

Blackening the Frame: Kerry James Marshall's *Rythm Mastr*

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues Marshall is “blackening the frame” with his African-centric comic series *Rythm Mastr*. The series is a corrective to the overwhelming whiteness of canonical comics and the silencing and erasure of Black people in American popular culture and fine art. Through the incorporation of Yoruba figures within the superhero genre, Marshall explores Black history and *reframes* American popular culture towards an African-oriented future as part of a broader insurgence among Black comic creators.

Keywords: Africana Studies, Comics, Black Studies, Kerry James Marshall, Black Popular Culture, *Black Panther*

Ennegreciendo el marco: *Rythm Master* de Kerry James Marshall

RESUMEN

Este ensayo argumenta que Marshall está “ennegreciendo el marco” con su serie de historietas centrada en África *Rythm Mastr*. La serie es un correctivo a la abrumadora blancura de los cómics canónicos y el silenciamiento y eliminación de los negros en la cultura popular y las bellas artes estadounidenses. A través de la incorporación de figuras yoruba dentro del género de los superhéroes, Marshall explora la historia negra y replantea la cultura popular estadounidense hacia un futuro de orientación africana como parte de una insurgencia más amplia entre los creadores de cómics negros.

Palabras clave: Estudios Africanos, Historietas, Estudios Negros, Kerry James Marshall, Cultura Popular Negra, *Black Panther*

文章标题：黑化框架：克里·詹姆斯·马歇尔的漫画系列“Rythm Mastr”

摘要

摘要：本文认为，马歇尔正使用以非洲人为中心的漫画系列“Rythm Mastr”来“黑化框架”(blackening the frame)。该漫画系列纠正了经典漫画中以白人为主的特征以及美国大众文化和美术中对黑人身份的压制和抹除。通过将约鲁巴人物融入超级英雄类型，马歇尔探索了黑人历史，并重新建构美国大众文化，使其导向非洲未来，以作为诸多黑人漫画创作者表达的抗议（白人主导文化）的一部分。

关键词：非洲研究，漫画，黑人研究，克里·詹姆斯·马歇尔，黑人大众文化，《黑豹》

Kerry James Marshall interrogates the central problem of art history, museum practices, historiography, and modernity in his understated painting of contemporary middle-class Black life entitled *Sob, Sob*. A young Black woman—painted in Marshall’s characteristic deep blue-black tones—sits on the floor in front of a bookshelf filled with books about African and African American history. In front of the woman is an open book entitled *Africa Since 1413*, a reference to Portugal’s first colonial landing on the African continent. The woman looks despondently away

Blackening the Frame



Image 1: Marshall, Kerry James. *Sob, Sob*. 2003, Smithsonian American Art Museum Washington D.C., <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/sob-sob-78744>.

from the bookshelf, and two nearly opaque thought-bubbles float above her head, saying: “SOB... SOB...” Despite living in a home filled with books about the history of African diasporic people, the woman looks away from the texts and seems to long for something different—something more. Marshall describes the young woman’s sob as a “powerful rebuke of some of the things you might have come to learn in history” (*Smithsonian*), and the painting encapsulates the central question of the contemporary moment: how can scholars and the general public understand African history without reducing cultures that date back to the earliest moments of civilization to Western European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade? It is a question that raises other considerations that Marshall has contended with throughout his career. How has Western historiography created false narratives about Africa and African-descended peoples? What roles do cultural production, museum practices, and the education system play in upholding anti-Black hegemonic structures? What does a Black insurgent artistic practice look like, and can this insurgency challenge the general climate of anti-Blackness?¹

These questions are particularly important for the realm of fine art and visual culture where African artistic practices have been simultaneously marginalized and mined as a source of cultural inspiration for white American and European artists. Marshall’s entire oeuvre—what he calls a “counter-archive” (Roslstraete 28)—is aimed at correcting the systematic erasure of Africans and African Americans within art history, and his paintings are imbued with an un-

1 I would like to thank Dana A. Williams for her support of this project, and her extremely helpful and incisive comments on previous drafts. I would also like to thank Amy Green and my peer-reviewer for their helpful suggestions.

apologetically and emphatic Black aesthetic, in both content and color. Marshall's Black-centered cultural insurgency goes beyond the realm of fine art. His Yoruba-inspired superhero comic series *Rythm Mastr* is an example of his similarly corrective engagement with American popular culture, and the series is spiritually aligned with Africana Studies because it follows Greg Carr and Dana A. Williams's recognition that "the period of enslavement and colonialism is a very recent and very temporary set of moments" in African history (302). If Marshall has a singular career-long project, it is *Rythm Mastr*, an ongoing endeavor since 1999 that has been prominently featured in several exhibitions and retrospectives throughout his career. Marshall insists the series "is both a straight art project and a comic book" ("A Thousand Words," 229), yet art critics rarely engage with *Rythm Mastr* as anything other than a "comic book-style" art exhibition (Wilkin 62). Unlike these critics, this essay takes Marshall at his word when he says that he is creating a comic book with *Rythm Mastr*, albeit mostly publishing the series in the highly unusual medium of exhibitions in fine art museums. Understanding the work as a comic is key because comics are a quintessentially popular culture genre. Comic scholar Sean Guynes notes, "comics have long been considered *low-brow*, belonging to a cultural status denoting intellectual or aesthetic inferiority in comparison to the supposedly more accomplished 'art' of *highbrow* culture" (144). *Rythm Mastr* is a fusion of so-called high and low art, and Marshall crafts a crucial engagement with popular culture, which Stuart Hall describes as "an arena that is *profoundly* mythic" (262). These cultural myths can either support or dismantle the historical narratives that a society tells about itself. Marshall's decision to steep his comic in Yoruba mythology is an important part of his corrective artistry centering African history, and the

series gestures towards his larger aims to center and celebrate African diasporic peoples within fine art and popular culture.

