Black Frankenstein: Exploring Race and Trauma in Victor LaValle's Graphic Fiction *Destroyer*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Victor LaValle's graphic fiction *Destroyer*, a contemporary reinterpretation of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein narrative that situates the iconic tale within the socio-political landscape of 21st-century America, specifically focusing on the intersections of race, racial trauma, and monstrosity. By centring a Black protagonist, Dr Baker, LaValle offers a nuanced commentary on the intersections of race, identity, and the enduring legacies of trauma within African American society. The narrative intricately depicts Dr. Baker's journey by navigating the moral dilemmas of creation, maternal love, and the implications of scientific ambition for marginalised communities. Through the lens of gothic and graphic, LaValle engages with historical and cultural discourses surrounding the Black experience in the context of American identity. This paper posits that *Destroyer*, in the legacy of Mary Shelley, acts as a vital critique of societal norms that often perpetuate racism and reinforce trauma that is frequently ascribed to Black bodies. Moreover, by positioning his characters within a landscape marked by the dual traumas of scientific inquiry and personal loss, LaValle invites readers to re-examine Frankenstein's legacy through a lens that articulates empathy and resilience, particularly in the context of race and racial trauma. Ultimately, this paper contends that *Destroyer* represents a significant literary contribution, as it challenges assumptions within literary and sociocultural narratives, reimagining Victor Frankenstein's monster and the evolution of Dr Baker's monster to depict systemic inequities and the rich tapestry of Black experiences in America.

Keywords: black Frankenstein, graphic fiction, monstrosity, racial trauma

Introduction

The phrase “graphic narrative” is progressively acknowledged as a more comprehensive term than “comics” or “graphic novels,” a conceptual framework initially presented to a wider academic audience by scholars Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven (Stein & Thon, 2013). Conversely, the word 'graphic narrative' is more inclusive while comics is self-contained and non-serialized. It can encompass various forms, formats, genres, and narrative traditions from diverse civilisations globally. Graphic narratives are defined by the following major traits and aspects: Integration of Text and Visuals, sequential Storytelling, Narrative Structure, and “Plurivectorial” Narration. Graphic narratives uniquely engage with historical and cultural discourses through their combined visual and narrative structures. They can create a “palimpsestuous presentness,” in which many levels of narrative meaning coexist, enabling a self-reflexive engagement with the past. This layering might make previous writings or historical circumstances pertinent in modern conversation. Methods like visual analogy and remediation are often utilised to establish links between apparently unrelated temporalities, ontologies, and knowledge systems. Certain graphic novels, for instance, employ visual techniques that evoke older art forms or historical records, thus establishing connections across various epochs or cultural contexts.

Graphic narratives basically combine text and imagery to convey stories. This synthesis is commonly termed a “hybrid word-and-image form” or a “hybrid art form” (Rippl & Etter, 2013). The interaction between word and pictures is essential for effective storytelling, as they both improve and clarify one other's meanings. The significance of graphic storytelling arises from an intricate web of relationships between text and visuals. Graphic tales progress by a sequential arrangement of images, usually structured into panels that adhere to a historical or thematic structure (Chute, 2008). The sequential nature is a defining characteristic that directs the reader through the narrative's development.

Regarded chiefly as a story form, graphic narratives captivate readers with an intrinsic anticipation of developing stories – Narrativity. The ordered sequence of panels, along with the concept of “closure”—the reader's involvement in connecting the visual and textual voids, or “gutters,” between panels—enables a unified narrative experience (Pratt, 2009). Furthermore, even basic sequences of adjacent images can convey narrative components by suggesting causal or temporal connections. Medium Specificity Graphic narratives are examined as a hybrid medium that encompasses several forms, such as comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels. This classification denotes their distinct material characteristics and encoding methods, especially the interplay between text and visuals on the page. Such features impose distinct possibilities and constraints on readers, shaping their perception of categories like time and location inside the narrative (Stein & Thon, 2013). Moreover, aspects such as visual aesthetics, arrangement, and sequencing function as essential medium-specific techniques for creating narrative environments and communicating significance.

