The absence of black supervillains in mainstream comics

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Both the DC and Marvel universes feature a litany of supervillains who wield great power and great intellect and who pose a true threat to the superheroes in these respective universes. However, relatively few of these supervillains are black. As this essay shall suggest, a number of narratological constraints and tendencies that historically have been replete in mainstream comics are largely the cause of this absence. Following a delimiting of the terms black and supervillain, this essay – through an overview of some of the more prominent black villains in DC and Marvel comics – shall evidence why these villains have yet to achieve the same powerful status as their white counterparts. The essay shall conclude by providing a rationale for the creation of more black supervillains.

Keywords: blackness; essentialism; mainstream comics; narratological constraints; supervillains

Though I was only three years old when it debuted in 1977, Star Wars IV: A New Hope made a lasting impression on me. Like many impressionable children, I immediately became enthralled with the grand spectacle, and that Christmas, my toy chest was filled to the brim with Star Wars action figures and starships. Of all the characters in the film, my immediate favourite was Darth Vader, the brooding, asthmatic Sith Lord. From the moment the black-armoured Vader entered the opening scene, he became – and remains – my all-time favourite Star Wars character.

Vader’s status as my favourite Star Wars character was at its peak when, a few years later, Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi (1984) arrived in theatres. Over the course of those seven years, as my awareness of race began to develop, my mother revealed to me that Darth Vader was ‘black’. Like many unaware and naive Star Wars fans, my mother had assumed that legendary actor James Earl Jones – who provided Vader’s deep, menacing voice – was the man behind the mask.1 The fact that the most powerful man in the galaxy was supposedly black obviously was great news to me, a burgeoning young black film buff and comic book reader who rarely got to see or read about immensely powered black folks in popular media.

With this in mind, one can imagine the great disappointment I felt, near the conclusion of Return of the Jedi, Luke Skywalker removed his father’s mask to reveal the glaringly bright countenance of a white Anakin Skywalker! Of course, I had already been given a hint that this might occur in Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back (1980) when Vader revealed to Luke Skywalker that he indeed was his father; however, I simply had

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dismissed this as a lie. Nonetheless, as the credits rolled, I had no other choice but to accept the greatest, most powerful villain of my generation was, like virtually all of his progenitors, a white man.

This realization – that all of the greatest supervillains are white – would be heightened when I became an avid comic book reader. My uncle Mike, a pretty good artist in his own right, returned from his stint in the Army with a trunk full of comic books, all of which I read enthusiastically. He had all the greats – Batman, Spider-Man, Superman – along with a few others like low-key classics OMAC: One Man Army Corps and Sgt. Rock. However, amidst his collection was Black Lightning, the first comic I had read that featured a black superhero. While I thoroughly enjoyed Black Lightning, eventually, I found it troubling because the title character – who fought crime in the slums of Superman’s Metropolis – was not as powerful as his counterparts and his villains were lame and white. Even his arch-nemesis, the black crime lord Tobias Whale, was an albino!2

Flash forward some 20-plus years and mainstream comics still remain without many black supervillains. While black superheroes have managed some progress (perhaps punctuated by the brief yet impacting run of DC Comics black imprint Milestone during the early- to mid-1990s), black supervillains have yet to experience such a boon.3 Thus, this essay aims to discern the reasons for such a long, pronounced absence of black supervillains in mainstream comics.4 As I shall postulate here, this absence largely emerges from a host of narratological constraints that have influenced other genres of popular media, particularly film. I shall conclude by considering the problematic nature of racialized villains while also championing a call for the inclusion for more.

Defining black, defining supervillain

The decision to pursue this topic largely came out of a question I asked several of my friends who read comics: ‘Can you name a major black supervillain?’ This question was posed without any qualifications of what I meant by black or supervillain. Nonetheless, I typically received one of two answers from my friends: (a) ‘I can’t think of any major ones ...’ or (b) ‘Well, there’s Apocalypse.’ These limited responses are not surprising given the nature of the question and the reality that black supervillains are few and far between. Of course, this contention of black supervillain scarcity rests largely on qualifying the terms black and supervillain. A consideration of the aforementioned Apocalypse provides me with an opportunity to delimit both terms.

