles for these representations. After the problem statement my theoretical approach is outlined, one that how comics are able to express racialized ideas while silencing other ways of knowing or thinking. I am using the work of Stuart Hall (1997; 2007) to understand how representation and discourse work in tandem to reinforce racialization in the media, including in comics. In addition, Miles' theories on racialization are covered to help ground my use and understanding of the concept of racialization. Afterwards, I offer a brief discussion on critical discourse analysis as the way I am tackling the analysis of *The Punisher* (2014). Using a critical approach to how discourse functions within *The Punisher* (2014), I demonstrate how representations work to perpetuate racialized discourse. This is followed by my research objectives and my analytical chapters on racialization through dress, language, and geography; racialization through references of war; stated motivations for committing crime and how it contributes to racialization. In my examination of literature on comics I have come across a number of themes. The themes I have identified are representations of crime, national identity, racialization, and pedagogy but, due to the scope of the project, I do not touch upon all the

themes identified through the literature review. I focus on are ways that comic books contributes to a racialized discourse

## **Literature Review**

### **What is a Comic?**

The debate about what constitutes a comic is based mainly around three points: Sequence (images appearing next to one another or in sequential order); Images (this appears to be a universally agreed upon point, comics must include images); Text (many argue that comics require text). McCloud (1994) includes the ideas of sequence and image, but excludes text from his definition of a comic, arguing that a comic does not require text to function as a comic.

Although, he does introduce the idea that juxtaposition is important in defining comics.

Juxtaposition is the placement of two or more images so that they can be viewed together. The idea of juxtaposition sets comics more firmly on its own as it shows how comics are different from other mediums that might include sequence, images, and text, such as film (McCloud, 1993). If we accept that juxtaposition is essential to comics than we are excluding single panel cartoons from realm of comics. Other authors (Jacobs, 2007; Norton, 2003) don't seem to agree with McCloud, and argue that text is an important element of a comic and continue to press the intersection of texts, images, and sequence. Mike Berninger et al. (2010) also use the aforementioned three-tiered approach to understand what makes a comic (texts, images, sequence). Sean Carleton (2013) uses the term "multilayered" to suggest an intersection of images and text, although he does not mention sequence in his definition. Carleton (2013) instead uses the term "visual representation," which could be a single image or multiple images. He also brings up the idea of "closure," also mentioned by McCloud, which is the practice of



mentally finishing an incomplete message. Closure is often linked to sequence in that the readers of comics take two or more static images and make a complete thought or idea from them (McCloud, 1994). Duffy and Clark (2008) adopt the term multimodal but also do not name sequence, instead they use a definition, such as the following, of “text, images, and panels.” A panel is a space in which an image is contained, thereby two or more panels juxtaposed creates sequence. Sequence, juxtaposition, and closure are some of the ways that readers can make their own critical interpretations of comics.

### **Comics as Educational Tools**

Comics make an excellent tool for teaching critical literacy. Jacobs (2007) argues that comics can aid in meaning making through linking words with images. Jacobs states, “If we think about comics as multimodal texts that involve multiple kinds of meaning making, we do not give up the benefits of word-based literacy instruction but strengthen it through the inclusion of visual and other literacies” (p. 21). Comics however have not been fully embraced as pedagogical tools; Vanderbeke (2010) outlines some of the critiques comics have faced:

comics have been predominantly regarded as a form of entertainment—and when utilized in the educational sector they have often been regarded as a kind of didactic deceit, a sugar coating for the bitter pill of learning. However, this traditional perspective has been increasingly challenged and comics have gradually gained acceptance and status. (p. 67)

Ultimately, he concludes that comics are finding a place within a educational setting. Advancing the scope of literacy, Duffy and Clark (2008) state that, “The idea of literacy now has to move from just being able to read and write to a model where we have to have the ability to navigate through multiple ways of presenting ideas” (p. 2). Other authors agree and think that comics can be a great tool for learning critical literacy and activist skills (Carleton, 2014; Stuller, 2012). For example, Carleton (2014) mentions “conscientization,” a term borrowed from Paulo Freire,

meaning an active process whereby people learn to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, as cited in

Carleton, 2014, p. 153). Carleton (2014) goes on to say,

As new generations grow up accustomed to encountering comics in libraries and classrooms, teaching, critiquing, and even producing comics can be another way for academics to help keep activist learning relevant and exciting. Academics can work with comics as tools for cultivating critical consciousness. Comics are certainly not perfect pedagogic resources, but they have liberatory potential. (p. 177)

Learning the skills to critically read and analyze comics people are equipped with the ability to examine other types of media and discourses that are problematic and contribute to forms of oppression.

Likewise, Littlefield (2008) challenges the media as a whole, but her arguments fit well into the discourse of comics as a tool for critical literacy and activism. Littlefield (2008) states that, “any social justice strategy that seeks to understand and respond to the current issues surrounding the media as a system of racialization has to first address methods of pedagogy” (p. 682). Additionally, Carleton (2013) notes the importance of recognizing alternative voices in comics, and how comics can be a tool for working with the alternative histories of racialized groups and not just a vehicle for the continued depiction of the racialized criminal.

### **Comics and the Criminal**

You cannot have good superhero battles if you do not have an enemy to fight. Whether that enemy is another super-powered hero who wishes to destroy or conquer the world, or a perpetrator of street crime, comics usually have a battle of good versus evil. For example, the battle between Batman and Joker, where Batman represents goodness and order and the Joker represents evil and chaos. The dichotomy between good and evil is one of the main points in Phillips and Strobl’s (2006) work on the study of the types of crime depicted in comic books.

They suggest that even in cases where the “hero” is a violent vigilante who kills “criminals” for a larger “justice” most comics are battles of good vs. evil (Phillips and Strobl, 2006). While terrorism and organized crime were represented as types of crime within their sampling of comic books, Phillips and Strobl (2006) state that the most prominent type of crime they surveyed was street level/violent crime, including drug use (p.314). While Phillips and Strobl (2006) did not include race and gender as part of their study many other authors do make the connection between race and crime in comic books.

Black men, Jeffrey Brown (1999) suggests, are often portrayed as criminal, violent, or deviant in some fashion within the media (McGrath, 2007; Pewewardy, 2002; and Shahdeen, 1994). McGrath (2007) mentions in an analysis of the character Arana from Marvels *Amazing Fantasy* (2004) comic, criminalizing a character can be as simple as representing stereotypical ways of dress that can identify a character with a particular group, thus perpetuating a racialized criminal stereotype. She demonstrates how some racial stereotypes are reinforced through the depictions of Arana as a tough streetwise kid, through her use of “streetslang” and her reliance on violence, even if it is for the greater good. Similarly, First Nations peoples, mentions Pewewardy (2002), are historically represented in comics as criminal, violent, and less intelligent. Likewise, Shahdeen (1994) mentions how comics have been used to represent Arab people negatively, often showing Arabs engaging in criminal activities or as terrorists. These types of depictions open up a reading of racialized as less than, or, un-American.

### **National Identity in Comics**

At first glance the battles of super-powered heroes often seem “just.” Of course, we may never argue against fighting off an alien invasion force, or to suppress an evil genius gorilla who wants to enslave humanity. By taking a deeper look into the story arcs of the comics in their sample

Phillips and Strobl (2006) reveal that the goal of most stories is to return society to an ideal status quo. By the same token, Jason Dittmer (2005; 2007), has a similar idea about the nature of stories in comic books. He recalls Gramsci's (1971) ideas about hegemony and how media, such as comic books, are a tool for "winning minds," and supporting American exceptionalism. Similarly, Rifas (2012) also shows how comics can be used to contribute to the hegemonic view of the Nation and its role globally as "liberators", through a historical analysis of *TinTin in the Congo*. By underpinning Belgium's goal of building imperial pride in its children and convincing them that the colonial effort was necessary, Rifas (2012) is able to show how within *TinTin in the Congo* the hegemonic understanding of Belgium, as represented by Tintin, is one of benevolence, civilization, and reason. In contrast, the Congo is represented as a place of need, tribalism, and superstition. Likewise, Wanzo (2009) and Zhou (2007) consider the historically negative treatment of racialized US citizens by the government and how nationalism manifests itself in different ways. In examining the historic treatment of African Americans, Wanzo (2009) explains how different types of nationalism exist for marginalized people, using the example of Isaiah Bradley, an African American character in the comic *Truth: Red White and Black*. While, Zhou (2007) looks at the historic treatment of Japanese Americans and national identity in the comic *Citizen 13660*. Despite living in a nation that sees them as the enemy during the Second World War, Zhou (2007) demonstrates, that Japanese Americans still had an American national identity.

On a topic related to the linkage of race and nationalism, Carleton (2013) critiques the false histories that Canadian nationalism is built upon. To accomplish his critique, Carleton (2013) examines three graphic novels that tell the tales of alternative histories of the exploitation and marginalization of racialized peoples. This is done through an examination of comics that

touch on the treatment of Chinese workers during Canada's gold rush; a firsthand account of an indigenous person's experience at a residential school; and racism and discrimination of indigenous peoples during Canada's gold rush. In a similar examination, Shannon (2010) looks at representations of immigrant populations in the US and the negative images used to portray them in early editorial comics and cartoons. In both examples we can see that national identity is most often represented by idealized forms of whiteness.

In regards to national identity, Dittmer (2007) suggests any enemy of the superhero, whether a super villain or a street criminal, is an enemy of the nation. Likewise, Shaheen (1994) shows that villains in comics are linked to anti-American sentiment through representations of Arabs as enemies of the US. Thus, we can see how racialized people can be constructed as villain and "un-American" through comic book representations.

