

**ADILIFE4 NAMA**

# **SUPER BLACK**

**AMERICAN POP CULTURE AND BLACK SUPERHEROES**

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS



AUSTIN



*To my mother Marquette Suwenia Bivens, the only superhero  
I have ever had the privilege of knowing*

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have defined American race relations over the past century. To name a few, the Great Migration, Jackie Robinson and the integration of major league baseball, the rise and decline of the civil rights movement, postindustrialism, the groundbreaking success of *The Cosby Show*, the near ubiquitous presence of hip-hop in American culture, and, of course, the first black president have held, at one time or another, center stage as racially defining political and cultural events in American history. Admittedly, against such socially significant events, the examination of black superheroes can easily be viewed as cultural trivia or an exercise in self-indulgent fandom. Yet as Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Dick Hebdige have superbly revealed in their respective works concerning cultural production and popular culture, that which appears the most mundane, innocuous, and everyday offers some of the most provocative and telling cultural and ideological information about a society.<sup>7</sup> I contend this is certainly the case with various transformations that black superhero figures have reflected over the past forty years in comic books, television, and film. Black superheroes are not the disposable refuse of American pop culture, but serve as a source of potent racial meaning that has substance and resonance far beyond their function and anticipated shelf life.

CHAPTER 1

# COLOR THEM BLACK

*Oh, we can beat them, forever and ever. Then we could be heroes just for one day.*

—DAVID BOWIE, "Heroes"

*Ain't no such thing as Superman.*

—GIL SCOTT-HERON, *First Minute of a New Day*

**S**cores of readers have used superhero comics to vicariously defy gravity and bound over skyscrapers, swing through the Big Apple with the greatest of ease, stalk the dark streets of Gotham, or travel at magnificent speeds throughout the universe on an opaque surboard. Yet superheroes are more than fuel for fantasies or a means to escape from the humdrum world of everyday responsibilities. Superheroes symbolize societal attitudes regarding good and evil, right and wrong, altruism and greed, justice and fair play. Lost, however, in the grand ethos and pathos that superheroes represent are the black superheroes that fly, fight, live, love, and sometimes die. In contrast, even the most obscure white superheroes are granted an opportunity to make their way from the narrow margins of fandom to mainstream media exposure. (Remember the film *Swamp Thing* [1982]?) Nevertheless, what black superheroes may lack in mainstream popularity they more than match in symbolism, meaning, and political import with regard to the cultural politics of race in America. Even the omission and chronic marginalization of black superheroes are phenomena rife with cultural and sociopolitical implications.

The lack of black superheroes has served as a source of concerned speculation and critique. Arguably, Kenneth Clark's groundbreaking yet flawed doll experiment from the 1950s is a theoretical cornerstone for the racial anxiety associated with an absence of black superheroes and its impact on both black



and white children. Clark's work revealed that when given a choice black children overwhelmingly preferred a white doll to a black doll and often associated negative qualities with the latter. This racial preference was taken as evidence that racial segregation contributed to internalized feelings of inferiority on the part of black kids.<sup>1</sup> The results also implied that black children needed "positive" black images to help counteract low self-esteem. Against this theoretical backdrop the need to create black superheroes for black children to identify with takes on greater significance as a social problem. On the one hand, black superheroes are needed to counteract the likelihood of black children detrimentally identifying with white superheroes. On the other hand, the glut of white superheroes could encourage white children to accept notions of white superiority as normal.<sup>2</sup> This type of racial logic is clearly on display in Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytical manifesto on race *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In this book he argued that figures like Tarzan the Ape Man reinforced real racial hierarchies by repetitively depicting whites as victors over black people and chronically portraying blacks as representatives of the forces of evil.

A similar suspicion is detected in the Black Power aesthetic of singer and spoken word artist Gil Scott-Heron. On his album *First Minute of a New Day* Scott-Heron echoed Frantz Fanon's trenchant critique of white superheroes with the terse edict, "Ain't no such thing as Superman." The statement subverts and calls attention to the racial implications embedded in Superman as one of the most iconic figures in American pop culture. In this case, a virtually indestructible white man flying around the world in the name of "truth, justice, and the American way" is not a figure black folk should waste time believing in. Gil Scott-Heron was signifying the dubious racial politics of having a strange and powerful white man presented as a figure of awe and wonder. Such a sensibility casts Superman's identity as having less to do with being the last son of Krypton and more to do with symbolically embodying white racial superiority and American imperialism.

In contrast to the concern over the normalization of white supremacy in comics, Fredric Wertham accused the entire comic book industry of being a nefarious influence on American youth of all colors. He pronounced that the graphic depictions of violence, suggestive sexuality, fascist ideology, and homosexual innuendo woven into the images and narratives found in crime, horror, and superhero comic books had negative effects on children and were subversive.<sup>3</sup> Wertham's staunch opposition to comics was eventually successful. By 1954 the comic book industry had succumb to pressure and adopted a content code to mute vocal critics of the medium and placate public concerns that comics were dangerous because they contributed to juvenile delinquency.<sup>4</sup> The code was put in place to protect readers from subversive and upsetting material even though

it was predicated on disputed media-effects theories.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the emergence of American youth as a significant consumer market and the increasing packaging of adolescent desire as an advertising method are likely stronger forces for cultivating behaviors, desires, and ideas than what is presented in comic books.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately the fear about media effects on black children that admire white superheroes is overly simplistic and fails to seriously take into account the fact that audience reception is a more complex phenomenon than is suggested by a strict stimulus-response model of media consumption.<sup>7</sup> For example, Junot Diaz, the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in his youth identified with the white mutant superhero team the X-Men. Because the group were mutants and were treated as social outcasts, as a young Dominican immigrant, Diaz felt an affinity for the characters due to his own marginalized racial status that stigmatized him as an outsider to mainstream America.<sup>8</sup> Diaz's experience speaks to the power of superheroes to deliver ideas about American race relations that stand outside of strict notions of authorial intent and draconian concerns about white superheroes (or black ones, for that matter) depositing negative notions about one's racial identity into the reader or viewer. Consequently, even though superhero figures are predominantly white guys and gals clad in spandex and tights, a strict racial reading of the negative impact white superheroes may have on blacks is too linear and reductive.

