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The Midnight Angels and Queer Afrofuturism

Prolific writer and thinker Ta-Nehesi Coates brought gravitas and interesting political drama to his well received run of Marvel's *Black Panther* comic book series, starting in 2016. The series depicts king T'Challa dealing with political strife and civil war in the Afrofuturist nation of Wakanda. There are many political players in the series, but one of the most interesting factions is the group led by the Midnight Angels. The Midnight Angels are Ayo and Aneka, two former members of the Dora Milaje and a romantic couple who decided to quit being part of the royal guard due to the crown not protecting marginalized groups in Wakanda. The characters of Ayo and Aneka are truly radical in both their identities as Black Lesbian Superheroes and in their political ideology. Ta-Nehesi Coates uses the Midnight Angels to counter the bigoted tropes of the superhero genre while utilizing Afrofuturism to explore Black Queerness, in addition to exploring a radical political ideology distinct from Eurocentrist thought.

Gender expression has been a crucial part of the superhero genre. According to Jeffery A. Brown, "Indeed, the split personality implied by the concept of a masquerade seems to be one of the most archetypal metaphors for the masculine condition in Western culture... The male identity in the 20th century is perceived in extremes: man or mouse, He-Man or 98 lb weakling" (Brown 25). This fits with the escapist nature of many comics, where people may identify with the weaker alter ego and yearn to be the hyper masculine superhero. Brown goes on to describe the role masculinity and gender expression has in white supremacy. "While the gay man, the

Jewish man, the Asian man (and many other Others) have been burdened by the projection of castrated softness, the black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being too manly, too physical, too bodily” (Brown 28). The intersection of the racist hyper-masculinity placed on Black men and the hyper-masculinity in the superhero genre is that Black superheroes by White creators have been made to be either hyper-masculinized as with blacksploitation or made into a comedic figure for fear of being too masculine (Brown).

The double-consciousness inherent in the alter ego aspect of the superhero genre is allegorized to be directly about race as well in many comics. “The idea of the split identity, one of the most definitive and distinctive traits of the superhero, is also one of the most powerful and omnipresent figures used to illustrate the dilemmas and experiences of minority identity” (Singer 113). Being a minority often means having different parts of your identity be in conflict with each other. This can be explored very well using the idea of the superhero and their alter ego.

Queerness is also inherent to the concept of the Afrofuturist superhero. Marc Singer discusses the connection of queerness with the superhero mythos through the example of a Black Lightning story, where the titular superhero, whose alter ego is schoolteacher Jefferson Pierce, finds out that a fellow teacher who died saving a child is gay. He meets his partner, who connects Jefferson Pierce’s conflict about his secret identity to his conflict about his homosexuality (Singer 114). The idea of being in the closet that most gay people go through is very similar to the secret identity idea. Thus, the intersectional identity of being a Black lesbian fits wonderfully into the superhero genre.

The intersection of Blackness and queerness is also connected to Afrofuturism as a genre through queer Afrofuturism. According to Amandine Faucheux:

“Black queer theory can be usefully applied to Afrofuturism because the black American historical context always already implicates sexuality, often a sexuality deemed abnormal. Like black feminism, black queer theory sheds critical insight on the racialization process that starts with the sexed and sexual body. Moreover, black queer theory... shares the afrofuturist objective to subvert linear historical narratives that produce various forms of violence against racialized and/or queer bodies. At the intersection of black queer theory and Afrofuturism lies queer Afrofuturism, a term meant to designate those afrofuturist texts in which race is inextricably tied to gender and sexuality in such a way that it is impossible to talk about one without always already signifying the other” (Faucheux 565).

Essentially, Faucheux argues that because Black sexuality and queerness is so ingrained into the Black experience, queer theory fits into the goals and tenets of Afrofuturism extremely well.

So, if the secret identity idea deals with race, gender expression, and sexuality, what does it mean for Ta Nehesi Coates' run of *Black Panther* to have a duo of Black feminist lesbian superheroes? While Ayo and Aneka do not technically have full alter egos in the sense of someone like Spider-Man, where they can be both an everyday person and secretly their superhero alter ego, they still have this idea of dual identity. In the origin story for the Midnight Angels, the idea of death is used to describe the lives Ayo and Aneka are leaving behind by becoming the Midnight Angels. When Aneka worries about them potentially being killed, Ayo says “A part of me is already dead...The part of me that was Dora Milaje. The part of me that once lived for our king” (Coates 1.32-33). When they don the Midnight Angel Armor for the first time, Aneka says “Let us act as dead women should” (Coates 1.33). This idea of the old self dying to become the new self as connected to the superhero origin story connects heavily to the

queer identity of Ayo and Aneka. There is often a sense of the old self before coming out as LGBTQ+ being discarded and replaced with something new. In the transgender community specifically, this rejection of the old identity before discovering the true self is so strong that the term deadname is used for the name someone has before it is changed to one that fits one's gender identity better. This is clearly what the origin of the Midnight Angels is trying to allude to.

