Sweet Christmases and Misty (K)nights: Representing Blackness in American Superhero Comics

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I would like to kick things off with a question. How many of you have actually studied comic books? Well, this presentation is aimed at introducing you to the fascinating realm of comic studies. It is a part of my ongoing research project and I am excited to take you on this journey. But before we dive in, let me share an interesting opportunity. How many of you are familiar with San Diego Comic-Con? Have any of you heard about the Comic Arts Conference? It is the academic counterpart to Comic-Con and here is the exciting part: if you are an undergraduate student and submit an approved poster, you can attend Comic-Con for free! Plus, if you get accepted, you even receive an extra ticket for a friend. So, if you have any interest in comics, consider how you can contribute to the growing field of comic studies. It a fantastic time to get into the field.

Let me first tell you about myself by sharing a story. I have a group of friends who used to be known as The Black Pack. Now, I know you are looking at me thinking, “Really?” But no, this name was created because everyone drove black cars. Every year on Halloween, these nerd friends of mine would dress up in costumes because they were comic book nerds and every year they would always tell me that I should go as Luke Cage. I would respond to them that I had a little thing called dignity, so my answer was always a no. The interesting question—and why I start with that—is because I want you to think for a second why a group of people would have wanted me to go out as Luke Cage out of all the characters they could have chosen. Where did that choice come from and what might that tell us about comic books and the representation of race and difference in comic books?

This talk will be a distillation of a number of courses that I have taught. The primary source material comes from a course I offer entitled "Race, Gender, and the Other in Comics." Today, we are going to explore the themes of “Sweet Christmas” and Misty Knight, as they represent the concept of Blackness in American superhero comics. As shown in Figure One, many of you might recognize Luke

Cage, especially if you watched the Netflix series. But have you ever wondered why his most famous catchphrase is "Sweet Christmas"? Does anyone know the origin of this quirky saying? When Luke Cage was originally created, the goal was to create an authentically Black character. However, a challenge emerged because, in comic books of that era, explicit profanity was off-limits due to the Comics Code.[1] In response, the writer drew inspiration from a Chester Himes novel and used the phrase "Sweet Christmas," believing it to be an authentically Black expression. This made Luke Cage a representation of what, during that particular time, writers considered authentic Blackness. Another character from this era is Misty Knight, the first African American heroine in Marvel Comics pictured in Figure Two. I will not read her dialogue here verbatim, but it contains an expletive that has been omitted. Take a moment to look at Misty. Does she resemble a Black person you might encounter in Huntington in the year 2023?

Figure 1 Luke Cage Source: Thunderbolts #137 (December 2009)

Figure 2 Misty Knight Source: https://www.marvel.com/characters/misty-knight/in-comics (Accessed September 10, 2023)

However, this representation still exists. Therefore, I would like you to ponder the following as we navigate through this material: Why might someone suggest that I should embody Luke Cage and why does Misty Knight appear the way she does? By addressing these inquiries, we hope to shed light on how comic books can reveal intriguing facets of our culture's history regarding race and representation.

COMIC BOOK INQUIRY

Since comic studies is a field of academic inquiry, I want to start by introducing a couple of academic ideas. We are going to look at two premises and then we will do a brief run through some of the important foundational elements of comic history before we dive into our topic. First, let us consider the work of Consuela Francis. She explores the notion of Blackness in comics in an article entitled "American Truths: Blackness and the American Superhero." The article's title references a 2004 comic book called "Truth: Red, White & Black." If you have watched "Captain America: The Winter Soldier" on Disney Plus, you might recall the introduction of Isaiah Bradley, the Black Captain America. This book played a pivotal role in introducing that character. To provide some context, it delves into the idea that before Steve Rogers received the Super-Soldier Serum, experiments were conducted on African-American individuals.

Francis argues that "a black point of view" is "disruptive to a superhero narrative." [2] To demonstrate her hypothesis, Francis considers the number of cultural critics that attacked this story as racist or an attack on America:

> Reactions such as [Michael] Medved's make *Truth* a perfect case study for examining the role that race plays in American superhero comic books. It is entirely possible that a successful black American superhero is impossible because it seeks to combine two ideals that are antithetical to each other: superheroes and American racial thinking. We project onto superheroes our basic ideas about humanity (no matter what distant imploded planet those heroes hail from), and they, in turn, reflect back the kind of heroism we would like to imagine we are capable of.[3]

I want to let you think about that for a second. Dr. Francis is making an argument that I want us to wrestle with throughout this presentation: Will audiences accept others? Black people, Asian people, the person who is not white, will this person be accepted as a hero?

Dr. Francis is suggesting that it is not possible within the ways in which our culture frames the heroic. I want to go deeper into this subject. We project onto superheroes our fundamental beliefs about humanity, irrespective of the distant, otherworldly origins of these heroes. In return, they mirror back the kind of heroism we aspire to possess. Given Dr. Francis' perspective, the superhero plays a unique role in our culture. Building on our initial premise, the question arises: Can audiences truly embrace a non-white individual as a hero? It is essential to acknowledge that stories and fantasies offer a distinctive kind of fantasy – one that posits the potential for an ordinary citizen to become an extraordinary hero in a world much like our own. Superhero comics are teeming with men and the occasional woman (keep that thought in mind) embodying the quintessential power of fantasy, often presented in an idealized image of heroism that is overtly virtuous, extraordinarily masculine, and above all, white.

As we proceed to the discussion of Luke Cage, I want you to think about Dr. Francis' hypothesis. Superheroes frequently embody the very opposite of our conventional cultural notions of Blackness (and, by extension, other forms of "otherness," as Dr. Francis suggests). Following Dr. Francis, our central question becomes: Where do Black superheroes and superheroines in general fit within this framework when there is often resistance to the inclusion of Black characters and individuals who defy conventional gender and racial norms?

BLACKNESS AND HEROES

This situation presents a complex conceptual problem, raising questions about the very essence of heroism. Superhero comics provide a platform for exploring several inquiries. Can a Black character embody heroism? Additionally, I am a passionate advocate for Black American pop culture, particularly Black superheroes. If you are looking for a starting point on this subject, I strongly recommend *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* by Adilifu Nama. I should note that I do not entirely agree with Dr. Nama's perspective, but his book serves as the most comprehensive introductory resource you will find.

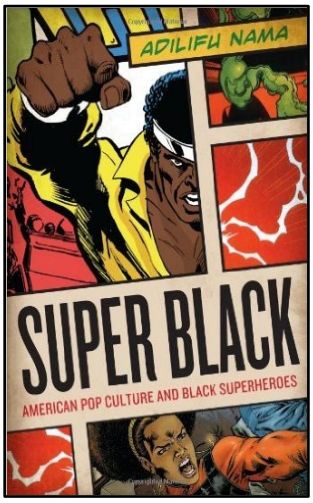


Figure 3 Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes Cover

Take a moment to consider the cover design of Figure 3, and you will notice two heroes prominently featured. These two, I suggest, serve as excellent archetypes for comprehending the construction of Blackness in comics.

Dr. Nama has made significant scholarly contributions in examining the sociological intent and impact of comic books. What sets his work apart is its valuable approach. It does not merely serve as an historical account that attempts to assign meaning to these character constructions. He critiques what he

calls a "nearsighted analysis," which tends to categorize Black characters either as products of the jungle comics era or as byproducts of Blaxploitation. In his own words, this kind of analysis provides an incomplete portrayal of the intricate and engaging ideological dialogues that black heroes engage in within American culture.[4] In stark contrast, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* draws attention to Black superheroes as a captivating racial phenomenon and a potent source of racial significance, storytelling, and imaginative expression in American society. These heroes convey a wide array of racial assumptions, political viewpoints, and fantastical preconceptions of Black identity. In simpler terms, examining who gets to be a hero and how that hero is depicted reveals insights about the historical period during which they were created, highlighting the significance of a historical perspective in our critique.

