

“The future thanks you for your service”: HBO’s *Watchmen* as Instructive Discourse

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ABSTRACT

HBO’s *Watchmen* carefully crafts a speculative United States that serves as a funhouse mirror in which Americans see themselves: distorted, ugly, but reflected all the same. Its careful interplay of plot, thematic, and cinematographic elements capture its subject issues—racism, race-based violence, and systems of power—with nuance and complexity. Black characters present viewers with multiple models of justice, while White characters demonstrate models of injustice. However, the series moves beyond an oversimplified oppressor-oppressed binary structure to interrogate more broadly who has power and privilege, and how they use that power and privilege to either help or harm. *Watchmen* breaks apart the history constructed by White Americans, peeling off the layers of nostalgia rhetoric to expose White viewers to the tragic, brutal reality of racism in the United States—and to their own culpability, even if they consider themselves liberal-minded. For Black viewers, however, *Watchmen* presents the narrative they have known their whole lives but have rarely, if ever, seen represented on the screen before. The series models the strategy of simultaneously deprivileging White Americans’ nostalgia and prioritizing an empathetic understanding of Black Americans’ traumatic history to present viewers with the nation’s ugly reflection; in the act of critically viewing the series, then, moving toward new conceptions of justice and progress is possible. When used this way, tele-

vision becomes a tool for an alternative education in the face of systemic efforts to suppress history.

Keywords: *Watchmen*, nostalgia, memory, race, racism, trauma

“El futuro te agradece tu servicio”: Watchmen de HBO como discurso instructivo

RESUMEN

Watchmen de HBO crea cuidadosamente un Estados Unidos especulativo que sirve como un espejo de la casa de la risa en el que los estadounidenses se ven a sí mismos: distorsionados, feos, pero reflejados de todos modos. Su cuidadosa interacción de la trama, la temática y los elementos cinematográficos capturan sus temas (racismo, violencia basada en la raza y sistemas de poder) con matices y complejidad. Los personajes negros presentan a los espectadores múltiples modelos de justicia, mientras que los personajes blancos muestran modelos de injusticia. Sin embargo, la serie va más allá de una estructura binaria opresor-oprimido demasiado simplificada para interrogar de manera más amplia quién tiene el poder y el privilegio, y cómo usan ese poder y privilegio para ayudar o dañar. Watchmen rompe la historia construida por los estadounidenses blancos, quitando las capas de la retórica nostálgica para exponer a los espectadores blancos a la realidad trágica y brutal del racismo en los Estados Unidos, y a su propia culpabilidad, incluso si se consideran de mentalidad liberal. Sin embargo, para los espectadores negros, Watchmen presenta la narrativa que han conocido toda su vida pero que rara vez, si es que alguna vez, han visto representada en la pantalla antes. La serie modela la estrategia de privar simultáneamente a la nostalgia de los estadounidenses blancos y priorizar una comprensión empática de la historia

traumática de los estadounidenses negros para presentar a los espectadores el feo reflejo de la nación; en el acto de mirar críticamente la serie, entonces, es posible avanzar hacia nuevas concepciones de justicia y progreso. Cuando se usa de esta manera, la televisión se convierte en una herramienta para una educación alternativa frente a los esfuerzos sistémicos para suprimir la historia.

Palabras clave: *Watchmen*, nostalgia, memoria, raza, racismo, trauma

“未来感谢你的付出”：HBO电视剧《守望者》 作为教育性话语

摘要

HBO推出的电视剧《守望者》仔细描绘了一个充满猜测的、发挥哈哈镜作用的美国，其中美国人看见扭曲的、丑陋的自己，但显现的却是同样的影像。该剧对情节、主题要素、摄影要素的相互影响进行仔细刻画，以细微和复杂的方式描述了其主题问题：种族主义、基于种族的暴力以及权力体系。黑人角色为观众呈现了多个正义模式，而白人角色则展现了非正义模式。不过，该剧并未采取压迫者—被压迫者这一过度简化的二元结构，而是以更广的方式质问有权利和特权的是谁，以及他们如何使用这种权利和特权来施以援助或造成伤害。《守望者》解析了由美国白人所建构的历史，剥离怀旧的修辞，让白人观众看到美国种族主义悲剧且残暴的现实，以及看到自身的罪行，尽管其认为自己是崇尚自由的。不过，对黑人观众而言，《守望者》呈现了他们一直所熟知的叙事，但这些叙事几乎从未在银幕上出现过。该剧展现的策略在将美国白人的怀旧情怀进行剥离的同时对美国黑人的伤痛历史进

行共情，以期为观众呈现该国的丑陋影像；通过对该剧进行批判审视，则有可能对正义和进程的概念进行新的构想。当以这种方式加以应用时，电视成为了一种替代性教育工具，直面压迫历史的系统性尝试。

关键词：《守望者》，怀旧，记忆，种族，种族主义，创伤

“I still see Black men being shot, and Black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke and see fire. I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams. I live through the Massacre every day.”

—Viola (“Mother”) Fletcher

“You can’t heal under a mask, Angela. Wounds need air.”

—Will Reeves (“See How They Fly”)

In her testimony to the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties on May 19, 2021, Viola Fletcher—a survivor of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre—described the terror of that event and the trauma she continues to endure one hundred years later:

On May 31st, 1921, I went to bed in my family’s home in the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa. The neighborhood I fell asleep in that night was rich—not just in terms of

wealth, but in culture, community, and heritage . . . Within a few hours, all of that was gone . . . I still see Black men being shot, and Black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke and see fire. I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams. I live through the Massacre every day. (Fletcher)

Fletcher was joined by two additional survivors of the Massacre who shared similar stories. Lessie Evelyn Benningfield Randle was six when she was forced from her Greenwood home after “white men with guns came and destroyed [her] community” (Randle). She recalled: “They burned houses and businesses . . . They murdered people . . . It wasn’t a pretty sight. I still see it today in my mind—100 years later” (Randle). And Hugh Van Ellis, a survivor and World War II veteran, told committee members, “The Tulsa Race Massacre isn’t a footnote in a history book for us. We live with it every day and the thought of what Greenwood was and what it could have been” (Van Ellis).

Terror and trauma. It is clear in their full statements to Congress that these individuals were terrorized by the events of those two days in 1921, and that their memories from childhood have continued to traumatize them throughout their adult lives. What is equally clear is the terror and trauma of the Massacre have not been confined to the people who were there on those fateful days. Its legacy is a part of the city, state, and country’s histories. Part of that legacy has been the concerted decision to ignore and erase what happened; instead, “a brutal invasion became a victimless crime, then a repressed memory, then a hazy urban legend that few people had even heard about” (Luckerson). The process of misremembering the Tulsa Massacre was—and is—intentional: “It’s a true

story that will be left out of schoolbooks, mislabeled a ‘race riot,’ and deliberately forgotten” (Nussbaum). Even as this Congressional hearing took place, the State of Oklahoma with the passage of HB 1775 worked to ensure the Massacre cannot be taught in its appropriate context and complexity. In a direct attack on critical race theory, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt—during his May 7, 2021, remarks posted after the signing of HB 1775—argued that historical events like the Massacre and the Trail of Tears should be taught “without labeling a young child as an oppressor or requiring he or she feel guilt or shame based on their race or sex” (“Governor Stitt’s Statement” 00:01:30).¹ Competent educators who seek to teach the truth about the Massacre cannot do so without acknowledging the oppression of one race over the other. And what Tulsan, Oklahoman, or American could view the acts of those two days and the subsequent decisions to cover them up without some measure of guilt and shame?

