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**VERTIGO'S REWRITING ETHOS: THE POETICS AND
POLITICS OF A COMICS IMPRINT**

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Note

Sections of Chapter 4 have been previously published in the essay collection *La Bande Dessinée en Dissidence: Alternative, Indépendance, Auto-Édition/Comics in Dissent: Alternative, Independence, Self-Publishing* (2014) and in the on-line academic journal *Comicalités: Études de Culture Graphique* (2014). They have been revised and amended for the purpose of the present work.

Vertigo's Rewriting Ethos: The Poetics and Politics of a Comics Imprint - Abstract

This dissertation critically examines Vertigo, DC Comics' adult-oriented imprint, in combining a wide range of approaches that include cultural sociology, narratology, comics criticism and postmodern theory. More precisely, the present work provides a (re)examination of the label's poetics, politics, and history, which the critical community have rather restrictively confined within the broader discourse of the art form's development – that is, the increasing maturation and legitimation of comics through the graphic novel phenomenon, the boom of 'adult' comics, and the often literature-oriented canonization of singular 'serious' and 'respectful' comics creators. Moving beyond this rhetoric of maturation and literature, this study argues that, since its inception, Vertigo has aimed to develop a particular rewriting ethos in order to stand out as a distinguished producer and organization within the American comics field.

Aspects of the label's register of rewriting can be seen in its programme, agenda, and cultural identity, all of which are of course intrinsically linked to the 'second-degree' and revisionist impulses underlying a vast majority of Vertigo comics. Many works produced by the imprint are indeed based on dense intertextual networks; they can be described as 'palimpsestuous' because they provide new perspectives on historical and fictional persona, narrative traditions, or particular storyworlds that they transform or subvert (e.g. *American Vampire*, *Animal Man*, *Doom Patrol*, *Fables*, *Sandman*, *Swamp Thing*, *The Unwritten*, etc.). These and other Vertigo series' multilayered processes of re-narrativization coincide with their (meta)engagement with genre-meshing practices, issues of dis/continuity and dislocation, as well as memory and historiographic concerns. Vertigo has both enhanced and reformulated these comics' particular poetics and politics of revision in order to advance its own stance of rewriting at the macro level. This macro stance of reconfiguration entails

innovative ‘expert’ perspectives on medium- and culture-specific issues such as multiversality, seriality, the renaissance of the auteur paradigm, and the mainstream/alternative dialectic.

The present work investigates the mechanisms and effects of this manifold rewriting ethos. While (re)reading particular Vertigo series’ postmodern-driven aesthetics through the critical lens of rewriting, this book surveys and discusses Vertigo’s catalogue as an *oeuvre* in and on itself; it analyzes the imprint’s key and innovative editorial policies, examines extradiegetic material as charged with narrative and brand power, and reassesses the label’s connection to the so-called ‘British Invasion’ movement. In so doing, this study adds evidence to Vertigo’s reputation as a norm-breaking comics producer beyond its so-called ‘literary’ qualities and ‘adult’ sensibilities.

INTRODUCTION

Vertigo as a *Site* of Rewriting: Discovering the ‘Second Degree’ of the Imprint

I am not what you could call a ‘lifer,’ that is, in the jargon of comics fandom and subculture(s), a person who has been reading and usually collecting comics for as long as they can remember. I am not American either. This is not to say I did not know about or was completely unfamiliar with comics before I started working on the present dissertation – by comics, I refer here to culturally specific works whose origins are Anglo-American¹. The above indications, however, may in part explain why I did not grow up with Vertigo comics and, more precisely, why my first experience with a Vertigo book was far from a traditional one – Vertigo is the so-called ‘adult-oriented’² imprint of the American mainstream publisher DC Comics³ which, since 1968, has been part of a larger media conglomerate which has

¹ My use of this phrase is not intended to promote a specific national or linguistic perspective on comics which can, obviously, encompass a variety of works that are produced by and published in various geographical horizons – that is comics in widest sense as referring to various practices of graphic narratives including *bande dessinée*, manga, etc. Rather, it is merely used here to emphasize a particular tradition and ‘world’ of comics that is different from the European comics world(s) I have been used to experiencing as a non-Anglophone. For insightful observations regarding the many transcultural and transnational relations that have historically animated the art form and comics industry, see the multi-contributor volume entitled *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads* (Daniel Stein, Shane Denson, and Christina Meyer [eds.], 2013).

² Although Vertigo does not publish erotic comics, this ‘adult-oriented’ modifier is often employed to describe the imprint. While this terminology is certainly problematic notably because it raises “the issue of precise age-groups,” the phrase has nevertheless stuck to describe comics “in contra-distinction to titles in the traditional preadolescent and adolescent categories” (Roger Sabin, 2010 [1993]: 3). Generally speaking, this phrase is now favored by both the industry itself and the legitimizing institutional arbiters of the comics form – including the sector actors, journalists, fans, and the critical community – to refer to more ‘mature’ works for allegedly ‘mature’ readers.

³ Since 2009, the mainstream publishing house has been reframed as a part of the ‘DC Entertainment’ group. According to the company’s overview feature that appears on the Warner Bros.’ website, DC Entertainment constitutes “the creative division charged with strategically integrating its iconic content [i.e. the characters and stories behind the brands DC Comics, Vertigo and MAD] across Warner Bros. and Time Warner” (Warner Bros Entertainment Inc., 2017: n.p.) – Time Warner being yet another division of the Warner Bros’ manifold and multimedia production platform. It is clear that the formation of DC Entertainment clearly emanates from the

grown into a fully integrated, broad-based entertainment company that is currently referred to as the Warner Bros. Entertainment Corporation.

