

A GRACE FILMS PRODUCTION

# WHITE SCRIPTS AND BLACK SUPERMEN

BLACK MASCULINITIES IN COMIC BOOKS

PRODUCED, DIRECTED and WRITTEN BY  
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DISCUSSION GUIDE



**Dwayne McDuffie**

(February 20, 1962 – February 21, 2011)

Thanks for dreaming for me, for us.

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I love comic books. There, I said it. But I am not alone. While I parted ways with comic books during my adolescence, I have recently rediscovered comic books as an important lens through which our understandings of humanity are articulated. Still, the documentary is not just about comic books; it is about its representation of Black men. In this sense, comic books are simply the medium while critical and scholarly engagement of the representation of black masculinity is the focus. The comic book genre is older than the television and has, for decades, provided adolescents with a lens through which they can interpret their nascent understandings of race, nationality, gender, sexuality, and religion among other domains of the human experience. One need only consider the motion picture industry and its investment in superhero films. In recent years, more than thirty major motion pictures have been produced that feature comic book heroes including Superman, Blade (three films), The Green Lantern, the X-Men (five films), The Watchmen, Spiderman (three films), Thor, Iron Man (two films), Hulk (two films), and Batman (seven films). Of course, the Avengers smashed opening day records and will gross billions of dollars. This is not an exhaustive list so suffice it to say that these films represent international sales (in theaters and after market) in the billions (not hyperbole).

Finally, an increasing number of educators are using comic books in their teaching. Consider *Columbia University's Comic Book Project*. This project “engages children in a creative process leading to literacy reinforcement, social awareness, and character development, then

publishes and distributes their work for other children in the community to use as learning and motivational tools.” Maryland’s state department of education created the *Comic Book Initiative*, reflecting their belief that “that comic books can serve as a conduit to book reading and help motivate reluctant readers as well as engage and stimulate outstanding students.” According to the National Association of Comics Educators, hundreds of teachers and college professors are using comic books in the classroom (teachingcomics.org) from grade schools to graduate schools across the United States and internationally.

Ultimately, comic books have moved far beyond the newsstand and are now considered by many scholars as an overlooked component of American popular culture that requires critique in the same manner that television, film, and print media are critiqued.

Finally, Blackness has always been a White fetish. This is certainly true for Black men as well. The documentary asks the question “What happens when, in the midst of African-American demands for civil and human rights, White men create ‘Black Supermen?’” Ultimately, the first Black superheroes reveal longstanding (and current?) societal understandings of race, Blackness, and Black masculinity. While we should recognize the “aspirational” (Julian Chambliss) aspects of these characters, we need not consume them passively. *The Black Age Movement* is a response to the representation of Blackness in the genre. This movement provides independent artists with a platform to share their work, ultimately expanding the range of representation of Blackness in the genre in ways that are more humane.

I appreciate your support of this project.

Peace,

Jonathan Gayles

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Jonathan Gayles, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of African-American Studies and Associate Dean for Undergraduate Learning of the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgia State University (Atlanta, Georgia). He is a graduate of Morehouse College (B.A., Psychology), Winthrop University (M.S., School Psychology) and the University of South Florida (Ph.D., applied anthropology). His primary areas of interest include the anthropology of education, educational policy, Black masculinity, race and ethnicity, as well as critical media studies.

An avid comic book reader as an adolescent, he was often frustrated by the general absence of African-American superheroes. He identified with the few African-American superheroes that he did discover primarily because they too were African-American men. As an adult and with a growing interest in the critical engagement of Black masculinity, his retrospective consideration of these characters has greatly diminished his fondness for them. With adult eyes, he was shocked by much of what he read in the comic books that he so loved as a child. In preparing a paper on the subject for an academic conference, he encountered a growing body of scholarship on race and representation in comic books. Furthermore, he was introduced to communities of scholars and artists that critique representations of African-Americans in comic books and create their own representations of African-Americans in the genre. After deciding to produce a documentary, he bought a Canon XHA1S, attended an intensive summer documentary film institute offered by Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, and began shooting during the fall of 2009.

## ABOUT THE FILM

As a young boy, the filmmaker loved comic books and the escape that they provided. However, as a young BLACK boy, his ability to truly escape was limited by the fact that many of the heroes were White. This documentary critically examines the earliest representations (1965-1977) of Black masculinity in comic books and the troubling influence of race on these representations. Within the last several years, many scholars have critically engaged comic books as a legitimate source of scholarly interest and critique. Indeed, comic books represent a genre within popular culture that is older than the television. Thinking critically about the manner in which Black men were first portrayed in hero serials provides insight into broader societal conceptions of the Black man as character, archetype, and symbol. Through interviews with prominent artists, scholars, and cultural critics along with images from the comic books themselves, it becomes clear that the Black superheroes that did eventually emerge are generally constrained by stereotypical understandings of Black people and Black men in particular. From the humorous, to the offensive, to the tragic, early Black superheroes never strayed too far from common stereotypes about Black men.

