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HYPERMASCULINITY AND INFANTILIZATION OF BLACK SUPERHEROES: ANALYSIS OF LUKE CAGE AND RAGE ORIGIN STORIES

Abstract: This study covers the relation between popular superhero culture and racial difference, specifically, narratives about black superheroes. With the analysis of the origin stories of two black superheroes, Luke Cage and Rage, the paper will point out how their stories consequently and predominantly form discourses of representing difference through the process of infantilization, and by perpetuating stereotypes saturated primarily in hypermasculinity. By theoretically framing the notions of representation of difference within the works of Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha, this analysis argues that hypermasculinity, anger issues, and infantilization came as specific subversive popular culture texts to respond to social and cultural challenges and problems in American society. In so doing, these discourses formed new stereotypes and maintained their circularity in expressing differences between the dominant white area in America's society and various ethnic and racial minorities.

Key words: race, hypermasculinity, infantilization, superhero comic-books, discourse, stereotypes.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the representation of race, primarily black superheroes, in comic-book narratives. The main point of the analysis is how something seemingly contradictive, as infantilization and hypermasculinity, makes a pivotal aspect in the discursive process of including racial difference in primarily masculine and white superhero area. Furthermore, the portrayal of the black body in relation to these discursive processes and its dependence on American national identity will be presented. The notion of national identity is substantial in this kind of discussion. It enables a further understanding of how exactly race is consequently excluded through the processes that seemingly include racial diversity in popular superhero narratives. Stereotypes about the black male are placed in the center of rethinking the role of two black superheroes, Luke Cage and Rage. Their origin stories are embroiled within the context of American society primarily as a critique and reflection of its problems, but consequently extinguished through the process of stereotyping. We approach the notion of the black body as crucial in understanding how stereotypes about black men in popular superhero culture are formed.

Relying on the theoretical aspect of stereotypes and representation framed by Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha, the issue of representing race through the specific code of the body is divided into two main arguments: Firstly, black superheroes are presented through hypermasculinity and infantilization that place them on the outskirts of what is labeled as dominant national identity in the United States; Secondly, the subversive elements identified through a close reading of stories about Luke Cage and Rage establish new forms of stereotyping that reinforce circular stereotyping – an impossibility of escaping specific determinants of presenting racial difference that fall into the category of stereotyping.

REPRESENTATION OF RACE AS A PART OF THE NARRATIVITY OF THE NATION

The relationship between American identity and superheroes is covered thoroughly in the work by Jason Dittmer entitled *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* (2013). His perspective is vital for the discussion on superhero narratives and national identity, primarily for his discussion of "the importance of superhero origins in connecting to and shaping national narratives" (Dittmer, 2013, p. 64) and of "how national identity is not a taken-for-granted 'thing', but rather something produced (among other avenues) through narrative, artistry, and consumption" (Dittmer, 2013, p. 124). His work also provides

the basis for further research on the significance of national identity and superhero narratives. One of the ways to continue this kind of research is by incorporating the representation of race that is covered in some of the recent scholarly work.

For example, *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (2013), edited by Sheena Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II, is a study that, through analyses by multiple scholars, problematizes the representation of race in comic books, although mainly relating it to many other phenomena such as film or animated adaptations with focus on black authors and their personal experience in the comic-book industry. In his book *Superblack: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (2011), Adilifu Nama, presents the most concise overview of black superheroes and their distinct archetypes. Nama brings insight into various trends that have appeared in American popular culture by relating these archetypes to the film industry. Rob Lendrum represents one of the scholarly tendencies to reexamine the representation of black superhero masculinity. He analyzed the first four black superheroes in the 1970s – Luke Cage, Black Goliath, Brother Voodoo and The Black Panther. With their stereotypical portrayal drawn from Blaxploitation films, Lendrum notes the inevitability in presenting black masculinity outside the confines of gender dichotomy as well as racial relations. Black superheroes thus function within simplistic narrative developments like white superheroes (Lendrum, 2005, pp. 369–370). Even though there is a significant interest in African-American experience in superhero narratives, scholarly work is still scarce when it comes to topics of (hyper)masculinity, and especially infantilization. The analysis of racial difference often enters the domain of stereotypes, which are, as postulated by Homi Bhabha, premised on the dependency on a "continuous and repetitive chain of other stereotypes" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 77).