### **Constructionism**

Littlefield (2008) touches on how the media enforces the socially constructed concept of race. She states that, "the media serve as a system of racialization in that they have historically been used to perpetuate the dominant culture's perspective and create a public forum that defines and shapes ideas concerning race and ethnicity" (p.677). Similarly, Royal (2007) agrees that comics are a rich tool for the analysis of cultural hegemony. When discussing comics, the idea of social constructionism plays a major part not only in what we see on the page and how we "read" it, but also how we see ourselves in relation to these messages. Thus, McCloud (1993) writes: "While most characters were designed simply, to assist in reader-identification, other characters were drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasizing their 'otherness' from the reader" (p. 44). Similarly, Creekmur (2004) and Wanzo (2009) examine the art styles used to create simple images that stand in opposition to the complex narrative of racism and eugenics in

the story of *Truth: Red, White, and Black*. Using the idea of constructionism, Rifas (2012) talks not just about how the artist and writer represent race in the comic that he examined, but how we have come to think that this representation becomes truth through an ideological discourse. Let

us turn to Foucault's discussion of how "truth" is fluid and how we construct our own realities:

Discourse constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining as acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it 'rules out', limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it (as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 44).

By using Foucault's definition of discourse we can see how when racialized people are consistently shown as "foreign invaders" or in some other way as "un-American," the hegemonic discourse of not belonging becomes the dominant discourse. It is only through challenging hegemony that counter discourses can break through.

The construction of the imagined racialized foreign Other is one way that creates American national identity through a discourse about what is and is not American (Dittmer, 2005; Pewewardy, 2002; Shahenn, 1994; Shannon, 2010; Zhou, 2007). Shannon (2010) highlights how immigrant groups and racialized people were characterized in such comics as, *Hogan's Alley*, *Moon Mullins* and *Polly and Her Pals*. Shahenn (1994) and Zhou (2007) demonstrate how comics are used to represent the "Arab", and Japanese peoples as the "dangerous Other." Pewewardy's (2002) argument involves the construction of particular tropes around the identities of First Nations peoples in North America. These complementary discourses all reinforce white nationalist US hegemony.

### **Problem statement**

Comic books are not a new medium, having been around for the better part of a century. Until relatively recently comic books have been an under examined part of the mediascape as a whole (Creekmur 2004; Dittmer, 2005; Phillips and Strobl, 2004). As well, comic books have, with one notable exception, gone unchecked in the cultural zeitgeist. The exception is the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* by Fredric Wertham in 1954, which ultimately led to a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing into juvenile delinquency, with the special focus on comic books. As a response to the scrutiny, the comics industry adopted a self-regulating policy of censorship overseen by a regulating body called the Comic Code Authority. Yet problematic racialized representations can be seen in comics published from the time the Comic Code came into effect up until the present day. While the media has long been identified as a site of racialization (Hall 1997; Littlefield, 2008), comics unlike other media such as movies, television, novels, newspapers, and radio have been primarily unregulated or self-regulated. The problematic images that continued to make their way to print are a testament to how without counter narratives or critical analysis the privileged position of the creators is not challenged and racialized discourses continue to occupy dominate positions. A review of the literature reveals that some authors are beginning to tackle the subject of racialization in comic books (Brown, 1999; Dittmer, 2005 and 2007; Pewewardy, 2002; Singer, 2002; Wanzo, 2009), but few scholars are examining the interconnected discourses of national identity and racialization. Similarly, while some scholars see comic books as a tool for critical pedagogy (Carleton, 2013; Carleton, 2014; Jacobs, 2007), they do not explicitly analyze discourses of racialization or national identity in comics. Most notably, because many of the authors that focus on comic books as a tool for critical literacy are not looking at mainstream superhero comics, but are rather examining *Archie*

or underground comics, racialization takes a back seat to other considerations. Thus, in this study I demonstrate how *The Punisher* (2014) racializes crime and national identity using the hegemonic discourses about Latin America and Latin Americans.

### **Theory**

The concept of representation is useful in any analysis of comics. Yet, much of the theory on representation has come from works not directly related to comics, but to “texts” more generally. Stuart Hall (1997) lays out how representation is a process by which we transmit and interrupt meaning through language. Using Hall’s (1997) definition of the discursive approach which he states is:

the effects and consequences of representation – its ‘politics’. It examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied (p. 6).

By focusing on a discursive approach to representation I can communicate how representation works in comics by conducting a discourse analysis on the ways that crime and national identity are racialized. Addressing discourses on crime and nationalism I demonstrate how what can be said about crime and national identity within the pages of *The Punisher* (2014) are governed by racialized discourses. Looking back at what Foucault says about discourse we can see the way the comic depicts racialized people constructs our knowledge about them. When discussing racialization I first look to Miles (1989) and his sociological work on racism and racialization. Miles’ definition is based on how he sees racialization as “a dialectical process of signification. Ascribing a real or alleged biological characteristic with meaning to define the Other” (p. 75). However, I do not agree with Miles (1989) assertion that “race” is a concept to be discarded and placed in “the dustbin.” The lived experiences of people who have been racialized cannot simple



be discarded as easily as a concept. Also, the discarding of the concept of “race” does not erase the structural barriers that exist in society, since racialization is constructed from a position of power and privilege. As Barot and Bird (2001) argue, “the racialization of the world is something coming out of Europe which has served to negate other cultures” (p. 611).

Thus, when we present/represent someone who has been racialized in a consistent manner it can seem “natural” in the sense that it aligns with discourses that we, as members of the dominant white groups, have created about racialized Others. Therefore, discourse about racialized people is limited by hegemonic understandings about racialized people.

Anderson (1991) states, the category of race and the process of racialization is a “system of knowledge... not constitutive in themselves but rather are constituted in and through human agency, historical circumstances, and territorial arrangement” (p. 23). Thus, in this study I take a constructionist approach to race, which Anderson (1991) reiterates is “one that situates the race-definition process in history, politics, and space” (p. 23). By a social constructionist approach I mean that things do not have their own fully-formed meanings prior to being defined. As Hall (1997) explains,

representation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things; thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or ‘constitutive’ process, as important as the economic or material base in shaping social subjects and historical events – not merely a reflection of the world after the event (p. 5).

Such a discursive approach allows me to examine the ways in which *The Punisher* (2014) uses hegemonic knowledge to draw geographical and moral boundaries that divide racialized people and non-racialized people.

## Methodology

My research is a qualitative case study of how racialization operates in Marvel Comics *The Punisher* (2014) Issues 1 through 12. By using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) for my research I am “interested in analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak, 1995, p. 204). I examine the representations of crime and national identity as a focus of racialization. I look specifically at the dress, languages, and space occupied by characters, as well as instances where war references are used to discuss racialized crime. Additionally, I contrast racialized and non-racialized character’s stated motivations for committing crime. I have chosen to use a spreadsheet set up in a grid to organize the themes. Given the serialized nature of the content a grid formation allows me to examine examples of the themes as they appear in each Issue of the comic. I then used a second spreadsheet for a more in-depth description and examination of themes that are most prominent throughout the comics. I then used the second spreadsheet to synthesise the themes and create a narrative of how the themes are played out during the course of the comic.

I have chosen a CDA of comics because the medium, through its intersection of images and sequence, facilitates closure or “the act of mentally completing that which is incomplete” (McCloud, 1994, p.14). For example, in *The Punisher* (2014) Issue 8, on the last page two panels are juxtaposed: the first panel has a team of characters in green military fatigues with rifles standing outside a light brown brick structure. The second panel features a racialized person with the lower half of their face covered in a white scarf, (dressed in robes and wearing a head wrap) falling to the ground. In the same panel a figure clad in green military fatigues is holding a raised rifle. We, as readers, can come to the conclusion that one character has shot the other, despite it

being two still images that without our performance of closure are not necessarily related. Readers can perform closure in other ways as well; we can read it as a United States soldier shooting a “terrorist.” The performance of closure is a process informed by my place within the socioeconomic stratum and hegemonic discourses that are prevalent in the dominant media. Thus, a CDA allows me to illustrate how the process of meaning making works through the medium of comic books. To support my analysis, literature focused on crime, nationalism, and race operate both within and outside of comics are used to provide a back drop for what the current hegemonic discourse is around these themes.

I selected *The Punisher* (2014) because it is a current release debuting at number 18 for monthly sales in February 2014, it has stayed mostly within the top 100 selling monthly comics over the course of the 10 months since its release (Comic Book, 2014; The Beat, 2014). The Punisher, as a character, has spawned three full length movies titled; *The Punisher*, *The Punisher*, and *The Punisher: War Zone*, a number of short films, and in other Marvel animated franchises and video games. I have also selected *The Punisher* (2014) because of my familiarity with it; I have been reading *The Punisher* since about 1992 and have explored earlier incarnations of the characters over the years. My insight into past representations aid in my reading of current representations.

Even though I am not using human participants for my research, ethical issues do arise. The need to be mindful not to perform critical interpretations that can ultimately be harmful to the populations that have been represented is paramount. For that reason I do not comment on the impacts, if any, of these representations on racialized populations. Since comics and *The Punisher* have been a large part of my life there is also a risk that my analysis can be influenced by feelings of empathy and nostalgia. I need to remain vigilant and reflexive in my conclusions.

## **Research objectives**

The reasons for tackling the issues of racialization through crime and national identity in *The Punisher* (2014) are: a) To suggest that in comics racialization is not enforced by a dominant governing body but by each person that reads and recognizes racial cues; b) To demonstrate that comics, an understudied medium, can be used as a tool to aid in the identification of racialization through a process of critical literacy; c) To recognize within myself problematic world views and myths of racialized discourse and make active growth in becoming a more reflexive person.

## **Chapter Outlines**

The first analytical chapter focuses on how characters are represented through appearance, language, and spatial associations. Looking at appearance entails an examination of clothing, styles, and colours, and how they are linked to discourses of racialization and crime. Similarly, with language I demonstrate how the use of Spanish is an indicator of how characters are linked to racial and criminal discourses. I do this by explaining how the Spanish is used in instances where characters are committing crimes or actively working against *The Punisher*. Through an examination of the representation of space I suggest that the depictions of Mexico and Central America contrast with images of Los Angeles. The result is to solidify traits in the comic that are associated with Mexico and Central America e.g., (Wildness, Underdevelopment, and lack of civility) to the corresponding characters. The characters then in turn carry these traits with them as part of a racial discourse.

