

# “The Living Nightmare: Deathlok and African American Slavery in Contemporary Society”

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ENG 359

Dr. Godfrey

The Living Nightmare: *Deathlok* and African American Slavery in Contemporary Society

Marvel's limited series *Deathlok* #1-4 ends its third issue with Deathlok confronting his creator Harlan Ryker at the corporate headquarters of Roxxon Oil. Deathlok laments Ryker's murder of his old self and the life he lived as Michael Collins, a black man employed at Roxxon Oil who worked for Ryker in the cybernetics department. Collins, as Deathlok, asks Ryker, "Was it whimsey that made you put me into your precious toy? Was it the puppeteer in you that found joy in programming me to destroy, in forcing me to kill?" (*Deathlok* #3, Figure 1). The Deathlok in this scene is almost the antithesis of the Michael Collins the reader is presented at the beginning of the comics. Deathlok the cyborg is a physical monstrosity, a walking weapon who is frequently mocked and scorned even by the very people he saves as a superhero. He is a lonely, demonized figure who lives on the fringes of society in abandoned warehouses with vagrants. It is through this alienation and demonization by society, as well as Deathlok's purpose as a weapon for Roxxon oil, that has lead Rivera and Foster to declare the post-cyborg transformation of Deathlok as a metaphor for modern African-American slavery. In comparison, Collins' pre-Deathlok stable and loving home life, advanced education, and successful career paint him as a man who has seemingly overcome all of the racist and false stereotypes that have been used to deride the black community – laziness, absent fathers, superpredators without morals and empathy. However, as the reader comes to see, the pacifist Collins is part of a system that has enslaved him without him even knowing. Collins work at Cybertek has, unbeknownst to

Collins, actually been to create prosthetic limbs for the Deathlok cyborg, a machine used by Roxxon Oil to kill South American villagers living on oil land. Collins will eventually be murdered and used to power the Deathlok cyborg, a literal manifestation of the historical middle passage and recurring exploitation of the black body throughout American history (Foster 150), but Collins was a slave to his white masters long before his time as Deathlok. Michael Collins origin story in *Deathlok* #1-4 is used to depict the realities of black servitude to whiteness, in all of its forms, where black bodies are used and forced against their will to put forward destructive and unethical interests that have changed little since the era of legal slavery.

Deathlok as a character, across his iterations in the Marvel Universe, is created to be a non-sentient cyborg weapon that uses an unconscious human brain as battery. However, in each iteration, this human brain becomes conscious and resists the commands of its controllers. Michael Collins was the third iteration of Deathlok in the Marvel comic universe. The character first appeared in *Astonishing Tales* #25 in August of 1974 as Colonel Luther Manning, an American soldier. Manning, a white man, has his consciousness moved by Simon Ryker into the Deathlok cyborg in order to save his life and preserve his military tactical expertise. Ryker attempts to use Manning as a soldier in a battle for world domination, but Manning's memories eventually cause him to rebel, and he works against Ryker instead. The Manning Deathlok then goes on to appear in a number of other crossover comics, working with Spiderman, S.H.I.E.L.D., and Daredevil among others. The next iteration of Deathlok, John Kelly, another white man, appeared briefly in *Marvel Comics Presents* #62 in 1990. A Vietnam war veteran who had recently lost his job as a police officer, Kelly volunteers his brain to Harlan Ryker, Simon Ryker's brother, to help reconstruct Deathlok. However, in his first mission as Deathlok, Kelly's brain disobeys an order and is electrocuted.

