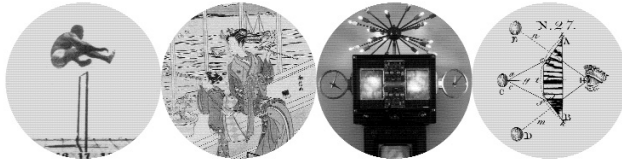# journal of visual culture

Superpower vs Supernatural: Black Superheroes and the Quest for a Mutant Reality

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Abstract

Comic books can be understood as a visualization of oral folk culture in the US. Well beyond stereotype, these tales are informed by white supremacist visuality, circulating in mainstream culture as over-determined narration. In this experimental article, the choreography of the panel and the choreography of the epidermis are explored in order to excavate the continuing problem of black superhero character development. Both white and black renderings of a superpowered black body are shown to have a limiting yet fulfilling perspective on blackness: that it is supernatural and therefore impossibly powerful. This supernaturalness is further explored as a site of antagonism to linear narration and fantasy-driven character development. The conflation of black everyday life with a supposedly fictional one reveals a central problem in white supremacist visioning of 'the real'.

Keywords

African American • African traditional religion • black • blackness • blacks in comics • comics • folk tales • mutant • ritual • superhero

I have had, probably a genetic trait or something, a complete fascination with comics. My father was an avid collector of Superman and had hoped to fund his college expenses with a trunk full of #1 issues of not just the red-caped one, but Batman and an assortment of post-Second World War characters like Captain Marvel, Captain America, et al. Well, his mother had other plans, for the trunk that is, and burned them all without asking her grown son why he still held on to the 'funnies'.

Such a tragic tale.

But my father's fascination with the superpowered male figure is perhaps a great 'American' practice of reality aversion.

In this article I investigate this aversion for the real as it intersects with the ways in which narrative, wordiness, seeks to usurp the corporeal as the site of engaging one's external world by the reduction of the intricate bio-mechanical and neuro-chemical transactions that a body makes in order to organize the world with a through-line, a distinct sense of future that is enabled by text. This textuality obviously hinges on visuality, and yet, the drawings of the superhero body function as a fascinating interpolation of fantastical imaginaries and studied anatomical renderings of the unseen, mainly, power. The pictures generate an in-sinew-ated perspectivalism, one that also aids in sustaining a stable, mono-racialized cultural imaginary through the fear of the ever lurking Other and their unfettered access to the Unseen. I will argue that the advent of the mutant, and black 'supers'' lack of access to this particular narrative device, is based on the unstated premise that a black body is always already supernatural.[1]

Through the comics, the naturalness of an otherwise ordinary body takes on mythic proportions for the common good. Those super-powered humans duked it out with the Führer, avoiding the Final Solution altogether, making unnecessary the A-bomb, then, in their post-war retirement, protecting the unbridled accumulation of goods and uneven flow of capital by chasing bank robbers, thwarting assassination plots, and stopping mad men scientists from tinkering with the natural laws of the world – laws which they themselves did not abide by. As super as these guys were, they were, for the most part, still common bigots and sexists. For all their hyped difference from the common joe, they were just projections of said guy, only better, wink wink.

In this regard, their whiteness, especially those of 'aliens' like Superman, is predicated on their difference of the same – they are visibly marked as white, such that their difference is subsumed, perhaps augmented by this whiteness. In this frame, then, the superhero ancestor of the mutant allows white men to explore Otherness publicly.

Any self-respecting upwardly mobile white guy in the pre-Civil Rights era had to have a negro lackey, so that he didn't end up needing to do menial tasks like wash his own clothes, carry things, etc. The first black 'supers' were not super at all, rather they were ordinary old niggahs, who happened to have had the good fortune to be tied to a superhero master. They went to war as cowards, trailing along in the wake of the super-shark whose skin they licked clean. For example, 'Whitewash' was Marvel's first 'black' superhero and first appeared in the 1940s war comic *Young Allies*.[2] This vision was in sharp contrast to the Double V Campaign that black soldiers and their families were waging in the pages of the Black Press – 'Victory Abroad, and Victory at Home'.[3]

But this choppy and digressive genealogy does not quite explain the advent of the mutant. Just like the era in which they first appear (the late 1960s, early 1970s), the baby boomer mutants didn't want to do it like their folks before

them. They weren't really super. They were anomalies. They were stricken, not aliens who could become sick when presented with a piece of home (it isn't that deep, . . . home is where normalcy is deadly). Stan Lee and his shop of inkers and writers leapt into the fractured reality of the 1960s, seeking a market in a moment when tomorrow looked like a lie for sure, when the basis for linear narrative – time as god – was losing its sway over productivity; when making it up as you went along suddenly took on epic proportions due to its very necessity as a survival device.

