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Truths of the Black Superhero



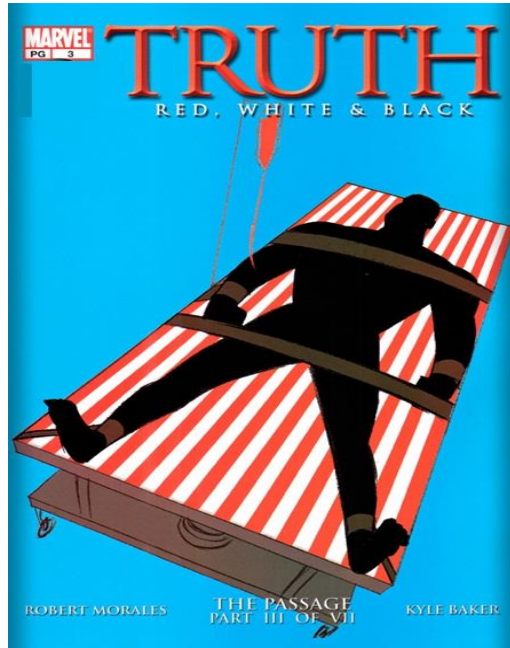
What do these comics tell us?

Contexts, Culture, Costume

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Speaking on the Culture and History



Black superhero comics have made a concerted effort to bring to light historical injustices black people have faced in America as well as different aspects of black culture, both positive and negative.



Editorial Statement:



The purpose of this zine was to demonstrate the purposes, meanings, and significance that black superheroes have on black culture as well as pop culture. We looked at five different characters that speak on a number of different topics relevant to black communities; whether it was historic events or injustices they alluded to, or whether it was the significance of their costumes, each character alluded to this idea of “blackness” in some fashion. I hope that you now have a better appreciation for these types of comics and can see that they, like all forms of literacy, can have cultural, political, and societal implications

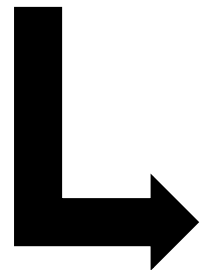
It is equally important to note the story behind **Falcon's** first comic. In it, he discovers Nazis are enslaving the natives of the island "Exile." Wilson and **Captain America** team up to in order to stop this from continuing.



Topics and issues like this are necessary to address in comics. Like all these other characters we have analyzed, **Falcon's** storyline is one that tackles historical injustices black people have faced throughout time. Additionally, **Falcon**, like Isaiah Bradley, eventually takes up the mantle of being **Captain America**, a powerful notion, indeed. Having a black man as the "hero of America" is an important step in representing, not only black people, but other people of color better in popular culture.

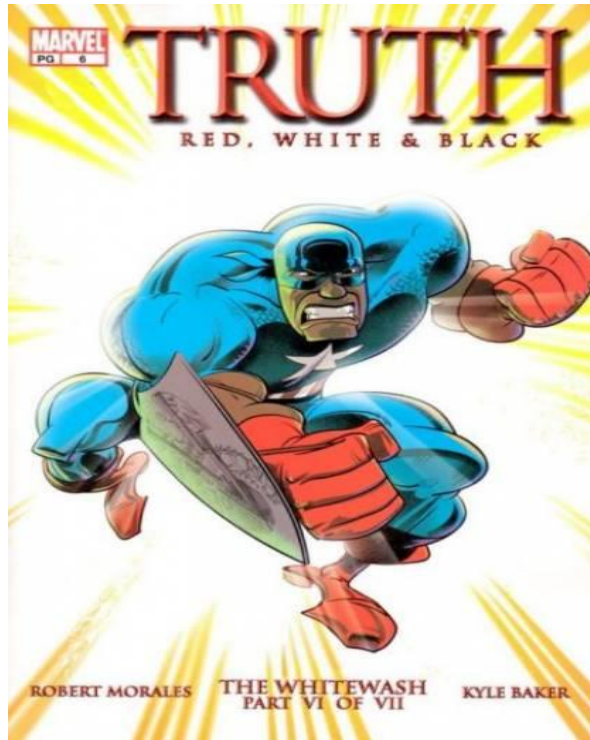
As **Kenneth Ghee** writes in his written piece "**Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?!**" these characters can "offer Black youth an alternate vision of themselves and of the culture." Additionally, the way these characters speak, dress, and act reveal quite a lot on the history of black people in **America**.

Now, Let's Take A Look At Our
First Character That We Will
Analyze!



First Up On the List:

Isaiah Bradley



Falcon first appears as a supplemental character in a 1969 Captain America comic. Coming fresh off the Civil Rights Movement in America, Falcon served as an important character in representing black people in superhero comics. Even though he may not have been the first black superhero to appear in a comic, writer Jordan Baranowski writes that Falcon is “**the first mainstream black hero to not have the word ‘Black’ in his name.**” One can imagine the kind of impact this character had in communities across the U.S.