Michael Collins first appears as Deathlok in the limited series *Deathlok* #1-4, produced by an African-American team lead by writer Dwayne McDuffie. Michael Collins, the first black Deathlok, is the first Deathlok whose placement inside the cyborg contains no “positive” motives. Whereas Manning was placed in Deathlok to preserve his brain, and Kelly volunteers for Deathlok out of desperation for a second chance, Collins is placed into Deathlok entirely against his will, a key metaphor for the lived experience of blackness in America (Rivera 105). Working at Cybertek, a division of Roxxon Oil, the reader is introduced to Collins as he is working on an artificial limb project. However, upon investigation into the project he is working on, the pacifist Collins discovers the artificial limbs he is producing are for a secret weapons project – Deathlok. Upon confronting Harlan Ryker about the project, Ryker shoots Collins with a sedative and uses Collins brain to power Deathlok. Collins first mission as the power source for Deathlok involves the murder of an entire village of natives in the Amazon rainforest, a region where Roxxon Oil has a significant capital interest (Figure 2).

Collins’ brain being used against his will to power a machine that serves corporate interests of Roxxon gives a clear parallel to slavery (Foster 150), but Collins can be seen to have been just as much a slave to white corporatism before being turned into Deathlok. As a cog in the corporate machine of Roxxon and unwitting accessory to the murder of Roxxon’s economic enemies, Collins actively works against his own personal worldview – pacifism – and only possesses the illusion of free will, as evidenced by his confrontation of Harlan Ryker upon finding out about the truth of the Deathlok project. The fact that Collins had secretly been working on a weapon underlies the completeness of Collins’ betrayal by white, corporate America. The reader is introduced to Collins as he lectures his son on the negative connotations of violence in video games, and his origin story contains at least three other references to

Collins' pacifism before his eventual transformation. It can be seen that through this emphasis, Collins' commitment to non-violence is perhaps his most treasured virtue. Before confronting Ryker, Collins tells his wife that he must quit his job on "moral grounds" and then tells Ryker, "We've got to do something about this." In Collins mind, he has not only the ability to act as he wishes and abandon his work on Deathlok, but also the agency to bring the program to a stop. Both sentiments prove to be false, as Ryker tranquilizes Collins and uses his body to finally bring Deathlok back to life.

Collins lack of agency and free will in response to the horrors of Roxxon brings to life the racial underpinnings upon which the American neoliberal capitalist society has historically been built. Collins is depicted as the sole African American member of the Cybertek staff, which is shown to be dominated by older white males. The illusions Collins possesses of being the equal of his white peers are shattered when it is revealed by his research partner that he was only member of the Deathlok artificial limb project kept in the dark about Deathlok's true purpose. Collins, just as he was the only black member of Cybertek, was the only Cybertek member with moral leanings against the violence in which Deathlok would be used. Collins, however, despite his differences has bought into white, corporate America, and attempted to assimilate as best he can (Foster 156). While extreme in Collins case, the illusion of African-American assimilation into a capitalist system that cares little for them extends far beyond the comic walls of *Deathlok*. As stated by Abraham Iqbal Khan, "The problem with neoliberalism is not that it asks us to be anti-racist ... but that it demonizes collective action, occludes class consciousness, and forestalls the formation of plausible solidarities." Through his work in creating Deathlok, Collins has become a part of a capitalist machine that aims for the profits of the capitalist, often at the expense of minority groups. Collins assimilation into white, corporate America, however, has

left him falsely colorblind, a fact he later acknowledges in *Deathlok #2* (monthly series p. 13). This colorblindness towards minorities is encouraged by the capitalist system which has hoodwinked Collins, as it “obscures race’s material effects in criminal justice, education, employment, housing” (Khan 41) in service of capitalist profits that would be harmed by the collective action of dispossessed and underrepresented groups. Collins’ unwitting role in a system that can be so harmful towards minorities such as himself is literally manifested by Deathlok’s eventual terror spree in the Amazon rainforest, powered by Collins’ unconscious mind.