Admittedly, defining black is rather difficult and often leads to essentialism. However, for the purposes of this essay, black shall refer to those people whose origins are in sub-Saharan Africa, especially the descendants of African slaves in the United States. Making this distinction is important because while there are a number of supervillains who emerge from Africa or are of African descent, the vast majority is not phenotypically black. As Jared Diamond notes in the influential yet highly controversial Guns, Germs, and Steel, many conflate being African with being black: ‘Most Americans and many Europeans equate native Africans with blacks, white Africans with recent intruders, and African racial history with the story of European colonialism and slave trading ... [B]lacks are the sole native Africans familiar to most Americans, because they were brought in large numbers as slaves to the United States’ (1998, p. 377). However, these assumptions about the blackness of Africa largely misconceive the continent’s racial diversity. Diamond notes, ‘Even before the arrival of white colonialists, Africa already harbored not just blacks but ... five of the world’s six major divisions of humanity.’5
Most supervillains with African origins – like Apocalypse – typically emerge from or have ties to ancient Egypt. As one can imagine, given their well-known wealth and power, the pharaohs have served as a source of inspiration for a number of villains. Apocalypse, perhaps the X-Men’s most powerful foe, emerges from the Age of the Pharaohs. The immensely powered mutant was born En Sabah Nur in the ‘harsh, unforgiving desert of ancient Egypt’ (‘Apocalypse’). Other supervillains – DC Comics stalwart Captain Marvel’s nemesis Black Adam, for example – have similar origins. However, viewing supervillains such as Apocalypse and his ilk as black is indeed problematic.

The blackness of ancient Egypt has long been subject to heated debates in academic circles. For example, as recently as 2007, the skin colour of the most well-known of the pharaohs, King Tut, was a source of controversy. During the King Tut exhibition at Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute Science Museum, Temple University’s Dr Molefi Asante (2008), the self-described ‘founder of the theory of Afrocentricity’, amongst other scholars, contested the reliability of a forensic reconstruction of King Tut’s head and shoulders. The reconstruction – which includes a disclaimer about the accuracy of skin colour – depicts a browned yet not discernibly black King Tut. For scholars such as Asante, concerns about the divorcing of Egypt from Africa and the denial of any black African influence on ancient Egyptian culture are strong and certainly justified given the frequent depictions of Egyptians as European (perhaps best exemplified by Elizabeth Taylor’s portrayal of Cleopatra in the 1963 film). Given the continued, heated discourse on the racial makeup of the ancient Egyptians, it seems unwise to wholly classify them as black (or any other race, for that matter). As such, considering the ultra-powerful Armageddon, who actually was born with grey skin, as black is equally problematic.

Given that most superheroes operate in urban locales within the United States, the few black villains in mainstream comics are African American and tend to originate from these spaces as well. Most black villains were created as foes to the few black superheroes, and, as I shall elucidate in the next section, because black superheroes are predominantly street-level vigilantes, their villains are limited in terms of power and purpose. Admittedly, there is no general consensus on the term; compendiums such as Mike Conroy’s 500 Comic Book Villains and Gina Misoroglu’s Supervillain Book: The Evil Side of Comic Books do not distinguish villains such as Paste-Pot Pete (later The Trapster), who has trapped heroes such as The Fantastic Four and Spider-Man in his superadhesive glue, from Doomsday, the massive monster who ‘killed’ Superman.

However, equating the likes of Armageddon and Doomsday with characters such as Paste-Pot Pete does not seem logical. Granted, most of the villains in mainstream comics are merely aliased or masked common criminal types (bank robbers, gangsters, etc.) or henchmen for military or terrorist outfits. This is not surprising considering that, as scholars Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl conclude in their analysis, organized crime and violent street crime are the two primary crime themes in comic books (2006, p. 314). Given how common these types of characters are, it seems that we should distinguish them from the other foes who are far more powerful: criminal masterminds (Kingpin, Lex Luthor), leaders of global terrorist organizations (Baron Zucker of HYDRA), military leaders (Red Skull), immensely powered mutants (Armageddon, Magneto), intergalactic tyrants (Darkseid), and world eaters (Galactus), amongst others. Of these latter types, which for the purposes of this essay I shall refer to as supervillains, very few black villains can be classified as such. While characters such as Armageddon – with his immense power, influence, and determination to conquer the world – epitomize the term supervillain, black villains rarely measure up to such standards.
Narrative constraints on black supervillainy