Sam Wilson!



Otherwise Known As
Falcon!

The
Version of
**Captain
America**
You
Probably
Don't
Know:



First introduced to the **Marvel Universe** in 2003, **Isaiah Bradley** appeared briefly in his own comic series **Truth: Red White and Black**, which featured seven issues. Creators Robert Morales and Kyle Baker saw a unique opportunity to portray **Captain America**, a historically white superhero, as a black man. This decision was both made as a cultural and political statement, attempting to shed light on historical injustices black people have faced in America.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study

The New York Times

Syphilis Victims in U.S. Study Went Untreated for 40 Years

By JEAN HELLER
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON, July 25—For 40 years the United States Public Health Service has conducted a study in which human beings with syphilis, who were induced to serve as guinea pigs, have gone without medical treatment for the disease and a few have died of its late effects, even though an effective therapy was eventually discovered.

The study was conducted to determine from autopsies what the disease does to the human body.

Officials of the health service who initiated the experiment have long since retired. Current officials, who say they

have serious doubts about the morality of the study, also say that it is too late to treat the syphilis in any surviving participants.

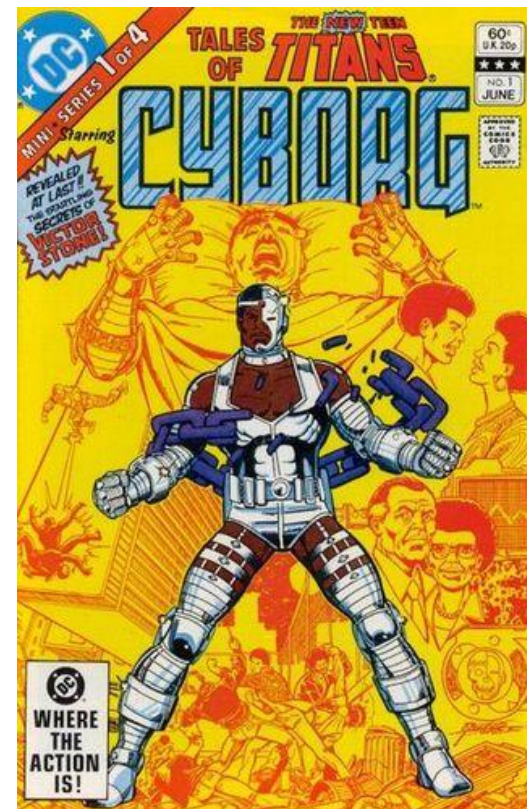
Doctors in the service say they are now rendering whatever other medical services they can give to the survivors while the study of the disease's effects continues.

Dr. Merlin K. DuVal, Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare for Health and Scientific Affairs, expressed shock on learning of the study. He said that he was making an immediate investigation.

The experiment, called the Tuskegee Study, began in 1932 with about 600 black men,



These issues found within **Cyborg's** comics as well as **Cyborg** himself are things seen in many divided areas throughout the United States. Cyborg's feelings of confusion and uncertainty emulate those of the people reading these comics. Therefore, having such a relatable character is one of the many reasons **Cyborg** is such an important and essential character for many people of color.



And now
our last
character...





Cyborg's appearance also speaks on the anxiety and isolation many black people feel when it comes to how other people see people of color differently. After his transformation into a half-bionic man, Victor can no longer stand the sight of himself, and he is constantly self-conscious whenever he is out in public. Blair Davis writes, **"While it is Cyborg's mechanical appearance rather than his race that serves to differentiate him, the character serves as a kind of allegory about judgment based on physical appearance."**

Perhaps one of the most overlooked injustices in American history is the **Tuskegee Syphilis Study**, which occurred at Tuskegee University from 1932-1972. During this time, the U.S. Public Health Service tested the effects of **untreated syphilis** on black male students. This American tragedy is directly alluded to in the origin story of **Isaiah Bradley**, who was one of three hundred black soldiers experimented on by the U.S. government for an advanced super-soldier serum. **Bradley** was the only survivor of the test,

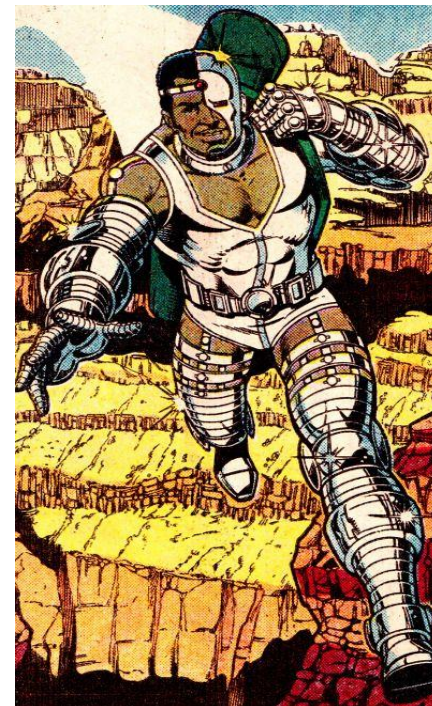




By the end of his run as **Captain America**, **Bradley** had been vowed to silence by the U.S. government to not speak on the failed experiments, which also alludes to feelings of suppression felt by some folk in the black community when it comes to various aspects of their culture. Author P.L Thomas describes this as the **"often invisible history and even presence of black people"** in American history.

