Representation of black comic book superheroes

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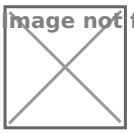
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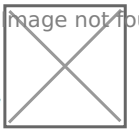
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Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni

Matej Mandek

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Zadar, 2016.



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Abstract

Analysing popular culture can be presumed to be a trivial task, but under the surface, when all the aspects are considered, the topic reveals to be fairly complicated. This work will focus on the study of representation in relation to race, power and stereotyping that was primarily researched by Stuart Hall. It will be carried out on the basis of the two black comic book superheroes that appeared in the early stages of comic, The Black Panther and Brother Voodoo. The lenses through which those characters will be observed through will include the influence of representation on forming meaning, and how power relations governed the way in which West viewed the rest of the world.

Keywords: popular culture, black superheroes, representation, stereotype, racism, orientalism

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary popular culture comic book heroes take greater and greater spotlight with the production of movies with those heroes as lead roles. Because most of those superheroes are white, the representation of black superheroes in the artworks of popular culture is often overseen.

When dealing with this topic it is crucial to first explain what popular culture is and what other concepts come into question when defining popular culture. This task can appear trivial at first, since popular culture literally means the part of the culture that is the most consumed by the society, but as it will later be mentioned, it is complicated to offer one definition of popular culture as it has to be considered from different disciplines' points of view (Storey 1).

Later on, the other major topic of this work, representation, will be explained since the comic books are visual media and the characters can be depicted with pictures. Representation of black people through history played a major role in moulding of the first black superheroes. The other influences also came from the stereotyping, racism and colonialism.

Furthermore, the concept of Orientalism, which was first introduced by Edward Said (1978), will be covered since it is a major factor in the cultural studies. The concept is similar to the concept of representation, but the difference is that Orientalism takes issue with how the representation of a certain part of the world influences the politics, life conditions and relations between countries of that part of the world.

The two examples that were chosen to embody the connection with the concepts of representation, racism and stereotyping, colonialism and orientalism are the characters of Black Panther and Brother Voodoo, as they are some of the first black superheroes ever to appear in comic books (Nama, 2011).

2. Popular culture

2.1. Defining culture

To explain the concept of popular culture, Storey (1) states that first the term "culture" should be defined, which Williams (87-90) deems to be one of the two or three most complicated words of the English language because, according to him, it can be given at least three broad definitions.

Firstly, it can be used to refer to a process of aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual development which would in the development of Western Europe correspond only to those three factors of development (such as great artists, philosophers and poets). Another use of the word "culture" might be to speak of a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group. In this case, the development of Western Europe would be referred not only to the development of the intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual, but also to the development of literacy, holidays, religious festivals and sports. Lastly, Williams also suggests that culture can be used to refer to "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (Williams, 1983:90), which would cover texts and practices which signify or produce meaning (this would thus include poetry, the novel, ballet, opera, and fine art). Storey (2) claims that when popular culture is discussed the second and the third definitions are covered and that is what also is the most relevant in this analysis of a part of popular culture (comic book superheroes).

2.2. Defining ideology

Another concept that has to be covered in order to define popular culture is "ideology" which is, according to Storey (2), "a crucial concept in the study of popular culture" (Storey, 2009:2). He claims that like culture, ideology also has many meanings which are of the same strength and decided to consider five of those meanings.

First, he writes that ideology can be used to refer to a set of ideas that a group of people is supporting and gives the example of "professional ideology" to refer to the ideas which

inform the practices of particular professional groups, while the "ideology of Labour Party" would refer to the collection of political, economic and social ideas on the activities and aspirations of the Party.

In his second definition he explains that ideology is used to indicate how some practices and texts present distorted images of reality to produce false consciousness (this usually works in favour of those in power against the interests of powerless) thus concealing the reality of domination of those in power. This definition comes from the notion that certain texts and practices are produced in circumstances that make them reflections or expressions of the power relations in the economic base of society.

A third definition that Storey (4) mentions is that ideology is used to refer to "ideological forms" thus giving the attention to the way in which texts always give a certain image of the world. While this definition depends on the notion that society is conflictual and not consensual, the aforementioned texts produced in such society take sides (consciously and unconsciously) in this conflict. Storey mentions Bertolt Brecht's (a famous German playwright) summary on this point: "Good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world. (…) There is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences" (Brecht, 1978 quoted in Storey 2009:4). Storey (4) claims that Brecht's statement can be applied to all texts thus making popular culture a place where social understandings are created and the "politics of signification" are played out in attempt to win people over to particular ways of understanding the world (Hall 122-23).

Fourth definition Storey relates to the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes who believes that ideology operates mainly at the level of connotations and unconscious meanings that texts and practices connote. This could be observed in the way in which British society

considers a white, masculine, heterosexual, middle class normal while other are inferior variations of the original. Storey (4) supports this with the example of “female pop singer”, “a black journalist”, “a working-class writer”, “a gay comedian” where in each instance the first term is used to denote the way in which they deviate from the categories to which they are ascribed.

The last definition that Storey (4-5) offers was very influential in 1970s and 1980s and he claims it is based on the definition of ideology developed by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser who deems ideology not as a set of ideas, but as a material practice by which he means that ideology is encountered in the everyday practices and not only the ideas because certain rituals and customs have the effect of binding people to a certain social order. For example, the practices such as celebrating Christmas serve so people can relax and after that return to appropriate place in the social order without complaining about the extortion they endure.

Storey (5) emphasizes that the main difference between the terms “culture” and “ideology” is that ideology brings the political dimension with it, while they both cover the same conceptual landscape. Additionally, the introduction of ideology in the discussion of culture and popular culture carries also the political and power discussion with it, which excludes popular culture from the simple discussion of free time and entertainment.

The definition that seems to be the most fitting to the topic of this work is that ideology is a set of ideas that are imposed on those who are not in the position of power, that is, the ideology is something that comes “from above” and it influences every aspect of live of those “below”.

2.3. Defining popular culture

In the attempt to define popular culture, Storey (5) offers six definitions which include in themselves the very process of studying popular culture. He also mentions the definitions by Williams (237) and those include: “well liked by many people”; “inferior kinds of work”; “work deliberately setting out to win favour with many people”; “culture actually made by the people for themselves”. What Storey (5) also mentions is that cultural theory’s history is a history of diverse ways in which the terms “culture” and “popular” were defined and connected in the historical and social contexts.

