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Narrowing the Margin: The Role of the Black Superhero

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NARROWING THE MARGIN: THE ROLE OF THE BLACK SUPERHERO

by

JULIAN STRAYHORN II

(Under the Direction of Edward Rushton)

ABSTRACT

Comic books can be understood as a visualization of popular culture in the U.S. For a long time these tales were formed by a white power fantasy, circulating in mainstream culture as over-exaggerated narrations. To give an example of white power fantasy, Dwayne McDuffie, a prolific writer in popular entertainment states:

“…if I write, as I have many times, a story where Daredevil, who doesn’t have powers, gets the drop on Thor, who has unbelievable powers, people go Oh, that was so cool! Daredevil was so clever! If I have Black Panther do the same thing that’s impossible! It’s like, yeah, it’s impossible with Daredevil too, man. It’s like, I write Batman all the time, in Justice League, where he’s hanging out with seven guys who, by any logic, should be able to you know, eat his lunch without even working up a sweat. And he’s constantly outmaneuvering them, and outfighting them and out-thinking them, and we think Batman is so cool! But when black characters do much less, relative to where their positions area it makes the readership uncomfortable, because they’re not used to seeing it.”

Superheroes have a strong influence in our society, and as such we should look at the messages they represent. To this end, I have examined the roles of African American characters by understanding their history before and after the induction of an African-American superhero, their appearance, and the archetypes they represent. I have interviewed artists, local comic retailers, and fans of comics on their favorite superheroes

and their reasons for liking that particular hero to begin my analysis, and branched from there to texts written by the companies who own the superheroes and other anthropologists who have examined the role of black superheroes in our society.

This body of work examines how America has conceptualized African American males and females as superheroes in popular culture and reflecting how they fit in the pantheon of heroes. I have chosen to appropriate certain materials from Marvel and DC Comics because they have defined the superhero comic book genre and how we should look at our heroes. I want the work to encourage people who consume media to think more critically. I want people to think more broadly about representation and not accepting what’s falsely represented in the media.

INDEX WORDS: Superheroes, Black Superheroes, Comic books, Graphic Design, Explicit Stereotypes, Implicit Stereotypes, Wheat paste, Racial Stereotypes, Street Art, Situationalism
NARROWING THE MARGIN: THE ROLE OF THE BLACK SUPERHERO

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the children whom never had the chance to see themselves as the superhero they aspire to be. This work is also dedicated to my Aunt Debra Jackson who passed away in 2012. I love you Aunt Debbie.
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CHAPTER 1
JUSTIFICATION

1.1 Definition of Graphic Design and Comic Book Design

William Addison Dwiggins, the father of the term ‘graphic design’, stated, “In the matter of layout forget art at the start and use horse sense. The printing-designer’s whole duty is to make a clear presentation of the message – to get the important statements forward parts placed so that they will not be overlooked.” Overtime the definition of graphic design has evolved, yet it still bears the resemblance of Dwiggins’ definition. The way I have defined it is that graphic design addresses visual communication and presentation, encompassing symbols, images, and or words to express ideas and messages. It is no different from the definition of a comic. Comics in the form of newspaper strips, comic books, or graphic novels are a combination of words and pictures in a specific sequence in order to communicate stories and ideas. Unlike cinema, the pictures do not move. Multiple images are presented in a single composed page and read like a prose novel even when there are no words present.

1.2 Comic Book Design Now

Design is a part of every aspect of comic creation. This involves character and location designs, panel layouts, page composition, font selection, balloon placement, and color design.

These days, comics rarely make it to the printed page without being touched at some point in the process by computer applications like Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator. In an interview with web comic creator Jay Potts he stated “in today’s culture of web
comic creators, I find it is a natural process to produce all the artwork directly on the computer and it’s viewed more globally.”

Hollywood has adapted comics into blockbuster-hit movies like *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, *Thor*, *The Avengers*, *Batman*, and *V for Vendetta*, as well as independent graphic novels like *300*, *Sin City*, *Persepolis*, *Wanted*, *Watchmen*, *American Splendor*, and *Ghost World*. Only four films were made with leading African American superheroes from major publishing companies: *Blade* (1998), *Spawn* (1997), *Meteor Man* (1993), and *Steel* (1997). However, within a lot of forms of media comes racial stereotypes and comic books are no exception to that assertion.

1.3 Validity

African-Americans have been portrayed stereotypically in Euro-American entertainment roles since their arrival into American society. In D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, the African American never controlled their representation. We are, thankfully, a long way from *Birth of a Nation*, but the representation of African-Americans in media is still primarily a product of Caucasian American male constructions.

The stereotypes used in the film have evolved within American culture dating back to the colonial years of settlement. After slavery, stereotypes became a racial institution that was inherited in today’s culture. The early blackface minstrel shows of the 19th century portrayed African-Americans as jesters, joyous, naive, superstitious, and ignorant. Some of the early historical archetypes, such as “The Black Sambo”, “Mammy”, “The Pickaninny”, “Magic Negro”, “The Buck”, and “Uncle Tom”, were used in different forms of media dating before the television. In the film *Gone with the*
*Wind*, Hattie McDaniel won an Academy Award for not only humanizing the "Mammy" stereotype, but also fully embodying it.

In the early 1960s and late 1950s you have the Sideny Poitier era. This is where In the early 1970s, Melvin Van Peebles, director of the controversial ghetto epic *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in 1971, gets credit, willing or not, for inaugurating the Blaxploitation genre low-budget action movies aimed at black audiences. During this period, marked the first time in American film history that Hollywood had welcomed African-American talent.²

Capitalizing on the brief moment, Hollywood carefully seized the opportunity to make a profit, churning out scores of action-packed knock offs. Significantly, this phenomenon was accomplished by reintroducing the Big Black Buck stereotype first seen in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Only this time around, that dark, ominous figure was transformed into the Great Ghetto Hero. Though the Blaxploitation era was brief, running roughly from 1971 to 1975, its impact would range far and wide.