The history of enslavement, racism, and anti-Black violence has consistently been obfuscated in the historical and literary record by White individuals seeking to maintain systems of White supremacy. To preserve power, White Americans depend on reconstructed versions of history that portray mythic origin stories and heroes triumphing over difficult

1 Proposed legislation introduced by the Oklahoma State Legislature in early 2022 seeks to continue this erasure of the historical record. House Bill 2988 declares that any state agency or school funded by the state cannot teach that (1) “America has more culpability, in general, than other nations for the institution of slavery;” (2) “that one race is the unique oppressor in the institution of slavery;” (3) “that another race is the unique victim in the institution of slavery;” (4) “that America, in general, had slavery more extensively and for a later period of time than other nations; or” (5) “the primary and overarching purpose for the founding of America was the initiation and perpetuation of slavery.” To do so, risks a withholding of up to 10% of state funding for that institution (Olsen).

odds. That effort was especially focused after the Civil War: "Postwar white southern elites faced a Herculean task of reproducing their world from the scattered fragments of a shattered past. The New South would require a new past" (Anderson 126). Postbellum memoirs that reminisce on the past (White) glory of plantation life serve as a clear model of the intentional process of misremembering; the horrifying conditions of enslavement were buried by a false portrait of enslaver-enslaved person relations that were purported to be at least happy, if not familial. This is the operative function of nostalgia: "Happy memories are placed on a pedestal whereas unhappy memories are knocked off theirs . . . This has, according to [sociologist Fred] Davis, an insidious effect because the diversity of the past is thus suppressed" (Anderson 107). The "happy memories" preserved in plantation reminiscences are both White and false, a component of "the suffocating hegemony of white national time which assumes linearity, closure, and a denial of responsibility" (Ore and Houdek 444). Misremembering is a frequent tool in the construction of a White, imperialist history, which, since written by the victors, actively suppresses marginalized voices and experiences. That process was implemented by White Tulsans to essentially remove the Tulsa Race Massacre from the historical record.

However, examining models of intentional misremembering like postbellum memoirs and plantation museums also reveals models of the work necessary to combat the oppressive prevailing (White) narratives. Nostalgia may suppress the past's diversity, but it can be disrupted and dismantled by the focalization of marginalized voices in cultural storytelling. In an evaluation of the Laura Plantation Museum and its visitors, Carter et al. found that "the *Gone with the Wind* narrativized world of the plantation is in decline. Counternarra-

tives from cultural products such as the television miniseries *Roots* and post-Civil Rights era textbooks might have reconfigured the narrative of the plantation” (555). The power of counternarratives has been demonstrated time and again, from pre-Civil War abolitionist literature to the neo-slave narratives of authors like Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, and Colson Whitehead. HBO’s 2019 limited series *Watchmen* is its own form of counternarrative, a story not of what actually was but of what could have been—had the Tulsa Race Massacre been remembered, had reparations been implemented, had the “nostalgia for a mythic great white past” cultivated by individuals like former President Donald Trump remained in the shadows rather than granted great political weight (Ore and Houdek 447). Just as neo-slave narratives worked to present a fuller account of enslavement and anti-Black violence, *Watchmen* combats the nostalgic misremembering of the twentieth century and its linear representation of White atonement for racism and closure to enter a purportedly post-racial twenty-first century. The Tulsa Race Massacre “had been relegated to a historical footnote, if it was mentioned at all, until *Watchmen* revived it in the national memory” (Kennedy-Karpat 289).

With increasingly frequent attacks on critical race theory, alternative education models are necessary to continue the testimonies of Fletcher, Randle, and Van Ellis. *Watchmen* is one such model. In response to persistent denials of “the continuity of anti-Black violence [that] often frame the closure of the past as an enactment of white atonement, redemption, and justice achieved,” *Watchmen* reveals the pervasiveness of racism today and the lie of a post-racial United States (Ore and Houdek 445). Opening in 1921 Tulsa, the first eight minutes of the television drama present in graphic detail the events of the Massacre, all from the perspective of a young boy.

Realized here, in these eight minutes, is the terror Fletcher, Randle, and Van Ellis describe. But the show does not simply employ this event as a historical touchpoint and move on—it demonstrates instead how these acts impact not only the life of the focalized character but his children, grandchildren, and the community writ large.

Watchmen's speculative United States is a funhouse mirror in which Americans see themselves: distorted, ugly, but reflected all the same. Its careful interplay of plot, thematic, and cinematographic elements capture its subject issues—racism, race-based violence, and systems of power—with nuance and complexity. Black characters present viewers with multiple models of justice, while White characters demonstrate models of injustice. However, the series moves beyond an oversimplified oppressor-oppressed binary structure to interrogate more broadly who has power and privilege, and how they use that power and privilege to either help or harm. *Watchmen* breaks apart the history constructed by White Americans, peeling off the layers of nostalgia rhetoric to expose White viewers to the tragic, brutal reality of racism in the United States—and to their own culpability, even if they consider themselves liberal-minded. For Black viewers, however, *Watchmen* presents the narrative they have known their whole lives but have rarely, if ever, seen represented on the screen before. The series models the strategy of simultaneously deprivileging White Americans' nostalgia and prioritizing an empathetic understanding of Black Americans' traumatic history to present viewers with the nation's ugly reflection; in the act of critically viewing the series, then, moving toward new conceptions of justice and progress is possible. When used this way, television becomes a tool for an alternative education in the face of systemic efforts to suppress history.

The series opens with an imagined Oscar Micheaux film *Trust in the Law!* (“Tales of the Black Marshall”). Micheaux’s affinity for elevating African American pioneers and bringing their stories to his community continues with the feature film created for the series. Chronicling the life of Bass Reeves, “the Black Marshall of Oklahoma,” the film shows Reeves, hooded and dressed all in black, chasing a local sheriff dressed in white across the Oklahoma plains. When Reeves captures him in front of a church and the local (White) townspeople demand an account for his actions, Reeves explains that the sheriff is both a “scoundrel” and “cattle thief” who does not “deserve to wear the badge” (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice” 00:01:21). Asked for his identity and backlit by the sun, Reeves throws back his hood, revealing both his face and badge. A young (White) boy identifies him—proudly—by name and title.

The decision to invert the black and white dichotomy between evil and good is purposeful in this carefully crafted film. And just as filmgoers in 1921 would have recognized this inversion and understood the explicit message of aspiration and racial uplift that *Trust in the Law!* provides as counter to D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Watchmen* viewers must be equally primed for challenges to their expectations. The point of view widens from the film to include the theatre in which it is being viewed and reveals an audience of one: a young (Black) boy whose ability to recite the lines suggests he has viewed the film many times. Viewers hear him repeat Reeves’s response to the townspeople’s call for a lynching: “There will be no mob justice today. Trust in the law” (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice” 00:02:12-15). The audience also hears a siren coming from outside the theatre warning Greenwood residents that mob “justice” is coming for them.

In *Watchmen*'s alternative timeline, Micheaux's *Trust in the Law!* premieres in Williams' Dreamland Theatre one week before the Massacre that destroyed much of that neighborhood and took more than 200 lives ("Tales of the Black Marshall"). As *Watchmen* moves from Micheaux's imagined film to the theatre to the streets of Greenwood, the scenes of devastation and destruction become more horrific. The young boy (Danny Boyd, Jr.), who we later learn is named Will Reeves, is joined in the theatre by his parents. His mother has been playing the piano accompaniment to the silent film, and his father—paralleling Bass Reeves's reveal framing—bursts in from the back of theatre, dressed in military uniform with a gun and backlit by the sun. As viewers follow them out of theatre, they are introduced to a full-colored world that the show identifies with a title: Tulsa 1921. *Watchmen* asserts "exactly whose nostalgia shapes its perspective on history by showing Reeves' memories of the 1921 massacre [...] shifting the central nostalgic perspective in the *Watchmen* universe" from White male oppressors to Black men and women (Kennedy-Karpat 289). Portraying this very real tragedy in these opening minutes asserts immediately the series' purpose as an alternative education model, providing a specific, often-unseen perspective. The establishing shot of Greenwood Avenue is then followed by more intimate moments of terror meant to be seen from young Will's perspective. Director Nicole Kassell is careful here to return often to Will's face and show how his eyes vacillate between open and closed. He sees a firetruck with its Black fire brigade lined up waiting to be executed by a group of White men; a Black woman chased out of a store and shot in the back by a White man; a Black man on fire; a White man in a Ku Klux Klan robe with a shotgun surveying the street for targets; a newspaper headline for a local (White) paper inciting mob violence; a hooded Klansman on a white horse; and a Black child holding a

dead Black infant (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice” 00:02:41-03:34).

