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REPRESENTATION AND METAPHORS FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN MARVEL COMICS

Brian Powell

The comics industry in the middle and late twentieth century was a mainstay of progressive politics, particularly in the field of minority representation. Writers like Stan Lee, Chris Claremont, Don McGregor, Jack Kirby, Dave Cockrum, and Marvel Comics in particular, spread ideas of the Civil Rights movement to their predominantly white readership in the 1960s and 1970s. Through metaphor and representation, Marvel Comics used its platform to push the ideas of progressive politics to echo the changing real world around them.

In 1963, the legendary creative team of Stan "The Man" Lee and Jack "King" Kirby set out to create a comic book title that would reflect the strife of the Civil Rights movement at its peak. Lee titled it, "X-men." They were a group of young mutants, meaning they were born with special abilities such as telepathy and bird-like wings, led by their wheelchair-bound teacher, "Professor X." The concept of mutants is an allegory for marginalized members of society such as people of color in America. Typically, humans hated mutants for the simple fact that they were different even though the X-men frequently saved the world from threats such as the evil mutant "Magneto" and his "Brotherhood of Evil Mutants." The metaphors used to liken Marvel's X-men to the Civil Rights movement did not stop there. Some readers observed the contrast between Professor X and Magneto as a metaphor for the distinction between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Professor X is a peaceful man with a vision of "harmonious human-mutant coexistence,"¹ similar to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Magneto as a militant with a "rigid attitude toward the defense of mutant-kind."² These comics were written during a time when Civil Rights leaders like King and X were marching and delivering grand speeches calling on the people of the United States to act in the benefit of their fellow man. The first issue of the X-men released in late September of 1963, hardly a month after King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. In 1965, Marvel introduced the "Sentinels."³ The "Sentinels" were giant robots created to hunt mutants and kill them.

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The introduction of these characters was a response to the Los Angeles riots in 1965, protests against police brutality. The X-men is the most political comic book title of the 1960s.

Alas, politics does not always lead to commercial success and, in 1970, the X-men comic books were canceled, and would not be revived until 1975, by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum. Wein and Cockrum's run on the X-men comics started with *Giant-Size X-men #1*. This comic introduced an all-new team lineup, including Storm, the first African-American female superhero to be published, Thunderbird, a Native American, Sunfire, a Japanese man, and others.⁴ In fact, only one white American male appeared in the lineup. All other characters came from a different ethnic background or nationality. The inclusion of these characters reflected a more significant movement at Marvel comics to push for greater diversity in comic books. This is in part because if Marvel produced cartoons with a broader range of ethnicities and backgrounds for the characters, it would increase the odds relating to the character and wanting to buy the comic book. The loosening of the Comics Code rules in 1971 may also explain these phenomena.

The Comics Code was a set of rules put forth by Congress to censor comic books. The infantilization of the 1950s and 60s comic books stories with goofy premises and silly tropes are attributed almost solely to the Comics Code. Before 1971, a comic book could not even mention illegal drug use or even death. Interpersonal conflict between characters on the side of good was almost non-existent. With the disillusionment of the post-Vietnam and Watergate era, Congress stopped worrying about what

was in comics and allowed for a relaxation of the comics codes.

Writers created more realistic stories with real-life conflicts like explicit racism, the loss of a loved one, corruption, drug abuse and poverty. Wein and Cockrum, followed by Chris Claremont, took the racism angle of storytelling to heart as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby had and widened the team's lineup to include several different ethnic groups. The characters and storylines that came from this period became the classic X-men that come to mind.

The characters that Wein, Cockrum, and Claremont popularized in the 1970s are still around today. Storm has gone on to no longer be considered the "token" black character in the X-men and became an official leader of the team in *X-men vol. 2 #1*, in October of 1991.⁵ She has been a mainstay of the comics and a fan favorite since her inception in 1975. Storm is the prime example of representation in the X-men as a character because she is notably a role model to the younger members of the team, educated and well spoken. She goes through her fair share of hardships in her stories, but remains strong, independent and kind throughout her publication history, thus making her not only a role model for African-Americans but young women of all backgrounds.

