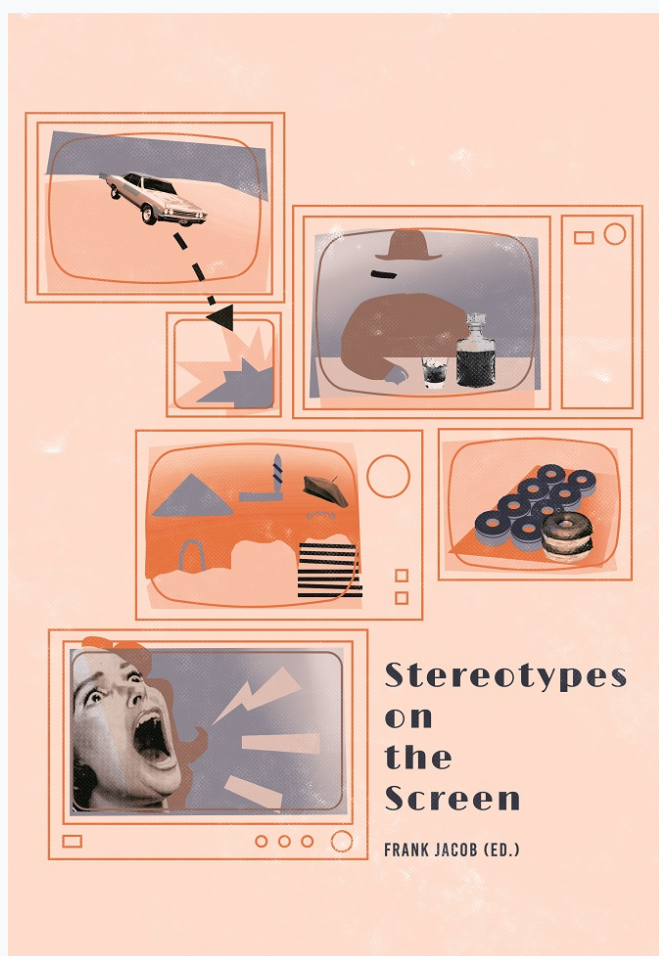


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Stereotypes on the Screen



### ¡Tigre Blanco, héroe del Barrio!: Living and Dying Latina/o in a Superhero World

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***¡Tigre Blanco, héroe del Barrio!: Living and Dying  
Latina/o in a Superhero World***

Luis SAENZ DE VIGUERA ERKIAGA

**(Not-so-)Secret Origin of a Latina/o Genealogy!**

In a world where the superheroic characters from Marvel Comics and DC Comics, the two major comic book publishers in the United States, are taking over mainstream media via film, TV shows, and video-games, it seems more relevant than ever to look at the way in which these comic book fantasies deal with diversity and the representation of minorities. Currently, one of the versions of Spider-man (the one initially operating in the “Ultimate” Marvel Universe, as opposed to the regular “611” Marvel Universe) is of mixed African-American/Latino origin, joining a growing cast of characters<sup>1</sup> that represent aspects of the diverse social identities that fall under the Latina/o category. Acknowledging that this effort to diversify these universes of fantasy is a popular culture response to the changing demographics of the country, as well as to the demands of the national and global markets, it is necessary to begin tracing a genealogy of the ways in which a particular minority, Latinas/os, has been portrayed in superhero comic books. We propose to do this by taking a look at how the first attempt at introducing a Latino superhero in American comic books reflected the stereotypes and misapprehensions with which the dominant White/Anglo group viewed Latina/o populations. Marc Singer mentions how the superhero genre has a “long history of excluding, trivializing, or ‘tokenizing’

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<sup>1</sup> Including new characters as well as iterations of previously existing ones, such as: Blue Beetle, The Question, and Vibe, from DC Comics; or, from Marvel Comics, Araña/Spider-girl, Victor Mancha from *The Runaways*, and Ava Ayala, the female White Tiger character from the *Ultimate Spider-man* animated TV series.

minorities to create numerous minority super-heroes who are marked purely for their race.”<sup>2</sup> This paper will, in fact, discuss racial stereotypes in regards to the character in question, as well as how he served as a blueprint for later representations of Latinas/os in comic books.

The honor and distinction of being the first Latino superhero in a comic book by one of the major American publishers belong to Hector Ayala, the White Tiger, created by writer Bill Mantlo and artist George Pérez for *The Deadly Hands of Kung-fu* #19 in December 1975. *Deadly Hands* was part of a black and white magazine line published by Marvel during the 1970s, aimed at more mature experimentation with form and topics, and an attempt to expand sales in the magazine market.<sup>3</sup> On issue #19, the spotlight of the series would shift from a multi-ethnic cast that included Anglo, African-American and Chinese martial artists to Ayala, a young, inauspicious Puerto Rican, who accidentally stumbles upon three mystic amulets that transform him into the super-powered White Tiger.<sup>4</sup> Bill Mantlo, the creator most closely associated with Ayala, scripted his misadventures in twelve issues of *The Deadly Hands of Kung-fu*, as a guest star in two issues of, respectively, *The Human Fly* and *Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-man*, and, subsequently, as a secondary character in 14 later issues of *Peter Parker*. It is worth noting that Mantlo, who would in the mid- to late 1980s study to become a public defender in the Bronx, remained the White Tiger’s sole writer between 1975 and 1979, continuing the

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<sup>2</sup> Singer, Marc, “‘Black Skins’ and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race,” *African American Review* 36, no. 1 (2002): 107.

<sup>3</sup> Marvel Comics, “Glossary: Curtis Magazines,” accessed April 11, 2012, [http://marvel.wikia.com/Glossary:Curtis\\_Magazines](http://marvel.wikia.com/Glossary:Curtis_Magazines).

<sup>4</sup> White Tiger is the name that the character takes on when he wears the amulets, which, shaped like a tiger’s head and paws, transform his clothes into a white outfit that covers all his skin. The name bears an uncanny resemblance to the Black Panther, another one of Marvel’s characters (see note 5), but it also follows standard comic book naming conventions (color+descriptive noun).

character's story over time and in those different series. Afterwards, Ayala only had a few significant appearances in *Peter Parker* in 1981, and quickly disappeared into oblivion until Brian Michael Bendis brought him back for a few issues of *Daredevil* in 2003, only to kill him off.

Commercially, the introduction of the White Tiger could be seen as a logical next step after the proliferation of African-American characters in comic books published by Marvel and DC in the late 1960s and the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> As a

