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AT WAR WITH REPRESENTATION

RYAN VOGEL-ENG342



THE REBIRTH OF SUPERHEROES

The history, presence and formation of a new kind of superhero

IS THERE A PREFERENCE?

Compare and contrast black superheroes across superhero groups

ARE CAPES NECESSARY?

Dive deeper into the idea of costuming across varying characters



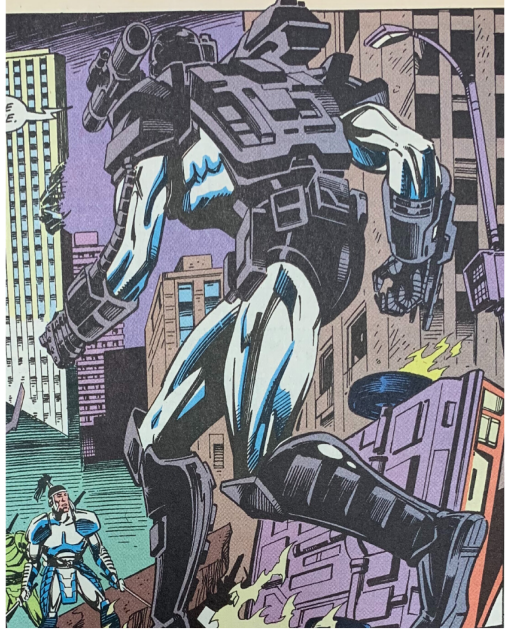


THE NEW CLASS OF SUPERHEROES





HOW DID THIS COME TO BE?



What can we learn about superheroes through analyzing *War Machine?*

War Machine's character is important for understanding how black superheroes are represented in varying superhero groups. The analysis answers the question: Is there a lack of positive representation? The answer? Maybe. Pieces of his character illuminate strength - his personal growth, the presence of his own costume, and the history of his character. However, other areas of *War Machine* are weaker. He relies a lot of Iron Man (for the creation of his character as well as his suit), battles aggression, and is often disregarded in conversations about superheroes.

What can we learn *War Machine* through the comparison of characters?

By comparing *War Machine's* character to other superheroes in varying groups, one is able to understand the process of forming superhero groups. There has been and likely will always be a lack of representation. With the little representation that is present, there is a lack of depth. The four other characters analyzed (Cyborg, Storm, Iron Man, and Black Panther) teach readers that there are problems present in the formation, history, and presence of their characters in groups. These other characters illustrate that *War Machine* is not alone in his war for representation.



"Why James Rhodes is Comics' Ideal Black Hero"

In his article under the same name, Graeme McMillan highlights overall reasons why War Machine is such an impactful character in comics for the audiences. But are his claims representative of positive attributions?

"By accident more than design, Rhodes has ended up possessing multiple characteristics that sum up the black superhero experience. Sure, he may not have the word "Black" in his superhero name...but look how many other checkboxes he's managed to tick..."

He's A Sidekick at Heart

"If there's one rule for black superheroes, it's that they're never the stars of the show..."

Sure, this is true of many black superhero characters, but why does this make *War Machine* iconic? Shouldn't this be further proof that black superheroes deserve a spot in the limelight?

He's Edgy

"A hero so edgy that he doesn't uphold the status quo, he takes on corporate interests that are raping and pillaging our planet...Because, that's what black superheroes do, apparently: they don't join in with everyone else to get the job done like we expect, they see the bigger picture and deal with social injustice"

I agree with points mentioned here, that Black Superheroes often do fight for social justice. However, *War Machine* does seem to follow along with stereotypes about aggression and concurs with ideas about black men not following the rules of society.

He's a Replacement

"And how did Rhodey get his start as a superhero again? Oh, that's right; he replaced Tony as Iron Man."

Again, why does *War Machine's* introduction into comics through Iron Man create the iconicity of his character? For me, this illuminates to me a kind of typology that black superheroes are only formed by white superiors.

He's a Cyborg

"What is it about high-profile black characters finding themselves turned into part-robot? Some kind of clever commentary on black culture being assimiliated into the white corporate machine, or white creators having a fear of a black robotic planet?"

Similar to X-Men's *Cyborg, War Machine* demonstrates how white authors and illustrators place their own feelings about black superheroes into their work and how they are created.

