Episode Six Script: The Avatar for America

Brendan: From the Tenement Museum, I'm Brendan Murphy.

Here at the Tenement Museum we have two historic tenement buildings. You've heard about 97 Orchard in other episodes of this podcast. But while 97 closed to residents in 1935, our other building, just a few doors down at 103 Orchard, remained open into the early twenty-first century. It is in 103 Orchard that we explore the experiences of a Chinese-American family, the Wongs. The Wong family moved in to the building in 1968, Kevin was born two years later in 1970. Kevin's parents and his two older sisters had immigrated from China and came to New York during a time of changing immigration laws and national migration, during a diversification of what had been a primarily white, European Lower East Side.

Yet, despite growing up within Chinatown's tightly-knit community, Kevin was still faced with the pressures of assimilation. Even his English name, Kevin, is an indicator of the tension he experienced.

Kevin Wong: Growing up as a Chinese-American, I didn't necessarily feel like I was a part of, of American society, but I was still living in it and I was still being assimilated to it, but not necessarily being a part of it, you know, fully integrated, but being still being on the fringe of it.

Brendan: Like millions of other American kids, Kevin found joy, and escape, in comic books. I called him up recently at his home in Seattle to hear more about his love of the comic book franchise X-Men, in particular, and how the series connected to his own American identity.

***Wolverine**: My name is Wolverine. I'm the best there is at what I do. But what I do isn't very nice.*

Brendan: I called him up recently at his home in Seattle to hear more about his love of the comic book franchise X-Men, in particular, and how the series connected to his own American identity.

Kevin: It was just, uh, one of the most exciting times because it was just a way for me to just open a new world for me in terms of escaping, um, some escapist fiction, I guess. I always found that exciting. And, and in fact then it was very serialized too. So, I was always waiting for the next epic comic book to see what happened to, you know, the heroes.

Brendan: He was particularly drawn to X-Men because, at least by the mid-1970s, the series boasted a cast of globally diverse characters.

Kevin: During I think around 1975 or so, um, they switched it up to an international cast where they had, you know, they had an African American for Storm…

***Storm**: Because I can control the weather, they call me Storm.*

Kevin: …and they had a Sunfire who was a Japanese superhero. Finally, there was something that people were interested in and not just only having one representation in comics, that there was interest in having multiple backgrounds. It just opened my eyes saying, hey, there's a lot of different interesting stories, interesting voices that can, you know, be, be heard now. That group character always lived on the fringe of society in terms of not being fully, being able to integrate because they may look a little different or they had powers that people were afraid of, but they still try to interact with society in terms of you're trying to protect civilians, so that's what struck me as a kid, more than anything else that, wow, this is, this is something that people may be interested in, in stories that may necessarily be a particular background I guess. That's what struck me more than anything else.

Brendan: Just like Kevin explained, comic books can provide more than just an escape; they offer a window into American society and a mirror for how we see ourselves in it. As we've changed, comics have changed with us.

In our final episode of the first season of How to be American, we're going to hear from two individuals who can help us shine light on the history of comics, the importance of fair representation in art and what comics tell us about our shared identity.

First, we will hear from Jonathan Gray, a renowned scholar and expert on American literature, about the ways in which comic books have reflected America's achievements, as well as our errors, for coming up on a hundred years. Later, I'll chat with Alex Simmons, a veteran comic book writer himself who has made a mission of using comic books to inspire young people around the world.

And just a heads up, we're going to refer to a ton of comic book characters in this episode. We encourage you to check out the show notes to help keep all these characters straight.

But first, I want to introduce you to Jonathan Grey, who will help us explore the origin story of the comic book genera.

Jonathan Gray: I'm Jonathan Gray. I'm a professor at the City University of New York. I teach English, African American literature, and American literature at John Jay College and also at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Actually, I can't remember a time when I wasn't reading comics. My older cousin had a huge collection and so, in the summertime when I would, you know, hang out with my aunt, I would just sit in the room and would just plow through ten issues of X-Men. The time would just go by like that.

Brendan: Jonathan explained that comic books' rise in the early twentieth century was fueled by two major American newspaper publishers: Hearst and Pulitzer, who were eager to get more eyes on their papers.

Jonathan: And so, one of the ways that they could differentiate themselves would be through comic strips. Right. Um, and so that was sort of the original thing... and then, some of the more popular strips would get collected into editions, um, and those editions would, you know, would be for sale. Then it's like, well, hold on, can we make up an original product?