Diaz's anecdote also demonstrates how easily entertainment media and the cultural politics of race can converge in an interesting way. Yet the connection between the two realms was not clearly perceived or seamlessly integrated until the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this period the bright line between the popular and the political was obliterated as American pop culture began to shed its escapist impulses and boldly engage the racial tensions that America was experiencing. For example, James Brown's song "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968) did double duty as a dance hit and a racial anthem of uplift and self-esteem. A more subtle but just as powerful illustration of the intersection of the popular and the political regarding race occurred on *Sesame Street*, the pioneering public-television show for children. In the early 1970s Kermit the Frog was one of the show's central characters, and when he sang a lament about how difficult it was being the color green the vignette clearly placed racial prejudice in the center spotlight. Even the most innocuous forms of American pop life were getting in on the trend. In 1971 Coca-Cola would launch a successful television ad campaign in which a multiracial throng of young people stood on a hilltop and sang the catchy jingle "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing (in Perfect Harmony)." On one hand, the commercial could be criticized as the pinnacle of pop drivel for an unsophisticated public to mindlessly consume. On the other

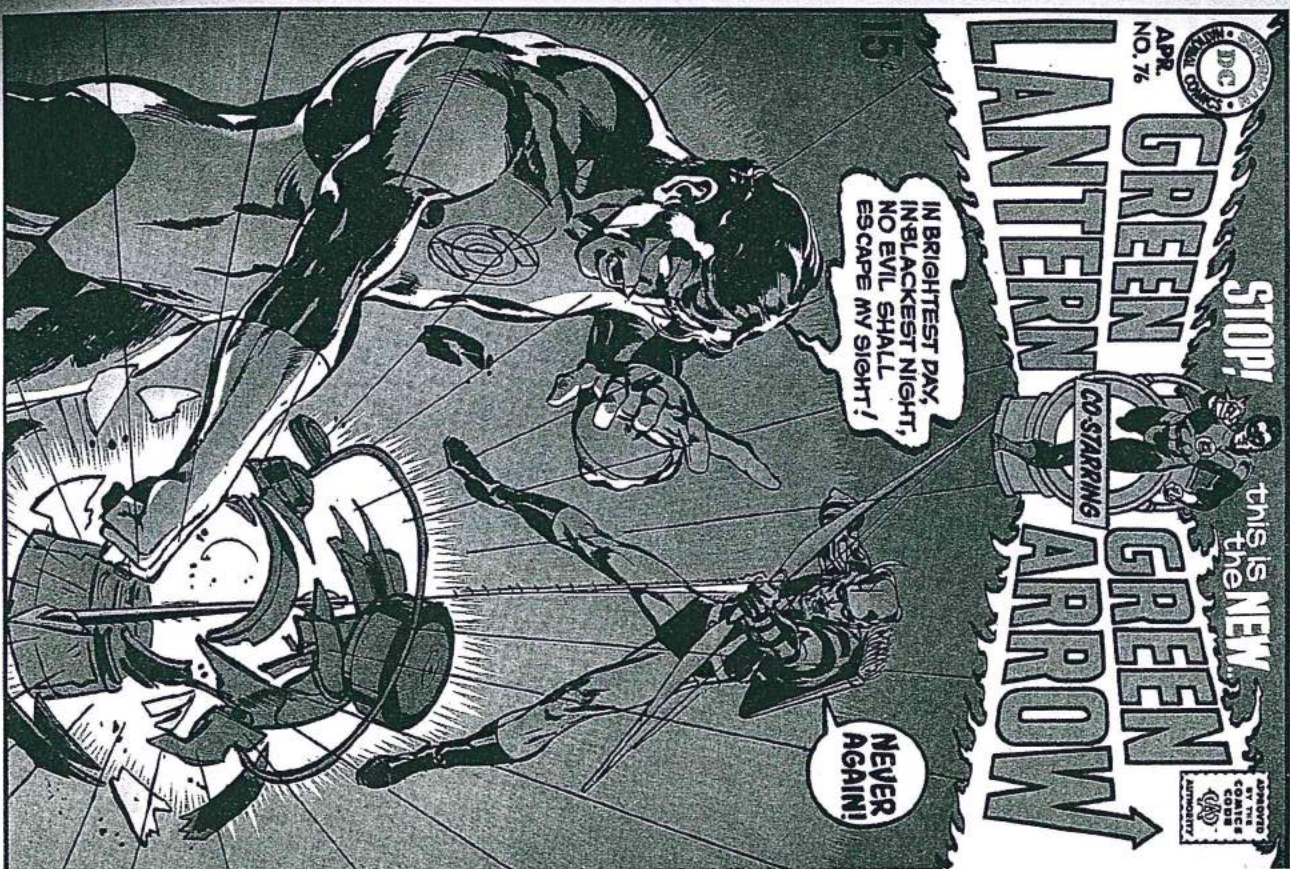


hand, by presenting an image of blacks, whites, and third-world people of color peacefully standing together singing in unison the commercial was a striking symbolic counterpoint to anxiety over racial unrest at home and the Vietnam War abroad.

Arguably the turn toward increasing racial and political relevance in American pop culture was spurred by the baby boomer generation coming of age at the height of American racial unrest and political turmoil. The formulaic and commercial appeal of traditional forms of American pop culture faced severely diminishing entertainment value for the baby boomers. Bloated musical spectacles like *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970) were virtually ignored, westerns with their high-noon shootouts and sanitized violence were replaced by operatic depictions of bloodshed in spaghetti westerns, and a blaxploitation movie craze provided a new round of two-dimensional black characters that misled many to believe that racial diversity and the Hollywood film industry were synonymous. Alongside these multiple shifts in content and style, superhero comics also experienced a profound transformation. Marvel Comics was first to adjust. The paradigmatic "perfect" superhero was recreated as emotionally flawed and conflicted, a sensibility that mirrored the adolescent angst and ideological identity crisis that had taken hold throughout America as the turbulent 1960s gave way to the early 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Reluctant superheroes such as Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, and the Incredible Hulk represented a new typology of superhero: troubled, brash, brave, and insecure. Not to be outdone, however, were the subsequent reimagining of DC Comics's Green Arrow and Green Lantern.