And there stood the black bodies, in the middle of this fork in the late-capitalism road, looking like maps, saviors, madonnas and demons all at the same time. Supernatural. Adaptable, sturdy, jaded and still hopeful, the black-bodied anti-citizens of the United States, suffering from that tragic magic as they did, instigated, demanded a new reality, one that ultimately could not be delivered (at least not evenly) by the subjects of white supremacy. They were too spooked.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

We Return to the Antebellum South, but Have We Ever Left?

● BLOODWYND™ and © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.
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● Real name: Unrevealed
● Occupation: Protector of the Blood Gem
● First appearance: Justice League of America #61, April 1992

Bloodwynd's ancestors were slaves belonging to Jacob Whitney. Even for a racist cotton plantation owner, this guy was evil. One of Bloodwynd's relatives, a woman named Clemma, had her fill of his violence. For 28 nights, the slaves gathered to perform the ritual of the Blood Gem. Mixing their blood in a cauldron and speaking incantations as old as mankind, they created this object of power. 'It was fashioned with the blood, the sorrow . . . the misery of all slaves.' The gem was used to murder Whitney, whose heart stopped under its light while his

soul was drawn into it. Passed down through the generations, the gem gained power as each of its bearer's souls became linked with it. The Blood Gem craved evil, drawing out the dark side of its user.

In time it fell into the hands of the latest descendant who used it to become the mysterious sorcerer named Bloodwynd. The Gem is actually another dimension that acts as the energy source for the Gem's owner.

http://www.blacksuperhero.com (consulted 2 Feb., 2003).

The Conjureman and the Judge

In the collected tales, spells, and testimonies from the Negro South, collated by Robert Hyatt, one will find the tale (perhaps tall but still telling) of a notorious two-headed doctor and an inexplicable murder . . .

This two-headed doctor had been accused of having the audacity to kill a white man in South Carolina. Now the townspeople all showed up to the court room for the arraignment and later for the hearing because no one could believe that those crazy-ass crackas had the audacity to lock up this infamous conjureman, crackas included. As it turns out, this conjurer was well known and frequently sought out by highly placed white clientele, so it shocked no-one that his name would have been implicated in a murder, but it shocked everyone that someone would point the finger at him AND have him hauled off. During his arraignment, it was said that a large buzzard came and sat in a big oak tree that was visible from the judge's bench. Those familiar with hoodoo took note, some secretly recommending to the judge that he figure out how to drop the case, or even have the charges voided. The judge, a man of god and science, was determined to prove that niggah rantings were worthless, impotent and generally not a cause for concern. The conjureman said nothing during his incarceration. Nothing when brought before the judge, nothing when placed on the witness stand. And everyday, a new buzzard would join what was now a flock in the oak tree. Soon, buzzards began to perch on the window sills of the courthouse. Folks got scared and stopped coming, and still the conjureman would not talk. Witnesses suddenly forgot that they had seen him leaving at such and such a time, the opposing lawyer skipped out on his client, the judge was losing weight. And still the conjureman said nothing. The judge ordered the windows closed and shuttered after catching the defendant having one too many meaningful glances at the feathered watch guard. The birds remained on their perches, waiting. Finally, sick and scared out of his wits, the judge declared a mistrial and freed the conjureman, who solemnly looked the judge in the eye, gave him a sly smile and slightly bowed his head, stood, and sauntered out of the courtroom, leaving the buzzards circling over the courthouse, waiting for Death to stroll in.

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Tales such as this continue to inform white supremacist visuality, circulating in mainstream culture as overdetermined narration.[4] As stories, they do not surface frequently within any particular text, rather they reside in the collective 'American' subconscious, surfacing instead as literal action: police brutality; NIMBY(not in my backyard)-driven neighborhood efforts; banking and financial practices; educational criteria and standards; and civic codes based on income and educational qualifications. Literalized, the supernatural, and hence uncontrollable, black potential is a coveted power, if unskilled and unpredictable. Folktales are still used as instructional texts in most communities in the US. Privileged, white (and therefore invisible as its users like to situate it as just plain 'order') hegemonic culture – white supremacist, liberal and radical – positions itself as modernized beyond the point of requiring such texts, oral, visual, or written. However, particularly in film and comics, these sublimated texts emerge as ghosted experiences, nightmares and feverish dreams. Magical realism.