The first definition that is described by Storey (5-6) could be said to be the simplest one, that popular culture is a culture widely liked and favoured by a larger group of people. The most important aspect here would be the quantity of, in example, purchased DVD copies of a movie or a number of vinyl records sold of a particular song album, which tells us that quantitative index is most important when defining popular culture in this way. The problem lies in what amount of sold goods of the same kind would be considered to enter the sales numbers of “popular culture” and the number that would indicate that it is still a part of “just culture”. It would also be hard to differentiate “popular culture” from “high culture” if only the quantitative dimension was considered since many of the “high culture” musicians achieved high sales numbers on their compilations.

The other way to define popular culture would be to ascribe in that category the parts of the culture that are left over when we take out the “high culture”. In this definition popular culture is thus the inferior category since it includes the residual items. This definition finds support in the fact that popular culture is often mass-produced commercial culture, while high culture results from individual act of creation. For this definition Storey (6-7) provides an example of Luciano Pavarotti’s recording of Puccini’s “Nessun Dorma”. Both of those musicians would be included in the high culture by any music connoisseurs, but in 1990

Pavarotti managed to put this in question when he climbed to number one spot on British music charts with his recording. That would make him (and any other author of such success) also a part of popular culture. Some people also complained that this commercial success devalued the aria, which shows the elitist investment of some in this continuation.

Another definition considers popular culture as being "mass culture" and the first point that the supporters of this definition draw to is that popular culture is hopelessly commercial culture, which draws similarities with the previous definition. The consumers of this culture are seen as "a mass of non-discriminating consumers" (8), which makes the popular culture manipulative and formulaic. But as some authors point out (John Fiske, 1989; Simon Frith 1983), between 80 and 90 per cent of new products fail in the market despite extensive advertising, many films fail to profit after their box office promotional costs and 80 per cent of singles and albums lose money in the end, which puts into question the fact that popular culture is the culture of brainless consuming and passive activity.

Fourth definition that is brought up in this discussion is that popular culture is the culture that comes from "the people" and not that it is imposed on them "from above" (from the institutions or people with greater power than them). This makes the popular culture same as the folk culture. Bennet says that popular culture is "often equated with a highly romanticised concept of working-class culture construed as the major source of symbolic protest within contemporary capitalism" (Bennet, 1980:27). The problem that arises with this definition is that it is difficult to say who comes into consideration when talking about people and that commercial use is tied with popular culture, which makes the raw materials of the popular culture those commercially provided.

Next definition includes the concept of hegemony[1] which relates to political analysis of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (75) and that concept relates to the way in which dominant groups in society seek to win the consent of the subordinate groups in that society through a process of moral and intellectual leadership. According to Storey (10), cultural theorists used Gramsci's concept to explain the nature and politics of popular culture. "Those using this approach see popular culture as a site of struggle between the "resistance" of subordinate groups and the forces of "incorporation" operating in the interests of dominant groups" (Storey, 2009:10). One of the examples of this is how a seaside holiday was exclusive for the elite part of society (aristocracy) but over time (within a hundred years) it became a part of popular culture.

The last definition of popular culture offered by Storey (12) is centred on the debate of postmodernism and the relationship between these two concepts with the main point being that "the postmodern culture is a culture that no longer recognizes difference between high and popular culture" (Storey 2009:12). This can be noticed in the examples of songs becoming hits after they appear in commercials for products. In this case, both the product and the song are being sold.

Storey (12-13) concludes that all the definitions of popular culture that were outlined have in common that popular culture emerged after industrialization and urbanization. This periodization of popular culture is supported by the claim that industrialization and urbanization changed "the cultural relations within the landscape of popular culture" (Storey, 2009:13).

The perspective on popular culture that Storey (13-14) also introduces is to consider popular culture as "other" because, when talking about the popular culture, we must always

[1] "A form of power based on leadership by a group in many fields of activity at once, so that its ascendancy commands widespread consent and appears natural and inevitable." (Hall, 1997:248)

consider its contrast (in example, high culture). It also must be remembered that popular culture and the definition of it is and will always be changing, it will never be fixed.

For it to be appropriate for this work, the concept of popular culture should be seen as a part of the culture that is the most “consumed” by society at a certain point in time because this also relates to the representations with which the media is most saturated and which influence the attitudes that society has (or has had) toward a group of people.

3. "Other"

3.1. "Other", otherness and meaning

Stuart Hall (216) claims that meaning is one of the most important factors to consider when beginning the discussion on representation, stereotyping and "otherness". He introduces the consideration of meaning with the cover of *The Sunday Times Magazine* from 9 October 1988 which shows black athletes competing in the Olympics with the caption "Heroes and villains" (Figure 1.). It is later explained that such a caption was given to this photograph because the winning athlete was found to be using drugs to enhance his performance with the gold medal in the end being given to the athlete who came in second, thus suggesting that no matter the colour, all athletes can potentially be "heroes" or "villains". The other meaning that could be seen in this cover could be that it just represents the moment of an athlete's triumph over his competitors (that is, if the person would not be familiar with the context). This shows that the context is one of the most important factors when ascribing meaning to information that people are exposed to.

Hall (218) comes to the question of which meaning is the preferred meaning when it comes to representation. In the case of *The Sunday Times Magazine*'s cover, both the "hero" and "villain" meanings are preferred because, as Hall says, it tries "to say something paradoxical like, 'In the moment of hero's triumph, there is also villainy and moral defeat.'" (Hall 1997:218). The captions on covers often do express the favoured meaning that they wish their readers to discover and select over all other possible meanings, thus making the meaning of the photo the sum of meanings taken from both the photo and the text that relates to it.

Furthermore, another meaning that could be given to this cover would be that "even when black people are winning, they need to use illegal substances to be better than others". Hall explains this by saying that "people who are in a way different from the majority ("them" rather than "us") often become exposed to the binary form of representation" (Hall, 1997: 219). They

are represented only in binary extremes (in example, good-bad, ugly-unbelievably attractive, civilized-primitive, etc. (Wetherell 326)), while often being required to be both of those at the same time to satisfy their belonging to "us".