The viewer, like Will, sees these images as a series of quick cuts. There is not time to process these portrayals of violence individually; the audience understands them now as a collective horror, acts of inhumanity that defy any adequate description. And because the viewer is focalized on this young boy, they are strongly invested in his safety. His parents successfully navigate this street of horrors and make it to the relative safety of an automotive repair shop. Will’s father places him in a trunk stowed on an escaping car driven by a family friend—the shop’s mechanic—who is fleeing the neighborhood with his own wife and child. Forced to leave his parents behind, Will witnesses their deaths through a fresh bullet hole in the trunk as a biplane drops dynamite on the building where they remained; he also sees the dead bodies of two Black men dragged behind a truck (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice” 00:05:14). Overwhelmed by these scenes, Will (and the viewer) cut to black only to awaken at night in a field outside of Tulsa. The mechanic and his wife are dead; their infant child is not. Young Will picks her up, carefully rewraps her in an American flag blanket, and tells her, “You’re okay” (00:07:01-02). After these first eight minutes, as much as viewers wish that were true, they most assuredly are not. Neither is the show’s audience, and the inclusion of the flag in this moment serves to underscore how these acts of racial violence are as much a part of the nation’s history as the many other events so often taught and eulogized in national narratives. Equally important is the inherent symbolism of these young Black children needing and deserving comfort from the nation during this moment of profound loss.

In 2019, Will (Louis Gossett, Jr.) returns to Tulsa a much older man, with only the eight-minute opening sequence thus far explaining his history there. Upon his arrival, he initiates interactions with series protagonist Angela Abar (Regina King), a woman who secretly works as a masked police detective with the code name Sister Night. Given Will's old age and apparent harmlessness, Angela and viewers alike are surprised to discover Angela's friend and Chief of Police Judd Crawford (Don Johnson) has been hanged and that Will is "the one who strung [her] chief of police up" ("Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship" 00:07:48-50). The sight of her beloved friend's body is traumatizing, and the loss opens Angela up to the possibility of constructing a new version of the past in response, given that nostalgia "always appears against the backdrop of 'massive identity dislocations,' in periods of 'rude transitions rendered by history,' in times of fear in the face of electrifying change, and at those transitional points in life when anxiety . . . is felt" (Anderson 107-8). On top of the anxiety and change due to Judd's death, Angela's identity is dislocated when she learns that Will is the grandfather who has been absent her entire life. These simultaneous inciting incidents for nostalgia provide the opportunity for Angela's version of the past to grow more expansive—to include Will's experiences within her family history and to broaden her understanding of the racialized conflicts in Tulsa.

While Angela wants an easy explanation of Will's arrival to Tulsa and Judd's death, Will is evasive, insisting that Angela must experience things for herself. She does through an overdose of Will's Nostalgia, an in-series drug that is essentially memories in pill form. However, Angela is immersed not in the Tulsa of Will's childhood, but in his adult life as a New York City police officer in the late 1930s and early 40s. The effect of taking multiple pills at once has distorted Angela's

very concept of memory, as represented by the manipulations of color, sound, point of view, and even which actor is physically in the role. Indeed, while some of the scenes are observed as Will's experiences, many of the most emotionally intense moments feature either Angela's body literally in Will's place or a first-person camera angle through which the viewer is placed in the scene. The visual elements are designed to mimic how trauma memories function within the brain: "[T]rauma narratives are characterized by sensory aspects, incoherence, and a lack of sequence, collectively referred to as fragmentation" (Bedard-Gilligan et al. 212). Without those cinematographic techniques, the basic plot of Will's memories explains to Angela his costumed identity as Hooded Justice, his investigation into a White supremacist mind-control cult called Cyclops, and his absence from Angela's family and her life. The careful interplay of those plot elements with the cinematographic techniques, however, reveals a more sophisticated thematic focus on Will's loss of idealistic faith in the law and how traumatic events may drive individuals toward retributive justice as a means of redress.

Will struggles with his fellow (White) officers, who use their positions to further their White supremacist ideology. Will, Angela, and the viewer fully realize this when Fred, a wealthy White man Will brought into the station for setting a Jewish delicatessen on fire, has not been booked by Will's fellow officers. Upset, Will storms out of the police station, which leads into a transition from one memory to another. The camera follows Will out, then pans up to the sky to transition to nightfall. As it returns to action, the camera first pans left to a lamppost; once there, it moves down the post to reveal Will in plainclothes after work, the post framed behind him ("This Extraordinary Being" 00:16:40-44). Here is the viewer's first hint of what is about to occur: lampposts were frequently

used for racially motivated lynchings, and the placement of Will in front of the post visually suggests the threat. The second hint comes as the camera tracks Will's movement. He walks past a vision of his mother playing the piano on the day of the Tulsa massacre, an image that returns to Will/Angela throughout the Nostalgia overdose (00:16:49). Her image is "the transgenerational 'phantom' that returns to unsettle the present with respect to crimes or transgressions that have not been worked through . . . [A] phantom or ghost, whether as metaphor or as hallucination, is a form of traumatic memory or post-traumatic effect" (LaCapra 379). The unresolved trauma and danger that the vision of Will's mother indicates is passed on from Will to Angela as she experiences the memories for herself. This and other images of the massacre use the same sepia tones from the opening sequence, while the action in New York City is filmed in black and white. The coloration stands out vividly, as the trauma of what Will experienced is vivid in his memory.

Another colored image of Tulsa will appear as the third hint of the danger to come. A cop car pulls up beside Will—the three officers who lied about booking Fred. Officer Borquin (Jordan Salloum), the trio's leader, offers Will a ride home, then invites him to grab a beer. Will, sensing the danger suggested to viewers by the lamppost and the vision of his mother, declines. Borquin finally yields, and the police car peels away; as it does, Will sees a vision of the two Black men dragged behind the truck in Tulsa ("This Extraordinary Being" 00:17:41). Borquin and his lackeys are placed against the White supremacists from the Tulsa massacre—specifically, the men who most likely shot the bullet hole in the trunk in which Will was hidden, giving him the ability to bear witness to his parents' death and the further destruction of Greenwood. The audience thus infers that Borquin, too, will reveal

a painful truth to Will through an act of racist violence. It is an inference quickly proven correct; when Will cuts through an alley, the car swings in front of him and the three officers get out. “Another time ain’t gonna work for us,” Borquin declares (00:18:23-24). The cops proceed to beat Will, forcing him to the ground and kicking him in the ribs repeatedly. The music, a crooning song about “The Way It Used to Be” (performed by Laura Dickinson), distorts as the violence continues. The camera pans around the violent scene before lowering to Will’s level, a height and gaze similar to his childhood perspective in Tulsa, then taking his place entirely. The final blow that knocks Will unconscious and cuts the shot to black is thus being delivered directly to the camera, to the audience (00:18:26-37).