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<sup>5</sup> Aldama, Frederick Luis, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2009), 29-30, accessed April 10, 2012, Proquest Ebrary; Brown, Jeffrey A., *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2001), 4; Nama, Adilifu, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2011), 17-29, 39-58, accessed March 12, 2016, ProQuest Ebrary. A list of the most popular black superheroes and superheroines in mainstream comics would have to begin with Marvel Comics' T'Challa, the Black Panther. He was introduced by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in *Fantastic Four* #52 (July 1966) as the King of Wakanda, a fantastically advanced African country. He would appear as a guest star in different series, joining The Avengers for a while until he starred in his own adventures in *Jungle Action*, from issue #5 (July 1973) to #24 (November 1976). In January 1977, he would be given his own title, which would initially last fifteen issues, although it has been then relaunched several times over the past few decades to varying degrees of commercial success. In *Captain America* #117 (September 1969), Sam Wilson, The Falcon, would become both the first African American superhero in mainstream comics, as well as the title's hero's sidekick. In the December 1971 issue of *Green Lantern* (#87), John Stewart, an African-American architect and former marine was introduced. He would become the occasional substitute of Hal Jordan, the white, Anglo Green Lantern. Although he would later gain more prominence as a character, it should be noted that, throughout the 1970s, he only appeared in four different comic books. Luke Cage, Power Man, was introduced in the first issue of his own series, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*, in June 1972. Jericho Drumm, Brother Voodoo, was introduced in *Strange Tales* #169 (September 1973), series in which he lasted for four issues, until the focus was switched to another character beginning with issue #174. In 1975, Dr. Bill Foster, a supporting character that had been created in 1966 and worked as a lab assistant to Henry Pym (Giant-man, one of the founders of The Avengers), would become an African-American version of Giant-man, enjoying his own title,

consequence of the financial success of “Blaxploitation” movies in the early 1970s, the mainstream comic book market witnessed the emergence of periodicals featuring African-American characters, created by white writers and artists,<sup>6</sup> under titles that clearly identified these characters in racial terms, such as *Black Panther*, *Black Goliath*, or *Black Lightning*.<sup>7</sup> As Rob Lendrum points out, 80% of “Blaxploitation” films were directed by white men, and “[s]imilarly, white writers script the Black superheroes in comic books almost exclusively,” taking their thematic, linguistic, and aesthetic cues from the films themselves.<sup>8</sup> This problem will similarly afflict White Tiger, although, significantly, both Mantlo and Pérez were born in New York City, where the character’s adventures will take place, and, more importantly, Pérez, although born in the United States mainland, is Puerto Rican, like Ayala himself.

Turning Hector Ayala into one of the main characters of *Deadly Hands* could be seen as a way for Marvel to diversify their comic book line and enlarge their market by offering something for the growing Latino community, while, at the

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*Black Goliath*, for five issues during 1976. 1975 also saw the debut of Ororo Munroe, AKA Storm, a member of the Uncanny X-Men in the pages of *Giant-size X-Men #1* (May 1975). In 1977, Black Lightning was created in a series that carried his name, and which would last eleven issues. A pattern can be appreciated from this brief genealogy: black characters were seen initially as sidekicks and iterations of white characters, and, once they went beyond playing supporting roles and moved on to their own titles, the lifespan of their series was rather short. The exception for this rule would be Luke Cage, who was able to hold his title for 66 issues until Iron Fist, a white martial artist, was added to it in *Power Man and Iron Fist #67* in 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Ghee, Kenneth, “‘Will the ‘Real’ Black Superheroes Please Stand up?’: A Critical Analysis of the Mythological and Cultural Significance of Black Superheroes,” in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, eds. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II (London, GB: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 232.

<sup>7</sup> Lendrum, Rob, “The Super Black Macho, One Baaad Mutha: Black Superhero Masculinity in 1970’s Mainstream Comic Books,” *Extrapolation* 46, no. 3 (2005): 360.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 363-364.

same time, catering to fans of the early 1970s Kung Fu/Bruce Lee mania.<sup>9</sup> The allegedly more mature, magazine-like *Deadly Hands* was not subject to the Comics Code Authority, through which the comic book industry regulated the contents of their own comics. This granted the creative team the opportunity to dwell into social issues at a deeper level than the regular color comic books at the time. Mantlo, with the help of a variety of artists, will use Hector Ayala to tackle problems such as unemployment, drug addiction, class and racial conflict, and educational inequality within the context of the fictionalized New York City of the Marvel Universe. However, Mantlo's social concerns collide with the narrative necessities of the action/martial arts genre that the magazine was dedicated to, as well as with the limits of an editorial line that, while providing some room for experimentation, was concerned, ultimately, with profit.

Thus, the first striking characteristic from Hector Ayala's tenure at *Deadly Hands* is how he, as well as the stories in which he appears, will perform the contradictions from which they both emerge, by falling into inconsistency and incoherence, as we will see, while missing the chance to become a positive symbol (for his community inside the graphic narrative, but historically, too, in regards to Latina/o representation in mainstream comic books). In the first issues of *Deadly Hands*, specifically, while he is being developed as a character, the amount of non-sequiturs, plot holes and contradictions that surround him is staggering. A possible explanation might be that while attempting to represent social conflicts and distresses surrounding the location of Puerto Ricans within mainland US economy and society, the subject matter might have proven excessive to the constraints of the form. Tensions between the reality of these problems, the stereotypes of Puerto Ricans that find their way into the stories, and, finally, the requirements of the action/martial arts

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<sup>9</sup> Rhoades, Shirrel, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, 106.

genre all coalesce into a problematic, schizophrenic narrative centered on a character that is defined by a negative identity, by his not being able to be and act like a non-otherized – non-chromatic – superhero. Furthermore, Ayala and his support cast become characters in constant crisis, under siege of the tension and excess arising between narrative inconsistencies, stereotypes deployed in order to represent the characters as Puerto Rican racialized others, and social issues connected to the colonial condition of Puerto Ricans in the mainland.

### **Puerto Ricans in NYC: Coloniality and Symbolic Capital**

To approach these tensions and the excess they generate around the figure of the White Tiger, the context from which this white-clad figure arises needs to be discussed. The character's background can be identified by three factors: hegemonic representations of Puerto Ricans in the mainland, the social and economic conditions under which said Puerto Ricans lived, and, finally, the way in which comic books construct Hector Ayala and his social and cultural context.

By the early 1970s, Puerto Ricans lacked symbolic capital within the mainland, in general, but especially in New York City, the location where the creators of White Tiger, and the character himself, lived. Ramón Grosfoguel takes the concept of “symbolic capital” from Pierre Bourdieu, and applies it to the racial hierarchy that structures social space in New York City. Within this context, symbolic capital is understood as “the capital of prestige and honor of each [social] group.”<sup>10</sup> One of the consequences of mapping the city around this capital is that “groups at the bottom of the racial/ethnic hierarchy have a low or negative symbolic capital – that is, no prestige – and their identities are usually tied to a negative/bad public image. These groups suffer discrimination in the labor market, finding barriers to

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<sup>10</sup> Grosfoguel, Ramón, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003), 152, accessed June 18, 2014, Proquest Elibrary.

economic opportunities.”<sup>11</sup> Historically, the reasons for Puerto Ricans being denied this symbolic capital arise from two circumstances that combine to affect them uniquely among other Latina/o groups. On the one hand, since the Spanish-American War, Puerto Rico’s connection to the United States has been vaguely colonial while remaining unresolved. On the other hand, in the 1950s and 1960s rural migration from Puerto Rico to the mainland positioned Puerto Ricans as peripheral labor in the “lesser-skilled segments of the U.S. labor force,” like the garment industry in the New York City metropolitan area.<sup>12</sup> In consequence, the insertion of Puerto Ricans in the economic and social fabric of New York City and the United States gave them a “structural position ... as part of a racialized, indeed colonial, pattern of labor exploitation.”<sup>13</sup> According to Grosfoguel, Puerto Ricans in the mainland suffer a situation of “coloniality,” that is, a “colonial situation” characterized by “the cultural, political, and economic oppression of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racial/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations.”<sup>14</sup>

