

Recycling the Other: The Role of Nostalgia in Superhero Comics' Orientalism

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Abstract

Whiteness has been one of the core ideals in American mainstream superhero comics, but in recent years, with demands for diversity increasing, more than ever, racial minorities have leading roles in superhero comics. However, the struggle for Asians in the superhero genre is not entirely gone. The number of appearances may have increased, but stereotypes do persist. Japanese characters in superhero comics, for instance, whether they are heroes or villains, are still forced to display their Otherness, even in recent works. In this paper, by using Wolverine's adventures set in Japan and the Japanese superhero Katana from DC Comics as examples, I argue that Asians in contemporary superhero comics are still contained within the grasps of Orientalism, and that nostalgia plays a significant role in that containment.

Keywords: Orientalism, nostalgia, racism, continuity, diversity

Introduction

As many scholars and fans have already pointed out, whiteness has been one of the core ideals in American mainstream superhero comics.¹ From DC Comics' Superman and Batman to Marvel's Captain America and Iron Man, the most famous and popular superheroes, as well as supervillains, have always been predominantly white. In recent years however, with increasing demands for diversity, this focus on whiteness has been highly questioned and criticized. Consequently, more than ever, racial minorities have leading roles in superhero comics. Miles Morales, the Spider-Man of Marvel's Ultimate Universe, is a mixed-race teenager, and the African Black Panther is now extremely popular after the successful film released in 2018. Asian representations too are praised to have improved significantly. For instance, Silk is an Asian-American superhero, with spider powers similar to that of Spider-Man. She was first introduced in *Spider-Verse* (2014), a crossover event that brought together various Spider-people of alternate universes, and eventually led to her own solo series. The series was unfortunately cancelled, and her appearances have decreased since then, but though it is outside comics pages, she was confirmed to appear in the sequel and spin-off movie of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). Another example is Amadeus Cho, a young Korean-American, who is known in the Marvel universe as one of the eight smartest people on earth. After finding out that the source of power that allows Bruce Banner to transform into the Hulk was about to detonate, Amadeus helped Bruce remove the Hulk from Bruce's body by transferring the Hulk onto his own. As the new Hulk, Amadeus too led a series entitled *The Totally Awesome Hulk* (2015-2017). Even after he was no longer the Hulk,

as Brawn, he continued as one of the main characters in *Champions* (2016-2018). Finally, there is of course, Kamala Kahn, or Ms. Marvel, whose top-seller comics features her adventures in which she struggles to find a balance between her identities as a teenager, a Muslim, and a superhero.

However, the struggle for Asians in the superhero genre is not entirely gone. The number of appearances may have increased, but stereotypes do persist. Marvel Studios recently announced that they are developing a film with Shang-Chi, or Master of Kung Fu, as the protagonist. While many are excited for Marvel Studio's first Asian-led movie, others are concerned that the studio's choice of character was a stereotypical martial artist who happens to be the son of Fu Manchu, the offensive and racist fictional villain popular during the twentieth century, who "emblemized the yellow peril from 1913 to 1970s."²

In this paper, by using Wolverine's adventures set in Japan and the Japanese superhero Katana from DC Comics as examples, I argue that Asians in contemporary superhero comics are still contained within the grasps of Orientalism, and that nostalgia plays a significant role in that containment. Japanese characters in superhero comics, whether they are heroes or villains, are still forced to display their Otherness, even in recent works. Tropes such as samurais, ninjas, and the Yakuza (the Japanese mafia) are recycled and reused in recent adventures that involve the Japanese and their culture. Though my paper focuses specifically on the depictions of the Japanese culture and characters in superhero comics, it is not my intention to exclude other Asian countries or claim that the Japanese are most affected by the continued existence of Orientalism. Japan is given central attention because first, it is the Asian country I am most familiar with; second, Japan in general remains understudied in American superhero scholarship; and finally, Japanese culture in contemporary popular culture, including superhero comics, is still stereotyped, as I will elaborate below.