There has been much ado about the 'magical negro' in current scholarly writings on film. Revisited in an article by Rita Kempley in *The Black Commentator* (2003), the 'magic negro' trope first surfaced as a concept in the 1940s to describe the way in which a particular type of shallow negro character was appearing to provide depth of conviction and character to the white characters with which he appeared in frame. The Magical Negro is an old–new 'positive images' trope that has arisen – again as it made its first appearance in 1940 – as non-black filmmakers have attempted to portray black people (not characters) in a better light. The problem derives from attempting to portray an entire culture through one character, rather than writing a character that propels the plotline like all the other characters. In seeking to vindicate both Hollywood and black people through these magical beings, the filmmakers, according to the scholars mentioned here, have simply created yet another white fantasy of being loved, cared for, and vindicated by blackness itself.

The Green Mile (Frank Darabont, 1999), *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Robert Redford, 2000), *Radio* (Michael Tollin, 2003), even that questionable Queen Latifah vehicle *Bringing Down the House* (Adam Shankman, 2003) all hinge on that something special about black people: their closeness to the spirits; their innate understanding of our souls (and here 'our' is the signifier for white people).

Conversely, the Magical Negro can work against you if you are not able to recognize it for what it is. The very denial of its existence can bring the wrath of the Unseen upon your head, purposefully, such as in *The Serpent & The Rainbow* (Wes Craven, 1988) and *The Skeleton Key* (Iain Softley, 2005), or inadvertently, as in *Kangaroo Jack* (David McNally, 2003). The nay-saying white characters that survive convert in the end, going native as it were; others are dealt 'justice', typically retribution masquerading as the preordained outcome. But the 'Magical Black', aka 'Sorcerer' (alias: 'Voodoo Doctor') as opposed to the 'Magical Negro', remains a force to be reckoned with, usually through the shielding good vibes of the Magical Negro.

In the little boxes of the comic book, where retribution and justice cavort as good clean fun, a Magical Negro is banal at best. Perhaps the Magical Negro looks promising on the big screen because there is an inkling of hope for a more developed black character. The fearsome and overdetermined black body in a comic book is storyline, arc, setting, and character all rolled into one. I am suggesting that the conflation of blackness with ill-informed representations of traditional African-derived pharmacopic healing and ritual practices defines black people as 'unseeable', not just inscrutable, particularly in superhero comic books, which could be understood as material vehicles for oral culture in the United States. Returning to my assertion that the failure of representation of black bodies is attributable to a failure of white hegemonic acceptance of reality as it is experienced (non-linear, multiple, simultaneous, and fractal) would then lead us to reconsider the power of the unrepresented as tyrannical against the perceived. Within comic books, this unseen force, this destinic purpose, literally drives each episode. An inexorable series of events, forcing the character into specific choices, then superhuman actions and finally 'justice' – the hero's journey – cannot be taken by an inscrutable force; this is traveling for mortals, or 'mortalized' immortals, but not sheer force. The writers of comics in the US have known for some time what I have come to know as a scholar of blackness:

➢   Blackness itself is a conspiracy.

This article is an expedition.

➢   We are journeying through several aesthetic conflations, all of which have this startling conclusion when taken together.

From Don Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes* . . . (2002) to Patricia Turner's *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (1993), even Robin D.G. Kelley's *Yo Mama's DsyFunktional* (1997), black scholars who deal in the visual spend an inordinate amount of time indicating the conspiracy *against* black people's bodies, interrogating everything from the film stock to the framing of facial features. I propose that we flip the search and instead think about the ways in which the shortcomings of visuality in white supremacist culture issue from a fundamental mistrust in visuality itself. That is, the search for 'reality' based on perspectival literalism is already a flight from divinity, and divinity as that which drives whiteness towards greatness (thinking here about the trope of discovery and manifest destiny) is also invisible, perhaps impossible.

In this regard, that which is seen is always not what is experienced (Stewart, 2003: 666). Moreover, that which is endured gives strength, aka unknown reserves for perseverance (again, here we can consider great westward narratives of whiteness). In this vein, literally bloody black bodies have unwittingly been given great strength and power through the centuries of torture they have withstood. Time and again, this unseen reserve of energy

rears its potent head in the form of a resourcefulness that only a non-human could muster. According to the excavations of the collective racist mind conducted by Patricia Turner, this 'Topsy/Eva' tale is readily consumed and utilized by non-black and black people alike to understand the horrors of the master/slave performance loop.

