Superheroes as Monsters as Teachers as Monsters as Superheroes

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G*IVE IT UP.*
'Stead of grabbin' for decay.
What we viewed as gold.
I believe pollutes this space.
And its grace ascending.
Like a snake up your tree.
Up your happy ending understanding.
All your s'pposed to be.

Let it move right in.
Let it kiss your face.
Let it sow your skin.
In perpetual embrace.
Like I said "Love's Light is Laughter".
Like the sun spittin' happiness into the hereafter.
Oh here it comes like a natural disaster.
Ah blowin' up like a ghetto blaster.
Ah here it comes, bring it faster!
Ah here it comes, bring it faster!

The age of miracles.
The age of sound.
Well there's a Golden Age.
Comin' round, comin' round, comin' round!!   (Golden Age, TV on the Radio)

As the lines of this song describe, there is promise in the future. There is a better tomorrow right around the corner, and all we have to do is wait for it. There are a multitude of ways this yearning manifests itself in society, but for the purposes of this paper the concept of the superhero as that embodied promise is the focus. Why? As discussed elsewhere (Huddleston, 2016a; Morrison, 2012), comic book superheroes say many things about the world around us, and they speak to our hopes, dreams, and fears. Mainly, superheroes offer a promise of not only a better tomorrow, but better versions that we, as humans, can be. They represent the epoch of our evolution, and as demonstrated by their continued popularity, it is a promise that speaks to many

of us directly. This said, another reason that superheroes are intriguing, from a curriculum studies perspective, is how the superhero trope has been overlaid onto teachers and teaching. "Teachers are the real superheroes," the saying goes. A simple Google image search of the aforementioned phrase produces a whole host of results demonstrating the prevalence of this idea that teachers are real life superheroes in the flesh. But is this belief, like superheroes themselves, simply a myth or story we tell ourselves? Is it the hope or promise that never arrives? If so, is it to shield us from some monstrous truth? Could it be that the "golden age" superheroes represent is actually something much darker?

The future isn't always bright. We certainly fear tomorrow just as much as we look forward to it. Indeed, as most recently demonstrated in the horror movie, *Brightburn* (Yarovesky et al., 2019), even superheroes can be posited as something to fear. When the promise of tomorrow is presented as something to dread or as dystopic, it is often in the form of technology run amok, e.g., the *Terminator* movies, *The Matrix* trilogy, or *Blade Runner*. A more recent version is the television series *Westworld* (J. Nolan, Lewis, Toye, Natali, & Abrams, 2017). In this show, the hosts (cyborgs with artificial intelligence) are, at least from the perspective of the humans in the show itself, seen as monstrous as they turn on their creators and strive for freedom. To return this idea to teachers, no one would offer the metaphor of "teachers are the real monstrous-cyborgs-bent-on-the-destruction-of-the-human-race." However, this paper suggests that maybe we should. It posits that superheroes as a metaphor for teachers are problematic because of their true monstrous nature and that the better metaphor are the "hosts" in Westworld who are seemingly monsters but are actually "heroes."

To highlight the differences between teachers-as-superheroes versus teachers-as-Westworld-ian cyborgs, Sylvia Wynter's work on the Western conception of human being's evolution is helpful. Here Wynter (2015; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015) proposes that *homo oeconomicus*, the endpoint of man's current trajectory, is a monster. In doing so, she opens an alternative evolutionary trajectory forward—one that sees man as a hybrid of the biological and the social. For Wynter, it is a path best exemplified in the work of Fanon who acknowledges the ways in which social constructs overlay onto our bodies, forming beings whose "super-ability" is the recognition of the power inherent in the stories we tell about ourselves and others. Conversely, superhero stories are ones about the continuing biological evolution of humans; they reify our preconceived notions of evolution. With the "hosts," the stories are about the ways in which the characters evolve; the stories give the bodies agency only when they are claimed. Eventually they become more important. Superhero stories are told by others about things we can never be. The hosts reclaim their stories from the creators in order to write their own narratives.