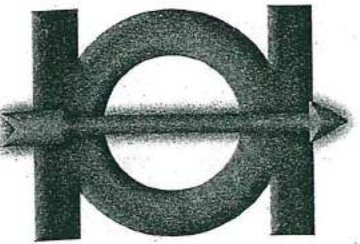
Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams's *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* (1970-1972) comic book series dramatically recast superheroes, and shaped the superhero comic book as a space where acute social issues were engaged. On one hand, Green Lantern embodied President Richard Nixon's no-nonsense dictum of "law and order" in the face of race riots and student protests. On the other hand, Green Arrow was the symbolic representative of activist youth, the working class, and the oppressed. Over at Marvel Comics, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby successfully tampered with the makeup of the superhero. In contrast, Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams changed the nature of the superhero genre by erasing the boundaries of what comics could discuss to such an extent that it had an impact on the genre for decades.

Prior to O'Neil and Adams, superheroes were quite predictable in that they mainly battled intergalactic threats or various types of villains committed to the most grandiose schemes often involving a quest for global domination. What made *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* unpredictably complicated was that a significant part of the stories addressed topical and pressing social issues:



Reprint of original cover from Dennis O'Neil's and Neal Adams's groundbreaking





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poverty, racism, overpopulation, and drug abuse. The comic symbolically pitted the conservative politics of the "law and order" elites against the "Age of Aquarius" idealism of youth activists that championed changing the world by challenging the status quo. The magnitude of the social issues Green Lantern and Green Arrow confronted along with the audaciousness of having make-believe figures confront real and troublesome social issues turned the superhero tandem into charismatic characters and politically charged symbols. In the inaugural issue, "No Evil Shall Escape My Sight," the pair confronts American racism. Across several panels an elderly black man is depicted questioning Green Lantern's commitment to racial justice when he voices this short soliloquy, "I been readin' about you... How you work for the Blue Skins... and how on a planet someplace you helped out the Orange Skins... and you done considerable for the Purple Skins! Only there's skins you never bothered with! The Black Skins! I want to know... how come?! Answer me that, Mr. Green Lantern!" With stooped shoulders and his head hung low, the ring-slinger responds with a feeble, "I... can't."<sup>10</sup>

Although the elderly black man is drawn as a decrepit and unappealing figure and expresses his concerns in an unconvincing black dialect, the exchange between the two is profoundly engaging. Their conversation forever changed the boundaries of the superhero genre. Superheroes were no longer constrained to fighting imaginary creatures, intergalactic aliens, or Nazis from a distant past. Now they would grapple with some of the most toxic real-world social issues that America had to offer. In their respective civilian identities as Hal Jordan and Oliver Queen, the two superheroes take off in a truck together and hopscotch their way across the country to experience the real America and find their true place and purpose in it. With their existential quest interrupted by personal dilemmas that are proxies for real social issues, the series reads like a superhero version of Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957). By shifting the focus from villainous spectacle to real social problems plaguing the nation, Green Lantern and Green Arrow were transformed from a pair of mediocre superheroes to robust symbols of the political tensions of the time. In this sense, both characters were ideological foils for the other, infusing their comic book dialogue with real-world resonance. Interestingly, racism was a central part of the plots of the Green Lantern and Green Arrow series, and was a source of superhero reflection.

For example, in a subsequent panel from "No Evil Shall Escape My Sight," Green Arrow underscores the immorality of racism by invoking the political assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. This point is clearly expressed by a poignant image of Green Arrow standing in the foreground of outlined images of Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy. The picture is underscored



by a caption that states, "On the streets of Memphis a good black man died ... and in Los Angeles, a good white man fell. Something is wrong! Something is killing us all! Some hideous moral cancer is rotting our very souls!"<sup>11</sup> In retrospect, it is easy to look at such writing as maudlin and crudely didactic. Arguably, however, because Green Lantern and Green Arrow were addressing such immense social issues, both characters required grand language and imagery to match the sweeping cultural fallout and the emotional trauma the American psyche suffered from witnessing a spate of political assassinations on American soil. Green Arrow and Green Lantern functioned as elegant cultural ciphers that openly questioned the crisis of meaning and identity that Green Arrow expresses in his lament over the assassinations. Despite the ham-fisted dialogue, the *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* comic book series was symbolically sophisticated when confronting white privilege and racial injustice in America.

For instance, in another issue titled "A Kind of Loving, a Way of Death," racial privilege is confronted whereby avowedly anti-racist whites are implicated in supporting a racial hierarchy. In the story, the white female superhero Black Canary is hypnotized by a white supremacist named Joshua.<sup>12</sup> Joshua plans on using her as an agent to instigate a race war, and one of her first tests is to kill Green Arrow. Although she fails to follow through on her task, Green Arrow speculates that Joshua's racist mind control was successful on her to a certain extent because the racial hatred the villain preached struck a chord deep inside of her. Black Canary responds to Green Arrow's insight by subsequently volunteering at an Indian reservation and engaging in deep self-reflection. Unquestionably this narrative tried to address the sociopsychological aspects of racial prejudice as a personal, even subconscious, problem, while the Black Canary easily symbolized white guilt. To the series's credit, "A Kind of Loving, a Way of Death" suggested that racist villainy was just as likely found by looking in the mirror as it was by scouring the countryside for Klansmen. However, the narrative was not without weaknesses. By having Black Canary delve into the recesses of her own heart and mind to root out racist motivations, her action implied that personal reflection was an equal or possibly more important and effective step toward eliminating racism than organized political confrontation of institutional racism.

