Superman, Steel and the Paradox
of African-American Superheroes

Everyone is now familiar with the basic story/myth behind Superman: he was/is (Dooley 1987, 20)

the starchild placed by his parents into a tiny rocket ship on the eve of the planet Krypton's destruction and hurled, the only survivor of a wonderful race, across millions of miles of interstellar space ... to Earth; of how the helpless babe was found in a cornfield by a gentle couple, the Kents, who raised the lad as their own son; and of the miraculous powers young Clark Kent discovered himself to possess - tremendous strength and X-ray vision, the gift of flight - powers he vowed at his dying foster father's bedside to use only for the good of humankind and the deliverance of the oppressed; to which purposes he hid his true identity behind the bland exterior of timid Kent, the newspaper reporter ... Only the occasional stray fragment of the lost world of his infancy, the dreaded kryptonite, could render the Man of Steel helpless as a babe again ... until some passing mortal or sudden stroke of grace delivered him once more from the hands of his enemies.

With this relatively simple but resonating storyline, a worldwide distribution across comic strips, books, radio, television, film, t- shirts, action figures and approximately 60 years of existence, Superman has been established as the penultimate superhero - the being by which all subsequent ones would be measured. He became more than just a character in a popular story however. Indeed, he became, as Dooley and Engle (1987, 12) argue,

the 20th century archetype of mankind at its finest. He is courage and humanity, steadfastness and decency, responsibility and ethic. He is our universal longing for perfection, for wisdom and power used in the service of the human race.

Taking on this archetype, the superhero took on a role unique in American and perhaps global history.[1] Linked by telecommunications, which provided easy and abundant access to a wide variety of information, and a desire to understand or an inability to withstand the onslaught of American culture, it is relatively safe to say that basically every man, woman and child has probably read, heard or seen something about the story at least once in their lives.

Given the prominence of this character, when DC comics announced that it was going to introduce an African-American Superman, there was much to rejoice about in both black and white America. With this action, another barrier had been surpassed, a super - no *the* super- barrier had been overcome. The icon would finally be shared with one of America's most visible and historically mistreated ethnic minorities. Similar to Jim
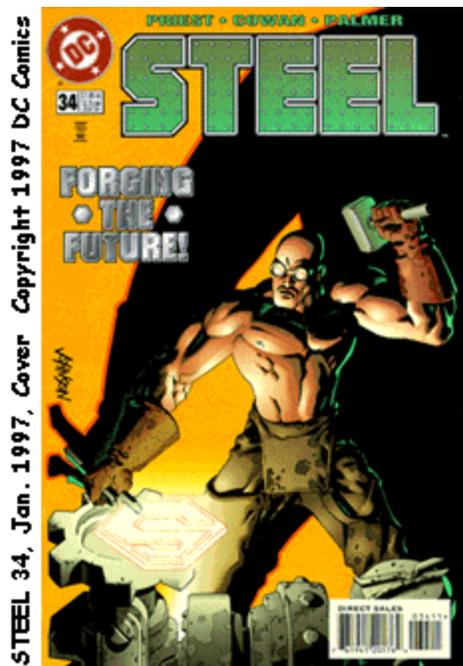
Rhodes taking over the role of Iron Man and John Stewart taking over the role of Green Lantern,[2] the black character, Steel, emerged to take part of the Superman legacy.

Upon picking up a Steel comic, however, several things immediately became apparent. It is clear after only a few pages of reading, that Steel was not Superman. He seemed more limited, in terms of both power and storyline. He seemed incapable of taking on the Superman legacy or even of having one of his own. Additionally, the story seemed false or deficient in its portrayal of black life.

Month after month, the comic appeared and each time it seemed to be deficient on some level: the problems confronted, the villains, new information about the lead character Henry Johnson (or John Henry or Henry Irons) - all appeared to be lacking. This continued, until it was clear that what was most disappointing about the story was the reality of a black superhero caught within the shadow of the weighty myth of the white Superman legacy. The juxtaposition of the two proves extremely important for it reveals a great deal about black superheroes as well as about race/racism in America.