The storytelling of graphic narratives is described as “plurivectorial,” signifying that meaning emerges from a web of interconnections among panels and pages. This narrative framework surpasses traditional plot development, facilitating various interpretation avenues that may exist in conflict with each other (Dittmer & Latham, 2014; Groensteen, Beaty, & Nguyen, 2007). Thus, interpreting a visual tale necessitates both sequential decoding and an understanding of the overall structure of the panel and the page. This multifaceted approach to narrative analysis enhances the comprehension of graphic narratives as a unique and intricate storytelling medium.

Victor LaValle's *Destroyer*

Victor LaValle's *Destroyer* (2017) is a graphic novel that reinterprets Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) within the framework of 21st-century America, highlighting the intersections of racism and monster. The graphic tale focusses on Dr. Josephine Baker, a Black female scientist and descendant of Victor Frankenstein, who resorts to her ancestor's research following the police violence that results in the death of her son, Akai (LaValle, 2018). In Victor Frankenstein's instance, the pursuit of forbidden knowledge and the aspiration for immortality culminated in the creation of the monster; conversely, in Dr. Baker's case, it was grief and fury, along with her scientific acumen, that compelled her to reanimate her son, resulting in a formidable "Black Frankenstein" creature (Dib, 2024; LaValle, 2018). *Destroyer* references a tradition of "Black Frankenstein" narratives in American literature and popular culture, utilising the Frankenstein story as a metaphor for the atrocities of racial injustice, the legacy of slavery, and the "white structures of power" that perpetuate disability through acts of violence (Dib, 2024; Young, 2008). The "Black Frankenstein" narrative stems from the racist responses to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein that emerged in 19th century America, particularly in relation to Nat Turner, a Black man who spearheaded a slave insurrection in 1831. However, it was Thomas Dew, in his introduction of Frankenstein to America, who sought to rationalise how the monster's figure could be employed to denounce insubordinate slaves, thereby rendering the gothic spectre of the white slaveowner apparent, ultimately subverted by his own defiant creation, exemplifying a role reversal (Young, 2008, p. 45).

Initial interpretations of *Frankenstein (1818)* depict the monster as a symbol of a rebellious slave, employing the narrative to rationalise slavery and vilify Black individuals. Elizabeth Young (2008, p. 71) asserts that these racist interpretations of Frankenstein necessitate the disconnection of the creature from his empathetic first-person viewpoint, the critique of injustice that drives his aggression, and the narrative correlation between the monster and his creator, which implicates Victor Frankenstein in the creature's deeds. LaValle *Destroyer* (2017) reinterprets the Frankenstein myth, reinstating the monster's voice and agency while contemporaneously addressing the issues of racism, dehumanisation, and police violence within modern African-American society. This renders it a relevant and thought-provoking visual novel that transcends the confines of both genre and representation, fostering new insights into race in the 21st century.

The creature in LaValle's *Destroyer* (2017) is not a construct of white European origin, but rather a "Black" child who has succumbed to police brutality and the effects of white supremacy. By reinterpreting the monster as a Black child, LaValle's *Destroyer* subverts the racist interpretation of Frankenstein, exposing the mechanisms through which white power perpetuates violence against "Black bodies." This decision recontextualises the Frankenstein narrative, connecting its themes of creation, abandonment, and vengeance to the persistent fight for racial justice in America. *Destroyer* (2017) underscores the resilience of black communities in the face of persistent persecution, exemplified by Josephine Baker's resolve to advocate for her son and confront the systems that contributed to his demise. Moreover, LaValle portrays Akai as a formidable entity pursuing retribution for his demise, rendering *Destroyer* (2017) a potent critique of the system that undermines and jeopardises "Black Lives."