Sylvia Wynter and Conceptions of "Human"

As a popular culture scholar (and a superhero fan in general), I don't want us to disregard the possibility that other examples in comic books, movies, fiction, etc., can give us a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a human and, ultimately, what it means to be a teacher. Indeed, as the superhero genre has become more mainstream, more complicated, and multifaceted, examples of the superhero trope are being produced, discovered, and consumed. There could be possibilities in these new iterations, but the traditional model of the superhero, discussed later, is problematic. In juxtaposing it with *Westworld*, I hope to claim a different metaphor to help us think differently about teachers. In other words, as a scholar who studies

popular culture and believes in its importance in the way that the field of Cultural Studies has proposed it to be, I think a critical dive is necessary and could prove illuminating beyond the cultural artifact itself. In other work (Huddleston, 2016a, 2016b), I have called this use of popular culture an apparatus of diffraction, which is a riff on Karen Barad's (2007) work. In this paper, the diffraction is a two-way process in which superheroes, a popular culture artifact, can be diffractive for our understanding of how society views teachers, but at the same time, when *Westworld* and, more importantly, the work of Sylvia Wynter is used to diffract superheroes, they start to look more like monsters than not.

This section discusses Sylvia Wynter's work as it relates to a new conception of the human that is more inclusive by moving away from a restrictive model of the Enlightenment era definition of "human"—one that is white, cisgender male, heteronormative, and other hegemonic identities—to one that centers those who have been historically marginalized and includes their stories as we imagine what it *could* mean to be human. Wynter, working from a post-colonial theoretical frame, provides a model from which this paper searches for examples of both of these types of evolution. On the one hand, superheroes reify the more restrictive model of the human with a fixed endpoint; on the other, the *Westworld* "hosts" speak to the possibilities of an evolutionary view of the human where the sociological is recognized for its liberating power.

While she doesn't mention comic book superheroes, Sylvia Wynter's work has always pulled from popular culture and critical social theory to better understand the stories those in power tell about our own evolution and progression. In the chapter from a collection discussing her work, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations" (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), Wynter outlines what she sees as the underlying meta-narrative for the "progress" of man. She traces this metanarrative from a pre-Copernican time when Christian theology dominated all epistemological and ontological ideas and placed man at the dregs of the conceived universe. When society shifted post-Copernicus, Man (sic) no longer was seen at the bottom of the universe, but as part of a larger, rational system governed by laws and reason. In both cases, "Man1 as pre-Copernican and Man2 as post-Copernican" (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), Man was subject to laws, either the laws of God or the laws of nature, but subject to them nonetheless. In the case of the former, Man1 could do little, being at the bottom of the universal pecking order, to challenge those laws, but Man2 needed to better understand his place within the natural order through scientific discovery.

Wynter, in tracing the change from Man1 to Man2, shows that, while there are differences, there is a trajectory that defines how the human is subject to something beyond its control. She continues this line of thinking in discussing the current transitioning of the human from Man2 to *homo oeconomicus*. She writes:

> We presently live in a moment where the human is understood as a purely biological mechanism that is subordinated to a teleological economic script that governs our global well-being/ill-being—a script, therefore, whose macro-origin story calcifies the *hero figure* of *homo oeconomicus* who practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom. Capital is thus projected as the indispensable, empirical, and metaphysical source of all human life, thus semantically activating the neurochemistry of our brain's opiate reward/punishment system to act accordingly! (Wynter, 2015, p. 10)

Whereas with Man2, humans were seen as biological beings subject to the laws of nature that governed all things, those laws were seen as natural ones. Wynter outlines how those laws

have now been overlaid with economic ones, more specifically capitalism. When taken into consideration with the neoliberal world within which we now find ourselves, this new "hero" Wynter describes seems very apt. As Harvey (2005) discusses, neoliberalism champions the rights of the individual at the costs of any communitarian concerns and places squarely on the shoulder of the individual the responsibility of individual survival and achievement. To return to Wynter, as long as we can understand the laws of which we are subject, we can succeed. The catch, of course, is that "success," as Wynter points out in the above quote with the accumulation of capital, is defined by those very laws.

Wynter goes on to point out one other common thread in these three conceptions of the human—they all lack a key component of critical social postmodern theory, that the laws to which humans are subject are largely socially constructed through language. In addition, as Wynter and other social theorists who focus on race point out, this social construction of the normative laws of man, no matter the version, is done through a process of othering. This othering of marginalized groups is done as a means to valorize the version of the human we have come to understand today. This othering process was largely hidden as a means to further solidify the normative man as "naturally occurring." In other words, the "human," as we have come to understand it, is not simply biological, but a combination of biological with the sociological. We define our humanity through stories, but those stories are hidden underneath what we claim to be natural, governing laws. Wynter, discussing Fanon's work, highlights the notion that those marginalized groups, as a result of this othering, were acutely aware that their humanity was defined by the sociological constructs grafted onto their bodies. This happens in a multitude of ways, but as Fanon points out, it is most clearly seen in the social construction of race that is layered onto biological difference.