This approach also unveils the subversive elements, shedding light on how we strive to redefine concepts of Blackness, Asian-ness, queerness, or any other category attributed to heroes. If you employ a historical or sociological lens to analyze a comic book, you can raise critical questions about the portrayal of race. Here is my pitch (and I promise to step down from my soapbox now): these analytical tools serve as invaluable instruments for simplifying the way in which images are crafted and transmitted to an audience. They help distill the complex dynamics of who is designated as a hero under specific circumstances, and how that character is represented and brought to life, transforming a two-dimensional figure into a three-dimensional, multifaceted creation. While Black superheroes may not always enjoy the same mainstream popularity as others, they compensate with profound symbolism, meaning, and political significance, particularly in the context of America's ongoing cultural dialogue on race. Even the omission and consistent marginalization of Black superheroes are phenomena rich with cultural and sociological implications.[5]

SETTING THE SCENE

As an historian, I prefer to start by rewinding the clock to a time before most events. We are going to take a quick run through of the history of comics with a focus on how race and gender were represented. In 1933, a significant milestone occurred with the publication of *Famous Funnies #1*, marking the advent of the first modern-format comic book. The story behind it is quite fascinating. Publishers realized that the printing presses used for newspapers were often sitting idle. By taking a newspaper sheet, folding it in half, and then folding it over again, they could create a book. From

repackaging comic strips from newspapers and printing them in a format that could be folded into quarters, they effectively transformed the content of newspapers into a book format.

Initially, comic books started as giveaways in places like dime stores. However, it soon became evident that they could be sold for a profit. In the early years, between 1933 and 1938, comic books primarily consisted of collections of popular newspaper comic strips and some original content. Notably, these early comic books featured action-adventure and romance strips. Comics were born out of 1930s pulp fiction and borrowed heavily from its tropes, including its representations of the exotic “Other” and its use of African and Asian settings.

The first significant Black character to make an appearance was Lothar from the comic strip series "Mandrake the Magician." I'd like to start with this character because you might find him somewhat familiar. Lothar made his debut in 1934, and he was the first African crime fighter. Despite being a king reigning over seven nations, being described as the world’s strongest man and being invulnerable to almost every form of attack, Lothar made the decision to relinquish his throne and serve alongside Mandrake the Magician as his faithful servant. In the early adventures, Lothar spoke in pidgin English and was used for comedic effect. For instance, he would quip lines like, “Once, fella in my tribe tried figure out women. Him figure for ten days—then him brains exploded."

Now, that is funny and you might laugh, but you might also feel uncomfortable laughing at it for several reasons. Keep in mind that, back in 1934, what we now recognize as problematic was considered quite normal. To provide a personal anecdote, my mother, who was born in 1951, has recounted how her father, born in 1916, found shows like “Amos and Andy” to be hilarious. My mother was deeply offended, but he sat there giggling like a child because, in the era in which he grew up, that type of racialized, stereotypical humor was widely accepted. Lothar embodies comics’ persistent racial problem: it is intriguing that Black people were envisioned as having a role, but the roles assigned to them often conformed to certain representational conventions.

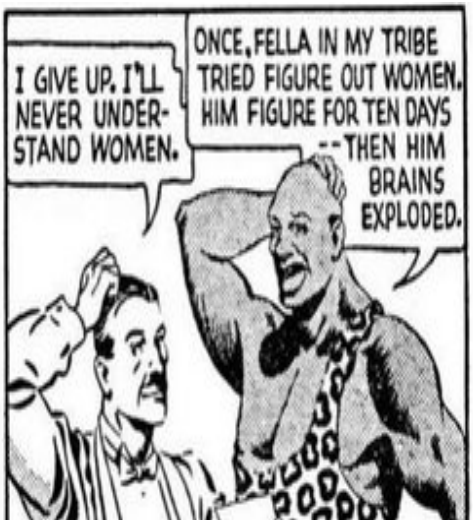


Figure 4 Lothar, the first African crime-fighter in *Mandrake the Mandarin* in 1939 Source: https://mengistuetim98167854.wordpress.com/2014/05/23/making-my-fmp/ (Accessed 10 September 2023)

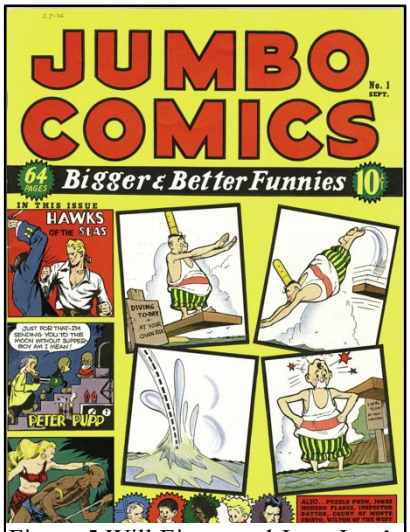


Figure 5 Will Eisner and Jerry Iger's Jumbo Comics Source: https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/index.php?dlid=26921 (Accessed 10 September 2023)

Moving forward, between 1937 and 1938, Jerry Iger and Will Eisner introduced Sheena, who is featured in the bottom right-hand corner of *Jumbo Comics* #1's cover, even though you probably can't see it. Sheena holds the distinction of being the first featured woman in a comic book, and this happened in 1937. Sheena predated both Superman and Wonder Woman. In my gender course, I delve into the problematic portrayals of white women in jungle settings, but we'll save that discussion for another time. Fast forward to 1941, and we encounter June Tarpé Mills, the creator of "Miss Fury," the first female-led, eponymous comic book. Mills published as Tarpé Mills (Tarpé was her mother's maiden name) because it was thought that audiences would not buy a superhero comic created by a woman. "June" was clearly a female, but "Tarpé" obscured her gender identity.[6] 1941 also saw the debuted of Harvey Comics' Black Cat, comics' first superheroine, and Wonder Woman, who debuted in October 1941's *All-Star Comics* #8.

While there were various spaces for women to be envisioned as comics characters and to create comics during the Second World War, fully realized Black characters were still a rarity during this era. E.C. Stoner was comics' first Black artist. His first published comics art appeared in 1937's *Detective Comics* #1, the title in which Batman would debut two years later. His work appeared in a wide range of comics until the mid-1950s.[7] Perhaps the most celebrated of comics' pioneering Black artists is Matt Baker. Baker's first credited work appears in 1944's *Jumbo Comics* #1. My first published work in

comics was about Baker, a gay Black man ironically best known for his illustrations of white pinup girls in jungle and romance comics.[8]

Figure 6 Voodah, comics' first featured Black character, in Crown Comics #3-19 beginning in 1945 Source: *https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/preview/index.php?did=6584* (Accessed September 10, 2023)

Matt Baker's work is noteworthy for its unique portrayal of race. Baker is generally recognized as creating Voodah, comics' first featured Black male lead. Despite the context of jungle and adventure settings, Baker's depictions of Black characters, particularly Black women, resonated with the appearance of people in Harlem, where he lived. This means that even though these stories are set in the jungle, the characters' hairstyles and appearances closely resembled those of contemporary Black New Yorkers, right down to the processed hair!