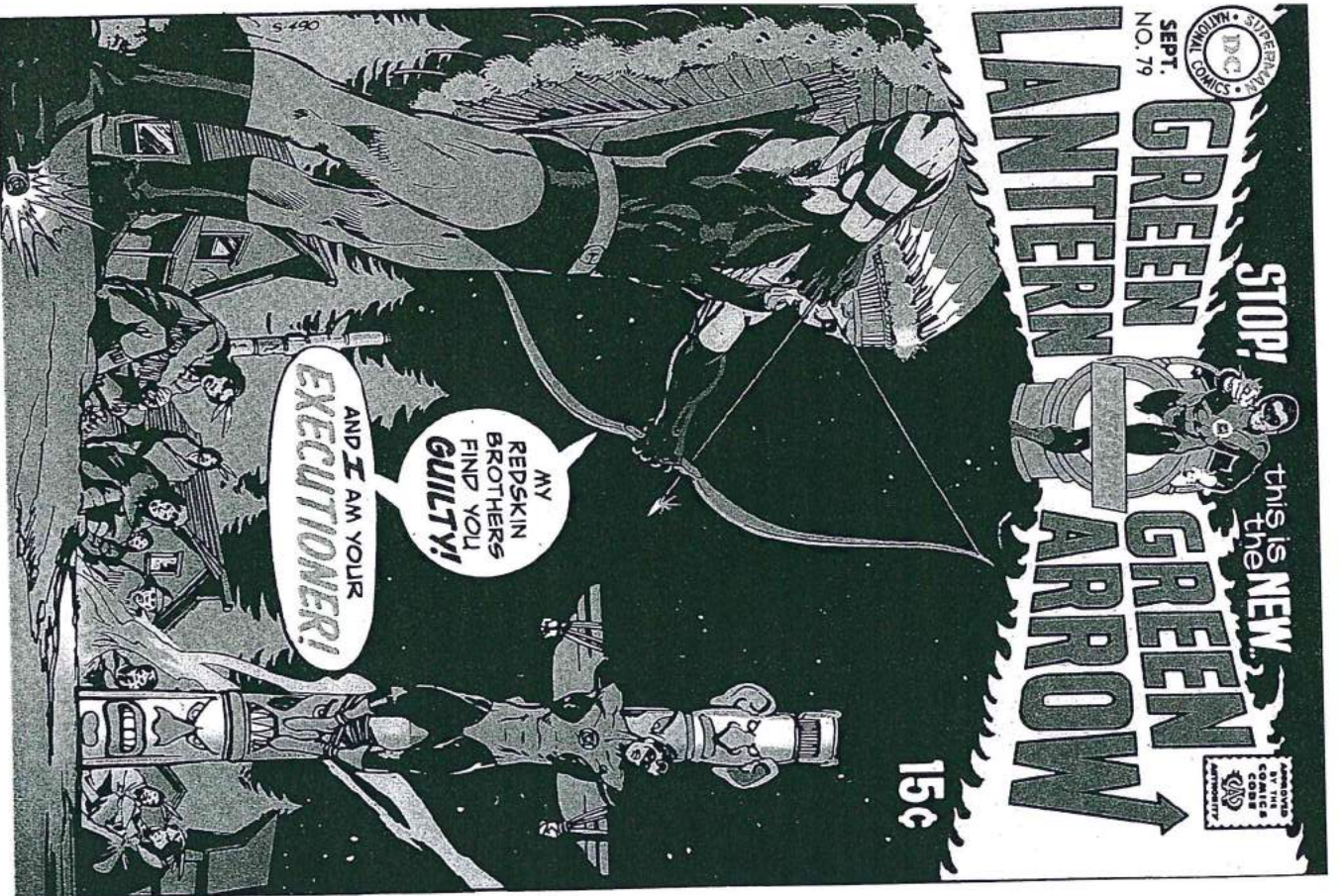
As well-intentioned as this type of personally transformative pop psychology may have been, it signaled that a personal pursuit of individual transformation was the true testament of change rather than the social and institutional quest for racial justice that proponents of the civil rights and Black Power movements advocated. As a real-world strategy to eliminate racism, the former approach is debatable. But as a narrative device in "A Kind of Loving, a Way of Death" it was pure genius. It demonstrated that racial bigotry could appeal to

even the most respectable and fair-minded whites and that even humans vested with superpowers were impotent to deliver America from racism. As a result, instead of Green Lantern, Green Arrow, and Black Canary leading the charge to end racism as superheroes, they symbolized the need for whites to take ownership of their white privilege, acknowledge their feelings of guilt, and most importantly strive for personal transformation. Ultimately the comic suggested that the most viable solution for ending racism in America was for its white citizenry to become introspective and mindful of their racial prejudices, a solution that did not require one to possess superhuman powers.

It is quite apparent that the *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* series was ambitiously dialoguing with real-world issues and trying to tackle some of the most vexing social problems facing American society. Nevertheless, reactionary impulses are also clearly present when the emerald duo confronted the color line. During the two-year run of the comic, the ideological debates and political polemics spoken by Green Lantern and Green Arrow at times lapsed into awkward renderings of American race relations. Increasingly the idea of racial revenge crops up. For example, the cover of the "Ulysses Star Is Still Alive" issue depicts Green Lantern tied to a Native American totem pole, as if he is being crucified. Green Arrow is adorned with a full Native American ceremonial feathered headdress as he stands in the foreground aiming his bow and arrow at the ring-slinger and declares, "My redskin brothers find you guilty! And I am your executioner!"<sup>13</sup> This type of attention-grabbing cover tilted dangerously towards racial pulp politics. The narrative for this issue was not lacking in racial histrionics, either. With classic lines like, "They've been under the white man's heel for so long they've lost faith in themselves," the comic demonstrated how pugacious the racial politics of the series could periodically become. Despite these shortcomings, the series was significant for another noteworthy element: the introduction of John Stewart, the original Black Lantern.

Until John Stewart, Green Lantern and his successor, Guy Gardner, were white men. When Gardner becomes injured and another Green Lantern reserve is needed to fill the position, the Guardians of the Universe choose John Stewart, an African American.<sup>14</sup> Initially, Hal Jordan objects to John Stewart as his backup even though Stewart possesses the requisite courage and honesty essential to activating the green power ring. Hal views Stewart as too angry to justly wield it. The critique of Stewart easily played to the racial archetype of the "angry black man," political shorthand for reducing Black Power advocates to mad men determined to exact revenge on white America with self-destructive violence and intimidation. John Stewart's appearance as the Black Lantern on the cover of the first issue suggested a similar sensibility. The Green Lantern is shown lying at the feet of a fully costumed and outraged Stewart who declares,





The hushwhale of racial relevancy is evident on the cover (Green Lantern

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"They whipped the Green Lantern. Now let 'em try me!" The caption "Beware My Power" is placed toward the bottom of the page.

