**Lesson 26: Constructing Black Superheroes**

**Daddis**

**Intent:** Understand how Black superheroes symbolized Cold War societal attitudes toward race, while aiming to remain culturally relevant within African American communities.

**Scheme:**

1. The Cultural Relevance and Allegiance of Heroes
2. Black Heroes Doing “Cultural Work”
3. Confronting Real Social Issues

**WARNO:** How did the depiction of Latino comics characters evolve during the Cold War era?

***Review***

* Popular appeal of *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* movies; an effort for the characters, America generally to go back, refight, and “win” the war; revenge as a plot device
* *The ’Nam* was written in the vernacular one might hear from a Vietnam veteran, and it served as a signpost for the authenticity series readers could expect
* The comic does not simply portray the war as a quagmire, but rather endeavors to fulfill an educational mission of authenticity
* This conglomeration of experiences creates a collected cultural memory; “collective memory” implies cohesion, while “collected memory” suggests a contentious nature of cultural memory
* In the 1980s, healing became synonymous with revising memories of the war
* Murray’s conceptualization for the series reflected that reality: “the characters would arrive in Vietnam and a certain number of issues later would go home”
* The comic also participated in propagating memories of the war engaged with popular arguments of the 1980s; arguments claiming “the United States could have won the war if...”
* Maintaining its commitment to realism, one of the main characters, Mike Albergo, is killed as early as issue number nine
* Unfortunately, the comics code stymied depictions of the harsh realities of the war such as fragging, drug use, prostitution, and rape
* This results in a limited memory of the war for a generation who may have relied solely on *The ’Nam* as a realistic depiction of the war
* Comics code restrictions may have limited some realism, however, *The ’Nam* certainly did not trivialize the war; moreover, the series was not apolitical

***Ghee, “Will the ‘Real’ Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?”***

224 the imaginary acts of fictional heroes can transcend stories, thus transcending time and space

224 Pearson: “high-level warriors” requires fight for something beyond their own petty self-interest; the enemy is no longer a person, group, or country, but ignorance, poverty, greed

224 today, most warrior heroes are fighting not at the *high level* but at the lower levels in the secular interests of their own groups, cultures, and countries

* *Did heroes of color have different responsibilities? How might this relate to ‘identity’?*
* *Did these heroes have a different challenge in transmitting values? How?*

225 hero characters and stories serve a major role in the developmental learning process by transmitting cultural values and allegories

226 most contemporary iconic mythologies are confined to a “bounded community;” the heroes’ aggression is projected outward

* *How might Black heroes (and villains) be ‘culturally bounded’? (226)*
* *How would their stories be influenced by the sociopolitical context of Cold War America?*

227 creative expression always occurs within a cultural and historical milieu

227 unlike in White culture, there is a dearth of serious culture-bound hero archetypes available to the youth in black culture that “represents” affirming values of African American culture

227 the Euro-American’s mainstream cultural promotion of altruistic human traits and characteristics is oftentimes at the expense of, or “collateral damage” of, Blacks

228 in the 1970s the Black-Owned Communications Alliance launched an advertising campaign addressing the dearth of fictional Black superheroes by showing a picture of a young Black boy engaged in pretend play looking in the mirror at the image of a White superhero

* *What are the implications when children can’t even imagine heroes like them?*
* *What does this challenge of reinforcing healthy cultural self-images within children tell us about larger tensions within competing narratives of Cold War national identity?*

229 do the sparse but “mainstreamed” White culture produced creations of Black superheroes have any redeeming value for positive and affirming psychic identification for Black youth?

* *How might we answer this? How important is explicit identification to cultural relevance?*
* *Why has there been such an outcry when White characters are recast as people of color?*
* *What does this suggest about the role of heroes in shaping cultural (and racial) identity?*

230 when a White hero is saving “America,” it is an implicit assumption that he (and the story) is *culture bound* and he is saving his own people and culture first

230 when, and if, a Black hero is saving America, he is often a supporting cast to a White hero

230 helping the White protagonist to save (White) America as the Black sidekick is not necessarily viewed in the Black culture as necessarily serving the best interests of Black America

231 while real-life Black heroes are often viewed as culturally allegiant and culture bound, most Black superheroes do not *explicitly* fight for Black cultural integrity or relevance

232 furthermore, most were not even created indigenously within Black culture

* *What does all this tell us about heroes’ allegiances? What do they fight for? Should they?*