Fast forward to the birth of hip-hop and its evolution, which included new negative stereotypes created within my own culture, for example “Hood Rats”, “Chickenheads”, “Skeezers”, “Dawgs”, and “Stallions”. In my own psychosocial development, growing up in a mostly black suburban area, I did not have a full grasp of what was expected of me as an African-American kid and, up to this point, as an African-American man. It created this extra burden that required me to step out of that mold of preexisting notions of the black figure. Through my research and the research of others, I

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found that these patterns of representation still exist in today’s culture, especially in comic books.

Comic books were a safe place for me growing up. The use of imagery and eye-popping text is what drove me to get into graphic design. Now that I’m looking at it more critically; overtime, I found that a lot of the characters that I like became problematic for me. In terms of race, comic books portrayed explicit stereotypes. An explicit stereotype is defined as directly stated or overtly expressed. For example the show “Family Guy” could have a clip about “Asian kids getting good grades because they study all the time,” which would be an explicit stereotype. Also, there are implicit stereotypes, which are a bit trickier, as they are stereotypes that operate outside of our conscious awareness. Basically, we do not know that our thoughts and judgments may be affected by a stereotype. Worse, we may not believe the stereotype at a conscious level, yet it still affects us at an unconscious one. For example, if people were asked if they believe black people are violent, most people would say no (and most would honestly believe it). However, those same people are more likely to mistake a phone or other harmless object for a gun if that object is held by a black man than if it is held by a white male. This suggests that the stereotype that black men are violent affects people's judgments even though they do not actually agree with or express the stereotype.¹

When the comic book characters were first created, the inclusion of stereotypes was not intentional. In other documented interviews, the creators were well-intentioned

liberals, trying to make progressive steps for minorities in comic books. However, some of the most well known characters that were created were exaggerated to a point where they were offensive. I state now that comics do not create stereotypes of minorities, but they were enforce, perpetuate, and emphasize them. Major publishing comic book companies like Marvel and DC Comics accented certain characteristics of African American characters.

The comic creator may accent certain elements that construct the subject as “Black”. When creators do this, they exaggerate the elements making the character not only look African American, but also creating the character to “act black”. This then creates the “Super Black.”

Superhero comic book characters like Black Lightning, Misty Knight, John Stewart Green Lantern, The Falcon and Luke Cage (Figure 1.). For me, “Super Black” can be defined as the heavily embellished elements of the African American representing a generality. The generality is made because when a black character is created and defined he or she then represents the race, thus, creating or enforcing a negative stereotype. It might be more accurate to say that people do not want to be exaggerated when they read comic books about themselves or a representation of themselves.

Exploring explicit stereotypes in comics lead me to research the primary sources of these stereotypes, their origins, and how they have evolved overtime. The sources are difficult and the reasons for them are troubling. In my work, I wanted to use the clarifying application of graphic design that will help the viewer to process the magnitude

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4 Namasha, Adilifu. Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes. Austin: University of Texas, 201
of issues that result from the simple choice of typecasting. The viewer will be prompted
to reflect on the effects of their own acts of typecasting.

Graphic designers need to realize their ability in generating archetypal roles for
the use of sale of products that may be questionable. Consumers need to be more aware
of the application of visual storytelling, marketing, and graphic design that influences
their preconceived notions of people of different races.

I like to think of myself as a creative cultural producer. A creative cultural
producer takes an idea and brings it to life. Cultural producers are found within the
traditional arts of music, theater, dance, literature and painting and even more often in the
different fields of design. They can be independent entrepreneurs like Aaron Draplin or
creatively active in cultural institutions like Shepard Fairey, free thinking enterprises or
private companies. They are, without question, producers possessing an uncanny sense of
style and creativity.

Cultural Producers often seek to animate or re-interpret public spaces in the
context of the communities they serve, and consequently their work often has a strong
component of community participation or co-creation. The goal of my research is to use
visual communication methodologies to study, identify, and address explicit stereotypes
used in mainstream comic books relevant to African Americans. I want to encourage
people to consume media more critically.

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CHAPTER 2
LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

2.1 Scope

There are many areas of media that could benefit from exploring explicit stereotypes in the superhero comic book genre. In order to limit the scope of the research, contemporary graphic design, comic book design and web design was the only area of design that could exploit my design skills. Throughout my process, I included design research that overlaps graphic design and other areas of design such as: editorial design, advertising design, typographic design, animation design, experience design, illustration, corporation communications design, brand and identity design. Broader areas of design such as interior design, industrial design, environmental design, system design and architecture were excluded.

2.2 Media

The media I chose to explore is printed public art and web. The research is partly web media because no other current media could come close to creating the same level of a two-way dialogue. Facilitating a dialogue requires an open system that allows for change. A printed medium, such as a book, would be a closed system that would limit dialogue. The web is one of the most accessible medias available for creating dialogue and displaying research (images, text, video, etc.) in one application. I chose to create Problem Six web comic to do just that. Problem Six was initially established to create a visual narrative that explores the specific tropes of the African American Superhero. My initial goal was to create 20 episodes, posting one episode every Wednesday, blog
anything relating to superheroes as a blog and use social network applications connected
to the website every Friday. The second part, which is my exhibition work, uses printed
public art or street art. This is an effective tool because it involves the community and it
changes the context of the pieces that I wanted to create. Graffiti writing and street art are
challenging the issues of property ownership, race boundaries, and culture. They are out
there making people think about what our society is, and what some of our laws really
mean. By comparison, it is a lot like graphic design. Graphic design is a creative process
that combines art and technology to communicate ideas. The graphic designer works with
a variety of communication tools in order to convey a message from a client to a
particular audience. The main tools are image and typography. The technique I used is
called wheat paste. It is a Street Art technique (I'm not a street artist), which some people
call Big Sticker, Cutout or just Street Art Poster (Figure 2.1). By using wheat paste, I
appropriated comics from my father’s era and more contemporary comics within the last
decade that I have hand selected. I also used Graffiti writing using spray paint on
plywood this was use to emulate the urban setting. Now for this I wanted to collaborate
with the community to create the panels to make it feel that different people were doing
this to make it more realistic. I also address the public setting using the walls around
Georgia Southern and the Statesboro community.

