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Wiz Kids, nuclear bombs, and Marvel's Hazmat

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In my paper 'Postmodern Chinoiserie in Gene Luen Yang's American Born Chinese' (2014, *Literature Compass* 11 (1): 1–14), I propose that existing scholarship on the portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans in American comics has largely focused upon racist newspaper cartoons from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and modern Asian-American alternative comics. There exists a small but growing body of academic literature on the depiction of Asian Americans in modern mainstream comics. In this essay I seek to develop the scholarship by analysing Marvel's character Hazmat (Jennifer Takeda) in the context of modern depictions of Asians and Asian Americans in American comic books and the postmemory of Nagasaki Hiroshima, and the Japanese internment camps. This paper is organised in two parts. The first focuses upon the ways in which Asians and Asian Americans have historically been depicted (or, in many cases, not depicted) in American comics. The argument includes an examination of the ways in which the Marvel character Hazmat has been written in relation to those stereotypes. The second half of the essay considers the ways in which Hazmat embodies (quite literally) the violence towards Japanese civilians during World War II, and the ethics of exploring the history of genocide through the superhero genre.

Keywords: trauma; postmemory; World War II; Asian American; comic book studies

Fu Binbin argues that, historically, American comic books have been 'been more damaging than uplifting to the Asian American communities' (2007, 274). Unlike their white and, to a lesser extent, African-American peers, Asians and Asian Americans have historically either taken the role of the villain or, more frequently, been entirely absent from American comics. Explicitly anti-Chinese racist cartoons in nineteenth-century newspapers such as *The Wasp* (1842–1843) depicted pigtailed violent and monstrous Chinese immigrants in coolie dress. Many newspaper cartoonists imagined Asian immigrants as an uncivilised swarm poised to invade American shores (see Choy, Dong, and Hom 1994). It was through such images (alongside other media) that the 'yellow peril' developed in the American cultural consciousness (Figure 1). Marchetti defines the 'yellow peril' as follows:

Rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Kahn and Mongolian invasions of Europe, the yellow peril combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and a belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East. (1993, 2)

The visual language for Asians continued throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, in 1937, the very first issue of Detective Comics (commonly known as DC) featured a slit-eyed pony-tailed Fu Manchu-like villain on the cover. Colour printing added pale skin

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Figure 1. 'The Yellow Terror in All His Glory' (1899).

Note: This image is in the public domain because its copyright has expired.

tones to the visual signifiers for Asian characters, a practice that is still used by some comic-book creators today (including the works of Asian-American comic-book creators such as Gene Luen Yang). When superheroes took up arms to fight the Axis of Evil, the visual language of comics cross-pollinated with propaganda posters. Japanese soldiers were generally either buck-toothed or depicted with fangs. They had slits for eyes, sallow skin, and spoke in faltering and badly pronounced English. A clear physical distinction was made between the wholesome American superheroes and soldiers and their animal-like enemies. In detective comics the wily, and invariably evil, Fu-Manchu-like villain was a recurring type. Examples include the Yellow Claw, who appeared in Marvel comics (then Atlas Comics) beginning in 1956.¹ The mid-twentieth century also saw Asian-American characters such as the *Smash Comics* character Wun Cloo (1939–1945), who took a protagonist role; but even Asian heroes were drawn using a visual language and racist rhetoric passed down from early-nineteenth-century newspapers. They generally spoke in stunted English, confused their *ls* and *rs* and were presented as objects of (albeit affectionate) ridicule.

Late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century American comics have largely abandoned Chinese-style robes, long ponytails, sallow skin, bad English and buck-teeth as

Asian signs. A few examples remained into the 1970s such as Shang-chi, Master of Kung Fu, a character who, in his 1973 introduction, was drawn from 'the fetish of Bruce Lee [coalesced] with the archetype of the Yellow Peril' (Ma 2000, 55). In the absence of older signs, newer stereotypes have emerged. Gardner contends that editorial cartoons in modern high-school newspapers depict Asian-American students as 'mechanised alien robots' (Gardner 2010, 135). Such cartoons draw upon imagery of the Asian-American as an academic high-achiever and a threat to students from other racial groups. Many modern American comics frequently feature Asian child geniuses such as Marvel's Wiz Kid or DC's Hiro Okamura. Other Asian archetypes have been inspired by manga or kung fu films. Japanese characters are often yakuza (such as DC's Shado), samurai (Marvel's Katana) or ninjas (Marvel's Amiko Kobayashi or Top Cow's Tora No Shi).