To address the subject, I compare and contrast both characters origins, their superpowers, and common themes. Superman's comics are not directly addressed for I believe that his actual comic is less important than the content of his legend, of his myth. As I will show, when one compares Steel to Superman race/racism pervades every aspect of the story. This entertains, enlightens, obscures and stigmatizes the character Steel.

A Brother Gets an "S" on his Chest

As with most superheroes, and anything else for that matter, the best place to begin is at the beginning. Unlike Superman's extra- terrestrial origins, the initiation of Steel's heroic career is found within four principal factors. Each will be discussed below.

The first factor highlighted concerns his upbringing. It is clear from the few brief flashbacks provided within the series (specifically in the first few issues of Steel), that the formative years of Henry Johnson were extremely important. His early childhood is portrayed as quite idyllic, except for the moment where his parents are killed.[3] Following this traumatic event, he goes to live with his grandparents, who treated him like their own. During this time, he is inundated with numerous values: the importance of family, a strong work ethic, as well as a respect/value for truth and justice. All of this is very similar to Superman and it provides a strong foundation within the character to later guide him.

The second factor relevant to Steel's emergence is his sense of disappointment with life. Following his graduation from school with a doctorate in engineering, Johnson goes to work for the government making weapons. While here, he is shocked to find out that his weapons are efficient at killing large numbers of individuals, and in his shock, remembering that guns were used to kill his parents, he decides to withdraw from society and take up steel work in Metropolis. This pushes him relatively "close to the edge."

The third factor concerns the death of superman. In the early 1990's, Superman was engaged in a serious battle with Doomsday and was killed. Henry Johnson observed this battle and in fact attempted to help Superman (without success) in order to repay him for saving his life. Previously, he had fallen off a construction site, after saving someone himself. Superman caught him in mid-fall and flew him to safety.

After the rescue, Johnson thanked the superhero (as is customary within the comic) and in response Superman asked him to "make (his life) count for something" (#0, 16). The presumption that nothing was being done previously appears to resound within the statement. The penultimate superhero saves a black person, a rarity within the long history of the comic, and then makes a relatively strange as well as perhaps even condescending remark about the use of one's life.[4] Regardless, obviously sensing that Superman's statement possessed merit, Johnson pledged that he would "make something." This opportunity arises with Superman's death. Indeed, the death of Superman actually performs several functions for Steel:

1) it left Metropolis without a superhero, and thus a job was vacant;
2) it made Johnson want to fulfill his promise to Superman for he felt guilty about not being able to help him in his battle with Doomsday; and,
3) it forced Johnson to see that he could not rely upon anybody else to solve the problems of urban America (problems which appeared to be racing well out of control).

The fourth (and last) factor influencing Johnson's decision to become Steel was a drive by shooting of a child right in front of him. Similar to Popeye, it appeared that Johnson got to the point where he just couldn't "stands no more": the random violence just appeared to strike too close to home. As if this wasn't enough, the gang members that killed the youth targeted Johnson for interfering and attempted to burn him alive. When he emerged from the fire, Johnson was Steel, armored and with hammer in hand. And with this, the superhero was brought forth. [5]

Directly in line with a do-it-yourself, "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps," philosophy, all four factors moved Johnson to create and become Steel. The reasons for Steel emerging is thus, to a large extent, a function of an interesting set of factors - all individually and cumulatively important.

Johnsons' is clearly one view of black life and response to oppression that has been evident throughout US history. It also fits well with the noble-character turned superhero genre, although there are also elements of the victim turned superhero-vigilante genre as well. What is equally as interesting and rather telling, however, is the lack of complexity within Johnson's life.

Yes, he was upset at the murder of his parents for civil rights activity. But, otherwise, his was the perfect existence within a seemingly segregated environment, somewhere in the south, where his parents lived a simple, diligent and peaceful life. One gets a sense that they are watching the film "Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored" and that basically life in America was good. And, yes, he was disappointed about his weapons being used to kill people - although one wonders what he actually thought they would be

used for. But despite this, he still basically believed in himself, his family, and the legitimacy of the existing political-economic system.[6] This is truly heroic.