Most likely contrary to many comics lifers and fans – whether American or not – I did not discover the world of the Vertigo imprint through any of its ‘classics,’ a non-exhaustive list of which would most probably include foundational titles such as Alan Moore et al.’s *Swamp Thing* (1984-1987), Neil Gaiman et al.’s *Sandman* (1989-1996), Grant Morrison et al.’s *Doom Patrol* (1989-1993), or maybe even later series such as Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon’s *Preacher* (1995-2000) or Bill Willingham et al.’s *Fables* (2002-2015). Rather, I first came across the world of Vertigo through a book that, I believe it is fair to say, somehow went under the radar of many a Vertigo comics *aficionado*, most probably because the narrative it presents somewhat distances itself from the fantastic genre in its many guises that most ‘classic’ Vertigo comics are known for. The book in question was Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece’s *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery* (2008) – a one-shot comic book that is set in the 1930s and narrates the story of Zane Pinchback, a light-skinned African-American reporter. Zane passes for white in order to investigate lynchings of blacks in the Deep South and, after doing so, condemns the perpetrators of these dreadful acts in the column entitled “Incognegro” that he writes for a New York-based newspaper.

At the time when I read *Incognegro*, around 2010, I had just started my doctoral research project whose initial goal was, rather presumptuously in looking back, to propose a

Warner Bros. corporation’s wish to integrate the economy of the comic-book industry (including most prominently DC Comics) into that of other media and consumer products – including movies, television, home entertainment, and interactive games – in order to develop a financially-relevant strategy that is based on the synergy of particular cross- and multimedia franchises. Because this move of the company is rather recent, however, it is relatively hard for the critic to assess the impact of this corporate-wide rebranding on the comics industry. This is why I have retained the term DC Comics rather DC entertainment. I should point out that my doing so is also motivated by the fact that much of the following discussion predates the formation of DC Entertainment and hence is mainly concerned with the (dis)connections and tensions between the Vertigo label and its most direct parent-company, i.e. DC Comics.

new expansion of comics studies by examining particular comics through a postcolonial lens. I did not wish to engage in what Franny Howes has designated as “the stereotype collector” paradigm in comics studies, that is a rather exhausted mode of inquiry that most generally involves that the researcher “looks at images of [...] indigenous people and evaluates the quality of their portrayal” (2010: par. 11).⁴ Rather, some of the questions that I had in mind went along these lines: What contemporary comics and graphic novels can we characterize, perhaps problematically, as postcolonial? Can the art form appropriately convey and deal with such issues as dislocation, crossing, displacement, diaspora, and resistance, all of which are more often than not explored in postcolonial and transnational works of fiction, and in a large body of scholarship that would include postcolonial, multicultural, or ethnic studies? In what ways do the mixing of text and image as well as the art form’s inherently fragmented layout can be said to participate in the construction of the generally hybrid and kaleidoscopic identity of the postcolonial subject or diasporic self? How can voices and genres denounce and possibly subvert the dominant ideology and narrative discourses of ‘colonial’ centers of comics production, the historically exploitative nature of the comics ‘mainstream,’ or else its long-held demonizing of the other – racial or otherwise? In order to provide tentative answers to these questions, I was very much drawn to the critical concept of ‘writing back’ initially developed in postcolonial studies.⁵ Broadly speaking, this theoretical paradigm focuses on

⁴ Book-length studies using this approach and commenting on the misrepresentation of certain minorities in comics indeed abound. They notably include Michael A. Sheyahshe’s *Native Americans in Comic Books* (2008), Fredrik Strömberg’s *Black Images in the Comics* (2003), and William H. Foster III’s *Looking for a Face Like Mine* (2005). Though to a lesser extent, other critical examinations of how colonial heritage has culturally and historically influenced particular regional productions such as Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* also fall under this category. Studies worth mentioning in this respect include Philippe Delisle’s *Bande dessinée franco-belge et imaginaire colonial: Des années 1930 aux années 1980* (2008) and *De ‘Tintin au Congo’ à ‘Odilon Verjus’: Le missionnaire, héros de la BD belge* (2011), and Marc McKinney’s *The Colonial Heritage of French Comics* (2011).

⁵ The idea of ‘writing back’ was made popular as a critical concept especially thanks to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s multi-contributor volume entitled *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2003 [1989]), which took its title from Salman Rushdie’s “the Empire writes back to the Centre.” For an interesting use of the concept in regards to rewritings of canonical Western works by

rewritings of specific canonical texts and works whose narrative form, content, or style are imbued with strategies of counter-discourse, including the challenging of particular histories, representations, or politics of storytelling as well as, paradoxically enough, the contesting of particular canonical authorities. I was particularly interested in exploring if and to what extent this idea of ‘writing back’ could be applied not only to particular comics but, possibly, to specific comics traditions, genres, and modes of production.

Johnson and Pleece’s *Incognegro* seemed to be a good start for this line of inquiry. The book can indeed be said to write back to many narrative and generic conventions, including most clearly the superhero genre. *Incognegro* uses many aspects of the superhero genre to call into question some of its underlying ideologies and historical tenets. In order to assess the ways in which Johnson and Pleece’s graphic narrative articulates what in many ways can be described as a manifold counter-discourse on the superhero genre and figure, let me first briefly address how this narrative can be located in the superhero genre.

Incognegro primarily echoes the superhero genre in presenting a protagonist that resembles the ‘classical’ superhero figure. As comics critic and historian Peter Coogan has argued in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006: 30-60), the superhero can be defined along four constituent elements, namely: a pro-social mission, a dual identity, a costume through which the codename and/or superheroic identity of the character is conveyed and, finally, extraordinary powers.⁶ The protagonist of *Incognegro* fits that model. Just like the conventional superhero, Zane Pinchback is forced into action by the ineffectual nature of

postcolonial authors and the ways in which the latter have called into question the politics of Western storytelling at large, see John Thieme’s *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon* (2001).

⁶ Needless to say, Coogan’s definition of the superhero figure can certainly be called into question since his (too) strict approach forbids many a superhero (story) to fit his model. Nevertheless, it seems fair to argue that the features that the critic has singled out remain important generic and historical markers of the superhero figure and genre. For more insights on the problematic definition of the superhero, see the essay collection *What is a Superhero?* (2013), which Coogan has co-edited.

democratic institutions and administrations⁷ – in this case racial segregation. Just like Superman has been characterized as “the champion of the oppressed [...] sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need,”⁸ Zane defends oppressed members of society. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that Johnson and Pleece’s protagonist does not, as he puts it, “wear a mask like Zorro or a cape like the Shadow,” he “don[s] a disguise nonetheless” (*Incognegro*, 2008: 18). Smoothing his hair with a little of “Madame C.J.’s magic” indeed allows Zane to “camouflage” his racial identity (*Incognegro*, 2008: 18) and to adopt his distinctive ‘Incognegro’ alter ego. Finally, it is this ‘disguise,’ combined with strong resolve and will, that grants the protagonist his powers. Because he can endorse both black and white identities, Zane possesses an omniscient vision of sorts similar to many a superhero. This vision allows him to infiltrate and spy on groups of white people. By the same token, the protagonist’s use of these powers can also be said to distance himself from other stereotypical tragic or opportunistic ‘passing’ figures, who generally perform a white identity in order to access to privilege, social advancement, or to ensure their survival in a segregated society.