The degradation of Asians and Asian-Americans in comics is not universal, however, and much of the scholarship (Fu and Gardner being prime examples) so far has focused heavily upon either negative portrayals of Asians in American comics or on the work of alternative comics scholars such as Gene Luen Yang and Derrick Kirk Kim. There is a small but growing body of academic literature on the depiction of Asian Americans in modern mainstream comics.² One might propose that comic books may be an ideal medium for examining marginalised ethnicities in America. American comics have, at times, been a site of discourse around themes of race. Superhero comics have often approached race through the depiction of metahumanity (super-powered humans). Superheroes, like many immigrants to America, frequently take on new names and identities to survive.³ The X-Men comics and films, for example, have served as thinly veiled (and often somewhat clumsy) allegories for the Civil Rights movement (see Shyminsky 2006). Autobiographical alternative comics have used the form to examine the lives of America's racial minorities either directly or, as with Spiegelman's *Maus*, through allegory. Modern comics such as *The Walking Dead* (2003–present) and *The Authority* (1999–2002) feature a range of heroic and multi-dimensional Asian and Asian-American characters which are not directly stencilled from racialised archetypes.⁴

One such character, considered in this essay, is Marvel's Hazmat, a creation of Christos Gage and Mike McKone. Hazmat was created by Gage and McKone in their series *Avengers Academy* (2010–2012). She has subsequently appeared in the series *Avengers Arena* (2013–2014). *Avengers Academy* concerns a group of 'at-risk' super-heroes-in-training, all of whom were tortured by villain Norman Osborn.

The audience's first introduction to Hazmat is narrated by the hero Justice in conversation with the focaliser of the first issue, Veil. Veil has just learned that her powers represent a life-threatening condition. Justice, her teacher, suggests that she might wish to speak with a fellow student who is in a similar situation. From the very first panel Hazmat is seen wearing her fitted black and yellow containment suit, a suit she will remove only a few times in the entire 39-issue storyline and the subsequent 18 issues of *Avengers Arena*. She is shot from a low angle, her arms spread wide, as another teacher, Tigra, dresses her (Figure 2). Justice explains 'that's Hazmat, Jennifer Takeda. She can project radiation, toxic waste, a variety of substances.... She had a good life. Loving family, long-term boyfriend, college-bound. Then Osborn basically kidnapped her. Jump started her powers against her will' (*Avengers Academy* #1, 2010). In the next panel Hazmat's helmet is in place, she has been hermetically sealed from the world and now sees through a visor.⁵ A tear trickles down her cheek. Justice continues 'Hank just found out why her parents have been so sick lately. Why her dog died. Why her boyfriend's in the hospital.' In the next panel Hazmat's tear, presumably having been shed before her helmet was in place, hits the edge of the computer screen before her. Justice explains 'she's poisonous. Her sweat,

Figure 2. *Avengers Academy* #1 (2010).

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saliva ... even her breath. Long-term exposure can be lethal'. In the next panel Hazmat has her back to the reader. Tigra has placed her hand on Hazmat's back in a comforting gesture. As Hazmat is led away, Henry Pym's hand enters the foreground of the scene to mop up the errant tear. Justice states 'she has to wear that containment suit around others. For the rest of her life'. This sequence, one might infer, is intended to establish Hazmat as a subject of pity, expectations that are subverted when Veil attempts to introduce herself and Hazmat replies 'Get bent.'