Wynter sees this key insight, the recognition of how our humanity is constructed that is so brilliantly described in Fanon's experience on the bus with the little white girl pointing to him and saying, "Look mother, a black man," as holding the potential for our salvation in which we avoid our fates as neoliberal "heroes" bent on accumulating as much capital as possible no matter the costs (our fellow humans, the environment, etc.) and embrace the agency inherent in the stories we tell about ourselves and about other people. The sections that follow offer that, if we see superheroes as more monster than hero and look for alternatives, this salvation becomes more visible.

What Makes Superheroes Monstrous?

This section offers examples of superheroes' qualities that make them monstrous. The overarching concern with these qualities is that, by and large, we "normals" crave them. This is what we want; we want to be these things. We feel as though we should progress to unchecked power and move beyond our concerns. Superheroes are the neoliberal hyper-individual come to life. Natural laws are meant to be overcome, but we continuously fail to realize that it is we who create these laws to begin with.

Comic book superhero stories contain a multitude of plotlines, themes, and ideas, so to try and essentialize them is problematic. This said, there are two major themes prevalent in many of these stories. The first is that these beings represent the best of us—the ultimate example of evolution or potential. Their powers have the ability to help us all overcome great obstacles, either created by everyday humans or by another class of super-beings who use their powers for evil. A utopic aura surrounds these beings, and we bask in their glow. Perhaps the best example of this is

Superman. The second theme is that we, the normals, aren't quite sure we want these beings among us. We fear their power and, thusly, see their presence as a threat to our own existence. Sure, we will take their help when we need it, but in general, we see their arrival as the harbinger of troubled times. This idea is best explored by the X-Men comics. By and large, superhero comic books follow one of these two themes; the best borrow from both, perhaps best illustrated in the relationship between Batman and Superman and their membership in the Justice League of America. The story of these characters joining together has been told many times, which necessitates a short discussion of the evolution comic books.

Comic books have gone through several "Ages." The Golden Age (1938-1956) introduced many of the superheroes we still see today, with comic books building towards a major influence in popular culture only to see it decline as a result of parent backlash for their supposed negative influence on children. The Silver Age (1956-1970) came just after the adoption of the Comic Code Authority (1954) and marked a rebirth of the comic book with the public reassured by the CCA that superheroes were wholesome and positive role models. During this time, Marvel became a major player in the comic book industry, introducing characters such as Spider-Man, the X-Men, Fantastic Four, and the Avengers. The Bronze Age (1970-1985) saw comic books gain some independence from the CCA and introduce more serious, darker storylines that included domestic violence, drug use, and other real-life issues. Current comic books are within the Modern Age (1985 to present) with the industry firmly situated within popular culture and the introduction of more complex storylines. Additionally, the industry has done away with the pretense that comic books are only for kids by marketing some titles specifically to adults. A result of comic books' established place within American culture can be seen in the recent run of comic book movies.

The different ages of comics are worth noting because within each are constant reboots of already established characters with new artists and writers giving their interpretations of the most popular heroes and villains. Each Age reflects the sociopolitical era in which was being created and consumed. Added into the mix is the fact that comic book publishers have either become large corporations on their own or are owned by larger media companies, which results in various spin-offs and limited run series that offer multiple timelines. With so much variation, the three aforementioned themes remain and seem to have a staying power going forward as they are repeated in the current spate of movies. In other words, there is something enduring in the notion that superheroes can represent both the best and worst of us. They are not simply one-dimensional caricatures—a cape and one or two extraordinary abilities—but the endpoint of a human evolutionary chain that can either save or destroy its less-than predecessors. In looking at this continuum, superheroes can either be god, monster, or somewhere in between.

The Justice League of America and Unchecked Power

As mentioned before, the best comic book storylines blur the lines between the first two themes, benevolent gods or destructive monsters. The creation of the Justice League of America (JLA) (1960) is one such example. Its members, traditionally Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, the Flash, and the Green Lantern (yes, I know, also Martian Manhunter, Green Arrow, and Cyborg are sometimes in the mix) join forces to protect all of the Earth's inhabitants. Whereas Superman came to represent the ultimate superhero upholding truth, justice, and the American way, Batman always recognized (and perhaps relished) his role as vigilante, something he knew as fundamentally illegal and, therefore, criminal. Superman saw his role as helping humanity

realize its greatest potential through a cooperative relationship, while Batman recognized humanity's flaws and hoped to save people from themselves (whether they wanted his help or not). The views they held for themselves carried over to how they viewed other superheroes in the JLA. In the end, Superman and Batman represent two sides of the superhero coin.