Marshall is “blackening the frame” with his African-centric, Yoruba-influenced comic series. *Rythm Mastr*—like much of his artistic work—is “blackening” because the series is Marshall’s corrective to the overwhelming whiteness of canonical comics and the silencing and erasure of Africans in Western popular culture writ large. It is a “blackening” of white Eurocentric political hegemony, which in the words of Hall, “is these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else” (257). “The frame” invokes three referents: the “frame” around a singular scene in a comic, the “frame” of paintings in an art museum, and the way that Black subjects have been historically “framed” by non-Black artists and writers. By “blackening the frame,” Marshall uses the medium of comics within the art museum to explore Black history and *reframe* American popular culture towards an African-oriented future. Marshall’s incorporation of Yoruba figures within the superhero genre allows him to base his story within African mythology rather than European cultural icons. “Blackening the frame” is part of a larger discourse where Black cartoonists respond to “muted blackness,” which Qiana Whitted suggests is “transnational racial discourses” in canonical non-Black authored comics that “have historically marked and muted blackness” (79). Marshall, like the Black cartoonists that Whitted considers, responds to and rejects “muted blackness” to restore the agency of the Black subject. The decidedly African-influenced *Rythm Mastr* is part of a broader insurgency among Black comic creators like Kwanza Osajyefo that are unapologetically demanding a central place within comics while refusing to capitulate to market demands to include Western, i.e., white, referents.

Marshall is widely considered one of the best living artists, and his work—especially the *Souvenir* series, the *Garden House* series, and *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*—has received substantial attention from art historians and academics. Unfortunately, *Rythm Mastr* has received comparatively little critical notice, especially from comics scholars. Major journals of the discipline like *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *Inks*, and *The Comics Grid* do not include a single mention of *Rythm Mastr* in their online databases. Part of this critical neglect can be attributed to the relative obscurity of *Rythm Mastr* since the series has been almost exclusively published in fine art museums. Additionally, *Rythm Mastr* is a superhero comic, which until recently have been comparatively marginalized within comics studies.² Finally, Marshall is explicitly critical of the comic industry and critiques stalwarts like *Black Panther*. In *Breaking the Frame*, Marc Singer aptly notes contemporary comics studies scholars often “slip all too easily into a common posture of unquestioning praise that celebrate their preferred comics artists” (29), and it is unsurprising that scholars invested in what Singer calls the “populist turn” in comics are uninterested in a series that is explicitly critical of the popular practices and characters of the medium. Each of these factors contributes to the neglect of *Rythm Mastr* in comics studies.

Despite the overall critical neglect of the series from literary critics and comics scholars, *Rythm Mastr* has received some critical notice from art historians, journalists, and artists.

2 In the introduction to the 2013 collection *The Superhero Reader*, the editors write, “the most compelling contributions to comics scholarship focused on historical, political, autobiographical, avant-garde, and other ‘serious minded’ comics” as opposed to the superhero genre (xi). The preference among critics for ‘serious minded’ comics is still apparent when one looks at recent issues of major comics studies journals.

Marshall's comic is commonly framed as a modernist art installation with art historian Petra Frank-Witt reading the comic as "pop art [...] comparable to Lichtenstein's pictures of air and sea combat" (396). Curiously, Frank-Witt and most other art historians neglect to read the series as a comic and instead emphasize the "high art" sensibility of Marshall's work. Journalist Logan Lockner helpfully places Marshall's work in conversation with Charles Williams's *The Amazing Spectacular Captain Soul*, yet he too neglects to read *Rythm Mastr* as a comic and instead suggests the artwork features iconographic reference to graphic narratives. Graphic novelist Frank Santoro helpfully recognizes the series as a comic, suggesting *Rythm Mastr* is a historically corrective work offering "an origin story for black superheroes in a museum context" (6). However, Santoro's essay is written for the general public and is more of a consideration of Black representation in comics rather than an attempt to critically engage or interpret Marshall's series. Artist Dan S. Wang offers a more sustained interpretation of the series by drawing attention to Marshall's use of Black American dialectic within *Rythm Mastr* and arguing the series is an apocalyptic story filled "with lots of fine and popular art-historical references and a hip-hop sensibility" (313). While these previous readings of *Rythm Mastr* have brought wider attention to Marshall's pivotal work, nearly all these works fail to read the series as a comic despite Marshall's repeated insistence that *Rythm Mastr* is and always has been a comic. Previous scholars' critical apparatuses completely neglect comics studies, and you are unlikely to find any reference to a frame or gutter in any of the criticism. It is necessary to engage with *Rythm Mastr* as a comic, especially considering this is how Marshall himself conceives of the project.

Marshall first released *Rythm Mastr* in 1999 with the explic-

it goal of creating an epic superhero story rooted in African folklore, and the comic's plot, setting, and art all support Marshall's mission to explore, in his words, "the legendary struggle for the souls of Black folks, to borrow a phrase from W.E.B. Du Bois" ("A Thousand Words," 229). For instance, the name "Rythm Mastr" is both the title of the series and the name of the central hero who brings African sculptures to life with the Yoruba talking drum. The comic's title is spelled in non-standard English, and Marshall explains that the spelling of "master" as "mastr" was done "to undercut the implications of control of other peoples' bodies that's associated with the term 'master' but preserve a certain idea of self-control, and the ability of somebody to implement a regime of power on their own behalf" (Doreen St. Felix). The spelling of "rhythm" as "rythm" also invokes Black vernacular English where constant dropping is a consistent feature. By naming his comics the non-standard spelling of *Rythm Mastr*, Marshall calls our attention to the racial dynamics that certain words are associated with and demands that Black vernacular English is given the same prominence and respect as standard American English. This is an intervention that continues with the plot of the series.

The overarching plot of *Rythm Mastr* is sprawling and often non-linear. The series has been published out of sequence, breaking with traditional narrative practices of a medium Will Eisner famously dubbed "sequential art." Scott McCloud notes comics are designed in a "deliberate sequence" (8), and Eisner argues, "The rendering of the elements within the frame, the arrangement of the images therein and their relation to and association with the other images in the sequence are the basic 'grammar' from which the narrative is constructed" (39). While Marshall is far from the first comic artist to experiment with non-linearity, his deliberate disre-

gard for the “grammar” of comics reconfigures the traditional narrative practices of the medium and is central to understanding how Marshall “Blackens the frame” of comics. Marshall crafts a nonsequential story that breaks from the traditionally ordered Western temporality privileged in American popular culture. This breaking of the “deliberate sequence” of comics engages with African concepts of time and more accurately mirrors the lived experience of human beings.³ While the passage of time is universal, the way time is perceived is culturally contingent. In his seminal work *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Mbiti writes, “The question of time is of little or no academic concern to African peoples in their traditional life” because African time is instead organized around events or moments (16). Scholars like Ulfried Reichardt and Joseph K. Adjaye have argued African diasporic communities have retained the African concept of time. Marshall’s temporal structure recovers and privileges African time while simultaneously breaking from traditional comic practices.