The second analytical chapter looks at how including the concept of war in a discourse of crime changes the way we think about crime and criminals. I argue that war references increase the level of acceptable violence used in confronting crime, enforces national boundaries, and

supports nationalistic rhetoric. The goal in war is to defeat your opponent, often by killing them, when this is married to a discourse of crime it replaces the ideas of due process and rehabilitation. Thus, changing the discourse in such a way that violence appears to be the best response to crime. War often conjures images of external conflict which, when transported to crime, reaffirms that characters who have been racialized are viewed as foreign criminals cementing a race/crime link. I also suggest that using war within a discourse of race and crime merges the concepts in a way that assigns crime as a racialized trait. This falsely builds a dichotomous relationship between the racialized foreign criminal and the non-racialized citizen.

In the final analytical chapter I contrast racialized and non-racialized character's stated motivations for committing crime. Racialized characters are presented as committing crime for money, power, and ruthlessness. I demonstrate that these are represented as their natural traits, which further support the connection between race and crime. In contrast, I explain how non-racialized characters are motivated to commit crimes for the reasons of fighting crime/patriotism, protecting others, and conservative ideas about crime. These place non-racialized characters outside of a discourse of crime because they are depicted as acting in the best interest of others and the State. Also, by actively working against racialized criminals non-racialized characters appear to be just in their actions.

## Chapter 2: Racialization through Dress, Language and Geography

This chapter looks at the ways Latino characters are represented in *The Punisher* (2014) through dress, language, and geography and how these are parts of a racialized discourse. Singer (2002) states that “Comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances, and this reductionism is especially prevalent in superhero comics, whose characters are wholly externalized into their heroic costumes and aliases” (p. 107). I show how racialization is maintained and supported in the comic through an examination of how some styles of dress are linked to race. With language, for example, Spanish is shown to be a cue to readers letting them know who is oppositional to the main characters; this is accomplished through the language itself but also how and when it is used. The work of Goldberg (1993) and Anderson (1991) allows us to get an understanding of how geography is discursively constructed. Applying this to the comic book we see how Mexico and parts of South America are represented in contrast to parts of Los Angeles County; and it also manifests how the meaning of space change with who occupies it. The ways that Latino characters are racialized in *The Punisher* (2014) is complex, but share a single thread, in that they let the reader know who is being marked as the enemy.

### Dress

The process of racialization through dress is present in the media and in many pop and subcultures. Daniels (2002) shows how clothing and race are combined when talking about “Zoot-suits,” when he states: “the outfit’s connections with race relations, jazz music and dance, slang, and ideology permit understanding of the politics and social significance of what is often seen as trivial in itself – popular culture and its attendant styles” (p. 99). Zoot-suits are a style of

dress that was associated with young African-American and Latino men in the 1940's; it had no gang linkage but made them the target of racial violence. Unfortunately for many racialized people clothing can associate them with crime Struyk (2006). In *The Punisher* (2014) Latino characters are shown dressed in hoodies, bandanas (primarily red), caps often facing backwards, and button up shirts with only the top button fastened. Some of these can



Figure 2.1

be seen in Figure 2.1 from Issue 3 page 19. In the first panel two characters are wearing red, while a third character enters from off scene in the second panel wearing a red shirt. We have a theme of red which can be read as a not subtle suggestion that the characters belonging to a gang or are involved in gang activities. Depicting Latino characters dressed in this way contributes to a racialized discourse by linking gangs and violence to race.



Figure 2.2

We see again how dress is used to racialize in Figure 2.2 from Issue 5 page 12, when Mr. Del Sol, the character in the red hoodie, is being escorted by unnamed characters as they are entering a building. The two unnamed characters are wearing button up shirts with only the top buttons fastened, white undershirts, and baggy shorts. Showing Latino characters with only the top shirt button fastened is another way to racialize the characters as linked with gang culture. This can be seen in other forms of popculture like the movie *Stand and Deliver* (1988), where Latino characters with a gang affiliation were shown dressed in this manner.

In another sequence, on the cover of Issue 12, we see The Punisher on top of a theatre marquee; with three masked characters in the foreground. The masks are again red bandanas. The image shows an explosion behind them. The characters are not looking in the direction of the explosion, which suggests that they are the ones responsible for the mayhem. The red bandanas lead the reader to think that the characters in the foreground are part of the Dos Sol



cartel because red has been present on most of the Dos Sol cartel characters we have seen throughout the story. If we look at scenes like the ones described above through a discursive lens, we can clearly see the making of a discursive formations, as defined by Hall (1997):

these *discursive formations*, as they are known, define what is and is not appropriate in our formation of, and our practices in relation to, a particular subject or site of social activity; what knowledge is considered useful, relevant and ‘true’ in that context; and what sorts of persons or ‘subjects’ embody its characteristics (p. 6 emphasis in original).

I am suggesting that the characters contribute to a discursive formation because through them the reader is provided with a way of thinking and talking about Latinos. Thus, when the vast majority of Latino characters are represented as criminals, race and criminality become synonymous thereby contributing to a formation of racialized knowledge. It is important to recognize that the social bodies of the characters are the body that Foucault (1977a) is referring to below:

the body that is *produced* within discourse, according to the different discursive formations – [is] a sort of surface on which different regimes of power/knowledge write their meanings and effects. It [discourse] thinks of the body as ‘totally imprinted by history and the processes of history’s deconstruction of the body’. (p. 63)

One of the reoccurring problems in *The Punisher* (2014) is how the comic depict racialized characters as criminals. Phillips and Strobl (2006) talk about “nostalgia for a desired social order,” which would include a strong sense of nationalism, low crime rates, and just punishment; “In this imagined social order, individuals who threaten the peace are identified as the ‘Other’ and swiftly neutralized” (p. 308). Through depicting racialized characters as criminals, we can see that the “criminal” label becomes part of a racialized discourse.



unseen enemies. Likewise, in the third panel, we see The Punisher in “uniform” firing a weapon off panel.

As mentioned, white characters are mostly shown wearing uniforms and wielding authority. Tuggs, for example, the character that provides The Punisher with weapons and armour is a military officer often shown in uniform. Police officer Samantha Stone is shown mostly in a police officer’s uniform and acting as an agent of the state against characters who seek to disrupt the status quo. The few instances where she is not shown in uniform are the scenes where she is questioning the effectiveness of the justice system, or actively engaging in criminal activity. Of course, we have our “hero” The Punisher, Frank Castle, who wears a uniform of sorts, as much as any “superhero” wears a uniform. As the namesake of the comic book he is empowered with a certain amount of legitimacy to engage in violence against characters that are identified as villains.

Dress is a way that characters are racialized in the comic book. Having characters speaking a different language performs a similar task because it is also a discursive tool that is used to racialize. This is examined in the next section where I look at how English and Spanish are juxtaposed and how that creates meaning. It is important to understand all the ways that racialization can occur in the comic book and how these representations can make their way into our cultural discourses.

## **Language**

Hall (1997) explains that language is how we share meaning through text, images, etc., and is able to represent ideas and feelings and in turn produce or reinforce shared cultural meanings. By showing how language a way to create meaning about “races” it is important to ask: Who is

privileged by the choice of language? Part of perpetuating a dominant culture's perspective is using language as a way to dominate. We have an example of a similar type of dominance in Canadian history in residential schools, which were able to force the assimilation of indigenous peoples in part through speaking English. A child not speaking English was seen as breaking the rules and punished. In the case of *The Punisher* (2014), English is the privileged language though Spanish is peppered throughout the dialogue at key points in order to show characters using Spanish at times where they are committing crimes or actively opposing The Punisher. By reminding the reader that characters who use Spanish words are racialized the creators are able to maintain the privileged position of English.



Figure 2.4

We see racialization through language in Figure 2.4 from Issue 1 page 20, when Hector, not pictured, is telling The Punisher how he cannot succeed in attacking the Del Sol facility because of a number of security measures. Having Hector use the Spanish slang word "ese", which means bud or man, acts as a reminder that Hector is a Spanish-speaker from Mexico. The same sequence of panels does not show Hector using any other Spanish words; the purpose is to illustrate his opposition to The Punisher. Since The Punisher is a representation of Authority, using Spanish this way links race and crime.





Figure 2.5

We again see Spanish used to racialize in Figure 2.5 from Issue 7 page 16. The Punisher, who has been captured by yet another Latino drug lord, is making an escape. As he slips into a room containing the guards, the first one is caught by surprise and The Punisher assaults him from behind the guard exclaims "Ay Dios Mio" [Oh my God]. The guard characters in previous panels had only been shown speaking English, marking another example of Spanish being used as a way to let the reader know who The Punisher's enemies are. Hill (2004) makes note of similar racializing events in her analysis of one of the final scenes in the film *Terminator 2*:

#### *Judgment Day:*

As young Connor [destroys] the evil artifact..., he says 'Adios.' Then we realize that the Good Terminator, whom the humans have come to love and admire, must also destroy himself – his futuristic metal body is as dangerous as those of his evil opponent's. Sarah must lower him into the steel. As he descends, he looks one last time at his human friends and says, 'Goodbye.' The contrast could not be more clear: 'Adios' for evil, 'Goodbye' for good (p. 233).

The use of the Spanish language cues the reader/watcher into knowing which characters are the criminals. It is important for our purposes not to get locked into the focus on a specific language. It could be any language, like mentioned previously Japanese was used in comics during World War II to remind readers that the Japanese were enemies of the United States. I focus on a specific discourse whereby Spanish is used as an identifier of the enemy. What it tells us is that the characters who are associated with a racialized group or speaking a different language also come with a set of criminalizing traits. Unfortunately discourses like the ones created about Spanish speakers exist as a type of knowledge. Hall (1997) states that “Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to make itself true” (p. 49). In other words, the reproduction of racialized discourses in the comic, by its creators and readers, recreates this knowledge enforcing its own “truth.” What is interesting for us looking at comic books is that, “the discourse also produces a *place for the subject* (i.e. the reader or viewer, who is also ‘subjected to’ discourse) from which its particular knowledge and meaning most makes sense” (Hall, 1997, p. 56 emphasis in original).” I mentioned the reader is an authority in that, as outlined earlier, they take a series of still images and words and create meaning from them, placing them both as viewer and creator of meaning. This is important because it shows how the reader absorbs racialized knowledge and recreates it on the bodies of racialized characters.