Hypermasculinity and infantilization are seen here as part of the same chain and intertwined within the discursive sphere of the nation. One of the most detailed works on the subject can be found in Ronald L. Jackson's book *Scripting the Black Masculine Body* (2006), where he overviews the importance and symbolism of the black body through history and contextualizes it within the acts of gazing, punishing and sexualizing as well as within the sphere of economy: "The body can be said to be political because it, as an immediately identifiable and visible marker of difference, accounted for the distribution of material, spatial, temporal resources" (Jackson, 2006, p. 15). Whether it is fetishized, beaten, killed, or used as a canvas upon which hate is poured, the black body has become one of the main foundations in the discursive construction of American national culture. Stuart Hall sees national culture as a discourse, a product culturally and socially constructed from various congested discourses and powers (Hall, 1992, p. 613). This kind of approach enables us to think about discourses about racial difference as something that has an analytical potential.

Issues elaborated thoroughly in Jackson's work point to the perpetuating history of using the black body, especially in the context of the American economy that is an epitome of American greatness, or in other words, an essential part of the national identity that is culturally and socially constructed.

HYPERMASCULINITY AND INFANTILIZATION – ANALYSIS OF LUKE CAGE ORIGIN STORY

It is important to note that neither Luke Cage nor Rage are the only and first black superheroes/antiheroes in comic-book history. Many note the Black Panther and his first appearance in *Fantastic Four* in this regard, as well as many other characters besides Luke Cage and Rage that appeared in Marvel and DC comic book universe. The analysis presented here uses these two superheroes as examples of the most dominant discourses regarding race and American identity that are prevalent in superhero comic-book narratives.

The first issue of *Luke Cage*, written by Archie Goodwin, was published in 1972, containing a critique of the American judicial and jail system as well as police brutality. The cover of the first issue notes this by its visual inscription around the image of the new black superhero Luke Cage. Placed in the center of the cover, Luke is portrayed alongside various social symbols. His body equipped with a giant chain instead of a regular belt and silver accessories on his forehead and his wrist, in yellow stylized clothes from which the black body jumps out in the chest area, enunciates the rage Luke has and is compatible with the red, shadowy background that connotes his past and present, the surroundings within which he is contextualized. Through this illustration, we can see what makes the body of "a superhero […] yet unlike any other before him" (Goodwin, Romita & Tuska, 1972, p. 2). That body is additionally emphasized by a second layer of red background filled with cards, dice, night bars, and women, alluding to an area of various illegal acts such as gambling, striptease, and prostitution. These images gradually disappear from the right side of the cover to the left, and are replaced with the portrayal of two white police officers and one black prisoner. The prisoner is lying on the ground, presumably due to the violence committed by the policemen, with one of them still bent on hurting him. The policeman's hyperbolized left fist marks a superior position to the smaller black hands The positioning of Luke Cage in the center of the cover connotes his superior, heroic position that symbolically defies policemen's violence. The cover announces "The sensational Origin issue" (Goodwin et al., 1972, p. 1), leaving out what exactly is sensational about it. By carefully reading the first issue, it can be concluded that its *sensational* aspect can be two-fold. The first element is the fact

that the cover states that Luke Cage is a "Hero for Hire" (Goodwin et al., 1972: 1). He is presented as someone who charges his services, unlike other superheroes who save and help people just because it is the right thing to do. The second element is the black body that connotes a dirty past and criminality. On the cover, Luke Cage's body is placed in the oxymoronic situation of being a prisoner and a superhero. This placement makes a case for the body as a political area, as something that cannot be clearly labeled as heroic – it is a part of the process of Othering. As Hall (1992) and Bhabha (1994) note, the process of Othering is significant in establishing stereotypical notions based on creating a difference. Othering entails labeling someone as a liability and a threat. That *someone* is a social and cultural construct that needs to be managed, extinguished or represented as something on the outskirts of wanted identity formation (in this case, national identity formation). In short, Luke Cage is (some sort) of a hero, but he is sensational because he belongs in the area of the Other.