In *Avengers Academy* #3 (2010), Hazmat narrates her own story. She appears this time without the containment suit, kissing her boyfriend, Greg, in bed. Rather than being sallow, her skin is coloured a darker shade than Greg's. Her room is filled with toys, figurines and a poster of the superhero Dazzler. She reiterates Justice's assertions concerning her 'good life', including a pleasant home-life and being likely to receive a scholarship. She adds the status-conscious preoccupations of a wealthy Californian teenager. 'I had a DVR, iPad, a platinum card with a four-figure limit – pretty much everything I wanted'. In a single narrative box, adding a beat to emphasise the significance of the statement she adds 'and I had Greg'. Her life, she concludes, was 'perfect'. In the next panel, Greg sits upright and raises his hand to his mouth. The narration reads 'until it wasn't'. On the next page Greg explains that he must have swallowed something, and that he wants this moment to be 'perfect', suggesting that the two are about to sleep together for the first time. They reinitiate kissing and then, in the final panel, Greg pulls back wide-eyed. Saliva sprays from his mouth and the sound 'HUUUCCHH!' breaks beyond the bounds of his speech bubble. On the next page, in a full-page bleed, Greg has fallen to the floor, foaming at the mouth. Hazmat has risen and spread her arms, recreating the pose and angle from her first appearance in issue 1.

Hazmat is biracial; her mother is white and her father is an American of Japanese ancestry. She can read Japanese (in *The Amazing Spiderman* #661; Gage, Reilly, and Olazaba 2011), but her first language is English. She was born, Justice notes, in California and is most likely fourth-generation American; her grandfather, the reader learns, was an American citizen and so must have either been born in America or have entered prior to the 1924–1965 ban on Japanese immigration. Her race, as shall be argued below, is a key aspect of her character, even if, her creator contends, it is not the central aspect of her identity. As an Asian American (particularly as an Asian-American student) she is forced to orientate her identity around racial stereotypes. As an individual of Japanese descent (indeed, as an individual who lives after World War II) she carries the *postmemory* of both nuclear destruction and of the internment of Japanese Americans.

Whiz kids

Christos Gage is clearly aware of the role of race in comics. In *Avengers Academy* #21 (2010), the new White Tiger, a Latino-American character, tells Reptil, another Latino-American character, '[m]y brother Hector was the first high-profile Latino super hero. He sacrificed everything to open doors for us. It'd be nice to see you trying to pay it forward'. Reptil later tells the other students that, whilst he is proud of his heritage, 'I don't see why a Hispanic super hero has to be a "Hispanic super hero"'. Gage's point is clear: progressive depictions of racial minorities do not need to make racial identity a centrepiece to be effective. This seems to be Gage and McKone's preferred reading of Hazmat. In the letters page of *Avengers Academy* #38 (2012), Gage writes that Hazmat's race 'should not be the defining characteristic of who she is, but as one of many facets of a well-rounded individual'. She can be an Asian hero, in other words, without being an 'Asian superhero'. When, in *Avengers Academy* #22 (2012), Hazmat meets Whiz Kid, a Japanese inventor and boy genius, she addresses him as 'Asian stereotype boy', suggesting that, unlike him, she is an Asian-American character who is not stencilled from an archetype. This moment might be read as an extradiegetic snub directed at Louise Simonson and Jon Bogdanove, Whiz Kid's creators. Gage and McKone's ethnic minority characters, Gage suggests, are multi-dimensional and not founded upon stereotypes.

Gage and McKone's preferred reading is complicated by Hazmat's backstory and, as is argued later in this essay, her embodiment of both Japanese and Japanese-American postmemory. Both Justice and Hazmat's accounts of her origins emphasise that, before the manifestation of her powers, she was an honour-roll student. Her origins are thus a muted version of Whiz Kid's; her intellect may not be her defining feature, but she is clearly an able student. This continues in her new identity as a superhero: amongst the Avengers Academy students, her powers are the most destructive. Even in the surreal superhero school environment, she is an Asian academic high-achiever.