Thus, as Littlefield (2008) states: “the media serve as a system of racialization in that they have historically been used to perpetuate the dominant culture’s perspective and create a public forum that defines and shapes ideas concerning race and ethnicity” (p.667). Ideas concerning “race and ethnicity” do not stop at clothing and language, but includes ideas about

where people are from or where they belong. People who do not fit into the “dominant cultures perspective” are seen as outsiders, not just culturally but also geographically.

## **Geography**

By looking at how space is represented in *The Punisher* (2014) we can see how it is used both as a way to racialize characters that are depicted as being non-American ideologically and geographically, as well as creating a space where Americans and American nationalism are placed morally above characters that are shown as being from outside the United States. I agree with Dittmer (2007) when he states, “instead of trying to simply link concepts such as nationalism and media studies, we could realize that they are in many ways one and the same” (p. 265). When looking at comics or media with a critical eye we can see how nationalist and racialized discourses are linked and take place.

Within *The Punisher* (2014) there exists a contrast in the ways that different national spaces are represented. Specifically, Mexico and Costa Rica are represented differently than parts of the United States, with particular emphasis on Los Angeles and Los Angeles County. I also look at the way space is represented within the United States, and how the meaning of space is changed by who occupies it. Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) argues, “the production of space [is] a set of interconnected processes: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. While unified, this triad nevertheless incorporates the arenas of the material, the imaginary, and the artistic” (cited in Dittmer, 2007, p.255). We can see that *The Punisher* (2014) contributes to a racialized discourse by creating an “us versus them” feel when dealing with any character from outside the United States.

If we look at Figure 2.6 which is the cover of Issue 1, it is dominated by a map of a section of Los Angeles County which is superimposed by a blackish green and white semitransparent image of The Punisher.

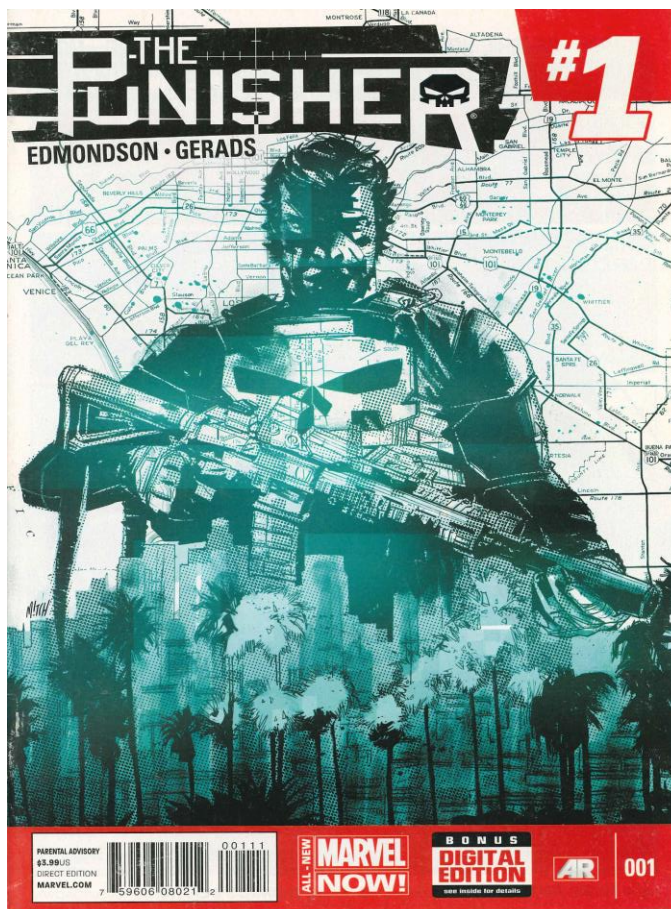


Figure 2.6

The map shows streets, highways, and cities, starting at Santa Monica in the North West running east to Whittier. The Northern and Southern parts of the map are covered by images of either the comic logo at the top, or an image of the body of The Punisher near the bottom. Below the image of The Punisher we see silhouettes of skyscrapers and other tall office or apartment buildings, which in turn have silhouettes of what appear to be a lush jungle in front of them. What I take away from the image is that The Punisher, being imposed over the map, is standing guard over L.A. County and guarding it from an incursion from south of the border as represented by the



reflection of lush jungle trees. The images combined are representational of the way that space is identified in Mexico and the United States, where the images cue the reader that the United States is developed and "civilized" based on the structure and development we see on the map. The images contrast Mexico as underdeveloped and "wild", being contained, suffocated, surrounded by a jungle, an ideal place for hiding illegal or illicit activities.

In the same Issue a few pages into the comic, The Punisher travels to Mexico's "La Trovara River" to intercept drug traffickers. The comic shows the La Trovara River as running through dense untamed jungle, large crocodiles are swimming and lounging in the water, which I feel hints at a wild, untamed, dangerous, place. Not only is Mexico represented as being relatively untouched by man, where nature is free to take over, and that the "wildness" is juxtaposed with crime. The criminals are free to engage in illegal activities far from the reach of law (law read as a civilizing practice).

The images of Mexico contrast well with the images of the scenes in Los Angeles. For example, in Figure 2.7 from Issue 1 page 10, in downtown Los Angeles we find The Punisher sitting in a diner.



Figure 2.7

We are then introduced to two other characters, Lou, the diner cook and possible owner, and police officer Sam Stone. Officer Stone and The Punisher are sitting at the counter while Lou is behind the counter preparing food; the three are engaged in some banter and small talk. The scene that introduces two new characters also shows the mundane nature of life in a US city and the "safety" one feels in a "society of law." The diner setting is shown in contrast to the way that Mexico is shown as "wild" and lawless (or law of the jungle).



Figure 2.8

The contrasting images do not stop with Issue 1, as seen in Figure 2.8 from Issue 2 page 2, in which The Punisher is in Mexico. We are met with an image of endless desert, what looks like a "drone" is flying by, performing some kind of reconnaissance (preventing drug smuggling, Border security?). The desert is another reference to the wild, uninhabitable nature of Mexico.



Figure 2.9

We again see in Figure 2.9 from Issue 2 page 3, that The Punisher is walking through a small isolated town in Mexico where buildings look "run down" or in "disrepair." We also see exposed brick and damage to the exterior walls. The ground is littered with dead bodies. The oranges that have been spilled onto the ground and a silver canister are the only things that are not cast in a pink (ground) or pale green (sky) colour. The colours I take to show the presence of an oppressive and radiant sun that bakes the land and distorts vision. The silver canister, which is the only thing The Punisher seems to be interested in, appears to be some kind of delivery device for whatever killed everyone in town.





Figure 2.10

In Figure 2.10 from Issue 3 page 2, we shift back to the United States, on the Pacific Coast Highway, running through Los Angeles. Unlike many of the roadways we have seen in Mexico, the roads in the United States appear paved and maintained. The highway is filled with cars, and the commuters all appear to be non-racialized. We see a woman and her son in one car; he is playing a game on some handheld gaming device.





Figure 2.11

In another car on the same section of highway, as seen in Figure 2.11 from Issue 3 page 4, a man appears to be in a state of shock at the violence erupting around him. He is wide eyed and his mouth is open in frozen protest. Violence is unknown to these people who exist in the safety of the United States. When violence is brought to bear against them they respond with fear and shock because they live in a country that is protected by the rule of law.



Figure 2.12

As we read our way through the comics, we see in Figure 2.12 from Issue 3 page 12, the Dos Sol cartel in one of their locations in a rundown building, which appears to be an old, possibly abandoned, gymnasium. The basketball hoop and backboard are still present but the walls seem to be decayed and it looks as if the paint is peeling. Despite being within the United States the image shows degradation and dilapidation, but the space is occupied by racialized characters and thus takes on particular meaning. When Royal (2007) talks about the power of the image he suggests that, “the figures that make up the comics rub up against reality in ways that words cannot, revealing the various assumptions, predispositions, and prejudices that the author-illustrators may hold” (p. 7). We can see this happening in *The Punisher* (2014) through the continued linkage of race and crime. Although, I argue that assumptions, predispositions, and prejudices are a product of a more hegemonic discourse and not solely the work of the authors. To understand the messages that are being passed between creator and reader, the readers must understand the codes used in the comics to depict events. Hall (1995) explains,

Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group. To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways (p. 2).

By recognizing Latino characters as racialized “Others”, it is easy for the comic to suggest that they do not belong to an overarching American identity. This places Latino characters not only outside of America spatially, but also ideologically. The examples provided here in are just some of the ways that characters in *The Punisher* (2014) have been racialized. The larger implications of racialization are seen both in the hegemonic narrative we are presented within the comic book, and how easy it is for a reader like myself to understand the messages that the writers are trying to get across, because of my exposure to and position in North American white culture.

### Chapter 3: Racialization Through References to War

During my reading of *The Punisher* (2014) I discovered something I had not expected but nonetheless is relevant to my discussion of the ways the comic book contributes to a racialized discourse. What I found was that the comic book consistently made references to how preventing crime or engaging with criminalized characters was war-like. I talk about three of the ways I see references to war influencing racialization: increasing the level of acceptable violence necessary to prevent crime, enforcement of national boundaries, and a nationalistic discourse on belonging. When references to war are used to discuss a criminalized character from a racialized group it creates a space where the types of actions that are acceptable when interacting with them increase in violence. In other words, if we are using terms of war/conflict to describe the actions of “criminals”, particularly racialized “criminals” authorities are able to intervene with more force, give longer sentences, or forgo trials altogether. If a race/crime discourse is linked with a discourse of war what we are left with is an incomplete understanding of the underlying reasons for crime. As McCann (2014), when talking about the Trayvon Martin case states, “the enthymemes of a ‘war on crime’ discourse that codes Black violence as intrinsically vicious, illegal, and at odds with the aims of civil society” (p. 481). Therefore, having *The Punisher* identify and engage with racialized characters as criminals within a dialogue of war perpetuates discourses that supports the use of extreme force and unchecked violence when engaging with racialized people.