GOLDEN AGE OF COMICS

As we navigate through this historical context, it is important to acknowledge that discussions about Black history often focus on what white people or others have done to Black individuals. It is less common to pause and reflect on the contributions that African Americans themselves have made. I would

like to briefly mention that there is indeed an African-American comics tradition that emerged during the golden age of comics, offering a unique and often overlooked perspective.

Black newspapers once featured syndicated black comic strips. Unfortunately, most of these treasures were lost during the microfilming of these newspapers, as they were deemed to have no value and were discarded. Consequently, obtaining these historic comic strips is a challenging endeavor. In the 1930s, Black newspapers began creating comic strips that featured Black characters; however, these strips often relied on the same sort of stereotypical images and punchlines for laughs that one could find in mainstream newspapers and media, World War II marked a pivotal shift in African-American audiences' tastes and demands. Black publishers responded by offering all-Black cast comics intended for a Black readership. These magazines strove to depict Black people in a more positive light and to challenge prevailing stereotypes, though modern audiences may debate how successful they were in that endeavor.

In 1947, a rare and highly coveted comic book, *All-Negro Comics #1*, was produced by Orrin Evans, a newspaper publisher based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Figure 7). Regrettably, when Evans attempted to create a second issue, he faced an insurmountable challenge in acquiring newsprint, resulting in the series never progressing beyond the first issue. *Negro Heroes* is another significant publication, initiated by the Parents Institute and the National Urban League, with its inaugural 1947 issue (Figure 8). Subsequently, the second issue, featuring a Jackie Robinson lead feature, was a collaborative effort involving the National Urban League and Delta Sigma Theta (Figure 9). My current research project explores the distinctions between issues where stories were adapted from white sources and magazines written by white authors for a general readership versus the issues in which two Black organizations, the National Urban League and Delta Sigma Theta, decided who qualified as a Negro hero or heroine and how that person should be portrayed. However, it's important to note that these Black-created publications remained outside the mainstream of the comic industry, resulting in their limited availability.

Figure 7 The cover of 1947's *All-Negro Comics* #1 Source: https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/preview/index.php?did=21983 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

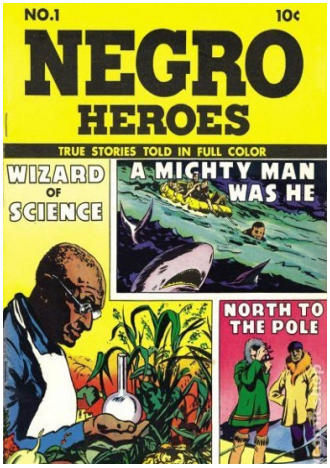


Figure 8 The cover of *Negro Heroes* #1 in 1947 Source: https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/preview/index.php?did=26194 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

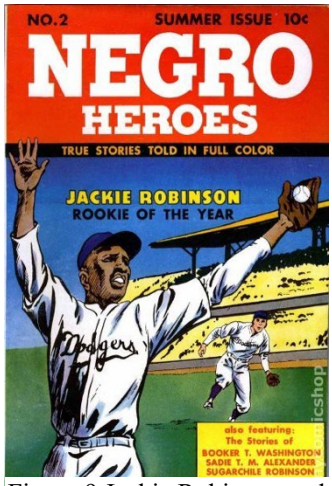


Figure 9 Jackie Robinson and other prominent African American stories featured in 1948's *Negro Heroes* #2. Source: https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc0963902 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

WORLD WAR II

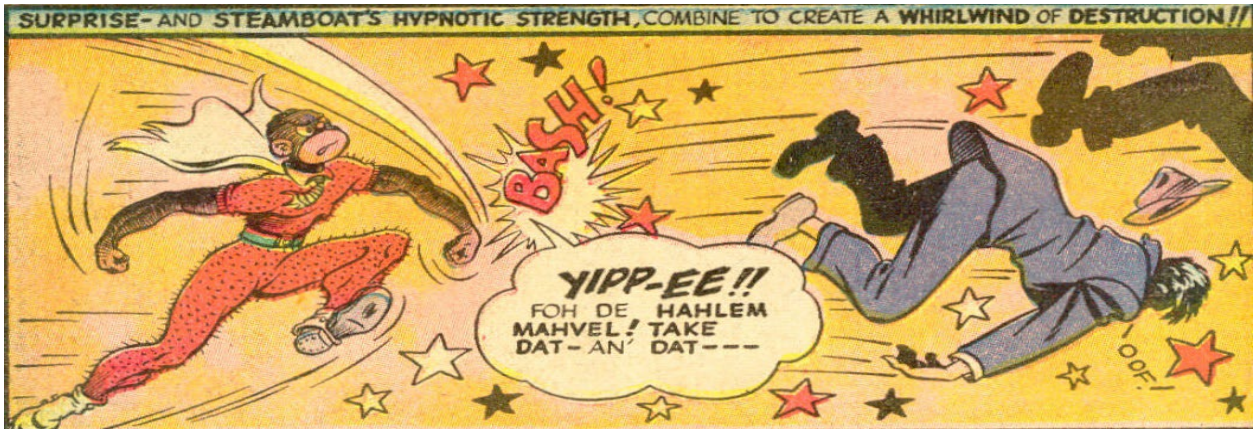
A significant turning point in racial representations occurred during the Second World War. Everything we have explored today within mainstream representations of Blackness tended to rely on negative stereotypes, drawing from traditional and often derogatory imagery. In *"'This Is Our Enemy': The Writers' War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books, 1942-1945*," Dr. Paul S. Hirsch highlights a compelling point. Hirsch argues that, through the Writers' War Board (created in 1942), the American government used comic books "as an essential means of disseminating race-based propaganda to adult Americans, including members of the armed forces" beginning in April 1943.[9] During the Second World War, the Writers' War Board sought to exercise control over the content of American comics. The Writers' War Board was determined to ensure that comic books, being the most widely consumed form of popular literature, reflected American values. While we will not go into the full implications here, it is worth noting that, during this period, the Writers' War Board collaborated closely with DC and other publishers, guiding and influencing the creation of comic book content to align with the nation's interests. This marked active government involvement in comic book production during World War II. What's intriguing is that during this time, many comic book publishers drew from the Writers' War Board's directives to craft new characters, thereby steering the narrative in war-themed comics. There were essentially two approaches taken by these comic books between 1942 and 1945. One portrayed the enemy

as racially and culturally flawed, but ultimately conquerable, while the other, coinciding with the escalation of the war effort, depicted the enemy as fundamentally irredeemable and unrelentingly violent.[10] As the war dragged on and the Axis powers still had not yet surrendered, the Writers' War Board redirected its focus toward shaping comic books' portrayals of the Germans and the Japanese. Hirsch asserts that the U.S. government actively "…encouraged very specific hatreds based on race and ethnicity to build support for the increasingly brutal U.S. policy of total war."[11]

Comics were possibly America's most popular form of media in the mid-1940s. Millions of copies of Superman, Batman, Captain America, Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman comics were sold each month and were read by children and adults alike. They were, Hirsch argues, therefore the perfect American propaganda tool to advance a particular narrative about race.[12] A core part of comics' World War II's racial propaganda mission holds particular relevance for our discussion. The Writers' War Board also aimed to shield Americans from the common critique that their nation was hypocritical. It addressed the issue of promoting liberty, freedom, and equality while simultaneously mistreating minorities. Consequently, the Writers' War Board sought to influence comic books to better represent minority groups. This resulted in some ironic, unintended consequences.