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Figure 2.1: Shepard Fairy Installation, Melrose Ave.
CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

3.1 Before the Induction of the Black Superhero

In understanding the comic book genre one has to understand the history from which it comes from. By studying the images that comics depict, we may thus acquire - both directly and indirectly - a snapshot of the realities in which the comics' creators lived. My task was to first understand the fact that comics are a medium of extremes. They often simplify and stereotype their subjects, partly in an attempt to make our complex world understandable, and partly as a means of efficient short-form communication.\(^7\)

Racism in comics is not only a matter of the drawings, however. It can - as I see it - be distinguished on at least three levels: the first is the purely pictorial (in which a certain minority is depicted with various stereotypical attributes); the second is the purely textual (in which captions and not least the use of language present persons in a negative way); the third, and probably the most subversive, is on a content level (in which for example people from a certain minority are constantly portrayed as evil, stupid, foolish, subservient ... or quite simply nonexistent).\(^8\)

In 1905, the T. C. McClure newspaper syndicate began to distribute Sambo and His Funny Noises, a strip created by the American William Marriner. The strip generally set Black boy Sambo Johnson (or Johnsin) against two white boy adversaries, Mike and


\(^8\) Stromberg p.24
Jim Tanks. Sambo often comes out on top in the skirmishes, but due more often to dumb luck, or to a "natural" ability to absorb pain, than to any intentional breaking of stereotypes.\(^9\)

At its inception, the Mickey Mouse daily strip was an exciting adventure serial set in exotic environments, with dangerous villains and fast-paced action. In the 1950s it became a family-oriented gag-a-day strip, centered on lightly humorous city life. Stromberg states considering that the early Mickey, like Felix the Cat, had arguably embodied some characteristics of Black stereotypes, one might view the strip's transformation as Disney's "whitening" of the Mickey figure as he became an American icon.\(^10\) The story takes place on a desert island travels lead by Mickey to conflict with stereotypical cannibal natives. The cannibals at times have Mickey in a pickle, but he manages - as a representative of the Western world, his black skin notwithstanding – to fool them. The Walt Disney Company deleted the cannibal sequence from a recent (1998) reprint of the desert island series, despite the fact that it is one of the few Mickey continuities actually written by Walt Disney himself.

Stromberg also asserts about George Remi’s work on *Adventures of Tintin*:

Georges Remi or as he is better known, Herge, the Belgian grandmaster of European cartoonists was asked by his editor to create a serialized comics story about the Belgian colony of Congo. The result was *Tintin au Congo* (Tintin in the Congo), the second Tintin serial, published in 1930 through 1931.\(^11\) As Herge later commented, it is a story full of racial stereotypes: "I didn't know anything

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\(^9\) Stromberg p.55  
\(^10\) Stromberg p.33  
\(^11\) Stromberg p.71
more about the country than what people were saying at the time. The Negroes are like big children; how lucky it is for them that we are there!" (Figure 3.1). Congolese Africans are presented as primitive, gullible natives, prone to worshipping the white man.

Unfortunately, the Africans are still depicted as stereotypical, somewhat naive and foolish, with big lips and poor dialogue.

Figure 3.1: *Adventures of Tin Tin*

In 1934, the Americans Lee Falk and Phil Davis created the classic adventure strip *Mandrake the Magician* (Figure 3.2). After researching other anthropologists on this comic strip, from what I understand it was a comic in which everyone has his place. You have: well-dressed magician, adventurer, and gentleman Mandrake is backed up by the strong, silent, not that intelligent Black servant Lothar, stereotypical native in costume and “Uncle Tom” in behavior. As originally conceived, Lothar provided the laughs in Mandrake, confronting Western cultural traditions, and habitually winding up at a loss.

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12 Stromberg p.70
As the years passed - and American racial consciousness evolved - Lothar evolved as well. It was revealed that he was the son of a king in his native land; Mandrake's servant became more and more an equal to the magician. Lothar lost his exaggerated lips, broken English, and lion skin garment - the latter swapped for jeans and a T-shirt. In theory, Lothar ultimately did become his master's equal.

Figure 3.2: Madrake the Magician and Lothar

In 1940, Detective Comic introduced a new detective, The Spirit who was a masked crime fighter with the Black youth Ebony White as his sidekick (Figure 3.3). As indicated by his name, the latter began his career as a traditional Black supporting character and, with his balloon lips and Southern drawl, represented a very conscious use of classical stereotype. Stromberg got a chance to interview the original artist Will Eisner. Eisner himself said of Ebony's creation: "I realize that Ebony was a stereotype
because I drew him in caricature - but how else could I have treated a black boy in that era, at that time?" Ebony gradually developed into more than just a humble sidekick, however. Stromberg also states that a change is especially visible when Eisner returned to the series after his service in World War II; Ebony received a more pronounced and equal role, and new Black characters were introduced to the strip. Among them were detective Lt. Grey, who was drawn in a more realistic way and spoke grammatically correct English, without any trace of Southern dialect.\footnote{Stromberg p.87}

Kimba was created in 1950, a period when Black characters were not that common in Japanese comics; this is not so strange when one realizes that Japan at the time had almost no immigrants whatsoever. When Black characters did appear, they usually took stereotypical forms that the Japanese had encountered in American comics during the first half of the century. Black humans were grass-skirted cannibal natives.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Ebony, The Spirit, Detective Comics}
\end{figure}

\footnote{Stromberg p.87}
with bones in their noses, servile servants, or may be at best jazz musicians. As for Tezuka's Kimba, it has turned the tables to influence American culture; not least by way of Disney's “The Lion King” (1994), which is in some ways derivative of Simba in spite of the Disney executives' fervent denials.