Another aspect of using war references that applies to my examination of *The Punisher* (2014) is the enforcement of national boundaries and cultural/ideological divisions that colours how racialized characters are viewed. Calling forth the Spectre of war leads to a discussion of “us vs. them,” which is already overtly present in the superhero genre of comic books. Using the

nationalistic hero Captain America as an example, Dittmer (2007) argues that he is “not just a fictional political actor in a fictional home and abroad, but instead the creation of a political actor/corporation that is actively (re)constructing the oppositional spaces of home and abroad” (p. 256). I see *The Punisher* in the same light, in the sense that *The Punisher* produces racialization by the ways he interacts with characters from outside the United States and/or perceived to be from outside of the United States. The mention of war also calls forth a discourse of nationalism and a racialized foreign Other.

When we look at the types of discourse that take place during war, or under the label of war we can look to the “war on terror,” as Gotanda (2011) does:

The racial attribution of foreignness has included multiple dimensions. Specifically at issue in the racialization of Islam is the Muslim terrorist. The Muslim terrorist is the latest incarnation of the Asian traitor, spy, and saboteur. Note that this incarnation of permanent foreignness operates to support U.S. foreign policy (p. 190).

We see a similar permanent foreignness present in the body of *The Punisher* (2014) comic in regard to Latino characters and how they are presented to the reader as being the racialized foreign Other engaged in actions that appear counter to an idealized American ideology.

### **Increased Level of Acceptable Violence**

We see *The Punisher* justifying extreme violence as a means to an end when confronting the Dos Sol drug cartel. For example Figure 3.1 from Issue 2 page 14, *The Punisher* has just intervened in a conflict between police officers and Dos Sol drug cartel characters. The police officers have been incapacitated by *The Punisher* for their own safety as he moves in to intercept a weapon the Dos Soles are moving. The Dos Sol characters flee with the weapon and *The Punisher* gives chase. *The Punisher* justifies the violence he uses by calling what he does “war”: “The cops mean well but this is war, and someone else said the only crime in war is to lose.”





Figure 3.1

This suggests that the ends justify the means and that no amount of violence is too much in order to win his "war."



Figure 3.2

We see another example in Figure 3.2 from Issue 11 page 25, where The Punisher is talking to a new character Rachel Cole-Alves. Rachel had her wedding day ended by a rain of bullets that killed the wedding guests and her husband, so we can see the similarities between her and The Punisher in that they both had their families murdered by “criminals.” Both Rachel and The Punisher are ex-military and are discussing how to take down the Dos Sol gang. They decide to pursue tactics said to be the same as those used to take down “terrorist cells.” The Punisher’s reference to war, under the banner of the “war on terror,” seems to shift the discourse away from a discourse on crime and punishment since we no longer talk about due process, fair trials, or reform. Instead we are talking about the elimination of the “terrorist.” We can see that in *The Punisher* (2014), the extreme response is directed at racialized characters, particularly when the word “terrorism” is tossed around so freely. Thus, when seen through the lens of *The Punisher* (2014) we are punishing Latinos, as well as others who have been racialized, by overlapping discourses of race with crime, and not recognizing that this linkage is one of many barriers

created for racialized populations in society. Green, Staerkle, and Sears (2006) state, “symbolic racism is one of the reasons why America supports a more punitive justice system over a preventative one” (p. 447). Symbolic racism is one way to explain how Latinos have been represented and illustrates how the creators of *The Punisher* (2014) have created a relied upon racialized discourse.

### **Enforcement of National Boundaries**

In the pages of *The Punisher* (2014), we can also see how war metaphors enforce national boundaries through the creation of the foreign “Other.” The characters that have been racialized as well as criminalized are the same characters that have been represented as being from, or perceived to be from, Mexico, or Costa Rica. Depicting racialized characters engaged in acts of crime, such as drug smuggling, murder, and torture for self-interest demonstrate how they act the state and its citizens, further marking the characters as foreign “Others.” For example in Figure 3.3 from Issue 3 page 18, The Punisher discovers the location of the Dos Sol drug preparation facility located in an old gymnasium. He makes his way to the roof of the gymnasium and peers down at the Dos Sol cartel members through a skylight in the ceiling.





Figure 3.3

The Punisher describes the Dos Soles as a "foreign army in L.A.'s very backyard", literally identifying the Mexican cartel members as "foreign, based on their perceived country of origin. By doing so he is creating a distinct division between other Americans, himself and this group of racialized characters. Without knowing their national identity he is marking them as foreign based on his perception of their appearance (e.g. dress, language) and actions (criminal activity, etc.).



Figure 3.4

Another example of war discourse used in discussions about racialized crime is shown in Figure 3.4 from Issue 4 page 20. Tuggs, in a conversation with The Punisher, makes reference to the actions of the Dos Sol cartel as a "full scale strike on L.A." This statement suggests that the Dos Sol cartel and all of its members are external combatants. The creators are putting across a message that people from Mexico are invaders seeking to destroy America or the "American way of life." Dittmer (2005) touches on the construction of the global "Other" in stating that, "Captain America serves as a territorial symbol that participates in the construction of difference between one region (the United States) and other regions (the rest of the world)" (p.631). Similar to Captain America, The Punisher serves as a vehicle in moving forward ideas that cast racialized characters as foreign. Dittmer (2005) goes on to say,

these pages [talking about *Captain America* #1] set up a clear dichotomy of insiders and outsiders, of innocent and unsuspecting domestic airline travelers, and of distant, foreign intruders. This portrayal is consistent with the idea of American exceptionalism, whereby American innocence is protected by its isolation from the rest of the world" (p.637).

In the same way, The Punisher is protecting the innocent Americans. In Figure 3.5, from Issue 12 page 2, we see white characters are shown as victims of the Dos Sol plan to take over Los Angeles.



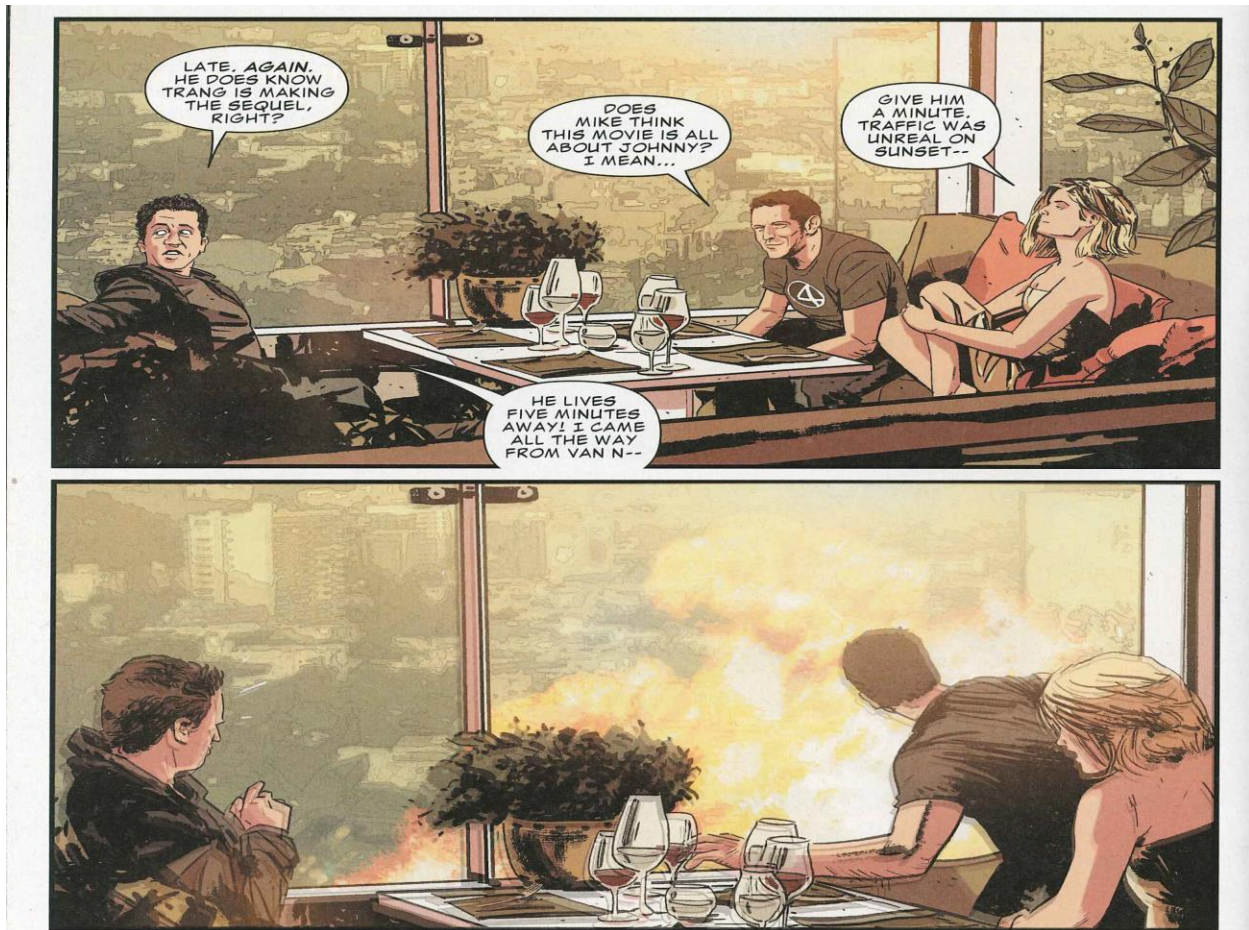


Figure 3.5

They are talking inside their apartment about such mundane things as how bad traffic is on Sunset Boulevard when an explosion goes off outside of their window, terrifying them. Again white characters are shown as innocent victims as in Figure 3.6 from Issue 12 page 4, where a young white woman screams in terror as an explosion rips through the side of a nearby building.