In practical terms, the peripheral position of Puerto Ricans as colonial subjects in the imagination as well as the reality of the mainland clearly translated into numbers. In 1972, just a few years before the appearance of *White Tiger*, unemployment among Puerto Ricans in the mainland – and this is especially relevant since Hector Ayala will be identified as unemployed throughout his initial cycle – was twice as much as among the general population.<sup>15</sup> Only 30% of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Santiago-Valles, Kelvin A., and Gladys M. Jiménez-Muñoz, “Social Polarization and Colonized Labor: Puerto Ricans in the United States, 1945-2000,” in *The Columbia History of Latinos in the United States since 1960*, ed. David G. Gutiérrez (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 94.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>14</sup> Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects*, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Santiago-Valles and Jiménez-Muñoz, “Social Polarization,” 96.



mainland Puerto Ricans twenty-five years or older had completed high school, as opposed to 63% of the general population.<sup>16</sup> According to a variety of measurements of social status, such as the already mentioned education accomplishments and unemployment, but also destitution and dependency on family programs, Puerto Ricans, at the time, were consistently classified as the lowest of all ethnic groups. They were also “[s]patially and socioeconomically compressed by racial segregation and limited affordable housing”<sup>17</sup> in areas such as South Bronx, Hector Ayala’s milieu, which was described in the late 1970s as “the most extensively abandoned piece of urban geography in the United States.”<sup>18</sup> City institutions, after the failure of previous initiatives and dealing with a serious fiscal crisis, cut most needed services in the early 1970s,<sup>19</sup> leaving South Bronx unprotected against unemployment, racial conflict, and crime, especially gang related.<sup>20</sup> The resulting scenario was an urban dystopia:

People moved to the South Bronx out of necessity, not choice, often installed there by the welfare authorities. All who could move away did so. Those who couldn’t often vented their rage on the police, the firemen, the buildings, and the neighborhood. Thus, shops closed, landlords abandoned buildings, the population declined, and the neighborhoods of the South Bronx collapsed.<sup>21</sup>

This dire situation was aggravated and normalized by “overwhelming Anglo media characterization of Puerto Ricans in particular (and, to a lesser extent, Latinos in general) within the United States [that continued] to be

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>18</sup> Conway, William G, “‘People Fire’ in the Ghetto Ashes,” *Saturday Review* 23 (July 1977): 16, quoted in Gonzalez, Evelyn Diaz, *The Bronx* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004), 109, accessed June 20, 2014, Proquest Elibrary.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 127-128.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 118-120.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 121.

disproportionately peppered ... with vermin infestations (biological and social), crime-ridden neighborhoods and shady figures,”<sup>22</sup> a problem that not only permeates *Deadly Hands*, but that will accompany Hector Ayala into the less mature, color world of the regular Marvel Universe when he reappears in *Peter Parker* #9 and 10. In those two issues, centered at the superficial level on minorities, public education, and the fiscal crisis, Ayala is part of a large group of African-American and Latina/o disadvantaged youths protesting against the decision of the president of Empire State University to cut down Night School programs. The representation of this group constantly oscillates between a compassionate (yet paternalistic) depiction that resembles the relatively recent – at the time – civil rights protests and social activism, and the underlying threat that they pose as a mob of infantilized, brute others that challenge the decisions made by white men in power, a collective of others that might bring, at any moment, the violence of the barrio to the educational institution. The tension generated by this duality in representation creates an excess that the story will try to dominate, in order to re-establish order. At the end, though, a forced happy ending leaves too many questions open, and the solution to social strife is postponed for another day.

In the comic books that concern us, as in most of the abandoned or dystopian urban spaces ubiquitous in popular culture from the mid-1970s onwards, South Bronx is constructed as a space where there is little room for hope or for descriptions of how the economically, racially, and socially oppressed are trying to improve their lot. It will become clearly identified as an in-between space, somehow connected to hegemonic space, but only as a fantastic place where social disease, crime, and otherness can be enclosed and controlled. In this regard, White Tiger’s South Bronx becomes paradigmatic of the “racially coded ‘combat zones,’ which populated the middle-class, Euro-North American imaginary”

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 114.

since the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, two stories are worth noting – “...Death is a game called Handball!” and “Flesh of my Flesh!” – published in *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #27 and 29, respectively. For a change, White Tiger will not engage in random, pointless battles with masked characters, but instead will explore the social space of the South Bronx. In these stories, the barrio is constructed exclusively as a location of violence and abuse, and the community is articulated as criminal gangs or brainless mobs intent on lynching White Tiger for a murder that he did not commit. Once again, the (actual and symbolic) violence in these comic books is displayed as a symptom of an internal flaw of these barrios (as the space of a racialized other), rather than as an indicator of larger social inequalities. From this perspective, there can be no mention of grassroots efforts to overcome the abandonment to which South Bronx and other barrios were subjected, since these efforts would problematize the hegemonic construction of Puerto Ricans and their barrios as racial and diseased others who need to be supervised, disciplined and controlled. As Beverly Tatum remarks, “[s]ometimes the assumptions we make about others come not from what we have been told or what we have seen on television or in books, but rather from what we have *not* been told.”<sup>24</sup> In this regard, an important role in the circulation of popular culture stereotypes about Puerto Ricans and South Bronx is played by the active disregard towards models of cultural, organized practices (involving labor, neighborhood and youth organizations) that, especially in New York City and Chicago, attempted to revitalize Puerto Rican barrios and offer basic services that institutions should have been providing.<sup>25</sup> Acknowledging these grassroots initiatives would

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>24</sup> Tatum, Beverly Daniel, “Defining Racism: ‘Can We Talk?’” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, 2nd ed., eds. Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blumenfeld, Carmelita Rosie Castañeda, Heather W. Hackman, Madeline L. Peters, and Ximena Zúñiga (New York: Routledge, 2010), 66.

<sup>25</sup> Santiago-Valles and Jiménez-Muñoz, “Social Polarization,” 97-99.

entail, for the dominant group, disavowal of the colonial relations between the United States and Puerto Rican subjects, recognition of the latter's agency, and a neutralization of the stereotypes that hegemonic media produce and circulate.

Quite the reverse, the *barrio* will be, for White Tiger, as well as for his Latina/o successors, a space of violence, crime, and poverty, of social disintegration. When discussing specifically the role of violence in the construction of the *barrio*, the bibliography on African-American superheroes becomes once again helpful. On the one hand, as Grosfoguel pointed out, African-American and Puerto Rican in New York City during the 1970s suffered stereotypes constructed along the same racializing, hierarchical lines.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, as mentioned above, the first explosion of African-American superheroes came right before the birth of White Tiger, and both owe a lot to "Blaxploitation" in terms of aesthetics. One of the main points that differentiate African-American superheroes from their white counterparts is that black superheroes are constantly fighting the system, and oftentimes are presented as occupying a liminal space between law and crime, in the same manner as "Blaxploitation" anti-heroes did.<sup>27</sup> They fight in areas that are invisible to white superheroes, while the latter engage in defending the social order, but not in ending social oppression. At the same time, as Lendrum points out, black heroes engage in violent behavior to stop mostly black criminals that are trying to prey on their communities. They do not attack institutionalized racism or the structural inequality that allows those criminals to emerge in these unregulated spaces in the first place: "What is worse is that [the simplistic distinction between good and evil that black heroes end up reproducing] oversimplifies a dynamic and complicated urban landscape that has developed

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<sup>26</sup> Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects*, 149-150.