Most of the series is set in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago that Marshall has called home since 1987. During the Great Migration, Bronzeville was known as the “Black Metropolis” because of the rapidly expanding African Amer-

3 Ulfried Reichardt notes, “pre-modern [African] temporalities are close to contemporary theories of time” (471), and scientists are increasingly suggesting that pre-colonial Africans’ conception of time more accurately mirrors the ways humans perceive time. Nonetheless, African time has been cited as an example of African cultural primitivism by colonialists and some modern Africans, and there has been a large push for Africans to adopt Western time throughout the continent, particularly in areas that rely on Western tourism for economic growth. The widespread adoption of Enlightenment understandings of time is an example of the “worlding” process that Black Studies seeks to critique and, hopefully, dismantle.

ican population in the area. Bronzeville was a key Black cultural center and important Black figures like Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Louis Armstrong, and Bessie Coleman called the neighborhood home in the 1930s and 40s. However, Ellen Tani notes the “Black Metropolis” moniker “faded when a plethora of large-scale, problematic housing projects went up there in the ’50s and ’60s.” Today, Bronzeville is a mostly middle-class residential area whose roots as a Black cultural center have been obscured. Marshall’s decision to set *Rythm Mastr* in the “Black Metropolis” allows him to spotlight a key historically Black area while also raising an association with *Superman*’s “Metropolis”—a connotation that is undoubtedly intentional given Marshall’s deep familiarity with comics. *Superman* takes place in a fictional New York-like Northeastern city named Metropolis, and this location is nearly as iconic as Superman himself. Both Superman and Metropolis have been framed as apolitical. Umberto Eco’s 1962 essay “Il mito di ‘Superman’ e la dissoluzione del tempo” is one of the most important essays in comic studies, and Eco argues Superman is a mythic archetype stuck in a paradoxical timeless stasis that “reinforces an equally stagnant ideological structure in which large-scale political action is neither possible nor necessary” (Singer 36). In his 1972 revision of this essay, Eco describes Superman as “a perfect example of civic consciousness, completely split from political consciousness” (22). While Siegel and Shuster featured numerous political commentaries in the early *Superman* comics and recent political interpretations of the character like Gene Luen Yang’s *Superman Smashes the Clan* have revitalized the ordinary political intentions of the Jewish-created hero, Superman is commonly framed in the popular imagination as an apolitical advocate of justice.⁴ Marshall’s *Rythm*

4 Marc Singer has written extensively on Eco’s essay and how he overlooks the more political moments in the *Superman* series. Singer notes,

Mastr is anything but apolitical, and Marshall's titular hero uses his powers to advocate for Black liberation. Marshall sets up Black Metropolis as a counterpoint to Superman's fictional New York, which sets up the titular Rythm Mastr as a countermyth to Superman.

Set in the Black Metropolis, the *Rythm Mastr* story begins when a young Black couple, Farell and Stasha, are separated after being caught in the crossfire of a gang shootout. Stasha is shot, and she crafts an elaborate plan for revenge by applying her knowledge of robotics and computer engineering to create an army of remote-controlled cars for retaliatory drive-bys. She also teams up with "a posse of wheelchair-bound tech wizards" who were victims of drive-by shootings (Tomkins 20). Meanwhile, as Farell is trying to escape the shooting, he runs inside the Ancient Egyptian Museum and encounters an elderly man named Rythm Mastr who uses traditional African drumming to bring Yoruba African and ancient Egyptian statues to life and infuse them with mythical superpowers. The elderly Rythm Mastr shares his secrets with Farell and teaches him how to harness these mythical powers of African drumming. When the elderly man dies, Farell becomes the new Rythm Mastr. Throughout the series, Farell and his team of Yoruba warriors clash with Stasha and her robotic army over the proper future of the Black Metropolis. Marshall describes the project as grappling with the African diasporic past, present, and future:

"The Superman that Eco describes is the Superman of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, after publishers stifled the political commentary in response to a moral panic over comic books and to Superman's increasing value as a commodity" (38). Singer is undoubtedly correct, and Superman comics have a long history of political engagement. However, this reality does not change the fact that Superman is typically conceived as an apolitical and almost empty heroic vessel.

To tell the story, I had to develop a conflict in which the past/present/future transitions could unfold. The Rythm Mastr and the African sculptures he brings to life represent the past from which a lot of people think we've been severed. My project is a critique of how that past is treated both by the dominant culture and by Afrocentrists. Gang violence presents a perfect backdrop for the present; and for the future, the computer, the Internet, robotics: I wanted to use all of those familiar sci-fi tropes. Technology is not all bad, and the past is not all good, but here they meet head-on in conflict. It's a love story, a story about vengeance, redemption, and internal cultural conflict. ("A Thousand Words," 229)

Rythm Mastr is an exploration of African American identity and the potential futures for African diasporic peoples. Marshall refuses to romanticize the past or imagine a utopic future. Instead, Marshall's cultural intervention is an extended interrogation of the history of African American communities, and the principal plot thread investigates how contemporary Black culture is continually influenced by an African past.

Rythm Mastr is inspired by the Seven African Powers of Yoruba. The incorporation of Yoruba mythology within the comic creates continuity between African religious practices and contemporary African American life. Five Yoruba-inspired heroes are brought to life by Rythm Mastr: Boli, Senufo, Ibeji, Oba, and Nkisi. Each of these characters corresponds to a different aspect of Yoruba culture or mythology. Boli is a mysterious stone-like character with no discernable features



Image 2: Marshall, Kerry James. *Rythm Mastr: Every Beat of My Heart*. 1999–2000, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C., https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2020.57.3.1ab.

and is a reference to the Boli Figure, a sacred artifact used by the Kono society in Mali. The Boli Figure is an abstract artifact that “is believed to be the embodiment of the spiritual powers of the society” (“Boli Figure, for the Kono Society”). Senufo wears a cloth mask over its face and has four feathers sticking out of its head. The Senufo are an ethnic group of West Africans, and they use a mask like the one the character Senufo wears to indicate when a woman is ready for marriage. The characters Ibeji are a pair of identical twins who wear a metal warrior helmet. In the Yoruba religion, Ibeji is the Orisha that represents twins, and twins are protected by Shango, the supreme Orisha of thunder and lightning. Oba wears an elaborate headdress with a coiled necklace. According to Yoruba religion, Oba is the Orisha of the river Oba, and she is the senior wife of Shango. The character Nkisi is made of stone and wears a solemn expression on his face. In Yoruba culture, Nkisi refers to an object that has a spirit inhabiting it, and these artifacts are often used by Yoruba people to commune with their ancestors. As the *Rythm Mastr*, Farrell’s character design is also inspired by Yoruba culture. He plays the talking drum, or the *dùndún*, to bring African sculptures to life. The talking drum plays an important role in Yoruba performance culture, and Amalyah Hart notes, “the drums really can be used to convey speech, a phenomenon known as ‘speech surrogacy.’” Like all his artistic endeavors, Marshall’s *Rythm Mastr* is a culturally corrective text aimed at centering the African presence in American artistic and popular culture. Of his comic, Marshall writes, “I’m trying to find a way to make our knowledge of African history, our knowledge of mythology, and our love of fantasy and superheroes and things like that all come together in a vital and exciting way, by connecting it to a story that is meaningful, historically and culturally, and that says something about the way in