Goodwin[1] portrayed the character of Luke Cage as full of anger, primarily because he was wrongfully jailed, and because of the police brutality he experienced in jail. Due to his inferiority, he ends up as a test rat and gains power through an accidental experiment. He breaks out of jail, living as a fugitive, only back home in Harlem, helping people. In these first issues, Cage is often portrayed without his shirt, enunciating his muscles and physical performance. For example, in the first frame in which Cage gets his powers, we see him naked, aggressive, and angry. These elements are evidence of his sexualization reminiscent of similar discourses found in Blaxploitation movies.[2] The black body is used here as an apparatus of differentiating black superheroes from other (already established) images of superhero characters. Luke is encrypted with elements of hypermasculine and objectified body that mirror the already established stereotypical style from the movies.

The story of wrongful incarceration and corrupt police officers is one of the main themes in the first issue that enables the reading of these topics as a critique of the juridical system in America. In 1972, during the upheaval of many social protests and discussions about racism within the official bodies of the nation, Goodwin chose to present Luke's origin story intertwined with social injustices that were a common theme in the public sphere. To present someone like Luke Cage as a superhero can be

[1] It should be noted that the first issues were penciled by George Tuska and inked by Billy Graham and they were also credited as co-creators of Luke Cage, together with Archie Goodwin and John Romita Sr.

[2] For more on this subject, see Lendrum (2005).

interpreted as subversive. Nevertheless, what is interesting in Luke Cage's stories is that the *subversiveness* gets obtruded by hypermasculine and sexualized aspects of his narratives. Goodwin's Luke Cage is trying to survive and earn some money with his superpowers, but the authors decided to concentrate on his body and his aggressiveness and use his body as a canvas upon which various stereotypical portrayals of black people in popular culture are drawn. Such an approach to his body serves as a kind of record, an inscription of the construct that was imposed on black characters in popular fiction.

Masculinity as a discourse enabled one more way of looking at race as transforming the male body into a sexualized one, something that was previously encrypted in the female body and now applied primarily to the passivized black body (Nixon, as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 293). If we use Sean Nixon's point about masculinity on a general level (and general level includes primarily whiteness), we can analyze how it is different when race comes into the equation. Enforcing the discourse about masculinity with competitiveness, aggressiveness, and coldness turns masculinity into something bigger, stronger, "hyper", when it is applied to a black body.

To explain the "hyper" effect, it is essential to point out that masculinity, in general, was often enunciated in various superhero narratives. In the beginning, all superheroes were visibly strong with muscles, tall, and agile in their action sequences as well as predominately serious and composed, angry only at the right moment. However, there was a constant lack of more explicit presentation of masculinity. Images of the naked body, ripping off the shirt, framing scenes, or constructing the gaze were not visible, and thus, there was no way to complement the objectification. Luke Cage, on the other hand, was often within the signifying chain of fetishizing the black body and fearing the black body, which compels the readers to reevaluate what it means to be a superhero. This difference does not make him establish some new notions of perceiving superheroes as much as he is just someone who is placed within the space of white supremacy in comic books. Also, he is placed just outside of the center, not having the same attributes and characteristics as other superheroes of the time. Luke Cage was a part of a nationalized discussion about human rights and racial issues in America, but in the end, nationalized discourse was used to place him on the outskirts, in the position of the Other. Luke is someone who needs to be there as his fringe position is what makes the already established whiteness in American national identity even more stable.

Infantilization in Luke Cage is not that obvious if we do not go further than his visual depiction. However, his superpower, impenetrable skin, and superhuman strength (that is used when he is outraged) expose the discourse of infantilization. His impenetrable skin and strength make his powers primarily defensive, making him more submissive than many other superheroes of that time who fly, shoot rays, have agility,

or enhanced IQ. If we think about how infantilized a grown man can be, we must note that infantilization is a social process, one that relies on a faulty perception of objectivity. In that way, infantilization marks someone who is immature, dependent, hectic, unpredictable, submissive – like a child. Luke Cage's tendency to ask for money for his services, as well as his anger and objectification, signify the process of Othering. This process is the practice of subjugation based on specific social characteristics (in this case, race) that influences identity formation. Luke Cage's infantile behavior is read as a part of his depiction, making him someone who drifts from the normalized vision of behavior in society. In the context of racial representation, anger, unpredictability and childish behavior are seen here as a part of the circularity of stereotypes.