My suggestion that we consider blackness a conspiracy begs the question: against what? The obvious answer is whiteness. The more elusive answer is against a clear, unencumbered visual field that can be readily consumed and understood as beautiful, profitable, and good . . . for whiteness. This good-ness presupposes a badness that can be contained, located, in very specific places due to the vicissitude of the site itself. Out of site, out of memory-scape. Blackness, as a site and series of performances imbued with defilement – that is, whatever blackness grazes it actually penetrates and ruins – then obstructs a clear consciousness, and thus, a clear view. Let's break it down:[5]

Confabulations
of the Extraordinary Sort

a powerpointy poem of provocation

Confabulation 1

- ♦Africans are not people
- ♦Africans are destined to be slaves
- ♦Africans have specialized knowledges
- ♦Africans worship hidden powers, including the devil
- ♦Africans are magicians
- ♦Africans are powerful

Confabulation 2

- ♦Black people are very natural
- ♦Black people are very expressive
- ♦Black people do not analyze, they act
- ♦Black people want white power
- ♦Black people are exceptional
- ♦Black people are dangerous
- ♦Black people are buffoons

Confabulation 3

♦ Africans are animist and have no religion
♦ African deities are superstitions
♦ African deities are demigods
♦ African deities are vindictive
♦ African deities possess the body, giving their 'horse' their powers temporarily
♦ African deities can help you where others fail
♦ Africans are gods and therefore evil and powerful

Confabulation 4

♦ Black Power is anti-American
♦ Black Power is a threat to whiteness
♦ Black Power advocates violence
♦ Black Power advocates a return to Africa
♦ Blackness is defined by Black Power

Consternations

➢ Black people are not African people
➢ Black people are loyal
➢ Black people are devious
➢ Black people have no origins
➢ Black people are strong originators
➢ Black people have no ethics
➢ African people are regal, but forsaken

Consternations, yet again

➢ Black people are outmoded farm equipment
➢ Black people are roots people
➢ Black people create urban blight
➢ Black people are marketable urban products
➢ Black people are dependent on government
➢ Black people are hardworking & self-reliant

If this sounds crazy, well, it is.

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As this article continues, we will engage the dramatic confluence of white supremacist texts about black kinethesticism, white liberalism about black supernaturalness and Black Power Ideologies about appropriate representations of black bodies. At stake here is the mode of presentation of power: superpower, human power, inhuman power, mutant power, financial power. Where the tales we tell ourselves and each other about our differences collide, one can discern the possibility for a reinvigorated visuality that comprehends its reliance on the Intangible as a series of productive, chaotic improvisations.

In the drawings, supers ripple with their energetic reserves. If god-force could be drawn, perhaps it would look like the bulging biceps and eerily solid quadriceps of a 'Thor' or a 'Juggernaut'. The vectors implied, however, by the definition of the muscle do not translate into force, or even motion, for the most part. Speaking as a performance scholar, grab a favorite comic book and attempt to get your body into one of the running poses, for example. The angles of the elbows, knees, and chin typically suggest an incredible lindy hopper, not a super speedy sprinter. The anatomy of any super of any racial categorization is obviously questionable. The pulsing triceps and overdeveloped scalenes would cause migraines for sure (perhaps that's why they're so vengeful). Rather than read these bodies as evidence of a repressed sexuality, as say, Scott Bukatman argues in his 1994 piece 'X-Bodies: The Torment of the Mutant Superhero', I'm more interested in understanding them as a series of concomitant choreographies of power.

The aforementioned angles of knees and elbows are by now standard, almost 'stock characters' unto themselves. We could quite productively think about the presentation of a superhero anatomy as an additional personage in the frame. Though costume color, back story, and witty repartee are employed to set each character apart from one another, the vitalization of the drawings, the ways in which the lines are stroked to seduce us into believing in both movement and directed, external force (they don't always happen together) seem uncannily familiar across genre, gender, 'race', and label. Who are these haunting figures? How does their literal positioning materialize specific modes of ingesting on the part of the consumer of comics? What stories do they instantaneously tell and to what end? I would like to suggest that these choreographies goad an audience's already plentiful reserves of stocked stories and stereotypes into action, not to fill in blanks and holes, but to assuage any fear or possibility of misrecognition of the Self as the more powerful being in the book. Black bodies problematize this.