On Orientalism and Nostalgia

The term "Orientalism" as I use it here refers to Edward Said's *Orientalism*.³ Said claims that Orientalism explains how the West presumes themselves the superior culture and continues to patronize the East through exaggerated depictions. In Orientalist understandings of the East, Eastern culture is depicted as the exotic unknown. With its differences from Western culture overemphasized, "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off the Orient as a surrogate and even underground self."⁴ On such practice, Xu explains that the "emphasizing [of the] difference means maintaining distance and superiority."⁵ Furthermore, the Western thinking often deems Eastern culture as primitive, barbaric, irrational, and even violent, which leads to the Western beliefs that the East is in dire need of Western intervention to assist in modernization. This binary relationship "of power, domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony"⁶ that situates the West as the superior and the East as the inferior Other results in misrepresentation through stereotypes, along with "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice."⁷

Fans of the superhero genre tend to enjoy being reminded of past works in present comics through continuity, which is the “interconnectedness of the characters, stories, places, and contextual temporality in comic stories”⁸ that influence each other in their storytelling and is a distinctive feature of the superhero genre. Therefore, stories of past comics serve as an important basis for contemporary superhero storytelling: creators cannot simply invent something new with no regard to existing works, as this will lead to a disruption of continuity as well as outraged fans. Because of the convention of the genre to always tie present works closely to the past, ground-breaking progressions are challenging to achieve, for there must always be a link between the new and the old. It is familiarity—and the intimacy and comfort that comes with it—that is preferred. For instance, an article on the superhero genre points out a “bout of nostalgia . . . follows a lot of upheaval over the last few years.”⁹ Vaneta Rogers mentions one of the reasons for this surge of nostalgia as “a backlash from all the ‘new,’”¹⁰ stressing the heavy reliance and expectation fans have on past works and continued references to them.

Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a yearning for a different time . . . a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress,”¹¹ identifying two types of nostalgia: reflective and restorative. Reflective nostalgia “thrives on . . . the longing itself,” while restorative nostalgia “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,”¹² and tends to hold itself as “truth and tradition” of “universal values,” refusing contradictory evidence of history.¹³

In the case of the superhero genre, it is restorative nostalgia that comes into play. This is because in the superhero genre, past works serve as solid canonical history, and when contemporary comics progress too much, fans yearn for narratives of the “lost home” from a different time. A good example is found during the late eighties and mid-nineties. In the late eighties, Frank Miller and Alan Moore revolutionized the superhero genre through their groundbreaking series, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Watchmen* (1986-1987), which caused a big shift in the narrative style of the genre. They introduced a more mature tone, dealing in a straightforward manner with realistic violence and, in *Watchmen*’s case, sexuality as well. Superhero comics influenced by the two works published onwards since then have been grittier, darker, and more pessimistic. By the mid-nineties, however, nostalgic works appeared that featured stories and characters more similar to those from a few decades ago, pleading to remember the “good ol’ days.” Mark Waid and Alex Ross’ *Kingdom Come* (1996) criticized the violence-crazed superheroes that were everywhere now, and “stage[d] the return of the classic heroes, the return of the powerful origin and inspiration to conform what was done to their name.”¹⁴ Kurt Busiek’s *Marvels* (1994) traced the feats of Marvel superheroes before the surge of Miller and Moore, “plead[ing] . . . that superheroes not be seen as monsters.”¹⁵ Both works “attempt to reclaim heroes and return to the early days of comic books.”¹⁶

In an interview on nostalgia in the superhero genre, one interviewee answered, “Nostalgia helps me overlook or see through many sexist elements of the series. What matters to me now is what the much younger I made of the story and character.”¹⁷ The same

can be applied to racism as well: the sentimental nostalgia allows the genre to ignore racism and Orientalism of past works. A number of non-white characters were created years ago, perhaps when racism, fetishization of cultures, and stereotyping were less questioned than they are now. Despite the fact that many of these characters' central characteristics are defined by exaggerated Otherness of exotic foreign lands and cultures, they still make appearances in recent works or remain popular among readers. Japan and the Japanese in superhero comics, from DC's Katana and Marvel's Sunfire, the Silver Samurai, and Lady Bullseye may at first seem to be "presented as a type of celebration of ethnic diversity and appreciation."¹⁸ However, in reality, they "never [stray] far from the racist . . . origins of timeworn stereotypes."¹⁹ Japan in superhero comics is thus frozen in time, as I will demonstrate in the analysis to follow.

The genre's dependency on nostalgia and the nostalgic nature of superhero comics provide an excuse to continuously reuse "the unexamined repetition of fossilized conventions that encode the colonialist attitudes that helped to create the original character type and continue to define it in relation to imperial practices."²⁰ Furthermore, because these "fossilized conventions" of "colonialist attitudes" are repeated for the audience for the sake of continuity, the Orientalist notions are overlooked and reinforced through repetition. As Galaver comments, in contemporary superhero comics, the "Orientalist pit is getting deeper."²¹ Recycling their stereotypical portrayals for modern use reinforces the beliefs of drastic differences of cultures between white America and the Other. The "dead and resurrected influence of the past"²² continues to fuel contemporary comics.