The scarcity of black supervillains is inextricably linked to the equal scarcity of black superheroes in mainstream comics, particularly those who have had an ongoing series. As one might imagine, black villains were created primarily as antagonists to those few black superheroes who have had their own ongoing series (although popular titles such as Daredevil and Spider-Man also have produced several black villains). For example, most of Marvel’s black villains originate from either the Black Panther series or the Luke Cage series, both of which feature black protagonists. Since DC Comics has historically failed to sustain a series with a black protagonist (outside of its Milestone imprint, in which the characters originally were not part of the DC Universe), it is not surprising that its comics have far fewer black villains than does Marvel.

As essays on black superheroes (Brown 1999, Lendrum 2005, Scott 2006) have noted, the modern black superhero emerged out of the rather turbulent late 1960s–early 1970s. This period also saw the rise of blaxploitation films, low-budget affairs geared towards the previously ignored black audience. This period gave rise to comics such as Marvel’s Black Goliath, Black Panther, and Luke Cage, Hero for Hire and DC’s Black Lightning, all of which, to a degree, maintained some of the tropes of the blaxploitation films, most notably a hypermasculine protagonist who operates in gritty inner-city settings. Like the anti-heroes of the blaxploitation genre, these superheroes’ ties to traditional heroics were always in question: Captain America’s partner The Falcon began life as a pimp/gangster named ‘Snap’ Wilson; Luke Cage gains his powers after being experimented on while in prison (albeit for a crime he did not commit); and Black Lightning is as wanted by the police as the villains he fights.

While the villains of the blaxploitation era were often various forms of The Man, the living embodiment of the white power structure, oftentimes, the protagonists of these films frequently would clash with black villains, as well. For example, in Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970), one of the genre’s earliest films, rugged detectives Gravedigger Jones (Godfrey Cambridge) and Coffin Ed Johnson (Raymond St Jacques) take down the crooked Reverend Deke O’Malley (Calvin Lockhart), a charismatic black reverend selling fraudulent trips back to Africa to the poor residents of Harlem. Similarly, black superheroes would often combat black villains, many of whom were aliasied or costumed petty criminals. For example, Shades and Comanche – who were amongst Luke Cage’s first villains – were mere hoods; the former had acquired a visor that shot concussive beams (similar to that of X-Men leader Cyclops), and the latter was adept with a bow and arrow. Like several of Luke Cage’s black villains (Diamondback, Mangler, Spear, for example), they had ties to Cage while he was imprisoned. Most were low-level mobsters (many were operatives of the criminal organization The Maggia), racketeers, and thieves. Most were motivated by financial gain or revenge against Cage.

Because of their origins as common thugs, most black villains – like their superhero counterparts – are often inadequate for adventures beyond the street corners and rooftops of the inner city. This is largely due to the industry’s tendency to use black superheroes (and characters, in general) as a means to address social issues that its primarily white, nigh invulnerable superheroes could not. As Rob Lendrum notes in his essay on 1970s black superheroes, ‘Superman is ineffective at dealing with [street-level crime and social issues]’ (2005, p. 369). As evidence, he echoes Umberto Eco’s earlier criticisms of Superman as a defender of the status quo, ‘Superman never engages in political or social struggles, he only defeats evil that attempts to seize private property. In fact even his civic consciousness has ignored an entire area of Metropolis populated by African Americans, making him complacent in an oppressive system’ (Lendrum 2005, p. 369). Thus, he distinguishes
black superheroes – in this case, Black Lightning, who primarily fought crime in Suicide Slum, the ghettos of Superman’s Metropolis – from their white counterparts by asserting that tackling street and organized crime is an essential part of their character. Lendrum writes, ‘The masculinity of the black heroes then, encompasses a code of morality that includes an obligation to protect the black community in a better way than has been offered by white agencies prior ... The black heroes battle an assortment of criminals and super-villains in their politically charged battle to protect the ghetto streets’ (2005, pp. 369–370). Lendrum’s contention falls in line with what writer Tony Isabella – creator of Black Lightning and Marvel’s Black Goliath – states about his creation, ‘[Jefferson Pierce] became Black Lightning because his sense of morality, his sense of social responsibility, wouldn’t allow him to withhold his gifts, all his gifts, from his community. He comes from a background that tells him that, if you can help, you must help. He’s a devout Christian who puts his belief into deeds’ (Naso 2003). As a result, most of the villains faced by heroes such as Luke Cage and Black Lightning are more akin to Reverend Deke O’Malley – albeit with the occasional superpower or weapon – than to Armageddon.