In *Giant Size X-Men* #1, 'Storm' is recruited by 'Charles Xavier'. Her body is drawn as a shapely soul sister, not a rippling super, bounding out of its skin with sheer possibility. When she begins to use her power, the drawings are almost lovingly rendered, perhaps as an ode to all the super badass Blaxsploitation mommas that had ever existed. But her body is not drawn straining under its force. It is natural for her frame. She thinks herself a god, not a mutant. She is forced to accept her misrecognition of reality and

materialize as a mutant. But in this act, this performative 'voiced' by the character Charles Xavier, she is vanished. Only her oddly colored eyes are meant to give you the impression that something is different about her. Little did Stan Lee and Jack Kirby know that all over the world plenty of black folks sport blue and green eyes. Storm's lines in the panels in which she appears wrap her in the ordinariness of being a magical negress. She is so powerful that she need not force it since she is the force itself. Her self-naming as a goddess, though refuted, marks her as a 'real' black body that one should not fear too much as there is no rational thought or understanding of its kinetic acumen, just an acceptance of supernaturalness.

Though comic books abound with beings of all genetic ilk, what most fascinates me is the lack of genetically based differentiations for black-skinned characters. It is as if only pharmacopic magic, spells and ritualized anger belong in the arsenal of the black superhero. Blackness itself becomes an elision of narrative possibility as the character is bound by its epidermis into very specific stock back stories (see Singer, 2002, for examples of bounded stories and/or stereotypes). Akin to the stock stereotypes found in film, the origin story of a super is the primary method of creating its subsequent serialization. A look at the major black super origins will prove infuriating.

Basic Formulations of Early Black Superheroes, 1960s to 1980s

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White Supremacists' & Talented Tenth Negroid Phenom

♦ A scientist of the highest caliber
♦ A fatal flaw in character OR
♦ A fatal flaw in sociological make-up leads TO
♦ Tragic accident in the lab
♦ 'Magical,' natural powers (re)activated by fusion, fission, chemical interactions

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The Phenom Alternative

♦ A scientist of the highest caliber
♦ A fatal flaw in character OR
♦ A fatal flaw in sociological make-up leads TO
♦ Tragic accident in the lab
♦ Repaired body made 'super' by scientific alterations

┌───┐
│ Supernatural Tendencies   │
│   │
│ ➤ A loyal, but misguided athlete of national renown │
│ ➤ A life changing experience with racism │
│ ➤ A dedication to either justice or evil for vengeance │
│ ➤ A funky costume to accentuate a natural, god- │
│   given skill now over-manipulated as a 'power' │
└───┘

Examples from DC Comics

- AMAZING MAN™ and © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission.

- Real Name: Will Everett
- Occupation: Member of All-Star Squadron
- First Appearance:
  - Amazing Man I: All-Star Squadron #23, DC Comics
  - Amazing Man II: (grandson): JLA #85
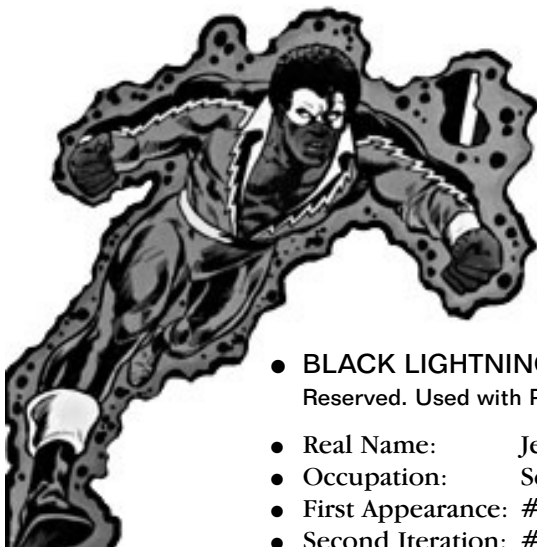
- BLACK LIGHTNING™ and © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission.

- Real Name: Jefferson Pierce
- Occupation: School Teacher
- First Appearance: #1, April 1977 – #11, Oct 1978
- Second Iteration: #1, Feb 1995 – #20, present

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│ ┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────┐ │
│ │                Supernatural Tendencies 2          │ │
│ │                                                    │ │
│ │ ➤ A mysterious freedom fighter of international renown │ │
│ │ ➤ A life-changing experience with globalization and/or │ │
│ │   corporate racism                                 │ │
│ │ ➤ A dedication to either justice or evil for vengeance │ │
│ │ ➤ A funky costume to accentuate a natural, god-given │ │
│ │   skill or a culturally inherited control over the 'spirits', │ │
│ │   now over-manipulated as a 'power'                │ │
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Welcome to the Arkestra!