Brendan: The first original product, as Jonathan put it, was Superman, which hit shelves in 1938, in the middle of the Great Depression. Superman was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two childhood friends from Cleveland who were both children of Jewish immigrants. They had come to NYC looking for work. Within this one character, Superman, we can see aspects of their immigrant pasts and their current moment. For instance, Superman's birth name, on the planet of Krypton, was Kal-El, a phrase that could roughly be translated into Hebrew as "the voice of God."

Jonathan: He's very much an immigrant, literally from another world, coming here. And you know, growing up salt of the earth in the Midwest. One of the funny things about Superman is that in his earliest iteration, he's not fighting for truth, justice, and the American way; he's like fighting against exploitative labor bosses.

By 1938 we've, you know, we've already had the '36 Olympics, right? We've already had, um, you know, sort of Nazi adventurism into Poland and, and, and, you know, and so for, particularly for sort of, you know, young, um, cosmopolitan, uh, you know, Jewish creatives, you know, they, this was something sort of on their mind, right? Um, and so I, until, I don't think it's, it's, it's a coincidence that we get this optimistic, you know, powerful, um, person who emerges at that moment because we do have this larger thing. It's a similar thing with Joe Salvo and Jack Kirby who created Captain America in 1940.

Brendan: The new medium quickly exploded. Many of the early comics were created by Jewish Americans who sought to shape their own identities through their work. Jack Kirby, creator of Captain America, for instance, was born Jack Kurtzburg. His peer Stanley Lieber changed his name to Stan Lee.

Jonathan: They are Americanizing themselves. They're becoming different people in part by changing their names. Each of them is articulating a certain notion of what it is to be an American in these superheroes.

Brendan: The characters they developed, like Kirby's Ben Grimm who is a member of the Fantastic Four, were projections of how they saw America, as well as their dreams of what America could be.

Jonathan: Ben Grimm is very much this sort of working-class immigrant, everyman hero. And he actually, he comes from a place called Yancy Street, which is just Kirby's reworking of Delancey Street. Right. And so even though he is part of this, you know, superhero team that lives in this futuristic, scientific building, the Baxter building, he still will go out and hang out with, with, with his guys from Yancey Street.

It's really important that, that the first issue of Captain America, he's punching Hitler. Except for the fact that at that moment, America was not in the war. And so, what you have is this like, wish fulfillment projection into the future where like, you know, the avatar for America can actually strike out and strike back against this, you know, this, this, this evil person.

That myth, um, I think that if you're thinking that, you know, America is the land of opportunity, right? Anything is possible, and you pick up a comic book, it's like, oh yeah, look at this, you know, like this fits, it fits right into that myth, right? So there's, there's a way in which, um, superheroes work really well in the popular imagination.

When people would send care packages to the, to the GIs at the front, um, you know, they would send, you know, a carton of cigarettes, chocolate bars, but they also send comic books. And so, it definitely was a way for them to simultaneously take their mind off of, but also sort of, you know, um, aspire to be this kind of heroic American.

Brendan: Although many early comic books were created by immigrants or children of immigrants, the medium was not representative of all Americans. Nearly a decade after Superman first hit shelves, an African American author tried to break into the industry. Orrin Evans launched All Negro Comics in 1947, the first Black-run comic business. Their first, and tragically only, issue featured a Dick Tracy-style detective named Ace Harlem.

Jonathan: Evans was a black newspaper man located, um, based in Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. And he got together some of his coworkers and they created this issue. As far as I know, he was able to print one issue about a thousand copies and sort of sell them around, um, but they sold. And so, then the next step was to create a second issue and you know, you know, print out more copies and then sort of, you know, in then widening his distribution base and go from there. And it's at that moment where when he went to print the second issue that he was denied. He was locked out of the market. And so that, so there's an example of racism preventing, um, his ideas from flourishing. We'll never know if Orrin Evans couldn't have created something as substantial had he been given the opportunity.

Brendan: Black characters became more popular in the 1960s, with the creation of the now famous Black Panther. America was in the thick of the Civil Rights movement and representation and equality were on the minds of many Americans. Even so, at first, they were brought to life exclusively by white men like Stan Lee. Other Black characters, Jonathan explained, were simply legacy characters that had been repurposed as Black.