Figure 3.6

Through this we can see how the creation and enforcement of national boundaries is also the creation and enforcement of racialized boundaries because throughout the comic book white characters are shown as victims of racialized crime. Hence, we are seeing the United States as a peaceful white country that is under attack by foreign racialized “Others.”

### **Nationalist Rhetoric**

Aside from the fact that The Punisher is an ex-marine, *The Punisher* (2014) uses many symbols of war to align the character with the American military, which adds legitimacy to his actions and places him squarely on the side of America in any conflict. In turn, the characters that The Punisher is opposing appear as anti-American. Wanzo (2009) draws similar lines among Captain America, Superman, and nationalism when she writes about these heroes “as an average man who can become an idealized first citizen, identifying and vanquishing clear enemies to the state, and clad in red, white, and blue making explicit the nationalist trinity of state, soldier, and flag” (p. 339). An example of such an image is Figure 3.7 the cover of Issue 8. We see the image of a rifle leaning against a rucksack. Over the muzzle of the rifle sits a helmet with a logo on the back of a sword that crosses over 3 lightning bolts; above this logo is a patch of an American flag. On the side, the helmet reads "special forces." Draped over the magazine of the rifle are dog tags. In front of the rifle is a bullet proof vest with The Punisher logo on it and next to that sits a hood

also with The Punisher logo on it.



Figure 3.7

Each of these logos or items is connected to a set of ideas. Dog tags and the helmet, for example, suggest a soldier. The patch of a US flag is connected to the military symbols tells us a tale of an



American soldier. All of these images juxtaposed suggest continuity between the task of the US military and that of The Punisher. Similarly, in Figure 3.8 and 3.9 from Issue 12 pages 20-21, The Punisher is suiting up for battle.



Figure 3.8

"THE CRYE SIX12  
MODULAR  
BREACHING  
SHOTGUN..."



"A PAIR OF  
CASPIAN 1911S,  
MACHINED TO YOUR  
PREFERENCES..."

"...YEAH, I  
ALWAYS KEEP  
EXTRAS HANDY."

"ITC HANDS-  
FREE RIFLE  
HARNESS,  
FOR QUICK  
SWITCHING..."



"FLASHBANGS,  
T-BOMBS..."

Figure 3.9

In Figure 3.9 we see panels that present the gear The Punisher has acquired from Tuggs. The gear that is being shown, image by image, are military grade weapons and body armour which, as noted from the text, is standard fare for The Punisher. The link between The Punisher and the military, as suggested through images like the ones presented above, creates parallels between The Punisher's war on crime and military operations globally. The Punisher is coupled with

nationalistic goals and anyone he designates as an enemy is cast as non-American or anti-American. Dittmer makes a similar argument for characters that come into contact with Captain American. Dittmer (2007) writes,

mainstream superhero comic books, due to the tyranny of the serial and their inability to portray systemic revolution, function as representational spaces of legitimation in that they reinforce the prevailing assumptions of the international system to the detriment of the other, alternative, geographies (p. 255).

Thus, through confronting and ultimately defeating the Dos Sol drug cartel The Punisher is propping up an ideology that suggests America be “tough on crime” as a way to protect American values from outsiders. As well, Dittmer (2005) argues that “through the medium of their comic book [Captain America], these men help create structures of expectations that consequently influence the way readers view the world and locate their own place as Americans within it” (p. 627). Of course, it is important not to forget about the individual agency of the reader when talking about what does and does not function as an influence.

#### **Chapter 4: Stated Motivations for Committing Crime and how they Contribute to Racialization**

It is misleading and naive to say that only racialized characters in *The Punisher* (2014) are committing crimes. It would however be realistic to suggest that for the most part characters that have been criminalized are also the same characters that have been racialized. It is easy to see how racialization and criminalization go hand in hand in comic books; several scholars agree that comics and the media contribute to, and reinforce, the criminalization of racialized people (Brown, 1999; Littlefield, 2008; Pewewardy, 2002; Singer, 2002). One of the ways that *The Punisher* (2014) accomplishes this is through the characters stated motivations for engaging in criminal activity. Much like Phillips and Strobl (2006) explain, “examinations of crime and justice representations, then, become important for understanding the cultural raw material which interacts with and feeds into public attitudes and perspectives” (p. 307). In other words, depicting racialized characters as criminals continues a hegemonic discourse that racializes crime. By contrasting the stated motivations for crime by racialized characters, with the stated motivations for crime by non-racialized characters, I demonstrate how crime becomes linked with racialized discourses in the comic book.

#### **Motivations to Commit Crime for Racialized Characters**

In *The Punisher* (2014) racialized characters have three main stated motivations for committing crime: money, power and ruthlessness. These are depicted throughout by racialized characters shown to lack empathy for other characters. Media plays a huge role in how crime becomes racialized and *The Punisher* (2014) is no exception. As Leverentz (2012) notes, “News media highlight incidents of crime, particularly when it is violent and sensational... This media coverage shapes commonly understood narratives about crime, criminals, and urban places,



telling readers who criminals are and where crime occurs” (p. 348). Additionally, Phillips and Strobl (2006) reference Katz (1987) when stating that, “reading about crime serves as a ‘ritual moral exercise’ in which people can work out their own moral unease without having to engage in anything more than a passive consumption” (p. 307). Phillips and Strobl (2006) go on to suggest that if absorbing media on crime is a type of ‘ritual moral exercise’ than “[in] this phenomenological understanding, crime, media, and entertainment – including comics books – become spaces in public life where the meaning of crime and punishment is created, consumed, and recreated” (p. 307 emphasis mine). In other words, the media plays a part in supporting, enforcing, and creating racialized discourses of crime.

### **Money**

Character express motivations in *The Punisher* (2014) through direct statements and actions. For example, racialized characters are most often shown to be motivated by money.



Figure 4.1

In Figure 4.1 from Issue 1 page 5, The Punisher has pre-emptively foiled a drug buy that was to take place on the La Tovar River in Mexico by killing the occupants of a boat that was making the drug buy. The Punisher then detonates the boat as another boat, the one carrying the drugs, approaches. One of the characters who is identified as a drug trafficker becomes worried about the money that was on the boat that was destroyed.



Figure 4.2

Figure 4.2 from Issue 1 page 6, suggests that the drug trafficker is more worried about the loss of money than he is over the loss of human life. Another example in the series is performed by two characters at different times throughout the story, Mr. Del Sol, and Mr. Ortiz, well known drug cartel leaders. At separate times they both captured The Punisher and decided that it was in their best interest to sell him to the highest bidder. In the interest of making money they decided to keep a risk to their operations alive. So we can see that money has become a strong motivator in the commission of crime, greed appears to rule over the need to eliminate a threat.

### **Power**

Racialized characters state the acquisition of power as another motivation for crime in *The Punisher* (2014). By power here I am suggesting the power to rule or govern over a territory, which inevitably means taking leadership from non-racialized “legitimate” ruling forces. In the comic we see racialized characters commit crimes like murder, drug trafficking, and torture to wrest power from the hands of the state. As Hardy (1986) explains, using examples from the

earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century, “they [racialized characters] were often portrayed in villainous roles and lower-status social positions, expressed a greater desire for power and revenge, a lower interest in material success, and a lower desire for love and affection’ (9)” (Hardy as cited in Pewewardy, 2002, p. 4). I argue, showing racialized character’s struggle for power against “legitimate” authority, the comic places non-racialized characters in a unchallengeable dominant position supported by legal forces. “As an oppressed other”, Brown (1999) argues “the black body [or racialized bodies in general] does not possess, power or privilege afforded white bodies” (p. 28). He (1999) uses the examples of economic disparity and incarceration rates to support his claims about privilege. Connecting this to Dittmer’s (2007) description of comic book superheroes as “more like super-powered policemen than anything else – their support for the status quo is what defines them, and any attempt to fundamentally alter the social system is what marks a character as a villain” (p. 253). We can see that the place of racialized characters in the comic book is subordinate and that by not supporting the status quo or engaging in actions that would shift the social power structures, racialized characters are criminalized.



Figure 4.3



Again the acquisition of power is shown as a motivator, in Figure 4.3 from Issue 5 page 17, the leader of the Dos Sol drug cartel, monologues about forming an army or a "national gang." He feels that it will be a rival for the National Guard or "some hero." Both the National Guard and "some hero" are bodies that are protectors of the status quo and act as barriers to any change that would allow for the "legitimate" elevation of racialized groups to power.