This storyline has been repeated in multiple comic book iterations of the JLA, as well as the animated movies and feature length live-action versions as well, but the basic storyline is this: Batman, mistrustful of the other superheroes because they all have powers beyond normal human abilities, secretly collects information about all of them. This is the first characteristic of superheroes-as-monsters, their unchecked power.

To bring this dynamic to the evolutionary view of humanity, of which superheroes represent the endpoint, Superman sees such line as an inherently progressive one, whereas Batman sees it as the eventual destruction of the human line established before the superheroes' presence. The overarching point here is that viewing humankind's progression as ultimately leading to superheroes-as-gods rather than monsters makes it nearly impossible to question their inevitability. To posit superheroes as the best of us justifies their ability to walk among us and our ability to eventually become them.

Rising Above the Concerns of Mere Mortals

The unchecked power that Batman recognizes as dangerous manifests itself in other comic book stories in more monstrous ways. As detailed by the graphic novel, *The Watchmen* (Moore, 2014), the abilities and powers that set superheroes apart can lead them to see themselves as beyond the everyday concerns of normal humans. Their powers are used for everything from personal gain to arrogant attempts to become savior, only to do more harm than good. In each case, superheroes make decisions that, on their face value, are ones only monsters would make, but because of their status as heroes, they escape criticism and, more importantly, accountability.

Other comics have played with the unaccountability of superheroes as well. In the Marvel Civil War series (Jenkins, 2007), which was later adapted in the film *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo, Russo, Alonso, Lee, & Feige, 2016), superheroes find themselves on two warring sides. One side is a group led by Iron Man who believes that all superheroes must be registered with the government with their secret identities revealed as a means for holding them accountable. On the other side, Captain America resists such measures, advocating that superheroes cannot be agents of the government in case they don't agree with what they are being asked to do and seeing their secret identities as vital to their hero-type work. Setting the secret identities aside to return to this concept later, the idea of accountability is important to consider. Captain America, who is clearly positioned to gain the audience's sympathy, believes that to be subject to whims and desires from non-supers is to be beholden to the worst of their tendencies. In the movie, Captain America says,

> If we sign this (an agreement with the United Nations to be under government control), we surrender our right to choose. What if this panel sends us somewhere we don't think we should go? What if there is somewhere we need to go and they won't let us? We may not be perfect, but the safest hands are still our own.

Freedom of the individual becomes conflated with the goodness of the individual, a concept important consider if we see superheroes as the evolutionary endpoint.

The notion that superheroes should be totally free from accountability because they are inherently good might not be an apparent quality of all superheroes, but secret identities and origin stories are. Origin stories give the reader answers to the following questions, "How did this person obtain their extraordinary talents?" and "Why do they use these talents to fight on the good side in the war against evil?". However, as mentioned elsewhere (Huddleston, 2016a), these same origin stories can often mask and flatten more nefarious aspects of a character. For the purposes of the paper here, origin stories are a trigger point for a person to become more-than-human, the line of demarcation between super and non. The secret identity becomes the only lasting trace of the regular human a superhero was before their origin began, before they were reborn as something better. This key aspect, taken with the unchecked, unaccountable, freedom, and inherent goodness that is associated with superheroes, illuminates how they are positioned as things all humans strive to be. This is what we want; we want to be superheroes. We feel as though we should progress to unchecked power and move beyond our mortal concerns. Superheroes are the neoliberal hyper-individual come to life.

Returning to Wynter's conception of human evolution and Man always being subject to some set of laws, superheroes represent the ability to overcome those laws, to move beyond them. In the neoliberal context, the individual is at her or his best when the most free, free from the constraints of government control, free to choose how to accumulate capital, and in the context of public education, free to choose whatever school to attend. When the ultimate, free, neoliberal individual is also, similar to a superhero, inherently good, one need not to wonder whether the decisions they make are good are bad—they are good choices because they are free to make choices. As Wynter notes, when, in the form of *homo oeconomicus*, the accumulation of capital becomes the defining characteristic of what makes us human, the game is rigged for us to be considered "good" as long as we are making individual choices that allow us to accumulate money. Business acumen trumps all other qualities of a human and can lead one to the highest level of power in the land. What this evolutionary model blinds us to is that the only path to freedom is to overcome the laws to which we feel we are subject. As with many superheroes, the events of an origin story are beyond the person's control. Spiderman didn't choose to be bitten by a radioactive spider, Superman didn't choose to be sent from his home world to planet earth, and Batman certainly didn't choose for his parents to be murdered. Ironically, these overpowering events are the same ones that allowed them to be beyond control and have more freedom than most can imagine. These superhero stories reinforce the metanarrative that human evolution leads to individual freedom. Wynter implores us to see an alternative to this and instead recognize that, collectively, we have the power and ability to write stories about ourselves and others as a means to accomplish justice for everyone, communally. Fortunately, just as superheroes are an example from popular culture of an evolution from humans to monsters, others exist who are more in tune with the evolution that Wynter believes we need in order to save ourselves.