Case Study I: Wolverine

Assumed Western superiority is especially notable in Akira Yoshida's *Wolverine: Soultaker* (2005). Controversial news broke late 2017 concerning this writer. It was revealed that Marvel's "Japanese" writer, Akira Yoshida was in fact the white American C.B. Cebulski, the now editor-in-chief of the same company. Under the Japanese pseudonym, Cebulski wrote mini-series such as *Elektra: The Hand* (2004) *Wolverine: Soultaker* (2005), and *X-Men: Kitty Pryde - Shadow & Flame* (2006). This revelation shed new light on these series' Western perspectives of Japan, as all of them take place in an incredibly stereotyped Japan that is represented as a place for Western heroes to save the country and experience exotic adventures. This controversy concerning Yoshida, or Cebulski, signifies how little concern there is for Asian representation. Despite his highly offensive actions that both appropriate Japanese culture and took away opportunities for Asian voices in the comics, Cebulski remains the editor-in-chief of Marvel. Other creators have gone on to defend Cebulski, stating that the "man has lived in Japan, speaks Japanese, and . . . very much associates with Japanese culture."²³ Other articles treat Cebulski's misrepresentation and yellow-face along with his violation of Marvel's contract policies that forbid editors from writing comics equally in terms of how and why his lies were problematic.

Yoshida's *Wolverine: Soultaker* begins with Wolverine arriving in Japan after receiving a distress call from an old acquaintance, who claims that Wolverine is the only one who can help her. After an exciting adventure involving ninjas, shrines, and katana swords dripping in blood, Wolverine ends up teaming with a mystic priestess, Mana, to save Japan from an evil ancient spirit. *Wolverine: Soultaker* is not Wolverine's first visit to Japan. His relationship to Japan was in fact first established in Chris Claremont and Frank Miller's *Wolverine* run during the eighties. Claremont and Miller's issues covered the majority of stereotypes of Japan imaginable: Sumo wrestlers are placed as bodyguards. Honour is upheld, however unfair a character's situation may be. One woman, Mariko, will "rather die" than deny her "honor-bound" obligations.²⁴ Lord Shingen, whom Wolverine is forced to fight, calls Wolverine a *gaijin* (Japanese for "foreigner"), underlining the clashing and incompatible differences between the cultures of the two men. Finally, scenes are set in either traditional Japan, with a large Buddha statue or rooms with *tatami* mats, or a modern and urban cityscape with neon lights. All of the above comes merely from the first issue out of four.

Soultaker demonstrates the Westerner Wolverine as the utmost saviour against evil. For instance, though Wolverine wields a centuries-old katana and fights with Mana by his side, in the end, the final battle in *Soultaker* is won by his physical prowess. This illustrates clearly that the priestess' mystical powers passed down generations, as well as the ancient mystical katana that is supposedly the ultimate weapon, are no match for Wolverine's claws, implying that it is up to the Western hero to save the day.

Mysticism frequently appears in association with Japan in *Soultaker*, as well as in Claremont and Miller's mini-series. What must be considered here is how Western culture understands mysticism. Richard King in *Orientalism and Religion* observes that the West recognizes Asian mysticism as "irrational" and an antithesis to their "liberal, egalitarian, secular and modern" culture.²⁵ Mysticism, he explains, is not only "religious" but also "traditional," opposing "secular rationalism."²⁶ King further points out that "the denial of rationality to the Other is a common strategy in subordinating the Other."²⁷ Thus, this practice of the West assuming the East's inability to modernize and secularize, remaining ever primitive, is nothing new but rather an act repeated in history and earlier academic discourses on the Orient. Presenting certain cultures as having strong ties to religious mysticism that influences both their private and public life is a strategy to suggest inferiority and failure to modernize.

This then explains why Wolverine's claws are more advantageous in the battle than Mana's mystic powers or the ancient sword. His claws are entirely removed from religion and mysticism, for not only are their uses extremely physical, but they were also given to him through pure biology and science. As a mutant, he originally had retractable claws as part of his skeleton. Later, he was taken into the Weapon X program, where experiments were conducted in which adamantium, an indestructible alloy, was bonded to his bone cells, resulting in the metallic claws for which he is famous. In addition, the physical strength that comes with his mutant abilities serves well in the superhero genre, since "physical power" is held as a "traditional male possession" or as a part of the masculine ideal.²⁸ Therefore, the

physical masculine ideal combined with Western culture's regard for secularism as superior to Asian mysticism gives Wolverine the power to triumph over both the mystic enemy and ally. He becomes a better saviour than the mystic priestess, also establishing Western ideals as more effective.