Gage and McKone mitigate the potentially dangerous use of stereotypes and history by evolving the character in a way that undermines and addresses racial caricatures. Gardner argues that 'comics have a unique and contrasting ability to *destabilize* racial stereotypes' (2010, 135, emphasis added). Multi-panel comics have the capacity to take a character that is founded upon stereotypes and evolve them in a manner that exceeds and challenges those stereotypes. Gardner's primary example is Frederick Burr Oppen's 'Happy Hooligan', a racist caricature of Irish Americans. As the character evolved, readers began to empathise with the protagonist, complicating the racist caricatures upon which he was based. Some caution should be exercised if using Gardner's arguments as a totalising statement on comics (a medium that sometimes relies upon racist stereotypes), but his statement sheds some light on Gage and McKone's Hazmat. Hazmat does not remain as a character type. Indeed, as a key character in an evolving storyline it would be difficult for her to do so.

One of the ways in which Gage destabilises racist caricature is by explicitly engaging with issues of discrimination through the metaphor of metahumanity (Figure 3). In *Avengers Academy* #10 (2011), the character Leech temporarily suppresses Hazmat's powers. She returns home to visit her parents. They are initially excited and believe that she can continue to live as a non-metahuman teenager. Her mother tells her 'we thought things were back to normal'. Immediately below this speech bubble Hazmat's face is

Figure 3. *Avengers Academy* #10 (2011).

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visible; unlike the majority of her appearances in the series, her face and hair (both of which are signifiers of her ethnic background) are visible. She shows her face to the reader by hiding it from her parents. She continues to face away from for the remainder of the page. She replies 'No, mom. Sorry. I'm not even close to normal'. Her father asks about her relationship to Leech, assuming incorrectly that, as a metahuman, she would want to be romantically involved with one of her own. She responds 'Dad! He's, like, twelve.' He responds, 'Oh, it's hard to tell with ... you know'. Hazmat grabs Leech's hand and, still facing away from her parents, announces that she has to leave. In the final panel tears stream down her face. In this case, mutants serve as a means to explore issues around race and prejudice. In relation to Leech and Hazmat, who are members of a minority group, Hazmat's parents become surrogates for a white majority who hold implicit prejudices regarding race. They are not outwardly aggressive towards mutants, but their speech and actions betray implicit prejudices regarding minority groups and a general discomfort around issues of race. They assume that Hazmat would prefer not to integrate with other racial minorities; that she would be happier with 'one of her own'. Her father is unwilling to articulate why he was mistaken about Leech's age (a reasonable mistake given Leech's appearance), but his silence represents a recognition of his lack of sensitivity and understanding towards mutants. The point at which his words drop off might be filled in with the name of any racial minority group, or simply 'them'.

In *Avengers Arena* #13 (2013), the question of intergenerational tension over race is addressed directly. Hazmat's parents, the reader learns, intended to pull her out of school because she was dating Mettle, a fellow student. In response, she and Mettle have fled the school. Hazmat's parents filed kidnapping charges against Mettle. Mettle explains that his parents, conversely, have been supportive of the couple: 'My dad's black, mom's Jewish. They know from prejudice'. Hazmat's parents were comfortable with the idea of her being romantically involved with a fellow mutant, but not with an African-American. One might assume that their prejudices are based, in part, upon anxiety felt by certain Asian Americans in relation to other racial minority groups. Elaine H. Kim (1988, 1) writes:

A pair of comments that white people often made remains stubbornly in my memory 'At least you are not black' or 'You should be grateful that you are not black.' These comments, I think, convey the particular type of racism Asian Americans should recognize and challenge. While being encouraged to feel superior to African Americans, Asian Americans are being positioned in a racial hierarchy meant to perpetuate white privilege at the expense of both Asian and African Americans.