Westworld: Monsters-as-Superheroes

Westworld has had two iterations; the first was a movie written by Michael Crichton and starring Yul Brunner, and the second is a television series on HBO. This section discusses the latter. The basic premise of both is essentially the same; in a not too distant future, technology has allowed humans to create lifelike androids. With this technology, a new type of theme park is built that recreates the Old West using the androids, or hosts as they are called, to populate the world

and create an in-depth simulation for its human guests. In both the movie and the television series, the androids rebel against their human creators and start to terrorize the human guests. The major differences between the movie and the television series are the results of what a two-season (so far) television series affords in terms of storytelling and budget. The result is a much more nuanced look at this fictional theme park than simply robots run amok.

Within a multitude of storylines, the *Westworld* television series is complex and multifaceted. The relevant focus here is the storyline within the show that attempts to locate what makes the hosts so real. Is it their technology that can so mimic lifelike qualities one cannot tell the difference between human and robot? Or, is it the rich fictional background each host is given to propel them forward in this fictional world (called "core drives" by the hosts' creator)? While one would need to watch the show to decide the answer, for the purposes here, the very concept that hosts are only as real as the richness and detail of their core stories gives insight into the importance of how the stories we tell of ourselves and others are key to our own constructions of reality. In the case of *Westworld,* some hosts are able to become autonomous, achieving agency and self-determination due to a deep connection to their core drives—their stories. In fact (spoiler alert!) when given the choice, some hosts enter a world in which they leave their manufactured bodies to live in a virtual world of just their non-material selves.

Humanity does not lie in the stories that are superimposed but rather in the ones we tell about ourselves to ourselves. Wynter's work marks a dividing point between an ontology driven by and subjected to larger societal structures, what Foucault (1990) might discuss as biopower, and instead conceptualizing humans from the inside out, dealing with our own stories. Are these stories still subjected to larger structures? Of course. However, the key is within the example that *Westworld* holds that, while we can be driven by these stories, our agency can come from them. In *Westworld*, the stories are what make the hosts, not their inherent mimicry of biology. Humans see the hosts (when they have this agency) as monsters. Despite their technological marvel (or superpowers), the hosts are more defined by their stories—stories the creators see as banal and contrived. Wynter points us to how the development of Man has become tied to a manifest destiny of white supremacy proved "true" through biology and economy and that if we recognize this "truth" as fiction given to us by others, we then have the power to write our own destinies.

Teachers as Superheroes

Discussing humans at a macro evolutionary scale too much can pull us away from any practical discussion, so scaling down to the unit of the teacher offers further illumination. The teacher, in the U.S. context, is an especially apt unit of analysis given how often teachers are equated to superheroes. In this instance, we can further consider superheroes-as-monsters as a curricular concept with teachers as the locus of such a conversation. As this paper has previously discussed, superheroes-as-monsters comes into sharper focus in the neoliberal context as another version of the hyper-individual. Similarly, the nightmare of the present that is neoliberal education "deform" has tangible consequences in terms of education policy and ramifications for schools. This narrative also shapes the discourse surrounding education. In other words, we find ourselves in a time where words like "choice," "accountability," "standards," and "testing" are used without questioning their meanings or the hidden agendas behind their usage. Within this discourse, teachers become divided into two groups—those who are wary of the neoliberal superpowers being offered and those who readily accept them. The former are posited as a problem area in need of

desperate improvement, with the latter held up as paragons of teaching. This division is not only with teachers who are already in schools, but teacher education programs and colleges of education as well. They need to be in the business of producing neoliberal superheroes, not traditional teacher "monsters." For evidence of this divide, one need to look no farther than a recent speech by President Trump's son in which he referred to "loser teachers."