● MAL™ and © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.
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● Real Name: Malcolm A. Duncan
● Occupation: Former Athlete, Jazz Musician
● First Appearance: DC Comics – Teen Titans, #26, 1970

Supernatural Tendencies 3

➢ A mystical, yet self-involved musician of some renown
➢ A life-changing experience within personal circle and/or with racism
➢ A dedication to either justice or evil for vengeance
➢ A funky costume to accentuate a natural, god-given skill or a culturally inherited control over the 'spirits', now over-manipulated as a 'power'

So far these lists have enumerated narrative tendencies within DC and Marvel comics beginning circa 1968 through as late as 1992. Black superheroes of this era can be read as signifiers of the struggle within the white cultural imaginary to make sense of radical, worldwide liberation movements of black people which did not conform to white hegemonic expectations of gratefulness (Trushell, 2004: 155). I could psychologize quite a bit here, or delve into the body of work from Afrocentric circles which illuminates the white master syndrome, but I found the statement by novelist Ariel Dorfman around the return of the Magical Negro most interesting, 'As a Chilean, however, I sense that maybe deep inside, mainstream Americans somehow expect those who come from the margins will save them emotionally and intellectually' (Kempley, 2003). Reframing this for my discussion of the failure of visuality vis-à-vis comic books and black bodies, the originating story distinctly posits a need for the eternal servitude of blackness, but belies an irrational fear of blackness liberated and free. As a self-determined condition, blackness would 'obviously' become synonymous with 'vengefulness'. The case of the Black Panther Party is always touted as one such example.

In the United States, the infamous Black Panther Party took to the streets of Oakland, CA, armed and dangerous, in 1967. With a bravado that struck fear in the hearts of white middle America, these agents of social change confounded held 'truths' about appropriate black behavior. The Panther Party was formed as an homage and extension of Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which used as its symbol a picture of a black panther, beginning in August of 1965. These 'Black Panthers' of Mississippi (see 'Black Panthers', 2006) were a democratic and conventional independent party, neither Democrat nor Republican. In 1966, the US comic book market was graced with:

Art by Liam Sharpe

- BLACK PANTHER™ and © 2006 Marvel Characters, Inc.
  Used with Permission.

- Real Name: T'Challa
- Occupation: Scientist
- Date of origin: As early as 1966, Black Panther #1 appeared in 1977.

- Book history: Fantastic Four #52, 1966.
  Also see Avengers   #52 & Jungle Action #5
- Black Panther (15 books):   #1, Jan 1977 – #15 May 1979
- Black Panther Series (4 books):   #1, July 1988 – #4, Oct 1988
- Panther's Prey (4 books):   #1, 1991 – #4, 1991
- Marvel Entertainment Group

On the website answer.com the co-authors of a Wikipedia entry which appears as the answer for 'What is the Black Panther', maintain that the character Black Panther pre-dates the Black Panther Party, insinuating that the group of militant blacks were inspired by a superhero written and drawn by white artists Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, respectively.[6] Panther did go on to become one of the all time favorite black superheroes for black audiences (see Brown, 1999), yet his story lines oscillated and changed with the brutal repression perpetrated by the FBI's COINTELPRO program of the late 1960s/early 1970s. While I am not too concerned over readership strategies and skills practiced by both black and non-black readership, I think it an imperative to investigate the *how* of story development of the black superhero. The Black Panther's origins as a Southern African from a fictional homeland are direct attempts at entering into a dialogue with the changing spheres of influence and control in a de-colonizing Africa. Yet they are also

about the powerlessness of black Americans to wage their own liberation struggles as a true human, i.e. African, non-American, had to come and beat up the Klan in order to free his brethren stateside (Jungle Action # 19 – 24, 'Panther vs. The Klan').

With atomic testing bearing fruit in the form of mutations in the Marvel Comics world, it is no stretch to think about the global Pan-Africanist liberation struggles of the time as a mere extension of said mutability. Black folks had lost their minds due to the fall out, not the centuries of servitude and torture. Black Panther and others who would follow him possessed not 'newfound human mutations', rather they were representations of unbridled retribution. Interestingly, as Storm (Marvel, 1976), Brother Voodoo (Marvel, 1973) and Hougan (DC, 1981) were manipulating African deification to their own ends, certain sectors of the black radical struggle in the US were also moving towards divine intervention of the non-Christian sort.

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The Black Arts Movement is characterized as a catalyzing moment for black independent thought, free of white liberal intervention and full of agitprop work created specifically to celebrate black people as a people distinct from Negro people, in particular, but any other people as well. Dance, music and theater as a unified performance (aka 'ritual'), not distinct modes of practice, became a medium for promoting blackness as a descendent of Africanness, but also as something badass and beautiful on its own terms. Ritual became not just a mode of worship, but a mode of life.