The camera stays in Will’s position when he regains consciousness, so the viewer is dragged by the ankles toward the large tree where the rope is being hung. The positionality reveals once again how similar these officers are to the men from Tulsa, dragging a Black man across the ground. Once Will is dropped at the base of the tree, the camera pulls back into observational mode. Borquin hits Will in the face again—the viewer witnesses what they experienced before arriving to the site of the lynching—and then another officer loops the noose around Will’s neck. The perspective cuts back to camera-as-Will when Borquin pulls a thin hood over Will’s eyes, forcing the viewer to see blurred images through the fabric. Will and the camera are pulled up; camera-as-Will gasps and the gaze darts frantically between Borquin and the car headlights, a use of both visuals and audio to evoke the claustrophobic suffocation of being hanged. Grunts turn to gasps, it becomes more difficult to see, and the music distorts and fades until there is only the sound of ringing ears. Will, and to an extent the audience, has been hanged (“This Ex-

traordinary Being" 00:18:40-19:34). For the White viewer, this is shocking and uncomfortable; the series asks them to empathize with an experience far removed from their lives, inviting a deeper understanding of the atrocious injustice of racialized murders. Since "narratives involve audiences . . . in the creation of a sense of shared past and present identities that structure social relations," *Watchmen's* insistence on forcing White viewers to embrace a non-White perspective demands that they reevaluate their current conception of the cultural past and social present (Carter et al. 547). For Black viewers, however, "discourses [linking lynching and other forms of racialized violence across time] evidence an alternative, nonlinear temporal orientation to anti-Black violence that better accounts for its continuity and persistence than those that divorce the present from the past" (Ore and Houdek 444). By linking the Tulsa Race Massacre to both a New York City lynching and the racialized violence in *Watchmen's* contemporary Tulsa, the series "threatens to rupture the hegemony of white national time and create openings for new understandings of what justice looks like" (445). The nation's violent past is not past at all, either in *Watchmen* or, as the viewer is forced to realize, in the real world.

Then, the cops abort the lynching and drop Will to the ground. As Will's vision strengthens, Borquin removes the hood and cuts the noose from the rest of the rope. He leans into camera-as-Will to say, "You keep your black nose out of white folks' business, nigger. Or, next time, we won't cut you down" ("This Extraordinary Being" 00:19:54-20:05). Borquin then throws the hood at camera-as-Will and walks away; the camera returns to an observational angle, and it is now Angela collapsed at the base of the tree, not Will. Angela coughs, grunts, shakes, and struggles to sit up. Her physical reaction to almost being lynched informs the viewer's own

emotional reaction to the scene's intensity. Further, her hiss at the cops indicates that Angela has felt both Will's traumatic experience and his emotional response—rage (00:20:10-38). The audience, too, should be angry.

As Will walks home, he stumbles upon a perfect outlet for his emotions that indicates his rapidly shifting notion of justice. Will demonstrates how “a crisis or catastrophe that disorients and may devastate the collectivity or the individual may uncannily become the basis of an origin or renewed origin myth that authorized acts or policies that appeal to it for justification” (LaCapra 394). For Will, the aborted lynching triggers a transformation into a vigilante combatting racism. The camera pans up from the hood in Will's hands to his face and the noose still around his neck. Then, he hears a (White) couple's cries for help. With only a moment's hesitation, Will tears eye holes in the hood—much like the bullet hole in the trunk in Tulsa, Will's experience has created a new portal through which he sees and understands violence. He tugs the hood on and springs into action. Like the trio of cops, there is a trio of White men assaulting the couple. Will enacts an inversion of his own assault: he punches the muggers' faces, pushes them to the ground, and kicks them in the ribs (“This Extraordinary Being” 00:21:05-22:17). More than just an expression of rage, this is a total reversal of power; the difference, however, is that Will is intervening on an injustice. Still, Will and Borquin both believe themselves to be fighting for their values—though Borquin and his colleagues' morality is eroded. With the hood, Will is a one-man mob, and post-lynching, his anger seeks retribution.

Will's total shift to retributive justice extends into his present-day, made clear when Angela and the audience finally learn the truth about what happened to Judd Crawford.

Will takes matters into his own hands; in an answer to Judd's question, "Who are you?" Will considers himself "Justice" ("This Extraordinary Being" 00:55:47-50). Will asks about the "Klan robe in [Judd's] closet," which Judd insists he has "a right to keep" (00:56:07-16). Angela's own memories intrude on the Nostalgia—specifically, flashes of what she herself saw in Judd's closet: the Klan robe and a photograph of Judd with his grandfather. Like Will's visions of Tulsa, Angela's flashes of memory appear in color, though more saturated to match her own perception of reality. Angela is traumatized by the realization that her friend and colleague is racist, much in the way that the massacre and destruction of Greenwood was a betrayal to young Will, so these visions are vivid. Though Angela's memories verify the possession of the Klan robe, they do not explain *why* Judd has it, and his only answer is, "It's my legacy" (00:56:17-18). Will pushes back on this argument: "If you're so proud of your legacy, why do you hide it?" (00:56:20-24). The irony, of course, is that Will has been hiding his legacy from Angela for decades. Will's inability to see similarities between himself and Judd invites the viewer to interrogate whether shame is inherently different when generated by trauma versus guilt.

Will does not wait for an answer to questions about legacy, or for proof that Judd is indeed a White supremacist. Instead, he turns back on his flashlight—a technique borrowed from Cyclops, the White supremacists he stopped from using mind-control to incite violence between Black people in the 40s—and declares, "You can hang yourself now" ("This Extraordinary Being" 00:56:54-56). The camera pans into the flashlight's beam to center it, then back out to reveal Angela now in place of Will handing Judd the noose. "The Way It Used To Be" layers with the piano accompaniment to child Will's film hero Bass Reeves; his loss of faith in justice plays

against that childhood faith itself. However, this does not result in any hesitation. Angela-as-Will nods to Judd, the signal to step off the stool and hang himself. This triggers a series of overlapping visions: his mother playing the piano; the drums from his police academy graduation; young Will reciting Bass Reeves' declaration that "[t]here will be no mob justice today" (00:58:30-33) as Bass Reeves himself appears; Will explaining Bass Reeves to June, the infant he found in Tulsa and his now-ex-wife; Captain Metropolis/Nelson Gardner, Will's (White) male ex-lover, talking about how Hooded Justice inspired the Minutemen; Will's folder with information on Cyclops; and June telling Will to stay away from Tulsa (00:58:10-59:01). The events of his life that led to his conclusive views on justice are presented in one montage to Angela and the audience.

Most of these images are black-and-white, but the scenes from Tulsa still "remain in colour, a cinematographic choice that succinctly conveys how Will's adult life seems less real to him than the wounds inflicted on his psyche in childhood" (Johnson 400). More than that, though, the black-and-white of "This Extraordinary Being" emulates Will's first notion of justice: Bass Reeves and *Trust in the Law!* Will's propulsion toward retributive justice is its own form of fantasy, just like the idealistic dreams of restorative justice manifested in Bass Reeves. While a Black man fighting crime and being praised for stopping a White criminal is unrealistic, Will's eye-for-an-eye retributive justice is unsustainable. Without concrete proof of Judd's crimes, lynching Judd is as unjust as the aborted lynching of Will himself. Now that two extremes of justice have been presented through Will's perspective, it is up to Angela and the audience to determine what real justice might look like.

Angela begins that work as she recovers from Nostalgia and frequently lapses into her own memories of childhood, this time recontextualized by the trauma Will has experienced and she has inherited. Both Angela and the viewer come to understand “nostalgia as a force that binds the past to both present and future” (Kennedy-Karpat 288). Will’s past informs Angela’s conception of her own past; how Will and Angela each process and integrate the lessons of retrospection on his experiences shape how they approach the present moment and the conflict with the Seventh Cavalry. Will’s past—and Angela’s own—are thus unable to be interpreted in a vacuum and instead are vital to understanding who they are now and why. The series demonstrates, through Angela’s new interrogation of her own past, “the value of situating trauma in larger contexts and histories of violence” (LaCapra 378). Ensnared in the capable hands of Lady Trieu (Hong Chau) and her treatment for Nostalgia overdose, Angela finds herself vacillating between Trieu’s medical facility and Angela’s Vietnam childhood; she “drops down a tunnel of inherited trauma [from Will], and what she finds there rewrites not just her own history but the mythology she’s inside” (Nussbaum). Angela specifically focuses on her most traumatic memories: namely, the death of her parents and the continued tragedies that follow. In this recollection, though, Angela begins the process of rewriting her history.