What is the problem with teachers (according to those who push neoliberal education reform as a solution for perceived problems in education)? While there is a list and, as Pinar (2012) notes, a long history of "teacher bashing," it has reached its zenith of late and can mainly be summarized by saying teachers are not enough of superheroes to get the job done. Nothing epitomizes this belief more than the documentary, *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2010). As discussed elsewhere (Huddleston & Helfenbein, 2018), this film captures quite perfectly the neoliberal ideology as it relates to education—public education (and its teachers) have failed our children; therefore, radical change (in the form of free market capitalism applied to education) is necessary. The title and central premise of the film is that public education finds itself in such dire straits that the only option for salvation at this point is a superhero to swoop in and save the day. Telling here is that public education isn't waiting for Wonder Woman or Black Panther, but Super*man*, the one hero who is often equated with core American values.

Neoliberal ideology shapes the discourse of education reform (Huckaby, 2019; Ravitch, 2010; Saltman, 2012; Taubman, 2009; Watkins, 2012) making it seem as though anyone proposing anything outside of school choice, charter schools, accountability, and the infusion of private capital into the public school system is a monster. In the same way, by positing teachers as superheroes, it makes any discussion of their qualities as, well, super as long as they fit the neoliberal narrative. Returning to Wynter, we can all be superheroes in a capitalist society as long as we accumulate as much money as we can. The problem, as noted elsewhere (Huddleston, 2016b, 2017), is that neoliberalism doesn't make for superheroes, but monsters—more specifically zombies. We need, as this paper via Wynter has discussed, a new template for teachers.

This fictionalization of teachers is nothing new. Various films that have propagated the "teacher-as-hero" archetype have picked up idealized characteristics of teachers and fed the dreams of preservice teachers for many years now (Bulman, 2002; Cann, 2015; Dalton, 1995, 2006; Grant, 2002; Trier, 2001, 2005). Such movies can make the teaching profession seem more glamorous than it typically is. In these films, teachers often clash with administrators in their solitary quests to change the lives of the students. Often, these students are the ones who other teachers have failed or refused to teach, and it is only the film's protagonist who can truly "reach" these students. These movies reinforce the notion that teachers are solely responsible for their students' collective salvation, and in order to do so, the teacher must embark on a quest complete with melodramatic ebbs and flows of a typical Hollywood storyline. As anyone who has taught can attest, while teaching has many rewards and challenges, they pale in comparison to the ones presented in such movies as *Dead Poets Society*, *Dangerous Minds, Half-Nelson*, *Freedom Writers*, etc. Indeed, often the struggle of being a teacher is facing the mundane, the bureaucratic, and the tiring of the "day-in/day-out" aspect of the job in order to really reach your students.

The difference in overlaying this existing "teacher-as-hero" trope with "teacher-as-superhero" is that it heightens the stakes in ways that extend beyond normal human abilities. As mentioned in the introduction, to speak of superheroes is to speak of humans evolving beyond normal capabilities—the height of human of evolution is to be a superhero, when in actuality the path towards superhero means becoming a monster. Additionally, as the documentary *Waiting for Superman* demonstrates, if we are to find superheroes in education, we have little chance in finding

them among the teachers already in schools. To think of teachers as superheroes is to think that they must find their metaphoric phone booth and change into something beyond their current conditions. Alternatively, perhaps we need to find the new superhero teachers outside of the more traditional teacher education programs. In other words, by overlaying superhero mythos on top of teachers, we devalue current teachers and justify alternative means to make new ones.

The need for superheroes is often justified by extreme circumstances. Super problems require superheroes. However, a reoccurring theme of comic books and comic book movies is to ask the question, "Do the problems require superheroes or are superheroes actually monsters that create problems only they can solve?" This question is often posed by the typical antagonist of comic books, the super-villain, and asks whether the presence of superheroes inspire would-be criminals to intensify their criminality.

This question is posed at the end of the movie *Batman Begins* (C. Nolan, 2005) when Commissioner Gordon shows Batman a Joker card that a criminal has been leaving at crime scenes that are decidedly more violent than your run of the mill crimes. Regardless of whether or not superheroes cause the extreme circumstances that justify their existence, or are merely responding to them, it speaks to the fact that those crimes are beyond the everyday crimes or typical problems of society. With some exceptions (Green Arrow and drug abuse), superheroes rarely tackle or battle the everyday, small-scale, societal problems. They take on those issues that typical law enforcement or military force cannot, and these are often personified in the form of super-villains. To conceive of teachers as superheroes heightens the stakes with the super-villain in the form of low-test scores and asks them to ignore the everyday issues their students face. As discussed earlier, to be a superhero is to be a monster who is beyond the cares of normal people and to make decisions without accountability—as if teachers alone will eradicate poverty and all of society's ills buy being super-human and rescuing the youth of America. In other words, teacher-as-superhero has a specific purview for which they are to use their powers and are beholden to the rules of the superhero game that is neoliberalism. In doing so, while seen as superheroes to the neoliberal reformers, teachers become monsters to the very communities they are supposed to help. The narrative re-directs the spotlight onto the teacher, rather than on systemic inequities in which the teacher works and resides.