Aneka is trapped in a prison, representing the metaphorical “closet” that gay people are forced into hiding their sexuality. She is broken out of this prison by Ayo, and the two kiss, talk about the death of their old identities, and become the Midnight Angels.

Ayo and Aneka also express femininity in a way that deviates from the stereotypes placed upon Black and female characters in comic books. Ayo and Aneka's costumes are drawn in a way that is not defined by the White male gaze. They are regal looking, and their armor is strong while still being feminine in certain ways like the exposed stomach. This character design seems like something picked out by the characters, rather than something solely made to appease the male gaze like many other female superhero costumes.

Another important aspect of the Midnight Angels that sets them apart from stereotypical depictions of Black superheroes is that they are able to engage with their femininity in a genuine way detached from stereotype. Ayo and Aneka are fueled by love, both for each other and for Wakanda. When they rescue Wakandans in issue two, Aneka comforts a child by saying “You deserved so much more, little flower” but then goes on to be more aggressive against her oppressors, saying “while the Midnight Angels breathe, I swear to you they all shall pay” (Coates 2.13). This synthesis of feminine ideas of compassion and motherhood with the power of the anti-authoritarian superhero makes for a female superhero that is able to be both feminine and powerful. Another way that lesbian love detached from the male gaze is portrayed are in the

silhouetted sections of the comic where Ayo and Aneka are together, in a loving embrace while talking about their plans. By having this moment be silhouetted, it portrays these intimate moments as something private, not for us to see. It blocks out the male gaze, whereas other comic book depictions of intimacy are heavily sexualized and made for straight men to enjoy. Lesbian and sapphic couples in particular have been sexualized and fetishized by the male gaze.

According to Marc Singer, Black superheroes “are absorbed into the generic ideology of the superhero, in which exotic outsiders-- and few are as exotic in the comics as Black superheroes-- work to preserve America’s status quo” (Singer 110). Ayo and Aneka are detached from America in that they live in the fictional nation of Wakanda. However, Ta Nehisi Coates and artist Brian Stelfreeze are both American and work for Marvel, which is an American company. Is the ideology of the Midnight Angels fueled by American ideas of what a government should be? After all, the Midnight Angels want to replace the Monarchy of Wakanda with a representative democracy. “Spreading democracy” has historically been used by the US government to justify coup d'etats, wars, and imperialism. Is the Political movement of the Midnight Sisters a way of bringing Western ideas of democracy and “progress” to Wakanda, or is it an Afrofuturist movement based outside of the West’s influence?

According to Reynaldo Anderson, “within the framework of European Modernity, the theme of Utopia projects the idea that society progresses through rationalism, technological advance, complexity, and materialism, whereas conversely, the Africana tradition projects the idea of the *Jubilee* or striving for perfection regardless of the destination” (Anderson 182). By this definition, it seems like Ayo and Aneka are following the Africana tradition. They are not governed in their ideology by rationalism, but in striving for perfection and justice. Ayo even admits that her breaking away from the Dora Milaje was not based on a coherent plan, but just

on her love for Aneka and the desire to save her (Coates 2.14). Comparing the Midnight Angels' calls for liberation to the bourgeois nature of the American revolution and many other US backed pushes for global "democracy" showcases that the Midnight Angels ideology is detached to a large extent from Eurocentrism.

This focus on striving for perfection and justice is also displayed by certain elements of prison abolitionism that exist in the Midnight Angel ideology. The first two actions of the midnight Angels are freeing two prisons, the first one to free Aneka and the second to free imprisoned women. In issue three, Aneka tells Ayo "We have proved we can punish the guilty, but can we protect the innocent?" in an attempt to switch their focus away from getting revenge and more towards protecting society, which could be interpreted as being an abolitionist stance to a certain degree (Coates 3.13). Western carceral states do little to keep citizens safe and focus instead on punishing "guilty" people, and Aneka's ideology rejects that.