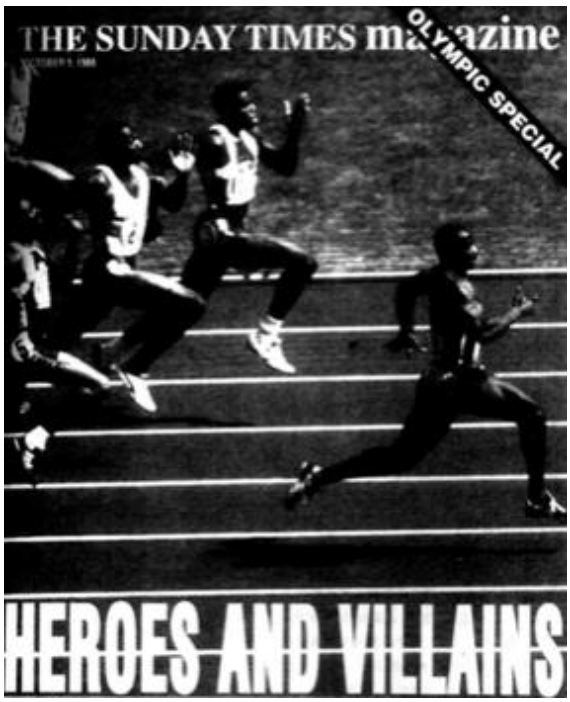


Figure 1. Cover of *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 9 October 1988 (URL 1)

The misrepresentation of the successes that black athletes achieved is not an exception to the times of 20th century, on the contrary, one of the more recent examples is quite similar to those of 20th century and it also happened after the Olympic achievement of a black person. The example mentioned is a modified image (Figure 2.) posted on social media website Twitter, by a (white) American comedian Ellen DeGeneres (who has more than 62 million followers on that platform who can see everything that she posts there (URL 9)). The image shows a black runner, Usain Bolt, in motion with her on his back, and the caption that she put under the image reads: "This is how I'm running errands from now on." This shows that even in the 21st century, the roles that were once "normal" in the America (blacks should serve whites and carry them like the image shows) are used as something comedic, without (or maybe with) realisation of what meanings such illustrations have.



Figure 2. Contemporary example (URL 8)

One example in which sexuality and gender were added in the representation of difference was when a black runner, Linford Christie won 100 metre gold medal in 1992 Barcelona Olympics for Great Britain. Other than his success, the British tabloid press "blew up" about how his running suit fit tight on his body and revealed the size and shape of his genitals. After being asked how he felt about those texts the runner said that he had felt embarrassed because he thought of himself as a serious individual. After black athletes had

successes in many sports, their body was also a point of focus in the media because it is the main tool for many sports and that is why images of their bodies in action cannot evade carrying the meanings connected to their gender and sexuality.

In relation to this, Hall (221-222) offers two examples of situations that happened to Al Joyner, to whom some people made remarks that his wife's body looks like a male body when she is photographed while running and that his sister looks like a gorilla in some pictures. The emphasis has to be made that in the press often the photographs of black athletes have to be put together, or in context, to gain meaning and this way of "acquiring" meaning Hall calls inter-textuality. He also defines the regime of representation as "the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which 'difference' is represented" (Hall, 1997:222).

When further discussing representation, Hall (224) emphasises the importance of "difference" and offers four ways in which this term had been addressed in the past by different disciplines.

The first perspective that he introduces is the linguistic point of view with the main argument being that "difference" matters because it is essential to meaning and that if there were no difference, there would be no meaning. The example of this would be that being British does not only come from the certain national characteristics, but also from the fact that "Britishness" is not-Croatian, not-American, not-French, not-Irish, etc. As it can be noticed in this example, binary opposition is useful in defining contrasts. Hall (224-225) uses Jacques Derrida's (1972, mentioned in Hall, 1997) argument that while the binary oppositions are useful, they often carry the relation of power between the two poles, thus, instead of saying white-black, men-women, masculine-feminine, etc., we should be saying **white**-black, **men**-women, **masculine**-feminine, etc.

The second explanation is that “we need ‘difference’ because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the ‘other’” (Hall, 1997:225). This relates to the fact that only in dialogue with others the meaning is constructed, it arises in the differences between the speakers, thus making the “other” essential to meaning.

Moving on, the next reasoning is anthropological and it claims that culture depends on giving meaning to things they encounter and on classifying those meanings into a neat system and Hall (226) claims that difference is the basis of culture. The problems arise when some items are miscategorised or when they do not fit in any one particular category (such as people who are mulattos) and what unsettles a culture is the situation when people do not know which category to assign certain items. The desire to keep the categories pure is evident when cultures show negative attitude towards foreigners, refugees, intruders and different “others” who try to unconsciously disturb their system.

The fourth explanation is psychoanalytic and relates to the role of difference in people’s psychic life and it claims that “the ‘other’ is fundamental to the constitution of the self to us as subjects, and to sexual identity” (Hall, 1997:227). To explain this definition, Hall (227) offers Freud’s (1977, from Hall, 1997) explanation of the myth of the Oedipus complex. At one point in a boy’s life he feels the unconscious erotic attraction to his mother, but his father blocks his way to satisfying this desire. After a while, a boy discovers that women do not have a penis and questions if his mother was once like him, with a penis, but due to actually satisfying her desire she was castrated as a punishment. This is when the boy starts, in fear, switching his identification to his father which marks the beginnings of him identifying with a masculine identity. Hall (227-228) calls these psychoanalytic theories into question because the majority of them assume that there is no firm core of “the self” that is given; everything comes from the interaction with the “other”.

The explanations of "difference" that Hall (228) offered are not mutually exclusive and there is no correct one, but there are two points that must be clear in the discussion of difference. The question of "difference" and "otherness" plays increasingly significant role within different disciplines. The second point is that "difference" is ambivalent, "it is both necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self as a sexed subject – and at the same time it is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the 'other'" (Hall, 1997:228).

3.2. "Other" and race

Furthermore, Hall (228) also analyses the examples in which representational practices were used to mark racial difference and signify the racialized "other" in western popular culture and this discussion should start with a brief historical overview of when "West" encountered black people. Hall (228) points out three major moments when these encounters happened. The first was when in the sixteenth-century the contact between European traders and West African kingdoms was made and it was a source of black slaves for three centuries. The next came with the colonization of Africa and the battle for control of the colonized territory, markets and raw materials between European powers in the period of "high imperialism". Post-Second World War migrations form the "Third World" into Europe and North America mark the third period, and last encounter which marked the Western ideas about "race" and images of racial difference.