Despite these resemblances with the classical superhero as defined by Coogan, *Incognegro*’s protagonist differs from the latter in significant ways. In so doing, this graphic mystery exemplifies the limitations of Cooga’s insightful yet incomplete theoretical model. For example, it is worth noting that the southern locales wherein the ‘disguised’ Zane Pinchback primarily uses his powers have been historically ignored by superheroes and almost non-existent in superhero narratives. As Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted have argued in their introduction to *Comics and the U.S. South* (2012), southern locales are quite rare in

⁷ As comics and film critic Scott Bukatman has argued, early Superman stories begin with the superhero “tackling [...] major social problem[s]” such as “corrupt politicians, slum clearance, [and] racketeering in the taxicab industry” (2013 [2003]: 185).

⁸ This is how creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster described Superman in the very first page page of *Action Comics* #1 (1938), in which the man of steel appeared for the first time.

superhero comics. When they do appear, “they are typically treated [...] as deviations from an unarticulated norm” that “draws substantially from the medium’s own origins amid the urban skyscrapers of the Northeast United States and among the pulp genres of the western frontier and suburban Midwest” (2012: vii). In fact, it is fair to say that the various influences that Costello and Whitted refer to have participated in the construction of a particular cultural model of the superhero (narrative), one that has been keen on presenting whiteness and the city as normative. By having their African-American superhero-like protagonist travel to a rural area of the US South – a region that has been plagued by a traumatic history of slavery, racial injustice, and segregation –, Johnson and Pleece remind us that superheroes have historically neglected particular spaces where various forms of injustice have yet been commonplace. In light of this, it is possible to claim that the artists indirectly underscore the traditional superhero’s lack of involvement in the American South in order to highlight the fact that African-Americans have rarely benefited from the powers and/or protection of superheroes.⁹ Thus, *Incognegro* alerts us to the limited scope of superheroes’ surveillance activities and, by extension, to the rather exclusionary politics underlying superhero fiction.

Incognegro does not only draw attention to the geographical and social aspects of the superhero genre’s exclusionary politics, however. Johnson and Pleece no doubt contextualize their story in the 1930s because the period fits with the numerous historical references to the Harlem Renaissance that the book draws on. But by presenting a superhero-like protagonist in a historical context whose diegetic time frame most likely predates the ‘official’ origins of the superhero genre – which both scholars and fans usually trace back to the first ‘canonical’

⁹ This inability of traditional superheroes to defend ethnic and cultural minorities has (in)famously been addressed in a 1979 superhero comic which depicts the superhero Green Lantern looking down, rather ashamed, and remaining powerless after an elderly black man confronts him with his lack of involvement for racial justice. As the elderly man puts it in directly addressing the superhero: “I been readin’ about you...How you work for the Blue Skins...and how on a planet someplace you helped out the Orange Skins...and you done considerable for the Purple Skins. Only there's skins you never bothered with! The Black skins!” (“No Evil Shall Escape my Sight,” *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* #76, 1970: 6).

appearance of Superman in 1938 –, there is little doubt that Johnson and Pleece also wish to contend that some passing figures were, if not superheroes *avant l'heure*, ‘real’ proto-superheroes of sorts. After all, as previously suggested, passing figures in Afro-American literature indeed resemble superheroes in that they possess a dual identity and particular abilities. But it is important to add that some ‘activist’ passing figures who are willing to use their ‘powers’ to infiltrate groups of white people and fight racial injustice, like Zane Pinchback does, engage in particular surveillance activities that are clearly reminiscent of superheroes’ watching over the city or other spaces to regulate their non-law-abiding citizens.

This more pronounced connection between activist passing figures and traditional superheroes is supported by the many literary and historical echoes to real ‘committed’ passing figures that *Incognegro* deploys. In the author’s note that prefaces the book, for instance, mulatto writer Mat Johnson mentions that it is after he learned in college about the activism of African-American essayist and journalist Walter White¹⁰ that he started thinking that it was worth writing about his experience as “a black boy who looked white” and grew up in African-American environment (Mat Johnson, 2008: n.p.). More specifically, he wanted to write about his childhood fantasy, one in which he imagined “living in another time, another situation where [...] his ethnic appearance would be an asset instead of a burden,” an asset that would allow him to function as a “race spy in the war against white supremacy” (Mat Johnson, 2008: n. pag.), much in a similar fashion to how White used his pale complexion to investigate lynchings and segregation in the South of the U.S. in the early twentieth century.

¹⁰ White joined the staff of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in its early years. He was then head of the organization for over twenty years, overseeing the protesting activities against racial segregation across the nation. White is also the author of the ‘passing’ novel *Flight*, first published in 1926. Last but not least, it is important to point out that White used his pale complexion to investigate lynchings and race riots taking place in the South in the late 1910s through the late 1920s, some of which are discussed in his autobiography *A Man Called White*, first published in 1948.

In the same line of reasoning, *Incognegro*'s protagonist, Zane Pinchback, is named after another mulatto African-American poet and novelist who is considered a historical forerunner of the Harlem Renaissance: Jean Toomer. Quite interestingly, the author was born Nathan Eugene Pinchback Toomer. Though less activist than White, Toomer spent much of his life trying to escape the restrictions of racial identity because he thought he was an American citizen before being black or white.

