The Representation of Black Masculinity in Hero for Hire #1

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The Representation of Black Masculinity in *Hero for Hire #1*

*Hero for Hire #1* is often touted as a progressive step for the representation of African-Americans in comics. An examination regarding the origin of how Cage received his superpowers and why he chooses to charge for his heroic services construct the major plot points of the story. Cage's conviction of a crime he did not commit causes him to escape from prison, eventually prompting his relocation to Seagate (a maximum security prison). In an attempt at freedom, Cage agrees to partake in a scientific experiment but a guard with a grudge sabotages it, providing Cage with his powers. The major beats of this story relate back to the techniques employed in the blaxploitation genre with negative stereotypes of African-Americans retooled as strengths used to combat a corrupt and dismissive society. While there are elements of negative stereotypes occurring in any blaxploitation story, *Hero for Hire #1* is usually seen as a move toward the inclusion of African-American males in comics and a more positive portrayal of African-American masculinity. However, the story as stated is not the sole focus of the comic. Taking a page from its periodical roots, comics include a series of advertisements interspersed with the main content. Multiple times throughout the comic, images of Cage acting in a brutish manner or suffering abuse by a white man contrast with advertisements of white men enjoying success. The juxtaposition between images of African-American and white masculinity create a dichotomy that devalues the supposed progressive message of Luke Cage as one of the inaugural
African-American superheroes, instead further supporting the stigmatized representation of African-American masculinity in society.

Before moving on to the beginning of the argument, I recognize the merit of using advertisements as part of a text to support the presented claims can be argued against. The advertisements bear no weight on the progression of the narrative. However, studying only the story of Luke Cage while ignoring the advertisements would be similar to reading a reprint or scan of the comic. The inclusion of advertisements (i.e. the exact advertisements that were in the original printing) would be most likely not occur “[erasing] the original historicized meaning” of the text (Bornstein 31). Why would the paratextual material not be acceptable in reprints or scans? Losing said material would result in a misunderstanding of the societal ideals that could have lead to the paratextual construction, and original meaning, of the text. It is imperative that the advertisements are accounted for when analyzing the introduction of Luke Cage. Said advertisements provide invaluable historical context that is vital in understanding the character as any representation of the same comic is. All versions are capable of “[modifying] contemporary constructions of meaning” (Bornstein 31) but to gain a proper historical context, the original comic with the advertisements must count.

Aspects of Cage’s characterization are based on past racial stereotypes (such the brute) of African-American men, however, the reappropriative nature of the blaxploitation genre supposedly subverts those negative stereotypical characteristics in an attempt to provide strength to the character, positively affecting their life. The elements that constructed past racial stereotypes, which tainted the representation of African-American masculinity, are supposedly reworked to craft a positive portrayal of African-American men. To better understand the
negative depiction of Cage when compared to aspects of positive white masculinity, negating the purpose of utilizing blaxploitation tropes, an examination of the antiquated stereotypes that Cage falls victim to is needed. Therefore, by examining the shift in the depiction of masculinity in the United States during the 20th century a clearer picture forms regarding the use of Cage to negatively portray African-American masculinity.

The inspiration for Cage’s character stems from the depiction of African-American men in blaxploitation media. A reappropriation of negative stereotypes concerning African-Americans defending “the black communities and the ghetto streets that they lived in fighting against crooked cops, mobsters, and other street criminals,” were some of the major components that constructed the genre (Lendrum 386). While the use of reappropriated stereotypes as being a successful way to depict the African-American community has been a contested subject, the genre as a whole has allowed for a greater focus on African-American individuals to be the hero instead of a supporting character (Lendrum 368). Therefore, the inclusion of a Cage as the first leading African-American superhero in comics, despite the possible negative connotations that could follow conventions of the blaxploitation genre, would generally be viewed as progressive for the medium of comic books.