Beyond limiting their goals to organized or street crime, the situating of black villains in the ghetto has had two other effects that prevent them from being major supervillains. First, it has vastly limited the powers and abilities of these villains. For the most part, black villains typically rely on their fighting prowess or access to weaponry. Marvel, in particular, has a litany of black villains who carry heavy weaponry: the aforementioned Comanche, who is proficient with a bow and arrow; the unfortunately named Butcher T. Washington, a weapons expert with a heavily armed tank at his disposal (granted to him by Dionysius in order to combat Hercules); the aptly named Ammo and Shotgun; and several others. This tendency undoubtedly emerges from both the unprecedented number and experiences of black soldiers who served in Vietnam and the complete dominance of heavyweight boxing by black fighters (Muhammad Ali, George Foreman, ‘Smokin’ Joe Frazier, Ken Norton, etc.) in the 1970s. Ammo and Shotgun, for example, are noted Vietnam veterans (with the latter having served alongside Marvel’s resident gun-wielding vigilante The Punisher) as is Superman foe Bloodsport.

However, outside of being able to fight and being able to use conventional and advanced weaponry, black villains – like many black superheroes – are most noted for their raw strength. Of course, superhero comics are rife with larger-than-life, inhumanly strong characters; however, this is particularly true of black villains. The portrayal of hypermasculine black men not only is a requisite of the genre but also is an integral part of racist ideology. As Jeff Brown notes:

But not all Others have been constructed as equal by the dominant masculine ideology. While the gay man, the Jewish man, the Asian man (and many other ‘Others’) have been burdened by the castrated softness, the black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being too hard, too physical, too bodily (1999, p. 28).

While Brown is speaking specifically of black superheroes like Luke Cage (whose skin is literally as hard as steel), his findings also apply to black villains. Take for instance characters such as ‘Big’ Ben Donovan, one of Luke Cage’s earliest nemeses. Though he possesses no superpowers nor has been augmented in any fashion, Donovan nonetheless stands nearly eight feet tall; his hands are large and strong enough to palm Daredevil’s face and lift him off of the ground (as he does in Marvel Knights #12)! When black villains are empowered with superhuman abilities, tremendous strength is usually one of
them, as is the case with Tombstone, a giant black albino with filed teeth and rock-hard skin, and Man-Ape, who gained super-strength by ‘[b]athing in the [white] gorilla’s blood and eating the gorilla’s flesh’ (‘Man-Ape’).14

A heavy reliance on brawn does not fully distinguish black villains from non-black villains, does not imply that black villains do not have other abilities or powers, nor does it necessarily imply that there are no black villains who utilize their intelligence. There are plenty of non-black villains – prominent examples are Spider-Man villains Ox and The Rhino – who are literally mindless brutes. There are black villains who possess unique abilities outside of the scope of super strength, such as Moses Magnum, whose ‘body generates seismic force which amplifies his natural strength and attunes him to seismic vibrations’ (‘Magnum, Moses’). Furthermore, there are those black villains who are highly intelligent, like Black Manta and Thunderball, who, prior to his criminal career was gamma ray physicist Dr Eliot Franklin.

However, what does distinguish black villains from their counterparts is that their great power and intellect rarely (if ever) coincide. Whereas supervillains such as Armageddon, Doctor Doom, Lex Luthor, and Magneto wield both great power and great intellect, black villains often are forced to choose between the two. One need only look to the aforementioned Thunderball, who despite his genius-level intellect relays primarily on his strength, has resorted to utilizing a ball and chain as a weapon, and commits crimes with his band of ruffians, The Wrecking Crew.15 Moses Magnum, perhaps the closest Marvel has gotten to a true black supervillain, is also incapable of wielding great intellect with great power. Before inheriting the ability to generate seismic waves, Magnum was ‘the world’s foremost independent weapons manufacturer’ (‘Magnum, Moses’).16 However, due to his many failures (and despite having actually conquered a small African nation for a short period), Armageddon rendered Magnum incapable of controlling his powers. As a result, characters such as Moses and Thunderball lend further credence to what Jeff Brown writes of the linkage between black men and hypermasculinity:

Moreover, the more one’s identity is linked to a hypermasculine persona based on the body, the more uncultured and uncivilized, the more bestial one is considered to be ... [B]lacks have historically and symbolically been represented as pure body and little mind ... Because of this racist ideological paradox, blacks in Western culture have been forced to shoulder the burdens of the body itself. In contemporary culture black men are often seen more as beasts, as rapists, as gangsters, as crack-heads, and as muggers – literally as bodies out of control – than they are as fathers, as scholars, as statesmen, and as leaders. It is perhaps this split between the mind and the body that marks one of the greatest threats of (self-) destruction facing blacks today (1999, p. 30).

This is particularly true in the case of black comic book villains such as Magnum Moses and Thunderball, neither of whom can seem to rectify their powerful minds with their powerful bodies. Both are quite literally black bodies out of control: Magnum can no longer be on solid ground without causing a tremendous earthquake; Thunderball’s power is limited to his proximity to his partner Wrecker’s magic crowbar.

Beyond greatly limiting the powers of black villains, situating them in urban locales has also, in many regards, made many of them redeemable figures. Many black villains do not stay villains, and even those who remain so have their villainy seemingly justified. Undoubtedly the product of white liberal guilt and the comic industry’s sudden interest in addressing social issues in the 1970s, the rise of black superheroes coincided with the rise of somewhat sympathetic black villains. As the origins of many of the black villains who emerged out of this period (and even later) suggest, many were victims of circumstance or
sought redress through crime for crimes committed against them. For example, before embarking on a life of crime, Chemistro, one of Luke Cage’s early foes, was Mainstream Motors chemist Curtis Carr. Carr had developed the Alchemy Gun, a device capable of transforming one substance into another (e.g. wood to rubber). When company president Horace Claymore became aware of the project, he unjustly fired Carr in an attempt to keep the gun for himself. As a result, Carr (as Chemistro) decided to seek revenge against the company – though he was ultimately foiled by Luke Cage and crippled after accidentally transmuting his own legs into dust. However, later, he reforms and assists Cage in foiling the second Chemistro. Thunderball has a similar story: according to his official biography, ‘Dr. Eliot Franklin was a genius-level physicist, nearly on par with Bruce Banner. He even designed a miniature gamma-ray bomb, a feat that eluded Banner. However, his invention was stolen by an unscrupulous executive at Richmond Enterprises, and Franklin was imprisoned after an attempt to steal it back’ (‘Thunderball’).

In fact, the black inventor who is incapable of capitalizing off of his creations was indeed a frequent trope of black villains. This fact is writ large in the former Spider-Man villain Rocket Racer. Rocket Racer is the epitome of the redeemable black villain: an inventive mind whose social circumstances forced him into a life of crime only later to embrace a role as a superhero. In his bio, his origin reads, ‘After his mother suffered a heart attack and was hospitalized, Robert Farrell began to feel the financial strain on his family. His talent for science and technology seemed to indicate a promising future, however, he designed a weapon equipped costume and a super charged skateboard only to turn to a life of crime as a means of making some fast cash’ (‘Rocket Racer’). However, after facing and losing to Spider-Man on several occasions, he finally reformed and eventually became a superhero.

Of course, the vengeful (even if justifiably so) black man is such a popular trope in mainstream comics largely because writers seemingly have very little else upon which to draw. The most prominent black men in American culture were, for quite some time, the beleaguered, defeated black worker and the hoodlum. Whereas writers have a veritable treasure trove of conquerors, historical figures, movements, and mythologies upon which to rely in the creation of non-white villains, such has not been the case for black villains. Of course, many comic supervillains are derived from historic conflicts such as World War II and the Cold War largely because of the resonance those events have had in American culture. Nazism, for example, has produced some of the greatest comic book supervillains, particularly Captain America’s arch-nemesis The Red Skull (who frequently is among the top-rated villains in polls). Communism has also produced its fair share of supervillains such as Fantastic Four villains The Red Ghost and the Soviet Super Soldiers. Furthermore, Greek and Egyptian mythology have been grist for the mills as well as the gods of both have been frequent villains (and heroes) in both the Marvel and DC universes. Nonetheless, despite having parallels upon which writers could indeed draw, creators have yet to do so for black villains.