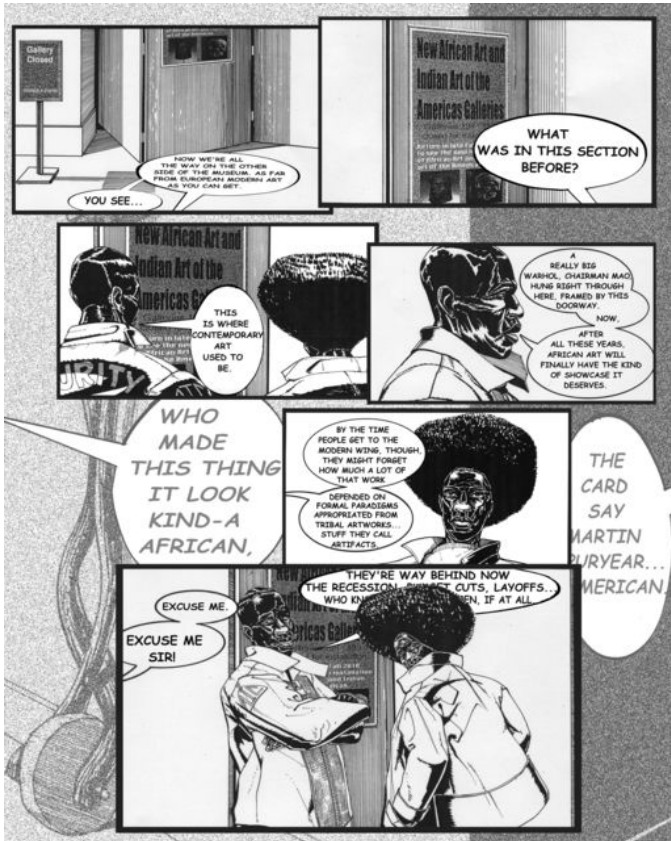


Image 3: Marshall, Kerry James. *Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*. 1999–2000, MCA Chicago, Chicago, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ker-ry-james-marshall-rythm-mastr-1>.

which we can carry these traditions into the future, so that they don't have to dissipate and die" (Interview by Art21). By designing his heroes in the Yoruba tradition and insisting on the cultural retention of African practices in contemporary African American life, Marshall blackens the frame of comics and the art museum.

While the Yoruba-inspired heroes play a vital role in the overarching world of the series, much of *Rythm Mastr* is concerned with the day-to-day lives of the Black citizens living in the Black Metropolis. In *Mastry*, Marshall selected a few exemplary panels from *Rythm Mastr* that spoke "directly to socioeconomic issues and the history of Chicago" (280). One example is a two-page excerpt that features Farell and an unnamed Black security guard walking around an art museum. In the first panel, there is a "gallery closed" sign on the lefthand side of the panel and text bubbles at the bottom that say: "You see ... Now we're all the way on the other side of the museum. As far from European Modern art as you can get." The men arrive at an exhibition entitled, "New African Art and Indian Art of the Americas Galleries," and this gallery is currently closed for renovation. With one line of dialogue and a few well-placed images, Marshall has described the layout of the art museum without ever showing the schematics of the location. Within this museum, Marshall places African art "far from European Modern art," and he implies that African art is materially and spiritually removed from European art. In the third panel, Marshall finally reveals the speaking subjects: Farell and the unnamed Black security guard. The two Black men continue to discuss the upcoming "New African Art and Indian Art of the Americas Galleries," and the security guard tells Farell, "This is where contemporary art used to be. A really big Warhol. *Chairman Mao*. Hung right there here, framed by this doorway. Now, after all these years

African art will finally have the showcase it deserves” (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). Here, Marshall positions African art as a belated insurgency that is correcting the historical erasure of African art in museums. Within this imagined museum, Marshall “Blackens the frame” by replacing contemporary art with African and American Indian art.

Additionally, the panel considers the position of the security guard. He is drawn as a middle-aged Black man, and his dialogue indicates that he has been working at the museum for a considerable amount of time. His persistent proximity to the art museum ensures that he is an expert in fine art. What has a middle-aged Black security guard who works for a fine art museum seen? More importantly, what has he not seen? Marshall asks his viewer to inhabit the perspective of the security guard and see the art museum through his eyes, a powerful reversal of the white gaze that so often defines Black-exclusionary. In celebrated creative spaces, the white gaze “has long determined whose stories are told [...] enforcing a seemingly immovable standard by which Black artists and other artists of color are nearly always cast in supporting roles to the mostly white stars of the Western canon” (Noor Brara). Marshall’s security guard has undoubtedly seen thousands of artistic works and exhibitions by and about white artists, and his face displays significant weariness as he tells Farrell, “after all these years African art will finally have the showcase it deserves” (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). This statement comes from a man whose Black gaze has watched the predominantly white space of the art museum work to marginalize and ignore African and Black art while aesthetically mining these traditions for their own gains. By having the viewer inhabit the Black gaze, Marshall works to challenge the white gaze that has traditionally structured the museum space.

The panel also serves an educational function. The security guard is talking to the much younger Farell, and the security guard becomes a figure much like Marshall the artist—an older Black man educating a young Black viewer about the long and impressive history of African art. The security guard tells Farell, “By the time people get to the modern wing, though, they might forget how much a lot of that work depended on formal paradigms appropriated from tribal artworks ... stuff they call artifacts” (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). Here is a clear example of Marshall’s attempt to “Blacken the frame” of the art museum. Through the security guard, Marshall educates his audience about the inspiration white modernist European and American artists took from African art. Helen Molesworth argues Marshall’s oeuvre participates in an “institutional critique” of the art museum that “demonstrates how the museum, along with its attending academic discipline, art history, has played a key role in the invention of racism and now must play a role in its dismantling” (32; 38). Part of this dismantling is a historical correction of art history. African and African diasporic people have made art since antiquity, and many of the most celebrated white American and European artists took direct inspiration from African artistic forms. Yet as the security guard notes, African art has often been reduced to “artifacts” by art historians. Marshall “Blackens the frame” to correct the historical record and highlight the seismic role that African art has played throughout art history.