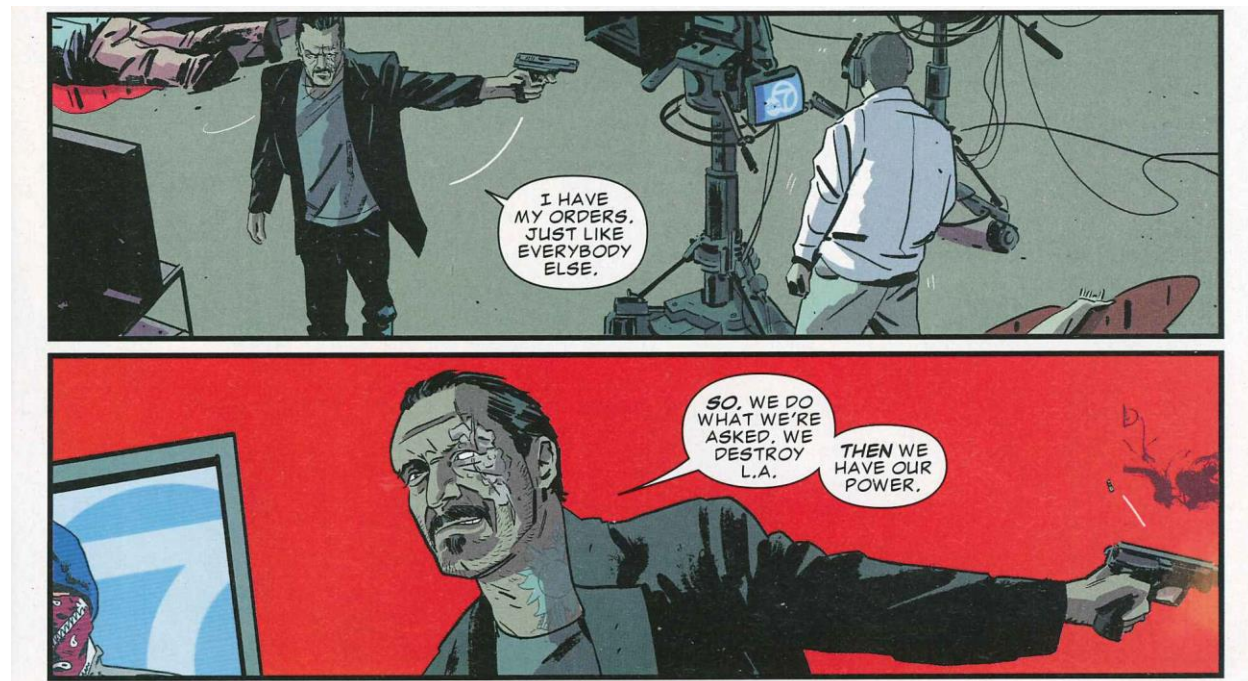


Figure 4.4

Once again power is shown to move characters to action. In Figure 4.4 from Issue 12 page 5, the scene is in a television studio, the Dos Sol cartel have taken over a television studio and are broadcasting a message that the gang is taking over. When questioned about the reasons why the cartel is calling for "chaos", the leader of the Del Sol cartel responds "to destroy L.A."

### **Ruthlessness**

The suggestion that racialized characters have a lower desire and need for love and affection is also represented in *The Punisher* (2014). Racialized characters, particularly characters that have



leading roles, are represented as ruthless, without compassion, and willing to commit terrible acts for pleasure. Aside from gaining pleasure from acts of violence they are also represented as displays of strength by which the racialized characters gain power and influence over their enemies, real or perceived, through the production of fear. We see examples of ruthlessness throughout the comic series. For example



Figure 4.5

in Figure 4.5 from Issue 4 page 5, we see that the Dos Sol cartel leader has captured The Punisher and is having him tortured by Electro, in order that The Punisher suffers a little before being sold to another of his enemies. The cartel leader's motivation for having The Punisher tortured is only to inflict suffering and to act in revenge for the problems that The Punisher has caused the Dos Sol cartel. Another example of racialized characters being



Figure 4.6

ruthless is Figure 4.6 from Issue 7 page 9. Mr. Ortiz, pictured here in the white suit, is a Central American Drug lord/cartel leader who uses torture as a means to gain respect from his competitors. He sets up a camera and records himself torturing The Punisher with the stated intention of showing people so they will respect Mr. Ortiz's ruthlessness. He even offers a small reward to any of his men that can make The Punisher scream on camera. The reason he has chosen to record the torture of The Punisher, to maintenance power through the use of fear.

We now must also question the actions of our heroes. They have also engaged in any number of crimes, from stealing from the US military, selling illegal firearms, murder, torture, to

general mayhem. The heroes though, are different from our villains, most notably in that the heroes have not been racialized, but also in their stated motivations for engaging in such crimes.

### **Motivations for Committing Crime for Non-Racialized Characters**

The Punisher (a.k.a. Frank Castle) is a known criminal who slips out from under the label of criminal and is blanketed by different terms like “vigilante” or “anti-hero.” Thus, the discourse that surrounds him is not one of criminality. Despite being a serial killer, Frank Castle is able to masquerade as The Punisher, an agent of justice, killing people he has deemed to be acting against the status quo. The motivations for committing crimes that I look at below are crime-fighting/patriotism, protecting people, and neoliberal/conservative ideals.

#### **Crime-fighting/Patriotism**

Within the pages of *The Punisher* (2014) characters that have not been racialized dominate the role of justice. Focusing on The Punisher he can be read as a force for justice, righting wrongs, and stopping “criminals.” Some of the ways that The Punisher is shown to stop crime is through engaging in vigilantism. We see examples of The Punisher acting against racialized “criminals” in Figure 4.7, Issue 1 page 19, The Punisher is questioning and torturing a character named Hector by burning him with the cigarette lighter in a late model car. Hector eventually gives up the location of a "drug processing facility." The Punisher proceeds to drive to the location of the building and produces a rocket launcher from his vehicle, which he fires at the building destroying it. He then proceeds to blow up the car containing Hector (killing him).





Figure 4.7

All of these crimes are motivated by a larger need to put an end to the production and selling of drugs, and to ultimately send a message to the Dos Sol gang as a larger entity; drug trafficking will not be tolerated.

Another example of The Punisher committing crime in Figure 4.8 from Issue 3 page 14, The Punisher has captured a character name Ruiz who is a member of the Dos Sol cartel. I have identified him as a Dos Sol character because he has two suns tattooed on his upper chest, Dos being the Spanish word for “two” and Sol being the Spanish word for “sun.” The Punisher has Ruiz strapped into a chair and is questioning him. The Punisher is using torture to extract information on Dos Sol’s new location of operations. The torture consists of a



Figure 4.8

physical beating, The Punisher makes it clear through the text that Ruiz does not want to see what he has planned next. Why do we see actions of The Punisher differently than the actions of the racialized characters we have encountered in the comic? Our answer seems to lay in an argument outlined by Dittmer (2007). In his examination of a *Captain America* story dealing with the villain The Flag-Smasher, Dittmer (2007) highlights an important dichotomy between how when violence is used in revolution (particularly against America) it is categorized as an act of “terrorism.” However, when the same violent tactic is used for the maintenance of the status quo it is seen as an act of “patriotism.” Captain American is quoted as saying “I’m not particularly proud of having to use these terrorists’ guerrilla tactics” (Dittmer, 2007, p.262).



Dittmer (2007) explains this more simply as “revolutionaries must resort to ‘terrorism’ in order to achieve political change” (p. 262). So, The Punisher, by fighting off threats to the stability of the social order, is seen in a positive light despite having to engage in criminal actions to achieve his goals.

### **Protecting others**

It is important at this point to state that the reason The Punisher became a crime-fighting vigilante is because one day, while enjoying a picnic with his family in Central Park, he stumbles upon a mob execution. In order to make sure that there were not witnesses the mobsters shot Frank and his family but somehow Frank survived. From that day forward Frank Castle transformed himself into The Punisher with the goal of protecting civilization from the “criminal element” that seeks to exploit and destroy the “innocent.” By looking at The Punisher’s motivation for protecting people and civilization it is clear that he thinks current models of law enforcement are ineffective.



Figure 4.9

For example in Figure 4.9 from Issue 2 page 14, police officers are responding to a call for service. Faced with armed resistance, the police are caught in a shootout with gang members in which the police are outgunned. Officer Stone is one of the responding officers and is calling for back up, but before backup can arrive an electrical discharge weapon is fired at the police officers killing one of them. We learn later in the series that the electrical discharge was the work of Electro. The Punisher appears on the scene equipped with tear/knockout gas and heavy weapons. He proceeds to protect the police by incapacitating them with gas followed by attacks on characters identified as the gang members. We see another example of The Punisher identifying as a protector in Figure 4.10 in Issue 4 page 20.

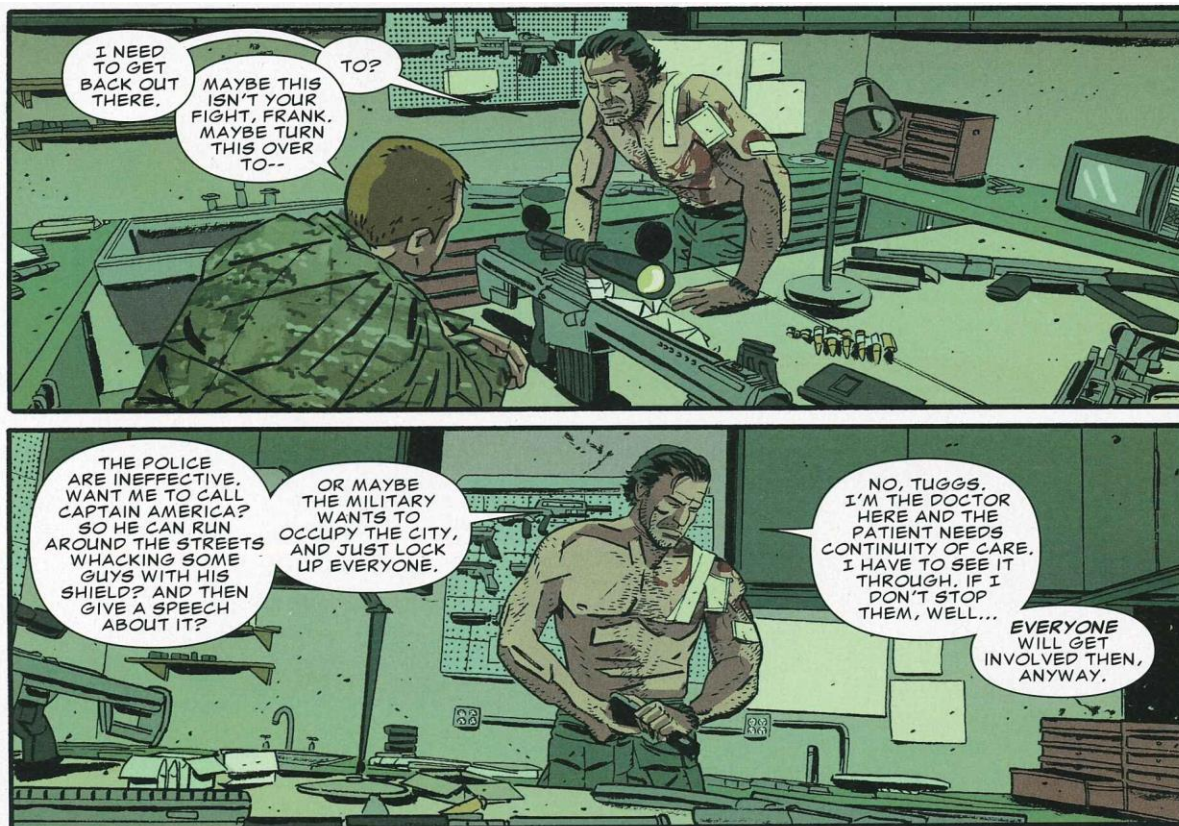


Figure 4.10

The Punisher has escaped from the clutches of the Dos Sol drug cartel and has made it back to his base of operations located along an abandoned subway route. We see The Punisher and Tuggs, in his military uniform, having a conversation. Tuggs suggests to The Punisher that maybe he should turn the fight over to someone else, by which he means the police or the military. The Punisher responds by explaining the ineffectiveness of local law enforcement and the military. He even uses a medical analogy suggesting that the Dos Soles or maybe crime in general, are a disease that requires an aggressive treatment to "cure." Phillips and Strobl (2006) state,

legitimate authorities, like the police and other policing agencies are ineffective in comic books, this is contrasted with how they are portrayed in other types of media like TV, where the 'cop drama', which is quite popular, show these policing agencies to be highly effective in stopping crime and bring the 'bad guy' to justice (p. 325).