Hall (229) claims that before the first encounters, not a lot was known about Africa, but the attitudes toward it were mostly positive because it had one of the oldest Christian communities overseas (with black saints even appearing in Christian iconography). Gradually Africans were declared to be the descendants of Ham who was cursed to be a servant of his brethren in *The Bible*. Later on they were identified with nature and were represented as

"primitive" in opposition to "civilized world". Hall (229) mentions that McClintock (1995) says that Curvier proclaimed the Negro race "a monkey tribe" and that philosopher Hagel declared that Africa was "no historical part of the world (…) it has no movement or development to exhibit", later on, when European colonization of the African interior was taking a swing, Africa was regarded as "marooned and historically abandoned (…) a fetish land, inhabited by cannibals, dervishes and witch doctors" (McClintock, 1995:41).

The most obvious representation of black people could be noticed in the advertising of commodity products, especially in the later decades of the nineteenth century (Hall 229-231). The adventures of the explorers to Africa were "charted, recorded and depicted in maps and drawings, etchings and (especially) the new photography, in newspaper illustrations and accounts, diaries, travel writing, learned treatises, official reports and 'boy's-own' adventure novels" (Hall, 1997:229). Through the advertising that used race as main premise (commodity racism), "the Victorian middle-class home became a space for the display of imperial spectacle and the reinvention of race, while the colonies – in particular Africa – became a theatre for exhibiting the Victorian cult of domesticity and the reinvention of gender" (McClintock, 1995, quoted in Hall, 1997:229). This advertising was called the spectacle because advertising translated things into a fantasy visual display of signs and symbols. Commodities were flowing out of the Empire, raw materials were brought into the Empire. One of the commodities that carried much symbolism was soap. Its use was related with "domestication" and some were advertised as being able to clean the black people and make them white (Figure 3.), purify them, while also able to wash off the soot, grime and dirt of the industrial slums. Hall (231) states that because of that it became a fetish object because it was capable of keeping the imperial bodies clean "out there" in the colonies.

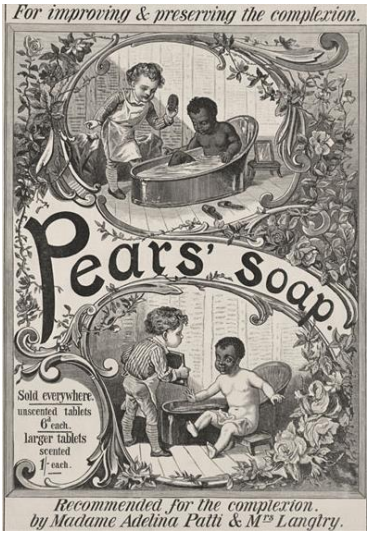


Figure 3. Pears' soap advertisement

A more recent example of racism in advertisement of products is a 2007 Intel (a company that develops and sells computer processors) promotional poster. In this advertisement (Figure 4.) a white person (who looks like a manager in a company) stands in a row between cubicles which are occupied by half a dozen black people dressed in running suits. They are portrayed ready to start running when the white boss orders them to. The aim of the poster is to promote a new version of processors which are claimed to be faster than any before.

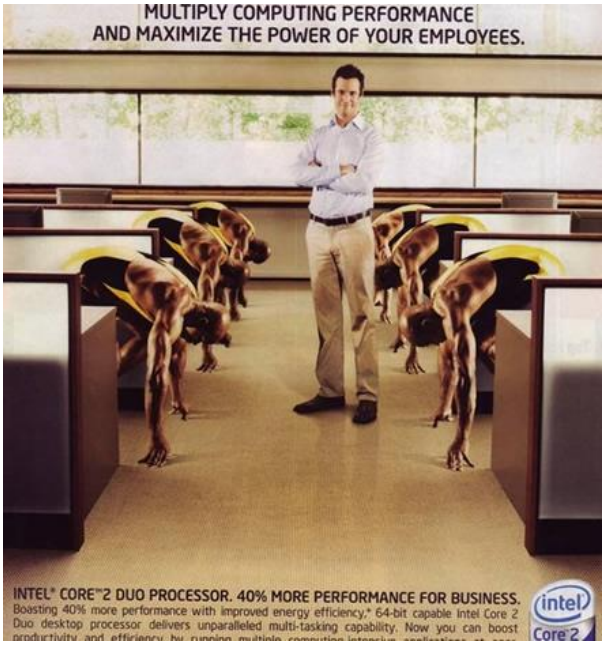


Figure 4. 2007 Intel commercial (URL 10)

The most obvious influence of racism was seen on the plantations where slaves worked, but the racism was not so widespread until Abolitionists started seriously challenging slavery in the early nineteenth century. During this time, a racialized discourse, in which ruled the belief that black man was unsuccessful in creating a civilization on his own, that they are biologically impaired and the fear from mixing races, had been created and the propaganda war between Abolitionists and defenders of slavery started (Frederickson 49). Hall (232) explains that this racialized discourse was structured by a set of binary oppositions (civilization and savagery, white and black body type, white intelligence and black instincts, culture and nature, and purity versus pollution). The Negros were believed to find peace and happiness only by mediation of white masters. The belief, that on the surface the Negros were "domesticated" but underneath that they were still savage brutes who would resort to cannibalism and other savageries once they were cut loose, was spread among the white race and it was supported by "science".

The "evidence" of blacks lacking evolutionary development was shown through "scientific racism". It was believed that blacks were created after whites and racial theory suggested that whites used culture to overcome nature, while with black people the culture/nature distinction was blurred. They were practically the same thing. Two of the disciplines which mostly supported this "scientific" evidence were anthropology and ethnology, but the most evidence was taken from the visual difference between whites and blacks; the body was the main proof for the blacks being impaired in some areas in which whites were not. This racialized knowledge that was created through such practices continued to dominate in signifying practices that were present in those times (Hall 233).