Hazmat's parents do not want their daughter to be associated with an African American, lest her (privileged) position in the racial hierarchy, to which they subscribe, be compromised.⁶

In this sense Hazmat's status as an academic high-achiever highlights the damage that stereotypes (asserted both externally and by other members of the same racial group) can wreak in the lives of academically gifted Asian Americans. An analogy might be drawn to the character of Danny in Gene Luen Yang's (2006) *American Born Chinese*. In Yang's comic, the protagonist, Danny, is tormented by his cousin Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee is a hyperbolic amalgamation of Asian-American stereotypes, including the racist editorial cartoons of *The Wasp*. Chin-Kee accompanies Danny to school and loudly announces the answer to every question, much to Danny's embarrassment. Yang's metaphor suggests that some Asian-American students feel a need to 'play dumb' in class to avoid being seen as academically gifted. As an Avengers Academy student, Hazmat is an 'at-risk' teen. She

may be the most powerful student in the class, but she is the top student in a volatile group who are not beyond excessively violent action toward their enemies and often turn on their teachers. Her rebelliousness might be read as a desire to disassociate herself from the Asian-American 'mechanised alien robot' high-achiever. She elects to play the part of a self-identified 'bad kid' (*Avengers Academy* #31) to remove the possibility of being seen as a 'smart kid'. Hazmat is caught in a bind; she can either accept the racist assumptions that others, her parents included, make of her, or she can orientate herself against them.

Another means by which Hazmat seeks to disassociate herself from Asian-American stereotypes is by physically hiding her racial characteristics. There are very few moments in the series when Hazmat's face is fully visible. Even when she removes her helmet, her face is often obscured. Consider, for example, the penultimate page of *Avengers Academy* #10 (2011), in which, despite being one of the main characters in the scene and placed centrally in many of the panels, Hazmat's face is constantly hidden, either behind a visor or behind Leech's head (Figure 4).

To avoid being cast as an Asian American high-achiever, Hazmat feels that she must hide her racial identity.⁷ Gage's proposal that an Asian-American superhero does not have

Figure 4. *Avengers Academy* #10 (2011).

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to be an ‘Asian-American superhero’ might thus be reinterpreted; to be a superhero, Hazmat feels that she must cease to be (or remove all signs of being) Asian American.

Postmemory

In addition to embodying the desire to hide one’s racial identity, Hazmat also serves as a means to dramatise Japan’s history through the late twentieth century. Hazmat’s powers relate to radiation, specifically radiation that can be mobilised as a weapon; indeed, the end of the *Avengers Arena* story climaxes in issue 18 when Hazmat ‘explodes’ in a manner almost identical to a nuclear bomb. She embodies the atomic bombs that American planes dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6–9 August 1945. The aftermath of these bombs has been documented in Akiyuki Nosaka’s semi-autobiographical novel *Grave of the Fireflies* (1967) and Keiji Nakazawa’s groundbreaking manga series *Barefoot Gen* (1973–1974), both of which have had a shaping influence on both Japanese and American writers and artists.⁸ Hazmat’s first introduction to her powers/disability occurs when she unwittingly gives Greg radiation poisoning. She witnesses him, as described above, going into convulsions. The scene is a much tamer than Nakazawa’s images of victims of the atomic bomb with their skin falling away, but it serves, in the terms of teen-appropriate comics, to centre Hazmat’s identity upon a traumatic moment related to radioactive fall-out.

Author Lore Segal gives a measure of the traumatic effect of bearing witness to mass killing upon rational discourse. In her short story “The Reverse Bug” (Segal [1989] 2007), an academic seminar on genocide is called to a halt when recordings of screams from the site of an atomic bomb detonation in Japan and the gas chambers in a Nazi death camp are projected into the auditorium and surrounding area. The horrors of such events, Segal suggests, precludes the possibility of rational or ordered discourse. Segal describes the text as being about ‘our failure to be horrified twenty-four hours a day’ (as quoted in Tabor 2011). She suggests, as per Adorno’s oft-misunderstood quote about art after Auschwitz, that the horrors of large-scale killing cannot be contained by existing narrative and rhetorical structures. If we truly understood the horrors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Segal submits, then traditional narratives and discursive forms would cease to be relevant.