To conduct ritual, cultural workers created distinct, self-defined spaces for blackness, such as Oyotunji Village in South Carolina in 1974, a village modeled as a generic, small Nigerian town. In the cities, ritualists from Cuba and Puerto Rico were arriving with blessed pots, beautiful dances and sacred rhythms. Sun Ra perhaps is a good example of the search for the supernatural as collaborator in the life of the artist. Anyway, to get The Man out of one's head was greeted with great enthusiasm, even though many of these practices, in the New World at least, were steeped in The Man's greatest fears about black-skinned people.

Syncretized Caribbean African-descended deities began to circulate throughout radical black communities, undergirding the old Negro fables of similar origins with a vivacity and strength which felt as if it could be lethal. Superpowered, magical and in dialectical struggle, this particular black community (there are many) appeared to move out of touch with 'true' struggle for the more traditional activist, but in fact, they understood themselves to be going to the root of the problem of racism itself: the vivid hidden life of energetic codes and modes.

<p align="center">***</p>

But with a limited understanding of the vastness of the oral culture surrounding these entities, be they from the Voudou, Santeria, Lucumí, Candomblé or Ifa, and quite frankly, the real sense that they had very little

time to get up and going with this information, a great deal of the work generated in homage to or in conversation with these ancient practices was hindered by the desire to be superbadass, to actually inhabit whitey's fear of a black planet, to be supernatural.

As this intervention wound down in the 1970s, due mostly to pervasive state repression, urban riots that took out arts venues, and subsequent drug trafficking and addictions which riddled urban black nationwide during the 1980s, the Black Arts Movement dissipated, but the work it had brought forth made its way into the white cultural imaginary, albeit still as a conspiracy. The character Storm is basically the Yoruba deity Oyá. Her name, Ororo, is the instrument used to 'sing' Oyá into manifestation. Oyá is lightning and gale force winds, radical change and sudden retribution that verges on the unmanageable. Storm's back story has her in Kenya, but her attributes and powers, her weapons, show that Stan Lee was all the way down. Well, at least as down as he could get. He was not alone.

In the early 1990s, Turtel Onli began a series of black comics that attempted to harness supernatural power, *Sustah Girl* and *Malcolm-10*, but they were largely unchallenging in story quality due to their preoccupation with designing and promoting appropriate blackness. The possibility of a black mutation moved even further in the distance in his work as raw supernatural power, being down for the community, took precedence over storyline, intricately constructed characters, and surprising back story twists. In effect, a black artist does not necessarily make black art.

Later in the same decade, this point was driven home by the creators of Milestone Comics. If blackness is a conspiracy, could one who wears it realistically assume access to it in order to render it as art? Is perhaps the conflation of the visuality of black bodies with the experience of white supremacist views of reality that which characterizes a 'black experience'? How can that experience be rendered visually and to what ends if the white supremacist view of the external world is that it cannot be trusted? What does that look like in the comics?

<div align="center">***</div>

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. As Jeffrey Brown has pointed out in his volume on Milestone comics, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and their Fans* (2001), one of the things which differentiates comic book industrial practices from cinema, music, or novelistic practices is the steady, meaningful contact between the writers and drawers of comics and their fans (p. 10). Not only is there this constant frisson, but fans frequently grow up to either start their own indie comic, or join either DC or Marvel in the comics division. While this has certainly led to evolving storylines for the staple supers and

mutants, it has not led to 'new' heroes, as Brown's thesis maintains. In fact, I would like to point out that it has merely led to a recycling of old tales and misrepresentations, bandied back and forth across whichever line of battle is drawn for dramatic effect.

The conspiracy of blackness has not been thwarted by an attempt at normalizing it.

Blackness is far too savvy and robust for that.

As long as the subtext of black skin remains 'supernatural power', merely changing the cast of characters will not suffice. The possibilities of a genetically driven storyline are profound. The mutants were the children of the atom bomb. As our temporal distance has increased from the Bikini Island tests and the ultimate horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, other, more common chemical reactions have had to take the place of nuclear fusion to create more 'mutations'.

In *Icon*, some type of crowd control agent, meant to be a non-lethal police tool, 'kills' everyone in a particular low-income neighborhood (McDuffie and Bright, 1996). But the power of blackness is so strong that they all come back as 'mutants', albeit evil ones. Class and race collide, creating new, street-smart anti-heroes who recognize the futility of trying to be down with The Man. 'Icon', an alien who falls to earth and takes on the form of an African slave because that's who found him (misfortune all his), is their antagonist, a black Republican brought out of the closet, so to speak, by a soon-to-be-unwed teenage mother, who is also his sidekick. This comic was created by black artists for their venture, Milestone Comics. I find absolutely nothing new about this. In fact, and maybe it's me, but all I can hear whenever I read this comic is '. . . you can take the niggah out of the country, but you can't take the country outta the niggah' – just replace 'country' with 'ghetto'.