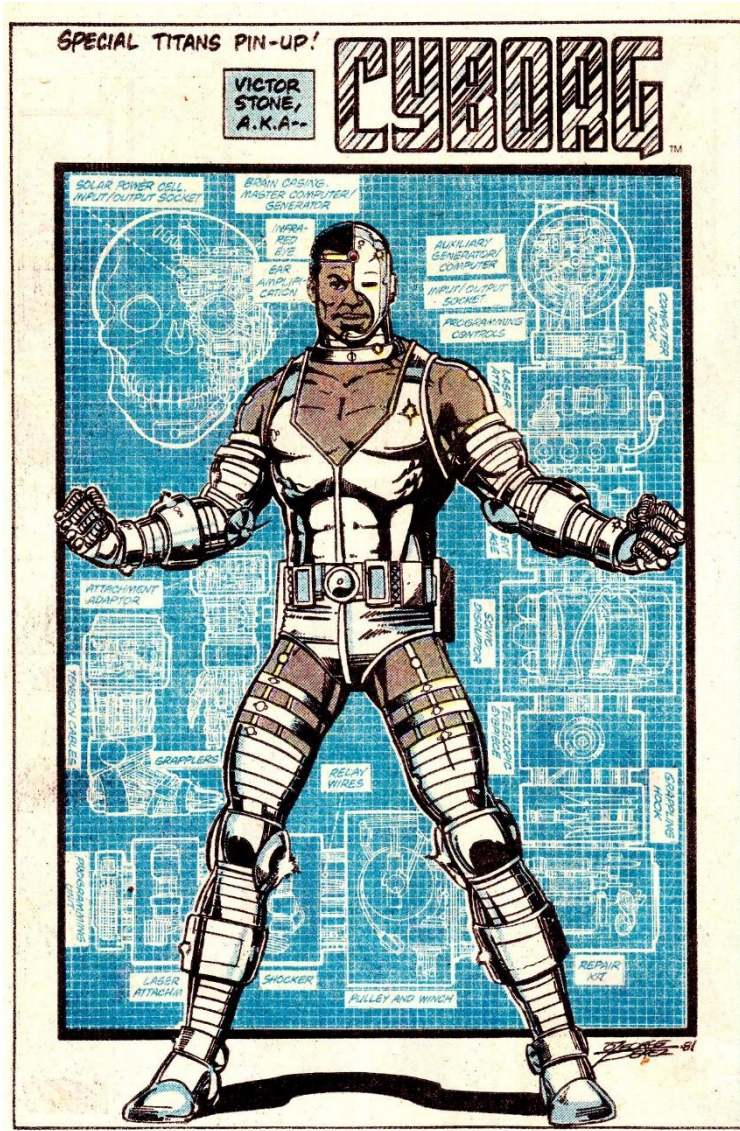


The superhero **Cyborg** first appeared in DC comics in the 1980s, as a member of the sidekick group "The Teen Titans." **Cyborg's** origin story is very much tied to debates and viewpoints within the black community, and his comics deal with both racial and socioeconomic divides within U.S. cities. Stone comes from an affluent family of scientists and lives a relatively secluded life, hidden from issues going on in the community around him.



He eventually interacts with people outside his household, who are lower class black people, and he comes to find out that many of them disdain the white hierarchy in the community as well as upper class black folk too. As a result, Victor is torn in the way he feels about these topics.

Who's Up Next??



How About **Victor Stone**,
aka **Cyborg**?

Much of **Bradley's** story taps into the emotions and feelings people in the black community have had throughout time. He was a prime example of a comic book character that had a significant impact on black culture, as have the other characters we will analyze going forward.



Next Up: Luke Cage!