African American comic books have often met resistance, especially in the earliest days of the genre. Dell comics tried to publish a Wild West tale in the same mold as The Lone Ranger with a dash of Batman. In 1965, Lobo is introduced as the first African American comic book hero who is the medium's first African-American character to headline his own series. Dell comics received most of the first and almost all of the second issues back in opened packages. Drugstore owners were reluctant to sell a comic book featuring an African American superhero. Which introduced a whole new problem in itself of how does one sell an African American comic.

![Lobo, Dell Comics](image)

Figure 3.4: *Lobo*, Dell Comics
3.2 Introducing the Black Superhero

Like most other forms of North American mass media in the twentieth century, comic books have more or less managed to erase all evidence of cultural diversity. For decades young readers have encountered a defining and idealized image of heroism that was explicitly honest, law abiding, chaste, excessively masculine, and above all, white.\(^\text{14}\)

Popular culture is practiced at capturing the spirit of the time (Figure 3.5).

The potentially harmful racial bias of comic books was so obvious by the mid 1970s that the Black-Owned Communications Alliance (BOCA) sought to capitalize on this image of unequal identification in their public service advertisement promoting the need for responsible racial representation in the media "What's wrong with this picture?" asks the advertisement's copy in bold letters under the photograph of a young black boy striking a heroic pose in front of the bathroom mirror-a towel tied around his neck for a cape, chest puffed out, fists defiantly resting on his hips. But instead of his Own idealized image staring back at him, he sees the reflection of a generic, white costumed hero. "A child dreams of being the latest superhero. What could be wrong with that?" the promotional copy continues. "Plenty," is the answer, "if the child is Black and can't even imagine a hero the same color he or she is." \(^\text{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Jeffrey A. Brown, Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p.3

\(^{15}\) Brown p.3
Focusing solely on the two comic book franchises of Marvel and DC Comics (comparisons to movies and video games aside), each company continues on this grand tradition and each helped forge pop culture, as we know it today.

The first African American superhero introduced to the world was The Falcon also known as Sam Wilson (Figure 3.6). The Falcon was initially introduced as Captain America’s partner, sharing equal footing as a superhero sidekick. They both played off each other like the original dynamic duo Batman and Robin. In the beginning, Marvel didn’t need to do anything else to make this character inoffensive and not insulting or condescending. He was the ideal African American superhero. Then the ‘retcon’ (retrospective continuity) happens. This occurs when the history of a character or a story is changed with no explanation other than the producers want to explore new avenues and conveniently change history to suit their new plans. You often see this in Soap Operas. In issue #186 with absolutely zero build up or foreshadowing, writer Steve Englehart
revealed an unknown life story of Sam Wilson, aka The Falcon. It was revealed; the Falcon was a mob-connected thug and pimp whose memories were altered by the reality-warping Cosmic Cube by the villain the Red Skull (Figure 3.7). Soon afterward, the Red Skull reveals the Falcon's true past as "Snap" Wilson, and unsuccessfully attempts to use the Cosmic Cube to make the Falcon kill Captain America. Now aware of his past, but deciding to continue as a hero, the Falcon is eventually named head of the Super Agents at the espionage agency S.H.I.E.L.D. After his time with S.H.I.E.L.D, the U.S. government mandated racial quota for the venerable team the Avengers. Consequently, he was offended of being a “token”. The Falcon will be making his film debut in Captain America Winter Soldier in April 2014.

Figure 3.6: Captain America and The Falcon #117
Black racial identity, there was a time and even now every superhero and villain required the title “Black” in their alias. You have Black Panther, Black Lightning, Black Manta, Black Eagle, Black Racer, Black Goliath, and Black Vulcan. Potentially one could add Black Nick Fury to this list. Most often the title “Black” gave reference to their skin color not so much their personal identity. In the case of Black racial Identity, Black Lightning was potentially the most problematic. Created by Tony Isabella in, Black Lightning was created as DC’s answer to the various black characters at Marvel, The Black Panther, The Falcon and Luke Cage. DC had initially approached Isabella to work on a character that had been created by another writer, The Black Bomber. Isabella recalled:

"The hero, who would be their first "black" character to star in his own title, was a white racist Vietnam who, as a result of taking part in chemical experiments to allow soldiers to blend in better with the jungle, turned into a black super-hero in moments of stress. It gets worse. In each of the two well-intentioned scripts, the hero would, in his white racist persona, save a person he
couldn't see clearly and, on finding out the person was black, exclaim something along the lines of: and this is a quote - "You mean I risked my life to save a jungle bunny?" And it gets worse. His super-hero suit, such as it was, looked for all the world like a basketball uniform. Sweet Christmas! DC wanted me to rewrite those two scripts and go solo on The Black Bomber with the third issue. I begged them to reconsider the series. I warned of protestors marching outside their offices with me in the front lines. Ultimately, I convinced them to cosign the Bomber to limbo with a question: "Do you actually want your first black superhero to be a white bigot?"16

Thus Black Lightning was born. Olympic decathlete Jefferson Pierce returned to his old neighborhood in which his father had died to take over as principal for the local high school. After years of suppressing his meta-human abilities he finally decided to use them when one of his most promising students was killed in gang violence, which had taken over the area. He adopted the identity of Black Lightning to be a symbol to his community and particularly chose “Black” because he was the only Black superhero around and he wanted everybody to know. While in costume, Pierce threw off suspicion by wearing a wig and adopting a more "street smart" style of speech (Figure 3.8). By observing this character, Black Lightning gave confusing signifiers in terms of his imagery. In order for him to be to be a black superhero and be taken seriously in his own neighborhood he has to put on a wig and change his language. His hair has changed over the years from having a wig to having no hair, and having his own hair in the New 52 (Figure 3.9); however, his presence in the comic book genre is not the same.

