



Image (L/R): (book cover detail) "Unstable Masks Whiteness and American Superhero Comics," edited by Sean Guynes and Martin Lund, The Ohio State University Press, January 2020; Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins; Eric L. Berlatsky; (book cover detail) "Ms. Marvel's America No Normal," Edited by Jessica Baldanzi & Hussein Rashid, University of Mississippi Press, February 2020

THE INTERSECTION OF SUPERHEROES IN COMIC BOOKS, RACIAL POLITICS, THE POLITICS OF RACIAL MIXING AND RACIAL MIXEDNESS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
FACULTY MEMBERS
HAVE CO-AUTHORED
TWO ARTICLES ON
THE INTERSECTION OF
SUPERHEROES AND RACIAL
POLITICS. A JOURNAL
ARTICLE AND BOOK
ARE FORTHCOMING.

Early this year, the multi-year collaboration between Dr. Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins and Dr. Eric L. Berlatsky, began to come to fruition. Since 2016, the two English professors have been working together on the intersection of superheroes, especially in comic books, and racial politics, particularly the politics of racial mixing and racial mixedness.

In January 2020, the two published an essay called "The Whiteness of the Whale and the Darkness of the Dinosaur: The Africanist Presence in Superhero Comics from Black Lightning to Moon Girl." The essay appears in the edited collection *Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics* from The Ohio State University Press, edited by Sean Guynes and Martin Lund. The article explores the ingrained and historical white supremacist ideology of the superhero concept, rooted in ideas of eugenics and racialized vigilante "justice," and how various depictions of black superheroes (from the 1960s through the present-day) both challenge that ideology and also, with some frequency, reinscribe it. In March, their "The Only Nerdy Pakistani-Slash-Inhuman in the Entire

(continued)



Images: (top) Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins;
(bottom) Eric L. Berlatsky

"With current events once again reminding us of the pernicious influence of racism and white supremacy in our society; and with superheroes dominating contemporary popular media, particularly in film and television, our work provides an opportunity to examine the ways in which popular culture both reflects and reinforces popular biases, and also the ways in which popular culture and narratives can challenge those biases."

- Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins,
Associate Professor, Department
of English
&
Eric L. Berlatsky, Professor,
Department of English

Universe: Postracialism and Politics in the New Ms. Marvel" appeared in *Ms. Marvel's America: No Normal* from the University Press of Mississippi, edited by Jessica Baldanzi and Hussein Rashid. This article examines the 2014 emergence of the Pakistani Muslim superhero, Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel, and the ways in which her depiction is reflective of contemporary discussions of the utopian potential of racial mixing, as well as how this depiction dabbles in problematic "postracial" thinking, even as it self-consciously challenges racism and Islamophobia.

These two chapters serve as the prelude to the two professors' larger project, the book *Mixed Race Superheroes*, an edited collection which should appear within the next year from Rutgers University Press. While the racial politics of the superhero genre has received quite a bit of academic attention in recent years, there is no book (and virtually no journal publications) on the specific intersection of superhero narratives (comics, films, television, or other media) and mixed-race experience. The book takes a long look at that intersection, the frequently stereotypical portrayal of racial mixing and racial mixedness in superhero stories and what ideas and ideologies are propagated in those stories. The book has chapters by top scholars on films like *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse* and *Venom*, television shows like *LEGION* and *Steven Universe*, and comics like *Monstress*, *Dr. Fate*, and *The Hulk*. In addition to editing the book and co-authoring the introduction, both professors have written a single-authored chapter, with Dagbovie-Mullins discussing the film *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and a 1984 *Amazing Spider-Man* comic of the same name, and Berlatsky discussing the CW *Flash* television show and recent comics about the same hero.

Dagbovie-Mullins and Berlatsky have also recently put the finishing touches on an article titled, "The Mixed-Race Child Within: Psychoanalyzing Race, Trauma, Vermin, and Spider-Man," to be published soon in a special issue of the psychoanalytic journal *American Imago* on Comics and Psychoanalysis. This essay analyzes some early-1990s Spider-Man comics and their depiction of a mixed-race supervillain undergoing psychoanalysis, once again in the context of popular understanding of the psychology of racial mixedness and its impact on society.

While it may not be immediately obvious that "escapist" entertainment like superhero comics, films, and television shows have something to say about U. S. racial identity and race relations, these professors' work helps to reveal that to be the case.

Dagbovie-Mullins' area of expertise is in modern and contemporary African American Literature, Critical Race Theory, and Critical Mixed Race Studies, while Berlatsky's recent work has been in comics studies and superhero studies. By working together they hope to shed new light on all of these fields.

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