While the X-men were definitively the most political comics of the 1960s, they by several politically charged characters and series followed. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby introduced the character, *Black Panther*, in the pages of *Fantastic Four* in 1966.⁶ Often recognized as the first black superhero, *Black Panther* was the ruler of an Afrofuturistic utopian nation in Africa called Wakanda. Wakanda appeared as a nation that was prosperous, peaceful, and, most importantly, free from the influences of European colonialism. Naturally, this made *Black Panther* a symbol of black power and culture from the 1960s to the present. *Black Panther* was not, however, named after the Black Panther Party, as the creation of the character predated the Black Panther Party.

While *Black Panther* did not obtain a regular title until 1977, he was a frequent guest star in the short-lived *Jungle Action* comic books. The famous story of *Black Panther*

vs. *The Ku Klux Klan*⁷ by Don McGregor initially came from these comic books. The story was controversial, and the creative team was discouraged from continuing the story at every turn. Thus, *Jungle Action* was canceled in 1976, citing low sales, except among college students.⁸ The cancelation of the series is evidence of a more cynical Marvel publishing company. Their sales were reportedly not doing as well as they would have liked; therefore, they decided to cancel a controversial book.

Over the years, *Black Panther* became a more central character in many stories Marvel published, including series of his own on and off since 1977. In 2018, Marvel Studios adapted *Black Panther* into a film starring Chadwick Boseman and directed by Ryan Coogler.⁹ The film consisted of an almost entirely black cast, a first for Marvel Studios, and a rare occurrence in Hollywood films in general. The black community and filmgoers the world over lauded it as one of the best films of the year, earning numerous awards and praises, including an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture. Critics and audiences loved it, and it represented a massive point for the black community. Shaun King wrote in an article for Medium.com that the success of *Black Panther* was a critical achievement for the African American community. He claimed the movie's success was as significant as Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus, the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States, and even Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Shaun King goes on to explain how excellent it is to have a movie focused around black people that "showed us our families in one piece. No war on drugs. No mass incarceration. No KKK. No lynching. No racial profiling. No police brutality."¹⁰ Media has often depicted African American based films as families being torn apart by the things listed above. However, *Black Panther* was about the empowerment of the black community, presenting Wakanda as a kind of black utopia. The team behind the film wanted to give young black people something to aspire to, like white children already have *Captain America*, Thor, and Iron Man.

While *Black Panther* was the first black superhero, he did not get his own title until 1977. The first black superhero to receive a titular comic series was Luke

Cage in 1972. Luke Cage was a wrongfully accused ex-convict, a victim of the war on drugs, who was subjected to scientific experimentation while he was in prison. A racist and abusive guard caused an accident during one of the experiments. This accident during the testing gave him super strength and unbreakable skin. After leaving prison, Luke went to Harlem, New York to live, but had trouble finding work being an ex-con. He decided to be a superhero for hire in New York, as well as policing his neighborhood of Harlem.¹¹ Popular blaxploitation films of the time like *Shaft* and *Superfly* largely influenced his stories. Luke Cage wore flashy clothes, possessed a limited vocabulary, and used the catchphrase "Sweet Christmas" as the Comics Code prohibited swearing in comic books. All of these features are shared with the characteristics of blaxploitation films. On top of this, Cage's origin story is reminiscent of medical experiments performed on African Americans. This is particularly true of the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments in which government officials infected numerous black men with syphilis and then refused to treat them just to see what the effects of untreated syphilis were. This experiment made the front page of the *New York Times* the very same month that Luke Cage made his comic book debut. Due to the incident's popularity at the time that it is highly unlikely that the two are not related, given Marvel's history of reacting to current events with stories.

In early 2005, Luke Cage became a member of the Avengers superhero team.¹² He did play somewhat play the role of the token black character in the series, but he also played an essential role in the way the team operated. Being a community-based superhero in Harlem, he was used to working on street corners and tackling gangs and drug dealers. This affected the team visibly in issue sixteen when the team went to Detroit, Michigan, and just stood at an intersection in a particularly crime-ridden neighborhood.¹³ This tactic is known as proactive policing. It is a tactic used to ingratiate the police with the local community and scare off undesirable elements by showing police presence, and often force. It is the equivalent of a police car parked on the side of a busy highway where many people break the speed limit. Everyone slows down. Luke Cage had the *Avengers* do this with street crime.