Jonathan: So there's a character called Black Goliath, right? So he can, he can grow tall, like, you know, but unlike the original Giant Man, um, you know, he's, he's a black guy who can do it. So, he's Black Goliath, right? Um, yeah, he didn't really last.

Brendan: Black characters like Luke Cage, who recently became the star of a Netflix series, reflected current events in the 70s just as much as Superman had in the 1930s.

Jonathan: Six months before Cage debuts, you have the Attica riots, right? Attica, the riots at the prison in upstate New York. And in Attica, which was, um, a reaction to the death of George Jackson at a prison in California. Right. Um, and so this all happens and then six months later you get the debut of Luke Cage, who is a black guy who was in jail for a crime he didn't commit and who a corrupt prison guard tries to kill. Right? And so, it's fairly clear because I mean, if you go back and look at the tabloids, you know, the New York Herald Tribune and the, and the New York Post and Daily News, you know, Attica dominated the headlines.

Brendan: Comics continued to expand their scope. The X-Men reboot of 1975, the same one that inspired Kevin Wong, explored diversity on a global scale.

Jonathan: Right, you have Wolverine who's from Canada. You have, uh, Kurt Wagner, Nightcrawler who's from Germany, you have Colossus who's from Russia, you have Banshee who is from Scotland, you have Storm who is from Kenya, right? So suddenly the way that you can sort of breathed new life into this tired franchise is by, is literally by making these characters more diverse. Right? And it worked.

Brendan: Even though we have more representation today, the industry is still in no way representative of the United States as a whole.

Jonathan: We still don't have enough creatives of Color, sadly. Um, as I said earlier though, with All Negro Comics, Orrin Evans was trying to create this parallel industry that could employ and thereby highlight the talents of, um, Black creators, but that never got off the ground.

Brendan: Jonathan also pointed out that Black comic creators can be held to different standards than their white peers.

Jonathan: And there's also this weird thing where when you look at the last two people to write, um, Black Panther for example, the last two people to write Black Panther are Reginald Hudlin and then Ta-Nehisi Coates. But Reggie Hudlin is a successful filmmaker. Like he wrote it, he did House Party. He did, we'll Boomerang. There are all these films. So, he made his career in another industry and then he gets invited into write comics. Similarly, with Ta-Nehisi, Ta-Nehisi wins the Pulitzer Prize and the MacArthur Genius Grant, and then he gets invited in to write Black Panther. There is this weird thing where you have to, up till now you've mostly had to establish yourself in another field before you are given the opportunity to write in comics, if you are not a white guy.

Brendan: I asked Jonathan about how characters change when they're written by people who share their experiences, like when Ta-Nehisi Coates took over Black Panther.

Jonathan: What you got is, is a, is a greater sense of interiority, right? And what you got is a more comprehensive mythology around the characters, right? So you had, you know, dozens of supporting characters introduced and they were given a kind of complexity. Um, and the fun thing is that once you do that, that's really the grist for the characters, for the writers who follow you.

We need representation in all mediums at all times. Representation is important both politically and aesthetically. Right? Particularly for stories that purport to represent who we are as a society, if you're leaving out large swaths of who we are as a society, then the stories are by definition, incomplete. You know, the reality is that people constitute themselves, not just by looking in the mirror, but by the people around them who look like them.

Brendan: After talking to Jonathan, I wanted to hear more about how an artist of Color approaches their work, and what representation means to them. We were so lucky to connect with Alex Simmons, the creator of the comic book BlackJack and a lifelong New Yorker, who had quite a bit to say on the subject.

Alex Simmons: My name is Alex Simmons and I'm a number of professional things, but I would say the short of it is I'm a freelance writer. I'm an arts-in-ed consultant and I am a, oh my goodness, a guest speaker and I've done both locally, nationally and globally, mostly involved in the creative arts.

Brendan: Alex has been hooked on comics since he was a kid in the 1950s.

Alex: The ideal scenario was you would go into a candy store or soda fountain shop, you get your favorite comic for, okay folks, hold on now, 10 to 25 cents. Okay. And then you could go and sit at the counter and have a drink and read your comics while you're slurping your soda, your egg cream or whatever. My favorite comic book character was in those early days in particular was always Batman.

Brendan: He began his artistic career on stage and in film, where he became acutely aware of a lack of fair representation.