<sup>27</sup> Lendrum, "Super Black," 368-369.

due to hundreds of years of colonial history including slavery and economic barriers.”<sup>28</sup>

In the case of the White Tiger’s barrio, the displacement of the violence of social injustice to random, generic violence is present throughout his initial cycle. Hector Ayala’s adventures do not take him out of the barrio (until *Peter Parker* #9), and, as it will eventually be revealed, he is connected, through his brother Filippo, to all the crime that he fights against. Neither Ayala nor his White Tiger alter ego challenge the roots of the problems that plague the neighborhood, nor do they criticize the precarious position that Puerto Ricans, starting with Ayala’s own parents, occupy in the mainland. Instead of addressing the institutional and cultural roots of oppression, instead of even facing supervillains, Ayala will spend most of his time fighting his brother, his barrio, or himself. Thus, a non-critical approach to the representation of location will be part of the stereotyping mechanisms that regulate the portrayal of White Tiger, and Puerto Ricans, as the racialized, colonial other within these comics. Yet the manner in which these stories engage in the reproduction of stereotypes affects them and their characters at a deeper level as well.

### **Stereotypes and Representation**

Charles Ramirez Berg begins his critique of how Hollywood – taken as a representative of the entertainment industry and mainstream media – has dealt with Latinas/os by stating the difficulty of finding a common definition of what stereotypes consist of and what they do. He appropriates from cognitive psychology the idea of stereotyping as a “value-neutral psychological mechanism that creates categories and enables people to manage the swirl of data presented to them from their environment.”<sup>29</sup> The mental process that initially

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>29</sup> Ramirez Berg, Charles, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, & Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 14.

identifies differences in order to categorize the world around us, however, quickly becomes value-ridden, and stereotyping combines with ethnocentrism in order to assign negative qualities to others, to an “outgroup” that, from within the in-group – that is, “one’s own group [as] the center of everything” – cannot be but perceived as “incomplete and imperfect.”<sup>30</sup> According to Tatum, stereotyping happens when a lack of direct experience with and direct knowledge of other groups is substituted by second hand (mis)information that we receive from an environment that includes our immediate community, institutions, and the media. When prejudice, understood as “a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information,”<sup>31</sup> is added to the equation, stereotypes of minority (out)groups – produced and reproduced by hegemonic media – become part of an intricate, racialized social structure that distributes advantages and burdens in an unequal manner.

In the United States, the media and pop culture representations of minority groups, such as Puerto Ricans, are especially prone to reproducing certain prejudices based upon false information or lack of knowledge. When the stereotype is encountered in a comic book, the predominantly white reader will accept and internalize the stereotype, or the stereotype will confirm the previous knowledge (prejudice) that the reader might have of Puerto Ricans, unless he or she has direct knowledge of, or experience with, Puerto Rican communities and individuals. When analyzing the main (archetypal) Latina/o stereotypes in Hollywood, Ramirez Berg defines stereotypes as a “negative mirror of dominant values” that, in the case of Hollywood and Latinas/os, “identif[ies], justif[ies], and support[s] mainstream (Anglo) beliefs [about the Latino as other:]...ideological stereotyping [becomes]

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Tatum, “Defining Racism,” 67.

hegemony, the subtle, naturalizing way [in which] the ruling class maintains its dominance over subordinate groups.”<sup>32</sup>

Right from the beginning of Hector’s Ayala journey in *Deadly Hands* #19, a series of visual and linguistic elements are deployed to confirm hegemonic stereotypes. Even before we see the character, we can “hear” his otherness through his first words in broken Spanish: “¿Que [sic] es?” In the next panel, physical features (hair, moustache) and quickly ascribed nationality (see “Puerto Rico me encanta” t-shirt in figure 1) provide the shorthand that allows the reader to identify the newly introduced character as a Puerto Rican youth.



Figure 1. In case there were any doubts, Hector Ayala performs his Puerto Rican identity. (*Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #19 (December 1975), 65. ©Marvel).

<sup>32</sup> Ramirez Berg, *Latino Images*, 22.

Besides loitering in dark alleys by himself, the reader will soon realize that Hector only has a clear social role within his family, as useless son and brother in need. While family is a staple of Latina/o cultures, the problem in Hector's case is that, except for his brief stint in college (as part of the supporting cast for Spider-man in *Peter Parker*), his social circle is limited to his immediate family, and most of the plotlines he engages in arise from family conflicts. The Ayala family does not work as an inner, Spanish-speaking, sheltering community against the outer, public, English-speaking one. Instead, family and home generate a claustrophobic space that adds to his problematic position as a superhero.

At the same time, though, the Ayala household presents a symptomatic study of stereotypes of Puerto Ricans. Hector's mother and father represent hard-working, Spanish-speaking, humble Puerto Ricans, who gave their lives to unskilled labor so that they could bring the family to the mainland. In this sense, they represent a "good" Puerto Rican family who, except for Filippo – Hector's oddly-Italian-named black sheep brother –, know what their place is and dutifully perform the role given to them by the social, political, and economic structure. In fact, this is the role that Awilda, Hector's strong young sister who dominates him, will advocate for when she tries to get him to quit his superhero career: "Puerto Ricans are supposed to be **janitors**, Hector! **Cab drivers! Delivery boys!** No RISKS! No PROBLEMS! They stay ALIVE!"<sup>33</sup>

For paradigmatic or archetypal comic book characters such as Spider-man or Superman, families, especially parents or parental figures, play important roles, since they transmit a strong moral code that humanizes the superhero (and guarantees his allegiance to the social order). Spider-man and Superman have powers and abilities that

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<sup>33</sup> [Mantlo, Bill (w), Keith Giffen (p), and The Tribe (i),] "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright..." *The Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #24 (May 1976), [Marvel Comics], 55 (emphasis in original).



exceed reality and realistic expectations, but the moral issues that they face, and the moral solutions that they learned from their families, allow (mostly white, Anglo) readers to identify with them to a certain extent. In the case of Hector Ayala, on the contrary, his family and his inability to act independently from them are elements that contribute to his otherization. The most obvious lesson he derives from them is that the power that he has come across by sheer luck is an obstacle to fulfilling the passive, submissive role in society that coloniality has assigned to him due to the low symbolic capital of his ethnic group. It will come as no surprise, then, that, at the end of the *Deadly Hands* cycle, in the story dramatically entitled “Dark Waters of Death!,” evil brother Filippo will be revealed as the criminal “mastermind” that has been behind several of the unexplained events happening around White Tiger. The punishment for Filippo’s transgressive appropriation of power will be death, but, ironically, it will come in the form of suicide, as he learns that the mastermind that planned his criminal endeavors was not his own, but rather Fu Manchu’s.<sup>34</sup> Fu Manchu, who appears *Deus ex machina*, constitutes an unavoidable reference when talking about the creation of “others” in Western popular culture, and he has more resonance as a representation of cunning and evil than Filippo Ayala. In the world of White Tiger, even when trying to resort to crime to acquire any kind of power, the Ayalas, and by extension Puerto Ricans, end up unwittingly serving other people’s designs.