Such a perspective, although historically valid, is problematic because through its simplicity it misses two important facets of black life. First, by maintaining a position that removing guns will eliminate the violence within inner cities (a common theme within the story), Steel ignores the motivation/reason for the violence itself. It ignores continued discrimination in the work place, in housing and in other areas of American society. Life just simply isn't that good for black, working class people placed within the contexts of the rural, jim crow south and the heart of northern urban America.

Granted, superheroes are supposed to be somewhat positive/progressive figures, but there is still meant to be some careful attention to life as people experience it. Perhaps this is the experience or desire of the writers, but it is a position that is never really reflected upon within the story (like in Icon for example). Do the writers mean to suggest that the character never waivers in his beliefs about truth, justice and the American way in the face of real historical evidence as well as evidence within the storyline itself (i.e., the involvement of the government in the distribution of guns within the inner cities)? Cynicism, a lack of trust and belief in the efficacy of the existing political-economic system is pervasive within the African-American community as evidenced by numerous public opinion polls. Clearly there are African-American's like the Johnson family. But, the content of these individuals is missed and they appear like the Black "Brady Bunch" in the heart of the 'hood'.

Second, the depiction of Johnson is problematic because it ignores important issues of African-American personality development. As James Jones (1991, 305) suggests:

Black personality is in part an adaptation to the political contours of racism. The conflict between the freedoms and rights of United States citizens is juxtaposed to the denial of freedom and rights that is the history of the African American presence in this country. If we view personality as the resultant of coping patterns and socialization directives, then black personality is, in part, the cumulative representation of the effects of racism over four centuries. It reflects over time, the effects of the form and structure racism takes, and comes to signal the nature of race relations at any point in time.

In considering this, it may be that Johnson's attitudes are functionally related to his southern roots and the particular culture found there. Much evidence exists on how and why the civil rights movement, with its emphasis on following/respecting the law, was fostered by different aspects of southern culture. To not develop this, however, is to ignore an important element of the character's "grounding" as both an American and as an individual of African descent. Simply, to ignore this element of the character is to deny his "African-Americaness."

Now, it may be unfair (for clearly Superman never had to discuss being white), but perhaps given the limited number of superheroes in comics, the lack of discussion about black life within the mainstream media, and the importance of this character historically, Steel must also be expected to bear the burden of the race as an explanatory device. Black superheroes, in America, might not have the luxury to simply be superheroes devoid of

ethnic complexities. I do not want it perceived that I am suggesting the character is not "black enough" - for it is unclear what this means. There are no Luke Cage's being called for. Rather, it is suggested that the reader should be provided with greater insight into how this particular African-American came to ignore his ethnicity (i.e., being black is never addressed within the comic). By not discussing it, he de facto comes to accept the melting pot thesis, and this must be addressed in some manner in order to make the character credible. Simply, Steel might need to carry baggage.

More on Origins...

While on the subject of Steel's emergence as a superhero, some attention must be given to the fact that he was not the only "Superman" to emerge after the original Superman died. Nor, can one ignore the importance of the lead characters name in the making of an alternative iconographic/mythic presence. Both will be discussed below.

Concerning the first point of the multiple Supermen, it should be clearly understood that Johnson did not just put on his armor and that was the end of it - a black Superman was born. Quite the contrary, he appeared to have to prove himself worthy to the city (Metropolis), its citizens (including Lois Lane), and the audience for the comic itself.

After Superman's death, there were three other superbeings that emerged to fill the vacuum: the last son of Krypton, Metropolis Kid (Superboy), and Cyborg. As discussed within the "Reign of the Supermen" series different news agencies sponsored different Supermen, people took sides, and everyone tried to figure out if any of the superbeings were truly Superman or, at least, which one was deserving of the legacy.

Although little space appears to be given to the different debates throughout Metropolis, it becomes clear from the "Reign of the Supermen" series that Steel is favored almost immediately. Steel is the only "Superman" not seeking media recognition. In the age of media mistrust/cynicism, this counts for a great deal. He busily goes about the business of being a superhero: fighting gang members (*The Man of Steel* #23, #25), eliminating gun manufacturers (*The Man of Steel #24*), fighting robots that threaten Metropolis (*The Man of Steel #25*), and fighting Supervillains (*The Man of Steel* #24, #26). He consistently reprimands the other Supermen: 1) telling Metropolis Kid to be more careful about how he does things (*The Man of Steel* #23, 13-15), and 2) telling the last son of Krypton (*The Man of Steel* #24, 3) while punching him in the face:

You want me to believe you're Superman... Then act like Superman! Process Server tried to serve both of us warrants to cease using the Superman name! You fried the papers! You tried to fry the server! That's not how Superman Acts!