"A HERO IS ONLY A HERO IF HE IS FIGHTING FOR YOUR CAUSE."

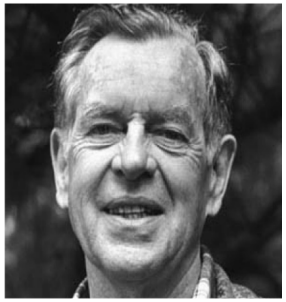
In his essay, "Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?! A critical analysis of the mythological and cultural significance of black superheroes," Kenneth Ghee highlights the development of a new class of superheroes. He touches on the **history** of heroes, the **presence** of their characters in media, and how the **formation** of black superheroes came to be.



let's dive deeper....

THE HISTORY OF
THE HERO MYTH

Joseph Campbell, 2008



1) The "Reluctant Hero"

The one who responds "heroically"

2) The "Action Hero"

A regular person who accomplishes feats of heroism due to average or superior skills

3) The "Superhero"

"The one with the extraordinary power or technology

4) The"Role Hero"

"Those whose role to serve and protect

At War with Representation works to illustrate and illuminate the presence of black superheroes in conjunction with popular superhero groups, through the comparison of mainstream characters in comics. Specifically focusing on *Marvel's* War Machine, one can analyze the reality of black superheroes and how their characters are formed.

The Pros and Cons of Black Costumes in Comics

"The integration of superhero comics continued apace in the '90s and '00s, with intriguing new wrinkles. DC and Marvel shook up tradition by giving black characters a chance to put on the costumes of the publishers' best-known heroes. A much less testy John Stewart spent more time as Green Lantern. James Rhodes became such an important part of Iron Man's adventures that he's now a staple of the Marvel Cinematic Universe." - Noel Murray, The Week

For War Machine, his costume allows him to be relevant in the lives of audiences. His character now graces the pages and the screens of thousands of fans, which would not have been possible without the way his chracter was created in *Iron Man.*





"Superman's cape, Batman's cowl and their respective chest symbols, as well as Captain America's American-flag color scheme and shield, are so visually distinct that they prove highly memorable, along with the fact that such imagery plays an ongoin role in the characterization of each hero. By comparison, the costumes of many black superheroes tell us little about the characters - perhaps explaining why such costumes seem to get designed every decade or so." - Blair Davis

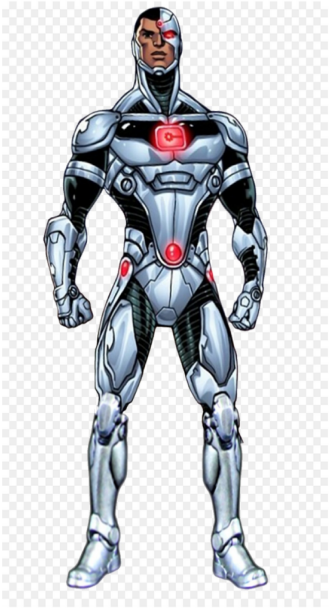
After analyzing many characters and their costumes, I have been able to detect how White Superheroes tend to have more intricate and developed clothing, whereas black superheroes' costumes are never a staple of culture or emphasize anything about the specific character.

"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." - Blair Davis



Cyborg

Cyborg's costume is very similar to that of *War Machine's.* The armor he wears covers almost his entire body, with only half of his face visible where readers can see that he is African American. He is a combination of man and machine, "with nearly half of his skull and all of his extremities now made of metal, giving him enhanced speed, strength, and other abilities." (Davis). Unlike Storm, Cyborg's character is formed by his costume, with his powers stemming from the machinery, not something innate inside of him.



WAR MACHINE

created by David Michelinie & John Byrne, published under Marvel Comics







Black superheroes like War Machine represent a small landscape of characters in comic books. The character, James Rhodes, is an African-American man whose rise to fame and heroism came from his relations with Tony Stark, aka Iron Man. The formation of his character can be studied to understand his impact on readers.

what's the connection?