Destroyer (2017) addresses the complexities of racism effectively; the graphic novel references the historical racist interpretations of Frankenstein, employing the monster as a

symbol for rebellious slaves and a justification for slavery. By reinterpreting the monster as a Black child slain by law enforcement, LaValle reclaims this myth and reveals the mechanisms through which white supremacy perpetuates violence against Black individuals. *Destroyer* (2017) emphasises the "economy of the flesh" articulated by Hortense Spillers, which pertains to the historical and persistent commodification and exploitation of Black bodies (Jarman, 2017). The novel illustrates how this economy transcends slavery into the contemporary era, where Black bodies remain vulnerable to violence and domination. LaValle's story also addresses the notion of "debilitation," as defined by Julie Livingston (2005), referring to "the gradual erosion of populations" resulting from structural oppression, frequently associated with racism and poverty. The demise of Akai and the associated circumstances underscore the detrimental impact of racism on Black communities. *Destroyer* (2017) links the dread and dehumanisation experienced by Black individuals to that of handicapped persons. The monster, as a Black crippled character, represents the convergence of these two types of oppression. The comic novel examines the notion of "crip/queer" cultural creation, aiming to reclaim pejorative terminology and contest prevailing narratives regarding disability (Cheyne, 2019; Schalk, 2022). LaValle's portrayal of Akai as a formidable and intricate figure, albeit his reanimated condition, challenges conventional portrayals of disability as frailty or ugliness.

In a modern context, *Destroyer* (2017) reinterprets the fundamental tension in Frankenstein between creator and creature, adapting the narrative to address contemporary issues of race, handicap, and scientific ethics. Kyle William Bishop notes, *Frankenstein* "has manifested throughout popular culture in a variety of adaptations across numerous media, making it one of the most adapted literary works in history" (2018, p. 111). Like numerous previous narratives of Frankenstein, *Destroyer* (2017) constitutes a component of a broader "intertextual dialogical process"; it does not merely recount the Frankenstein myth but rather engages in discourse with Mary Shelley's novel and the other adaptations that precede it. Numerous adaptations, such as *Destroyer* (2017), have opted to reinterpret the Frankenstein narrative from alternative viewpoints, employing diverse genres and approaches to examine the novel's core issues innovatively. As noted by Dennis Cutchins and Dennis Perry, "art and comic adaptations of *Frankenstein* often become metaphors for the monster's creation itself from used body parts" (Cutchins & Perry, 2018, p. 15). This concept of "repurposing" (intertextuality) is fundamental to LaValle's endeavour in *Destroyer*, as he utilises the foundational elements of Shelley's novel and reconfigures them to confront modern racial challenges, particularly the experiences of Black Americans in the 21st century.

Graphic Engagements With Frankenstein and Race

Given LaValle's thematic interests and the distinctive capabilities of the graphic novel form, especially in the adaptation of Frankenstein, it is plausible to assert that *Destroyer* utilises graphic aspects to interact with historical and cultural discourses of race, monstrosity, and marginalisation. This may be expressed through graphic depictions of the body, investigations of trauma, the layering of time periods, or the reinterpretation of visual motifs related to these subjects. The Frankenstein mythos, crucial to the adaption in *Destroyer*, has historically intertwined with societal ideas of race and monstrosity. The post-Civil War myth of the Black rapist prominently utilised monstrous metaphors that depicted Black males as "damned black beast[s]". Artist Glenn Ligon incorporates Frankenstein into his artwork, exemplified by *Study for Frankenstein #1*, to question the power dynamics within the art world, where the value of Black artists is frequently evaluated via the perspective of white evaluators. Ligon utilises Mary Shelley's narrative, highlighting the fragmented and mediated

voice of the monster to express a non-essentialized "I," thereby challenging reductive personal interpretations of Black identity (Young, 2008, p. 241). This technique demonstrates how the figure of the Frankenstein creature serves as a conduit for engaging with intricate matters of race and identity through adaptation and artistic interpretation.