Inextricably linked to family and barrio, Spanish is commonly used as a marker of Latina/o characters. In Karen

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<sup>34</sup> Dr. Fu Manchu is a fictional evil Chinese mastermind created by British author Sax Rohmer and first appearing in *Story-teller* in 1912. He then went on to star in a series of novels, films, and radio serials, becoming a popular culture icon. (“Fu Manchu, Dr.” *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature* (January 21, 1995): N. PAG., *Literary Reference Center*, accessed March 13, 2016, EBSCOhost). Today, he can be seen as a clear symptom of sinophobia and the “yellow peril” fear that swept Great Britain in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

McGrath's analysis of representation of race and gender in regards to Araña – a new Latina character created for the Marvel Comics universe in the early 2000s –, the latter's use of Spanish is symptomatically identified, together with the role her family plays in her life, as elements that express her "Latina identity."<sup>35</sup> Mainstream comic book creators, especially non-Latinas/os, are not necessarily expected to understand the complex map of identities that constitute the Latina/o experience, and the varied intersections of race, gender, nation, and language that said map represents. However, it becomes highly problematic to see this diversity of experiences and social identities reduced, for the purpose of entertainment, to pure otherness via dialogues punctuated by an "amigo" here and there.

Not unsurprisingly, White Tiger becomes a pioneer for future Latina/o superheroes when it comes to his use of Spanish, too. Mantlo borrows from film, television, and cartoons the stereotyped depiction of the English spoken by fully or partially bilingual Latinas/os as a heavily accented English generously sprinkled with Spanish words. Mantlo's Ayala, with his colorful patois will, in fact, be the first in a long line of Latino super-heroes that will compulsively call everyone they talk to "amigo," "compadre," "señor," and "hombre," in a similar manner to how African-American characters scripted by white writers will unfailingly resort to slang. Spanish, even if meaningless, and slang, even if made up, serve in each case the function of racializing the other. White characters' colloquial English, on the other hand, becomes normalized as the universal, clear vehicle of rational communication.

Besides Hector's compulsive need to address everyone using the same words over and over, Mantlo's use of Spanish in the dialogues for the White Tiger cycle presents an

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<sup>35</sup> McGrath, Karen, "Gender, Race, and Latina Identity: An Examination of Marvel Comics' *Amazing Fantasy* and Araña," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 15:4 (2007), 280.

additional problem. The Spanish spoken by Ayala, his family and anonymous characters in the background is marked by certain linguistic peculiarities. If read by a native or heritage Spanish speaker, Ayala's lines might probably provoke a chuckle rather than recognition, familiarity, and identification. Instead of Puerto Rican or Nuyorican Spanish or Spanglish, the characters tend to speak in a rather direct, and often erroneous, translation of English structures into Spanish. For instance, when White Tiger is about to be attacked by someone from the back, he thinks to himself: "¡El peligro viene dos!"<sup>36</sup> which, while probably attempting to say something along the lines of "Danger Strikes Twice!," literally means "Danger comes two!" A few issues later, as he is trying to wake up a super-powered character who is setting a hospital on fire while unconscious, White Tiger exclaims: "¡El corpus de Cristo!" – an expression that did not exist in Spanish before Hector – and "¡Carajo! ¡Yo incendio! I burn!"<sup>37</sup> The problem here would be that "yo incendio" means "I set [something, we do not know what in this case] on fire," not "I burn," as would be intended in this sequence. There are plenty more instances of this bad translation, but these few samples illustrate the point. The attempt to use Spanish to create dialogues that more or less accurately reflect the speech of Puerto Ricans in New York City would be undermined by the lack of skills, resources, or care to make those lines actually sound like genuine spoken Spanish or Spanglish.

At the same time, though, it should be noted that when Spanish is used to convey information essential to understand the logic and importance of a certain action, the same character that uttered those words in Spanish will provide the reader with an immediate English translation, as well as with additional information/expressions of emotion. Leaving aside genre conventions and necessities, Puerto Rican

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<sup>36</sup> [Mantlo, Bill (w), George Perez (p), and Jack Abel (i),] "The Beginning," *The Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #20 (January 1976), [Marvel Comics], 56.

<sup>37</sup> Mantlo, Giffen, and the Tribe, "Tiger, Tiger," 52.

characters are being constructed as having a doubly problematic relationship with Spanish: they do not speak Puerto Rican Spanish or Nuyorican Spanglish properly, and the use of Spanish is immediately neutralized when the information is repeated in English.



Fig. 2. Usted no comprende que you don't understand. (*Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-man* #10 (September 1977), 1. ©Marvel).

This problematic relationship with Spanish acquires its darkest, yet most unintendedly hilarious, point at certain moments in *Deadly Hands* and *Peter Parker*, when Hector Ayala/White Tiger is running around, mulling over interior monologues which he duly translates into English within his thought balloons or when talking aloud to himself, with no non-Spanish speaking witness (except for, decisively, the reader).



Fig. 3. ¿Qué me está pesando [*sic*], Madre de Dios? (*Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #20 (January 1976), 59. ©Marvel)



Fig. 4. Only yourself, Hector, only yourself. *Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-man* #9 (August 1977), 7. ©Marvel)

Bilingualism, code-switching, different roles and spaces for each language, and diverse proficiencies in languages are all part of the Latina/o experience. The inner self-translating appearing in these comics, however, is slightly different, and it supports the racializing of Puerto Ricans as colonized subjects, who replicate within their own minds the language of the metropolis. To a degree, this instant, internal self-translation indicates a narrative desire to read Puerto Ricans, and by extension other Latinas/os, as alienated from their own language, or the language of their country of origin, to

the point that they have interiorized the colonial power's demand that they make themselves be understood in English. Additionally, Hector Ayala – and the Latina/o superheroes that come after him – would seem to lack an inner, intimate self, and, instead, even their internal thought process is a performance of their inner, unsolvable inconsistency for the benefit of the English-speaking audience. Hector Ayala's self-translation and his Spanish, poorly translated from English, should be read, thus, as markers of how he internalizes his position as a colonial other.

Another element that contributes to this characterization is Hector's passivity – hence, the appropriateness of his “loitering” the first time we encounter him. He operates almost as an empty category that will be defined by overblown – mostly internal – dramatic dialogue and by misinterpretation by other characters. Cultural constructions of Puerto Ricans that contribute to maintain and justify the low symbolic capital assigned to them by hegemonic groups often entail also a feminization process. “Racially subordinate populations” are given negative traits associated to women: “being capricious, irrational, excessively emotional, wayward, infantile, and therefore in need of guidance, control, protection, supervision, instruction, and tutelage.”<sup>38</sup> Ayala is often characterized as a feminized, irrational other: unable to act, he indulges in self-pity and excessive reaction. His tendency to collapse into emotional breakdowns and the general lack of direction that he displays have to be repeatedly reined in by “mature” male figures, such as Detective Blackbyrd, Spider-man, and Daredevil. At the same time, in a doubling up of the feminizing effect, he will need the guidance and control given to him by similarly racialized, female characters such as his sister Awilda, and his African-American girlfriend, Holly Gillis. Furthermore, Hector is also constantly misread by others, yet the meaning that they assign to him becomes a very important component

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<sup>38</sup> Santiago-Valles and Jiménez-Muñoz, “Social Polarization,” 88.