In his piece, Kenneth Ghee highlights the historical lack of black superheroes in the media: "In the late 1970s BOCA (The Black-Owned Communications Alliance) launched a national advertising campaign addressing the dearth of fiictional Black superheroes by showing a picture of a young Black boy engaged in pretend play looking in the mirror at the image of a White superhero. Their caption read: "What's wrong with this picture? A child dreams of being the latest superhero. What could be wrong with that? Plenty, if the child is Black and can't even *imagine* a hero the same color he or she is...The emphatic point is that a Black child should, at the very least, be able to imagine a positive superhero or mythological archetype and icon from his/her own race or culture instad of always having to look to another culture for his/her pretend play and idols." Unlike white children, in history there has been an extreme lack of characters for black youth to look up to in the media. War Machine is one character that today's youth can relate to.

The overwhelming presence of White Superheroes

"The unmitigated whiteness of popular superheroes is part and parcel of their origins. Superhero comics have been going strong since the late 1930s. This is when many of the iconic superheroes were first published: Superman (1938), Batman (1939), Captain America (1941), and Wonder Woman (1942). They have a legacy that has helped to propel them into popular culture as near mythic characters. By contrast, the first black superhero published by a major company is Marvel's Black Panther in 1966 (and he doesn't get his own series until 1973). The marked lack of black superheroes has an insidious inertia to it; their "history" is brief. The most popular characters tend to be those that were created during comicdom's golden and silver ages. These superheroes were created during times when racial representation was not prioritized for the comics industry (or the nation as a whole for that matter) but also, the lack of creators of color meant that there was zero impetus on the creative side for racial inclusiveness. Thus the golden and silver age superheroes represent a tableau of stark whiteness. The superheroes that have become fixtures of pop culture are almost entirely white." - *Racebending and Representation in Comic Books,* Bryan Cooper Owens

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Well, it means that we can compare the histories of white superheroes with those of black superheroes, analyzing their presence in society at the time of creation!

Let's do this with two very popular characters from the Marvel Universe



"Her first appearance finds her initially portrayed not as a superhero, however, but as a kind of deity."
- Blair Davis



Storm

Storm's representation in the X-Men is defined by her over-sexualized costumes: "She wears only a skirt and a headdress, and her long white hair covers her breasts—her seminude body is in keeping with those of the villagers who pray before her. An apparent part of her culture, such nudity therefore becomes naturalized within the context of the scene, with only her headdress setting her apart from the others." Readers understand how the Africanization of her character contributes to her costume. When she comes to America, she has to become accustomed with new costumes, even though she felt "more comfortable in her Kenyan attire." She doesn't want to cover herself with American clothing, sharing that "Gods, I wish I didn't have to wear these absurd scraps of cloth..."

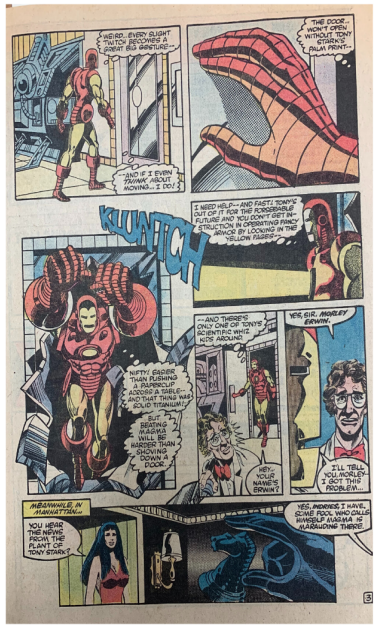
Unlike War Machine, whose character is created based on their costume, Storm creates herself outside of the clothes that she wears. Her character's powers do not originate from what she wears. Although her character is overly sexualized, her character develops over time to be more Americanized, which stems from America's views of women in comics

DIVING INTO THE CREATION OF BLACK COSTUMES

James Rhodes took over Iron Man's armor after Tony Stark's battle with alcoholism impacting his behavior. He overtook Stark's *Mark II Armor*. The armor was then upgraded with more weaponry that then helped rebrand James Rhodes as *War Machine.* He never gave the armor back to Tony Stark, even after he was clean of alcohol.



War Machine



Although *War Machine* is positively represented by having his own set of armor in the comics he is a part of, there is still the looming idea that it was never meant for him. He became the character that he is strictly because of Tony Stark, and might not have ever became the superhero that he is because of Iron Man. Being that the armor is created by Stark Industries, Iron Man will continuously have power over *War Machine.*





War Machine's character appears in the Iron Man series. He serves as a side character to Tony Stark, and his armor is a development of Stark Industries.