232 unfortunately, too many Black comic book heroes and their stories have little or no explicit or implicit reference points for psychological relevance to Black youth or to the Black community as culture bound heroes

232 typically such “White heroes in Black face” have little or no reference to a sustaining Black family, a viable Black community, continuity with Black history or Black culture

233 the Black superhero character may be contributing to the status quos of White America and may have little relevance to Black America

* *What makes for a relevant superhero? Are there timeless qualities or situational?*

233 the dominant White culture continues to be an active and powerful propaganda agent for perpetuating negative stereotypes of African and African American icons and images

234 a culture is not healthy without trans-generational mythology to pass on to each generation the ideals, values and possibilities of its kind in both fictional fantasies and non-fictional realities

**Nama – *Super Black, Introduction***

2 The Falcon operated on a broader social level; gliding across an urban skyline symbolized the unprecedented access and upward social mobility many African Americans were experiencing in education and professional positions

* *How was this image show the “cultural work” that Black superheroes perform?*
* *What does Nama mean by this term?*

3 Tarzan, the beneficent white jungle-savior, presented black characters as stereotypically subservient, primitive, or savage

4 black superheroes symbolize American racial morality and ethics

4 they overtly represent or implicitly signify social discourse and accepted wisdom concerning notions of racial reciprocity, racial equality, racial forgiveness, and, ultimately, racial justice

* *What do we mean by the term “social justice”? How do superheroes relate here?*
* *How is American identity and our understanding of social justice tied together?*

5 view the meaning of any pop-cultural commodity, image, figure, or representation as not being fixed or automatically evident as it first appears

6 during the 1960s and 1970s, the increasing convergence of the popular and the political in American culture was a significant catalyst for the appearance of black superheroes

6 black superheroes and blaxploitation film characters shared the same signifiers of a superhuman status

* *Why might this superhuman status be especially important for people of color living in a still racialized America? Again, how were heroes doing ‘cultural work’ here?*

6 various black superheroes, in their roles as valued partners and team players beside white superheroes, symbolize struggles over racial integration and the political and cultural toll that shifting racial dynamics have on accepted notions of America’s racial order

8 that which appears the most mundane, innocuous, and everyday offers some of the most provocative and telling cultural and ideological information about a society

***Nama, Color Them Black***

9 superheroes symbolize societal attitudes regarding good and evil, right and wrong

9 what black superheroes may lack in mainstream popularity they more than match in symbolism, meaning, & political import with regard to the cultural politics of race in America

10 on the one hand, black superheroes are needed to counteract the likelihood of black children detrimentally identifying with white superheroes

10 on the other hand, the glut of white superheroes could encourage white children to accept notions of white superiority as normal

* *Given what you have read, what do superheroes most symbolize for us?*
* *How might they represent and reinforce racial hierarchies?*

10 Frantz Fanon argued that figures like Tarzan reinforced racial hierarchies by depicting whites as victors over black people and portraying blacks as representatives of the forces for evil

10 Superman’s identity as having less to do with being the last son of Krypton and more to do with symbolically embodying white racial superiority and American imperialism

11 Junot Diaz: because the X-Men were mutants & were treated as social outcasts, as Dominican immigrant, he felt an affinity for the characters due to his own marginalized racial status

11 the power of superheroes to deliver ideas about American race relations that stand outside of strict notions of authorial intent

12 O’Neal & Adams’s *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* (1970-1972); Lantern embodied Nixon’s no-nonsense dictum of “law and order” in the face of race riots and student protests

12 Arrow was the symbolic representative of activist youth, the working class, and the oppressed

12 a significant part of the stories addressed topical and pressing social issues; poverty, racism, overpopulation, and drug abuse

* *Why did it matter that make-believe figures confronted real & troublesome social issues?*

15 an elderly black man is depicted questioning Green Lantern’s commitment to racial justice

15 superheroes were no longer constrained to fighting imaginary creatures, intergalactic aliens, or Nazis from a distant past; both characters were ideological foils for the other

15 Green Arrow cover caption: “Something is wrong! Something is killing us all! Some hideous moral cancer is rotting our very souls!”