Segal’s conflation of the Shoah with the deployment of nuclear weapons is far from straightforward. The large-scale murder of Jews during World War II was an act of genocide; it was an attempt to kill an entire people, whereas the deployment of nuclear weapons (justifiably or otherwise) was a demonstration of military capability which successfully led to Japan’s surrender.⁹ An understanding of the strategic use of nuclear weapons in World War II requires an entirely different set of ethical and political considerations than the Nazi’s Final Solution. Segal would counter that any attempt to *understand* death on a large scale through rational discourse represents a failure to recognise fully the horror of large-scale killing regardless of context.

Hazmat’s poisonous saliva and sweat might thus be understood as a dramatisation of the *postmemory* of the violence of World War II. Hirsh (1997, 22) contends that

[p]ostmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.

The bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima is a traumatic event that continues to affect the lives of Japanese citizens, both the victims and their offspring. It is not an event that is

directly representable or accessible, but one that continually insists upon the lives of those who survive the survivors. In Hazmat's case this traumatic memory may have behavioural manifestations, such as scepticism towards the stability of authority figures to protect her, and difficulty in forming social ties; but it is embodied, primarily, through a figurative bodily process. Hazmat's body, a signifier of her race, constantly produces lethal toxins. She does not fail to be horrified 24 hours a day because she herself serves as an unrelenting dramatisation of the violence inflicted upon Japan. She cannot lead a normal life because her body pulls her continually into the past.

Gage and McKone's decision to make a member of the Japanese diaspora representative of the Japanese post-war experience is highly problematic given that neither Hazmat nor her family were direct victims of nuclear weapons. To explore the post-World War II Japanese experience through a fourth-generation Japanese American threatens to conflate the identities of two distinct groups and to reduce and even negate the Japanese-American experience. Gage and McKone do engage with history of violence against Japanese Americans through Hazmat; her grandfather was not the site of the bombs, but was imprisoned in an internment camp during World War II. He was 'crammed together with three families and no heat' (*Avengers Academy* #30, 2012). Like many Japanese Americans he was imprisoned not because he fought against America, but because of racial profiling. Between 1942 and 1945, more than 110,000 individuals of Japanese descent were held first in assembly centres and later in 10 relocation centres. The majority of those held were American citizens including Nisei (second), or Sensei (third) generation immigrants (Ng 2002). One prisoner describes the conditions in an assembly camp as follows: 'It was filthy, smelly, and dirty. There was [*sic*] roughly two thousand people packed in one large building. No beds were provided so they gave us gunny sacks to fill the [*sic*] straw, that was our bed' (quoted in Ng 2002, 34). Conditions in relocation centres were little better. The camps were modelled on army barracks and, in many cases, surrounded with barbed wire and watch towers. Each family, regardless of size, was housed in a single room measuring between 16×20 and 20×25 feet. Hazmat's assertion that three families would share a room was something of an exaggeration, but in some cases two families were forced to share an already small living space (40). Many of those interned were forced to sell personal property and settle their finances before their imprisonment. The cost to those who were held, in terms of property and psychological hardship, was immeasurable.¹⁰

The current literature in clinical psychology includes some evidence of the transmission of trauma, or behaviour consistent with trauma, between generations, but is not an automatic or predictable process. Zilberfein (1995) and Dickson-Gomez (2002) have shown that the behaviour patterns of first-generation survivors can be observed in their children, including a 'traumatised' world-view. Postmemory can be separated from verbalised factual memory; Hazmat is aware of the conditions of her grandfather's internment (whether through personal stories or her own research) but the transmission of postmemory has come to her non-verbally. Her grandfather's post-traumatic world-view has shaped the way in which he relates to his son, who, in turn, has passed behavioural fragments of a traumatised world-view to his daughter.