By suggesting the existence of real proto-superheroes of African-American origins, I do not wish to claim that Johnson and Pleece reclaim a superhero heritage for *Incognegro* and, by extension, for a particular strand of passing literature. Rather, in articulating what could be labeled a 'mock-superhero' narrative framework that draws on real history and figures, Johnson and Pleece interrogate some of the narrative mechanisms and ideologies underlying superhero fiction. First, *Incognegro*'s reliance on real figures and histories can be said to ironically turn into ridicule superheroes' powerlessness in the face of real threats, that is, superheroes' inability to take action in the real world despite the fact that they were in part created as a response to the rise of fascism¹¹ and that some of them literally joined the fight against Nazism in their diegetic universe(s).¹² Moreover, it can be said that by privileging writing and by extension literature to fight racial injustice, *Incognegro* calls into question the anti-democratic means that most superheroes since the advent of Superman have employed to fight crime or the so-called 'Axis of Evil.' Whereas most superheroes indeed primarily rely on raw strength and violence to enforce law and/or justice, Zane Pinchback – like the real historical figures he is modelled after – cannot resort to physical prowess to save the crisis he faces, most obviously because he would risk his life in doing so, but also because he realizes

¹¹ For more insights on the connection between superheroes and fascism, especially in the early years of the genre, see Chris Gavalier (2015).

¹² The cover of Captain American's first issue (published in March 1941 by Timely Comics), for instance, depicts the American superhero *par excellence* punching Adolf Hitler in the face.

that the threat he fights cannot be contained with violence. Rather, it is through literacy and wit that *Incognegro*'s protagonist further criticizes superheroes' inability to act in the real world. The artists' rooting of the character in real history coincides with their wish to present a superhero-like protagonist who does not need fantastical powers but rather hopes to bear witness to a particular traumatic reality that the reader can understand and possibly empathize with since it is not anchored in fantasy. As such, in fact, Zane Pinchback can be said to follow in the footsteps of reporting figures created by alternative comics artists such as Art Spiegelman and Joe Sacco who, as Vanessa Russell has argued, engage in a type of memory work that challenges the "superhero's vision of omniscience" and thus, propose to "use the reporter figure in a replacement capacity for the superhero" (2009: 229).

Next to interrogating some of the narrative ideologies underlying superhero fiction, Johnson and Pleece's mock-superhero narrative also indirectly advocates that the dominant historiographic discourses exploring the superhero figure and genre are clearly ideologically-flawed. Various scholars have indeed argued that the origins of the genre are intrinsically connected to, first, socio-cultural changes such as urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism (Scott Bukatman, 2003; Aldo Regalado, 2015) and, second, to various popular narrative traditions, among which dime novels, adventure and frontier-inspired stories, pulps, detective fiction, and masked vigilantism – e.g. Coogan (2006), Coogan and Robin S. Rosenberg (eds., 2012), Jean-Paul Gabilliet, (2010 [2005]), Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (eds., 2013). However, by amalgamating the superhero (genre) with particular passing figures and literature, *Incognegro* argues in an oblique way that superhero scholarship has so far overlooked the role that a particular strand of early twentieth-century African-American writers and activists may have played in the construction of the superhero figure and genre.

Johnson and Pleece indeed ironically comment on the ways in which the history of segregation and racial politics in the US have made it impossible for particular passing texts and figures to integrate the (pre)history of superhero fiction. As Zane puts it in the scene that depicts his ‘transformation’ – a scene which further echoes the superhero genre (fig.1) –,¹³ since “they [white people] refuse [...] to see [their violent] past, they can’t really see me too well, either” (Johnson and Pleece 2008, 18). Thus, integrating passing figures such as Zane in the (pre)history of superheroes would imply that America recognized a traumatic past that would include the history of interracial encounters in the U.S. and, one might add, the fallibility of the adage that Superman and most superheroes after him have endorsed, that is ‘truth, justice, and the American way.’ This is most likely why by the end of Zane’s ‘transformation’ scene, the protagonist and narrator addresses the reader in asking them to “watch [him] step out of history” (*Incognegro*, 2008: 18).

These statements, in fact, suggest that in contrast to most superheroes – especially Superman,¹⁴ Zane Pinchback and the many real passing figures he is modelled after cannot be Americanized. Therefore, they can hardly be integrated in a proto-superhero canon. The reason for this manifold exclusion is at least twofold. First, racial passers destabilize the reassuring binary dynamics in terms of dual identity that the superhero personifies. By extension, such liminal figures challenge the good/evil binary that superhero narratives have historically supported. Secondly, the ability of passing figures to cross over the color line challenges the traditional alleged omniscience and panoptic vision of superheroes and,

¹³ Drawing on both recent and older examples of superhero narratives, Marc Attalah (2014) has suggested that the episode of the superhero’s transformation has functioned as a key moment in the history of genre since its early days. Quite interestingly, he argues that the scene of the superhero’s transformation is invariably connected to social anxiety and dystopian values and ideas (Attalah, 2014: 86-96).

¹⁴ Comics critic Chris Murray has shown that even though he is of alien origin, Superman resonates with the meta-narrative of American unity because he “touches upon on the main themes that characterize the American experience: immigration and integration” (2002: 188).

possibly, the inclusive yet incomplete model that scholars have pointed out to describe the superhero genre. Zane's particular 'enhanced vision,' which differs from that of traditional superheroes, seems to be corroborated by several panels in the page describing his transformation (cf. fig.1). In the third panel of this page, for example, a transparent American flag separates Zane from his alter-ego refraction. This translucent effect, which can also be observed in the second panel, clearly echoes African-American thinker W.E.B. Du Bois' philosophical concept of 'the veil,' which he developed in his autobiographical work *Darkwater: Voice from Within the Veil* (2007 [1920]). According to Du Bois, the veil covered colored people and functioned as an invisible barrier between black and white people, a barrier imposed by segregation and racial ideologies in the US. Throughout *Darkwater*, Du Bois makes clear that African-Americans are conscious of the veil covering them but insists that through it, they can see whites clearly whereas whites cannot because the veil constantly distorts their viewpoints. In sum, through their protagonist, Johnson and Pleece comment on how a particular understanding of Du Bois' veil may have affected the superhero genre, not only on a historiographic level, but also in terms of narrative ideology.