The Captain Marvel character Steamboat debuted in 1942's *America's Greatest Comics* #2. Steamboat drew on common contemporary racial representations and was, therefore, not particularly unusual for the era; however, Steamboat happened to appear alongside a character who was so popular with young children that his books often outsold Superman comics. Ironically enough, this made Steamboat the most visible Black character of comics' Golden Age and the most visible example of anti-Black representations in superhero comics. Early Captain Marvel stories were written for children and everything in them is overly broad and silly. Fawcett Comics clearly intended for Steamboat to be funny and sympathetic, featuring him in more than 50 stories.[13] Figure 10 shows Steamboat from a now-infamous 1942 story "The World's Mightiest Mistake" from *Captain Marvel Adventures* #16. In this seven-page story, Steamboat is hypnotized into believing that he has Captain Marvel's powers and rushes headlong into potential disaster as "The Harlem Marvel."

Figure 10 *Captain Marvel Adventures* #16 (1942). Black children's criticism of the character resulted in his removal from the book in 1945. Source: *https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/preview/index.php?did=1081&page=1* (Accessed September 10, 2023)



Now, you might find this depiction vulgar, but it is worth noting that Steamboat was a member of the Marvel family, alongside characters like Captain Marvel and Captain Marvel, Jr.. A Black character had a recurring role in the most popular superhero magazine of the day, but that role came with a heavy, negative representational price. Hirsch suggests that the Writers' War Board's members were uncomfortable with Steamboat, but made no move to suggest that Fawcett eliminate the character. Instead, Steamboat's retirement resulted from a group of Black junior high students from New York City's Junior High School 120 meeting with Captain Marvel's editor and ultimately convincing him that the character would convince "[his] one-and-a-half million readers" that Steamboat represented real Black Americans. Editor Will Lieberson then removed the character from the Captain Marvel books, prompting the Writers' War Board to send him a thank you note.[14]

At a time when the priority was emphasizing American values and unity, the sheer volume of negative depictions of America's non-white citizens and allies was seen as counterproductive. Ironically, the members of the Writers' War Board also aimed to utilize Congress to combat racial animosity within America. Their intention was to demonstrate that the United States represented an inclusive society in contrast to its fascist adversaries. Their goal was to ensure that all Americans were united in their opposition to the Axis powers. This involved advocating for public, as opposed to private, tolerance. One of the most intriguing aspects of the comic book era lies in the moment when people were so concerned about the influence of comic books on children that the American government even called for a limited endorsement of racial equality.[15]

While it might be unrealistic to expect readers to suddenly embrace heroes or heroines belonging to minority groups, comics could take intermediate steps to make comics more inclusive. There was certainly room to include subsidiary characters with Jewish names or to depict them as individuals of

African descent. Have you ever wondered why some characters in comic books had Jewish names like Cohen and Schwartz in the 1940s? This practice was a result of a collaborative effort between the Writers' War Board and the Race Hatred Committee to promote stories reflecting minority contributions to American culture. Unfortunately, these "positive" racial and ethnic representations often left much to be desired. In the *Young Allies* comic, Bucky and Toro led their gang into thrilling adventures, portraying fearless American boys fighting for democracy (Figure 11). They're all broad ethnic stereotypes, but the character that stands out the most to contemporary viewers is "Whitewash Jones," the Black harmonica player with a predilection for zoot suits and watermelons.

Figure 11 Young Allies #1 (July 1941) Source: Screen capture at https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Young_Allies_Vol_1 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

Figure 12 Military Comics #5 (December 1941) Source: https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/preview/index.php?did=26085 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

Figure 12 features King Hotentot from 1941's *Military Comics* from 1941. The intention was to convey America's inclusivity by having King Hotentot join forces with Chief Chuckalug and the other members the Death Patrol to combat the Nazis. However, Hotentot was portrayed as an African and, quite problematically, as a cannibal. In the middle of the story, he chases a Nazi, calling our "Ah! There's a juicy-looking fellow!! He'll make a fine stew!" The Nazi dives through a window and lands in a steaming stew pot. The chef preparing the stew faints and the king utters "Mmmm!! Yum yum!!" as he stares at the simmering soldier. The narrative does not clarify the soldier's final fate.[16]

COMICS IN CRISIS: 1945-1955

The next phase in comics involved the post-war period, as soldiers returned to the United States. During this time, there was a surge in the creation of comics intended for an increasingly adult audience. The comic book landscape transitioned from predominantly superhero, funny, and crime comics to include romance and horror comics. There are a number of things that changed and, frankly, this is to me the most creative part of what is called the Golden Age of Comics.

After the war, there was increasing concern about juvenile delinquency. Enter Dr. Frederic Wertham, an Austrian psychiatrist working in New York. One day, while at his Hooky Club, he was engaging with troubled youths and he noticed that they all had one thing in common: comic books. Driven by this observation, he made a rather remarkable logical leap and concluded that comic books were causing harm to America's children. To further his cause, he adopted a strategy that targeted mothers. Publications like *Reader's Digest*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Ladies' Home Journal* began running articles with titles like “What Parents Don't Know About Comic Books” and he even likened comic books to "marijuana in the nursery.”

Dr. Wertham's accusations were extensive, as he claimed that comic books were corrupting children's minds. He specifically accused them of promoting fascism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and even pedophilia. Everything you could possibly blame on comic books, he blamed on them. The American public took action by burning comic books by the truckload. In an effort to avoid complete business collapse, comic book producers took a significant step in 1954 by adopting the Comics Code, a self-regulation system. From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, comic books placed heavy emphasis on conforming to societal norms. They showcased adult white males in dominant roles and reinforced the idea that women should be subordinate. As an example, in *Justice League of America* #9 from 1962. In the early Justice League comics, the heroes met in a cave in a place called Happy Harbor. The ninth issue portrays Wonder Woman as the heroes’ maid cleaning up the cave while wearing an apron. The Justice League, quite literally, convened in a cave, and they expected the Amazon princess to do some cave cleaning while wearing an apron – a rather comical thought. Furthermore, in the 1960s, comic artists also began reinventing female characters' proportions, particularly their breasts, as they were seen as overly sexualized and problematic. The drawing of female characters intentionally became blockier in appearance to match the physical image of the male characters. This was a deliberate design choice,

intended to make Wonder Woman look more like her male counterparts. It may sound a bit odd, but if you examine various comics from that era, you will notice this trend.

REPRESENTING BLACKNESS IN MAINSTREAM COMICS IN THE 1950s AND 1960s

What happens to the representation of Black characters in comic books? Originally, there were problematic portrayals of Black people and the Writers' War Board and the military wanted to avoid such representations. When EC Comics published so-called "preachies," "socially conscious stories that boldly challenged the conservatism and conformity of Eisenhower-era America" and attacked American racism, however, those stories were denounced as negative and anti-American.[17] With Frederic Wertham's claims that comic books were teaching race hatred, especially in jungle comics featuring Black characters, a new challenge arose. Again, being Americans, we responded in the only logical way that we knew: drive the Black people out of the comics so that you do not have to represent them. If you do not portray them, they cannot be problematic. Therefore, in the late 1950s, comics that attempted to address racism were effectively prohibited because the Comics Code Authority would not approve them without significant editing. This resulted in Black people being virtually erased from comic books in the 1950s.