Finally, he is the only one of the Supermen not calling himself Superman. At one particularly heated moment Lois Lane (*The Man of Steel* #23, 13) grabs him and asks:

Hold it right there, buster: the others (the other three Supermen) have been falling all over themselves trying to convince the world they're Superman! What about you?

To this, Steel responds "I never said I was Superman," and flies away. Later Lois Lane, provides a significant endorsement and reflects (*The Man of Steel* #23, 22):

The others seem to have Superman's face, his body, his costume ... The man of Steel seems to have his soul. Superman or not ... He may be the kind of hero Metropolis needs.

This endorsement should not be slighted for if anyone selects Superman's air apparent it would be Lois - who else would know better. In fact, the only thing better than Lois Lane's endorsement is for Superman himself do so, and this Steel receives in issues #26 and #27 of the "Reign of the Supermen" when Superman comes back to life.

With the return of Superman, the other characters (except for Cyborg) go on to their respective corners and begin to live their own lives. Johnson goes home to Washington, D.C. - the place where his family resides, and amidst significant levels of violence, crime, and drugs, Steel is born.

The last point relevant to Steel's origin concerns the importance of establishing a counter myth for Steel. As discussed above, it is now common knowledge that Superman came from outer space and adopting this planet decided to fight for truth, justice and the American way. What is perhaps less widely known, given the potential audience for Steel, is that this character is also associated with a particularly weighty mythology - specifically the one of John Henry (his namesake).[8]

SUPERMAN: MAN OF STEEL 13, June 1993, Cover

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The story of John Henry is somewhat difficult to pinpoint historically, but it appears to emerge around the late 1800's and early 1900's (Chappell 1968). The story is identified once during the "Reign of the Supermen" series (#13), and is mentioned again at the beginning of Steel's series (*Steel* #0). The basic myth proceeds as follows (*Steel* #0, 1)

Back in the old days, steel drivers helped build the big bend tunnel ... Takin' up ten pound hammers to pound steel drills into the rock ... To make holes for blastin' explosives ... One day the boss brought a steam driven steel drill into the tunnel. Called it the "inkydoo" and claimed it could out-pound any man alive.

John Henry stepped forward an' wagered he could beat it in a race. He lifted a 20 pound hammer in each hand an' started poundin.' By the time the boss yelled "stop!" John Henry'd drilled two 7-foot holes... Nearly twice as much as the "inkydoo!" But when the boss turned to congratulate him, John Henry collapsed to the ground.

In one fell swoop, we are thus provided with a historical legacy that accomplishes several things:

1) it establishes the character's basic direction - one of effort and hard work (for a seemingly unclear purposes);
2) it grounds the character in an easily accessible myth associated with African-Americans (but is essentially American in its thrust); and,
3) it associates the character with a myth that resonates well beyond 1994 (similar to the myth of Superman).

Where the myth may falter, however, is with its meaning and relevance to the youth of the 1990's. This is clearly observed in the following scene where several youth leave a cultural center where Henry Johnson has just finished telling the story of John Henry. Upon leaving, one looks at the other and says (*The Man of Steel* #22, 1-3):

Zoid: "I don't see why John Henry was such a big deal, anyway. He's like... Dead! He pounded so hard, a blood vessel in his brain burst an' he died!
Keith: "He may be dead Zoid, but he won!"
Zoid: "I still don't see what's so great about that John Henry dude."
Keith: "He went up against somethin' everybody knew couldn't be beat... an' he beat it all the same. He's cool! Sorta like Superman! He..."
Zoid: "Mr. Johnson could make any dude seem like Superman! You been fooled by production values, man! Johnson's voice sounds like Darth Vadar!"