Alex: We were still at one end of the stick or the other, either still doing some of the stereotypical stuff and that would either be plantation stuff or angry Black man. And then on the opposite end of that, we would be intelligent, angry Black man.

The normal kid, male or female, watching certain things that are exciting, they're into, they want to imagine themselves doing it. And if you were, you know, a Caucasian, you had plenty of examples to pull from. But as a Black person coming up in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, what you were seeing predominantly was we were sidekick or we weren't there. Or, I'm sorry, sidekick, servant or we weren't there. Ultimately that made no sense to me. And again, not anger, just this is ridiculous. This is absolutely ridiculous. And then because of the Civil Rights Movement, more information was starting to come out about how we were soldiers and we were explorers and we were doctors and inventors and all of that. So, by the time the ‘80s came around, I'd already really started developing myself as a writer. Before that was school, and then there was acting, now I’m writing more.

Brendan: By the time he was in his 20s, Alex had made friends in the comic book industry, like Don McGregor, who wrote some of the early Black Panther stories. Eventually, Alex began submitting material to his friends, and got a handful of gigs. Inspiration struck after he began reading about the life of Ira Aldridge, a Black American actor who made it big in Europe in the mid-1800s.

Alex: He had some racism and stuff he had to deal with, but still he was seen as a star. And then when he died, he was buried in a Łódź, Poland. I'm reading all this stuff, this is phenomenal and I want to write about it, but what am I going to do?

Brendan: Alex was a big Sherlock Holmes fan, and decided to create a play that celebrated Ira Aldridge, but through the lens of a mystery.

Alex: I was really into that sort of stuff. Um, the whole idea of traveling to other countries and finding lost treasures or tribes or you know, escaping death traps or figuring out who done it. These were all within Sherlock Holmes. All these were things that I just loved and ate up as a kid.

Maybe 200 people will come to see a play about Ira Aldridge. Lots of people will come to see a play about Sherlock Holmes and learn about Ira Aldridge. So, I wrote that, the play got produced off-off-Broadway. We had a really great run and it eventually got published and I was really excited about that.

Brendan: He decided to put that character into a comic.

Alex: So, I consciously was not saying I want to write a Black character for Black people. I wanted to write a Black hero for everybody. And that's what I set out to try and do. And again, ups and downs, ins and outs, accepted one place, rejected another place, then the place that had accepted it didn't publish again, abbreviating. So, eventually it became an independent publishing project. And I was quite excited about that because one of the things I heard was, oh, well these will only sell in Watts or Bedford Stuyvesant or, you know, basically Black communities.

His nom de plume is BlackJack and he's an African American soldier of fortune in the 1930s. And again, I was very particular about the era. You didn't have the Internet, you didn't even have television to the realm of our level that it was in the ‘50s, let alone. So, everybody had to either wait for some newsreel to show up at a theater or a radio, you know, piece on it. But for the most part, the world was ignorant of so many corners of the world. So that was a great time for globe-trotting. It was also major time in history. I mean, World War I had ended just a few years before and World War II was already brewing. Japan had already invaded China. All these things were happening. It's also the time when Blacks had the most problem with the military, you know, so this was a good time to drop him in and, and to set up his family history and how he, Arron Day is his actual name, gets pulled into all this.

Brendan: Arron's dad was a soldier, too, and Arron grew up overseas with a nurturing family.

Alex: While the dad was off battling whatever he was doing, the mother was trying to introduce him to the cultures that they were in the middle of, you know, as best she could. And so Arron had a broader view of the world, Arron and his sister. So Aaron reaches a point in his career where he's going, 'Wait a minute, some of the stuff I'm being asked to do, you know, doesn't sit well with me and my father would have, but I got to start deciding where my father ends and where I begin and what I will and won't do for certain people and for the money.' So, it's a character who is still defining himself. He's still, he's a Black man in 1930s trying to establish his own identity in a world that says we have no identity at all.

Brendan: Alex told me that, like Batman, BlackJack isn't superhuman. He is roughly six feet tall and physically imposing. He is often depicted in the iconic explorer outfit, with khaki pants and knee-high boots. Because he is human, he's also subject to everyday perils.