At the same time, we do encounter some noteworthy efforts during this period to feature Black characters in magazines published by mainstream publications. For example, Fawcett Comics, home of Captain Marvel, released *Joe Louis: Champion of Champions* in 1948 to celebrate the Brown Bomber and, in 1950, published *Negro Romance*, a magazine clearly targeting Black readers as the romance comics genre's popularity was skyrocketing.[18] Waku, Prince of the Bantu, made his debut in 1954-1955 in *Jungle Tales #1*, becoming the first Black character to be prominently featured in a Marvel comic book (Figure 13). Waku can be seen as a prototype for Prince T'Challa, the Black Panther, who shares a commitment to a peaceful life and protecting his people. However, the backlash against jungle comics' content led to this series cancellation in 1957. Another interesting story involves *Lobo*, which was the first comic book series centered around a Black character (Figure 14). It ran from 1965 to 1966, with stories written by Don Armon and drawn by Tony Tallarico. Unfortunately, when it came time for distributors to return unsold copies, most of them had never been put out for sale. Distributors shied away from the product solely because it featured a Black man on the cover, despite the fact that his skin color was hardly emphasized in the issue itself. As a result, over 90% of the print run was returned, making these comic books among the rarest in the world. It is worth noting that in 1965, nobody believed this book had a chance of selling.

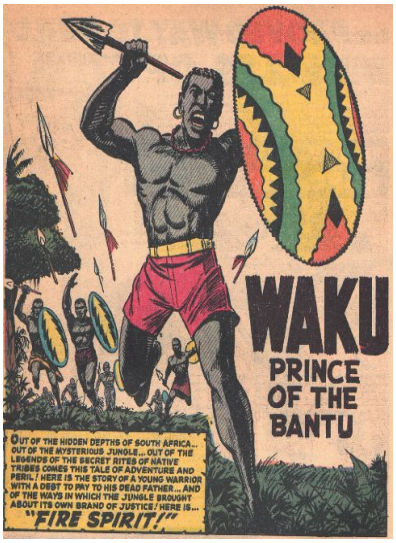


Figure 13 *Jungle Tales* #1 before the magazine's name was changed to *Jann of the Jungle* for issue #8. Source: *https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Jungle-Tales/Issue-1?id=158015#1* (Accessed September 10, 2023)

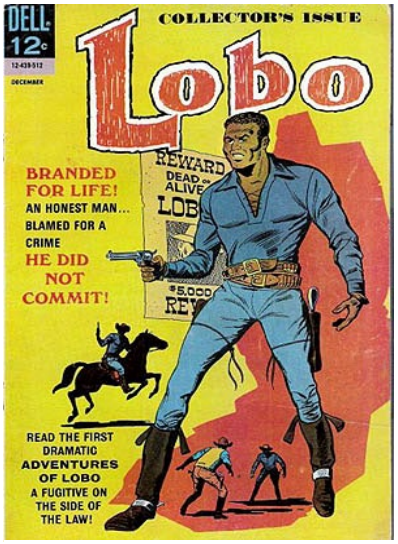


Figure 14 The cover of Dell Comics' *Lobo* #1 (1965). Source: *https://www.ep.tc/problems/70/* (Accessed September 10, 2023)

CREATING THE MODERN BLACK SUPERHERO

Marvel's true first African-American hero in the modern Marvel universe is Gabe Jones featured in Figure 15. In this illustration, Gabe Jones is seen alongside Sergeant Fury and his Howling Commandos. Now, for any World War II history enthusiasts, can you spot what is historically inaccurate about this portrayal? Indeed, Gabe Jones is depicted as an African-American soldier in an integrated unit, a scenario that did not occur during the actual events of World War II. Both Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, who were themselves in the military, were aware of this historical fact. However, when crafting this fictional version of American history, they placed Gabriel Jones as one of the Howling Commandos, fighting alongside his comrades, portrayed as an equal. It is also worth noting that he continues an African-American comic book trope. Gabe is a musician and is shown with a trumpet in his hand. If you have ever been in the military, would you really want someone standing around playing the trumpet during a combat situation? That makes no sense, folks.

Anyway, I want dive into the first Black superhero character, the Black Panther, introduced in 1966 by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. Kirby was a creative genius, but when it came to costume design, well, let us say he was not always successful (Figure 16). Originally conceived as the Coal Tiger for reasons that passeth all understanding, T'Challa sported a rather peculiar costume at the outset. Lee and Kirby

introduced this character almost simultaneously with the emergence of the Black Panther Party, making his name somewhat problematic from the start. Marvel would later distance itself from the name "Black Panther" for a time, opting to refer to the character as the "Black Leopard." This decision was prompted by the character's intention not to be seen as political, as the name "Panther" had connotations in America that did not align with the character's portrayal. He adopted the name "Black Leopard" since, a panther is, in fact, a type of leopard. It is an interesting twist, to say the least.

Figure 15 Gabriel "Gabe" Jones, Silver Age Marvel's first African American hero showing the limits of 1960s racial liberalism. *Sgt. Fury and His Howling* Commandos #1 (May 1963), pp. 4-5. This image is color-corrected. In the originally, Jones was accidentally colored white! Source: https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Sgt-Fury/Issue-1?id=76782#1 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

Figure 16 The Black Panther, the first Black superhero created in 1966. Source: https://marswillsendnomore.wordpress.com/2011/07/26/black-panther-gallery-early-jack-kirby-design/ (Accessed September 10, 2023)

Notably, T'Challa, or the Black Panther, is recognized as one of the earliest Black super scientists in modern comics and was deliberately designed to be on par with white male counterparts. He is meticulously designed to surpass them in many aspects; however, he follows in the footsteps of characters like Lothar and Hotentot, who were depicted as Black men essentially conforming to white standards. Just like them, the Black Panther decides to relinquish his African kingdom. And what does he do? He embarks on a journey to the Americas to join the Avengers, believing that he can contribute more effectively to a noble cause. In the process, he leaves his people behind. What is intriguing is the foreshadowing of where we are ultimately headed. When Don McGregor, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in 2019, took over the Black Panther, he was determined to portray him as authentically African. McGregor sought to make the character authentically African, so when T'Challa returned to Africa, he found his throne occupied, as seen in the movie adaptation. Killmonger's challenge and the events at

Panther Falls, which were featured in the Black Panther movie, drew inspiration from McGregor's work. The “Panther's Rage” arc, consisting of twelve issues, revolved around T'Challa's struggle to regain control of Wakanda, mirroring the movie's plot. Notably, McGregor decided to maintain the series’ integrity, refusing to compromise on the presence of white characters.

During the 1970s, Marvel's then-publisher Stan Lee initiated the next phase of Marvel Comics. The strategy was to seize on whatever was trending and popular at the time. Recognizing that African-American readers were an underserved audience, Marvel set out to create a slew of Black characters. This initiative was a response to the late 1970s, coinciding with the conclusion of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black Pride. It was a time when people were eager to see heroes who represented them. You will see this long list of Black characters who were introduced in the 1970s. mostly at Marvel but also some at DC Comics. However, some of them had problematic elements. For instance, DC’s Black Manta character was reimagined as Black in 1977’s *Adventure Comics* #477 based purely on his name. His new motive for crime? He concluded that the surface world was too racist. He subsequently relocated to the underwater world and embarked on a secret mission to eliminate all white people.