When transported back to Angela’s Vietnam, the viewer sees a world saturated in color. It is a vibrant, bustling day commemorating the end of the war due to Dr. Manhattan’s (violent, destructive) intervention. Angela has purchased a movie to watch—featuring a masked protagonist named Sister Night—and her father explains why she cannot: “People who wear masks are dangerous, Angela, and we should be scared of them” (“An Almost Religious Awe” 04:52-56). As

he imparts this lesson, she embeds Will's memory of masking himself as Hooded Justice, including one moment where her father, Marcus, watches. The viewer understands, as she does, that his feelings about masked vigilantes have been influenced by his (poor) relationship with his father. Nostalgia has provided new context for this final conversation with her father.

Subsequent embedded memories, however, serve a different purpose. Instead of providing context for her life, Will's experiences force Angela to reevaluate her understanding of the world she inhabits and reimagine her own history. The effect of the aptly-named pills is a major function of nostalgia itself: "While nostalgia may be understood as a failure or at least a reluctance to adjust to changing circumstances, it can also prompt critical reflection on the past that productively shapes things yet to come" (Kennedy-Karpat 283). As she makes her way back to return the video, Angela is drawn to a puppet show that features Dr. Manhattan besting Vietnamese soldiers in battle. The lightning bolts of fire shooting down from his hands trigger a memory of Tulsa: she sees the fire truck and its brigade about to be executed. Here is a first glimpse of this potential reevaluation: Manhattan is not the American hero who liberated Vietnam and provided the United States with its fifty-first state. He is, in Angela's subconscious, connected instead to the Tulsan White supremacists who murdered Greenwood's residents and destroyed that community. To further emphasize this connection, the saturated color of Angela's Vietnam is replaced by the sepia tones of young Will's Tulsa. The puppeteer then hands a bicycling man—who contemporary Angela knows is the suicide bomber who will kill her parents—a backpack and triggers in Angela a vision of the first Klansman viewers and young Will saw in Tulsa. As she watches the bomber, she connects him and his act with multiple scenes from the Tulsa Massacre.

Angela sees the Black woman shot in the back and the Black man on fire; the two Black men dragged behind a truck; the hooded Klansman on a white horse; and the young Black boy with a dead Black infant (“An Almost Religious Awe” 00:05:35-06:25). The show (and Angela) has just complicated the viewing again. In her connection of the bomber with the Klansman, Angela reasserts a reading of *him* as a terrorist who (like Manhattan) has come to disrupt the political and domestic life of this place’s residents.

Will’s memories (his history) when layered over Angela’s own complicate not only her understanding of her parents’ deaths but also the American acquisition of Vietnam. James Brown’s “Living in America” no longer serves as a useful anthem for the celebration of Victory Vietnam (VVN) Day; it is now a painful reminder that many Vietnamese are forced to live under American occupation.² And Angela’s resistance to see the bomber as anything other than a terrorist is soon challenged by the history of her grandfather. As the viewer saw in “This Extraordinary Being,” Will’s origin story is complicated, but the show’s repeated presentation of Bass Reeves, his mother, his graduation from the police academy, and the aborted lynching suggest that his journey to Hooded Justice uses those moments and figures as touchstones. “An Almost Religious Awe” positions Angela similarly: she, too,

2 In “How ‘Watchmen’s’ misunderstanding of Vietnam undercuts its vision of racism,” Viet Thanh Nguyen provides a compelling reading of the show’s discussion of the war, imperialism, and its Vietnamese characters. In “Thinking About *Watchmen*: With Jonathan W. Gray, Rebecca A. Wanzo, and Kristen J. Warner,” Wanzo makes a similar claim, arguing the show “does fail to interrogate imperialism and the Vietnam War.” While *Watchmen* certainly does not devote extended time to American imperialism and Vietnam, these scenes with Angela may allow viewers to consider—as Angela does—the American war in Vietnam, its statehood, and the treatment of former Vietnamese citizens who are clearly fighting against these developments.

loses her parents at a young age and finds in law enforcement a role model that will dictate her professional choices. But if Will's path for justice has moved from a "trust in the law" to retribution, Angela's has proven to be quite different.

After her parents' death, two Saigon police officers bring Angela a suspect they believe is responsible for the act. The man, hooded in the back seat, is the puppeteer. Officer Roy removes the hood, and Angela clearly identifies him as the man who gave the bomber the backpack: "That's him . . . I'm sure." ("An Almost Religious Awe" 22:40-49). They stare at each other for a moment. As Roy removes him from the car and replaces the hood on the puppeteer's head, Angela flashes back to the moment Will places the hood on his head post-lynching before his first act of vigilantism. This will be hers. Roy leads the puppeteer away, Angela steps forward, and the camera closes in on her face to show she understands the weight of her action. Officer Jen tells her she is "very brave" and directs her to return inside, but Angela instead asks, "Can I listen?" (23:04-11). Impressed, Jen hands Angela her badge, telling the young girl to "come find me" when she grows up (23:19-21). As Angela holds the badge, she experiences flashes of others: Bass Reeves's, Will's at his graduation ceremony, Judd's underneath his lynched body with a drop of blood violating it. Then, a gunshot echoes; Angela turns around. She has listened. A man has been lynched.

This, perhaps, is the show's most subtle of scenes. On the one hand, careful viewers—or perhaps anyone with basic United State Constitutional knowledge around the Sixth Amendment—recognizes the illegality of what has just occurred. And like with Judd's lynching, viewers are left with more questions than answers concerning this purported terrorist. Did he know what he was delivering to the bicyclist?

Do the police have additional evidence linking him to the bombing? Is the audience to assess his guilt by his scar and shifty looks? On the other hand, what is clear is the inversion of justice progression that occurs for Angela in comparison to her grandfather. As a young child, Will believed so strongly in the law that even the Tulsa Massacre and the death of his parents could not dissuade him from becoming a police officer in New York City. But there, his aborted lynching by fellow (White) officers finally convinced Will of the necessity to pursue retributive justice, and his alter ego was born. Angela found retributive justice early in the death of the puppeteer. As her life progresses, she moves further away from that model and by the end of the show is a clear proponent of restorative justice.

That shift is helped in part by a person Angela meets *after* becoming a police officer in Saigon: the love of her life, Dr. Manhattan/Jon Osterman. When Jon and Angela meet, he is in his classic blue form, but he does not stay that way; he and Angela choose to take the identity and form of a dead man so that Jon has legal documents and can live a new life free from his complicated history as Dr. Manhattan. Angela presents Jon with three options: a Vietnamese man and two white men (“A God Walks into Abar” 00:17:19-52). She wants Jon to pick, whereas he insists she choose someone with whom she would be comfortable. Because Jon’s powers require him to exist in all of his experiences simultaneously, he already knows that Angela will choose—and that she has not shown him all the options, so he prompts her to reveal the choice she has been holding back. That choice is a Black man, Cal, and Angela says, “I’d be comfortable with him” (00:19:22-23). *Watchmen* understands the nuance and complications that go into a White man choosing to inhabit the form and take the identity of a Black man. When Jon/Cal meets with

Adrian Veidt in his new body, Adrian positions himself as the critic: “It’s quite an interesting form you’ve decided to take. [...] It’s not the 80s anymore, Jon. This kind of appropriation is considered quite problematic now” (00:28:51-29:07). It would be problematic—perhaps it still is—had Angela not wanted specifically to be with a Black man while revealing through her approach that she understood Jon could not choose that form for himself.