We have seen how this type of discourse is played out in *The Punisher* (2014) through the two examples of The Punisher acting as a protector, but the reasons for this appear more clearly when we marry the idea of ineffective law enforcement with the idea that *The Punisher* (2014) is a vehicle for racialization and nationalism. Phillips and Strobl (2006) talk about a “nostalgia for a desired social order”, which would include a strong sense of nationalism, low crime rates, and just punishment. As they explain “in this imagined social order, individuals who threaten the peace are identified as the ‘Other’ and swiftly neutralized” (p. 308). Thus we see the role The Punisher plays is both maintaining a social order, and continuing a racialized discourse for characters that do not fall in line with his ideology.

### Conservative ideas

I show through examples of internal monologues and statements made by The Punisher that he supports a conservative view on crime and on criminals. Looking at Figure 4.11 from Issue 10 page 4, The Punisher, currently incarcerated within the Costa Rican penal system, thinks about the prison system from a very conservative perspective.



Figure 4.11

In the text we see phrases like “revolving door” and “second chances,” which he scoffs at. We get a peek into the mind of The Punisher when we get privileged access to his internal monologue. The conversation between The Punisher and his cellmate in Figure 4.12 found in Issue 10 page 5, is another an example of conservative thinking on crime.



Figure 4.12

The Punisher’s cellmate says he is in prison because he killed some people for his gang, “But hey, now I get food, I got a bed, I’m safe.” The creators suggest that The Punisher sees the prison system as a means of “welfare” that supports people he finds detestable.

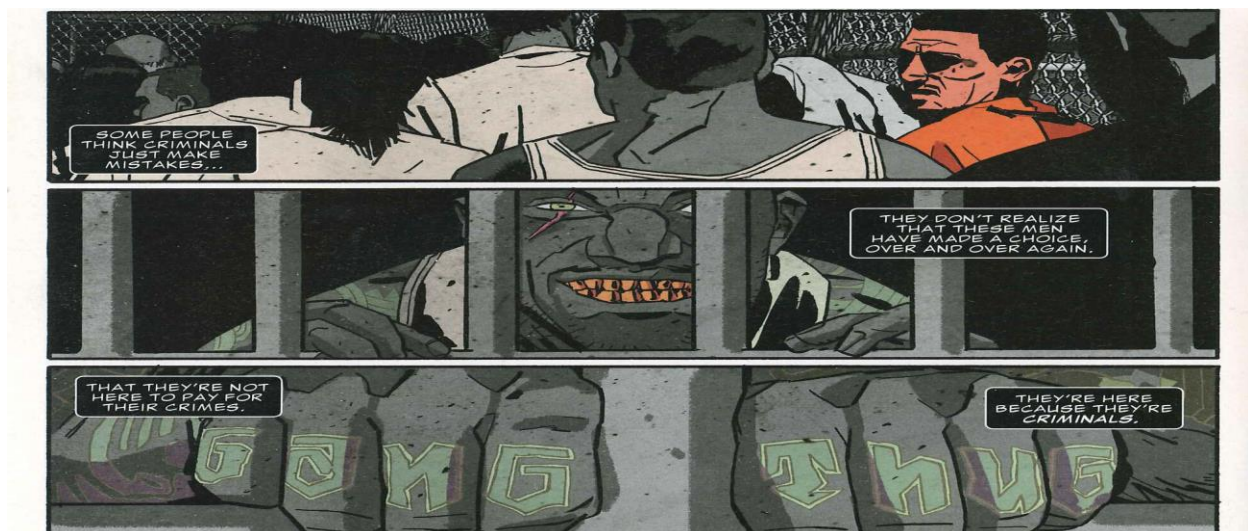


Figure 4.13



Further panels, like Figure 4.13 from Issue 10 page 6, provide the reader with text that continues to demonize incarcerated characters. The Punisher again thinks through a very conservative view of what a "criminal" is. This view on crime discounts all the social factors that contribute to crime, like poverty, systemic racism, and etc.



Figure 4.14

We once again see that The Punisher thinks about crime and the people he sees as responsible for crime in Figure 4.14 from Issue 12 page 14. The scene is Los Angeles where violence is erupting, masked people are on the streets looting and setting fires. As The Punisher is driving down the street toward his final confrontation he makes reference to the state of the city. The Punisher states, "The city's a powder keg. The have-nots think their time has come" which suggests that crime is the realm of poor or marginalized people. We can look at the scene another way, if the looters are indeed "have-nots," we can view the violence as an attack on the structure of society and systematic oppression. Through the lens of the oppressed The Punisher would be an agent of continued oppression. In support of the idea of the super hero as an agent of the state, Dittmer (2007), speaking on a *Captain America* story arch, but equally relevant for The Punisher story, argues that

the narrative of the story served as a space of legitimation for the concept of the state...  
Comic book discourse inscribes the winning combatant with ideological legitimacy...

those readings are part of a Left/Right debate that is solidly within the boundaries of publicly acceptable, anti-revolutionary discourse (p. 262).

Thus, the motivations for stopping crime are based in problematic ideas and representations of what a criminal is. By seeing criminals as greedy, self-motivated individuals, a conservative view of crime misses a larger understanding of criminogenic factors that contribute to crime.

It is possible to see how the motivations for the stated character groups are drastically different, and divided by racialized lines. By highlighting the differences, I show how *The Punisher* (2014) participates in the continued racialization of people that are marked by society as “criminal.” Rifas (2012) argues, “Comic books and other mass media do not present a simple, consistent, ‘ideological position,’ but rather an arena in which heroes and villains, and other characters continuously work through issues and conflicts in the form of stories” (p.225). Rifas (2012) continues by saying that some of these “ideas usually come out on top, winning *hegemony*” (p. 225, emphasis in original). I argue that the ideas that are “winning hegemony” are ideas that support the existing status quo.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this project I examined a number of ways that *The Punisher* (2014) contributes to a racialized discourse. This was accomplished not only by looking at how the characters were represented, but also how we as readers come to understand and recognize these representations. When looking at how characters are represented through dress, language, space, and spatial positioning I demonstrate how hegemonic representations of racialized people have become part of a broader discourse that overlaps with discourses of crime and national identities. In doing this

it becomes possible to see the ways that people are racialized not just in this comic book, but in everyday life. It is through these systemic representations that we come to know the representations in the comic book, which in turn, reinforce racialized knowledge. The same is true for the concepts we use when discussing racialized people.

I also discussed the concept of war and how its use changes how we see and engage with racialized people. Whether using war metaphors to discuss racialized crime, like in the comic book, we are engaging with them in a way that casts them as foreign “Other.” The comic book uses war to move away from crime as a symptom of larger social issues and positions crime as being an active process of anti-social/anti-national behaviour. Thus, the conversation about crime is shifted toward an elimination of “terrorists.” The metaphor of war also conjures up ideas of nations and national boundaries and positions people within the context of these borders. War metaphors move the conversation to a place of foreignness. Also, the comic is able to position non-racialized characters within a nationalistic rhetoric through the intersection of military iconography with the actions of non-racialized character in suppressing crime; this linkage puts the goals of the non-racialized characters in sync with the goals of the nations, and thus marks characters that do not share these goals as foreign criminals.

Why people might commit crimes is covered through contrasting motivations as they are stated in the comic. Although I touch on only a few of the racialized and non-racialized character’s motivations for committing crime it is clear that a distinction exists between the two groups. Racialized characters are shown to be motivated by money, power, and ruthlessness. I provided a few examples from the comic to build my argument on how this task is performed, but if we look beyond the comic into other mediums we can draw parallels to characters like Tony Montana from *Scarface* (1983), or groups like MS13, where we see similar discourses. On

the other side of the equation we have non-racialized characters who are shown to be motivated by crime-fighting/patriotism, the need to protect others, or conservative ideas about criminals and crime. By depicting non-racialized characters this way we see an opposite phenomenon happening, where characters who have been racialized are moved from criminal to enemy combatant.

One of the themes I did not cover due to the scope of the project is comic books as a way to combat hegemonic racialized/gendered/etc. discourse. I think that this aspect of comics is very important and provides a counter narrative to what is happening in most mainstream comic books. I have left this out and will approach it in further studies as it warrants more time and space than I can afford it in this current project, but some of the subjects I would consider for further research are things such as comics from the margins, by which I mean comics created by people that have been racialized or gendered, and that provide a first-hand telling of experiences, or counter histories. Within this theme of counter narratives I would also like to explore comics as a pedagogical tool and as an interactive medium designed for learning.

I have covered some of the ways that *The Punisher* (2014) contributes to a racialized discourse, but this discourse does not exist in a vacuum; these ideas are present in other Medium and are presented in different ways. By bringing to light some of the ways that I see racialization occurring in *The Punisher* (2014) my hope is that racialization and racializing practices will become more visible within comics.

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