Marvel introduced comics’ first African-American male superhero with The Falcon in 1969. Luke Cage became the first African-American hero to have his own standalone comic book in 1972. Then, there is John Stewart, a character from DC Comics, who was the first African-American superhero there. Brother Voodoo made his debut as the first Afro-Caribbean hero. Blade was introduced in 1973, and the Living Mummy emerged as another Black character, although one of the most cringe-worthy. Then, in 1976, we got Tyroc. If you are curious, I would recommend Googling *Superboy* #216 and looking at the cover for more insight into why I consider Tyroc one of the most embarrassing characters of them all. Unfortunately, there have been numerous embarrassing stories within all of these characters’ arcs.

My talk began with Luke Cage and I would like to consider *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #5*,* which stands out as one of the most awkward and problematic tales within Luke Cage's history. If I ever find Steve Englehart, he's in for quite a scolding from me for this. In this series, Luke Cage is not a superhero; he’s a private detective in Harlem very much modeled after 1971’s “Shaft” if Richard Roundtree had possessed superpowers instead of the world’s greatest theme song. “Don’t Mess with Black Mariah” is the story of Luke Cage’s encounter with Black Mariah, a morbidly obese, Black female gangster with a fake southern dialect wearing the world’s largest flapper dress, after Mariah’s henchmen kill Frank Jenks, Cage’s prospective client. Mariah might be the most offensive representation of an African-American woman, if not all African-American characters, in 1970s comics. In some ways, “Don’t Mess With Black

Mariah" is a stunning collection of racial stereotypes evocative of 1940s imagery that one is somewhat surprised to see in 1973. The dialogue is so far from how real people speak.

"I hope y'all are proud 'a yo'self, Mr. Hero for Hire: beatin' on folks lak dat." Right.

"Mah boys heist me a pea-shooter?" Really? It's just nonsense.

"Mass means weight—and if you talkin' weight—Cage, I got it!" [19]

Seriously? If someone were reading this in 1973 and didn't know anyone Black, which was possible in parts of America in the early seventies due to segregation and its aftermath, that person might actually believe these grotesque representations.

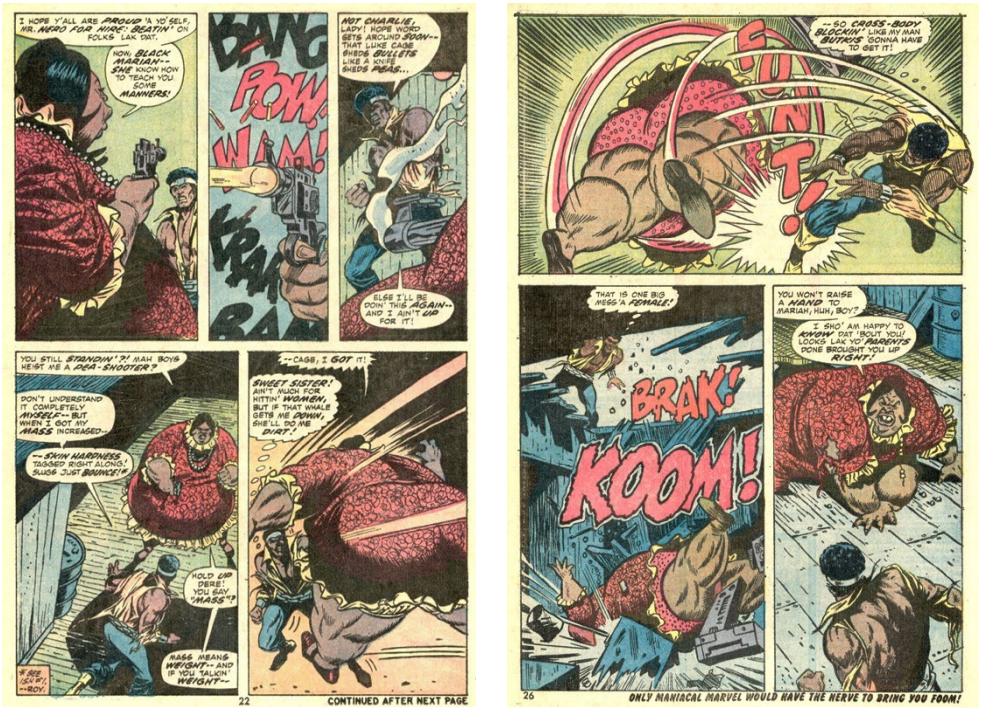


Figure 17A and 17B. *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #5, Black Mariah. Source: https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Hero-for-Hire/Issue-5?id=84465#1 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

Now, let me read this passage, and then we'll wrap up. Please keep in mind that some people have suggested I dress up as Luke Cage:

"Sweet Sister, ain't much for hitting women, but if that whale gets me down, she'll do me dirt!"[20]

Do any of you know anybody who talks like that? I doubt it. Also, I have to point out that Luke Cage's outfit is quite something. He's wearing a silk shirt, a chain around his waist, a silver headband on his Afro, and yellow boots.

Moving on. Here's a fun fact: DC's first Black female character is Lois Lane, and her story is rather peculiar (Figure 19). She is "Curious (Black)," and Lois wants to go to Metropolis' Little Africa to interview Black people to understand what it is like to be a minority. However, when she visits Little Africa, they all run away from her. Lois Lane, being the rational person we all know her to be, decides she needs supernatural powers to turn her skin darker. You get lines like this:

"Look at her, brothers and sisters! She's young and sweet and pretty! But never forget…she's Whitey!"[21]

Who writes this?

Figure 18. *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* #106 (1970). Source: https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Superman-s-Girl-Friend-Lois-Lane/Issue-106?id=46233#1 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

Figure 19. Green Lantern/Green Arrow #87 (Dec 1971-Jan 1972). Source: https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Green-Lantern-1960/Issue-87?id=28308#1 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

Look at the cover in Figure 19: Green Lantern, also known as John Stewart, is DC's first African-American hero. Now looking at that, you would think that happened in the comic book. It does not happen at all. That scene is not in there. Who knows Green Lantern's oath? "In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight. Let those who worship evil's might, beware my power, Green Lantern's light." Note where the cover's text places the emphasis in debuting John Stewart: "Introducing an unforgettable new character who really means it when he warns…beware my power."[22] If you couple that with Neal Adams' ferocious-looking drawing, John Stewart appears to be an Angry Black Man™, not a superhero.[23] Cage and Stewart debuted at approximately the same time and each has the same characterization. Like Luke Cage, Stewart is not portrayed as a traditional hero. Cage doesn't altruistically provide his assistance when his career begins. He's in it for the money. Belligerent Stewart seems to be in it for the power trip and that selfish orientation is emblematic of the 1970s vision of Black heroism. Almost everything about Cage and Stewart runs counter to what Francis describes as the superhero's "idealized image of heroism that [is] explicitly honest, law-abiding, chaste, excessively masculine, and, above all, white."[24] Each is portrayed as having heroic qualities, but the Black superhero is portrayed as Other. The Black superhero operates under a different, blacker moral code usually defined by his inner-city upbringing or because he operates as a hero in a ghetto (even if he is, himself, accomplished and well-educated). White superhero morality versus Black superhero morality is often the primary tension in 1970s comics stories, particularly at DC Comics' early stories. The Black superhero's journey is his journey to becoming a true hero.

Where does all this lead us?