"If there's one rule for black superheroes, it's that they're never the stars of the show (Or, at least, not for very long;...Jim Rhodes is, and always will be, a sidekick to Tony Stark's Iron Man. His armor was created by Tony. His training and experience all came from Tony. Hell, even his reason for becoming a superhero in the first place is Tony and that whole alcoholic breakdown thing....but let's not kid ourselves: James Rhodes is defined by Tony Stark." (Gizmodo) War Machine serves as a secondary character to Iron Man, as many black superheroes do

"Tony Stark made his first appearance in Tales of Suspense #39 in 1963. He was created by Stan Lee, Larry Lieber, Don Heck, and Jack Kirby. Tony's character was loosely based on the life of the rich and successful playboy Howard Hughes." (Comic Vine)

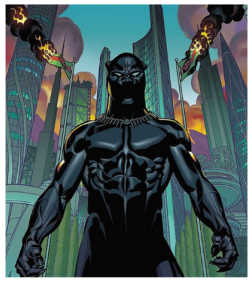
"When Marvel re-emerged on the comic book scene in the Silver Age (some say Marvel's re-emergence signaled the beginning of the Silver Age of Comics) a big factor in their popularity was making easily relatable characters." (Comic Vine) In this sense, readers understand how Iron Man's race is situated with the audience

While the two characters have many similarities, such as originating from the same comic book series and donning the same armor, the two differ in one, *stark way.*

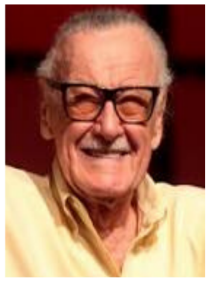
The issue gets compounded when Marvel seems like it's more committed to showcase people of color and women in secondary or background roles. While Nick Fury is the glue that holds the MCU together, he's still a character that toggles between secondary and tertiary status. The more popular black superheroes, like War Machine and Falcon, are, indeed, cool. But they are also still second to their white friends, Iron Man and Captain America. They back up the white superheroes, sometimes act as their conscience, and are utilized as a soundboard for their ideas. In short, these black superheroes do a lot of emotional legwork for their friends, while the script doesn't often write the white superheroes reciprocating much of that emotional labor back.

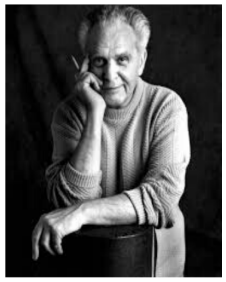
Black Superheroes are still put in the background as secondary characters to their white superiors - why?

"If you don't employ black creators...people are going to ask why that aspect of black culture is worth celebrating but black creatives aren't worth hiring." - Laura Hudson, Wired



***Black Panther*, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby**





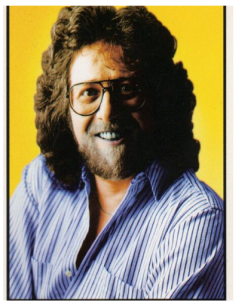


***Cyborg*, created by Marv Wolfman**





***Storm*, created by Len Wein**



When contrasted with Iron Man, War Machine's character is shown to be only separated from him by his race. They share many alike qualities, such as their armor and abilities, but the one thing that divides them is their skin color. The problem with many superhero comics is that the black superhero is often cast to the side, like War Machine in *Iron Man.* Readers are able to understand how even though there has been the introduction of a new class of superheroes, there is still issues around how these superheroes are placed into their comics. This concept can be attributed to the opinions of white writers who create these comics, along with how black Americans were represented in society at the time.



"Given that white writers and artists created the majority of black superheroes, these characters and their reception among audiences, can therefore be seen as touchstones for how white American society regards black identity (including such concerns as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, among others) in any given period. Since cultural beliefs typically change over time, so too does the visual design of these characters evolve, with specific costumes, hairstyles, and the like becoming closely connected to specific eras in history..." - Blair Davis



Black superheroes, when given costumes at all, are often overshadowed by their white counterparts. White superheroes are commonly seen donning patriotic colors, whereas Black superheroes rarely are given costumes that evoke patriotism. Readers can then connect country pride to White Americans, while black Americans are then seen as unpatriotic and their costumes are often set aside.