of how he is intended to be “read,” since he tends to contradict himself and lacks stability as a character. At different points of his adventures in *Deadly Hands*, for instance, he is declared by other characters to be a drug-addict, an adult baby, a junkie, a killer (repeatedly), unstable, a criminal, a thief, a lazy unemployment check collector, someone with street cred, etc. These classifications connect clearly with, on the one hand, stereotypes that contribute to otherize minorities, but, also, with hegemonic stereotypes of Puerto Ricans circulating at the same time as these comic books, such as “[t]he association of ‘Puerto Rican’ and ‘African American’ identity in the Euro-American imaginary with racist stereotypes such as laziness, criminality, stupidity, and uncivilized behavior.”<sup>39</sup> The character of Hector Ayala works, both in excess and in lack, as a recipient of racist stereotypes linked to Puerto Ricans and African-Americans in New York City, and, unavoidably, with the practical consequences of those stereotypes. While it is true that mainstream superhero comic books have traditionally abused stereotypes as means of characterization, what makes Ayala’s case stand out is the relentless way in which they are applied to him, the fact that these labels are consistently applied due to his milieu (South Bronx) and his ethnicity (Puerto Rican), and his inconsistency as a character beyond the way in which others impose meaning on him. Thus, another problem emerges from the implicit, and at times, explicit, narrative desire to make Ayala/White Tiger a positive representation of minorities, in spite of all these problems. For instance, going back to Hector’s first appearance, and how he obtains his superpowers, we can already detect how efforts to construct him as a hero are being undermined by the stereotypes that the authors are reproducing. The Sons of the Tiger, previous possessors of the Tiger amulets that confer Ayala superpowers, had to prove themselves worthy of those powers via their martial arts prowess. Ayala the Loiterer, on

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<sup>39</sup> Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects*, 149-150.

the other hand, just happens to stumble upon them in a darkly-lit alley where the Sons of the Tiger had thrown them away when breaking up as a group.

Moreover, from the moment he picks up the amulets until the end of his tenure at *Deadly Hands*, Hector does not choose freely what to do. Instead, he is pushed along by circumstances, allies and enemies. In this initial cycle, Ayala and the White Tiger engage in non-stop action, trying to obtain revenge for some obscure, unmentioned reason or to clear his name from crimes falsely attributed to him/them. From the beginning of his career as a Latino superhero, Ayala is marked as superheroic other, too: he finds by sheer chance, and among other heroes' trash, the tools that will grant him a chance to do something for himself, and supposedly, for his "people." However, these tools have already been rejected by non-Latino characters, and the story will demonstrate how unsuited Ayala and his context are to the power that the amulets represent. Thus, the potential superhero fantasy takes an unpredictable turn, and it becomes a reflection of the problematic identity and colonial situation of the Puerto Rican diaspora: Ayala is caught between worlds, languages, genres, and communities. All in all, he can only survive by following what other characters tell him to do, which restores his placement as a colonial, feminized, racialized other, and reaffirms hegemonic views on Puerto Ricans.

### **If You Read Peter Parker Backwards...**

The role of stereotype in the construction of Hector Ayala/White Tiger is especially poignant if we compare the pair to Peter Parker/Spider-man. Spider-man, first appearing in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (August 1962), was, at the time of the creation of White Tiger, a flagship character of Marvel Comics, as well as one of the most recognizable creations of American popular culture worldwide. Inside comic book history, he had also become the most successful embodiment of the "hero-by-accident" trope in American superhero narrative. It is against Peter Parker/Spider-man, then, that we



have to position Ayala/White Tiger, in order to appreciate the meaningful differences between the constructions of Parker, representative of the centrality and universality of Whiteness in American society, and Ayala, who, quite literally, becomes a “dark” mirror image of Parker.

Peter Parker, created just about thirteen years before than Ayala, had become Spider-man – and, thus, the main character of his own superhero narrative – after being bitten, at a science museum, by a spider that had been exposed to radioactivity. Parker, a Queens’ native, is a teenager high school student that comes across his super powers and superheroic identity as a consequence of his pursuit of scientific knowledge. Hector Ayala, on the other hand, accidentally finds the amulets that grant him his White Tiger powers, as well as his identity problems. Yet, instead of the educational setting where Parker acquires his powers, Ayala finds the amulets in a dark alley. Peter Parker is aligned to hegemonic society and its educational institutions (high school, museum, science). However, Ayala’s origin cannot help becoming an inverted quote of Parker’s story. From the moment of his birth as a comic book character and a superhero, he is already marked negatively as other. Instead of the power, light, knowledge, and technology to which Peter Parker is linked since he acquires his powers, Ayala first appears as a loiterer, linked to the margins, to the dark alley. The reader will never find out what he was doing in that deserted *cul-de-sac* alley<sup>40</sup> and, in fact, for the longest time Ayala enjoys no occupation or social space assigned to him, except for his family. He is introduced as a marginal character that moves between interstitial spaces (alleys, roofs of apartment buildings, South Bronx) and passively comes across the power of the amulets, generating a profound instability in his legitimacy as a superhero.

Peter Parker poses his basic moral dilemma and resolution in a single story, in a single phrase “With great

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<sup>40</sup> See figure 1.

power comes great responsibility,” thus rearranging in an orderly fashion all the destabilizing elements of his narrative: technological accident, departure from reality, exploitation of new-found ability to earn money through wrestling and the possibility of emancipation, loss of father figure, and acknowledgment of responsibility. The basic problem that the character embodies justifies, after the fact, the accident that created him. On the other hand, Ayala lacks a clear moral dilemma that his further adventures will develop or attempt to solve, nor will he be able to enjoy a sense of closure or resolution. In fact, his whole tenure in *Deadly Hands* is characterized by rambling and chaotic action, and a deeply troubling relationship with a super-powered alter ego of which, initially, he is not even aware. While Peter Parker’s dual identity offers him the possibility of freedom, power, and enjoyment, Hector Ayala’s initial transformations into White Tiger are surrounded by imagery that resembles withdrawal symptoms associated with drug addiction (figures 5, 6 and 7), a connection highlighted by Ayala getting always sick as he returns to his non-superhero self, and even underscored by a passerby (figure 5).



Fig. 5. Hector Ayala and the symptoms of being a superhero.  
(Deadly Hands of Kung Fu #20 (January 1976), 59. ©Marvel)



Fig. 6. Sick again. (*Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #21 (February 1976), 62.  
©Marvel)



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Fig. 7. "Meet Hector Ayala, sick at the moment..." (*Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #22 (March 1976), 45. ©Marvel)

The moral dilemma that, unwittingly, White Tiger's adventures come to pose, but not resolve, seems to be centered around duality. Whereas dual identity represents a flight of fantasy for Peter Parker, for Ayala, the Puerto Rican colonial subject, duality is impossible to reconcile and produces excess in the form of a schizophrenic relation to his alter-ego. Hence, the recurrence of drug-addiction and junkie imagery.

This aspect of the Hector Ayala/White Tiger conundrum opens the possibility to talk about over-symbolization of minority representation in hegemonic media and popular culture. This over-symbolization would imply narrative inconsistencies and tensions that emerge due to the representative value that a narrative tries to assign to a minority character that would be fated to stand in for his perceived group, while white characters are allowed to enjoy their individual lives. One of the clearest instances in which this over-symbolization threatens with overtaking the

narrative is, precisely, the junkie imagery surrounding Ayala's transformations. Interestingly enough, the parallelism between withdrawal and superheroic transformation are carefully drawn out in the first few issues, later to be dropped altogether. Nevertheless, although abandoned, these initial instances remain obscure, non-symbolizable residues that open the narrative to ambiguity, avoid closure, and connect to harsh realities external to comic books. Another aspect of this overflow of symbolic meaning is present in the plots, which are continuously contradicting themselves (a story is taking place within 24 hours of the previous one, yet some characters seem to have lived days in-between those 24 hours). It is difficult to avoid reading these peculiarities as other than indexes of Ayala's conflicted relationship with his dual identity and his inability to behave (or to be read) as a mainstream superhero.