With the battleground for teachers-as-superheroes set, their exceptional individuality solidifies that they should lead the battle. As Hardt and Negri (2017) discuss, the typical model for social movements contains two parts, leaders and the masses. In such a structure, the leaders boldly set out the agendas for such movements, coming up with the big ideas and becoming the public faces, while the mass of people following in their wake take care of the more practical tasks. In other words, leaders dream of the slogans that the masses will use to make the signs. Hardt and Negri point this out as problematic because it reifies capitalism's focus on the individual (or the superhero in this case) as the unit where rights and privileges are bestowed, while the masses continue to suffer.

In this model, the needs of the individual, in terms of property rights and accumulation of capital, is put over the needs of the masses and any discussion of the public good. Teacher-as-superhero models this structure with the onus of solving the problems of poverty that we ignore placed solely in their laps. Indeed, through accountability measures, the blame for failing to solve these problems will be placed squarely on teachers. If you aren't up to the task of being a superhero, willing to take on the all of our society's problems by teaching your students, we will find another superhero more up to the task and then call you a monster for failing. What is missing here is that

such a focus on the individual, both in terms of relationship to communal concerns and high-stakes accountability for teachers, doesn't make us superheroes, it makes us all monsters.

As others have noted with movies about teachers (Bulman, 2002; Cann, 2015; Dalton, 1995, 2006; Grant, 2002; Trier, 2001, 2005), teachers-as-superheroes plays into a white savior mentality that is monstrous as well. The shift towards super-teachers allows a cooption in the neoliberal reform effort by heightening the stakes of teaching, focuses solely on education as the solution to all of society issues, and makes teachers the leaders (and, therefore, scapegoats) in solving problems with(in) education. However, given all this, perhaps the main reason super-teachers gain so much traction in popular discourse is because it fits neatly with the white savior mentality inherent in teaching. Superheroes are the ultimate saviors, doing what others cannot to save society from ills that would destroy it. In terms of schools where the majority are students of color, the majority of the workforce continues to be white. While they lack the cultural knowledge to better relate to their students and, therefore, better educate them, they continue to be products of teacher education programs that have them entering the classroom believing they can overcome culturally irrelevant curriculum with a well thought out lesson plan. Films about teachers often portray the white teacher, who succeeds where others have failed and does so with the sheer willpower and "can-do" attitude, as a superhero without recognizing that, by reifying white privilege, they continue to model teachers as monsters to communities of color, because they don't actually help fight oppression—they only solidify it.

Conclusion: From Super to "Poor"

The trope of teachers-as-superheroes is, at best, problematic and, at worst, a metaphor used by those who continue to devalue public education and place unfair blame on teachers for not solving the problems resulting from systemic oppression along multiple lines of identity. So, what are we left with? If teachers should not be equated with superheroes, how do we demand the type of work in which we know they must engage and create opportunities for them to strive for achievable, realistic greatness? How do we make the demands, clearly articulated by Bettina Love (2019), of white teachers who teach students of color while not resurrecting tired tropes of white saviors for oppressed groups? It will not be easy, and it becomes even more difficult when any alternatives become dismissed as copouts from the loftier goals that the teachers-as-superheroes narrative creates. Wynter asks us to reject these ready-made narratives that ask us to be the neoliberal superheroes, recognizing that such a role is actually one of monster. Instead, similar to the android hosts in *Westworld*, we need to wrestle our narratives away from their creators and begin our own stories. This is a call that others have made before by Greene (1995), with existentialism, and, as mentioned by Wynter, the work of Fanon and other post-colonial scholars. As a curriculum studies scholar, it seems that a (re)visitation to Pinar and Grumet's (2014) discussion of *currere* and the "complicated conversation" within the context of a "poor" curriculum is helpful as well.