One could easily hear Zoid repeating again "Yeah - but he's dead" to whatever Keith stated. For urban youth the point is precisely Zoid's: why exert effort within a system/context that may kill you, especially when it may not treat you well even if you do not die (i.e., you might get "downsized," or your benefits might get cut, or your workload might be increased without adequate compensation). The authors seem to put forward the claim that the work ethic is dead, while I would suggest that it was killed (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Wilson 1997). In either case, only a relatively simplistic understanding of inner city problems is presented.

All that Glitters Ain't Shiny:
Towards an Understanding of Steel's Powers

Perhaps the most important distinguising characteristic of a superhero is the powers he/she wields. Again, as discussed above, Superman's powers are as equally well known as his origin. They include flight, speed, x-ray as well as heat vision, impenetrability, and the ability to hold his breath or use it to supercool objects. Could DC have given Steel powers comparable to Superman? No, I would argue, for three reasons:

1) there had to be a vacuum that only Superman himself could fill (therefore justifying his return and at the same time allowing the character to fill other positions);
2) no one could be Superman except Superman; and,
3) historically African-American superheroes had never even come close to the powers wielded by Superman and thus to take such action would have been truly revolutionary.[9]

L. SIMONSON · GOSIER · FABER
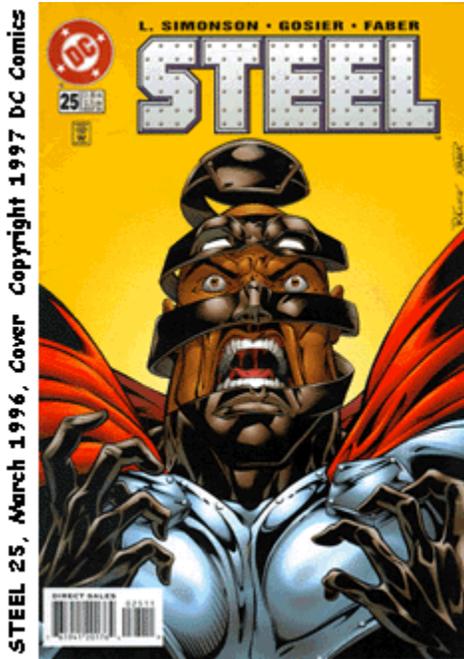
STEEL

What else could DC provide a character with? What could compare to Superman, but not upstage him as the ultimate superhero? Staying within the parameters of a relatively new trend, the creators of Steel gave their character armor. Now, Steel's armor is worthy of superhero status - that should be clear. Furthermore, the armor serves several purposes that are crucial to the story:

1) it emphasizes the fact that he was a normal man who through his own ingenuity (i.e., "by his own bootstraps") created something that could address his problems;
2) it drew upon Johnson's background as an engineer and inventor, highlighting the characters intelligence; and,
3) it stressed the fact that he armed/shielded himself in order to do battle with forces that were in need of redress.

Additionally, Steel does have a mechanism that fires steel rivets out of his arm as well as a hammer that adds significantly to his fighting ability, while at the same time continuing/solidifying the John Henry myth.

At the same time, however, it should also be noted that the only thing that Superman and Steel had in common was the "S" on their chests. Steel is not as physically strong as Superman, and he must rely on his armor for strength, flight and impenetrability. Steel is not as fast as Superman. He has no special vision, and he must attach a breathing device to his armor in order to go into space or under water. Steel is very much sub-super in line with the long list of other African-American superheroes (Davenport 1997). Here he differs significantly from the other Supermen - who were naturally endowed with all of these characteristics. Interestingly, in order for the African-American to possess these qualities, he had to become an engineer and make his own - another not so subtle message about America and, in this particular case, African-American effort.

Over time the powers initially given to Steel change, thus expanding his capabilities and the storyline itself. The change revolves around the biggest difference between Superman and Steel: the former was naturally a superhero and secondly a man, the latter was naturally a man and secondly a superhero. This difference becomes somewhat limiting for Steel because whenever he is caught without his duffle bag full of armor, he is in trouble. Whenever there was a problem for Superman, however, he could always deal with the situation at hand because he was always Superman.