Unlike Peter Parker's case, Ayala's original stumbling upon the amulets is not redeemed by a simplistic restoration of order. On the contrary, Ayala becomes the other that has illegitimately occupied a position that is not his, that of the white, Anglo superhero – and his all white uniform is especially meaningful in this regard. He is dressed in/as white, but spouts words of Spanish to reaffirm his identification as other by the reader. In this case, the comic is quite effective at neutralizing any possible ambiguity.



Fig. 8. Just in case any casual readers happened to pick up *Deadly Hands* #30 without any prior knowledge of the White Tiger, and assumed him to be a “white” character, he screams in Spanish (and self-translates, to be sure). (*Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* #30 (November 1976), 11. ©Marvel)

Consequently, the stories centered around him will continuously problematize identity (in regards to Hector’s fragile self, as well as in regards to the oversymbolization of minority representation), and deny him closure as well as agency. The instability that he brings to narrative as a character will only be controlled when, at the end of *Deadly Hands* #32, his initial cycle is abruptly finished. Ironically, he returns as a character in the full color *Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-man* #9, the first of an already mentioned two-partter starring Spider-man and White Tiger that focused on minorities, higher education, cuts in public services, and protests. In the cover, a tagline describes the White Tiger, puzzlingly, as “Marvel’s Most Controversial Creation!” which he very well might be, although probably not in the sense that the comic’s editor or writer had in mind.



Fig. 9. Glorious and controversial cover. *Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-man* #9 (August 1977). ©Marvel

It is necessary to highlight that in his transition from the world of black and white magazines to the color of standard



comic books, White Tiger will forget a lot of the problems of identity that he had presented in *Deadly Hands*, and, in fact, he will effortlessly be cheered by the people in the barrio. As if by magic, his representativeness, as both a character and a superhero, will no longer be in question, and this might be the basis for future Latina/o superheroes to fondly remember and respect him for reasons that the long-time reader will be unaware of.



Fig. 10. And, suddenly, as if by magic, White Tiger finally becomes... ¡el héroe del barrio! *Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-man* #10, 22 (September 1977). ©Marvel



Fig. 11. The sun begins to rise over the Bronx, and over Hector Ayala. *Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-man* #10, 27 (September 1977). ©Marvel

This change in tone, with Bill Mantlo still at the helm narrating his adventures, might be explained by the change in audience, and the necessity to submit to the Comics Code Authority, which might have frowned at the depictions of

drug addiction-like symptoms as well as to some of the violence present in earlier stories. While *Peter Parker* had to be approved by The Comics Code, *Deadly Hands* did not. At the same time, though, this newer, less conflicted White Tiger will no longer attempt to occupy a central position in the narrative. Quite the contrary, he becomes part of a multiracial cast of characters that surround Peter Parker in college. In a sense, it is only when he loses any pretense to centrality or agency that he ceases to function as a narrative problem. Only when he becomes a sort of unofficial Spider-man sidekick, accepting his secondary, inferior role, will he be able to actually be fully integrated in the Marvel Universe as something other than a chaotic cypher.

### **Your Legacy is tu legado, amigo!**

As we move simultaneously towards the end of this paper as well as towards that of Hector Ayala's spotty career fighting himself and crime, the idea of legacy needs to be further discussed. There are two characters that have carried on the White Tiger mantle after Hector Ayala was killed in *Daredevil* #2 #40 (February 2003), and both of them are, remarkably, female blood relations of Hector's. First came Ángela del Toro, supposedly the daughter of Awilda Ayala. Ángela enjoyed a brief career as White Tiger in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After she was killed off (yet another pattern emerging here), Ava Ayala, allegedly Hector's youngest sister, became the new White Tiger in the Marvel Comics universe, as well as in the *Ultimate Spider-man* animated TV series. While it would be necessary to analyze the way in which these characters, as Latinas, double up the amount of otherness they represent and whether they have to suffer, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the same humiliations that Hector endured, the remaining of the paper will focus on how the idea of White Tiger's legacy is presented via Ava Ayala, both within the Marvel Universe, as well as in a meta-comical way in regards to the position of Latinas/os in mainstream superhero narratives.

When Ava is introduced as part of a slate of young superheroes joining the “Avengers Academy,” the idea of legacy is immediately introduced through her confrontation and dialogue with Reptil, another young Latino superhero. First, Ava mentions the fact that she is following on her brother’s footsteps: “It’s a family legacy. One I’ll never stop working to honor.”<sup>41</sup> However, after analyzing the way in which stereotypes structure Hector Ayala, and his problematic relationship to the idea of community, it is difficult to understand the next mention of his legacy:



Fig. 12. An intense legacy of intensity. (*Avengers Academy* #21 (January 2012), 17. ©Marvel)

While it is true that Hector Ayala opened the doors for Latina/o superheroes and superheroines like Reptil or Ava Ayala, this scene can also be read as the beginning of a whitewashing of Hector’s problematic existence as a fictional character. Instead of the confused, split, incoherent way in

<sup>41</sup> [Gage, Christos (w), Sean Chen (p), and Scott Hanna (i),] “Welcome, Students,” *Avengers Academy* #21 (January 2012), [Marvel Comics], 16.

which he originally was portrayed, Hector is presented from this moment on as a model for Latina/o superheroes. He might very well be so, but only if we forget his initial misadventures, and we stick to his appearances as a secondary character. As we have seen, the Hector Ayala that sacrificed everything, was active in the community, and became a role model for Latina/o characters did not actually exist in the comic books that tell his story. Rather, he might have existed in the silence of the untold stories, in the void that lies between his last appearance in *Peter Parker* #52 (March 1981), and his brief return in *Daredevil* v2 #38 (December 2002) only to die in a gratuitous way in #40 (February 2003) after being wrongly accused of a crime he did not commit. Yet this might be too generous a reading of the retconning of Hector Ayala's symbolic value, since his disappearance as a character for two decades was due to lack of interest in him as a character on the part of comic book creators and readers alike. Although in the interim other Latina/o characters emerged, both inside and outside the mainstream,<sup>42</sup> Hector Ayala was killed off as a character not worthy of a second chance, something remarkable when considering how the two major American comic book publishers rely heavily on formulaic iterations and the rehashing of old characters and plots.

When Ava Ayala starts her own fictional career in *Avengers Academy*, the scenes in which she is alone with Reptil are marked by a tension around the figure of Hector Ayala and the idea of legacy. This tension shall be used to (re)establish him as a role model, and to create the idea that he was a great brother to Ava and a defender of his community.

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<sup>42</sup> Aldama, *Your Brain*, 29-60.