In this excerpt, Marshall’s use of the gutter departs from traditional comic practices. The gutter is the space between panels in a work of sequential art, and it is typically a blank white space that gives the page structure. McCloud argues the gutter has a profound impact on the reader’s imagination, and he writes, “the gutter plays host to much of the magic and

mystery at the very heart of comics” (66). For McCloud and comic scholars of his ilk, the gutter allows the reader to fill in gaps in the narrative and create meaning from a sequence of panels. As such, the whiteness of most gutters must not be ignored. The traditional gutter is white because it allows a publisher to save on ink and not print anything in the margins of a comic. Yet whiteness as the default transforms the gutter into a generative site of racial inquiry in Marshall’s deft hands. In this excerpt, Marshall’s gutter is gray and features a simultaneous scene that is happening in the background. Unseen Black art patrons are discussing the work of the abstractionist African American artist Martin Puryear. Puryear famously rarely discusses his racial identity, and his abstract artforms elude a singular interpretation. One of the patrons asks, “Who made this thing? It look kind-a African.” The other person responds, “The card says, Martin Puryear . . . American” (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). The ellipsis is particularly important because it suggests a hesitant pause at Puryear’s identarian mark “American,” as if the Black patrons are skeptical of this descriptor. In a refusal to simply use the gutter as uninterrogated blank space, Marshall’s gutter offers a critique of Puryear’s reluctance to identify himself as a Black artist.

Additionally, the ellipsis that Marshall places in the gutter might also serve as a critique of Puryear’s commitment to abstraction. Abstraction is a particularly fraught subject in African American art. When Marshall began producing his early celebrated work like “A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self” (1980) in the early 1980s, realism had allegedly sounded its death rattle with Jean Baudrillard declaring “the death of the real.” Realism was pastiche amidst “the all-encompassing embrace of postmodernism and its concomitant culture of parody and programmatic suspicion of all belief systems and epistemologies based on realist truth

claims” (Roelstraete 49). Arts museums began celebrating many Black abstraction artists like Norman Lewis, Ed Clark, and Puryear. While Marshall produced some abstract art early in his career, he famously turned away from abstraction a few years into his career, and he says, “I stopped making abstract work—because white figures in pictures representative of ideal beauty and humanity are ubiquitous” (qtd. in Roelstraete 49). Marshall believed that the embrace of abstraction was a rejection of Black representation. As such, his reject of abstraction was an embrace of unmitigated Black representation in art. With his commitment to abstraction and hesitancy towards racial categorizations, Puryear is in many ways Marshall artistic opposite, and it seems clear that Marshall is engaging in a critique of Puryear when the Black patrons in the *Rythm Mastr* excerpt voice skepticism towards Puryear’s non-association with Blackness. Marshall stages a critique of Black abstraction within the gutter, and he transforms the white gutter into a space of Black racial inquiry.

The museum storyline continues on the next page. The top panel features a Black woman standing with her hands on her hips, and she asks the security guard about the African art exhibition, “Excuse me... This still not open?” (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). The woman is standing in front of two young children who are almost out of frame and begging their mom to leave the museum and go home. The security guard tells the woman that the exhibition remains closed, but he notes the museum promised the exhibit will “be open for Black History Month.” Marshall is highlighting how Black and African artists have often been relegated to Black History Month or other diversity-focused initiatives rather than being an enmeshed part of the museum space. The viewer naturally identifies with the unnamed woman who says, “Are you serious?” as a crowd of Black museum visitors form behind

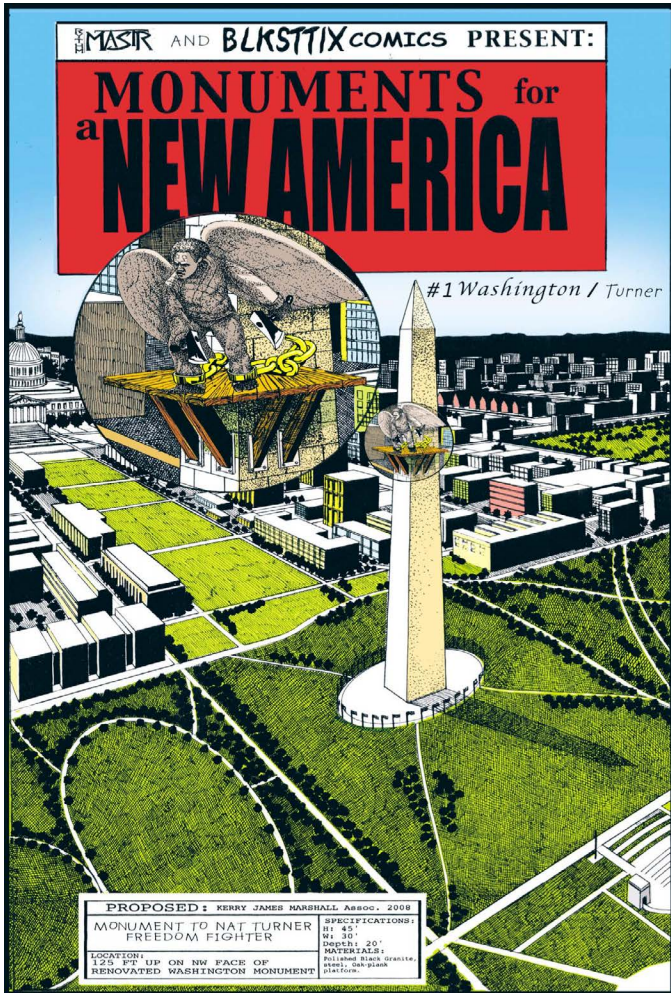


Image 4: Marshall, Kerry James. *Rythm Mastr: Monuments for a New America*. 2003, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/kerry-james-marshall-dailies-from-rythm-mastr>.

her and complain about this injustice. Rather than exploring other parts of the museum, they all leave while someone in the crowd exclaims, “That’s the last twenty dollars of mind they get!” The security guard turns to Farrell and sighs, “See . . . now that’s another group might never come to the museum again” (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). Marshall has often critiqued the lack of representation within art museums, and he writes, “It would not be a stretch to suggest that low ‘African American’ attendance correlates with their low visibility in the art” (“Just Because” 242).