Collins eventual transformation into Deathlok eventually reveals the otherness in which he lives, as the actual Deathlok cyborg is a physically monstrous and unrecognizable as human, but Collins was always othered even if he never knew. According to Foster, “Deathlok's physical body is racially marked, in ways that this relatively privileged, middle-class black man comes to appreciate only after he becomes a cyborg, his relationship to the category of the universally human was already problematic” (153). The root of Collins attempted assimilation into a social class that actively works against him can perhaps be best seen through the lens of Frantz Fanon’s work, a black philosopher who lived in the French colony of Martinique. Describing the lived experience as a black man under white colonial rule, Fanon states, “The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly” (“The Fact,” 324) and “As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro.” (325). According to Fanon, the ugliness asserted onto black people by their white oppressors becomes conditioned and eventually internalized. This leads the colonized and oppressed black to eventually attempt to outwardly portray himself in the only manner that is not demonized, white (*Black Skin*, 20). Writing in the 1950s, Fanon’s arguments still hold water in contemporary society, as black

people often must perform as ‘non-black’ – or disassociate themselves as strongly as possible from black stereotypes – in order to be accepted by white society. This required externalization of white qualities is inherently engrained in the previously discussed American system which enslaved Michael Collins, as those black people who act non-black “may be believed to be less likely to disturb the implicit racial order – white people as dominant and black people as subordinate.” (Jackson). As such, the internalization of Collins’ oppression at the hand of white America leads him to perform as non-black and assimilate into white, capitalist, corporate America, the only way that he can be allowed to succeed. As Fanon says in his essay “The Negro and Language”, the colonized person will only be treated as a real human being “in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness.” (419).

The performative actions of Collins may perhaps best be seen then through what he does not do. Collins himself, prior to being turned into Deathlok, neither acknowledges his blackness nor bears any cultural traits that would denote him as black. In fact, if it were not for the comic book form, the reader would have no way of knowing that Collins and his family were black at all. In the brief moments we see Collins before being transformed he is explicitly presented as contradicting many harmful black stereotypes, and embraces many white stereotypes. Much of the presentation of pre-Deathlok Collins could then be seen not only through the lens of Fanon, but also the more contemporary studies of Fordham and other scholars. In her studies on successful black students, Fordham has documented a frequent burden to act “white” in school settings – this is due to the fact that whiteness is inherently associated with success and blackness its opposite. As Fordham states:

[acting White] is the embodiment of what U.S. culture has historically defined as success and quintessentially American...[that is] what the culture defines as success and as “the” U.S. identity continues to be the prerogative of those who are White, as well as male. To put it bluntly: White and Whiteness are synonyms for power. (qtd. Stinson 62)

Following Fordham’s claims, the lack of “blackness” associated with Collins, as evidenced by there being no tangible attachment of black culture to Collins throughout his origin story, must be seen as forced upon him by white society. As Fordham argues, whiteness is synonymous with success and power, and, as such, the black man who wants to succeed must embrace that whiteness if he hopes to get ahead. Therefore, Collins struggles with two similar but slightly different concepts – that society’s white colonial mindset, as discussed by Fanon, demonizes black skin, but also a society that equates professional success with cultural whiteness.

Not all of Collins’ origin story can be seen as performative, but rather the workings of Collins upper middle class, stable life are explicitly emphasized in a manner that contradicts many false stereotypes surrounding the black community. Collins is introduced in a stable and loving home bemoaning how he needs to spend more time with his son (*Deathlok* 1. #1, Figure 3), an admirable sentiment that conspicuously and explicitly contradicts the myth of absent black fathers, a false narrative which has unfortunately been thrust upon the black community as a scapegoat for the consequences of oppression (Smith). Being a good father isn’t performative, nor is having a stable marriage, but the choice to introduce Collins in a manner that runs contrary to well established racist narratives disparaging the black community help to illustrate the foundation for Collins being the kind of black man that white America would like. Further, Collins is a computer scientist, a field that has historically been dominated by white men and