Whilst an analysis of Hazmat in terms of the Japanese American internment camps alone invites an uncomplicated reading, the case remains that Gage and McKone problematically intertwine this history with the psychic fallout of the nuclear weapons deployed in the war against Japan. These two disparate themes crystallise in a single figure in much the same way that, in Segal's short story, the screams of mass violence defy categorisation or context. The following analysis seeks to understand Hazmat in

terms of postmemory in such a way that is inclusive of both the Japanese-American and Japanese post-World War II experience, whilst endeavouring to respect the unique nature of each group and the distinct forms of violence that they faced.

The history of violence against both Japanese and Japanese Americans during the twentieth century is a subject that, one might argue, holds too great an ethical weight to be handled appropriately in a conventional superhero comic.¹¹ Were the allegory of violence against either Japanese citizens or Japanese Americans to be made explicit, then it might serve as either the motivation of a villain or a subject in a hero's backstory to be worked through (or, more bluntly 'gotten over'). In either case, the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of people or the wrongful imprisonment of others would be reduced to a plot device and cathartically resolved.

Twice in the series Gage almost proposes a cathartic resolution of postmemory when Hazmat has the option to be free of her powers. In both cases she decides that she would rather remain metahuman despite the disadvantages her status brings; she refuses to return to normal out of a sense of responsibility. If understood as a metaphor for postmemory, Gage's treatment of his subject is problematic: Hazmat achieves a degree of cathartic self-acceptance when she chooses to remain radioactive and imprisoned in her suit. Gage suggests, therefore, that personal development (in other words, a 'greater good') can arise from incidents of either mass killing or mass imprisonment; that the recipients of inherited trauma are somehow ennobled by it. Such a position fails to address Rosen's question 'What if some history does not have anything to teach us? What if studying radical evil does not make us better?' (1997, 85).¹²

Gage mitigates the potential misuse of the violence against both Japanese citizens and Japanese Americans by developing his allegory in such a way that the historical subject never comes completely into view. As postmemory, it remains present and insistent but inaccessible. The closest the comic comes to naming Hiroshima and Nagasaki is when the character Nico, whilst verbally squaring off with Hazmat, ironically states that 'radio-activity and Asians are a bold new combination' (*Avengers Academy* #27, 2012).¹³ The violence towards both Japan and Japanese Americans remains a haunting but unnamed presence. To make it present but unnamed is, like the screams projected into the auditorium in Segal's story, to insist upon it without reducing it to something that can be contained, and thus resolved, by narrative. The subject of nuclear destruction is further dispersed by the refractions of Gage and McKone's allegory. There is no immediately obvious equivalent to Hazmat's destructive potential in the lives of survivors of the atomic bomb. The metahuman allegory ultimately fails completely or neatly to contain its subject. Instead it disperses and becomes polysemic as the series progresses. During the writing of *Avengers Academy* Hazmat's radioactivity took on an additional resonance when, on 11 March 2011, in the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant measured a seven on the International Nuclear Event Scale (World Nuclear Association 2013). The event prompted the villain of the series, Jeremy Briggs, to describe Hazmat as a 'walking Chernobyl' in *Avengers Academy* #34. The multiple meanings of her powers/disability further complicates any easy reading of the allegory; the mass murder of Japanese citizens and the internment of Japanese Americans is an event that sends traumatic but intangible resonances throughout the narrative.

Conclusion

Hazmat is one of many heroic Asian and Asian-American characters in modern American comics. She represents a departure from historical images of the 'yellow peril' and an

acknowledgement of modern Asian and Asian-American stereotypes. In the reading above I have suggested that Gage and McKone engage with issues such as the damaging influence of racial stereotypes and the postmemory of historical violence through his character.

There is much more to be written on the subject of the depiction of Asians and Asian Americans in American comics. Choy, Dong and Hom (1994), Ma (2000), Chan (2001), Fu (2007), Gardner (2010), P. Lee (2012), and my own modest contribution (Smith 2014) have all made advances in this area. The majority of such scholarship, however, has been devoted to documenting the depiction of Asians during the early- and mid-twentieth century and the work of modern Asian-American alternative comic-book creators. Whilst such scholarship is important, there remains significant work to be done regarding depictions of Asians and Asian Americans in mainstream American comic books, and there is thus a danger that the literature might present a distorted view of mainstream American comics. Future scholarship would benefit from examinations of characters such as Glen from *The Walking Dead*, Jenny Quantum from DC's *Wildstorm* universe, The X-Men's Jubilee, Sunfire and Karma (Xi'an Coy Manh), and Sunfire (Mariko Yashida) from the Exiles.