Art and comics have adopted the Frankenstein metaphor to illustrate the creative process and explore themes of assembly, repurposing, and the abject. In art and illustration, the notion of "repurposing" is crucial for comprehending the Frankenstein metaphor. Kate Newell (2018) emphasises that images for various editions of Frankenstein are frequently "recycled or recaptioned," reflecting the Creature's assembly from diverse bodily parts. This approach highlights the pliability of the Frankensteinian image and its suitability for various situations and interpretations. The selection of illustration style, as noted by Newell, influences the reader's comprehension of the work, confirming specific interpretations or proposing other ones. The visual arts, especially comics, adeptly convey the abject, evoking fear and revulsion linked to the violation of boundaries between self and other. Véronique Bragard and Catherine Thewissen (2018) contend that the Creature's "composite quality" exemplifies the abject, subverting concepts of identity, order, and representation. Comics, by their ugly artwork, twisted figures, and textured panels, can graphically elicit the visceral sensation of disgust that Victor feels upon encountering his creation. Bragard and Thewissen examine how artists such as Marion Mousse, Denis Deprez, and Alex Baladi employ expressionistic techniques, distorted lines, and textural nuances to graphically represent the abject essence of the Creature and its effect on the observer.

Comic book versions of Frankenstein frequently reinterpret the Creature to embody the societal fears of their own eras. Joe Darowski (2018) observes that in Marvel's *X-Men* comics, the Creature is reinterpreted as an extraterrestrial and a leader of an underground civilisation, embodying the fears related to difference and otherness that are common in superhero storylines. This repurposing corresponds with the overarching trend noted by academics such as David Picart and Fred Botting, who contend that versions of *Frankenstein* function as indicators of cultural anxieties. The Creature's malleability renders it an exemplary representation of these worries, enabling comic book authors to investigate themes of discrimination, social exclusion, and the dread of the unknown. The assembly of the Creature from disparate components parallels the creation of a comic book, encompassing its panels, dialogue bubbles, and visual storytelling. The inherent fragmentation and assembly in both facilitate a conceptual link between the Creature and the comic book medium. The relationship is further reinforced by the palimpsestic quality of comic book tales, which frequently expand upon and reinterpret prior iterations of characters and stories (Costello, 2018; Saltzman, 2011). The Creature, akin to a composite of several bodies, embodies a synthesis of diverse visual and narrative inspirations in the comic book realm, mirroring the character's history and the evolution of the medium.

Art and comics, in contrast to film, can transcend the sheer adaptation of the visual components of the Frankenstein narrative. They can investigate the metaphorical and philosophical aspects of the text, use visual language to depict abstract notions such as creation, annihilation, and the essence of existence. Lynd Ward's illustrations for the 1934 edition of Frankenstein utilise German Expressionism and Romantic imagery to establish a visual equivalent to Shelley's narrative, encapsulating the psychological and emotional upheaval of the tale. This method emphasises the use of art and comics to explore the profound ideas of Frankenstein, employing visual metaphors and symbolism to augment the reader's comprehension of the narrative. Art and comics offer a distinctive medium for the

adaptation of the Frankenstein metaphor. They transcend mere visual depiction, engaging with ideas of assemblage, repurposing, and the abject. Through the distinct attributes of their own mediums, painters and comic creators have redefined the Creature as a potent visual metaphor, encapsulating cultural fears, examining the creative process, and enhancing our comprehension of Shelley's timeless narrative (Cutchins & Perry, 2018; Kukkonen, 2013; LaValle, 2018; Young, 2008).

Character Representation of Monstrosity and Racial Trauma in *Destroyer*

Narratives of Black racial trauma are vividly captured in the medium of graphic fiction, critiquing racist ideologies, exploring the nature of oppression, and navigating the humanity of Black individuals (Young, 2008). *Destroyer* (2017) enters contemporary issues of racist violence, it is also deeply informed by LaValle's own lived experiences as a Black man in modern America, the "too-real endangerment faced by African American boys and young men" in America (Oualline, 2019). This graphic novel re-tells the story of the Creature, portrayed by an adolescent Black male, Akai, and Frankenstein, a female Black scientist and mother, Dr. Josephine Baker.