3.3. Signifying difference

Hall (233-234) claims that the racialized signifying practices were positioned around two main arguments. First was that the blacks possess innate laziness, which means that they were

fit for serving, but that they would not labour in ways that would profit their masters the most. The second theme was that the blacks were all primitive. It was believed that simplicity and the lack of culture ruled among the blacks and that they were incapable of civilized improvements. Whites found amusement when the blacks tried to imitate their white masters, but it was more often the case of blacks mocking the whites, and that is when the signifying practices appeared.

It was typical for the representation of the blacks to reduce their culture to nature, to naturalize difference. This practice was common because, if the blacks had a chance to form a type of culture it would mean that they would be able to develop in the same way the whites could, but by reducing them to nature, it was impossible for them to develop since the nature was considered to be out of history, fixed and unchangeable. "Naturalization is therefore a representational strategy designed to *fix* 'difference', and thus *secure it forever*. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable 'slide' of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological 'closure'" (Hall, 1997:234).

The blacks could not escape their true nature of primitivism (which was culture for them) and blackness (nature), which were interchangeable for them. The same was the reality for women, they could not escape their biology which was their destiny. The blacks were not only represented with their essential characteristics, but they were also reduced only to their essence (this involved laziness, simple fidelity, mindless "cooning", trickery, childishness) and it belonged to blacks as a race and species. The slaves had nothing else in their lives but serving their masters and their other essential characteristics (Hall 234).

This reducing the blacks to their essential characteristics and presuming that all of them are same and that these characteristics are fixed is stereotyping. "Stereotyping of blacks in popular representation was so common that cartoonists, illustrators and caricaturists could summon up a whole gallery of 'black types' with a few, simple, essentialized strokes of the

pen" (Hall, 1997:237). They were reduced to the signifiers of their physical difference (thick lips, fuzzy hair, broad face and nose, etc.).

3.4. Fighting the stereotype

The traces of racial stereotypes persisted to the late twentieth century, but they were always contested by the anti-slavery movement and Abolitionists who put different images of black people into circulation in order to fight stereotypes. The movement was successful in Britain where the stop to slavery was put in 1834. During the period leading up to the Civil War in the USA, Abolitionists adopted a different slogan about the black slaves – "Are you not a man and brother? Are you not a woman and a sister?" – which put the emphasis on the common humanity and not the difference among blacks and whites. The problem was that still the stereotypes that were present before carried on when the slaves were freed, as they were so grateful for their freedom to their former masters that they were still pictured kneeling before them (Figure 5.).



Figure 5. Emblem of the English Abolition Society (URL 3)

Racial segregation ensued after the Civil War in whole USA (legal in the South, informally maintained in the North). With the slavery abolished, one could assume that the racial stereotypes were gradually phased out of the society, but that was not the reality for the black people. Best example can be seen in the American cinema, which was one of the most

popular art forms of the first half of the twentieth century. Hall (243) mentions Bogle's critical study of American cinema (6-10) in which Bogle lists five main stereotypical characters which were present in this media. Those were: 1) Toms (who were the good Negroes, always subjects to harassment, flogging, insults, but who never turned against the whites who harassed them); 2) Coons (lazy subhuman creatures, always joking, good for nothing but eating watermelons, stealing chickens and butchering English language); 3) The Tragic Mulatto (mixed-race woman caught "between races", the prototype of sexy heroine, beautiful, her partially white blood makes her "acceptable", but condemned to a tragic ending because of her partial blackness); 4) Mammies (the prototypical house-servants, mostly fat, bossy, unquestionably servant to white households while their husbands sleep it off at home); 5) Bad Bucks (physically big, strong, up to no good, violent, strongly oppose the whites). In the 1930s black actors mainly filled the roles of jesters, simpletons and servants in the mainstream films, while it was only until 1950s that the films started to address the subject of race as a problem. Sydney Poitier, who was an extremely talented black actor, rose as a key figure in these movies. His roles made him the hero of the integrationist age since he was the first black actor to be allowed a star-level salary in mainstream Hollywood films. He played everything that black characters until that point were not (educated and intelligent, with proper English, dressed conservatively, and had best table manners). Poitier was a black man who met the standards of the mass white audience.

Hall (243) claims that Paul Robeson was the only one who could transcend the regime of racialized representation in the American cinema up to 1960s. He was a major black star who was able to capture the attention of both the black and white audience with his "musical talent, sonorous voice, his intellect, physical presence and stature, coupled with his simplicity, sincerity, charm and authority" (Hall, 1997:243). But even as outstanding performers as Robeson could not escape the representational regime of racial difference in the mainstream

cinema until the 1960s, when segregation was ended in the South and enormous migration of blacks to the cities in the North started.

3.5. Stereotyping

"Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature" (Hall, 1997:247). Hall states that Dyer (30) argues that without the use of types it would be difficult to make sense of the world because we understand the world by referring to objects, people or events we encounter or know of and place them in general classificatory schemes in our brains into which they fit according to our culture. In example, we decode an object with at least one leg as a chair and we fit it into that category in our minds, even though we might have not seen such a chair ever before. This is what typing is, and it is essential to meaning in this case.

The difference between typing and stereotyping is that stereotypes only consider few "simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics" (Hall, 1997:247) about a person and reduce everything about that person to those details and then exaggerate and simplify those traits. "It can be said that stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes difference" (Hall, 1997:247). A strategy of splitting is also employed by stereotyping in a way that it divides normal and acceptable from abnormal and unacceptable and then excludes everything which does not fit. Thus, it can be said that stereotyping also serves to maintain social and symbolic order in a way that it keeps "us" normal (white) separated from "them", "other" (black). It also creates an imaginary sense of binding together those who are considered normal in a society (Hall 248). Stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power and it usually means that power is directed against the subordinate, excluded group.

3.6. Representation and power

When power is connected with representation it should not be considered only in economic aspect and physical coercion, but also in a sense of cultural or symbolic terms (including the power to represent something or someone in a certain way).

One of the examples in which symbolic power was used through representational practices is the way in which Europe constructed a stereotypical image of "the Orient", which was written about most vocally by Edward Said. He claims that European culture was able to politically, ideologically, militarily, scientifically and imaginatively manage the Orient during the post-Enlightenment period (Said 7-8). Hall (249) notices that Said's discussion of Orientalism parallels Foucault's power/knowledge argument[2] because in the example of Orientalism "a *discourse* produces, through different practices of *representation* (scholarship, exhibition, literature, painting, etc.), a form of *racialized knowledge of the Other* (Orientalism) deeply implicated in the operations of *power* (imperialism)" (Hall, 1997:250). The general idea that governed who or what was oriental was created by a logic driven on not only the empirical knowledge, but also a collective "of desires, repressions, investments and projections" (Said, 1978:8). This was one of the main points that Said wanted to point out in his study of Orientalism, the difference between the academic knowledge about India and Egypt and the "true" (or uncorrupted) knowledge about those two countries (Said 19).

