
SUPER BLACK: A FAN BASED STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF BLACK SUPERHEROES

by Fredrik Strömberg





Nama, Adilifu. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 2012. ISBN 978-02-292-75-3543. 180 pages.

When I wrote the book *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*, way back in the late 1990s/early 21st century (it was first published in Sweden in 2001, and then in the US in 2003), I ended the book with a plea for more books and articles on the representation of black people in comics, as I had only scratched the surface of this very interesting topic. It took a while for this to happen, but now it seems that the dam has burst, and that even if we might not see a flood, there is at least a steady trickle of new books and articles on the representation of black people in comics, from a wide variety of perspectives.

Some of the more interesting books that have been published on this subject are Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and their Fans* (2001), William H. Foster's *Looking for a Face Like Mine* (2005) and *Dreaming of a Face Like Ours* (2010), Nancy Goldstein's *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist* (2008), and Damian Duffy's *Black Comix: African American Independent Comics, Art and Culture* (2010).

To this roster can now be added *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* by Adilifu Nama. Nama is Associate Professor and Chair of the African American Studies Department at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, and a long-time comics fan. Some of his earlier books are on subjects closely related to this, such as *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008). He is thus amply suited to write a book on black superheroes in general and, as an avid comics-reader, particularly on black superheroes in comics.

Nama's focus in this book is American superheroes, mainly from major mainstream publishers such as Marvel and DC, which is quite obviously a subject



that is close to his heart. He does not shy away from including himself and his personal experiences in the texts, alluding to his own early experience of being a black superhero fan, of seeing various TV-series and films with black superheroes, and so on. This is one of the strengths of the book, as it adds personal insights from someone who has experienced many of the comics and films analyzed firsthand, and not only as a dry academic subject of study.

The book is divided into five chapters, the subjects of which roughly present a chronological order from the 1960s to present day. The first chapter, "Color Them Black," discusses the early black superheroes of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the famous politically inspired *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* comics, the comic book *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali*, and how superheroes in this era became signifiers of racial anxieties in American society. The second chapter, "Birth of the Cool," looks more closely at the two seminal early black superheroes the Black Panther and Luke Cage/Power Man in the context of the Black Power movement as well as the Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s. The third chapter, "Friends and Lovers," looks at how the pairing of black and white superhero characters have reflected racial tensions, but also advocated racial equality. The fourth chapter, "Attack of the Clones," examines how many classic white superheroes have been remade as black and how this puts black racial identity center stage, often in ironic and contradictory ways. The fifth and final chapter, "For Reel?: Black Superheroes Come to Life," explores the lamentably few black superheroes that have made it into films and television, and ends with an examination of how President Barack Obama, for a while, became a comics character and a superhero.

Of these chapters, the ones that I find most interesting are chapters three and four, since this is where Nama's scholarship adds most to the study of comics. There has been earlier writing on both these subjects, but Nama's analyses are definitely interesting and gave me several new insights into these subjects. Oh, and I just loved the idea of pairing up Black Lightning and the black Green



Lantern for a Green Lantern/Green Arrow kind of title, set forth in the end of the first chapter. It is clearly an idea formed by a fan, but refined by an academic mind, theorizing on Black Lightning representing black integration and the black Green Lantern standing for a more strident position on black nationalistic ideas.

The main focus of the book is not superheroes, though; at least not as far as I am concerned. The part where I feel that Nama is really contributing, is in the way that he consistently steers clear of the knee-jerk negative rejection of black superheroes as token characters (a trap that I from time to time have fallen into myself) and uses what he describes as “a self-conscious critically celebratory perspective” (p. 5, emphasis in original), i.e. one that tries to avoid the easily reached conclusion that all black superheroes are simply negative stereotypes, in order to go further in his analysis. The analyses do not always lead as far as I could have hoped, but this rejection of the easy conclusions does mean that *Super Black* feels new, fresh and different.

Nama’s style is not a purely academic one, but veers towards the popular, using an extensive system of notes but a language that is easily accessible to most readers and that makes little reference to theoretical issues. This makes reading *Super Black* a breeze, but the more academically inclined part of me would have liked it if someone with as much insight would have made more inroads into the theoretical part of this subject.

The book is richly illustrated, which is visually gratifying since comics is a visual medium, something that is too often forgotten when academics publish about comics. The images, which are often full covers or comics pages, are also consistently reproduced on full pages in the book, rather than as stamp-like miniatures (thumbnails) or selected panels taken out of context, which is another bad habit of people designing books about comics.

On the whole, Nama’s book does add to the understanding of the representation of black people in comics, although maybe not in as significant a way as I had



hoped when setting out to read it, since much of what is discussed has been written about before. But then again, I am probably not the intended average pop-culture reader, having studied this topic for more than a decade. The best part of the book is Nama's determined approach of looking for the deeper meaning of the inclusion in comics of black superheroes, combined with the personal experiences of the author. This is where this book really makes a contribution.