been gated by expensive degrees and bigoted hiring practices (Myers). Again, being a successful computer scientist is not necessarily performative, but, as noted, it is a very “white” job that allows for Collins further assimilation into white corporate America. Rather than being performative, Collins’ stable suburban life and white-collar job allow the narrative to frame Collins as the type of black man one could expect not to be othered in white society if such a thing were possible. As Brian Jones says, “As a middle-class, light-skinned black man I am ‘better’ by American standards but there is no amount of assimilation that can shield you from racism in the US.” The performance then lies in the previously discussed detachment from black culture and assimilation (which, as previously discussed, is acknowledged by cyborg form Collins as Deathlok in a later issue). Collins bears all the traits of assimilation that could be asked of him, yet due to his skin he still must perform in the vein of Fanon for he will always be the colonized in the eyes of white America. As Woods says, “there is no ethical accounting of racial politics that leaves violence by the wayside.” (444). Collins may be forced by white society to embrace whiteness as best he can, but he will never be able to leave behind the slavery and violence against blackness that is inherent in American society.

For all intents and purposes, Collins home life, house, personality, and career possess the attributes of whiteness, but Collins is still othered despite doing being the opposite of all the black stereotypes used to demonize black culture, and the embodiment of many white stereotypes. As previously discussed, Collins otherness as a black male in his work place is manifested not only by his being forced to power Deathlok, but by being the sole member of his team not let in on the Deathlok secret. As such, Collins attempted assimilation is proven to be a false dream, and the performance forced upon him to be successful at his all white workplace proven futile. It is this very performance, forced upon him by a society that expects the

assimilation to whiteness, that ultimately leads to his undoing, as his success in corporate America is merely used, through his unwitting part in Deathlok, to continue the racial order and allow the ultra-white Roxxon – especially after they murder their only black employee, Collins – to further advance their capitalist interests through the murder of oppressed racial groups. What is key is that Collins is shown to have no choice in the matter: either he performs and upholds the racial structure, or he subverts and is punished. When Collins discovers that Roxxon is using him to create a profit-ensuring weapon, he, as previously discussed, confronts Harlan Ryker with not the threat, but the promise, of exposing the Deathlok program. Here the narrative depicts Collins embracing his otherness, going against the grain of a workplace that is the embodiment of white, corporate greed. As soon as he does stop his performance, however, white, corporate, capitalist America, embodied in Harlan Ryker, acts to both prevent his subversion and continue his enslavement to their profit seeking interests. Collins is murdered, his body desecrated, and used to power the very machine he attempted to speak out against, proving that in many ways the performance that Collins gave was essential to his very well-being, and borne not out of any selfish desire to succeed but rather as a foundational aspect of his survival as a black man in white America. As such, Collins can be seen as enslaved by white, corporate America, forced to lead a life that raises no red flags and refuses to rock the boat all while being exploited to advance the profit-based goals of his superiors.

*Deathlok* #1-4 tells the story of Michael Collins as he is transformed into the conduit for the Deathlok cyborg, a machine used to advance the corporate profits of Roxxon Oil. As the first black iteration of Deathlok, the use of Collins bodily organs against his will to power a machine antithetical to his moral views conspicuously brings to mind the horrors of the enslavement of black Americans. However, Collins need not be literally turned into a cyborg against his will to

be enslaved; instead, Collins transformation into Deathlok is merely a literal manifestation of the oppression, colonization, and enslavement faced by black Americans every day. Collins, before Deathlok, still faced the exploitation of his labor for the benefit of a corporate machine that actively worked to oppress minorities. Further, centuries of oppression and colonization presented Collins with few options but to either perform as subservient and nonthreatening to his masters, or face punishment – manifested through his murder and transformation into Deathlok following Collins’ rebellion against being exploited for the Deathlok project. Even when Collins did perform, he was still othered and oppressed, as his superiors kept him in the dark about the Deathlok mission. The subtitle for the *Deathlok* #1-4 limited series is “The Living Nightmare of Michael Collins,” alluding to the torture Collins feels being forced to live as an outcast from society in the Deathlok body. However, the Deathlok body was merely a manifestation of the nightmare African Americans had been forced to live in under corporate America, a nightmare that began for Collins long before he became Deathlok.

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