Jon sacrifices everything that comes with being Dr. Manhattan to fully become Cal so that he and Angela can be together. And a sacrifice it is: “Like Hooded Justice, [Jon/Cal] uses blackness as a shield of anonymity in a world transfixed by white heroes. But because he agrees to give up his powers and memories to save his relationship, blackness also robs him of his ability to alter history with the snap of his fingers” (Luckerson). Cal is left without any memory of his life as Jon, and Angela has to reintegrate him into the world, not as a super-powerful being in Vietnam but as a Black man in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His powers are still there, but only reflexively when Jon/Cal feels his or Angela’s life is in danger. Essentially, though, to live a real life with Angela, Cal has to give up the privilege of superpowers (Dr. Manhattan) and the privilege of Whiteness (Jon). What Angela wanted when she chose Cal’s body is, perhaps, a partner in the potential dangers of Blackness in America. They are vulnerable in Tulsa, but they are vulnerable together.

The dangers that Will, Angela, and Cal face in Tulsa do not need to be overly explained. Viewers are already familiar with the enemy; though *Watchmen*’s contemporary Tulsa is a speculative version of the America viewers know, its racial strife is grounded in *this* United States. While the (Black) protagonists function as illustrative models for the discovery of

and experimentation with different forms of justice-seeking, the (White) antagonists and supporting characters demonstrate injustice, both overt and subtle, and motivate viewers to evaluate their own behavior toward and interactions with marginalized individuals. *Watchmen's* American politics are oriented further left than those of the audience's world, but this does not eliminate prejudice and hate from (White) people who feel their status is being threatened. Though some progress, such as reparations paid to survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre and their direct descendants, has been made, the series is careful not to suggest that actions like these are a solution to racism. In fact, social progress is responded to by White supremacists in a familiarly violent, reactionary way. The reparations so hotly debated in the real United States are, when implemented, only another invitation for (White) rage to respond.

Watchmen's careful inversion of roles and subversion of expectations begins in the first contemporary-Tulsa scene: a traffic stop—but the police officer is Black, and the nervous driver is White. The driver does everything Black parents tell their children to do to survive police encounters like these; he places his hands on the top of his steering wheel, announces any movements he is going to make in the car, and—with the exception of one comment about the police officer wearing his mandatory mask—is polite. The scene also reveals the careful reforms to policing in this Tulsa, from the body-camera filming to the restricted access to police-issued firearms. Still, the familiar racial pattern plays out. The White man pulls his firearm and shoots the Black man (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice” 00:08:20-12:06). The power of this officer’s authority position cannot protect him from the power of White supremacy, no matter how many liberal policies have been enacted.

Two forces are at play in Tulsa to uphold White supremacy: legal authority (the police) and White rage (the Seventh Cavalry). Two (White) men have been using their positions of power to relatively control the racial tensions in Tulsa. Judd Crawford, Angela's friend and the victim of her grandfather's lynching, has been keeping the police under control. His premature death makes it impossible to understand the full depth of his involvement *or* the extent of his own prejudice. His collaborator, however, is explicit in his goals and beliefs. Joe Keene (James Wolk) is a Senator for Oklahoma, and he purports to fight against the Seventh Cavalry while actually running it. Joe is personally responsible for the law that put the police in masks, ensuring that both sides of the racially motivated conflict have obscured identities.

Joe's mask strategy is a mere recreation of his internal balance of public and private identities. In his public life, he supports liberal policies and condemns the Seventh Cavalry. In his private life, he controls them. Joe explains in a speech to his fellow White supremacists,

Thirty-four years ago, Adrian Veidt unleashed his monster on the world. No, not his giant one-eyed octopus, but his puppet president [Robert Redford]. First, he took our guns. And then, he made us say sorry. Over and over again. Sorry. Sorry for the alleged sins of those who died decades before we were born. Sorry for the color of our skin. All we wanted was to get cops in masks, take some power back, start ourselves a little culture war. And if we control both sides of it, then I could come riding up on a white horse, right into the White

House. ("See How They Fly" 00:30:50-31:40)

All Joe had to do was harness the rage and frustration of White Americans reckoning—or avoiding reckoning—with their own histories. *Watchmen* staunchly refuses to suggest a policy such as reparations could adequately redress decades of racism or eliminate the opposition to that attempted redress. In fact, that opposition only grows stronger, angrier. While Angela's assessment of her own history is a productive exercise in reevaluation, the (White) oppressor's response to such a call to action is plainly antagonistic. Despite Joe's framing of "alleged sins" as decades past, he is actively continuing the work of Cyclops; the organization Will fought to take down in New York City is alive and well in Tulsa. The viewer's participation in Angela's experience of both Will's and her memories provides the context for Joe's willful avoidance. Joe may not want to reevaluate his harmful history, but Angela, Will, and the viewer have, and they know that individuals like Joe have to do more than say "[s]orry for the color of our skin."

It is not difficult for Angela—or the other non-White characters, like Cal and Lady Trieu—to deal with an individual like Joe Keene, nor is Angela surprised to learn that he is the leader of the Seventh Cavalry. More surprising, or at least disappointing, is the way Angela is forced to engage with Laurie Blake (Jean Smart), the FBI agent—and former vigilante Silk Spectre—who is assigned to investigate Judd Crawford's death. One of the first things Laurie tells Angela is, "I'm here to help" ("She Was Killed by Space Junk" 00:27:06-07). And Laurie genuinely means that; her goal is to find the truth in Tulsa. However, her attempts prove mixed, and Laurie and Angela quickly find themselves at odds with each other.

Laurie's assurance that she is there to help comes at an unhelpful time—the cemetery, just before Judd's funeral is set to begin. Angela is there with her family, as Judd's friends, instead of as a police officer; her adopted children do not even know that she has continued in that line of work. She explains to Laurie the lie that she retired three years ago, and Laurie says policework is dangerous, especially for someone with a family. Cuts to Topher and Cal's faces suggest that the two are uncomfortable with this conversation—Topher is suspicious of Angela, while Cal wants their secret kept. The anonymity of policing in Tulsa is meant to be protective, but Laurie disregards the potential danger for Angela (and her family). Laurie's conversation with Angela seems to be in earnest, but the thoughtfulness of her desire to help does not outweigh the thoughtlessness of her approach. She is in earnest, too, when she begins clapping along to Angela's singing during her eulogy, recognizing Angela's vulnerability and need for support (“She Was Killed by Space Junk” 00:30:11). Laurie at least respects Angela—or, if not that, wants Angela to feel respected so that she can get information. Either way, she needs Angela's cooperation, yet Laurie interacts with her without fully considering what Angela herself wants. Nor does she consider how public her actions are and what that may communicate to the individuals around them.

Laurie does not consider the larger impact of her actions even in life-or-death situations. When a Seventh Cavalry member interrupts Judd's funeral in an attempt to “kidnap” Joe Keene using a bomb vest rigged to his heart, Laurie shoots him in the head anyway with a gun she snuck into the funeral (“She Was Killed by Space Junk” 31:21). As the bomb indicates its imminent destruction, it is Angela, not Laurie, who springs into action. She tells everyone to run, drags the Cavalry body and bomb into the grave, and pushes Judd's casket on top

of it to minimize the blast's impact on others. When Laurie and Angela fall close enough to make eye contact, Angela is clearly unhappy with Laurie's decisions. *Watchmen* is equally clear—when Laurie acts without considering the potential impact on others, she increases risk for those with less power than her.

Laurie and Angela have few opportunities for extended screen time together, but when they do, their exchanges often reveal essential flaws with Laurie that establish her as a progressive (White) woman who does not fully appreciate Angela's position and experiences. Laurie's belief in justice and her inability—or unwillingness—to place it in any historical or personal context becomes more problematic as she interacts with Angela. In "If You Don't Like My Story, Write Your Own"—an apt name for the scene about to be discussed—the viewer initially reads the antagonism between Laurie and Angela as one centered on the investigation into Judd's death and Angela's withholding of Will's involvement. But those details soon give way to conversations more personal and traumatic.