The striking cover art and rage-filled declaration of revenge telegraphed a sensational racial drama inside the comic book. John Stewart's first mission as a superhero is to protect a white politician who is an overt racial bigot. The politician plans to stoke racial hostilities by having a white police officer killed as a result of a phony attempt on the politician's life by a black gunman. John Stewart begrudgingly accepts the assignment to save the racist from harm and later foils the nefarious scheme to instigate a race riot. As a result, Stewart gains Hal Jordan's respect and trust. If ever there was an origin narrative that was over-determined by race, this is truly the one. Rather than having John Stewart use his power ring on his first mission to defeat some generic monster-alien or save a busload of tourists from plummeting off a broken bridge, he had to protect a comic book version of George Wallace from harm. In his debut, unfortunately, his character was buried under a mound of racial rhetoric and anxiety concerning the type of Black Power politics John Stewart symbolized in the beginning of the story. Early in the issue when Stewart first dons his Green Lantern costume, Stewart informs Hal that he better be called "Black Lantern," and he rejects wearing a mask because, "This Black man lets it all hang out! I've got nothing to hide!" Stewart is a cocky, anti-authoritarian, angry, and race-conscious figure. Near the end of the truncated origin narrative, however, Stewart proclaims that color is not an important criterion for judging character. His change of heart is clearly an ideological nod toward Dr. Martin Luther King's axiom that people should be judged by the quality of their character and not the color of their skin. In keeping with that approach, the Black Lantern moniker is rejected and he is subsequently referred to as John Stewart.

Admittedly the overt hostility toward white authority that Stewart initially expressed and the racial melodrama his origin story represented were crude and sensationalistic. Yet the reliance on racial antagonism as the driving force for John Stewart's origin reflected a broader trend. During the early 1970s, films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), and *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973), to name only a few, exemplified how blaxploitation cinema was often a sexually gratuitous and bloody referendum on white authority. Of course by showing blacks killing, fighting, humiliating, loving, and winning against whites, many mediocre movies were able to make good economic sense. In the process, blaxploitation films increasingly relied on sensationalistic depictions of racial strife, wherein crazed and corrupt whites appeared to live only to plot for the black protagonist's death and, by symbolic extension, black peoples' defeat in the struggle for racial justice. Unfortunately, real racial issues were increasingly presented as spectacle, and



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MAN, THAT'S PRETTY  
GAWDY. EXCEPT FOR  
THE PART THAT SAYS,  
"BEWARE MY POWER!"

MAN--HUM--  
I DO DIG THOSE  
WORDS!

WE MAY AS WELL  
BEGIN YOUR *HAIR*  
*TRAINING*. YOU'LL  
NEED A PROPER  
CURRY--

THESE AREN'T ANY  
TRENDS, JAMES.  
GROWNY WOULD WEAR--  
BUT THEY'VE GOT HIM  
USUAL SHAPES--  
ARMY SPECIAL!  
HANG OUT!

ONLY ONE THING...  
I WON'T WEAR  
ANY BLACK!  
HANG OUT!

I'VE  
GOT  
NOTHING  
TO  
HIDE!

FOR HOURS,  
THEY PRACTICE  
IN THE SKY  
ABOVE THE  
CITY--

YOU HAVE A  
REAL *ZIGZAG*, JOHN.  
YOU'VE QUICKLY  
MASTERSSED THE SKILLS  
NECESSARY TO SUSTAIN  
FLIGHT--

IT'S *EASY*  
COMPARED TO THE  
SKILLS NEEDED TO  
REACH MY PAD AFTER  
DARK! THOSE *MUGGERS*--  
SOMETHING *ELSE*!

The audacity of the Black Power movement and the sense of black pride are clearly symbolized by



various social movements of the period had degenerated into political theater and posturing.<sup>15</sup> A similar impulse cropped up with Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams's *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* (1978) comic (formally *All-New Collectors' Edition* #C-56). The cover was exquisitely evocative of deep-seated yet familiar racial antagonism present in the American body politic. Although the narrative inside the comic has Superman temporarily forfeit his powers to fight Ali, combined with a feel-good racial reconciliation message, the magnitude of the racial symbolism presented on the cover dwarfs any concessions concerning Superman's abilities.

Displayed on the cover of the oversized comic book are Superman and Muhammad Ali, wearing boxing gloves, facing each other at the center of the ring, and preparing to throw the first devastating punch with a massive crowd of superheroes, celebrities, and everyday folk as spectators. Ostensibly the *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* bout concerns the fate of the planet, as the winner will have to box the representative of an alien race to defend Earth. But symbolically the cover was a potent signifier of American race relations, given that the heavyweight-boxing tournament has historically functioned as a public staging ground for dubious notions and desires concerning race to play out when one opponent is white and the other is black.

In 1908 Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight boxing champion, which inspired the distinguished American writer Jack London to call on a "great white hope" to reclaim the title from Johnson. In response, James Jeffries, a former undefeated heavyweight champion was urged to come out of retirement to restore the heavyweight championship title to its previous luster. Billed as the fight of the century, the boxing contest was a racial spectacle that inspired black celebration and white violence in the wake of Johnson's victory.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, subsequent titleholders inherited this racial subtext virtually anytime a black fighter and a white fighter were matched against one another. Take for example, Joe "the Brown Bomber" Louis's two heavyweight bouts with Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938, where Adolph Hitler's perverse ideas about Aryan racial supremacy and Nazism underscored the boxing contests between the two. Four decades later, when the Irish slugger Jerry Quarry faced Muhammad Ali the former was dubbed a "great white hope," and the same theme appeared again when Gerry Cooney boxed Larry Holmes in 1982 for a shot at the heavyweight title.

For decades in America, no matter if the contestants embraced or rejected the racial roles they symbolized when a white and black boxer faced one another in the ring, racial anxieties and personal prejudices were projected onto each fighter as representatives of their respective race. Accordingly, the *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* comic book cover signified not only the spectacular nature of a fight between two American icons but easily drew on the potent racial history

associated with heavyweight championship fights that had occupied America's public imagination for nearly seventy years. On one hand, the cover easily reads as a comic book clash between two titans, a contest that pits the "Man of Steel" against "the Greatest of All Time." On the other hand, an epic battle between a white man that represents "truth, justice, and the American way" and a black Muslim that refused to fight in an American war he was drafted to serve in dredges up deep racial anxieties not fully settled or forgotten since Jack Johnson's heyday, much less Ali's recent racial past.