Luke Cage:

The New-Look Superhero

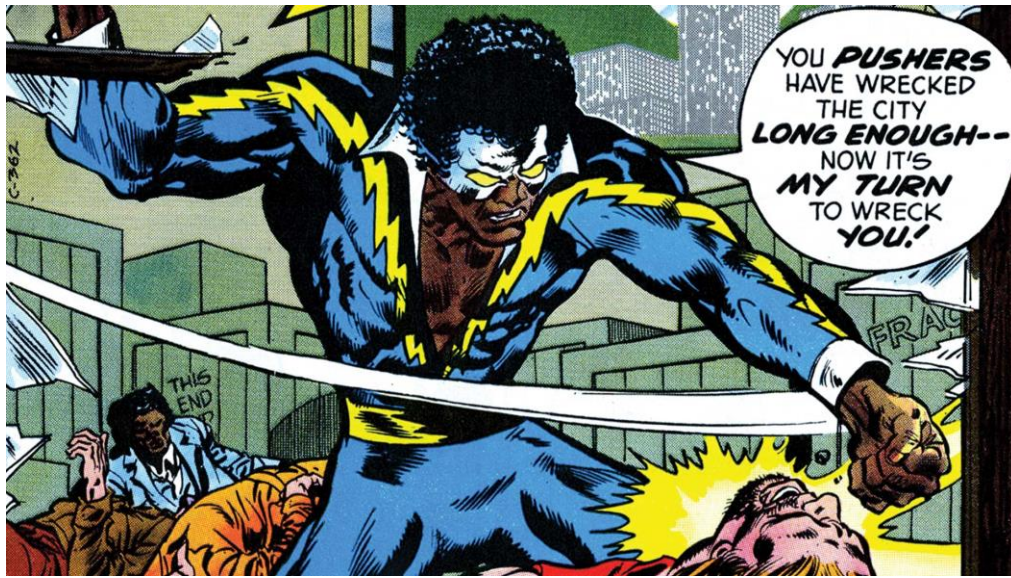


Like Luke Cage, Black Lightning's costume is not the archetypal superhero outfit; it speaks a lot more to cultures from which these characters emerge. While Black Lightning does wear a mask, his costume very much as a 70s funk vibe, which was a big part of black culture at the time this comic came out.



Black Lightning's afro is also a big cultural statement. Blair Davis describes it as **"closely connected to the 'black is beautiful' movement that emerged out of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s."** The fact that this afro is a detachable part of the costume, however, is an interesting detail, for it leaves Jefferson Davis, the schoolteacher, with a non-iconic haircut in black culture. Does this speak to a suppression of black culture in regular societies in America?

Black Lightning, aka Jefferson Pierce, broke barriers in the history of black comics, as he was the first black superhero to have his own DC comic series. His origin story represents many of the real struggles people in low-income black communities face across the United States.



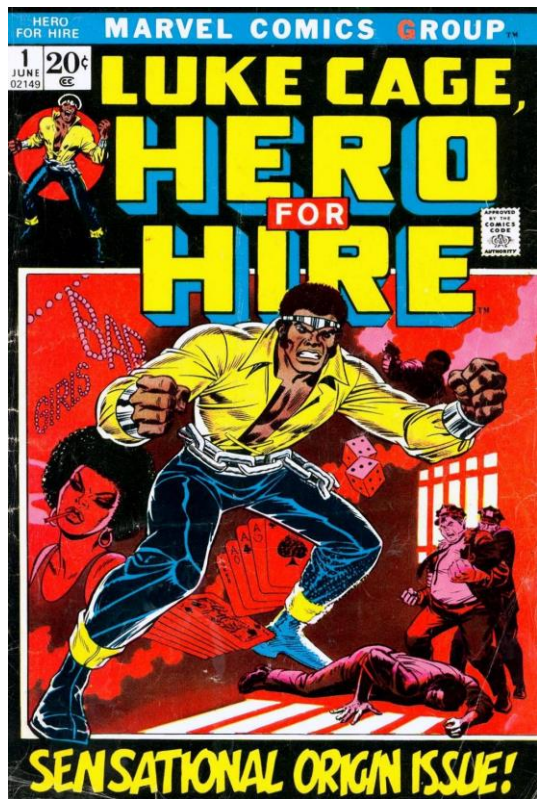
Jefferson Pierce grew up in a place called **Suicide Slum**, where not many people make it out to live better lives. Pierce recognizes this and attends college, eventually graduating and coming back as a high school to help kids have a similar path. This notion is one that has been practiced by people within African American communities for many years.

Luke Cage is another prime example of a black superhero whose character, particularly his appearance, is representative of many different aspects of black culture.



As scholar Blair Davis writes, his costume **"assumes the very nature of all the images that surround him."** He wears no cape or mask, but instead dons clothes that people in his community would wear, signifying that superheroes do not have a set look... a superhero can be anyone.

A part of Cage's costume in the early versions of the comics are the bracelets he wears around his wrists and the chain around his waist. There has been speculation as to what these parts of his appearance may mean, and one theory by Blair Davis suggests these things serve **"as a reminder of the heritage of slavery that Cage carries with him as a black male."**



As a result, Cage's character represents the historical struggles black people have suffered through and endured, thus acting as a **cultural icon** for these communities.

And Our Next Superhero We Will Analyze Is...



Black Lightning!