The documentary addresses more than forty years of representation of Black men in comic books. The characters included in the documentary are as follows: Lothar (first appearance in 1934), Whitewash Jones (first appearance in 1941), Waku, Prince of the Bantu (first appearance in 1954), Gabriel Jones (first appearance in 1963), The Black Panther (first appearance in 1966), The Falcon (first appearance in 1969), John Stewart (first appearance in 1971), Luke Cage (first appearance in 1972), Tyroc (first appearance in 1976) and Black Lightning (first appearance in 1977).

Cover art by the illustrious John Jennings, Ph.D.



How to use this Discussion Guide  
(last updated 18 May, 2012)

We are socialized to watch films passively – not critically. The purpose of this guide is to encourage more active engagement of the documentary. I have never been a fan of providing students with guides prior to any activity for fear that they will focus only on the pertinent portions identified in the guide and ignore everything else. The questions included below are intended only as points of reference for class discussions of the documentary.

The documentary pursues a critical engagement of the manner in which Black masculinity is represented in comic books featuring the first Black superheroes. Consequently, many of the questions focus on issues of representation, race, masculinity, and the influence of racial/historical contexts on the first Black superheroes. *This is not THE study guide.* As the filmmaker, I am probably far too close to the material to develop a comprehensive guide. This is simply a beginning point for your class discussions. If you want to share some good questions, submit them to the facebook page ([facebook.com/blacksupermen](https://facebook.com/blacksupermen)) or use the contact page on [blacksupermen.com](http://blacksupermen.com)) I will give you credit for your submission and create a list of “community questions” and update them every few weeks or so.

Additionally, the documentary should not be the *only* source for this study. The documentary shares scholarly space with a number of academic domains *including* African-American Studies, hip hop studies, gender studies, popular culture studies, communication, American studies, media anthropology, as well as ethnic and racial studies. Drawn for your own area(s) of interest to use the documentary in your work.

This guide reflects only the documentary. I have not developed questions for the more than forty video clips available on the site. Many of these clips should be useful to your class discussions.

The documentary addresses the following topics within the broader theme (among others that you are welcome to identify):

- A general history of early Black male superheroes;
- The manner in which these characters represent “controlling images” (Patricia Hill-Collins);
- The ways in which these characters are influenced by (White) consumers;
- Evidence of the “Black Buck” stereotype;
- The manner in which their powers are limited and qualified in comparison to White heroes;
- The influence of Blaxploitation films on these representations;
- The impact of racism and racial thinking on the publishing and distribution of titles featuring Black heroes; and
- The distinction between representation of African and African-American superheroes.

More information at  
[www.blacksupermen.com](http://www.blacksupermen.com).

**FEATURED**



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**ANTHONY TALLARICO**  
CREATOR, LOBO



## INTRODUCTION: BLACK MASCULINITY IN COMIC BOOKS

1. In what ways is cool pose misread (Jennings)?
2. In what ways are Shaft and Sidney Poitier different (McDuffie)?
3. In what ways does the “DNA” of comic book masculinity potentially harm Black communities (Cobb)?
4. In thinking about the representation of Black men in popular culture, describe/ identify specific “signifiers” that constitute a “cluster of threatening signifiers” (Brown).
5. How is the comic book genre a White male power fantasy and how might this influence the representation of Black Superheroes (McDuffie)?

## LOBO

1. What might the response to LOBO #1 tell us about American conceptions of Black masculinity in the mid 1960’s?
2. How and why did the LOBO challenge conventions about the cowboy hero in the United States?
3. Was Dell Comics naïve to support Lobo?



*“In comic books, there are two kinds of people; there’s Shaft and there’s Sidney Poitier.”*



*“The minute they saw a Black comic book in there, they sent the bundles back.”*



## THE BLACK PANTHER

1. How might American sensibilities about race relations influence the storyline addressing apartheid (Cha-Jua)?
2. How might the Black Panther's status as an African superhero enhance/undermine his iconic status as compared to African-American superheroes?
3. Why is the notion of "Negro Dignity" problematic for the Black Panther (Cha-Jua)?



*"The Panther, despite his superpowers represents... Negro dignity, dignity in service to the existing White supremacist state."*

## THE FALCON

1. In what ways does the Falcon's "retcon" reflect larger understandings of race and White supremacy (Chambliss)?
2. How does the "retcon" undermine his superheroic potential (Chambliss)?
3. How does the Falcon's sidekick status undermine his superheroic potential (Chambliss)?
4. How did blaxploitation contribute to the Falcon's "identity crisis" (Chambliss)?