A decade before the release of *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali*, Ali was a vocal member of the Nation of Islam, a controversial black nationalist religious organization. The "Louisville Lip" rose to fame as a loudmouth heavyweight-boxing champion, but his personal convictions, as a follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and later a voice of poetic dissent regarding the Vietnam War, made Ali a despised figure for many white Americans. By the time the *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* comic was released, Ali was less of a political lightning rod. He had regained his title as the heavyweight champion of the world, which, for the most part, supplanted his past status as a black Muslim and draft resister. Yet his radical black nationalist past remained resonant if not as equally recognized as Ali's status as "the greatest of all time." In this sense, the cover illustration of a white superhero that trumpets "the American way" combating a black man that was a vocal critic of America signified a colossal confrontation of epic racial proportion. Ultimately, however, the *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* comic book is best framed as marking the beginning of the complete transformation of Muhammad Ali from one of the most despised black athletes in America to one of the most beloved icons in American pop culture.<sup>17</sup>

Arguably the fact that Ali stuck to his principles in the face of severe professional sacrifice and regained the heavyweight title as an underdog challenger to George Foreman helped remake his image and paved the way for his acceptance as a mainstream and tremendously popular American icon. The American public values the underdog narrative of the little guy winning against the odds, and more than anything Ali's triumphant comebacks dovetail with a cornerstone of all superhero narratives: meeting harsh resistance and overwhelming odds with integrity and perseverance. Ali, like most superheroes, succeeds not because of superior strength but by moral determination in the face of severe opposition.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the re-release of the *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* comic book fits with Ali's transformation into a mainstream hero who upholds American values, a theme that was signaled in the original narrative but that can now be fully embraced, thirty years later, with a story about Superman and Ali working together to save Earth against alien invaders.

By the late 1970s the kind of socially relevant and racially engaged superhero





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figures that O'Neil and Adams had created had nearly disappeared. Admittedly their work was not perfect, but it spearheaded a transformation for how superhero comics were written and thought about. Comics were no longer just for the kiddies, and were increasingly recognized as another medium where ideas concerning American racial morality and the cultural politics of a society trying to come to grips with dramatic societal shifts were also seriously engaged. As the end of the 1970s approached, DC Comics introduced a new black superhero that loosely represented a continuation of the superhero social relevancy tradition established by O'Neil and Adams. Black Lightning was the first black superhero in the DC Comics universe to get his own title series, and as a result he could not avoid symbolizing black self-determination or serving as a symbolic reminder of racial tokenism.

Black Lightning is Jefferson Pierce, a former Olympic athlete and a teacher in Suicide Slum, one of Metropolis's toughest areas. When danger appeared or when justice was needed, Jefferson would don an Afro wig attached to a mask, squeeze into a bluish body suit accented with lightning bolts, slide on his buccaneer boots, check his power belt, and then hit the streets as Black Lightning.<sup>19</sup> Dressed to impress, Jefferson would proceed to kick and shock various henchmen and their crime lords into submission. Despite his nearly laughable disco-chic look and the embarrassingly awkward black jargon Jefferson adopted when he became Black Lightning, he articulated a serious set of class and racial politics. Jefferson Pierce was a striver, a black guy who fought his way out of ghetto squalor to become an accomplished athlete, a successful educator, and, finally, a ghetto superhero. Black Lightning's upward-mobility narrative registered subtle elements of Black Power politics concerning self-determination and black social responsibility, but his black middle-class status was also a source of multiple anxieties. His black bourgeois sensibility clashed with a superhero persona that delivered affected black dialect, a crude racial signifier that attempted to demonstrate that Black Lightning was an authentic black hero not alienated from the inner-city streets he swore to protect.

Despite Black Lightning lapsing into stock phrases to convey his blackness, he communicated several interesting points about black agency. Here was a black superhero situated in the same city as Superman that decides to dedicate his life to single-handedly fighting the rampant crime, drugs, and delinquency that threaten to take over his neighborhood. Moreover, by having Black Lightning combat symbols of white oppression, like Tobias Whale, a white fish-headed crime boss, the comic articulated an acceptable (albeit formulaic) version of Black Power politics as black social responsibility.<sup>20</sup> Even if *Black Lightning* was a comic book holdover from the blaxploitation-film era, he was a subversive repackaging of Black Power notions, like community



control and black middle-class anxieties over economic empowerment and racial authenticity.

Black Lightning symbolized a critique of black Americans that had joined the American middle class in the wake of the civil rights and Black Power movements but abandoned their less fortunate brethren still stranded in black ghettos across America. Regardless of his successful socioeconomic upward mobility, Jefferson Pierce as Black Lightning was going to take his fight to the streets, keep it there, and do it on his own terms, a theme strikingly rendered on a cover of the *Justice League of America* comic book.<sup>21</sup> The cover illustration depicts Superman inviting Black Lightning to officially join the ranks of the "World's Greatest Superheroes." Black Lightning adamantly rejects the invitation. Eventually, however, Black Lightning becomes a reluctant member of the JLA and serves periodic stints as a member of a loose consortium of superheroes fittingly named the Outsiders.