It is important to state that Said's study of Orientalism is not "a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious "Western" imperialist plot to hold down the "Oriental" world" (Said, 1978:20). He states that it is a study of how the world is constructed by a discourse that claims that the world

[2] Foucault's power/knowledge argument is similar to stereotyping. Power/knowledge classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as "other" (Hall 248).

is made of two unequal halves (Orient and Occident) and that discourse maintains the control that the more powerful half (Occident) has (Said 20).

Due to the effect that such discourse had on the 19th century authors, Said studies Orientalism as an exchange between those authors and the political concerns that were moulded by three great empires (British, French and American) where the texts were produced (Said 22-23). Which is quite similar to the discussion in this work where an analysis of characters will be presented in the context and contrast to the times when they were designed.

Blackness can be noticed in the analysis of the two characters examined in this work and it stands for the way in which white (authors, in this case) society "sees" the black people. It can also be noticed in everyday life and the prejudices that people have when they see a black person. This concept serves to denote that a person is not only a different colour from white, but that they are a part of a marginalised group, a contrast to the whites. As it was mentioned before, those people are still subjects to stereotyping and because of their *blackness* they are often overlooked by society, but also overdetermined by it (both physically and mentally). In the eyes of society it is impossible to overcome the *blackness* and the set of traits that it brings with itself. The discourse that surrounds this concept implies that those to whom *blackness* can be ascribed always lag behind those who do not fit in that category. They are seen as "stuck in past" in contrast to whites (who are always in the present, if not in the future). *Blackness* is a sum of all the stereotypical representations and racial inequalities that, throughout the history, were connected to black people (Bhabha 236-256).

4. Comic books

4.1.A brief history

The comic books have reached their peak in the middle of 20th century and that is the time frame that will be considered in this work since the history of comic books as a whole is too wide of a topic to thoroughly write about here. The comic books were popularized in the USA during the 1930s, with *Famous Funnies* being the first modern comic book (URL 4). *DC Comics and Marvel Comics* are the two companies that were since then most popular among the consumers in and out of USA (Nama 4).

The realms of imagination and representational schemes that are occupied by black superheroes in comic books, cartoons, television express powerful visuals, compelling narratives, and multiple meanings around a variety of racial ideas spread across American culture (Nama 3-4).

"Whether obscure or prominent, the first wave of black superheroes in DC and Marvel comics drew their raison d'être from racial conflict. In an effort to address the dramatic shift occurring in American society, black superheroes were crafted in creative and artistic ways that symbolized the racial climate" (Nama, 2011:36). They appeared in the 1960s and were highly marked by their blackness.

4.2. Are black superheroes "really black"?

Ghee (223) claims that comic books have historically been seen as reading entertainment for youth with emphasis on the graphic pictures that accompany the texts. He categorises heroes in four major sections:

> "(1) the "reluctant" or "circumstantial" hero, who responds "heroically" (willingly or unwillingly) to a crisis situation, (2) the "action hero", who is a regular (but highly skilled) person who accomplishes extraordinary feats of heroism due to above average or superior intellectual, analytical, technological or physical skills (or typically a combination of them all), (3) the "superhero" who may or may not be regular human, or no longer a

> regular human, but has a special gift or extraordinary (super) power or technology that is used in the act of heroism, and (4) the dutiful "role hero" – the regular mom and dad, policeman, fireman, soldier, etc. – whose duty is to serve and protect. These are real or fictional characters who either do what is expected or go beyond the "call of duty" and they are often deemed as "heroes" in the eyes of those they serve, support and/or save, and by the culture that honours them for the familial or occupational (heroic) roles they play" (Ghee, 2013:224).

The heroes that capture most attention are mostly fictional (The Black Panther, Superman, etc.), but heroes can also be non-fictional (The Black Panther Party). Nowadays, African Americans have more Black superheroes in popular media (comic books, movies, etc.) than ever before, but most of them were created by European writers (Black Panther, Spawn, Blade), and a question of identification with them is imposed (Ghee 229). Campbell (23) claims that black superhero's cultural relevance and firmly established self that is connected with black culture is crucial if the aim is that black people identify with.

For an example of how the black superheroes are impaired, Ghee (230) describes that when a white superhero is saving "America", the implicit assumption (in the mind of the reader or spectator) is that he is culture bound and saving his own people and culture first. When a black superhero starts saving America, or even helping a white superhero to save it, the implicit assumptions are a bit more complicated due to the race relations throughout history. If a black superhero is to be determined as truly black hero, there must be cultural relevance, alliance and allegiance in his character.

However, most black superheroes do not fight exclusively for black cultural integrity or relevance, and some even might not fight for the black community or culture at all. The most notable mainstreamed (real) black superheroes to date "are: The Black Panther, Storm (of the X men), Blade, and Green Lantern" (Ghee, 2013:232). Even though they were originally created by white writers, nowadays they are moulded by both black and white writers, but

“unfortunately, too many Black comic book heroes and their stories have little or no explicit or implicit reference points for psychological relevance to Black youth or to the Black community as cultural bound heroes (…)” (Ghee, 2013:232).

5. Analysis of representation of black superhero: example of Black Panther and Brother Voodoo

In this part the focus will be solely on the first appearances of these two comic book superheroes. The issues of comic books that will be considered to deal with the mentioned concepts will be *Strange Tales* (1973) number 169 for the character of Brother Voodoo and *Fantastic Four* (1966) number 52 for the character of The Black Panther.

5.1. Short history of the characters

The first black superhero ever to appear in comic books is the character of Black Panther, or, by his real name, T'Challa. He firstly appeared in Marvel's Fantastic Four series beginning in July 1966. He was also the first African superhero, as the country, Wakanda, of which he is the king, is located on African continent, but is fictional (URL 5). This fictional country was never colonised by any outside oppressor and is thus, and by the help of alien technology, the most technologically advanced country in the world. The concept of colonisation can already be connected at this point, but that will be explained later. Another fact that is to be emphasized is that Wakanda is isolated from the rest of the world and very few people in the world know about it.