Blaxploitation was a trend within American films during the first half of the 1970s; it was mostly action-oriented films with low budgets, geared toward entertainment.
rather than reflection. The major factor, though, was that they contained Black heroes and were aimed at a Black audience. The biggest hit of this genre was the film *Shaft*, from 1971; however, over sixty films were made before the audiences lost interest in this particular form of entertainment. The American comic book industry soon jumped on the bandwagon and adapted this concept to its most popular genre: superheroes. Since superhero comics are aimed at younger readers than the films, the main character's sexuality was toned down. Luke Cage, Hero for Hire was one of these "blaxploitation comics," and Cage in 1972 also became the first Black character to have his name as the title of an American comics magazine (Figure 3.10). Stan Lee, written by Archie Goodwin, drawn by George Tuska, and inked by Billy Graham, created the character. Of all these people, only Graham is actually Black.

Figure 3.10: *Luke Cage*, Marvel Comics

Xenophobia can be defined as the fear of the unknown; it is the theme of the series X-Men. The basic idea behind this comic is that some people are different because
of mutations that have given them supernatural powers. A recurring theme is the fear that "ordinary" people feel for these "new" humans - often interpreted as a comparison of racial tension in that time period. What can be determined is that the civil rights movement was in full swing when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created the series in 1963. Subsequent writers on the series have also found inspiration in the situation of Blacks in America. Stromberg noted that despite this there was for a long time only one Black character, Storm, a female with typical European characteristics blue eyes and long, straight white hair (Figure 3.11). In this color reproduction, like this one by Dave Cockrum, Joe Rubenstein and Bob Wiacek, from 1981, it is difficult to see that she is supposed to be Black.17

Figure 3.11: Storm

This idea was also introduced to the new Aqualad in the series Young Justice (Figure 3.12). Now his appearance changed from the comic book version, which was introduced

17 Stromberg p.171
around 2010. I ask myself, why does such a drastic change need to occur to one character if the other characters did not need one at all to be recognized in a cartoon series.

![Aqualad (comic and animated version)](image)

**Figure 3.12: Aqualad (comic and animated version)**

“Cool pose”, Richard G. Majors defines this term as depicting African American using this posture as a defense mechanism to shelter their emotions. This specific trope can be related to the character Cyborg, introduced in 1980 as a young African American teenager named Victor Stone, who was a football player that got involved in a very dangerous accident that destroyed half his body. To save his life scientists gave him metal prosthetic limbs and computer software that allowed him to connect to any computer across the globe (Figure 3.11. The depiction of the half man, half machine gives the viewer signifiers; he is more machine than man. Consequently, he would be as emotionless as a robot. This can be seen in other characters as well: Misty Knight, who
has more of an arm prosthetic (Figure 3.14) and another Deathlock, a half zombie and half machine, who was once an African American male (Figure 3.15).

Figure 3.13: Cyborg, *Justice League New 52*

Figure 3.14: *Misty Knight*
Finally, a new step in the right direction happens in the early 1990s with Milestone Media. Milestone Media was founded in 1993 by a coalition of African-American artists and writers Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Michael Davis and Derek T. Dingle, who believed that minorities were severely underrepresented in American comics. Milestone Media was their attempt to correct this imbalance. Milestone Media struck a deal with DC Comics, under which DC would publish Milestone's comics, but Milestone would retain all legal and creative control, including copyright. The comics were published under the Milestone imprint.
The Milestone imprint lasted for four years. It went into decline by 1995 and 1996, marked by falling sales and a number of canceled titles. The last three ongoing Milestone titles *Static*, *Icon*, and *Hardware* were cancelled mid-story in 1997 (Figure 3.16). In 2000, Milestone Media launched the Static Shock animated series on Kid's WB. It ran for four seasons, totaling 52 episodes, from 2000 to 2004.

The current status of African American superheroes has not changed much since the 1970s. There are hardly any African American superheroes with their own title. DC Comics recently introduced the *New 52*, which was their opportunity to introduce a new cast of diverse characters. Cyborg would be apart of Justice League. Vixen probably the only African American Super heroine in this universe right now would be introduced in Justice League Unlimited. Another new character that was introduced was Batwing, DC’s first attempt in creating an African based superhero to compete with Marvel’s Black Panther. However, one problem about his costume is everything reminds you of Batman
(Figure 3.17). You also have Static Shock and Mr. Terrific, which both of them were cancelled due to poor sales.

Crossing to the other side to Marvel, much recently it seems the best way to create a diverse cast of characters is to clone them and not actually creating a new superhero. A few years ago Marvel Ultimate introduced the new Ultimate Spider-man, which created a huge backlash. Marvel at the time was described as pulling the race card. However in *The Avengers* film, Nick Fury, the character played by Samuel Jackson is African American and there was no cry of foul. Throughout history Nick Fury has been Caucasian American, but this version of Nick Fury was widely accepted. So the question I kept posing to myself, “Is it the only way for a black superhero to exist is to create a universe that’s not widely accepted for them thrive”.