The narrative centres around a twelve-year-old boy Akai, who while returning home from a baseball game is holding a baseball bat in his hands, it is reported by a white woman to the police that a male is carrying a rifle in his hand; is eventually caught, shot, and killed by white police officials; with no valid grounds and procedural justifications. However, LaValle and the illustrator of *Destroyer* (2017) refrain from graphically presenting the murder of Akai, avoiding the confrontation narrative of Blacks and police, disengaging from the need to visualize lynching ethically. This non-depiction of the murder act further strengthens the "bleak story about the value of Black life in America" (Dib, 2024, p. 110). This central premise highlights centuries-old racial trauma and Black bodies anxieties as a form of "non-normative embodiment" (Hobson, 2019). Historically, dating back to the transatlantic slave trade, Southern plantations, and Apartheid laws, black bodies have been subjected to objectification, assault, trauma, and undignified treatment. Innumerable young and adolescent black males were one of the prime trades executed by white slave owners, because of their physique and strength. From history to contemporary real-life stories of the infamous African American male murders like that of George Floyd, Akai Gurley, and Tamir Rice by white police officers following a negligible offense the central character Akai is an archetype of "Black youth meeting a premature death" (Dib, 2024, p. 111). *Destroyer* (2017) poignantly foregrounds racially engraved violence in the contemporary American culture, blurring the boundaries of the "monster" narrative, and questioning the audience: who is the monster? The black males or the white police officers. Turning to the graphic narrative in *Destroyer* (2017), Akai is described as a boy with a tender heart, who sympathizes with tiny creatures, a trait which categorizes black males with one-dimensionality. Towards the end of the novel, the narrative bends into describing Akai who refuses to conform to the stereotypical societal norms, as a carefree boy who is wearing a hoodie and baseball sneakers – a stark representation of the multi-dimensionality of black males of contemporary America. As a form of vengeance by Akai's mother, he is reanimated and resurrected to life as "somewhere between a cyborg and a 12-year-old black adolescent" (Hobson, 2019, p. 56). Visually his black body appears stitched resembling autopsy cuts, it is a patchwork form exposing tissues which look like metal or steel, his eyes are yellow with deeply etched eye shadows. He is sustained from aging by nanobots and nanotechnology, potentially emerging into a figure who can combat racism. Nevertheless, this monster does become a site of "specimen" violating the boundary of personal space as is commonplace with black bodies, when the lab

agents touch Akai's body without permission to evaluate its new texture of a cyborg (Hobson, 2019). LaValle explicitly links Akai as a monstrous figure who exhibits Black racial trauma, Akai becomes a monster because of ingrained racial injustices etched in American society and subverts the racial stereotypes to emerge as a contemporary Black male in American society. The root cause of Akai's death is the result of racial stereotyping by a white woman who perceives a Black male as a threat to the white community (Oualline, 2019). Racial injustice is rife when noted by LaValle that "Look at the backflips people will do to find the humanity in that monster. But when they saw a boy like mine, they had no love to spare" (LaValle, 2017, Chapter 5, Figure 7) Akai as a monster in *Destroyer* (2017) is a retelling of Frankenstein monster, as it subverts the idea of monstrosity; the one where real monster trait is ascribed to the whites, narrating blacks as victims of racial discrimination.