As a way of overcoming this deficiency and increasing Steel's powers, the armor begins to disappear and reappear by itself. This becomes problematic for the character, but interesting for the story. As time progresses, Johnson begins to wield greater and greater control over his armor (making it perform as he wishes) and eventually he even opens a realm called the "white zone" (which is where his armor disappears to and is automatically repaired). The changing armor provides many things for Steel:

1) at first it presents an uncontrollable element to the story that would leave open the possibility that anything could happen (therefore allowing the story to go in directions that are not easily predictable);
2) it made the character even more powerful as one of his most obvious weaknesses was removed (making him more like Superman); and,
3) it reduces the self-made conception of the character as it is no longer clear what role Johnson actually plays in the process.

Indeed, with regard to the third point, it may be that it was created by some other being or altered. Regardless, the armor is no longer something that Johnson created by himself. Further altering the Johnson/Steel mythology, the power of controlling the armor leads to the revelation that Johnson is not a mere human at all. Rather, it is believed that he is a meta-human, who possesses a meta-gene. This throws off the "average joe" image previously cultivated and again mirrors the Superman myth rather closely.

Inner City Blues:
The Where and When of Steel's Superdoings

Basically, superheroes protect citizens from threats. They serve as super-policeman, if you will, in a world fraut with a multitude of trials and tribulations. One way of investigating superheroes, I argued within a previous study (Davenport 1997), is to gauge the variety of these threats: the conclusion being that a superhero's worth/importance could be gauged by the variety of things confronted. Again, comparing Superman to Steel on this variable is rather telling.

From the myth, Superman appeared to combat every kind of injustice, everywhere. He could be seen pulling a cat from a tree and on the next page flying to fight aliens in a distant universe. Such is not the case for Steel, however, for, similar to most African-American superheroes, rarely could one find Steel outside his regular domain. Generally, steel would be on the ground, on earth, and in his own neighborhood (in Washington D.C. or later Jersey City). This indelibly ends up influencing the subjects that Steel deals with and additionally the targets of the particular threats he must confront - in a sense parochializing him.

Threats and their Targets

Steel primarily addresses four topics: random violence, guns, drugs and crime. The black Superman thus addresses problems of general concern to inner city areas - perhaps the problems most relevant to other individuals of African descent. He will, from time to

time, deal with rescuing individuals from a fire or fighting off some threat to the city. By and large, however, the characters primary subject is in a sense "ghettoized." Steel addresses things that are most associated with blacks. In his words (*Steel* #5, 4)

my job is on the streets. To make them stop the madness that's destroying so many lives.

In terms of targets of these threats, there are again basically four: Steel's family, Steel himself, the city he is in, and the Earth. Given their frequency, I will address only the first two.

Drawing from the Superman myth, rarely did his family get involved in his superdoings. Part of the myth seemed to be that his family was generally safe in smalltown, while Superman carried about his business throughout all of existence. There are some interesting twists within this basic plot: there is a story when subliminal programs are used to brainwash and control youth (*Steel* #16) and in another story a drug named "tar" is found that enhances an individuals aggressiveness, physical strength, but kills you after several uses.[10]

Directly opposing this, Steel's family was right in the middle of most of his problems/super-doings. This conveyed the immediacy/severity of the problems involved, and it also tended to highlight how vulnerable we all are (especially African-Americans) by directing the threats against individuals that we would generally think are somewhat impervious to them (i.e., the family of a superhero).

Steel's family is the target of numerous threats, the victims of numerous attacks (Steel's grandmother is killed by a superhero, his nephew is shot by gangsters, and his niece is kidnapped by a super-villain), they consistently discuss what he should or should not do as a superhero, and they occasionally get directly involved in fights (for example, Steel's nephew jumps on a swat-team member that was about to shoot, his niece "tar" so that shw will be strong enough to help, and his grandmother throws him a frying pan while combating some storm-troopers).

The involvement of the Steel family in the story is quite interesting. It provides a major inspiration for the character to begin and then continue to be a superhero. The constant threats to his family from gang members to supervillains, calls out for heroic behavior in order to handle numerous threats (often simultaneously). In a sense Superman fell from the sky, while Steel was forged as a response to victimization. At the same time, Steel's family serves as a constant weakness. Similar to Superman, when an aspect of his past is brought into the story, he becomes somewhat paralyzed and unsure of how to proceed, occasionally proceeding in an uncharacteristic manner.[11]

On another level, however, the presentation of the Steel family reveals an extremely conservative perspective regarding inner city life, and African-American communities. This perspective is revealed by the numerous discussions about gangs and families.