THEORIZING THE BLACK MALE SUPERHERO

Pictured below in Figure 20 is a representation from the 1990s when Christopher Priest, the first African American to write the Black Panther, reimagined the character. Who does that image look like to you? This character is designed to look like Avery Brooks, who played the cool Black detective Hawk on TV's "Spencer: For Hire" and "Hawk." Priest describes his Black Panther as having "the sleekness of the

jungle cat whose name he bears" and living by "the law of the jungle [that] dictates that only the swift, the smart, and the strong survive."[25] Going from having a costume, you have T'Challa dressed like a gangster or a pimp with female entourage. If you have seen the Black Panther movies, those women are the *Dora Milaje*, the king's bodyguard. They are also not wearing armor, however. The women are dressed like they are headed off to the club. With this image, we end up wrestling with comics' core racial representation issue: whose aspirational representation are we going to have? As Nama points out, all Black superhero representations are political. Different audiences consume Black characters differently. For some audiences, the emphasis is on black cool, resulting in a portrayal like Christopher Priest's T'Challa, a suave, sophisticated, and dangerous Black genius who can get one over on "The Man." For other creators and audiences, the emphasis is on representing what they believe to be authentic Blackness.

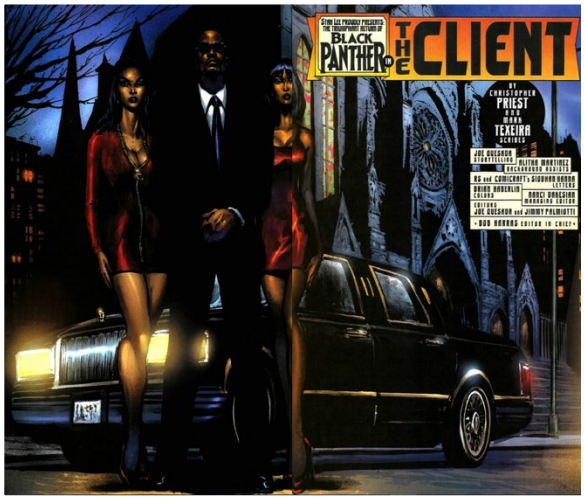


Figure 20. Pages 5 and 6 of *Black Panther* #1. Vol. 2, from 1998. Source: https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Black-Panther-1998/Issue-1?id=29743#1 (Accessed September 10, 2023)

What makes a Black comic book character authentic? That becomes the foundational question. Luke Cage might be the best example that I can offer. I'll sketch Luke Cage's evolution very quickly. In his debut issue, *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* #1, he sports a yellow silk shirt and a chain around his neck, reminiscent of a character straight out of a crime novel. He is a man wrongfully experimented on in prison, breaking free with superpowers, and relocating to Harlem to establish himself as a mercenary

superhero. Unlike Superman, who fights for truth, justice, and the American way, Luke Cage fights for financial gain. The character emerges in 1972, clearly influenced by the politics of the black liberation era. However, he fades away in the mid-seventies, only to be reimagined in the 1990s with a more contemporary look and haircut. This incarnation discards the symbols of Blaxploitation, consciously embracing an urban aesthetic, but this attempt also falls short.

When Brain Azzarello sought to reimagine the story in 2002, Cage was transformed into a character sporting a gold tooth and knuckle dusters. It is worth noting: Luke Cage possesses steel-hard skin, so why would someone with this attribute opt for brass knuckles? Azzarello's *Cage* mini-series attempts to encapsulate a specific understanding of Blackness by leaning directly into a gangster aesthetic in a magazine marked with a parental advisory for explicit content. In the 1970s, authentic Blackness was epitomized by the concept of Blaxploitation. In the 1990s, however, the trend shifted, rejecting the Blaxploitation image for a more stylish, urban character. Yet, when reimagined for a white audience in 2002, the portrayal swung back to a gangster rap aesthetic. The modern version of Luke Cage, as seen in series like Netflix's *Jessica Jones*, breaks new ground, presenting Luke Cage as one of the first Black heroes to marry a white woman, settle down, have a family, and eventually lead a version of the Avengers.[26] Thus, in contemplating authenticity, one must question what constitutes genuine Blackness. Is it a 1990s hip-hop imitation or does it aspire to embody something greater—a hero fit for the age of Obama?

Figure 21. This collage traces Luke Cage's evolution from his 1972 debut to the 1992 *Cage* series and the 2002 *Cage* mini-series. The final image, from 2012's *The New Avengers* Annual #1, shows the character's final evolution into a family man. Source: These comics may be found respectively at
https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Hero-for-Hire/Issue-1?id=84452#1
https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Cage-1992/Issue-1?id=80107#1
https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Cage-2002
https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/New-Avengers-2005/Annual-1?id=77708#1

THE TRIPLE-BIND FOR BLACK WOMEN IN COMICS

I also have seen a similar problem with Black women. If you have not explored Jeffrey Brown's book *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, I highly recommend it. Brown argues that the action heroine is a problematic construction in the western imagination. In the west, action and empowerment are widely considered to be masculine traits. At the same time, however, the action heroine's "perfect" and "scantily clad and extremely curvaceous" body functions as sexual fetish that caters to the male gaze. For Brown, this constitutes the action heroine's "double bind…as both a heroic subject and as a sexual object."[27] Scholarly examinations of this "double bind" often overlook the representation of Black action heroines. If white action heroines suffer from a double-bind, I argue, the Black action heroine suffers from a triple-bind: mainstream audiences' cultural conception of a hero as properly male and white; comics' insistence on portraying all bodies, but especially female bodies, as perfect and increasingly hypersexualized; and western culture's complex fetishizing of Black femininity as simultaneously enticing and taboo.

Comic books commodify all women's sexuality, but Black heroines have been uncommonly naked since comics' first Black heroine's debut in 1971. The first black heroine was The Butterfly from *Hell-Rider* #1 (Figure 22). The question arises: why is she dressed in such a manner? It looks like her choice of fashion is duct tape. When discussing significant Black comics heroines, the X-Men's Storm, who debuted in 1975 is often the go-to. For those familiar with the modern X-Men's characterization of Storm as a mature team leader and one of the team's most powerful members, her original portrayal might raise eyebrows. A new team of X-Men debuted in 1975's *Giant-Size X-Men* #1. Professor Charles Xavier personally recruited each member. Xavier travels to Kenya to recruit Storm, or Ororo the Wind Rider. Her portrayal takes a somewhat stereotypical route—she is naked and in Africa, doubling down on a certain perception. I cannot prove this without additional research, but I believe she may have been the first mainstream Marvel superheroine to be portrayed topless. It makes you wonder about the choices made.

Or consider the image of Vixen (Figure 23). When you observe her attire, the question arises: why is she even dressed that way? Vixen is African and female, so naturally she is quite comfortable being close to naked, right? This exemplifies a recurring theme for Black female characters—being subjected to a cultural construction that perpetuates specific stereotypes about Black female sensuality and sexual availability.[28] The realm of superhero fandom is predominantly shaped by a white male perspective, contributing to the limited interest in other types of representations of Blacks in comics, especially Black women.

A final fun fact: Vixen was DC Comics' first Black heroine. The character was scheduled to debut in 1978, but her comic was canceled before publication. Consequently, DC did not feature its inaugural Black heroine until 1981. Keep in mind that comic books debuted in 1933 and superhero comics commenced in 1938 with the advent of Superman. It had only taken 43 years.