LaValle characterizes Dr. Josephine Baker as the last living descendant of Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein; Dr. Baker is a Black woman, a highly intellectual nanotechnologist in contemporary America. Dr Baker's portrayal by LaValle is a strong reversal of the historical characterization of a black woman as a victimized and marginalized other. However, as a Black being she is not spared by the whites in her society. LaValle notes her experiences with discrimination, as a young Josephine her intelligence was questioned. A white teacher made her take a re-test after she scored more than all her peers. Later, she is described to be struggling between motherhood and her professional life. Her boss at the Lab, who is a white lady forces her to quit her job, as she violated a contract to embrace motherhood. This is an irony depicted by LaValle, that a science corporation dedicated to practice research on immortality, refuses pregnancy and motherhood to Dr. Baker. LaValle thereby creates a character of a Black woman who faces racial discrimination but however, but Dr. Baker does succumb to the racial injustices when her son Akai is unlawfully killed by white police officials. Thereby Dr. Baker becomes a Black woman who explores America with the challenges of being a black woman scientist who has lost her son due to racial injustices (Hobson, 2019). The event of Akai's untimely death overwhelms Dr. Bakr with anger, grief, and revenge, which initiates her vigor for scientific acumen and the legacy of Victor Frankenstein to venture into the reanimation and resurrection of her son Akai. As Jones and Norwood in *Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope* (2017) note that black women are rendered invisible, dehumanized, and then face consequences of exercising their voice which results in being transformed into the trope of the Angry Black Woman. Josephine is attributed with this trope when upon confrontation with Bride/The Plier, a monster, she claims that "if she were a man, her quest for vengeance would be considered heroic" (LaValle, 2017, Chapter 6). But her scientific niche does leave a legacy with Akai, contributing to a radical future, where a Black woman's creation survives into the future with hope and heroism as evident in Akai's new avatar. Dr Baker's character emerges as an icon of black femininity (Dib, 2024).

Dr. Josephine Baker emerges as an emblematic figure upholding the African-American race in several aspects. Dr. Baker disapproves of Akai's death, as being one amongst the millions, faceless and unnoticed, she catalyses her scientific acumen to re-animate Akai, thereby venturing into the Afrofuturistic narrative which rejects the traditional narratives by asserting agency and control over Blacks' death. The character of Dr. Josephine Baker fights systemic injustice by raging about, "Then one day I'm told I have to come down and identify the body of my only child. I don't owe this country a damn thing except the same hate it's always given me." (LaValle, 2017, Chapter 6), these words stem from deep-rooted unjust and systemic discrimination faced by Josephine as a young girl and mother, positioning her as a destroyer of oppressive white systems (Oualline, 2019). LaValle attempts to reject the

“respectability politics” (Dib, 2024, p. 98) concept wherein the marginalized community conforms to the dominant group's expectation by adopting their norms of language, dress, and behavior, to be perceived as equals and respectful by the dominant group. In the case of Dr. Josephine Baker, she refrains from being a peacemaker and a helpless black mother, instead, she turns into a heroic mother in quest of vengeance for her son's death to such an extent that before her physical death, she uploads her consciousness into her son Akai, such that she can guide her son to continue her fight against unjust and racially discriminating society. LaValle rightfully weaves the character of Dr. Josephine Baker in the legacy of Black women of mettle carrying forward the inclusion of Blacks in American society.

Conclusion

LaValle's graphic storytelling substantially enhances the current discourse on racial representation and its mediation in literature and popular culture. Moreover, it contributes to the evolution of “cripistemologies,” a neologism chiefly formulated within disability studies, notably by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, which acknowledges how knowledge and experience are influenced by race and disability, thereby challenging conventional limits of what is deemed “thinkable” or “knowable” (Barker & Murray, 2018; Cheyne, 2019). Future scholars can enhance their studies by examining the conventional portrayal of disability in popular culture, particularly with horror and monstrosity. Furthermore, analysing *Destroyer* (2017) through the framework of Posthumanism allows scholars to understand how graphic fiction interacts with contemporary issues and possibilities related to the posthuman condition, including the deconstruction of traditional human concepts, the exploration of the evolving relationship between humans and technology, and the challenge to established power structures and hierarchies.

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