Finally, it should be said that the multifaceted 'writing back' discourse that *Incognegro* explores also works well with the peculiar visual aesthetics of the book. The book adopts a 'color-free' aesthetics, that is, black and white visuals without halftones or shades of grey. This specific visual style obviously renders racial identity "in monochromatic drawings" (Tim Caron 2012, 140), and thereby lives up to the book's subtitle: 'a graphic mystery.' More precisely, Pleece's art style results in a lack of visually clear-cut distinctions between the protagonist and other light-complexioned or white characters in the book, thus problematizing racial perception and the representation of both blackness and whiteness. This is not to say that this 'color-free' art amounts to an outright concealing of blackness or to a complete erasure of African American identity. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that Pleece's art

has the merit to reinforce the ‘writing back’ ideology that the narrative adopts insofar as the former also ‘draws back’ to the long-held discriminatory discourses of the comics medium around the black body. Pleece’s art, in other words, challenges the historical fetishization and tokenizing of blackness in comics.¹⁵ In fact, considering the many parallels that *Incognegro* draws with the superhero figure and genre, I believe that it is fair to say that Pleece’s visual approach specifically aims at countering how many of the first African-American superheroes appearing in mainstream comics in the late 1960s and early 1970s were “marked purely for their race,” as Marc Singer has perceptively put it in his discussion of race and superhero comics, citing names such as Black Lightning and Black Panther (2002: 107).

After this analysis of *Incognegro*, whose purpose and relevance for the introduction of this work will become clearer in a moment, let me come back to where I left off the initial line of reasoning of this dissertation’s introduction before I started analyzing Johnson and Pleece’s collaboration. As I hope the reader will have no doubt realized by now, I was quite struck by the richness of *Incognegro*’s writing back ideology at a time when I was barely drawing the contours of my doctoral research. So much so, in fact, that *Incognegro* made me rethink my initial research project, especially since I was struggling to come up with what I believed could be a decent *and* consistent corpus of postcolonial comics in the widest sense of the term – that is, as I have previously suggested, a selection of works whose ideology, formal characteristics, production contexts, or politics of storytelling at large participate in a vocabulary of resistance or dissent in regard to specific narrative codes, cultural traditions, social worlds, etc., whether or not these comics were produced in actual postcolonial spaces.

The comics I had gathered up to then for the corpus of my initial research project were too heterogeneous in terms of narrative and cultural traditions, geographical horizons, and

¹⁵ For an insightful perspective on the tokenizing and erasure of blackness in contemporary mainstream American comics, see Ronald Wimberly’s short critical web-comic “Lighten Up” (2015).

linguistic varieties;¹⁶ they were all published by very different publishers in particular publishing, social, and historical contexts. This, I believed, made for a poor sample analysis, especially as I realized that the selection process behind my corpus was too biased given that I was only choosing works whose thematics or form could be said to register emblematic ideas of postcolonial theories and conditions. To put it differently, I felt that I was instrumentalizing particular comics to advocate a paradigmatic shift in comics studies, one that would potentially compel critics to reconsider the pictorial and narrative (dis)assembling of panels and pages that comics rely on in light of new models of identification, history-making, and spatiality – i.e. analytical frameworks which would underscore the multifarious ‘contact zones’¹⁷ that, according to many critics, underlie postcolonial thinking and postcoloniality. Even though such an approach is valid insofar as it may demonstrate how engaging with key questions in postcolonial studies may contribute to new orientations in comics scholarship, I was from satisfied with it, particularly because I was not at ease with what I felt would be extrapolated from a small and too heterogeneous sample. This is why I decided to take a closer look at the catalogue of the imprint that had published the graphic mystery that fascinated me. I was secretly hoping to find other works in the vein of *Incognegro*, comics that would somehow engage with strategies of resistance to and subversion of particular canons, identities, representations, and histories. In other words, I wished to find out whether or not other Vertigo comics could be said to rely on poetics and politics of writing back similar to that deployed in Johnson and Pleece’s narrative.

¹⁶ Some of the comics I had selected included the transcultural adaptation of a well-known Marvel superhero entitled *Spider-Man: India* (2004) by Indian artists Sharad Devarajan, Suresh Seetharaman, and Jeevan J. Kang, Grégory Jarry et Otto T.’s multi-volume *Petite Histoire des Colonies Françaises* (2006-2012), South-African artist Anton Kannemeyer (aka Joe Dog)’s satiric collection of comics and cartoons *Pappa in Afrika* (2010), and New Zealander Dylan Horrock’s graphic novel *Hicksville* (1998).

¹⁷ I here mean to expand on Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of ‘contact zones,’ which she developed in her monograph *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturalization* (1992). Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (1992: 4).

I was quite pleasantly taken by surprise after my initial and brief survey of Vertigo's catalogue revealed the imprint's embracing of what narratologist Gérard Genette would most likely call a 'palimpsestuous' register (1997 [1982]). What I mean by this is that many Vertigo titles almost programmatically engage with various genres and/or composition techniques that fall under the aegis of rewriting in its widest sense – that is, as Matei Calinescu has shown in his discussion of postmodern rewriting, how rewriting encompasses “some major concepts of traditional poetics [...]” that “include imitation, parody, burlesque, transposition, pastiche, adaptation, and even translation [...] and commentary” (1997: 243), a list to which I would add the revisiting of genres and transfictionality.¹⁸

For example, and as is well recorded, the core titles that launched the imprint (*Animal Man*, *Doom Patrol*, *Hellblazer*, *Sandman*, *Shade the Changing Man*, and *Swamp Thing*) all have their roots in the DC universe and are thus in the 'second degree,' as Genette would have it. In other words, they are “derived from another preexistent text” that they inevitably engage with in some respect, albeit without “necessarily speaking of it or citing it” (Genette, 1997 [1982]: 5). So too, in fact, are other Vertigo comics inspired by usually defunct DC titles; they include series and graphic novels such as *Army@Love* (2007-2008), *Haunted Tank* (2008-2009), *House of Mystery* (2008-2011), *House of Secrets* (1996-1998), *Human Target* (1999, 2002, 2003-2005), *It's a Bird* (2004) or *Sergeant Rock: Between Hell and a Hard Place* (2003). More generally, Vertigo has manifested more than an interest in the re-appropriation of various characters and a range of narrative traditions that are not specifically tied to the universe(s) of its parent company DC Comics. *Uncle Sam* (1996-1997), for instance, reinvests the personified allegory of the US and, by extension, tropes and themes of American cultural history, while also echoing the previous comics incarnations of the eponymous character.