Alex: A bullet will take him down. You know, he can be injured. He can be, he can be faked out. You know, sometimes people pull a number on him. Uh, it's not a good thing to do though. When he eventually finds out there's a problem. And I think the fact that again, that he is trying to establish himself as a person and as a, as a professional is a struggle that he deals with in a, in a world where it's even his own sometimes don't like him because, 'What are you trying to be? You trying to be white? You're trying to be better than us?' And so that backlash comes in there. A lot of the social issues that I deal with this character in the books still exist. And so it's a good way for me to explore what's happening now and connect it to what's already occurred. And isn't it sad that some of that hasn't been rectified? He represents America. He's an American hero.

Brendan: Arron travels the world, works as a bodyguard, battles a Bedouin warlord and more. But he always comes back to, and reflects, America.

Alex: Yes, he knows that this racism here, he knows, he's felt it, he's seen it. He knows what his parents have shared with him. He knows what his sister is going through, where she's living in the United States. He wants to walk to a higher ethics. He does not want to become the very thing that is dragging us down. And maybe that's a bit of me talking and wondering. Maybe that's a part of me talking. That's a part of what I was raised with. That's a part of what I believe in. So yes, he's an American hero.

Brendan: Alex had no intention of BlackJack being an outlier, so he launched a program called Color of Comics, to help teach people about the history of comics, and for underrepresented populations to find themselves in the medium.

Alex: I, um, was doing an exhibit on the campus of Bronx Community College which was where the first Color of Comics exhibition was. But I'm on the, uh, on the campus and a young Latino man is hanging one of the pieces of art and to be very specific, it's an Archie cover done by Fernando Ruiz. Alright. This young Latino man is young man is hanging up this piece and he notices the signature and he turns to me, now he's an art student, he turns to me and he says, there are Spanish people doing American comics? And I went, holy smoke. And so I talked to him about it. I pulled up some of the other artwork. They were done by other Spanish artists and he's blown away. He's a college student in his early twenties and he didn't know. So once again, it became about spreading the word, getting it out there. So that was, that was a monumental moment for me. It's to me it said, 'Okay, I'm on the right track.' And then later we went to Africa with that same exhibit and to have African children say to me that they had never seen black superheroes. And I'm thinking, I'm in Africa.

Brendan: He also created a Kids Comic Con to help young people engage with comics as well.

Alex: I want to do a conference that shows young people, college age, that comics is a business too, that there are jobs here and there that you could actually develop skill sets for and make a living on. And the school thought, well maybe 20 kids will show up in everything. They gave us a conference room, a big conference room. 200 kids and a bunch of teachers started seeing all these students go, so they started coming, standing room only, people are jammed at the door.

In a couple of cases, they've come back to me at 25, 30-something with their own children to tell me how much what we did in those workshops, what they gained out of these creative experiences did for their life.

Brendan: I've always loved superheroes. As a kid, I was a huge Ninja Turtles fan. I liked Donatello. He's the brainy one who is quiet and more reserved than his brothers, but still a core member of their team. When I look back on my childhood, it makes complete sense that I connected to him. I was shy and loved to read, but I also desperately wanted to fit in. Aside from being a mutant turtle, he was exactly who I wanted to be.

It is easy to dismiss comic books as something for children or, dare I say it, low-brow culture. But by digging into to the history of the medium, we can see that it offers so much more than just superhero stories. Within these colorful pages are stories of immigration and assimilation, stories that reflect massive cultural shifts, and, as Jonathan said, stories that allow people to see themselves as heroic. In so many ways, our superhero canon feels truly American.

Yet, both within and behind those same pages, the diversity of this country hasn't been reflected. There are so many stories that haven't been told; haven't been allowed to be told.

Today, there is far more diversity in comics than there used to be. Take the Black Panther film, which made one billion dollars at the global box office in less than a month. And we see even more in the comic book world. Spider-Man is Miles Morales, an Afro-Latino teenager from Brooklyn. Ms. Marvel is a Pakistani-American teenager who lives in New Jersey. She is the first Muslim character to headline her own comic.

If comics are indeed a heightened version of the United States, this feels like progress. But, like any wise superhero, we can’t get complacent. We’ve got to keep training, keep learning, and keep fighting the good fight.

This episode wraps up the first season of How to be American. We told a bunch of stories and talked to a ton of people, but we haven’t heard from you yet. Help us make season two even better by giving us your feedback. You can email us at podcast@tenement.org.

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From the Tenement Museum, I’m Brendan Murphy. Talk to you next time, in season two.