Through this kind of objectification of his body, we get three racialized aspects, which are, following Bhabha (1994), interconnected and thus form an important means of maintaining and producing stereotypes – infantilization, aggressiveness, and sexual objectivization. Although the narrative of black hypermasculinity and black rage is the most significant, the origin story of *Luke Cage* has a specific grounding in social issues outside fiction, such as police brutality or corrupt prison system, which offer a critique of racial representation and racism. While white masculinity primarily entails the values of family, economic success, and social position, black masculinity is labeled within the process of Othering that has the potential to disrupt whiteness. However, this potential is extinguished. Through all these discourses, Luke Cage becomes infantilized, with the author ignoring the critique of structural violence that was the premise of his origin story, and he ends up as a stereotype. Goodwin tried to introduce more diverse characters into the mainstream, but there were still problems concerning his effort of avoiding tokenism and trying new ways of inclusion (Lackaff & and Sales, 2014, p. 67). This circular stereotyping can be seen in the 1990s when superhero Rage was introduced.

NATIONALITY IN CONTROL – ASPECTS OF INFANTILIZATION AND HYPERMASCULINITY IN RAGE'S ORIGIN STORY

Larry Hama, the author of the superhero Rage, created a story about a black superhero, determined by his hypermasculinity and anger, which features narrative strategies similar to those employed in *Luke Cage*. He, as well, is a victim of racism. The origin story is portrayed through juvenile violence experienced by a kid, Elvin Daryl Haliday, who was wrongfully accused of stealing comic books by his peers. Accusations were based on his race, with statements from other kids such as "what's one of your kind doin' on our street" and "I bet he stoled them comic books!" (Hama,

Ryan & Palmer, 1990c, p. 16) Elvin gets pushed by his peers into radioactive sewer drainage, and left for dead. He survives the dangerous chemicals and becomes a 30-year-old strong and big African American. Due to his muscular appearance, Rage is depicted as dangerous and aggressive. The development of the main theme of his origin story starts with the situation where he arrives at the construction site where other famous, already established Marvel superheroes[3] work on their new headquarters. Rage wants to join them, and throughout his somewhat aggressive request and their refusal of his help, Rage accused Captain America and the rest of the members of racial inequality and lack of understanding for minorities in America, claiming that they needed to broaden their horizons and let him be part of their team. Rage's critique manifested in his statement to Avengers "Now that you don't have any minority avengers, you start building a fancy mansion in the middle of a ritzy, lily-white neighborhood" (Hama et al., 1990a, p. 9) can be understood as an explicit critique of the white terrain that superheroes perpetuate and, in that way, mirror the American nation. What makes this event interesting is the mode of reconciliation that is depicted through the rest of the story. Reconciliation erases any kind of subversiveness (or, at least, of critique) Hama wanted to portray. He included race as one of the main elements of Rage's story, and that kind of theme implies how it is difficult to function without the theme of racism. Racism, or aspects that imply racist tendencies are portrayed in other characters that interact with Rage. Bhabha notes that race as a signifier is often fixed within racism. He elaborates this by stating that racism can be portrayed implicitly, through discrimination that is authorized by the process of innocence (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 75, 80). Innocence is presented within the dominant white milieu of Captain America and the rest of the Avengers in the scenes in which they talk to Rage, in the middle of the terrain for new Avengers headquarters in the rich neighborhood. Avengers constantly point out that they are not scared of him because of his race but because they do not know him (Hama et al., 1990a, p. 9). By authorizing their reluctance to cooperate with Rage, they are authorizing and rationalizing discrimination. This is further developed in Captain America's tendency to settle the differences that Rage ignited. Difference cannot avoid being visible, but reconciliation is the part where differences become truly dividing. Rage (with his powerful, muscular physique) is constantly aggressive and cynical, as he reacts childishly to Captain America's attempts to make him realize that he must act in a specific way if he wants to be a part of the superhero conglomerate. Rage is treated like