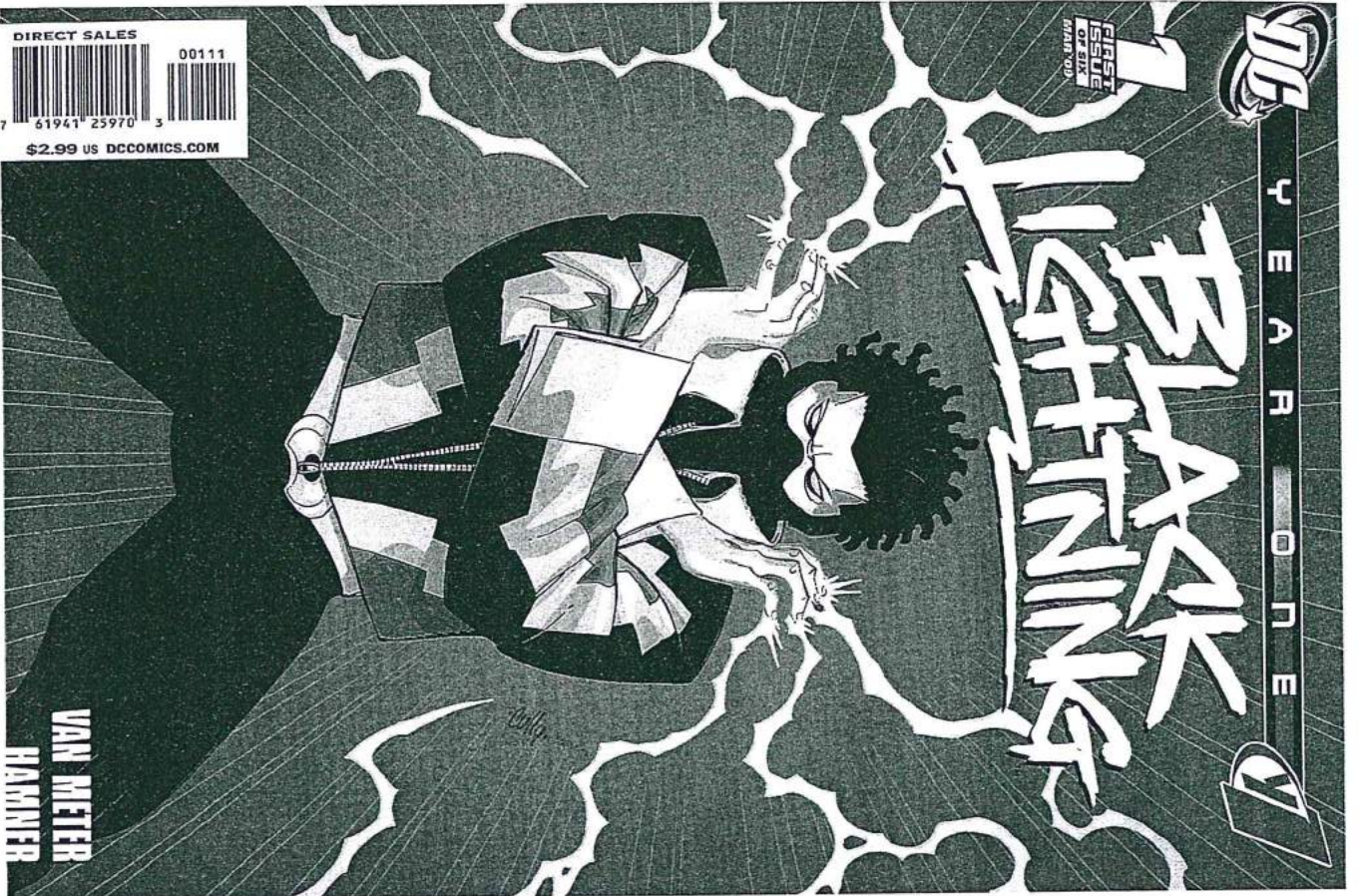
In retrospect, *Black Lightning* arguably tried to incorporate the quest for social relevance concerning race in the same style that O'Neil and Adams pioneered in the *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* series. After a mere eleven issues, however, *Black Lightning* folded. The character subsequently became a sporadic guest star in other superhero titles and has periodically regained a solo title several times since. Along the way his look and his powers were constantly revamped, he became increasingly driven by more interior struggles and eventually Black Lightning was rebooted for the new millennium.<sup>22</sup> But for me, the original, late 1970s version is the most dynamic because it showed Black Lightning rejecting membership in the JLA and joining a group of superheroes called the Outsiders, a clear racial critique of black tokenism. Ultimately, Black Lightning was a black superhero that symbolically stressed self-reliance, critiqued tokenism, and most importantly symbolized how African Americans were simultaneously insiders and outsiders in American society.

For a brief moment, O'Neil and Adams's socially relevant and thought-provoking material captivated the comic book world by having imaginary superheroes tackling real social issues. Instead of serving as escapist fodder for an increasingly jaded youth market, superheroes provided a more complex and messy morality for readers to consider without totally abandoning the ethical high ground usually associated with the American superhero. O'Neil and Adams's groundbreaking approach to superhero comics also provided a framework for comic book professionals like Frank Miller and Kurt Busiek to create gritty, emotionally unsettled, self-reflective, and socially provocative comic book superheroes and characters. Nevertheless, this type of symbolic and literal exploration of social ills, like the racism witnessed in both the *Green Lantern* and *Green Arrow* series and, to a lesser extent, *Black Lightning*, went out



The use of a water hose on Black Lightning evokes the imagery of civil rights advocates assaulted by





Black Lightning gets a stylish upgrade from his previous disco look from the 1970s

#### ..... COLOR THEM BLACK .....

of fashion. Consequently, O'Neil and Adams's significance to the comic book field has overwhelmingly been consigned to the past. Often overlooked is the fact that Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams laid the foundation for a black man to vigorously compete with his white predecessor for center stage in the contemporary American public imagination as the definitive Green Lantern.

Accepted wisdom links the blaxploitation-film fad to the emergence and stylistic cues present in black superheroes. Ironically, during a later period, in which blaxploitation no longer existed, the African American Green Lantern became the lead character in a major superhero comic book series. For roughly two years, from 1984 to 1986, John Stewart held the Green Lantern title and in doing so became an important outpost for black representation. Certainly John Stewart's stint as Green Lantern in the mid-1980s appeared to symbolically express contemporary white anxieties about unqualified blacks replacing whites in the workplace as a function of affirmative action. Stewart's early tenure as the black replacement for the white Green Lantern appeared to mimic such racial paranoia because he was a tentative and mistake-prone superhero that inspired doubt and indifference.<sup>23</sup> This changed, however, when Stewart was teamed with the exotic, auburn-colored alien female Katma Tui.<sup>24</sup> Their pairing provided an emotional complexity and a dramatic arc to Stewart's reign as Green Lantern. Katma is a Green Lantern guide, partner, and Stewart's future wife. The blossoming romance was unique among their superhero peers. Up to that point, black superheroes rarely had a female superhero counterpart as the object of their interest and affection. Superhero coupling of that sort was traditionally reserved for white superheroes, like Mr. Fantastic and Sue Richards, the Wasp and Hank Pym, Scarlet Witch and Vision, Cyclops and Jean Grey, along with Green Arrow and Black Canary.