However, with the presence of black superheroes in comics (positive or not), readers are able to compare differing superhero groups to analyze varying ways of representation. The majority of superhero groups are led by white men, with one or two members representing a diverse group. This begs the question: **Where does War Machine fall into this?**



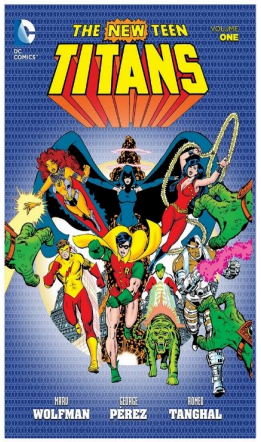
His Group: *The Avengers*

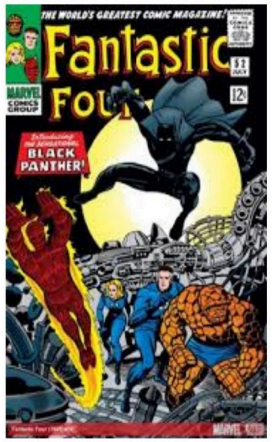
*W*ar Machine, in the Iron Man suit, became a founding member of *The West Coast Avengers* , Marvel's top superhero group in *Avengers West Coast* Issue #94, but rejoined as War Machine in Issue #94.

Representation in the group at the time of War Machine's rejoining was low. There was a clear lack of diversity, with James Rhodes serving as the only African American member of the group.

Other Prominent Superhero Groups







LET'S COMPARE *THE AVENGERS'* REPRESENTATION TO THAT OF THE OTHER SUPERHERO GROUPS, SHALL WE?

FANTASTIC FOUR:

Fantastic Four, which was originally published in 1961, had four main characters: Mr. Fantastic, Invisible Girl, Human Torch, and Thing. All of these protagonists are white, with the introduction of *Black Panther* in Issue #52 in 1966. Black Panther is primarily introduced by luring the four to Wakanda, and then attacking. This action paints African-Americans as aggressive, which perputuates societal expectations of Black men.

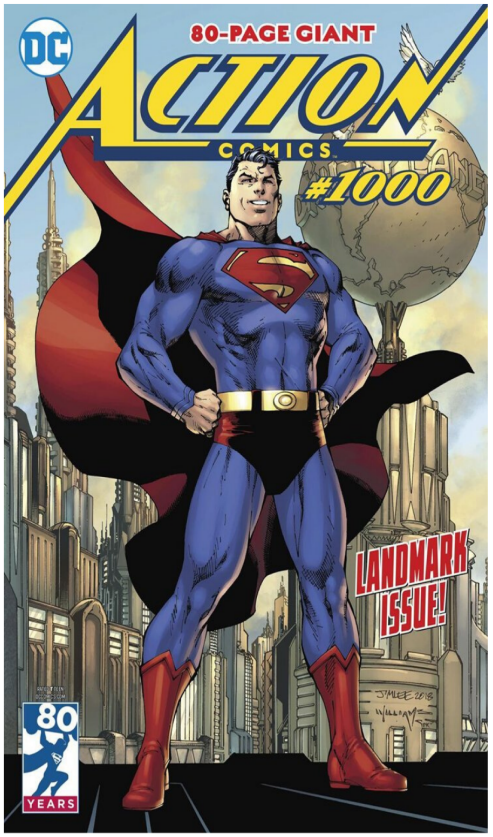


"The Black Panther was created in 1966 by the recognized genius of a Marvel Comics Mogul Stan Lee in the 52nd issue of the Fantastic Four. He was the first mainstreamed Black superhero. He was created and characterized as an African prince (now a king) unequivocally committed to his highly technological and advanced scientific, yet native and indigenous, remote and concealed African kingdom." - Ghee



The Physical Representation of Black Superheroes in Comics:

In CBR.com's research of the 20 best superhero costumes, nobody on the list was African-American. The list ranged from Wonder-Woman to Wolverine, through Captain Marvel to the number one ranked costume, Superman.



What's the reasoning behind this list?