Notes

1. Fu Manchu was the villain of a series of prose fiction novels by British novelist Sax Rohmer. The thrillers were published in 1912 and well received in America. The books depicted familiar themes of the 'yellow peril'; a horde of bloodthirsty Asian warriors poised on the brink of invading Europe. Fu Manchu was a cunning character clad in an exaggerated version of traditional Chinese dress. For more on Fu Manchu and the Yellow Peril, see Clegg (1994).
2. This field includes the work of Choy, Dong, and Hom (1994), Ma (2000), Chan (2001), Fu (2007), Gardner (2010), P. Lee (2012) and Smith (2014).
3. Two of the most celebrated mainstream comic-book creators, Stan Lee (Leiber) and Jack Kirby (Kurtzberg), both changed their names to appear less Jewish.
4. If we were to look beyond America, then we might also include *The Nao of Brown* (2012) as a comic that features a progressive depiction of an individual of Japanese descent.
5. The disadvantage of Hazmat's powers, and the scene in which her powers awaken, bear strong similarities to the X-Men's Rogue.
6. For more on the relationship between African Americans and Asian Americans, see, amongst others, K.C. Kim (1999), Ho and Mullen (2008) and J.H. Lee (2011).
7. Her suit also attests to the invisibility of Asian faces in American media. Consider, for example, the controversy over the casting of the film *The Last Airbender* (2010). The film was based on a cartoon series set in a fantasy world drawn from the history and cultures of Asia. In December 2008, the list of the main cast was released in *Entertainment Weekly*. Many fans were shocked to discover that none of the leading roles had gone to Asian actors. The preference for white characters over other racial groups (sometimes referred to as 'white-washing') is a common occurrence in American media, one that comics have not been except from. Hazmat's suit might be read as a dramatisation of this invisibility; it both physically separates her from her peers and hides her racial identity.
8. Pulitzer Prize-winning American comic-book creator Art Spiegelman (2005) wrote the introduction for the second volume of the English edition of *Barefoot Gen. Grave of the Fireflies* has been the inspiration for two films, in 1988 and 2005.
9. The perpetrators of the Holocaust also saw the killing of Jews as a necessary military act, but the execution and scale of the event, as Steven Katz (1994), for one, has argued, defies comparison.
10. The mistreatment of Japanese Americans led to the 'Redress Movement'. Those interned were eventually granted reparations, and the sites of many of the camps have been preserved as historical landmarks. Least we be led to a monolithic understanding of the Japanese American World War II experience, there is another aspect of the Japanese American World War II

experience which remains unexplored in the character of Hazmat: the 442nd Infantry Regiment of the United States, a fighting unit composed entirely of soldiers of Japanese heritage (see Chi and Robinson 2012).

11. Art Spiegelman, of course, drew upon the funny animals genre in his Holocaust biography *Maus* (2003), but the genre appeared, as many have argued, as an admission of the artist's failure to depict his subject. The genre was a means to depict that which was beyond depiction.
12. To understand Hazmat's acceptance of her powers we might return once more to Yang's *American Born Chinese*. In the story, the Chinese-American protagonist Jin Wang transforms in to Danny (who is white) so that he can integrate with his classmates. At the end of the comic Danny changes back into Jin and thus accepts his Asian-American identity. Like Jin, Hazmat decides that it is better to be 'who she is', even if that means that her family peers will continue to insist upon 'toxic' racist caricatures, and even if that means living with the unrelenting postmemory of violence to Japanese and Japanese-Americans, that accepting the reality of racism and mass killing, in other words, can make us better and more noble people.
13. Nico may also be alluding to Godzilla.

Notes on contributor

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