No black supervillains is a good thing, right? If the black villains upon whom I have focused here seem somewhat antiquated and stagnant, it is for good reason: thus far, there has been very little creation of new black supervillains or development of existing ones since the litany of those whom appeared in the 1970s. Those who have emerged since then, in many regards, differ little from their predecessors. While there indeed has been much progress in terms of the number of and portrayal of black superheroes (though there still remains very few black superhero comics), black supervillains have not fared well in recent years.
Perhaps the most noteworthy black villain to emerge since the 1970s is Geoffrey Wilder of Marvel’s hit series *Runaways*. The series focuses on the adventures of a group of super-powered teenagers who have discovered that their parents are members of a secret cabal of villains – the Pride – allied by a pact to bring about the end of the world. Wilder is the leader of the Pride, which has cornered the market on organized crime in Los Angeles since the 1980s (in *Runaways* continuity, at least). As leader of the Pride, Wilder seemingly wields great power and influence and is indeed the most dire threat to the teenaged adventurers.\(^{19}\)

Nonetheless, Wilder’s power is not without serious limitations. For starters, the Pride are actually the servants of the Gibborim, a clan of god-like giants who act as the Pride’s benefactors. The Gibborim, who seek the end of humankind but are too weak to appear on the physical plain long enough to do so, have agreed to spare six members of the Pride and allow them to rule in a post-human world as long as they do their bidding in the present. Thus, Wilder’s power is not inherent but granted.

Being granted power, of course, is not necessarily detrimental to being a powerful supervillain. However, of the members of the Pride, Wilder and his wife Catherine are the ones with the most humble beginnings and glaring lack of actual powers or special abilities. The other families of the Pride had some form of or access to a significant superpower even before their meeting with the Gibborim: Frank and Leslie Dean were actually humanoid aliens who can fly and use solar power to do other feats; Gene and Alice Hayes were both telepathic mutants; Robert and Tina Minoru were black magic sorcerers; Victor and Janet Stein were mad scientists; and Dale and Stacey Yorkes were time travellers. However, the Wilders were just common thieves. As such, Wilder’s reliance on the Gibborim, his lack of actual power, his stereotypical origins as a common hood, and, perhaps most importantly, the Pride’s untimely deaths at the hands of their children undermines any notion that he is a major supervillain. That Wilder and the other black villains before him fail to become major supervillains is of no surprise, especially given the mainstream comic industry’s historic struggles with portraying minorities.

As a result, one might wonder why I even would question the absence of black supervillains. After all, one need look at the history of perhaps the greatest archetype for the modern supervillain, Fu Manchu, as evidence of the dangers of racializing villains. As Karen Kingsbury notes in ‘Yellow Peril, Dark Hero’, Fu Manchu ‘was indeed built on all too-familiar framework of racist, imperialist assumptions regarding Asians’ (2004, p. 105). As Kingsbury suggests, Fu Manchu’s creator, Arthur Sarsfield Ward, created him as a reaction to rampant street crime in London’s Limehouse district and the fears of the Chinese created by the Boxer Rebellion (2004, pp. 105–106). Undoubtedly, Fu Manchu was the result of intense racial animosities, and he has proven to be the poster child of the dangerous Other and Yellow Peril.\(^{20}\)

Furthermore, as Marc Singer notes, superhero comics have always had a problematic track record with depictions of race. He writes:

> Comic books, and particularly the dominant genre of superhero comic books, have proven fertile ground for stereotyped depictions of race. Comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances, and this reductionism is especially prevalent in superhero comics, whose characters are wholly externalized into their heroic costumes and aliases. This system of visual typology combines with the superhero genre’s long history of excluding, trivializing, or ‘tokenizing’ minorities to create minority superheroes who are marked purely for their race (2002, p. 107).