But what if our mutations were caused by social dis-ease? What if our genomic traits dispersed or rearranged themselves after years of abusive discursive practices? Yes, this is venturing a wee bit into the new-agey, but really, it has been scientifically proven that words can hurt you and your resultant physiological experience of the words, if repeated over time, can lead to the withering of needed neurotransmitters, or the development of not so useful hyper-aggressive ones. Ponder: 'Rawhide' – a mutant whose skin is thick like an alligator and secretes a deadly venom when objectified. 'Penny' – a racially mixed (really, what does that mean) girl who mutates from having to count loose change all the time to pay for basic needs, her skin shines like copper whenever a transnational business is about to conduct massive layoffs any-where in the world. 'The Whisperer' – a hermaphroditic mutant whose power is to suck the air out of gossipers and backroom deal makers and use it to revitalize the oxygen supplies of a dying planet. What if excessive sweetener caused a mutation? Oh. That's just type 2 diabetes, but you get the point.

Could we think productively and aggressively about the characteristics attributed to race colloquially that are really markers of time and territory? Sickle cell, hypertension, even diabetes are genetically driven story subplots,

yet un-mined for their potential to make the next new mutant. A black body is supernatural, super bad (and that means super good), but is (when statistically aggregated) an ill body, a body in pain, a body with a horrifically short lifespan. It is the spirit that is indomitable, graceful, all-powerful and quite unseen. Visually, black bodies maintain the veneer of the indestructible. Socially, black people are called upon to withstand scarcer resources, more polluted neighborhoods and towns, less daylight (stacks of shipping containers and freeway flyovers). Politically, the black body exerts extreme force by its absence as human in the form of the Electoral College. So we circle back to this conspiracy called blackness, this crisis of representation that so marginalizes people who wear that skin that their own bodies elide narration altogether.

Black bodies are already stories, mythological beasts with epic powers and tragic presaged endings in the faulty perspectivalism of the white supremacist world. In the garish cartoonish world that is supposedly the everyday, black people's feats of heroism, while thriving on the margins, completely obliterate current narrative practices for generating the superpowered and mutated. Moreover, the supernatural qualities ascribed to blackness itself and perpetrated against black bodies – athletic, hyper kinetically oriented, highly aware of surroundings but not astute – perform in each frame of a comic as a character unto itself, frequently revealing themselves in the choreographies of the figures. An artist's perception of a necessity for representing the 'real' when rendering a black body as fictional character almost always reveals the creator's intention of getting it right or righting a wrong, but rarely writing a story. Beyond lines and hatch marks, black superheroes still await their mutations into actual fictional beings. And black people, we're awaiting reality. They said it would be soon.

Notes

1. It's common practice in comic book studies to abbreviate 'superhero' as 'super' and I will do so throughout the rest of the article.
2. A list of all Marvel and DC black characters and supers can be found at [http://www.blacksuperheromuseum.com] Interestingly, Black Panther is considered by some as the first real Marvel black superhero. More on that later.
3. For more on the Double V campaign's visuality, please see the film *Soldiers without Swords* (Stanley Nelson, 1998).
4. Here, I want to step away from the more obvious term 'stereotype' to engage the act of formulating story arc. Stereotype allows us to more succinctly talk about shallow characters, but relying on it as an analytical tool can also take us away from the depth of a narrative device. As an example, the uproar against comics themselves points to an attempt to stabilize these overdetermined narrations against the onslaught of 'disrespect for established authority' (McAllister, 1990: 61).
5. I've decided to manipulate the false sense of surety provided by Power Point framing as a way to underscore the flight from the visual field as a marker for truth. Bulleted, tight, and without distraction, the Power Point presentation is a type of superpower. I also think that Keynote is better, but most readers may not know what that is.

6. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Panther_%28comics%29]. While there are
   those among you howling at my citing an online source at all that is not a PDF
   reprint of a 'real' article, Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia is an interesting
   underscoring of my contention that these tales of white supremacy lurk at a
   depth far greater than a stereotype. The Wikipedia is an open-source,
   collaborative endeavor; any interested party who wishes to help create this
   database may sign up for a user id and password and get to work. Therefore, I
   find it instructive to think about this insistence on a white-created comic book
   character enabling a black political movement.

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