Additionally, not only does *Soultaker* play into stereotypical exotic fantasies, it distorts Japanese history as well. The *Shinsengumi* was a special governmental police force active during the 1860s, or Edo-era Japan. The force is now known for the strict codes they lived by and their charismatic members and are frequently seen in Japanese popular culture. Whether they are to be seen in a positive or negative light, as they were authoritative figures of an overthrown government, is another debate for another time. Yet, what is important to note here is that a large portion of their history and significance to Japanese history and culture is lost in *Soultaker*. When the *Shinsengumi* (whose name is misspelled "*Shisengumi*" in the first appearance) suddenly appear as a zombie army of the enemy, the comics explain to their readers that the *Shinsengumi* consisted of "eleven of the most wild and deadly samurai to ever live. They [were] brutal killing machines who swore revenge when they were executed as traitors."²⁹ Not only are the generalization of members' deaths historically inaccurate as not all were executed, these historical figures—who are now one of the most known and popular in Japanese history—are also turned into inhuman and ruthless murderer zombies. Their only purpose, for Wolverine, is to destroy them and demonstrate that Western modernity has been and will always be superior to the archaic and inefficient traditional culture Japan had. According to Western popular culture, including these comics, Japan may still be archaic, inefficient, and traditional, as these works persistently imagine contemporary Japanese culture to have close ties to, for example, the samurai. As Wolverine slays the *Shinsengumi* zombies, he conquers Japanese history from modern times.

Narratives involving Wolverine and Japan have appeared a number of times after *Soultaker*; for Wolverine in Japan is a well-loved plotline, and they continue to this day in later series such as *Wolverine: Back in Japan* (2012) and *Wolverine: Japan's Most Wanted* (2014), in which the very first panel is of a huge screen with an anime-styled girl in a kimono advertising ramen, with neon signs of gibberish letters surrounding it. Issues thirty-one to thirty-six of *Old Man Logan* (2016-2018) take place in Japan as well. With the Hand clan, a supervillainous organization founded in sixteenth-century Japan involved in the arc, it seems (evil) ninjas, mysticism, and samurais were unavoidable. Japan is therefore deeply rooted and tied to Wolverine's character. However, these ties are not to the actual Japan, but to a stereotypically imagined Japan.

Case Study II: Katana

Another character that deserves attention is DC Comics' Katana. Created in 1983, Katana is, for a lack of a better description, a samurai superhero from Japan. She has a tragic backstory in which her husband, Maseo, was killed by a mystical sword that trapped his soul inside it. The Yakuza was involved in Maseo's death, and Katana seeks revenge. Jeff Yang comments

that “if [one is] a superhero of a particular race or color [their] ethnicity always shapes [their] power somehow,”³⁰ and Katana is no exception. While she does not have a particular superpower, her choice of weapon, her high abilities in martial arts, and her improbable status as a samurai all signify Japan. Her superhero outfit, too, even after a redesign in 2011, exhibits her ethnicity. The strong emphasis on Japan in her character thus continues to center the construction of her narratives.

One might argue that Katana is a progressive character. After all, she is a foreign woman of colour who is a fierce superhero rather than a passive Madam Butterfly, a type in which many Japanese female characters in various media fall. However, Katana still remains immensely stereotyped. She is intensely devout and submissive to Maseo, despite the fact that he exists only as a spirit in her sword. Her main purpose of fighting is not to protect citizens, but to avenge Maseo’s death. She fights evil and protects people on her way to revenge and does have a strong sense of justice, but that seems to be for approval from her husband.³¹ When Maseo’s soul seemingly disappears after telling her that he is disappointed in her actions, she is devastated and falls unconscious.³² Maseo is also shown to make decisions for Katana’s actions as a superhero. In the *Birds of Prey* (2011), she arrives in Gotham only because “[her] husband suggested it” and “urged [her] to give serious consideration to” the offer given to her to join the superhero team Birds of Prey.³³ Therefore, though Katana is a fierce warrior, she is inherently written as an Oriental submissive wife who serves her husband even after his death. Her devotion to Maseo has always been there since early depictions, but interestingly, it seems more exaggerated in recent appearances, perhaps because as one of the central characters, more attention is given to her rather than the side character she was during the eighties and nineties.