Another way that Marvel thought to solve diversity issues was to put their racial counterparts on a team. For example, say your main superhero team has an all white cast with the exception of one token character. The superheroes leave Earth to save the
universe and all that is left to create a subsidiary team is the majority of the African American superheroes. These are paired with much lesser known characters or questionable characters. Much to my dismay this team would be called the Mighty Avengers (Figure 3.18). This as Dwayne McDuffie has described is a black product or “breaking the rule of three” theorizing that in all popular entertainment, there can only be at most two black characters in a production; any more and it is then considered to be a black product.

Figure 3.18: The Mighty Avengers
CHAPTER 4
APPLICATION PROCESS

4.1 Defining My User

I had to choose between designing something that an avid superhero comic book reader could grasp right away or recognize the imagery and designing something that an inexperienced superhero comic book reader (who have recently been introduced to superhero movies) with little or no superhero knowledge, could immediately pick up and have an interaction. This was an important decision and one that could drive the works overall look and feel. The objects I make are placed in the canon of contemporary graphic design, in hopes of making visible what is overlooked in the superhero comic book genre.

4.2 Influences

The initial idea for the installation came from looking at artist like Marc Dean Veca and Barry Mcgee (Figure 4.1 and 4.2). Veca's uses colorful, dynamic paintings that pop off the page in bright red, orange and turquoise hues, with lines inspired by the underground comic world. His work incorporates everything from pop culture references like Popeye and Scrooge McDuck.

Mark Dean Veca draws on paper, canvas or walls and uses simple black lines to manifest volume, space, and depth. He shares his illusionary worlds and characters to express the internal and external tension of the human condition as he experiences it. His work is visceral, carnal, with its depictions of organs and orifices and writhing tendons, arteries, and intestines. It is comic and unnerving with strong contrasting palettes and patterns and odd juxtapositions of historical and popular iconography often abbreviated, disfigured, or exposed. Whether large
or small the work is intentionally spectacular and the artist wholeheartedly embraces his constructive affliction of horror vacui.\textsuperscript{18}

Figure 4.1: Marc Dean Veca, Son of Phantasmagoria, 2012, Acrylic and latex on walls.

Barry McGee developed as a graffiti artist, often under the tag name "Twist." Deploying a visual vocabulary that borrows elements from graffiti, comics, hobo art, sign painting, and other sources, McGee’s imagery simultaneously celebrates and critiques his diverse Mission District neighborhood. He has long viewed the city a vital site for art and activism, but his more recent work brings the urban condition into art spaces with installed environments that express the anarchic vitality of inner-city street life.\textsuperscript{19}

Mcgee uses a visual language that borrows elements from comics, hobo art, sign painting, and other sources, McGee’s work addresses a range of issues,


from individual survival and social depression to alternative forms of community and the harmful effects of capitalism, gentrification, and corporate control of public space.

Figure 4.2: Barry Mcgee Barry McGee, Installation view, 2011. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Another artist and graphic designer I looked at was John Jennings. He explores the same subject matter and interest that gave birth to “Black Kirby”. In this series he worked alongside with Stacey Robinson another artist. John Jennings research focus on the analysis, explication, and disruption of African American stereotypes in popular visual media. Jennings research is concerned with the topics of representation and authenticity,
visual culture, visual literacy, social justice, and design pedagogy. Both he and Robinson remix certain superheroes from their childhood by appropriating covers of specific comics that were done by Jack Kirby (who was very prevalent in the comic book industry) and black cultural imagery (Figure 4.3). I acknowledge my work could be perceived to be a copy; but in my work I focused more on changing the visual language of comics and presenting it more to a broader audience. I pulled comics from my fathers collection, comics I read growing up and comics that are considered contemporary.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 4.3: John Jennings, The Unkillable Buck, Digital, 2011.


Another artist Kehinde Wiley, his work focuses on evolving notions of identity and cultural influence, globalization and youth culture. His practice as a contemporary painter works within portraiture and the wider international art scene. What intrigued me about his work was his use of scale and creating a performance in the paintings. He uses art historical references in his work. A good example of this would be *Prince Tommaso Francesco of Savoy-Carignano* (Figure 4.4).

![Figure 4.4: Prince Tommaso Francesco of Savoy-Carignano, (2006) Oil on canvas 96" x 96"](image)

Another one of my influences is Mark Bradford, Bradford transforms materials scavenged from the street into wall-size collages (Figure 4.5) and installations that respond to the impromptu networks by appropriating abandoned public space. He draws from the diverse cultural and geographic makeup of his life in southern California. “My
practice is both collage and décollage at the same time,” says Mark Bradford. “Décollage you take it away, and then collage, I immediately add it right back.”

Other artists that have influenced me include: Jack Kirby, Shepard Fairey, Swoon, Michael Ray Charles, Kera Walker, Banksy, Kerry James Marshall, Cope2, Lesean


Figure 4.5: *Untitled Collage*, (2007), mixed media collage, 19×22in
Thomas, Sanford Greene, James Jean, and Jim Lee. Other influences include video games and walking the streets of little five points in Atlanta to Broughton Street in Savannah.

4.3 Web comic

As the project progressed, I found that I wanted this project to live on as an ongoing message outside the gallery. I initially created a web comic series that ran for 20 weeks it went by the name *Problem Six*. The web comic series explored the different tropes found in African American superheroes: (1) the extreme cool pose, (2) the colored superhero needing the title “Black” to be a black superhero, (3) the angry buck stereotype, (4) black superheroes being clones of their counterpart, (5) hyper-sexualized African American male and female superheroes, and (6) the question of black identity.

This comic strip was influenced by my love of comic books and anime, My sources of inspiration for web comic series was The Boondocks. Some of the humor comes from my own personal experiences.