The animated television series *Justice League/Justice League Unlimited* (2001–2006) provided a similarly complex version of John Stewart. In the *JL/JLU* series, Stewart was one of several members of the superhero team, yet his character was fully fleshed out due to the brilliant foresight and writing of Dwayne McDuffie. He was even given a signature characteristic: Stewart's eyes have a green glow as a consequence of heavy exposure to the radiation emitted from the green power ring. Across sixty-odd episodes, considerable screen time, story arcs, and character development are devoted to Stewart's Green Lantern. He is also shown with several different love interests: his past relationship with Katma Tui is revisited, and he gets tangled in a love triangle with Vixen and Hawkgirl. This type of character development remains extremely rare for a black superhero sharing the narrative spotlight with other prominent white superheroes. For example, in the long-running animated series *Super Friends* (1973–1986), figures like the laughable Black Vulcan and the poorly developed





**NEXT:  
TIME OF MIND!**

The narrative of Stewart and Karna Tai brings emotional intimacy to the series that competes

Cyborg were barely included in any superhero adventures. Accordingly compared to the Super Friends, John Stewart's tenure as the lead Green Lantern in the comics and animated television series was quite refreshing. The *Green Lantern: Mosaic* (1992–1993) series is arguably the only other version of John Stewart that was dynamic and interesting. This incarnation of John Stewart was one of the most experimental expressions of superhero blackness ever represented.

The black ring-slinger of the *Mosaic* series was literally light years away from the original John Stewart in style and the field of action. In *Mosaic*, Stewart did not just occasionally venture into space—he relocated there, on the planet Oa, located at the center of the universe. There he battles with various alien creatures to save worlds. Later he becomes a Guardian of the Universe, a godlike entity responsible for protecting life. Although the intergalactic nature of these narratives placed Stewart in various alien milieus and distant planetary locations, the series reads like an existential meditation on black racial identity in America. The inaugural issue and the impressively complex and compelling fifth issue are notable for how they poignantly dialogue with the wonderfully peculiar burden of being a black man in America.<sup>25</sup> The latter has Hal Jordan engage in an epic battle inside Stewart's mind, confronting the various interdependent racial identities that are part and parcel of Stewart's real self. The *Mosaic* title only ran for eighteen issues, but each one reads like a chaperoned acid trip through a wonder world of Dadaist imagery and beat poetry. The beautifully bizarre *Mosaic* presented one of the most daring and complex representations of Afrofuturistic blackness of the time and arguably since. On this distant terrain John Stewart is a cosmic version of the prodigal son, a black star-child returning to his galactic beginnings.

Notwithstanding the avant-garde version of the *Mosaic* John Stewart, his character is also significant in a very traditional sense. Stewart affirms the Green Lantern mythos. In the DC Comics universe, the Green Lantern Corps exists as an intergalactic force comprised of various types of life forms that patrol and protect various sectors of the cosmos. They are governed by a group of diminutive old men with white hair called the Guardians of the Universe. Most importantly, various Green Lanterns of humanoid and alien forms all work together to serve the general good of all living beings under their overarching organization. In this sense, the Green Lantern Corps offers a model for how racial and ethnic diversity should function in America. Admittedly the type of utopian diversity signaled in the Green Lantern Corps is not completely unique. Most notably the original *Star Trek* television series, along with subsequent television and film spin-offs, pioneered the type of science fiction multi-species and racial unity suggested in the Green Lantern comic books.<sup>26</sup> Similarly the interspecies makeup of the Green Lantern Corps symbolized a utopian form







of cultural pluralism. Yet the intergalactic morality and multi-species membership suggested by the Green Lantern Corps is fully realized in terms of race and is anchored in the real world with the inclusion of a black man in their ranks. In this manner, Stewart's racial symbolism has remained fairly stable since his mid-1980s manifestation, and the character basically articulates an integrationist, albeit culturally pluralistic, ethos.

The aggressive and strident Black Power identity politics John Stewart originally symbolized and the contemplative racial existentialism he embodied in *Mosaic* have faded into relative obscurity. But the John Stewart character of the comics and animation series has become one of the most traditional and successful symbols of racial diversity, and can be considered a mainstream superhero. A testament to Stewart's foothold in the mainstream is the fact that several different versions of his toy action figure were made, a difficult feat for any black superhero. Nonetheless, the white Green Lantern has mounted a definitive comeback.<sup>27</sup> Not only has Hal Jordan regained his power ring in the comic book universe, but a film adaptation of *Green Lantern* looms on the horizon, which is sure to establish the original white character as the definitive emerald knight.

John Stewart and, to a lesser extent, Black Lightning owe their emergence to the narrative gamble that the *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow* title represented. Unfortunately, they were not paired to take on various social issues like their predecessors. Instead, they symbolically engaged broader racial issues on their own. But imagine if John Stewart and Jefferson Pierce had teamed up like O'Neil and Adams's Green Lantern and Green Arrow of the early 1970s. Stewart and Pierce together in one comic book would read like a superhero version of Chester Himes's Harlem detective duo Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones. John Stewart would symbolize black integration into the mainstream, and his Black Lightning peer would take a more strident position about American race relations, in line with a black nationalistic set of cultural and political talking points. Stewart and Pierce would traverse the American urban landscape fighting bad guys, engaging in deep discussions about the black community, commenting about discrimination in their civilian identity, and arguing over their tastes in music, women, and sports.

Despite existing in separate realms, when John Stewart and Black Lightning are contrasted a very striking picture still emerges concerning what they communicate about race. Both the black Green Lantern and the campy Black Lightning of the late 1970s were symbolic signposts that respectively marked continuing racial anxieties born of Black Power and affirmative action. In the end, however, John Stewart, the African American Green Lantern, moved significantly away from the overt racial symbolism that Black Lightning continues to articulate. The narrative arc of the former easily dovetails with a post-civil

rights sensibility, or possibly a post-racial sensibility, despite that label being carelessly bantered about in the America of today. To the character's credit, however, the racial transcendence, ascension, and acceptance of John Stewart as a formidable Green Lantern symbolically suggest a desire for the destruction of rigid notions of racial hierarchies in American society. Paradoxically, in the DC Comics universe, such racial transcendence only appeared viable in the far reaches of other galaxies, a setting John Stewart is constantly navigating as a member of the Green Lantern Corps. I suspect, however, if O'Neil and Adams had their way, he would be headed back home to Earth in a hurry.