As mentioned earlier, the portrayal of Luke Cage, when examined in conjunction with the advertisements, is similar to the negative “brute” stereotype. The purpose of stereotyping African-American masculinity serves “to limit the movement of black men into social positions of importance, influence, and power, [as] black male agency needed to be defined as threatening,” (Morris 79). While this negative societal representation of African-Americans further developed during slavery, the stereotypes of African-American men have shifted over the
past two centuries based on the needs of white masculinity. As society began to move toward becoming “commerce [based with a focus on] industrialization, a normative masculinity was needed that valued intellect and emotional control over physical strength,” (Morris 81). The view of African-American men went from “docile [and] ready to serve [to] brutes harboring a ready anger that threatened at any minute to erupt as violence against [white society]” (Morris 79). Thus, regardless of the intention, it is disconcerting to have Luke Cage be, during the beginning of the comic, presented as both physically imposing yet still powerless against white masculinity. The advertisement, titled “The Insult that Made a Man out of ‘Mac’”, (see fig. 1), before page four of Hero for Hire #1, is in the form of a comic and promotes a “free book” by Charles Atlas that will “give [the bullied character] a real body.” Every character in the advertisement is white and only with a small amount of effort the downtrodden character that gained a ridiculous amount of muscle “later” (no mention of an excessive passage of time occurs between panels) defeats his bully. White masculinity is presented as the only power that can counteract itself. On the subsequent page (see fig. 2) Cage is treated in a dismissive manner by Captain Rackham and shoved around by the white guards. Despite the attempt at presenting African-American masculinity as dangerous, white masculinity is presented as being superior despite the paradoxical nature of displaying the presented physicality of African-American men as negative; it is being established that white masculinity is on the whole “better” than African-American masculinity.
Fig. 1
This comic styled advertisement presents “Mac” becoming physically strong and overcoming hardship, contrasted with the next image where the supposedly strong Cage is harassed by white men.
Fig. 2
Cage being harassed by white guards.
African-American masculinity, despite the excessive representation of their physicality to present white masculinity in a more positive light, is further presented as inferior against any form of white masculinity in Hero for Hire #1. On page five of the comic Cage is paying the price for resisting to work with Rackham. Quirt, a guard, is assaulting Cage by providing false reasons such as Cage being a “stir-crazy punk” who is trying to “[make] a move” at him (Goodwin, et al. 5, see fig. 3). Despite the presentation of Cage as more physically imposing than Quirt, he is still powerless to resist his beatings. The advertisement on the next page achieves a similar effect as the first one. Again when Cage is in a compromising position, the juxtaposition of the image with Arnold Schwarzenegger supporting a muscle enhancement program while holding a white female model (Hero for Hire #1 back of page 6, see fig. 4) provides another positive image of white masculinity occurring next to an instance of weakness for Cage. The dichotomy present between the two images further separates the spheres of African-American masculinity and white masculinity. The one area in which African-American masculinity “succeeds” over white men fails with the representation of Cage when directly compared to the image of a successful, strong white individual. Said images do not assist in progressing the image of African-American masculinity but rather feeds into a then-contemporary reworking of a negative image of African-American masculinity.
Fig. 3
Cage is being physically beaten by a white guard.
Fig. 4
A positive physical representation of white masculinity.
The hyper-physical representation of Cage, his super strength, and extreme durability is a response to both the character's origins based on tropes within the blaxploitation genre and the reappropriation of the negative “brute” stereotype regarding African-American men. Yet, instead of resisting the negative antiquated stereotype, Cage becomes a hyper-stereotype himself. Cage’s brute strength and apparent lack of intelligence become the antithesis of the traditional “Captain America” type of superhero. According to Robert Lendrum, “Cage is stereotyped the most” (368) when compared to other African-American male superheroes of the 1970s. Before Cage gained his powers, his “morality is conflated with the survivalist ethic of the black criminal known as the ‘hustler’,” (Lendrum 368) and yet the event that makes him beyond human, a character who should be a bastion of positive social values, moves in the opposite direction when studying the comparison of Cage's representation to the depiction of white men in the comic. Take the events surrounding Cage receiving his powers: Luke Cage is an unintelligent African-American who was wrongly convicted and must suffer the injustices of the United States criminal system despite the fact that Cage regularly participated in criminal activity before his arrest. Even though Cage is the hero, it is established that Cage is just a stereotype. In an attempt to “hustle” his way out of prison, Cage agrees to take part in an experiment he knows nothing about. Captain Rackham causes a catastrophic accident as revenge against Cage causing him to gain his powers. Cage breaks free of the machine in a dramatic fashion and while completely nude, knocks Rockham out (Goodwin, et al. 12, see fig. 5). According to Lendrum, “technology is considered oppressive and in opposition to the physical world that the black man inhabits,” (366) and Cage breaks free of this oppression by only exaggerating the negative image. The physicality of Cage’s being is on full display in these panels as he becomes a hyper-stereotype of
the “brute”. Consequently, the advertisement on the very next page (Hero for Hire #1 back of page 13, see fig. 6) displays a white man working as an architectural “drafter” advertising the success white masculinity can achieve through their “higher intellect” when compared to the extremely negative representation of intelligence regarding the intelligence of African-American men. The stark contrast between Cage at his most brutish with the image of success of white masculinity due to the artificially inflated gap in intelligence between African-Americans and white individuals cements Cage as a hyper-stereotype that fails to progress the perception of African-American masculinity.

Luke Cage, the first African-American mainstream superhero headliner, through the combination of how he represented African-American masculinity and the positive advertisements with white men further serves a stereotypical image of African-American men and escalates the representation of white masculinity. The representation of Luke Cage in his inaugural work is a promotion of negative stereotypes regarding African-American despite the basis of the work on the blaxploitation genre. Cage’s attempt at freedom, unfortunately, restrict him even further and offers a negative image regarding African-American masculinity.
Fig. 5
Cage utilizing his hyper-physicality to overcome white masculinity and technological restraints.
Fig. 6
Cage’s most physically imposing moment is contrasted with the image of a white man participating in the intellectually based career of architecture.
Works Cited