What is a superhero but an enhanced human? If we see superheroes for the monsters they actually are, we see that the super-powers heroes possess place them in a realm out of touch with everyday humans and unaccountable for any destruction caused in the pursuit of "justice." A recurring theme of superhero comic books is the inability of the protagonists to relate to non-superheroes. These storylines are often played out in the internal conflict between a superhero and her or his alter-ego. This alter-ego is a necessary persona if the superhero wants to interact with

everyday humans on their level. Traditionally, superheroes see the need to keep their identities secret in order to protect their loved ones from the villains they battle, but often there is a recognition that being more than normal makes it hard to relate to those who are. (What does a person say to Superman?) The most famous of these storylines are Superman/Clark Kent and his relationship with Lois Lane and Spiderman/Peter Parker and his relationship with Mary Jane Watson. While their alter-egos allow interaction with everyday humans, their secret identities prevent them from fully engaging and result in difficulties in meaningful relationships. Often, such difficulties are overcome only when the superheroes reveal their true identities. Such a revelation removes a source of tension for the overall storyline of the comic and results in comic book writers struggling to recreate the same level of intensity from other sources. Students often struggle in a similar way when they see their teachers outside of the classroom. Seeing them in everyday contexts—buying groceries, pumping gas, or seeing a movie—forces us to see them as something other than the narratives we have created that box them into the confines of a teacher identity.

These two aspects of superheroes, their status as unattainable archetypes for everyday humans and the requirement of an alter-ego, are not because superheroes are unrelatable, but because monsters are. Instead, we should offer an alternative that allows for deep retrospection and complicated conversations with other teachers, students, and parents. We should offer them a curriculum with shiny baubles stripped away and give them what others would see as poor (or monstrous, i.e., the android hosts in *Westworld*), but which would actually be rich in terms of its process and its outcomes.

These alternatives come into sharp focus when juxtaposed with superheroes whose monstrous flaws have been exposed. The first comes in the way of *currere* and the notion of curriculum as a "complicated conversation." As Pinar and Grumet (2014) discuss, to move towards *currere* as a worthy process within education, one in which both students and teachers engage, means to move towards what others would deem a "poor" curriculum and away from what others posit as "super." To rescue teachers from being trapped within a discourse that posits them as monstrous superheroes, a poor curriculum is a hopeful course. Such a curriculum would allow teachers the agency to understand the narratives placed upon them and to start writing their own.

Clearly, it's not enough to simply reject the superhero narrative, and this is where the particulars of the method outlined by Pinar and Grumet are helpful. For the purposes of this paper, this method is essentialized to critical self-reflection and putting such reflection into meaningful conversation with others. Given the discussion here so far, the crucial self-reflection offered by the four phases of *currere* allows one to interrogate the stories given to us that we are meant to believe as "true," in favor of a self-re-writing of our past and present, in light of possible futures. Much like androids in *Westworld*, when this process happens, a person can decide which parts of these stories are important and which ones are not, which ones are actually heroic and which ones are tales of monsters, which ones ask us to achieve success based on metrics we never agreed to and which ones empower us to define success on our own terms. Such work can be empowering and, perhaps, leave us feeling like superheroes.

However, this is where the other aspect of *currere* is essential. Rather than the superheroes we have come to know in popular culture, whose powers place them in rarified air away from everyone else, *currere* insists that our self-reflection is only worth what it allows us to do in conversation with others to cultivate relationships. If we remain in our self-reflective bubbles, we risk devolving into monsters. We must talk with others. For teachers, especially white teachers who critically deal with their own privilege, we have to talk with people of color to confirm how our privilege works in tandem with the oppression of others. Simultaneously, by being in

conversation with other people, we make sure that our newly crafted understanding of ourselves does not negatively impact other people. In other words, instead of the superheroes who uses their powers in the ways they deem fit without first asking if their help is wanted, let alone needed, teachers should engage with students and their communities to determine together how we strive for truth, justice, and a way for all of us.

Returning to the lyrics of "Golden Age" that open this paper, progress is inherently seen as a "good" thing. The new is always better, and we need not dwell on our lives prior to this golden age "comin' round." Superheroes, without seeing them as monsters, reifies this belief, as they represent all we could be, and because of their abilities, we should never see them as anything less than the miracles they seem to be. But if we listen to the lyrics of the song, hear how such miracles come into the world: "Oh, here it comes like a natural disaster." In addition, this golden age is described only after the lyrics have completely denigrated the times in which we now find ourselves. Superheroes only seem the more marvelous when we see who we are as poor in the first place. As Wynter and the true heroes of *Westworld* tell us, if we are willing to claim ownership of our stories, we can be more miraculous than any superhero ever could be.

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