As outlined in the narrative, both organizations are believed to provide similar functions: physical protection, identity, and financial security. Left unaddressed within the comic, is why one organization (gangs) came to replace another (families). In fact, the comic never deals with the issue of why gangs exist in the first place, but only how they get armed. In a sense, it appears that the writers expect that once guns and drugs are removed off the streets, individuals will return to the only other societal organization - the family. But, if we all need a Steel in our family to bring this about (which the story seems to suggest), then the likelihood of this ever taking place is remote. This is especially the case if Steel is not a mere human.

The second primary target of a Steel comic is the character himself, or more specifically, his armor. In many, if not the majority, of the comic's narratives villains attempt to take Steel's armor - at one point there is even a bounty on it (*Steel* #18). By other characters it is viewed as an amazing invention, a prize, or as a weapon for somebody's arsenal. While flattering to the inventor, Henry Johnson, as it indirectly highlights his creative intelligence, this emphasis limits the story significantly because most of the time the character is reacting to attacks made by others. He is rarely proactive in his superdoings (like Spiderman on patrol), although this is always a consistent element within the storyline: there is always one small scene when the character quickly subdues some gang member. Steel is generally under assault and is thus unable to get a second to breath or reflect without some new threat to his person.

Can't a Brother Get Some Respect
(Or, at Least, a Good Story)?

There are two factors that seem to problematize and limit *Steel*: 1) America is segregated, and 2) comics are inherently about making money. These two factors are important because they directly impact the content of any comic about African-American superheroes. For example, an exclusive superhero (one that simply deals with either black or white people like Luke Cage, Zwanna, Brother Voo Doo, Original Man, Sustah- Girl, Horus or Brother Man) lacks crossover appeal to a wider audience. Consequently, most African-American superheroes that endure jump between 2 worlds (Black Panther, Falcon, Iron and Rocket, Iron Man/War Machine, Static, Storm, and Steel). From this perspective, one world is predominantly made up of black people and another is predominantly made up of white people. Steel is no exception for there is a Steel in the 'hood' and one that is not.

The 'hood-Steel' occasionally uses but is consistently surrounded by black vernacular (ebonics), deals with inner city problems, and captures an extremely violent way of life. Here, the character is surrounded by people of color and he appears to save blacks from themselves as he races around beating down gang members, breaking guns, and arresting people. The anglo-Steel consistently uses proper English, varies a great deal with regard to how he resolves problems (i.e., he is equally likely to hit someone as use some less aggressive, more intelligent means), and deals with a wider variety of problems - effecting a larger number of people. Here, Steel is predominantly surrounded by anglo-Americans, and appears to save individuals from diverse threats and not from themselves.

This marginalizes and simultaneously stigmatizes inner city (as well as African-American) life because it casts their problems and the possible resolutions to those problems in a particular light: simply, the violent problems are minimal in impact for the larger community and thus seem to call for an equally violent albeit limited resolution.

The balance maintained between the two Steel's within each comic issue is important - too much of either becomes problematic. If the 'hood-Steel is highlighted too frequently, the characterization becomes stereotypical, and perhaps limited in market potential since it is generally irrelevant to whites or offensive to blacks. The opposite effect is also possible.[12] Alternatively, if the anglo-Steel is highlighted too frequently, then the character again becomes stereotypical, albeit in favor of a larger potential market, and the character might suffer from over-homogeneity.

What constitutes the adequate mixture is also unclear. How much would tilt the balance? What does a "hoodized" or "anglicized" Steel mean? These are empirical questions. What is clear, however, is that having the character jumping back and forth between two worlds without addressing the characters reflection/opinion about this "jumping" will render the character unrecognizable and vacuous. Dubois' comment about the two- sidedness of African-American life must still be addressed.