[3] Captain America, Scarlet Witch, Iron Man, and others, who form a special superhero conglomerate called Avengers.

a child by Captain America, the most evident presenter of American national identity,[4] as he talks to Rage about manners and controlling his anger. Captain America's naivety, his faith in truth, justice, and the American way, is one of the main characteristics that embody their differences and place Rage in the realm of infantilization. An example of this is when Rage tries to help Captain America in an ongoing fight against villains. Rage is forced to go to the place of the battle by subway transit, which places him in the social frame of the lower class and distinguishes him from other superheroes who fly, wreck trucks and cars, or fly in a jet to get to the destination. Hama implies that he is aware of Rage's placement by making Rage comment that this situation in which he chases the subway is "degrading" (Hama et al., 1990b, p. 12). Hama presents a scene where Rage enters the subway with Captain America (who also does not have the ability of flight or super speed, and is narratively justifiably present to monitor Rage) and shocks people in a wagon, especially an elderly woman who is relieved only when she sees Captain America walking into the wagon after Rage. The aim of the author was quite clear, to comment on the dichotomy and double standards based on people's judgment of someone's appearance. Racial profiling is included as an important aspect of this judgment. In these scenes, Rage is fixed within the stereotypical circle of aggressiveness and infantilization, as someone who needs to be taught as if he were a child and needs supervision and protection from the reactions of people that Captain America presents.

After the dramatic battle with the villains, Captain America cannot disagree with Rage's willingness to be a hero, and yet he makes Rage "an Avenger on probation" (Hama et al., 1990b, p. 17). Rage's search for membership through Captain America's decision profiles the role of white manager that has to control potential memberships. Also, tensions between Rage and the rest of the Avengers members serves as an allegory of real tensions in the public regarding racial issues. Narrativity of the nation (that Captain America is a part of) symbolically depicts racial difference portrayed in Rage as something manageable and controllable. The possibility to tame Rage with the promise of entering the dominant sphere of superheroism (that serves as an allegory of whiteness) is an important element in managing difference in American society. At the moment when he is presented to the public as a new Avenger, Rage states that "the change has to come from within. If the Avengers want to give a chance to change them, then I don't care what their motivations are" (Hama et. al., 1990d, p. 19). In that way, Hama perpetuates the discourse of acceptance of difference by the possibility of reconciliation that is not further developed as much as it is controlled and tamed.

[4] More on the topic of Captain America and national identity can be seen in: Dittmer (2013).

Through this narrative that Captain America and Rage share, Rage's formidable body and infantilization are understood as something that can be managed, cultivated, something that Rage can overcome with time, through socialization during the probation period. This inclusion again reproduces and creates new discursive forms that we can embed within the racial stereotype.

Rage's origin story is a story about an infantilized black superhero determined by his hypermasculinity and anger. Later, Rage stories were scarce, never gaining popularity and recognition like some other superheroes who were different from the established white male heterosexual milieu. Ignored by many scholars, as well as fans and comic-book readers, Rage is nonetheless a valuable artifact, not to be forgotten in analyses that try to contextualize, explain, and determine the past, present, and future of black superheroes in American comic-book narratives.

CONCLUSION

The visual and narrative investigation of two black superheroes, Rage and Luke Cage, provides insights into the representation of American national identity and the role the black body and stereotypes related to the black body have in popular superhero culture. The main argument was based on the circularity of stereotypes and the impossibility of escaping the process of Othering in the narrativity of the nation, narrativity that discursively relies on excluding and managing differences.