With the arrival in 2016 of the Netflix-produced television show starring Mike Colter as Luke Cage, Marvel saw yet another political moment to seize. The numerous shootings by police of unarmed black males led to a boiling point of racial tension in the United States, punctuated by protests from the Black Lives Matter movement. In the series, Luke Cage stands up to police brutality unabashedly wearing a hoodie, much like the style that Trayvon Martin wore when gunned down in his own neighborhood⁸. Luke Cage is a black man that does not need to fear confrontation with the police because they could not harm him if they wanted to. His persona is like a fantasy that was tailor-made for the year 2016. It was a fantasy of power for members of the black community in the United States.

In September of 1969 by Stan Lee and artist Gene Colan created another early African-American superhero Sam Wilson, also known as the Falcon.¹⁴ The Falcon, recognizable from the *Avengers* film franchise, could fly using mechanical wings and had a bird sidekick of his own name Redwing. Initially, he was only a minor character in a *Captain America* story, not even being given a name until the middle of the second issue in which he appeared. However, Sam Wilson became so popular that Lee decided to give the character more press time. Falcon became a regular sidekick to *Captain America*, particularly in predominantly African-American neighborhoods in New York City, such as Harlem. The Falcon and Captain America even shared the title billing on their comics for most of the 1970s.

While most of Marvel's comic characters and story arcs present a progressive look at race and politics, the Falcon's history is slightly more muddled and controversial. In *Captain America #186* by Steve Englehart, Falcon, who had always been depicted as a social worker for troubled youth in Harlem up to that point, was revealed to have been a career criminal for several years and having numerous mob connections.¹⁵ This goes against the traditional Marvel mold of progressive ideas by insinuating that the black character, who was one of the very few black characters present in the comics at the time, was a criminal. This was against the progressive ideas of

the company and was changed in the early 2000s. In *Avengers* #181, the Avengers draft a new team under the supervision of their new United States government liaison, Henry Peter Gyrich.¹⁶ Henry Peter Gyrich is often used in comic books as a metaphor for government red tape, which is rarely a good thing in the comic industry. In this particular instance, Gyrich was there to ensure that the Avengers complied with the United States government hiring policies, namely minority hiring. Gyrich announced that the lineup would include the Falcon, but not Hawkeye, who had been an Avenger for many years at this point. The United States minority hiring practices were given as the main reason for this, and since *Black Panther* was not available, they decided to go with Falcon. Falcon resented being patronized as the "token" black member of the team and quit the team at his very first opportunity. This is not a progressive way to talk about affirmative action because typically, the liberal view is that the government should get minorities into positions by just about any means necessary and the fact that Falcon feels patronized and resentful counters the benefits of affirmative action.

In November of 2014, Sam Wilson, took on the mantle of Captain America when the original one, Steve Rogers, was

unable to continue. He became the leader of the newest *Avengers* team that years earlier, he felt he did not deserve even to be a member of.¹⁷ This team itself was a second diversity push. The group consisted of Ms. Marvel, a young Pakistani-American girl, Nova, a young Hispanic boy, Thor, who had become a woman via magical purposes, and the new black Hispanic Spider-Man, Miles Morales. This push for diversity brought new minority characters in, but also marked a higher standing for the older characters like *Black Panther*, Luke Cage, and the Falcon. They all lead the Avengers at some point and enjoy a spotlight that they no longer are required to share with white characters.

Throughout the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, characters like *Black Panther*, Luke Cage and Falcon have enjoyed growth as characters and objects of attention in the public sphere. Their inclusion in the overall narrative of the Marvel comic books could have happened at any time. However, the fact that they arrived at a time when people of color were fighting for civil rights in America showed Marvel writers' and editors' support for the ideals of the civil rights movement and the black community as a whole.

ENDNOTES

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