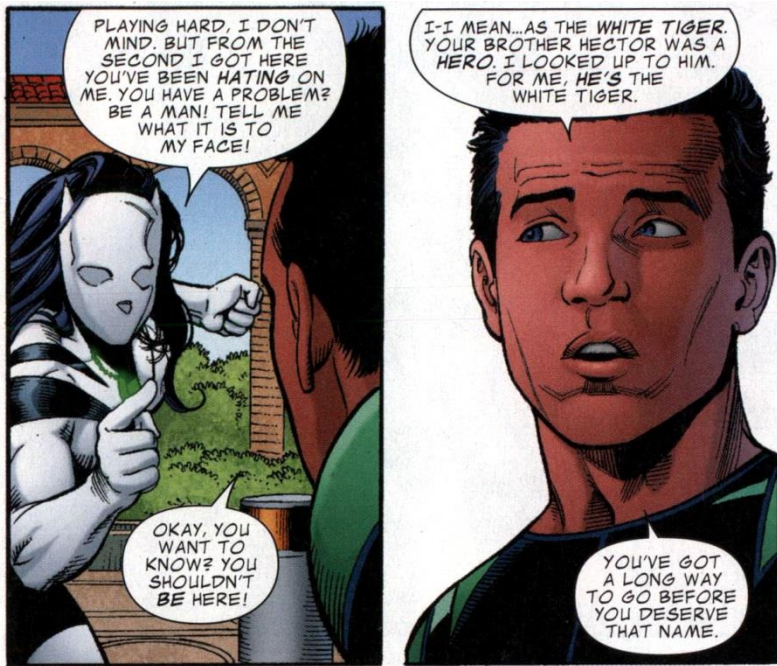


Fig. 13. History being rewritten. Everybody looked up to Hector, but not while he was alive. (*Avengers Academy* #22 (January 2012), 4. ©Marvel)

Not unlike how certain tropes become obsessive in Hector Ayala's initial forays into masked adventure (family, barrio, badly-translated Spanish, images of sickness and addiction), his reintroduction as the imagined originator of a legacy (both particular, for his sister, but also universal, for Latinas/os like Reptil) is also plagued by an obsession with re-inscribing him as an honorable, inspirational figure. Like everything else surrounding Hector Ayala, this excess emerges from his incapacity to claim that kind of status for himself in his own stories. In fact, insistence on the two principal emotions that he awakens in the young characters (love in his sister, respect in Reptil) only draws attention to the continuity problems that allow for these new emotions to surround the memory of tragic Hector Ayala.

“Retcon,” used as a verb or noun, is a common term within the world of popular culture fandom. It alludes to the idea of “retroactive continuity,” and refers to “process of revising a fictional serial narrative, altering details that have previously been established in the narrative so that it can be continued in a new direction or so that potential contradictions in previous events can be reconciled.”<sup>43</sup> In the comic book universes of the two major companies, retcons are a very common occurrence, especially if we take into account that some of their characters have been around for more than 75 (DC Comics) and 50 (Marvel Comics) years, respectively. Their “continuities,” or established histories, get constantly revisited according to plot needs, current commercial interests, and the desire to maintain a sense of continuity over “large and complex narrative constructs that tend to get out of hand.”<sup>44</sup>

In the case of Hector Ayala and his legacy, *Avengers Academy* gives us a double retcon. We have already established that his White Tiger was not allowed, as a character, to reach the foundational status that current, younger characters assign to him. At the same time, though, the second revision of his continuity is more problematic, especially since it concerns the very existence of Ava Ayala, the sister that is trying to assert his role as the founder of a heroic tradition. Before *Avengers Academy* #21, it had been clearly established that Hector only had one brother (Filippo) and one sister (Awilda), who both die within a relatively short period of time during Hector’s stint as White Tiger. In regards to Ángela del Toro, his alleged niece, at no point in Hector’s stories is there a mention of any children of Awilda’s, something that would be difficult to hide given that most of Hector’s social life has to do with his close family, Awilda included.

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<sup>43</sup> Booker, M. Keith, “Retcon,” in *Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, vol. 2, ed. Keith M. Booker (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2010), 510.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



The case of Ava is more mystifying yet. When readers are introduced to the Ayalas, the parents are shown as middle-aged, and there is absolutely no mention of a fourth sibling: Awilda is presented as his only sister, and it is clearly implied that Filippo and Hector are the remaining members of the family. When, in *Peter Parker* #49, Hector's parents and Awilda get killed in a random display of senseless violence by a character called Gideon Mace, neither a younger sister (Ava) nor Awilda's daughter (Ángela) are mentioned. Both of them would have become orphaned minors at that point. After a series of adventures in which Hector almost dies at the hands of Mace, he decides to leave New York on a bus with his girlfriend. In the farewell dialogue between Peter Parker and Hector Ayala, there is no talk about a younger sister and the responsibility her existence would entail for Hector, his only close relative. On the contrary, it is implied that he has nothing or no one left to keep him in the city. This makes Ava's scenes in *Avengers Academy* more puzzling, since they make her brother, whose stories ignored her existence, such an integral part of her life.



Fig. 14. He really loved her, even though he did not seem aware of her existence. (*Avengers Academy* #24 (March 2012), 9. ©Marvel)

It is, then, as if the contradictions and inconsistencies that affected Hector cannot be simply retconned out of Marvel continuity by the *Avengers Academy* writer, Christos Gage. Quite the opposite, any attempt to erase them poses further problems, and more so since this specific attempt takes place in *Avengers Academy*, a series that purports to represent diversity of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. When Reptil mentions to Ava that he has a collection of old magazine articles that talk about Hector,<sup>45</sup> Gage and his characters presuppose that Hector Ayala's fictional biography is a blank slate that can be constantly rewritten in order to satisfy the demand for diversity and minority characters for a growing demographics/market. In the case of the White Tiger, though, if one considers his centrality as the first Latino superhero, this rewriting of his history is especially egregious, since it cannot help but bring back to mind coloniality, and how the colonial subject's history does not exist, but on the contrary, can be written and rewritten to satisfy the demands of hegemonic power.

What is missing in contemporary Marvel's rewriting of Hector Ayala's memory and legacy is, precisely, an acknowledgment of the way in which he was originally a stereotyped attempt at commodification of the experience of a marginalized population. Without this acknowledgment, the shadow of the racialized otherness that constrained the original White Tiger will continue haunting its successors, and, by infection of excess, Latina/o superheroes and heroines published by the major companies.

Trying to erase his history generates a paradoxical text that uncannily echoes the duality that Marc Singer observed in African-American superheroes in mainstream comic books. Applying ideas from Ralph Ellison, Frederick Wertham and Franz Fanon to stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities in superhero comic books, Singer points out how "[w]hether

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<sup>45</sup> [Gage, Christos (w), Tom Grummett (p), and Cory Hamscher (i),] "Family," *Avengers Academy* #24 (March 2012), [Marvel Comics], 9.



these stereotypes assume the form of unrealistic portrayals of racial minorities or an equally unrealistic invisibility, they often fulfill this double function of oppression [of the minority] and reaffirmation [of white American's believe in equality]."<sup>46</sup> This duality, in the case of Hector Ayala, appears as the tension between a present that tries to re-imagine, from today's awareness, how the first Latino superhero should have been, and the evidence of the historic creation and development of the White Tiger, and how they connected to stereotypes of Puerto Ricans circulating at the time. Today's celebration of diversity, though, cannot take place without properly acknowledging the excesses of the past, unless we want to leave the door open to their return.

All in all, the original White Tiger should be revisited as a foundational moment to understand the different ways in which the first Latino superhero created by mostly non-Latino authors historically reproduced and naturalized a series of racializing stereotypes and prejudices towards Puerto Ricans. In a way, Rob Lendrum's conclusion can be applied to White Tiger as well: "The black heroes of the 1970s do succeed at creating a new space in superhero masculinity for race. Unfortunately, that space is the marginalized area of stereotype."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Hector Ayala created a legacy. However, this legacy is as contradictory and problematic as his own existence as a fictional character, and only by acknowledging this history will we be able to unburden his imaginary descendants.

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<sup>46</sup> Singer, "Black Skins," 107.

<sup>47</sup> Lendrum, "Super Black," 371.