*"Do you think it might be problematic to make the origins of the first African-American superhero a crazed, Nazi White supremacist?"*

## JOHN STEWART

1. In what ways does the “tension” in the representation of John Stewart reflect broader societal tensions about Black men and masculinity (Brown)?
2. What opportunity did DC comics sacrifice in deciding to produce a “White” Green Lantern film?
3. What is the potential significance of the fact that John Stewart refused to wear a mask?
4. What is the significance of John Stewart’s place in the cartoon series?



Reginald Hudlin

*“When they make a live action movie, they go ‘let’s literally dig the White man up from the grave... ’”*

## LUKE CAGE

1. In what ways does Luke Cage’s costume “control” his representation?
2. In what ways does Cage’s “hero for hire” status qualify his heroic status?
3. In what ways does Cage’s “hero for hire” status represent historical narratives about race in the United States?
4. What do Luke Cage’s enemies tell us about his status as a superhero?
5. How do Luke Cage’s enemies reinforce negative representations of the black experience?
6. How is Cage aspirational (Chambliss)?
7. Describe Stanford Carpenter’s love/hate relationship with Luke Cage.
8. Are there representations of Black life with whom you have a similar relationship?
9. When we resist stereotypes about the group to which we belong (or are assigned), what do we lose?
10. In what ways did the creators of Luke Cage fail to present an accurate portrayal of Black men?



Stanford Carpenter

*“I had a love/hate relationship with Luke Cage.”*

## TYROC

1. In what ways can Tyroc's superpower be interpreted (Carpenter, Brown, Nama)?
2. What connections exist between Tyroc's creation story and African-American history (Carpenter)?
3. Why is Superboy's failure to identify his own Whiteness problematic (Singer)?



*“Tyroc is a pretty minor character, but a great diagnostic for looking at how diversity was handled and handled badly in comics.”*

## BLACK LIGHTNING

1. How does the representation of Black Lightning compensate for his “late arrival” to racial tensions in the United States (Chambliss)?
2. What were Tony Isabella's aspirations for Black Lightning?
3. What are the potential differences between a Black superhero and a superhero that is Black (Carpenter)?
4. Why must a Black superhero be concerned with his race (Nama)?



*“You cannot have a Black superhero and have him not be concerned with his race.”*

## ENTER THE BLACK AGE (SPECIAL FEATURE)

1. What are the origins of the Black age?
2. The Black Age is a response to what reality?
3. Why is “the Black corner” problematic?



*“We are the mainstream.”*



## GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. How are Anthony Tallarico's and Tony Isabella's aspirations similar?
2. In what ways is the "Black Buck" stereotype confirmed/challenged by the characters featured in the documentary?
3. Considering the time period (1965-1977), what relationship is apparent between American tensions about Black men and the representation of Black male superheroes?
4. How might we interpretively "recover" these heroes in ways that are more empowering, whole, and humane (Nama)?
5. What is the most common representational aspect of the characters featured in the documentary?
6. In what ways are the representations of these heroes consistent with common and current representations of Black men in popular culture?
7. How have the representational expectations of Black men in popular culture changed/remained the same?
8. What influence have comic books had on your understanding of your identity or that of others (including race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, etc)?
9. What are some common themes in the manner in which these comic book superheroes are represented?

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Dedra!)...Byron Hurt for his incredible work and inspiration as well...Georgia State University Department African American Studies for supporting this new journey and for the beautiful framed print...University of South Florida Department of Anthropology for inviting me to present (sorry that it did not go as well as I would have liked)...Mark Anthony Neal (the M.A.N) for the Left of Black interview (talk about validation!)...E.J. Ford for the many words of encouragement (Sherman Chow as well)...Omar Bilal for the heads up about Wordpress and your cheerleading...Rocky Seker and Grace Gipson for the interviews and encouragement...EVERYONE that shared their time with me for interviews-THANK YOU!..."King" Williams for the feedback and inspiration...All of the facebook messages, e-mails, youtube messages asking about the film - they kept me going when I was discouraged...Prof. Ricky Jones for the brotherly encouragement (you were right!)...Terry Jones for putting me up during my East Coast interview trip...Daryl Wilson for checking in on me and keeping me focused (you know I love you man)...Scot Brown for the ASALH panel and everything else...The Duke University Center for Documentary Studies for an INCREDIBLE summer institute...California Newsreel for distributing the film (it was always my dream) and for being patient with a novice filmmaker (I am talking about you Cornelius Moore!)...and everyone that is not named here - this project would not be complete without you... and you...and you...and you...

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you!