As the series progresses, the United States of America is remade as Rythm Mastr and his team of Yoruba-inspired Black superheroes change the national culture, including national monuments. For example, the Washington Monument has been augmented with the “Monument for Nat Turner: Freedom Fighter.” While the Washington Monument still stands, there is now a platform added to the middle of it where a marble statue of a winged-Turner sits. Gold chains wrap around his feet—indicating Turner’s escape from bondage and perhaps a reference to the pivotal role that West African gold played in the birth of modernity. The Turner statue peers out from the edge of the platform, ready to jump away from the chains and fly to freedom. Marshall has recast the famous monument to America’s first president—and owner of 123 enslaved African Americans at the time of his death—into an acknowledgement of the most famous slave rebellion in American history. The panel that features the “Washington/Turner” Monument is presented as if it is included in a pamphlet about numerous monuments for “New America.” At the bottom of the page, Marshall writes, “next issue: Jefferson / Prosser,” referencing Thomas Jefferson and Gabriel Prosser. Jefferson was the fourth president of the United States, the principal author of the U.S. Constitution, and one

of the most famous slave owners in American history. Prosser was born into slavery in 1776 and the leader of Gabriel's Rebellion, a slave rebellion that directly confronted the hypocrisy of the U.S. Constitution. These dual monuments reveal that Rythm Mastr and his team of heroes have remade the United States into a more liberatory nation for African diasporic communities.

In interviews, Marshall has argued that augmenting these real monuments “dedicated to slave-holders [...] with statues of slave rebels” would undermine “the tendency to idealize history” (“Kerry James Marshall”), and *Rythm Mastr* allows Marshall to speculatively imagine an American future where history is acknowledged. Throughout the series, Marshall suggests the incorporation of African-inspired superheroes into the American body politic will create a total reimagining of the nation. Through the historical correction of important American landmarks, Marshall suggests that the incorporation of Black culture within cultural sites that Black people have been denied access to will lead to a reimagining of American culture writ large. Art is not neutral, and it is reflective of a culture's values. Public art like the Washington Monument is used to uphold white supremacist hegemonic power structures by silencing the Black presence and labor that these “Great Men” the monuments honor were dependent on. Elsewhere, Marshall has said, “It is a problem to recognize the greatness of Washington and Jefferson without also acknowledging that as they fought for freedom they were denying it, not only to African Americans but also—in the process of consolidating the country—to Native Americans through genocide” (“Kerry James Marshall Discusses his Exhibition at SF MoMA”). The *Rythm Mastr* project challenges traditional artistic historiographic practices by highlighting how art, especially in the form of

public monuments, is used to uphold the power systems of a racist regime.

Marshall continues his interest in a corrective history throughout the *Rythm Mastr* run. One of the excerpts of *Rythm Mastr* was published in the magazine *Esopus* Issue 14. The selection begins by introducing the reader to the Black Metropolis with the opening image of an all-black highway sign that reads, “exit 1619 A: Black Metropolis.” The exit number is an obvious reference to the arrival of the first Africans in the United States on 20 August 1619, when 20 Angolans, taken by the Portuguese, were brought to Jamestown and sold to the British colonists. Works like *Before the Mayflower* by Lerone Bennett Jr. and *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones have compellingly argued that the arrival of these 20 Africans signals the twin beginnings of the American project and the exploitation of Black people and their labor. As Hannah-Jones writes, “No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed” (17). By making the Black Metropolis exit “1619,” Marshall demands that readers recognize this date as the important starting point for American history and African American identity. The next page of the *Esopus* run is another highway exit for the Black Metropolis, but this exit is listed as “1865 B.” This date is a reference to the end of the American Civil War. After this date, the Southern plantocracy system of slavery legally ended—though, of course, the institution of slavery still exists in the form of legalized prison slavery. By framing, the entrance to the Black metropolis around these important dates in Black history, Marshall centers the importance of Black history within his imagined Black Metropolis.

The medium that Marshall chooses to showcase his comic is worth further consideration. Other than an 8-week run

where the comic was published in *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* magazine every Tuesday and occasional features in art magazines like *Esopus*, *Rythm Mastr* has been exclusively featured in museums where it is typically shown out of narrative order, which invites the reader to physically move their body throughout the art museum to uncover the narrative. By forcing his audience to struggle to locate the plot, *Rythm Mastr* mirrors the barriers that have been erected to obscure the African presence throughout history. Additionally, Marshall has typically featured *Rythm Mastr* in massive visually striking and grandiose exhibitions. For example, the original exhibition of the series was released during the 1999 Carnegie International, and the panels were placed behind glass paned windows and organized akin to a comic book. Each individual panel is the size of a newspaper. When the individual comics are taken together, the exhibition morphs into a visually arresting image. The exhibition at the 2018 Carnegie International was similarly overpowering but organized in an entirely different fashion than the 1999 showcase. The 2018 *Rythm Mastr* was presented as a singular seventy-foot-long comic strip that once again asked his reader to move their body to uncover the plot and appreciate the comic. Marshall designs showcases of *Rythm Mastr* to be visually overpowering. The massive scale of Marshall's work is a complete breaking of the frame of traditional comic publication, which often seeks to control and limit Black comic creators. Speaking of the scale of his paintings, Marshall says, "If you have things that we're [only] used to seeing in a really small format, if you double that size or increase it exponentially, then all of sudden it assumes a lot more importance" ("Meet Kerry James Marshall" 3:16-3:24). It seems clear he has similar aims with the publication practice of *Rythm Mastr*, and the choice of medium is foundational

to Marshall's desire to "Blacken the frame" of both popular culture and the art museum.