As Singer’s remarks suggest, superhero comics are inherently dangerous ground upon which to represent race. As such, what Anna Beatrice Scott (2006) writes of comics in
particular and Stuart Hall (1997) writes of popular culture in general rings true: Neither seems like solid ground upon which to look for true representations of race.21

That stated, while I do not wish to romanticize superhero comics or overemphasize their influence, I do believe that they can provide a means in which to challenge preconceived notions about blacks. Like many other forms of popular media, comic books have been singularly focused: As a result of movements by the likes of activists such as Jesse Jackson and the NAACP, over the course of the last three decades, popular media has overcompensated for its lengthy history of negative depictions of black folks by either greatly limiting or outright eliminating roles in which black men and women portray villains. However, doing so is no more progressive than the tokenism to which Singer refers; in fact, what appears to some as altruism is more akin to an inability (or refusal) to develop complex black characters. However, as Brown indicates in his work on Milestone Comics, ‘[B]lack scholars and cultural critics see the need to develop new models of black masculinity, models that counter the dominant stereotypes not by reforming the hypermasculine image of the black male into an image of refinement, restraint, and desexualization, but by incorporating the associated properties of the mind (e.g., intelligence, control, wisdom) into the popular presentation of black male identity’ (1999, p. 30). One way in which to do so has been achieved – to a degree, as Brown suggests – in the portrayals of more contemplative superheroes in the Milestone universe. Conversely, the same could be achieved in developing complex, contemplative, and powerful black supervillains.

Notes
1. Though James Earl Jones provided Vader’s voice in the original Star Wars trilogy and in virtually every other appearance of Darth Vader in popular culture, British actor David Prowse primarily portrays Vader in the original trilogy. However, in Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi (1984), Sebastian Shaw plays the unmasked Vader. Besides the various stunt doubles, the only other actor to portray Vader in the films was Hayden Christensen, who filled the role of Vader’s alter ego Anakin Skywalker in Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002) and Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005).

2. Furthermore, Tobias Whale is an obvious nod to Marvel Comics’ Kingpin, the rather large (and white) crimelord who would prove to be an arch-nemesis to Daredevil and Spider-Man. Kingpin first appeared in Amazing Spider-Man #50 (1967). Tobias Whale first appeared in Black Lightning #1 (1977).

3. That said, mainstream comics seem to be experiencing some regression in terms of black superheroes. Marvel only has three black superhero titles, Black Panther, Doctor Voodoo and War Machine, that are ongoing; DC currently has none (though its Vertigo imprint features a black revision of The Unknown Soldier, which cannot be considered a superhero title in that its protagonist is an insane Ugandan doctor). Amongst the major independents, Image Comics long-running superhero title Spawn featured a black man as the lead character until recently and had also run several volumes of the black superhero comic Shadowhawk. Otherwise, there are virtually no other black superhero titles in circulation. Fortunately, the lack of serials has been tempered somewhat by the rise in status of several superheroes in group titles. For example, Luke Cage is currently the leader of the New Avengers; Black Lightning, after a stint as the Secretary of Education (under Lex Luthor), is an important member of the Justice League of America.

4. In this essay, I privilege DC and Marvel Comics as they are the two most popular comic book presses. Admittedly, there is a heavy emphasis on Marvel, for I am most familiar with Marvel Comics. However, this emphasis is also reflective of the relative dearth of black supervillains in DC Comics. Furthermore, the independent press has not provided many notable examples of black supervillains. Along those lines, there will be a heavy emphasis on black male villains and black masculinity given that, as one might imagine, there are even fewer black female villains than black male villains.
5. According to Diamond, ‘The five major human groups to which Africa was already home by AD 1000 are those loosely referred to by laypeople as blacks, whites, African Pygmies, Khoisan, and Asians’ (1998, p. 378). The only division not to emerge from Africa is the Australian Aborigines and their descendants.

6. Many of Marvel’s villains from Africa also come from Wakanda, the fictional African kingdom ruled by Black Panther, Marvel’s first black superhero to be featured in his serial. Another African villain, and arguably Marvel’s most powerful black supervillain Moses Magnum, is from Ethiopia. The blackness of Ethiopians also has been questioned, though certainly not to the same degree as that of the ancient Egyptians.

7. The disclaimer reads, ‘The features of [Tutankhamen’s] face are based on scientific data. But the exact color of his skin and the size and shape of many facial details cannot be determined with full certainty’ (Rose 2007). Photographs of the reconstruction can be seen on the National Geographic Magazine website: http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0506/feature1/index.html.