Furthermore, the other black superhero that appears in the early superhero comic book history is Brother Voodoo. His real name is Jericho Drumm and comes from Haiti. He first appears in Marvel's *Strange Tales* in 1973 where the story of the reason why he became a voodoo priest is portrayed (URL 6). In example, his brother was murdered by a villain priest and his brother's dying wish was that Jericho is to become an opposition to the threat that the villain posed to their village. He then wanders through rainforest to find an old priest who will help him learn the way of voodoo and the way of connecting to the nature. Having said that, it is apparent how this character is connected to nature, which was a stereotype that occurred many times relating to black people, as it was mentioned on several occasions during this work.

5.2. Racism and stereotyping as frames for character creation

When considering these two superheroes and their early issues there are numerous examples of racism and stereotyping, mostly due to the time in which they appeared. Some of the examples encountered also show that not only the main characters in these comic books had undergone stereotyping, but there were also many other minor characters (for example, the thieves, muggers, villagers and others) who have been designed in a stereotypical way. The way those minor black characters "speak" and look like are demonstrating stereotypes, they have shaped muscles that are easily visible, and they all have some kind of an "afro" hairstyle and emphasised, puffy, lips (Figure 6.). Their physical shape is in all cases great and the trait that is most noticeable is the way they speak; their grammar is bad, some words are misspelled to amplify how "black" some characters are. The Wakandans in Black Panther comic are all dressed in animal skin, even though they are one of the most developed countries in the world, to emphasise their connection with nature, as it was then believed that black people are "closer" to nature than white people. Another trait that characterises Wakandans is that they are portrayed to be always carrying their weapons, as if they are ready to fight at any point of day, and are just waiting for the orders to be given. The balance in stereotyping was attempted to be achieved by also stereotyping one of the minor white characters who has Indian ancestors, and that blood relation enabled him to have special abilities such as stealth with which he could sneak up on his enemies and disable them (Figure 6.).



Figure 6. Stereotyping of minor characters

5.3. The image of Black Panther and Brother Voodoo and it's connection to the history of representation of black people

Stuart Hall, who was previously mentioned, is one of the most contributing writers to the topic of representation. In his speech *Representation and the Media* (1997) he deals with problems of the role of media in society and how it creates visual representations of the world. This is one of the reasons comic books are great examples of representation of certain ethnic groups (such as black people in middle of 20th century in America) using images of heroes which have been created, on the basis of human rights' groups. The character of Black Panther is represented as a leader of the only African country that has not been colonised, who invites the team of four American superheroes known as Fantastic Four (who are all white) to come and visit Wakanda where they would take part in ceremonial hunt, but instead of hunting some kind of animals, he hunts them and traps them. This represents the African leader as shifty and dishonest. In later parts of the story, he is also presented as being connected to the nature. He hunts a female superhero who has the ability to become invisible, but that does not help her against this black man that has animal instincts (Figure 7.).

Brother Voodoo is also connected to nature by the way in which he became what he is, but the example that is more gripping is when his appearance is depicted as "(…) his muscles

rippling beneath his skin" when he fights the river stream (Figure 8.). Not only is Brother Voodoo presented in a way that raises questions, but also is the villain he fights. The villain who attacked a woman that Brother Voodoo rescued is presented as one of the men in black with a "terrible face" and in this it is obvious that black characters still can frighten women and other characters (Figure 9.).

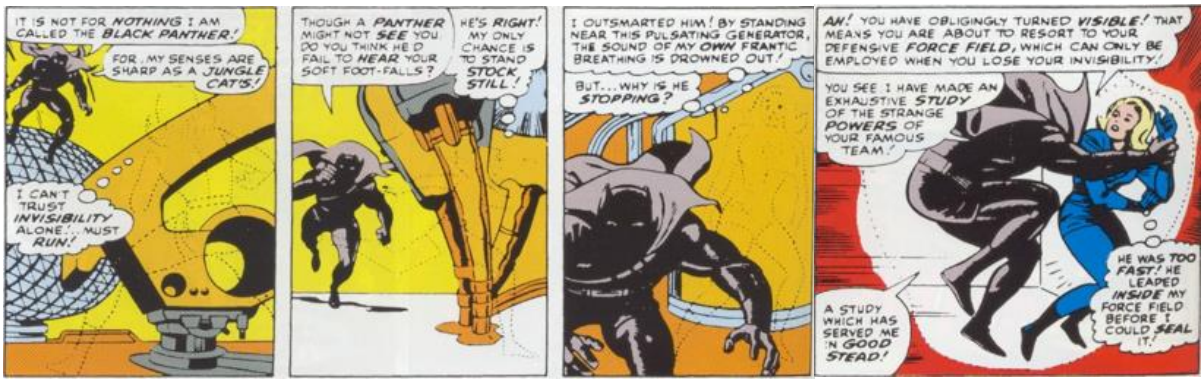


Figure 7. Black Panther's animal instincts help him hunt down the female character