In 1999, an eight-part limited-run comic strip was published in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as part of the overarching *Rythm Mastr* project. These strips were designed to look like old, distressed newspaper clippings, establishing a fictionalized genealogy of the series. Throughout his career, Marshall has addressed the alleged belatedness of African American art, lamenting how art allegedly "ended" as soon as Black artists gained admission into the fine art community after decades of fighting for that access. The fine art world engaged in a variety of "end of narratives" between the 1970s and 1990s, and art critics like Arthur Danto suggested, in Hegelian terms, the contemporary period was the "end of art" because art was entering a "post-historical phase" (181). Danto argues, "once art-makers are freed from the task of finding the essence of art, thrust upon them at the inception of modernism, they are liberated also from history, and have entered the era of freedom" (180-81). Post-Blackness and certain Black abstractionist movements seemingly resonate with the idea that the "end of art" will offer a certain kind of liberation. Paul C. Taylor makes the connection between post-Blackness and Danto's "end of art" argument, and he writes, "the sense that the history of blackness or of raciality has made a decisive turn, enshrined in the determination to identify a post-black, post-civil rights, or post-soul condition, suggests that something more is available, and perhaps necessary" (639), Marshall has never found these types of arguments convincing. Regarding his rejection of abstraction as a liberatory framework for African American art, Marshall says, "What I wish to show is that abandoning black figure representation was not really a move toward true freedom but instead another box within which black artists encountered other issues,

chiefly the idea of belatedness, that prevented them from being recognized as significant contributors to the art historical record” (qtd. in Brehmer n.p.). Marshall’s paintings have attempted to correct the “art historical record” and avoid the “belatedness” issue. The stylized distress of the comic strip allows Marshall to engage in a similar critique of the comic form—a space where Black artists also deal with the issue of a belated arrival, particularly in the superhero comic genre.

Sequential art has been around since antiquity, but the modern comic strip is today often understood as beginning with *The Glasgow Looking Glass*, published in 1826. The American superhero comic genre was solidified with the publication of *Action Comic #1* on 18 April 1938, featuring the introduction of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman and ushering in the Golden Age (1938–1956) of comics. The Golden Age also introduced the world to Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and several other heroes who remain popular to this day. The Silver Age (1956–1970) was defined by the restrictive Comics Codes, but the era also introduced superheroes like the Flash, Spider-Man, Aquaman, Iron Man, and the X-Men. While the subsequent Bronze (1970–1985) and Modern (1985–present) Ages of comics have continued to introduce new characters and artists, these early days of comics still hold significant sway within popular culture—as evidenced by the massive success of the Marvel movie franchise. Black characters and Black artists are not well represented among so-called “classic comics.” To be clear, Black representation in American comics began almost immediately, and while some of this representation was racial or racist caricatures by white artists, Black artists were establishing their presence in American comics from the outset. For instance, E. Simms Campbell’s cartoons were published in almost every issue of *Esquire* between 1933–1958, and the

All-Negro Comics—a single-issue run of comic strips by exclusively Black creators—was published in 1947. *Fantastic Four* #52 was released in 1965 and introduced the world to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s Black Panther. Though Black Panther was created by two white artists, his introduction signaled an ideological and representational shift within superhero comics, and other Black characters like Storm, Luke Cage, and the Falcon followed in his wake. Benjamin Saunders writes, “as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, the (always) white and (almost always) male ranks of the superhero also slowly began to diversify, while the boundaries between superhero fantasy and the ‘real world’ continued to erode in stories exploring themes of racial intolerance, political corruption, and social inequality” (203). In 1993, four African American comics—Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Michael Davis, and Derek T. Dingle—created *Milestone Media*, and published Black superheroes like Static, Icon, and Hardware. Today, there are numerous Black comic creators such as Barbara Brandon, John Jennings, and Brian Stelfreeze as well as literary writers who have come to the medium as comic writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Victor LaValle. Despite increasing racial representation within comics, the Black presence remains marginalized within the medium today, and Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson write, “comics are still only peppered with representations of the multifaceted Black experience by Black artists” (15). Part of the issue is the comic industry’s obsession with self-referential works, what Singer calls “recirculations” (70). Singer argues, “The traditionalism isn’t limited to the comic’s self-conscious allusions or its preferred moral code; its nostalgia and its investment in the logic of decline also reinforce some of the genre’s less palatable traditions” (91-92). This self-nostalgic imaginary reinscribes the historical marginalization of Black comic creators. As

such, Marshall's decision to stylize his comic strip as a distressed and aged artifact is crafting an imagined past for African American art and offers a key example of his attempt to "Blacken the frame" of comics.

From a popular culture perspective, it is fair to ask if *Rythm Mastr* really matters. There is no doubt that *Rythm Mastr* is an exceptional sequence of fine art, and Marshall's artistic mastery is evident throughout each iteration of the series. However, Marshall's vision for *Rythm Mastr* goes far beyond the realm of fine art. Marshall hopes to turn the series into a graphic novel and a cinematic blockbuster that can rival any Marvel property. Marshall says, "My goal [with *Rythm Mastr*] is to match the iconic level of 'Star Wars'" (qtd. in Tomkins n.p.), and Marshall imagines *Rythm Mastr* as an insurgent Black presence within popular culture and comics that will provide Black audiences with iconic African-inspired superheroes. Yet the 2010s and 2020s are the age of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*. The 2018 film adaptation of *Black Panther* is the 14th highest-grossing film of all time, and the 2022 sequel *Wakanda Forever* has earned over 800 million dollars at the box office. Iconic Black superheroes are available for Black audiences. And while no one, outside of vitriolic racists, would complain about more Black representation within popular culture and comics, it is fair to ask if the sometimes polemic and often narratively obscure *Rythm Mastr* has the same urgency in the contemporary moment. Black comic scholars like Rebecca Wanzo and Jonathan W. Gray find utility in *Black Panther*. While Wanzo notes that *Black Panther* is a "post-racist caricature" (*Content of Our Caricature* 211) and her work has illustrated the "epic struggle to make a 'real' Black character out of something that was a white fantasy of blackness" ("And All Our Past Decades Have Seen Revolutions" n.p.), she also recognizes significant utility in the

character. Wanzo argues, “The rehabilitation of black representations is foundational to African American cultural production,” and as such, rehabilitating *Black Panther* becomes part of a “liberatory black aesthetic practice [...] responding to negative representations” (*Content of Our Caricature* 211; 212).⁵ Similarly, Gray praises Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* by writing, “This is a movie whose political theory matches its stunning special effects” (“The Liberating Visions of *Black Panther*” n.p.).⁶ Gray also suggests the original comic iteration of *Black Panther* “deliberately positions the ‘Negro’ as intellectually equal to his white counterparts, establishing the competence of African peoples in the face of Western scientific dominance” (“Black Panther and Cold War Colonialism in the Marvel Universe” n.p.). If *Black Panther* is a viable Black popular culture icon, shouldn’t comic artists interested in a liberatory Black cultural production work to expand the *Black Panther* cinematic universe and create similar decolonial efforts with already-canonical Black superheroes like Luke Cage, Black Adam, and Falcon?