The detachment of the Midnight Angels from Eurocentrism is highlighted by their differences with the other rebellious political players in Wakanda, Tetu and Zenzi. Tetu wants to change the power structure in Wakanda, but he is willing to use support from the West for his crusade. In issue 4, Tetu meets with Ezekiel Stane, a rich supervillain and American billionaire who financially supports his movement. Zeke Stane's inclusion is likely meant to allegorize how United States companies fund coups in other countries. When Tetu meets with Mr. Krowl in Issue 5 to get information, he stands behind Zeke Stane who is in the center and most prominent position, showing that he is the real power in this group. The Midnight Angels and their faction have to decide whether or not they will ally with Tetu's faction in Issue 9. Their ally and mother figure, M'bali, says "A free house is not built with a slave-driver's tools" (Coates 9.15). According to Bibi Burger and Laura Engels, This Wakandan parable is actually "echoing

(African-American feminist) Audrey Lorde's famous quote, 'The master's tool will never dismantle the master's house', implying that the Midnight Angels cannot use the methods of patriarchal tyranny to fight patriarchal tyranny" (Burger and Engels). However, the meaning of this reference goes beyond just a rejection of patriarchal tyranny, but is also a rejection of western influence. Using Audrey Lorde's quotation highlights how Tetu is using the White Imperialist Zeke Stane to fight Imperialism, while the Midnight Angels are independent and born of Wakanda. The funding from Zeke Stane is the "master's tool" in this story. Thus, Tetu despite his military strength has done less to effectively change Wakandan society than the Midnight Angels. As M'bali says, "In fighting Tetu, [T'challa] wars against a terrorist. In fighting the Midnight Angels, he wars against a nation" (Coates 10.11). The Midnight Angels have created a movement that is more than just a Military threat to the Wakandan status quo, but an ideological one.

The Midnight Sisters also contrast with the somewhat Western sensibilities of T'Challa himself. T'Challa is criticized throughout the run for his ties to the Avengers, with many Wakandans claiming that T'Challa abandoned his country to be with the Avengers. The Avengers is a very White, Eurocentric group with most members being American, including the symbol of American patriotism himself, Captain America. In Issue 6, T'Challa is advised by Tony Stark, who is an American billionaire just like Zeke Stane. In Issue 5, T'Challa also takes advice from other world leaders in a majority White panel to discuss what he should do about the uprising in his country. T'Challa is thus taking advice from the Eurocentric Western school of thought in order to control his own people. This of course bites him in the back, as Tetu leaks the advice one of the White leaders gave T'Challa to the public resulting in heavy backlash.

The most important foil to the Midnight Angels is Shuri. Upon her return from the Djalía, Shuri is adorned in an outfit very similar to the Midnight Angels' armor, with a blue top and pants along with an exposed stomach. Shuri then goes directly in an ethereal form to visit Aneka and Ayo, threatening them to join Wakanda and fight for the King. In a peace negotiation between Wakanda and the faction of the Midnight Angels, Shuri berates them for separating from Wakanda. In the end Shuri and the Midnight Angels end up enacting change and bringing representative democracy to Wakanda: "There will be a new council in the coming months, representing every region of Wakanda. The Purpose shall be a new constitution and ultimately a new government, elected by Wakandans. The creed shall be-- No One Man" (Coates 12.20). Since Shuri represents the history of Wakanda through her journey in the Djalía, the Midnight Angels are synthesizing their ideology with the legacy of Wakanda, while T'Challa and Tetu tried to synthesize their ideology with the influence of the West. Thus, the Midnight Angels were able to bring positive change to the Wakandan status quo.

The identity of the Midnight Angels as queer Black heroes actually furthers the importance of their ideology winning out in the end. Black, LGBTQ+ and/or leftist characters have often been coded to be villains in pop culture. Even this year, the villains of *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (which also featured an Ayo stripped of her sexuality and her radical politics) were the Flagsmashers, left-wing anarchists coded to be similar to the media portrayal of Black Lives Matter activists and "Antifa." The group was led by Karli Morgenthau, who is played by a mixed race lesbian actress. These identities have long been portrayed as ruthless antagonists, so it is a positive subversion to have the Midnight Angels actually be in the right and have their ideology win out in the end.

Ta Nehesi Coates' exploration of the Midnight Angels' identity and ideology rejects the bigoted norms of the genre and portrays a revolutionary ideology detached from Eurocentric ideals. The Midnight Angels' identity as Black lesbians is explored through the dichotomy of the superhero identity and the alter ego, with Ayo and Aneka discarding their former, closeted selves and using their love for each other and their people to fuel their cause. Their ideology, especially when compared to that of other characters in the story, is also uniquely detached from Western influence, synthesizing with the history and heritage of Wakanda to create positive change. While sadly the film adaptation of Ayo has been stripped of both her lesbian identity and her radical politics, hopefully someday the Midnight Angels as written by Ta Nehesi Coates will receive the mainstream attention they deserve.

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