I never realized how much goes into a web comic series. In order to get the audience I needed I had to use social network sites like Twitter and Facebook constantly. The most difficult thing to sift through was spam messages to get to my audience. When I posted to the Facebook groups and forums I’m apart of, people would comment on the site and not at my website. For me everything was trial and error; however, I was mesmerized by the number of people that frequented to my site. I used Google analytics to understand who visits my site (Figure 4.6). My site had been viewed all over the world and what was exciting about it was the fact that I was connecting with people who were not on this continent.
4.4 The Murals

*We Like’m Blue*

Rags Morales variant cover of Action #3 (Figure 4.7) influenced the design of this mural. In the original cover people are surrounding Superman shouting at him telling him to go back to where he came from. That kind of tension was what I wanted for my interpretation. I wanted everyone surrounding my hero in one color and the reason for that there were a lot of multi ethnic figures in the cover, so it would only make sense to address racism by a community. The signage in this piece addresses how superheroes are cloned as an excuse for white washing. I gave this hero no name in my web comic because unfortunately he looks a lot like Superman and he would be referred as Black Superman. (Figure 4.8)

*Your Black Power*

Joe Statton and Bruce Patterson comic cover of *Green Lantern* #197 (Figure 4.9) and Carmine Infantino cover of *The Flash* #324 (Figure 4.10) influenced the design of
this mural. Both originals also address the tension between rivals. The idea was address
the loss of identity. The first section deals with my time growing up on comic books and
watching Saturday morning cartoons, what I noticed most of all the Black Superheroes
had the word "Black" in their name. There was Black Panther (Marvel), Black Lightning
(DC Comics), Black Vulcan (DC Comics), Black Goliath (Marvel), and the original
Black Power Ranger who was played by a black actor, to name a few. Even with cartoons
without humans made sure you knew who the Black ones were for example Panthro from
Thundercats and Jazz from Transformers.

In the second part, my character Cool Breeze is holding a villain that’s wearing
Brown Skin. I wanted the villain to be reminiscent of the Brown Bomber from DC
Comics (Figure 4.11), this character is a powerless white Caucasian, but when he screams
"Black Power," he transforms into a stereotypical Afro-American with superpowers
similar to that of Captain Marvel. His powers only last him for one hour after he says "the
magic words" but it can be assumed he can say the words more then once. When he’s not
the "Brown Bomber" he’s a fat bald white man. My character Cool Breeze has a problem
with his own identity therefore he wears a wig in order to be a black superhero much like
Black Lightning (Figure 4.12). So it gives you these conflicting images of racial identity.
At one point he talks like a well to do blue collar superhero and next he talks in a more
what is perceived as black people speak. (Figure 4.13)

Chromed Out

Ron Garney cover of Red Hulk #30 (Figure 4.14) influenced the design of this
mural. In the original cover Red Hulk is walking through destruction of a city. With this
re-interpretation I wanted to convey a mix of the extreme cool pose and the angry buck
It was Luke Cage (refer to Figure 3.), and Killer Bee from *Naruto* (Figure 4.15). Luke Cage represents the cool pose i.e. the bulletproof skin and the angry buck and Killer Bee represents the token black character in which the only way you can tell that he’s black is he raps instead of talking and using what is considered black vernacular. (Figure 4.16)
Figure 4.8: Rags Morales, “Action #3”, Digital Comic Book Cover, 2011.
Figure 4.9: “Your Black Power”, Inkjet Print and Wheat Paste on wall. Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art, Stairwell, 2013.
Figure 4.10: Joe Statton and Bruce Patterson, “Green Lantern versus Green Lantern #197”, Pencil and Ink, Comic Book Cover. 1985.
Figure 4.11: Carmine Infantino, “The Flash #324”, Pencil and Ink, Comic Book Cover. 1983.

Figure 4.12: The Brown Bomber, “Justice League of America #1”, Digital, Comic Book Panel. 2006.
Figure 4.13: Trevor von Eden, “Black Lightning #1”, Pencil and Ink, Comic Book panel. 1977.

Figure 4.14: “Chromed Out”, Digital Print and Wheat Paste on wall. Carroll Building, Stairwell, 2013.
Figure 4.15: Ron Garney, “Hulk #30”, Digital, Comic Book Cover. 2011.

Figure 4.16: Killer Bee, “Naruto Chapter 411”, Digital, Manga Panel. 2010.
4.5 Exhibition

In discussing this body of work, *Narrowing the Margin*, I would like to begin with the presentation of the work. Each piece is a large installation of 12 plywood panels that are 4’ x 8’. The panels are covered with graffiti writing layered with wheat paste cutouts of comic book characters. There are no frames, the panels create a wall much what a person would see in major cities (Figure 4.17). The imagery ranges from characters from my web comic to text, to cut out shapes layered in multicolor halftones. The use of negative space offers visual interest to what may otherwise appear as a layer of fantasy. I didn’t want to create static objects or object, the design functions much like street art allowing interaction so that a viewer may feel compelled to experience the work and take part in some aesthetic exchange.

Figure 4.17: Graffiti Writing, Chucky
The pieces are posted up in a grid like manner so that when looking at the work, viewers are attracted and visually pulled by an image, the use of halftones, or graffiti that may lead the viewer’s eyes from one panel to the next. When viewers look at this work, the structure provided by the panels helps to visually move them. Each panel entices the viewer to soak in the imagery.

Figure 4.18: Mighty Avengers #1, 2013.

The work is a sequential narrative, the multiple characters and events are represented in the work much like what you would see in a comic book (Figure 4.18). A sequential narrative is very much like a continuous narrative with one major difference. A sequential narrative focuses on enframement to develop temporal development while a continuous requires criteria provided by the image itself. Viewers may start at any panel
when viewing the work without needing information from other panels to internalize some meaning.