Marshall rejects the notion that Black creators should work to rehabilitate a Black hero created in a white imaginary, and

5 It is important to note that part of Wanzo’s argument about *Black Panther* is a practical engagement with the realities of a market-driven popular culture. In her 2016 article “Why the Stakes are so High for the Black Panther,” Wanzo argues it is necessary for the *Black Panther* film to monetarily succeed for more Black comic films to be made. Wanzo writes, “Unfortunately, when it comes to underrepresented populations, the success or failure of these texts always ends up being about more than the specific text in itself. It becomes a referendum on whether or not stories about people who are not straight, white men are valuable, and whether or not people who tell such stories should be given the resources to do so.”

6 This is not to say that Gray was only laudatory of the film. He notes, for instance, “the movie didn’t sufficiently explore the complicated relationships that bind and bond” Shuri and Ramonda.

he argues *Black Panther* simply cannot achieve the emancipatory work that he is aiming for with *Rythm Mastr*. Marshall suggests traditional canonical, i.e., white-authored, superhero comics are insufficient icons for African American and African diasporic peoples. Regarding Ta-Nehisi Coates's renditions of *Black Panther*, Marshall says, "If all you can do is take characters that already exist, it's a failure to me" (qtd. in Tomkins n.p.). For Marshall, an adaptation of *Black Panther* is inherently limiting, and he argues, "The trouble with revivals, though, is that the new authors must preserve enough of the original for a series to remain recognizable to die-hard fans while simultaneously opening it outward to more universal experiences" ("Marvel's Black Panther" n.p.). While Marshall's writings⁷ reveal that he is a fan of *Black Panther* and has a deep familiarity with the source material, he recognizes that being a fan of an established comic character created by a canonical and white author, even if that character is Black, is not the same thing as a Black writer crafting a mythic Black superhero inspired by Yoruba religious practices. The latter is potentially liberatory while the former is simply diversity. For this reason, *Rythm Mastr* remains urgent, and Marshall's "Blackening the frame" is imperative for the type of liberation that Black and Africana Studies strives to achieve.

Marshall's *Rythm Mastr* has demanded a Black popular culture insurgency since the comic first arrived on the scene in 1999, and that insurgency seems to be happening at this very moment. In recent years, there has been a growing collection

7 For instance, Marshall corrects the misreporting that the Coates-Stelfreeze run on *Black Panther* was the first Black comic and Black writer team leading the series and points out "That distinction goes to Hudlin and Ken Lashley on the fabulous Dark Reign series in 2009 [with] probably the best-executed Panther story arc since artist Billy Graham drew the Don McGregor-scripted stories in the mid-'70s" ("Marvel's Black Panther").

of Black comics who are creating space for themselves in the industry while producing original African-centric stories. The husband-wife duo Manuel and Geiszel Godoy created *Black Sands Entertainment* in 2016 with the express intention of creating “indie comics by Black artists, written for Black families about Black people, with a focus on tales of Africa before slavery” (Pineda). The Godoy’s flagship comic is *Black Sands: The Seven Kingdoms* and features several Afrofuturistic Black heroes. Similarly, *Black* was written by Kwanza Osajyefo, co-created by John Smith 3, and drawn by Jamal Igle, and these three Black men created a comic series that imagines a world where only Black people have superpowers. *Black* is filled with references to African American culture as well as symbols from the Akan religion. These emerging Black artists and writers are unapologetically demanding a central place within comics while refusing to capitulate to market demands to simply reskin already established characters like *Spiderman: Miles Morales*. Like *Rythm Mastr*, these works are steeped in African mythology, and these artists are creating original intellectual property specifically for Black audiences. One of the most famous panels from *Rythm Mastr* features several animate African artworks escaping from their display cases in a museum. Two Black security guards stand in the middle of the museum, and one says to the other, “Wha...? Did you hear that noise?” The other security guard responds, “Let’s go! I didn’t hear shit!” In the middle of the page, large bold letters say: “The Time Has Come” (*Rythm Mastr: So it Begins*). Thanks in no small part to creators like Marshall who have spent their careers “Blackening the frame” of the art museum and comics, it seems the time *has* come for greater recognition of unapologetically Black and African-inspired comics that seek a liberatory future for African diasporic peoples. *Rythm Mastr* will undoubtedly be beating his drum to welcome this future.

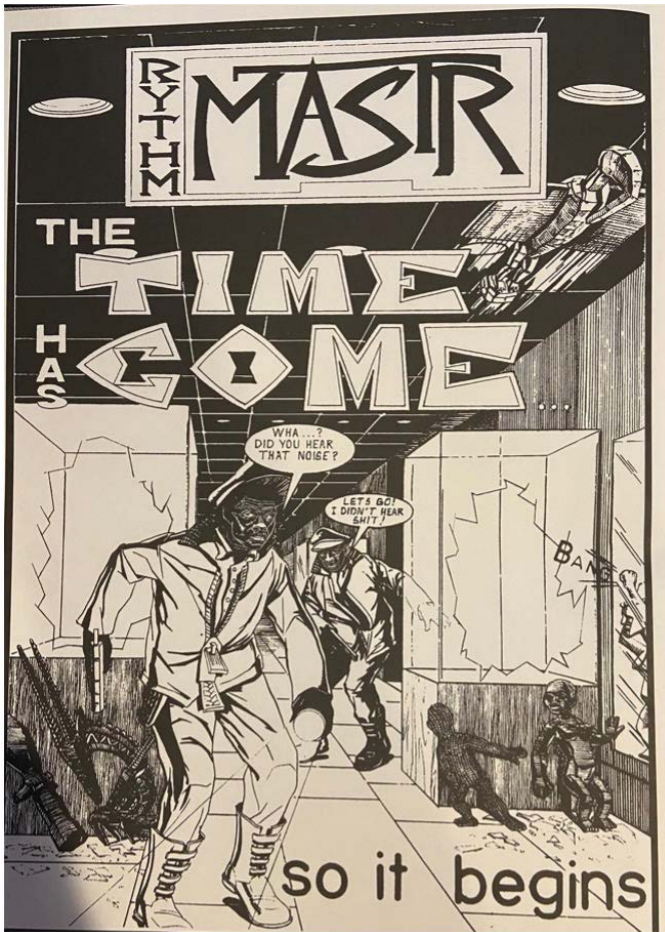


Image 5: Marshall, Kerry James. *Rythm Mastr: So it Begins*. 1999–2000, *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, edited by Madeleine Grynstejn, pp. 1. Skira Rizzoli, 2016.

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