According to *Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros: The VIsual Design of Black Comic Book Superheroes* by Blair Davis, "Superman, Spider-Man, Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman—these characters rank among the most immediately recognizable superheroes by comic fans and nonfans alike worldwide, having secured an enduring role in popular culture. Each embodies distinctive visual elements: colorful costumes, memorable masks and/or capes, unique symbols and adornments." These characters are recognized more for the prominence of their series in media, unlike black superheroes who often lack popularity.

Let's analyze how black superheroes are constructed

X-Men

The characters of the X-Men series are mutants; superheroes known for their differences. The mutants are oppressed in their society for strictly being mutants, which is synonymous with how marginalized groups lack representation in society.



Some characters in the X-Men comic books, however, continue to reinforce ideas of separation between races. Storm, a female goddess who joins the X-Men in *Giant Size X-Men #1.* There are many opinions on Storm's character and whether or not her representation in the comics is positive. She journeys throughout the series from being Africanized due to her home nation to an Americanized mutant. In her essay *Oh My Goddess,* Ana Paula Oliveira shares that "Storm gained recognition for being the first black woman to be relevant in a comic book from a renowned publishing house."

However, Storm also faced backlash for over-sexualization, evident as Oliveira highlights: "The comic exploits Storm's sexuality on several occasions by insinuating the sexual act, showing her using seductive manners...but this representation is more connected to gender issues than racial ones.

Despite the over-sexualization of her character, Storm differs greatly from War Machine in her role as a leader in the X-Men: "Storm's recurring leadership status contradicts the stereotype of subservience and the oppressive background experienced by a black woman,...Storm leads groups comprised almost entirely of white men." She is powerful, whereas War Machine often takes a seat to Iron Man or other leaders.



Black Panther's personification in comic books varies over time. Originally in *Fantastic Four*, he was shown as aggressive and overpowering. Then, when he transitioned to being a member of *The Avengers*, he became a symbol of empowerment for African nations. As an African superhero, he differs from War Machine as he represents often overlooked areas of the world.



"T'Challa is evidence that Stan Lee, his co-creators, and the writers and artists who followed in their footsteps knew that black people existed in a fuller way than was often shown in comics. Some of their well-meaning efforts were clunky and embarrassing, but they were gesturing in the right direction. That was enough for me."

This quote is surprising to those who have looked deeply into the formation of comic book characters. After studying the presence of black superheroes in comic books, one can understand that not all comics represent African Americans in the greatest light compared to their white counterparts.



For example, in his article Sidekickism: Tokens of my Affection, David F. Walker shares that War Machine's on-screen character did not live up to par with his comic book predecessor: "The only problem — at least for me — was that Cheadle never really got to be a superhero. Instead, he got to be a sidekick."

Teen Titans

Cyborg and War Machine have lots in common. Both superheroes bodies are taken over by the machinery in their suits. However, Cyborg's character lives up to common stereotypes about black men in the media. In an article written by 'sonofbaldwin', he stated:

"At the same time, conversely, Cyborg serves in the racist mold of "the Buck." So, of course he's an athlete; of course he plays football. White supremacy must always find some "productive" use in black bodies, must always be able to capitalize off of our labor. Oftentimes, when white writers are attempting to write black characters, they rely on stereotypes because they can't imagine black people as actual human beings. These are the creations of people who don't know any/many black people, but have seen plenty of them at basketball games or on television, or maybe even had a beer with one once, and considers them a "friend."





Cyborg's character, when introduced in *Tales of the Teen Titans Issue #1,* illuminates how varying typologies of African American superheroes are formed in comic books. He represents the stereotypical man that white writers formulate due to lack of knowledge about these people. His character is strong, manly, and aggressive. One can learn about how these characters are formed and then compare them to other members of the group they are associated with.



The other members of the Teen Titans include the following: Changeling, Kid Flash, Raven, Robin, Starfire, and Wonder Girl. Each one of them have powers, but are not mechanically driven by their superhero abilities. None of them remotely differ from stereotypical superhero characters, with the exception of Changeling whose skin is green. There are female members of the group, but they also are majority groups due to their skin colors.

"The mainstream comic book industry is afraid to tackle the notion of what a truly radicalized black person with superpowers would actually look like and what they do with those powers." - 'SonofBaldwin'