Figure 22. Comics' first black heroine: "The Butterfly" from *Hell-Rider* #1 (1971). Source: https://heroheroinehistory.blogspot.com/2011/02/butterflythe-first-black-superheroines.html (Accessed September 10, 2023)

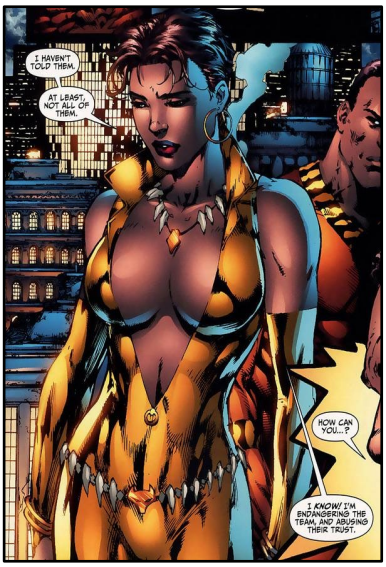


Figure 23. Vixen, DC Comics' first Black superheroine, *from Justice League of* America #22 Vol. 2 (2006) Source: https://viewcomiconline.com/justice-league-of-america-2006-issue-22/ (Accessed September 10, 2023)

The juxtaposition of these exoticized representations of the Butterfly, Storm, and Vixen with Misty Knight from 1972, the same year as Luke Cage, is instructive. Misty is not a sultry jazz singer like the Butterfly or a fetishized African goddess like Storm; Misty is a New York City police officer who received a bionic arm after being injured in an explosion. She is also the only one of the four characters that we are discussing who was created by a Black artist, Arvell Jones. Perhaps this is why Misty bears a striking resemblance to Pam Grier, the undisputed queen of 1970s Black action heroines? [29] The Misty Knight character was also the first mainstream comics heroine to participate in an interracial romance, being romantically involved with Luke Cage's white partner, Iron Fist. Her romance with Danny Rand also links her to another aspect of 1970s pop culture: the period's discovery of Bruce Lee and martial arts films.[30] This contributed to another layer of the character: her connection to the kung fu era in comics creation. She and her partner, Colleen Wing, are both martial artists known as the "Daughters of the Dragon." Together they form Nightwing Restorations, Ltd., a detective agency. As the foregoing

suggests, Misty is a Blaxploitation-inspired street-level superhero who usually battles against the same kinds of inner-city menaces that plagued Luke Cage.

Figure 24. Promotional poster for Pam Grier's *Coffy* (1973). Source: Screen capture from https://www.amazon.com/Coffy-POSTER-Movie-11-Inches/dp/B00KK6H6EC

Figure 25. Misty Knight with Spider-Man in *Marvel Team-Up* # 63 (November 1977) Source: https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Marvel-Team-Up-1972/Issue-63?id=34684#1

Consequently, you're left with these two archetypes defining Black superheroines. On one side, you have the Blaxploitation, urban crime fighter embodied by Misty Knight. On the other, there's the explicit African goddess exemplified by Storm and Vixen.

CONCLUSION

Where does that leave us? The same question persists. Despite an increase in the introduction of Black women and characters into comics, the core issue remains: they simply do not sell as well. Even when more Black women enter the comic scene, they often end up creating content targeted at Black readership that struggles to gain traction. For instance, when Shuri. T'Challa's younger sister, assumed the mantle of the Black Panther in 2009, the books experienced a decline in sales, prompting a return to

T'Challa. Even when these characters make it to the big screen, the movies don't always perform as expected, often facing backlash online. Even though Shuri replacing T'Challa as the Black Panther has its origins in the source material, fan response to the move was hostile and "Black Panther: World of Wakanda" underperformed expectations significantly. Consider the case of Riri Williams, introduced in the comics in 2016 to replace Tony Stark as Iron Man. There was a backlash against the character in the comics and again when she was positioned to take Tony Stark's place in the MCU in the second Black Panther movie. When there is a race or gender change in characters, it often sparks audience backlash. Unfortunately, that appears to be the primary method used to introduce Black characters into contemporary comics.

While there have been positive strides in African-American participation and improvements in character representation, the challenge persists in aligning audience preferences with cultural expectations, especially when it comes to Black heroes or heroines.

NOTES

1. Comics publishers established the Comics Code Authority in 1954 to regulate comics' content in the wake of public concerns that comic books were a primary cause of juvenile delinquency. For a history of the Comics Code, see Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).
2. Consuela Francis, "American Truths: Blackness and the American Superhero" in Frances Gateward and John Jennings (eds.), *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 139.
3. *Ibid*., 138-139.
4. Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 2-4.
5. *Ibid*., 3-4, 9.
6. Ironically enough, her pioneering work emerged during the period between 1942 and 1945. With many American males drafted into wartime service, women took over artistic and writing roles for several comic books, only to be replaced by male creators after the war was over.
7. For more on Stoner, see Ken Quattro, *Invisible Men: The Trailblazing Black Artists of Comic Books* (New York: Yoe Books, 2020).
8. See Dwain C. Pruitt, "It Rhymes with Lust? Matt Baker and the Ironic Politics of Race, Sex, and Gender in the Golden Age," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 7:2 (2016), 197-209.
9. Paul S. Hirsch, "'This Is Our Enemy': The Writers' War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books, 1942-1945," *Pacific Historical Review*, 83:3 (2014), 448-449.
10. *Ibid*., 448-469, especially 451-461.
11. *Ibid*., 461.
12 . *Ibid*., 456.

13. *Ibid*, 477.
14. *Ibid*.
15. *Ibid*., 475 and 482.
16. David Berg, "Death Patrol," *Military Comics* #5 (December 1941), 30.
17. For more on EC Comics' activism, see Quiana Whitted, *EC Comics: Race, Shock and Social Protest* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).
18. For issues of *Negro Romance*, visit https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/index.php?dlid=34288.
19. Steve Englehart and George Tuska and Billy Graham, "Don't Mess with Black Mariah!" *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* (January 1973), 22.
20. *Ibid*.
21. Robert Kanigher and Werner Roth, "I am Curious (Black)!" *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* (November 1970), 4.
22. Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams, "Beware My Power," *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* # 87 (December 1971-January 1972), cover.
23. Readers meet John Stewart during a tense exchange with a white police officer that threatens to turn violent. Assessing John Stewart's character when he is first told that the Guardians of Oa have selected him to be a Green Lantern, Hal Jordan says, "Maybe he's brave…honest…and has the right kind of mind…but it's obvious he also has a chip on his shoulder the size of the Rock of Gibraltar!" See *Ibid*., 5. When he learns the Green Lantern oath, Stewart dismisses it as "pretty corny…except the part that says, "Beware my power!" Mmm-hum…I do dig those words!" *Ibid*., 7.
24. Francis in Gateward and Jennings, 141.
25. Christopher Priest and Mark Texeira, "The Client," *Black Panther* #1 Vol. 2 (November 1998), inside cover.
26. Fans can still find Marvel series inspired by Cage's over-the-top, blaxploitation-inspired presentation, however. In 2016, Genndy Tartakovsky produced *Cage*!, a visual callback to the 1970s that even brought back Black Mariah!
27. Jeffery Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 11 and 145. See also 22-39.
28. For more on black superheroes' costumes, see Blair Davis, "Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros: The Visual Design of Black Comic Book Superheroes," in Gateward and Jennings, 193-212.
29. On a personal note, I had the pleasure of meeting Pam Grier in 2010, and let me tell you, that woman talked my ear off. I had to walk away from her because of my schedule!
30. For a recent cultural history of American responses to 1970s Asian martial arts films, see Grady Hendrix and Chris Poggiali, *These Fists Break Bricks: How Kung Fu Movies Swept America and Changed the World* (New York: Mondo Books, 2022).