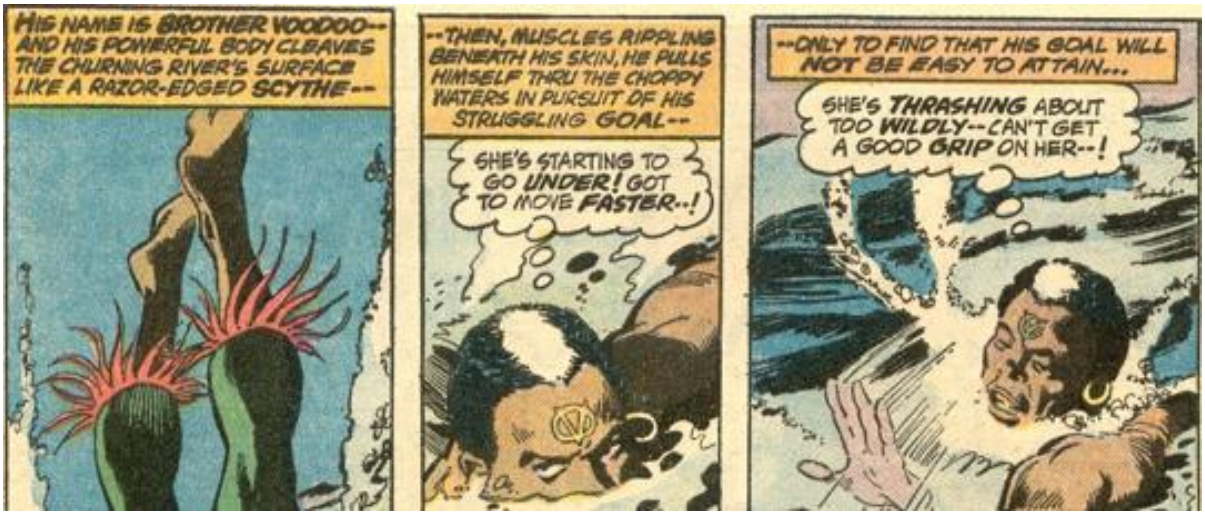


Figure 8. Description of Brother Voodoo's body



Figure 9. The fear of the black villains

5.4. Symbols of colonialism

Symbols of colonialism arise mostly in the Black Panther comics. Since Wakanda was never conquered by any other foreign oppressor, the country is technologically more advanced than the rest of the world. The problem in question appears in thoughts that the American superheroes have when they see how Wakanda actually looks like after their defensive cloak is off (Figure 10.). They say it is "truly a jungle… but like nothing ever spawned by nature! It's a man-made jungle!" What their reaction gives off is the feeling that the people in an African country, that is more developed and has all the highest technological improvements known to mankind, still need the jungle because they would not know how to cope without one, so they built their own (Figure 11.). Another example where Wakanda is depicted as unnatural and strange is also when one of the American superheroes thinks that there is something ominous in the air when they enter Wakanda and are not encountering any hostility. All in all, the atmosphere that is created in this part of the comic book gives the feeling that the whole setting is wrong and unnatural, that there cannot be such a place on the African continent, a place that was not once a colony of one of the empires.



Figure 10. Strangeness of Wakanda

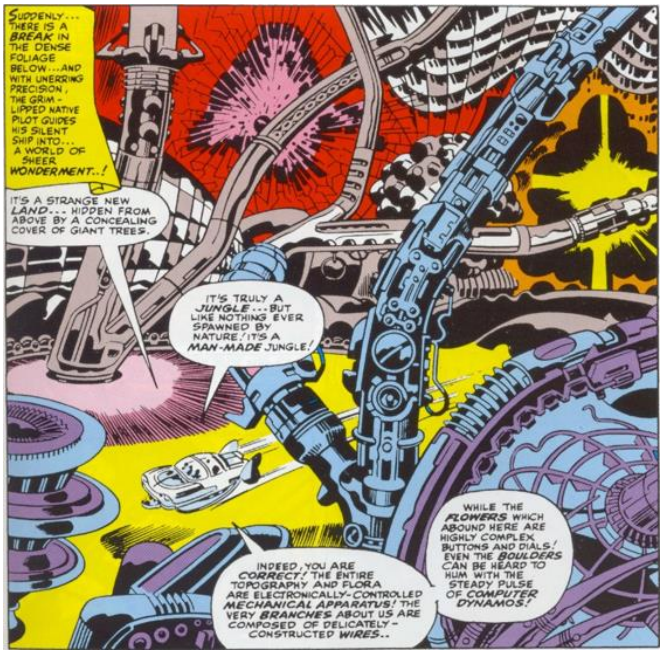


Figure 11. The necessary jungle

5.5. Aspects of Orientalism in Black Panther and Brother Voodoo comic books

These two characters also have a common share in the area of how oriental they are presented. One of the great examples of orientalism in the Brother Voodoo comic is when in the beginning of the comic, a white doctor arrives to Haiti and is attacked by a gang and all of a sudden Brother Voodoo appears and rescues him, which gives off the feeling that whenever a white doctor is in danger in the land that was once a colony, a humble black hero or anybody else will appear and risk their health to save the life of a doctor (Figure 12.). Second example

of orientalism is from the Black Panther comic book when his guests arrive for the ceremonial hunt. He betrays them and sees them as the prey which gives the image of an African host who is reduced to some kind of a hunter who will hunt the first non-native people that set foot into his land and that portrays an image that such kind of hosts are common in Africa (Figure 13.).



Figure 12. Black hero saves white doctor



Figure 13. The Black Panther hunts his prey

6. Conclusion

To sum up, it is apparent that the question of popular culture is not trivial and that it offers many different views on the topic of culture and society. The role of slavery and the way in which black people were treated since the first encounters that Europe had with them also cannot be ignored as it had detrimental effects on further representation of black people in the history.

The black superhero comic book characters in general are a source of many examples of how the representation of black people in media such as comic books can be greatly influenced by stereotypes and racism. This work has considered only the first issues of the comic books where these characters appeared since the sources for these examples are vast, but this analysis can serve as a foundation for further investigation on how attitudes of the majority can influence the works of writers.

Even though these characters rose up during the time when the fight for rights of black people was at its peak, the stereotyping appears inevitable in many cases (since the two characters portrayed in this work are not the only black superheroes that were presented in this way) and in the first publications that included these characters there is vast amount of examples of it. This raises many questions, one of which would be: “were stereotyping and racism necessary to build a hero that would represent an ethnic minority that was fighting for their rights at that time?” and “was stereotyping only used to bring closer the reality and the fiction of the comic books?”

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Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku
Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

Prikaz crnih superheroja u stripu

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Sažetak

Prikaz crnih superheroja u stripu

Analiza popularne kulture može se činiti kao jednostavan zadatak na prvi pogled, ali ispod površine krije se stvarna težina tog zadatka jer se popularna kultura ne može sagledati iz samo jedne perspektive. U središte ovog rada biti će stavljen prikaz superheroja u odnosu na rasu, moć i stereotipiziranje, što je istraživao Stuart Hall. To će biti prikazano kroz analizu dva crna superheroja koji su se pojavili u ranim fazama stripa, The Black Panthera i Brother Voodooa. Stajališta s kojih će se sagledati ovi likovi uključuju utjecaj prikaza na stvaranje značenja te kako su odnosi moći određivali pogled Zapada na ostatak svijeta.

Ključne riječi: popularna kultura, crni superheroji, prikaz, stereotip, rasizam, orijentalizam