8. Afrocentrism and the blackness of Egypt has been the subject of much heated debate within scholarly circles. I cannot do justice to the myriad of issues involved in the debate in such a limited space. However, in ‘Defending the Paradigm’, Adisa Alkebulan (2007) provides a rather in-depth analysis and literature review of key texts in the debate. Though Alkebulan is defending Afrocentrism as an approach, he also carefully articulates arguments against it.

9. Phillips and Strobl (2006) perform a content analysis of story arcs in 20 popular comics. Of these comics, 12 are superhero comics, including titles such as Justice League of America, Powers, and Ultimate Spider-Man.


11. Interestingly enough, the Milestone Comics serials, despite being created and written by predominantly black writers, also did not feature many black villains, let alone supervillains. However, the Milestone comics were DC’s most successful comics featuring black characters, as the DC Universe comics such as Black Lightning failed to last beyond 13 issues. Recently, the Milestone characters were incorporated into the mainstream DC Universe; however, this has yet to result in any new ongoing series for any of these characters.

12. Arguably, Milestone Comics emerges out of the second wave of blaxploitation, the popular ‘hood films’ of the early 1990s. The influence of films such as John Singleton’s Boyz N The Hood (1991) and Menace II Society (1993) can clearly be seen in Milestone’s Blood Syndicate, for example, which centres on a superpowered street gang.

13. In The Brothers’ Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience, Herman Graham III notes, ‘In the early years of American involvement in Vietnam, African Americans enlisted and reenlisted at higher rates than did whites and even displayed a more favorable opinion of the draft’ (2003, p. 15). Furthermore, as James E. Westheider notes, black soldiers in Vietnam received a great deal of praise for their fighting abilities: ‘As they had in previous wars, African Americans in Vietnam once again demonstrated their abilities as warriors. They compiled an impressive record in the early years of the war, and the military noticed it. In 1967, [General William C.] Westmoreland went out of his way to praise the valor and skill of African Americans under his command. His appraisal of black fighting prowess may have surprised and even irritated some of his audience, but it was the opinion of most officers in Vietnam, black or white’ (2007, p. 51).

14. Despite being 6’7”, 215 pounds, Tombstone, unlike many of his predecessors of that size, did not initially have superhuman strength or rock-hard skin. He acquired these powers after exposure to chemicals. However, before he acquired these abilities, he still was quite strong and had filed teeth.

15. The Wrecking Crew – Bulldozer, Piledriver, Thunderball, and Wrecker – share superhuman strength which was accidentally bestowed upon them by Karnilla, the Norn Queen and one of Thor’s arch-enemies. In order to utilize their power, the Crew must be in close proximity to Wrecker’s crowbar, which is where all of Karnilla’s magic is concentrated. On several occasions, Thunderball has sought (and briefly held) sole control of the crowbar. To Marvel’s credit (though this vacillated between writers), Thunderball is usually distinguished as the smartest, most ambitious member of the Wrecking Crew even though he is not the de facto leader.
16. Magnum was granted his powers from Armageddon in return for lifelong servitude. After being thwarted by Luke Cage in his attempt to mine energy from the earth’s core, Magnum falls into a crevice, where he is rescued by Armageddon.

17. The second Chemistro is actually Carr’s former cellmate, Arch Morton. The third Chemistro is Carr’s younger brother, Calvin Carr.

18. Arguably, outside of the common street tough, the voodoo priest has proven to be another common trope for black villains. Villains such as Black Talon, Empress, Hougan, amongst a host of others all utilize a stereotyped form of voodoo.

19. In Runaways #18 (Volume 2), Wilde apparently kills Gertrude Yorkes, one of the teenaged adventurers and daughter of two of his fellow Pride members.

20. Fu Manchu has also served as inspiration for a number of comic book supervillains, namely The Mandarin and Yellow Claw.

21. Scott writes, ‘The implicit argument harbored by comics like DC and Marvel, and later Milestone and a few other indie black titles amassed under the banner of ANIA, The Association of Black Comicbook Publishers, is that there are limited narrative choices to a black character, therefore one must not confuse the issue (and reader) by suggesting that blackness can resonate as itself in scenarios where one would not (but actually “could not”) find black people authentically portraying blackness’ (2006, p. 310). Hall states, “[P]opular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience’ (2006, p. 132).

Notes on contributor
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References