¹⁸ To put it briefly, transfictionality (Richard Saint-Gelais [2005, 2011], Marie-Laure Ryan [2008, 2012]) refers to “the migration of elements such as characters, plot structures, or setting from one fictional text to another” (Marie-Laure Ryan, 2012: n.p.).

Fables and its many spinoffs including *Jack of Fables* (2006-2011) and *Fairest* (2012-2015) revisit legends, folk- and fairy-tales from a variety of cultures. *Preacher* (1995-2000) re-examines the tradition of the Western and the American myths of the frontier and the self-made man. *Northlanders* (2008-2012) combines Norse mythology and sagas with contemporary storytelling techniques, including fragmented narrative points of view that highlight the role that women may have played in the construction of Norse mythology. *Prince of Cats* (2012) is a modern hip-hop retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* that focuses on Tybalt (the so-called ‘Prince of Cats’) and mixes samurai action with Shakespearean drama.

Following a similar line of reasoning, it is also worth mentioning that the label has been keen on publishing adaptations of various works. DC’s imprint has indeed released works directly inspired by or heavily drawing on the life and oeuvre of many science-fiction, horror, and gothic masters. *The Nobody* (2009), for instance, is a modern and sentimental take on H.G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man* (2004 [1897]). *The Heart of the Beast* (1994) is a retelling of the Frankenstein myth that is set against the backdrop of the New York contemporary art scene of the 1990s. *In the Shadow of Edgar Allan Poe* (2003) revisits the life and morbid tales of the American author, while *The House on the Borderland* (2004) is a graphic adaptation of the eponymous novel by William Hope Hodgson (2012 [1908]). This trend of adaptation, however, is not only concerned with the transposition of or echo to literary works into the comics form. For example, the graphic novel *Greendale* (2010) expands on Neil Young’s eponymous concept album released in 2003, an opera-rock which arguably paved the way of the ‘audio novel’ genre. In a similar way, Vertigo’s comics version of *Django Unchained* (2014) is not merely an adaptation of Quentin Tarantino’s movie of the same name; in fact, the graphic novel is the transposition of the movie’s full, i.e. uncut, screenplay.

This by no means exhaustive list clearly illustrates that the theoretical and interpretative framework of ‘writing back’ that I had in mind while exploring *Incognegro* was of potential significance in regard to the Vertigo catalogue. In many ways, this writing back paradigm was worth scrutinizing in relation to how many Vertigo productions articulate strategies of rewriting (including intertextual and transfictional effects) and, in so doing, reexamine various types of relations between different comics, literary, and other fictional works and the narrative worlds that they project. Thus, my rather unconventional entry into the world of Vertigo through *Incognegro* had allowed me to find a pattern within a coherent corpus that was worth engaging with, especially so when considering that the development of these manifold rewriting strategies across the Vertigo catalogue had drawn little attention in comics studies.¹⁹

Needless to say, what can be described as the ‘rewriting ethos’ that transpires from a wide array of comics narratives published by the Vertigo imprint begs several questions. They include: How and to what extent do Vertigo titles rewrite other narrative works? And why is it in the first place that so many comics published by the imprint are based on or inspired by other pre-existing storyworlds, characters, or historical figures and tropes that they transform and dislocate from the generic or medium-specific contexts with which one generally associates them? What has Vertigo achieved in possibly privileging the production of particular forms of rewriting? And in what contexts have these phenomena of rewriting taken place? Does it make sense to claim that the label has developed a polymorphous system of rewriting? And, most importantly, is it possible to chart the effects of this multifaceted matrix of rewriting?

¹⁹ Some of the possible reasons as to why this has been the case will be assessed in Chapter 1.

These are, among others, some of the questions that the present works deals with. What is crucial in attempting to answer them is the understanding and conceptualization of Vertigo's rewriting ethos as a matrix that goes beyond the level of texture, that is, beyond textuality – an observation that accounts in part for my privileging of the term 'rewriting' over hypertextuality in the Genettian sense of the word (cf. Genette, 1992 [1987]).²⁰ More precisely, and as the above questions suggest, Vertigo's rewriting ethos is at least twofold. First, this rewriting ethos is articulated on several micro scales in regard to how individual comics narratives published by the imprint engage in many intertextual and transfictional relations. Secondly, the imprint's paradigm of rewriting also functions on a macro scale, especially in terms of publishing strategies, social and cultural realities, (re)organization issues, and institutional dynamics. In fact, I argue that these two layers of rewriting overlap and intermingle and that, as a result of this intertwining dynamics of rewriting, both Vertigo and many of the comics produced by the imprint have interrogated not only narrative worlds, but the very 'signifying universes' that these narrative worlds are part of and belong to, including the social spaces and systems that they project and participate in, consciously or not.

The manifold rewriting strategies underlying Vertigo productions and the publishing venue itself can be understood as a reformulation of 'world-questioning' concerns and issues that have permeated dominant strands of postmodernism and postcoloniality over the last decades. Both postmodernism and postcolonial 'conditions' have indeed prompted artists and scholars to formulate new textual, spatial, geographical, cultural, and historical models and categories that challenge traditional and often modernist understandings of 'the real,' or essentializing categories and totalizations by privileging ideas such as destabilization,

²⁰ This choice will be further justified in Chapter 1.

decentering, heterogeneity, hybridity, deterritorialization, and migrancy.²¹ The idea behind this dissertation, however, is not simply to claim that Vertigo's rewriting ethos is emblematic of the consequences of postmodernity, postcoloniality, or globalization. Rather, the present work insists that the many rewriting strategies deployed by both the imprint as well as by artists present a unique vantage point through which one can analyze how Vertigo has aimed to *sustainably* reflect and (re)negotiate the realities of a specific medium (comics) and culture (the pre-dominantly Anglo-American comics world). As the reader will discover throughout this work, these medium- and culture-specific realities are numerous as they pertain to practices and discourses that engage with ideas and concepts as diverse as seriality, multiversity, the graphic novel, understandings of authorship, processes of canonization, the socio-cultural spaces of the American comics field and, finally, 'genre-splicing,' that is, what comics critic Doug Singsen has defined as "the combination of two or more genres in a way that fragments the fictional reality of the work or violates the norms of the genres employed" (2014: 170).