* *Once more, were comics educational or entertainment? Who is the audience here?*

16 issue titled “A Kind of Loving, a Way of Death”: white female superhero Black Canary is hypnotized by a white supremacist; plans on using her as an agent to instigate a race war

16 racial bigotry could appeal to even the most respectable and fair-minded whites and that even humans vested with superpowers were impotent to deliver America from racism

17 they symbolized the need for whites to take ownership of their white privilege and most importantly strive for personal transformation

* *How did these stories compare to what we’ve seen in EC Comics back in the 1950s?*

17 In “Ulysses Star Is Still Alive,” the line “They’ve been under the white man’s heel for so long they’ve lost faith in themselves” demonstrated how pugnacious racial politics could become

17 initially, Hal Jordan objects to John Stewart as his backup; Hal views Stewart as too angry to justly wield it

* *Note the implicit assumptions here of Blacks being ‘emotional’ and ‘fiery.”*

19 Stewart’s first superhero mission is to protect a white politician who is an overt racial bigot

19 rather than having John Stewart use his power ring on his first mission to defeat some generic monster-alien or save a busload of tourists from plummeting off a broken bridge, he had to protect a comic book version of George Wallace from harm

19 early in the issue Stewart informs Hal that he better be called “Black Lantern,” and he rejects wearing a mask because “I’ve got nothing to hide!”

19 Stewart is a cocky, anti-authoritarian, angry, and race-conscious figure; yet the reliance on racial antagonism as the driving force for John Stewart’s origin reflected a broader trend

19 blaxploitation films increasingly relied on sensationalistic depictions of racial strife

* *How were these comics and blaxploitation cinema a referendum on white authority?*

22 *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* cover was exquisitely evocative of deep-seated yet familiar racial antagonism present in the American body politic

22 for decades in America, no matter if the contestants embraced or rejected the racial roles they symbolized when a white and black boxer faced one another in the ring, racial anxieties and personal prejudices were projected onto each fighter as representatives of their respective race

23 an epic battle between a white man that represents “truth, justice, and the American way” and a black Muslim that refused to fight in an American war he was drafted to serve in

23 his personal convictions, as a follower of Muhammad and later a voice of poetic dissent regarding the Vietnam War, made Ali a despised figure for many white Americans

* *How did comics like this highlight racial anxieties alongside racial prejudices?*

25 Black Lightning was the first black superhero in the DC Comics universe to get his own title series, and as a result he could not avoid symbolizing black self-determination or serving as a symbolic reminder of racial tokenism

25 Jefferson Pierce was a striver, a black guy who fought his way out of ghetto squalor to become an accomplished athlete, a successful educator, and, finally, a ghetto superhero

25 a superhero persona that delivered affected black dialect, a crude racial signifier that attempted to demonstrate that Black Lightning was an authentic black hero not alienated from the inner-city streets he swore to protect

* *How was this version of Black Power politics one of black social responsibility?*

26 Black Lightning symbolized a critique of black Americans that had joined the American middle class in the wake of the civil rights and Black Power movements but abandoned their less fortunate brethren still stranded in black ghettos across America

26 Black Lightning rejecting membership in the JLA and joining a group of superheroes called the Outsiders, a clear racial critique of black tokenism

* *Why was the ‘ghetto’ such an important locale for many of these storylines?*

27 (caption) the use of a water hose on Black Lightning evokes the imagery of civil rights advocates assaulted by water cannons and surrounded by white mobs

29 Stewart’s stint holding the Green Lantern title from 1984 to 1986 appeared to symbolically express contemporary white anxieties about unqualified blacks replacing whites in the workplace as a function of affirmative action

* *What did (and do) these “replacement theory” fears tell us about race in America?*

29 Stewart teamed with the exotic, auburn-colored alien female Katma Tui

29 up to that point, black superheroes rarely had a female superhero counterpar

29 superhero coupling of that sort was traditionally reserved for white superheroes, like Mr. Fantastic and Sue Richards

31 Stewart affirms that Green Lantern mythos, an intergalactic force comprised of various types of life forms that patrol and protect various sectors of the cosmos

31 the type of utopian diversity signaled in the Green Lantern Corps is not completely unique

31 the original *Star Trek* television series pioneered the type of science fiction multi-species and racial unity

34 the intergalactic morality and multi-species membership suggested by the Green Lantern Corps is fully realized in terms of race and is anchored in the real world with the inclusion of a black man in their ranks

* *How might we compare this to the earlier message in “Judgment Day!”?*