As they travel to Lady Trieu's complex to inquire about Angela's stolen car, Billie Holiday's "You're My Thrill" accompanies the conversation as non-diegetic then diegetic sound. Viewers are treated to an instrumental accompaniment first; Holiday's lyrics are suppressed by the conversation between the two women. The camera keeps the viewer eye-level with both characters' faces. Angela's face is foregrounded and vacillates in and out of focus depending on who is talking; the camera repositions itself to the backseat, so the viewer is either behind Angela or in Petey's position behind Laurie. In keeping with the show's aesthetic, viewers are a part of the conversation or witnesses to it. Laurie mentions her "ex"—

Dr. Manhattan—and then says to Angela, “He’s no Cal” (“If You Don’t Like My Story, Write Your Own” 00:28:48-49). Repeat viewers understand the significance of this statement; Cal is Dr. Manhattan, which Angela knows but Laurie does not. First time viewers see instead in this comment and the next both jealousy from Laurie and concern from Angela when she learns that the agent has visited with him. In the latter’s look at Angela, it is clear she’s trying to provoke the officer because she suspects her; Laurie’s interrogation continues.

Upon discovering that Angela is an orphan, Laurie claims an immediate understanding of her: “Well, people who wear masks are driven by trauma. They’re obsessed with justice because of some injustice they’ve suffered, usually when they were kids. Ergo, the mask. It hides the pain” (“If You Don’t Like My Story, Write Your Own” 00:29:14-25). When Angela asserts that she wears her mask to protect herself, Laurie replies, “Right. From the pain” (00:29:27-30). After that bit of reductive psychoanalysis, Laurie attempts to mollify Angela by suggesting that she, too, once felt the need to wear a mask, but when asked about her “trauma,” Laurie refuses to own her history and defers to Petey: “[H]er dad tried to rape her mom” (00:30:34-37). Neither the viewer nor Angela know the context of this act or Laurie’s relationship to it. All viewers have is this discussion of her “origin story.” In it, the viewer sees Laurie attempt to make an equivalence between Angela’s trauma and her own. Laurie also implies that her personal rejection of a masked identity suggests she has both healed and progressed past her “pain.” But this episode demonstrates how much Laurie has not progressed at all. She continues to seek out ways of communicating with her ex-boyfriend Dr. Manhattan and employs sex toys modeled after his genitalia. The one sexual relationship she does pursue in this episode is with a subordinate—Petey—who she

can clearly control. And she extends this distrust of men to her professional relationships: viewers recognize her continued marginalization of Wade Tillman (Tim Blake Nelson), Angela, and other Tulsa police officers who employ masked identities to protect themselves and their families. One needs only to witness her use of Wade/Looking Glass's mask to pick her teeth as an example of that distancing technique. As the viewer, Angela, and Laurie sits with her "unmasked" lie, Holiday's lyrics become non-diegetic sound again, and the audience is forced to consider how the vocalist's own trauma could have resonance with both women: "When I look at you/I can't keep still/You're my thrill."

In these establishing scenes, Laurie gives Angela little reason to trust her. Even as they both search for justice, Laurie does so alone without any thought of allying herself with Angela. Because her idea of justice is so binary—privileged through the (White) lens she employs—Laurie is unable to consider Angela's position or the possibility that a wider conspiracy may exist until the (Black) detective has done the work for her (and suffered for it). When Wade determines his best course of action is to betray Angela to save her, he uses Laurie's listening device—and suspicion of his partner—to entrap her. Laurie immediately takes the bait and shows Angela exactly who she is: another obstacle in Angela's search for justice.

The two White male characters who have their perspectives focalized (either in a deviant episode or scenes scattered across episodes) are not White supremacist antagonists, but well-intentioned individuals who, like Laurie, try and fail to adequately secure justice. One, Adrian Veidt (Jeremy Irons), is another ex-vigilante from Laurie's past; Adrian is responsible for the alien squid hoax, which he claims saved the world from nuclear apocalypse. The other, Wade, is Angela's part-

ner on the Tulsa police force and the only featured character who was directly impacted as a victim of the “alien” squid and the accompanying psychic shockwave of horrific images.

Wade, a Tulsa native, was in Hoboken as a missionary on November 2, 1985;³ in the face of nuclear war, Wade is a true-blooded (White) American Christian, trying to save carnival-goers from damnation. He approaches a group of teenagers and, after rehearsing his question to himself, says, “Hello, neighbors. Are you ready to hear the truth?” (“Little Fear of Lightning” 00:03:03-06). As he does, a young woman in the group glances back at him with her compact mirror. These two, then—Wade and the woman—have a truth to share with each other. She leads Wade to the hall of mirrors and asks him if he has had sex yet, because “[y]ou wouldn’t want to get nuked before you get fucked” (00:05:23-26). The double meaning is clear when she strips him, takes his clothes, and runs away. Wade’s impulse is to self-punish: “You dummy. You’re pathetic, and you’re a sinner. You’re a filthy dumb sinner, and now you get what you deserve!” (00:06:09-21). Then the squid fall begins: his ears ring, the psychic blast delivers nightmares, and the impact of the squid shatters the mirrors all around Wade. The woman who stole his clothes is dead, and Wade has gotten what he thinks he deserves.

These two events—the stolen clothing and the squid—form the foundation of Wade’s adult identity; he is afraid of both aliens and intimacy. Comic readers and repeat viewers know while watching this flashback that Adrian is responsible for the squid fall on New York City, which killed three million people and traumatized millions more. So, while Wade is fa-

3 The event, known in *Watchmen*’s world as the 11/2 Psychic Shockwave, is memorialized the way the real United States memorializes 9/11, which enables the viewer to make emotional inferences that help to understand Wade.

miliar with mass trauma, that trauma is contextualized first as a foreign threat and then as the act of a wealthy (White) man. Whiteness is thus fundamental to the viewer's understanding of 11/2—an event perpetrated by a White man that harms a focalized White man. This lens is complicated by a meeting of the support group Wade leads for individuals impacted by the traumatizing psychic shockwave, in which Jerry, a Black man, explains, “There’s this thing, genetic trauma. Basically, if something really bad happens to your parents, it gets locked into their DNA” (“Little Fear of Lightning” 00:24:44-55). The concept could—and should—be applied to the experiences of Will and Angela, but that labor must be done by the viewer because it will not be done by Wade, who seems almost determined not to understand his partner.

Partner is itself a complicated word to apply to the working relationship between Angela and Wade, in part because they have a similar preference to work alone. When Angela does ask Wade for a favor—to test the pills from Will at his ex-wife Cynthia’s lab—Cynthia assumes Wade is testing the drugs for a “lady friend,” not for any more meaningful reason (“Little Fear of Lightning” 00:23:16). Instead of telling Angela about the pills immediately after getting the results from Cynthia, he waits until he gets her in front of the bugged cactus and uses that information to help Laurie. Like Angela, who was most comfortable in the station talking to Judd before his death, Wade has informally aligned with an authority figure instead of with his partner. The distance between Wade and Angela makes it easier for him to do what Joe Keene asks—to set up Angela so that she will be arrested, or else she will be killed. Wade does not try to find some way to collaborate with Angela; instead, he makes a decision based on what he thinks will be best for her. Allowing police officers to wear masks “offers Angela and several other characters [like Wade] the

opportunity to hide from trauma—racial and otherwise—under a mask, but it cannot give them justice” (Johnson 398). Wade disguises his trauma just like Angela, and the pieces are there for Wade to understand her: the experience of trauma with long-lasting impact, trust and intimacy issues, the concept of genetic trauma. However, Wade never puts those pieces together to try to empathize with Angela. He chooses rather to dwell in his own lived experiences and prioritize himself and his decision-making abilities. Ultimately, then, Wade and the police force alike fail Angela.