Luke Cage was an epitome of public yearning for a black superhero within the Marvel pantheon. Goodwin presented a story with a significant critique of social and political problems in American society, but within it, Luke Cage was not able to escape some of the codes of labeling differences, such as rage, hypermasculinity, and infantilization. As anger was already an established trope of black characters in popular culture, hypermasculinity was one of the aspects that only started to develop in popular culture, primarily through Blaxploitation movies, which Luke Cage helped to reinforce. Infantilization is an additional analytical element here, presented primarily through Luke Cage's inability to control anger, talk, and act in a specific way that is more mature. One of the most evident examples is his portrayal of heroism, which is determined by Luke wanting to be paid by the people he helps. This analysis pointed out how the aspect of the infantilization of black characters is connected to other stereotypical aspects and how it is embedded in the process of Othering that is detrimental to portraying difference in American superhero narratives. To present the black character as a superhero, the narrative often employs the dichotomy between superhero and antihero. Black superhero is differentiated from other superheroes,

making him a deviation, anomaly, and/or something that can be controlled and tamed, but is often portrayed as a liability. The seemingly convoluted depiction of these stereotypes is empowered by Homi Bhabha's work in postcolonial theory, primarily his notion that stereotypes work in an interconnected way. Many of them coexist in the discursive forming of the race, and the nation. This coexistence and entanglement is a feature that provides discursive sustainability of stereotypes, and it makes an essential part of securing the already established American national identity that is primarily formed based on the notion that white American milieu is still in the position of economic and cultural power.

This kind of discourse which approaches racial difference by enunciating body and infantility was circulated 20 years later with new writers and new superhero Rage. The dynamics between being an anti-hero and a superhero transferred to Rage. His story combines stories of tolerance and acceptance of difference that is perceived as dangerous and complicated, but also controllable, by the dominant white sphere. The relation between Rage and Captain America, as well as between Luke Cage and the police, symbolizes the relation between black minorities and the public sphere, always intertwined in a dialectic of acceptance/tolerance and prejudices on various basis. The circumstances around the black body in America are (and were) characterized by police brutality and a continually growing list of wrongfully injured and killed black men and women. Luke Cage and Rage mark the difference as "The marking of 'difference' is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture" (Hall, 1997, p. 236). Without difference, there would not be a representation of a unified American identity. Difference is needed to maintain the fiction and false objectivity of stable and prosperous American society that different social events, protests and injustices in the American public sphere consistently call into question. The black body is an essential element within the representation theory that influences the image of perfect America and is manifested in the acts of the introduction of racial difference and diversity in the popular culture landscape. These origin stories mirror the culture that produces them, but can as well create new ways of noting difference, new areas of critique. However, these new areas, as the analysis in this paper tried to point out, is consequently in danger of falling short of changing the way how difference is accepted and portrayed. Marvel's past and future comic-book narratives should be read in that way – how they document the reality in American and other societies, and how exactly they create new spaces and new stories that criticize racism. In so doing, authors and readers need to be wary of the danger of falling into already established, repetitive discursive (stereotypical) forms of dealing with race and ethnicity.

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ZLATKO BUKAČ

HIPERMASKULINITET I INFANTILIZACIJA CRNIH SUPERJUNAKA: ANALIZA PRIČA POSTANKA LUKE CAGEA I RAGEA

Sažetak: Rad prikazuje odnos reprezentacije rase i američke popularne kulture. To čini kroz analizu dva superjunaka i njihovih narativa u stripu, koji su usko povezani sa kritikom tadašnjeg stanja stereotipiziranja manjina u američkoj popularnoj kulturi. Analizirajući takozvane priče postanka, superjunaka Luke Cagea iz 70ih godina, i Ragea iz 90tih godina, rad prikazuje narativne elemente u kojima je različitost prikazana prvenstveno preko diskurza hipermaskuliniteta, infantilizacije i bijesa. Zaključuje se kako je takva strategija prikazivanja utjecala na cijeli splet dodatnih diskurzivnih formacija koje i dalje jasno odvajaju različitost od dominantne bijele heteroseksualne patrijarhije kojom je obilježena američka popularna kultura, ali i američko društvo.

Ključne riječi: infantilizacija, hipermuškost, reprezentacija, rasa, superjunaci, stereotipi, vizualna analiza, diskurzivna analiza.

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