In light of these observations, then, it should be clear that the objectives of this work are manifold. The main purpose is obviously to make a strong case for considering the Vertigo imprint itself as a *site* of rewriting.²² By this, I do not only mean that Vertigo has absorbed the often subversive practices and discourses underlying the fictional, generic, and textual transformations and dislocations at work in a majority of comics that it has published.

²¹ A non-exhaustive list of scholars whose critical works can be located in this 'movement' would include, in alphabetical order, Homi Bhabha (2012 [1994]), Paul Gilroy (1993), Linda Hutcheon (2004 [1988], 2003 [1989]), Fredric Jameson (2003 [1991]), Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984 [1979]), Brian McHale (1987, 1992), Edward Saïd (1983, 1994), and Edward Soja (1989, 1996).

²² My use of the word 'site' is not innocent as it is meant to echo Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, which the historian developed in various writings on French history, most of which have been gathered in English in his *Realms of Memory* trilogy (1996, 1997, 1998). Next to 'realms of memory,' the term has also been translated into English as 'sites of memory.' In a nutshell, Nora's sites of memory designate artifacts and entities "where [cultural] memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (1989 [1984]: 7). By extension, the present dissertation suggests that Vertigo itself has become a site of rewriting, one which has registered *and* shaped a particular cultural memory and history of the US comics field.

Rather, I want to highlight how Vertigo has also shaped and perhaps even empowered these discourses by profiling itself as a particular organization whose *authority* has contributed to (re)play out debates of revision, transformation, belonging, spatiality, and memory as they can pertain to some of the publishing principles and narrative strategies governing the American comics field. Finally, this understanding of the label as a site of rewriting aims to put into perspective existing scholarly discourses on the imprint and some of its key figures and works.

One of the significant rationales underlying this work is to write back, or in response to how critics have celebrated, maybe even glorified, the so-called ‘literary’ and ‘sophisticated’ qualities of particular Vertigo works and artists. Much the scholarly attention that has been devoted to Vertigo has indeed too often revolved around a rhetoric of adulthood and maturation (e.g. Murray, 2010; Round, 2010; Weiner, 2010). This literature-oriented criticism has downplayed the importance of other more socially- and culturally-inflected critical approaches and commentaries on the poetics and politics of the imprint. In addition, this type of criticism has overshadowed particular lesser known Vertigo works and how they can be said to have participated in the label’s development of a particular rewriting ethos, which is nevertheless central to the label’s cultural identity and history. In fact, existing Vertigo-related scholarship has somewhat confined much known and talked about Vertigo comics to specific interpretations – this is especially true of early titles published by the label (e.g. *Swamp Thing*, *Sandman*, *Preacher*, *Animal Man*, etc.). More generally, this criticism has led to a restricted perspective of the role that the label has played in the history of the art form and the construction of the comics field in the U.S. By insisting on Vertigo’s poetics and politics of rewriting rather than particular works or artists, my aim in this dissertation is twofold. First, I hope to provide alternative views and interpretations of new and familiar (i.e. much talked about) Vertigo comics. Secondly, I wish to stress the pivotal importance of the

active role that the Vertigo imprint has played in redrawing the lines of the American comics landscape beyond issues of textuality, fictionality, and maturation. In order to engage with the aforementioned objectives and issues, the following dissertation is divided into five sections.

Chapter 1 lays out the theoretical background of this research project. It starts out with an exploration of rewriting as a critical concept that is tied to notions of intertextuality and hypertextuality. It justifies my privileging of the term rewriting over hypertextuality and intertextuality for the purpose of this study by drawing on a wide and interdisciplinary body of criticism which ranges from postmodernist and postcolonial studies to narratology, comics scholarship, and sociological approaches to the production and consumption of culture. After this state-of-the-art discussion, the chapter then moves on to explore the possible reasons why the second-degree ideology and cultural identity of Vertigo has so far been overlooked in comics studies; it then situates the interdisciplinary critical framework that this work subscribes to in regard to the state of comics scholarship. Particular attention will be paid to how comics studies have privileged critical analyses that heavily draw on the classical tripartite model ‘author/text/reader.’ Nevertheless, this particular methodology has often downplayed the sociological and cultural importance of publishers and how they participate in the construction of what comics scholar Bart Beaty calls a “comics world,” i.e. “one of many art worlds” (Beaty, 2012:37) whose social networks (editors, artists, publishers, fans, critics, etc.) participate in the creation of artistic meaning and value that (re)define comics.

Chapter 2 reassesses the emergence and early history of the Vertigo imprint in reconsidering its ties with the so-called British Invasion, a loosely defined group of British artists who started working in the American mainstream comics industry in the mid-1980s and whose ‘innovative’ style and subversion of the superhero genre helped launch the label. Critics invariably posit that the British Invasion is part of the wider cultural phenomenon of the comics form’s maturation and legitimation; they insist that Vertigo would not have

enjoyed the success that it has without the ‘literary’ qualities of the British Invasion writers and their strong *auteur* persona (cf. Murray, 2010, Round, 2010, 2013; Weiner, 2010). While these artists and the American comics renaissance certainly helped to shape the popularity of the Vertigo imprint and its ‘literary’ reputation, this chapter argues that these elements are only part of Vertigo’s successful debut story. Drawing on selection systems theory, whose key principles will be outlined in due time, Chapter 2 addresses how and why the launch of Vertigo is tied to the label’s ‘expert’ agenda and stance in regard to ‘organizational rewriting,’ i.e. how the imprint has relied on innovative politics and poetics to make a remarked market entry in the American comics industry of the time. As will be shown, the label’s originality lies as much in Vertigo’s focus on the importance of the authoring process in its widest sense rather than in the role of particular British authors. In fact, it will be shown that the label has asserted its brand power by absorbing Moore and his peers’ many subversive strategies for its own symbolic and distinguished purposes, both of which should be understood in relation to Bourdieu’s critical theory of cultural tastes and judgments (2013 [1979], 1996 [1992]).²³