Wade and Laurie fail Angela in small ways as (White) allies, and when they join forces with Adrian Veidt (Jeremy Irons) in their successful bid to stop Trieu from stealing Manhattan’s powers, viewers see how they carelessly sacrifice Greenwood—and quite possibly its residents—with their solution to the Trieu problem. Readers of the *Watchmen* comics and viewers of “Little Fear of Lightning” understand how little Adrian cares for property destruction and loss of life. After Manhattan sends the trio to Adrian’s lab “to save the day” (“See How They Fly” 00:41:28), Adrian conceives of a smaller scale squid attack that could destroy Trieu, but he needs help from Wade and Laurie. Wade supplies Adrian with the date of the last squid drop and decreases the temperature of the squids so they arrive frozen and “incur damage and casualties” (00:46:31-34). Laurie merely asks questions. In his answer to why Trieu is unworthy of Manhattan’s powers, Adrian provides a response loaded with sexism and racism: “that girl will not rest until she has us all prostrate before her, kissing her tiny blue feet” (00:47:30-40). While the viewer may have their own problems with Trieu’s killing of Manhattan—the show presents his death not as a failed or flawed god’s but as Angela’s lover’s, and this pathos-laden scene is enhanced (and racialized) when Cal (not Manhattan) is the

final man we see die at Trieu's hand—they cannot embrace Adrian's rhetoric by trivializing her accomplishments (“girl”) or employing racial stereotypes (“tiny (blue) feet”).

The viewer is left to wonder, then, how appropriate is the action taken by Adrian (and Wade and Laurie) to stop Trieu. The damage of one frozen squid is enough to pierce a hole in Trieu's outstretched palm (completing her symbolic association with Jesus Christ). Viewers see how an accumulation of squids take down her transfer device, killing her. But there is enough collateral damage that much of restored Greenwood is also destroyed. And although the viewer does not see it, it is difficult to imagine additional lives were not lost; after all, Adrian knew there would be “casualties” from this attack. In many ways, then, this resulting damage from their solution transforms 2019 Greenwood into the opening 1921 version. Once again, as (White) people work out their problems—Manhattan and his decision to conquer Vietnam, Adrian's unwillingness to acknowledge his daughter, etc.—Black people suffer for it.

One of those who must suffer is Cal. Despite Adrian's quip about Manhattan's appropriation of Cal's form, viewers understand this was Angela's choice. The morgue scene presents both her and Manhattan with a number of forms he could take, but he leaves the choice in her hands, and she clearly prefers Cal over other (White/Vietnamese) options. This—coupled with Manhattan's eventual suppression of his powers—means that he (as Cal) will live nine years as a Black man in America. Even though the show does not illustrate the impact this has on Cal, viewers may not find it surprising to see how much time he spends in the (relative) safety of his home. The impact of this appropriation becomes clearer for Manhattan when Angela removes his suppression de-

vice, and he retains Cal's form (although not his skin color). When he dies, Manhattan dies as Cal, not as Jon Osterman or Dr. Manhattan. For viewers then, the death we see is a Black man's; this release of energy propels Angela backwards and marks the end of Manhattan's life.

When Angela recovers from the physical consequences of her husband's death, she must then face the collateral fallout of Adrian's frozen squids. She takes shelter in the Dreamland Theatre, where she finds her grandfather Will "watching over" her three children. Angela is an emotional wreck, and King's acting in this scene clearly shows the toll the death of the character's husband has taken on her. Will expresses remorse for Angela's loss, but he has had time to process it: Will tells Angela that allying with Trieu was Manhattan's idea; he knew he was going to die. As both Angela and the viewer consider Manhattan's sacrifice—and the possible parallels to Christ—Will does not allow either to fixate on this idea for long, reminding both that he and Manhattan "helped each other" ("See How They Fly" 00:53:38-40). For Will, this conversation cannot be about Manhattan as sacrificial god. He pivots instead to the shared experiences he now has with his granddaughter. As Angela recalls—and the viewer sees—herself-as-Will immediately after his lynching had been aborted, Will tells her the story of this place, his mother playing the piano, Bass Reeves in "flickering black and white," (00:54:40), and the origin for his sense of justice (00:54:10-56). He speaks about his need for a hood and the feeling he had when donning it, asking Angela if she felt the same. She replies, "Anger" (00:54:19). Will agrees but says that he realized he was wrong: "It was fear and hurt" (00:55:28-31). Angela breaks down. Will says, "You can't heal under a mask, Angela. Wounds need air." (00:55:35-46).

Unfortunately, the show does not linger on this exchange, nor does it allow viewers to process Will's words and the appropriate connections they should make to their world. It is, instead, a missed opportunity to reinforce the lessons delivered by the show throughout the series. If the viewers' world has failed to acknowledge the Tulsa Race Massacre, the show does so in the first eight minutes of its inaugural episode. If the viewers' world has failed to acknowledge how these incidents of domestic terrorism and the continued injustices of systematic racism have orphaned Black children and led to generational trauma that continues to impact their descendants, the show does so through its explication of Will and Angela's lives. Angela's ingestion of Nostalgia—and the show's decision to focalize the audience through Will's perspective—provides an empathetic pathway to understanding his experiences and the trauma he continues to endure. His message, then, at this moment deserves attention. It also provides the clearest counter to the current debate over what history should be taught in schools. Those attempting to mask America's racist past ensure that America cannot heal from it. Their racial wounds need air.

With the White supremacists, Lady Trieu, and Cal/Jon dead, it would seem that the legacy and powers of Dr. Manhattan are at their end. However, the final minutes of the series complicate even that ending. Angela brings Will home with her and her children, and the pair have one more conversation before Will goes to bed. They return to Angela's grief, and Will says of Dr. Manhattan, "He was a good man. I'm sorry he's gone. But, uh, considering what he could do, he could've done more" ("See How They Fly" 1:02:36-51). Will is right, of course—this is one reason why Lady Trieu wanted to take Dr. Manhattan's powers. However, her desire to have his powers and her willingness to do whatever it took to obtain them

are why even Adrian felt she could not be allowed to succeed. What was missing from Lady Trieu's attempted transition of power was consent from both parties.

Cal/Jon had a plan, however, one which enabled a passage of power built on consent. When Will goes to bed, Angela begins to clean up the kitchen—including a carton of eggs she smashed while yelling at Cal/Jon. Angela realizes there is one egg wholly intact in the carton (“See How They Fly” 1:03:33). Remembering that Jon told her on the night they first met that he could transfer his atomic components into organic material that, when consumed, would allow the consumer to inherit his powers, Angela decides to do exactly that. She walks outside, drinks the raw egg (1:05:11), and approaches the swimming pool. Slowly, she lowers one bare foot to the water's surface (1:06:00). The screen cuts to black before the viewer can see whether the power transfer is successful, but the lyrics from the Beatles' “I Am the Walrus” playing over the credits suggest an answer: “I am he as you are he / As you are me / And we are all together” (1:06:08-16).

In the end, then, *Watchmen's* conclusion is not about vanquishing White supremacists or conquering narcissistic multi-billionaires (although these things happen, too). For Wade and Laurie, the opportunity to arrest Adrian is their first step toward correcting how they enable (White) systems of power that disadvantage minorities and holding themselves and their peers accountable. For Angela, the narrative arc has been about learning what it means to fight for justice, and for which model of justice she should fight. She loved Jon despite his shortcomings, and inheriting his powers is an opportunity to carry on his legacy with love while working to overcome his failures. The story ends with hope: hope that Angela will do better, hope that Angela will do more, hope

that Angela will be a hero. At the same time, it recognizes the obligation White characters like Wade and Laurie have to seek justice as well, even without Dr. Manhattan's powers.

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