Recently in the ongoing narrative, a positive move was taken when several comments were made about the fact that the "S" on Steel's chest is white in orientation. Specifically, Steel is verbally assaulted when he is trying to figure out why this one character has killed several people to get his attention and states (*Steel* #37, 19), "I've done nothing to you." To this the character, Skorpio, retorts:

Of course you have. You put on that armor ... You wear that symbol ... You demanded my attention. Made me wanna flex a little-see what kinda brother you are. That is assuming you're a brother at all. Wearing that white man's symbol...

STEEL 37, April 1997, pg. 19 Copyright 1997 DC Comics

This brief exchange represents the first time that the fact that Superman was white emerges at any length. With the subject finally breached it may now be possible for some discussion about the various subjects I have highlighted above.

The path to a more balanced and marketable Steel will not be easy by any means. The subject is extremely complex because it brings to fore the issue that there simply might not be an African-American superhero that is acceptable to both races. The problem appears to revolve around several questions:

Would African-Americans feel comfortable and purchase a superhero that saved everybody but did not appear to identify with one group of people?

Would whites feel comfortable and purchase a superhero in a comic that saved only blacks and identified exclusively with African- Americans? The demise of Milestone appears to suggest otherwise (*Comics Journal* 1997, 18-21).

Would African-Americans feel comfortable and purchase comics about a hero that did not use black vernacular? Would whites?

Would African-Americans feel comfortable and purchase comics about a character exclusively dealing with the 'hood (directly addressing a large part of their reality) or would they prefer a comic that stepped outside this realm (ignoring but extending their reality)?

Can African-Americans sustain a comic on their own through their purchasing power alone?

How difficult is it for an African-American superhero to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps," and prove to be marketable, when they exist within the shadow of other clearly defined superheroes?

What problems exist when this transformation takes place and how do these problems influence the content of the character as well as their story?

The answers to these questions are unclear, but what is clear is that the complexity of expectations, reality, and tolerance of both blacks and whites are perhaps too much for any superbeing to bear. The future of African-American superheroes and Steel in particular is uncertain.

Endnotes:

[1] As suggested by Dooley and Engle (1987, 11) only four other characters on the planet are as well known: Mickey Mouse, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, and Robin Hood.

[2] This emergence also dovetails with an explosion in the number of black superheroes. See the appendix.

[3] There was little to no violence, racism or inequality in Johnson's world - although his parents appeared as if they were killed because they engaged in some civil rights activity

(which is treated in an extremely casual manner as if this type of political activity was rather commonplace or merely an attempt to establish that the character was black).

4 Randomly investigating about 25 Superman comics this statement did not appear to be the usual response.

5 It is somewhat unclear on this point reading the "Reign of the Superman" series and then "Steel" because in the former his armor was already constructed and in the latter it appears as if it is re-created.

6 Johnson would not be attempting to seek reparations for past injustices or arguing for a redistribution of wealth. Rather, since he became successful himself (through sports, education and then employment with the military), he appears to believe that if people work hard, and can be held to the letter of the law, that all will be well.

7 Interestingly, the one person he did not need to convince was himself. Unlike John Stewart, who upon taking over the role of Green Lantern, kept doubting his capability, Steel appeared to step into the role rather easily. The armor proved to be an effective way of resolving his previous bouts of angst/despair and despite his apparent lack of training in combat he appears to fight extremely well. The stereotype here is far to obvious to mention.

8 Decision to use the name Clark Kent seemed to be less important by contrast (Dooley 1987, 29).

9 Generally African-American superheroes are expected to be athletic, strong, spiritual/magical, and in possession of relatively limited powers.

10 This is quite similar to discussions about "gansta" rap that emphasizes that youthful African-Americans are drawn to this form of music because of its sense of empowerment within a relatively oppressive life situation.

11 In one particular issue (*Steel* #27) he resorts to using an extremely powerful gun, known as the annihilator, which is something he would normally despise.

12 The opposite situation might be the case, however, like with Luke Cage. Here, we have the longest running African-American superhero who also happens to be the personification of black stereotypes: he is naturally athletic, not to smart, aggressive, and generally limited in terms of the number of different things (threats) that he contends with. Whites perhaps purchased the book because it captured black life as they expected it to be. Blacks perhaps purchased the book because it was the only thing available. The Brother Might be Made of Steel, But he Sure Ain't Super... Man

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