Chapter 3 further examines Vertigo’s expert agenda and how it is tied to interwoven layers of rewriting by providing a common critical framework for the analysis of the key series that helped launch the imprint, all of which were scripted by British Invasion writers – namely, Jamie Delano et al.’s run on *Hellblazer* (1988-1991), Neil Gaiman et al.’s *Sandman* (1989-1996), Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing* (1984-1987), Grant Morrison et al.’s run on *Animal Man* (1988-1990) and *Doom Patrol* (1989-1993).²⁴ More specifically, this chapter examines how and why these series can be said to articulate a particular form of progressive spatiality

²³ The foundational aspects of Bourdieu’s cultural sociology will be addressed in Chapter 1 and 2.

²⁴ In comics jargon, a ‘run’ refers to all of a given title’s issues scripted by the same writer. Given that in the comics industry, a series can outlive its original creative team and can, therefore, be taken over by a multitude of artists over time, this distinction has helped fans and critics to be more precise in their historical contextualization of a particular series’ era.

that writes back to the containing and gridding principles of the superhero genre and its mainstream organization, that is, how the worlds of superheroes have historically been ordered and controlled in order to maintain the genre's discipline ethos, and this at both diegetic and extradiegetic levels. The chapter will pay particular attention to how *Swamp Thing*, *Sandman*, and *Animal Man* engage with more open-ended conceptions of space in its widest sense, including the representation of bodies, the spaces of narratives, and the narratives of space. Highlighting these series' *alternative* construction and perception of space will then allow us to critically consider how Vertigo's emergence in the comics market was more than the result of the art form's maturation, especially insofar as the label's 'genesis narrative' is deeply connected to politics of re-mapping and 'migratory aesthetics.'²⁵ The imprint was indeed launched after its editors decided to literally re-locate series that were first published under DC Comics to the Vertigo catalogue. It is this phenomenon of re-location and Vertigo's insistent emphasis on spatiality and boundaries in extra-diegetic materials that, I believe, stress the imprint's desire to profile itself as a critical re-reader and co-author of the above-mentioned series. In short, the discussion and characterization of this particular poetics testifies to how Vertigo has, since its creation, aimed to distinguish itself as a particular critical game changer in the comics field of the time.

Chapter 4 expands on Vertigo's initial and historical critical awareness of spatiality and migratory issues by examining how key publishing and organizational strategies implemented by the label beyond its early history attest to its meta-critical (re)positioning in the American comic field. More specifically, this chapter considers how the vocabulary of displacement that characterizes Vertigo's early history has been both pursued and mirrored in the imprint's adoption of an ambiguous position in regard to the mainstream/alternative

²⁵ 'Migratory aesthetics' is phrase that I borrow from cultural and art critic Mieke Bal (2002, 2007). The theoretical underpinnings of this concept will be unpacked in Chapter 3.

dialectic, that is, the traditional dichotomy that is widely used to characterize the two poles of the American comics field. In the same way as many characters of Vertigo titles have taken unexpected itineraries in crossing over various generic and fictional frontiers, thereby “projecti[ng]” and “experience[ing] [...] a *world* from a particular perspective” that registers “the narrative potential of travel” and that of travel writing – as Kai Mikkonen puts it in his theoretical discussion of travel as narrative (2007: 286-287, emphasis added), the label’s heterogenous catalogue can be said to have expanded the cartography of the comics field. This chapter therefore first offers a detailed analysis of how the imprint’s catalogue is revealing of Vertigo’s ‘double awareness,’ that is, its ability and desire to appeal to both mainstream and alternative audiences in order to, quite paradoxically, challenge the culturally and socially constructed boundaries of the American comics world.

This particular politics of demarcation is also intrinsically connected to the imprint’s almost obsessive ‘archival impulse,’ by which I mean how various forms of rewriting and recuperation characterize the label’s catalogue. This memorious-oriented type of comics production is obviously yoked to issues of nostalgia, memory as well as lineage, and therefore to processes of (self-) canonization and discourses of cultural legitimacy. The second part of Chapter 4 consequently focuses on some of the label’s macro rewriting trends in terms of intro- and retrospective engagement, that is how Vertigo’s catalogue and particular promotional artwork provide a meta-commentary on the comics form, its history, and its (renewed) perception in the American context. More specifically, in recurrently paying homage to the DC archive beyond the superhero genre, the pulp heritage, as well as to the Gothic tradition, it is my contention that Vertigo has participated in a critical logic of commemoration that distances itself from the mnemonic discourses championed by both the mainstream and alternative poles of the comics industry.

Chapter 5 connects both distant and close reading strategies by investigating how various interconnected Vertigo series – namely *Fables*, *Jack of Fables*, and *The Great Fables Crossover* – produce layers of ‘rewriting in the second degree’ that ambiguously write back to Vertigo’s own palimpsestuous register. More precisely, this chapter shows that these series reformulate the polymorphous hesitation between worlds that postmodernism and Vertigo have embraced by playfully undercutting the totalizing gestures inherent to mainstream comics transfictionality and the traditional conception of the graphic novel as a stand-alone narrative with ‘heavy’ as well ‘serious’ literary qualities.

Finally, based on the analysis of Vertigo’s poetics and politics of rewriting that this work presents, my conclusion proposes a new critical socio-poetic tool for future comics scholarship wishing to pay particular attention to the history and cultural identity of publishers and imprints, namely ‘the megafame.’ Without entering into too much detail here, the megafame can be conceived of as a narrative and organizational canvas whose frames are assembled so as to reflect and shape the ideology and history(ies) of particular publishers. To fully understand the rationale and theoretical underpinnings underlying this idea of megafame, the conclusion presents the latter as an expansion and revision of comics critic Thierry Groensteen’s notions of ‘hyperframe’ and ‘multiframe’ (Groensteen, 2007 [1999]).