Images in the work are layered on top of wood panels. Few images are connected from seam to seam. In gaining insight from one panel that includes the image of guns pointed at a black superhero, it guides and provides information for other panels. The imagery creates dialogue that not only exists within singular panels; it speaks to multiple panels and to the overall sense of the work. Each has a QR code that relates back to the web comic to present context.

The panels contain marks made by spray paint and marker. Images are printed, images are drawn using Manga Studio software, text is incorporated both hand-written and printed, and all of these elements work harmoniously to entice viewers to gather visual information and make inferences about the work. The layered images become collaged pictures that create new and interesting juxtapositions with one another tempting viewers to question groupings and one panel’s effect or relationship to another panel. Although each panel may not include all of the elements that make up the total installation, they all create an interesting interplay between the pieces and often reference one another with the same character or a character from one of the murals.

*Assimilators Assemble*

The setting for the design was to create a more urban feel. What I wanted to convey in these figures is the idea of questioning their role in the realm of superhero; whether questioning it was their role in a superhero setting or being forced into it. “Bitch” was my commentary on the increase use of the word in African American culture often times when a African American female character is introduced in a superhero comic she
comes off as if she has a chip on her shoulders. “Dawg” was my commentary on characters like “Luke Cage” and “Black Lightning”, two very different characters, but have to act black to be superheroes. Dawg has to have “Black” in his name to be a superhero. Another flaw I added to this character was the need to be paid much like Luke Cage’s motto “pay me and I’ll be a superhero”. (Figure 4.19)

Super Black Death

These sets of panels illustrate the longevity of African American Superheroes. The inspiration for this piece was “DC Comics Covergirls” it explored almost every important female character in DC Comics history except for the ones with ethnic background. What struck me there was no acknowledgement of any form of diversity in DC Comics. What is noticeable in the book is that all the women that were listed were Caucasian. Each figure in this set was a appropriated from comics that exists in the 21st century.

In the first panel two women are fighting for supremacy in an outlined swivel. One of the characters is part of the Hood Rats. I depicted her as more of an animal hybrid to give a commentary on the name itself; from the way that she dresses to the overall look of her. In an interview with Books-a-Million owner Angela Miller “she states it’s very rare to see two black females let alone two African American females occupy the same space in a comic.” Consequently, I wanted that statement depicted in this piece.

The second part is a depiction of one my characters “The Hero with No Name”. This superhero was my commentary on Milestone’s character Icon, created by Dwayne McDuffie. For comic book readers he was the equivalent to Superman. This character
Icon also known as Augustus Freeman IV crash landed on earth in the American South almost like Superman; however, his timeline started in 1839. What is interesting is that Icon started originally as an Alien hybrid. His ship was designed to allow him to mimic the first sentient life form that discovered him. That life form would be his adopted mother Miriam who was a slave. In the present he has survived through every American Experience including the Civil War, both World Wars, and the Civil Rights Movement. During those times he never revealed himself as a superhuman. He made it so that his identity was in relation to a close dead relative. He is portrayed as very intelligent and conservative in political and sociological settings. Due to his upper class job as a lawyer and proper way of speaking he is criticized as a “sell out” or “white washed”. He did not officially become a superhero until protégé Raquel and her gang robbed him and revealed his powers. For the majority of the series he mostly fought street criminals and those who gained powers from the Big Bang. During the merge of DC Comics and Milestone he has appeared in one storyline and as of 2012, Icon has yet to be seen in DC’s The New 52 universe, except for a brief cameo in Static Shock #8, which was Static Shock’s last issue.

When I was creating this piece I took the idea from Pauli exclusion principle two objects can’t occupy the same space. In this case two superheroes of equal measure can’t occupy the same universe. In the fourth panel is my character Cool Breeze who appears to be dead. In my research I found that when black characters die they tend to stay dead, there is no mini series of them coming back from the dead. An example of this was Black Goliath who had the same powers, as Ant-Man, the power to grow super tall in height. He had a very short run in comics from 1966 to 1975 compared to Ant-Man. He was
killed in Marvel’s Civil War series a few years ago. When I was researching this character not only did he have powers like his counterpart, but for a good thirty years or so he was lost in the narrative in Marvel Comics. There were no game changer, pivotal moments for this character versus Dick Grayson, the first Robin, he becomes his own self-made superhero and then eventually he takes on the mantle of his mentor. (Figure 4.20)

*Brown Suga*

The last set of panels explores the idea of hyper-sexualized African American super heroines. The images represents this hyper-sexualized, fetishized role for African American women combining the qualities of both seduction and danger, creating a sort of “idealized male and female” that is the object of white male fantasy (Figure 4.21). While the construction of the modern African American super heroine may be an attempt to contain the threat of female sexuality and power, it also exposes cultural fears regarding these conflicts. On one hand, they reproduce many of the sexualized gender inequalities embedded within the society that produces them and, on the other, they may serve to question and destabilize many of these same categories. For these last panels I wanted it to end with admiration and obsession of Hood Rats and also Cool Breeze.
Figure 4.19: *Assimilators Assemble*, Mixed Media, 2013.

Figure 4.20: *Super Black Death*, Mixed Media, 2013.
Figure 4.21: Brown Suga, Mixed Media, 2013.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The principles behind this project were rooted in comic book design and the materials involved in street art. It made sense that the end product used things like wheatpaste cutouts, graffiti writing, and plywood. I’m very happy with the end result of the project. However, I’m most happy with the skills I have learned while experimenting with different materials. One of the most valuable things was learning how to create my own webcomic series. This project opened up a new arena for me to explore as a graphic designer, allowing me to create mixed media interactive installations, something that I always wanted to learn for myself and experiment with. Future projects will probably still focus on superheroes, stereotypes, public venue, and technology, but the research and thought put into user experience also interest me. One of the next steps is to learn how to create animations to interact with my installations and really have understanding on deconstruction with the understanding of limitations in representation.
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