Exaggeration of her Japan-ness can be found, for example, in the *Katana* (2013) solo series, which ran for a short period of merely ten issues. The series takes place mainly in either Japan or Japantown and never allows Katana outside this pseudo-Japanese circle. Though it is said that the Japantown is in San Francisco, the town depicted in the comics hardly resembles the actual one. Katana herself describes Japantown as a place “where time telescopes. Antiquity and Modernity stride side by side,”³⁴ finding traditional Japanese customs among contemporary society. Rather than underlining its “Antiquity,” it is more accurate to acknowledge that Japantown is “held back in time.” With the ever-present Yakuza and brothels, it is corrupt as well. The livelier areas of the city resemble a tourist attraction, with Japanese architecture, people wearing strangely designed kimonos, and ninja shows that recreate what may be a traditional Japan fantasized by Western audiences that emphasize exotic qualities of Japanese culture.

Similarly, a *Suicide Squad* (2016-) issue that features a short comic on Katana’s backstory shows her in a time that readers may mistake to have been not some years in the past but a century ago, if not for the men wearing modern Western clothes in the background. Taking place in a traditional wooden house in a “countryside [setting]... bereft of technology,” which is a common image of Japan that counters the cyberpunk “technologically advanced”

urban areas,³⁵ Katana is removed entirely from Western society. This also reinforces the image of Japan as an alien culture with landscapes that strikingly differ from America.

In *Birds of Prey*, Katana is recruited by Black Canary to join her and Starling. They are joined by Poison Ivy, who is more of a villain than a hero. In *Birds of Prey*, Katana is considered by her teammates as “mentally unbalanced”³⁶ and “delusional.”³⁷ Neither Black Canary nor Starling believes that her sword contains Maseo’s spirit. Apparently, a spirit-containing sword is more absurd than Black Canary, who has the ability to let out an ultrasonic scream, or Poison Ivy, who can control plants. To them, Katana is a strange foreign woman who has a habit of regularly conversing with her sword. Though Poison Ivy is the villainous member in the team with unclear motives as to why she joined, it is Katana, the sole non-American, who is treated as the unstable and perhaps even crazy member.³⁸ Furthermore, as the non-American in the series, her foreign nature is highlighted repeatedly in her appearances. For example, in addition to her occasionally throwing in Japanese words here and there, in one scene, Katana consoles her husband, who became agitated seeing Starling’s tattoos because tattoos in Japan are considered common signifiers of the Yakuza, and he suspected her of being a member. Katana soothingly tells him that because “she’s an American[,] . . . her tattoos mean nothing.”³⁹ Not only does this suggest her different cultural background by specifically pointing out Starling’s Americanness, but a distance is also set between her and America. Though eventually Black Canary and Starling come to trust her, Katana is never quite in sync with her American teammates. In issue fifteen, after a mission that takes place in Japan, she stays behind.

By keeping Katana within a Japanese environment, and never allowing her to blend into American culture, it is as if she is provided a personal bubble that shuts out Western or American influences from her adventures. This ensures adherence to “the western Orientalist discourse on Japan” that specifically “support[s] the construction and maintenance of ‘Japaneseness.’”⁴⁰ Japan is emphasized in the settings, along with her allies and enemies, giving the series a distinct or exotic tone in comparison to the majority of other comics by DC that are set in an obviously American environment.

Conclusion

Appearances of non-white characters are increasing and representations are improving in the superhero genre. This, for sure, is undeniable. However, some portrayals remain problematically stereotypical because the superhero genre is built on continuity. Nostalgia, which makes complete innovations of characters and eliminations of outdated features difficult, plays a significant role in maintaining this continuity. Additionally, because it requires constant references to past works, racist storylines are replayed in contemporary times. Since the 1980s, Japan has held a crucial place for Wolverine, whose exotic adventures in the country are popular enough to be written or referred to every so often. The essence, though, has not changed since then. Wolverine continues to fight stereotypical Japanese enemies such as ninjas, samurais, and evil mystic spirits or creatures. Katana is a character

whose history, personality, and appearance signify almost loudly a Japan that differentiates her from other American superheroes. Through repetition, Otherness continues to be reinforced, ever trapping the Asian Other, or in my paper's case, the Japanese Other, in the confinements of Orientalism.

Notes

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