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Neither/Nor: Anti-Heroes and the boundaries of Heroism¹

In this paper I wish to move further away from the papers we have heard so far on the likes of the Humane Society, Marilyn Monroe and Boadicea and further into engagements with imagined heroism. As we have seen the topic of heroism can be taken in a number of interesting directions, but for me the most interesting engagements with heroic action lie within popular culture, specifically the realm of Comic-books and Graphic novels. These are imagined worlds and universes, populated with heroes and villains bestowed with superhuman abilities and capable of great heroic deeds and epic feats of villainy. Although arguably and wrongly dismissed as the play things of children, comics haven't escaped academic inquiry in numerous disciplines from Jason Dittmer's (2005, 2007a, 2007b) geographic critique of Captain America to more traditional encounters within cultural studies by Fingeroth (2004), Alford (2006), Bongco (2000), Bukatman (2003) and others. In the following I will be using an analysis of DC Character Black Adam within one storyline, "52", and audience engagements within internet fora, to argue that our understandings of Anti-heroics and heroism are understood in part by cultural discourses such as Orientalism, the Self/Other and engagements with the 'real'. This is supplemented by audience readings of Adam and the 52 storylines that further expand and explore this theory.

Analysis of the comics was undertaken using discourse analysis of images, storylines and characterisations (Aitken & Craine 2005; Gill 1996; Johnston et al 2000; Potter 1996; Rose 2007) Discourse Analysis is a reflexive methodology however and represents just one viewpoint on how these comics can be engaged with as a source for the study of Heroism and its construction. Comics are read by audiences of over 14 million in the USA alone (Dittmer 2005) and each individual reader will decode the symbols and signs used to construct the comic in a different way to each other in order to consume the Text (Hall 1980 p134; Johns 1998; Moores 2004; Morley 1980; Kneale and Dwyer 2004; Hills 2002, Jenkins 1992; Ogborn 2002; Potter 1996; Thompson 1995; Barthes 1987, 2000; de Certeau 1984; Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Bongco 2000; Jung 2003; Jung & Kerényi 2002; Wolf-Meyer 2003). Thus

¹ This paper has been reworked somewhat due to copyright issues surrounding the use of images which formed the basis of much of the original talk. Quotations are taken directly from internet fora and contain spellings, punctuation and grammar as originally expressed by the user.

to expand upon the singular academic reading an engagement with the Audience of the comic was undertaken utilising internet fora² discussions surrounding Black Adam.

Black Adam was created by C. C. Beck and Bill Parker in 1945 for '*The Marvel Family # 1*'³ as a villain for the comics hero, Captain Marvel, to defeat (Daniels 2003; Jimenez et al 2004). In 1958 Fawcett ceased publication of Captain Marvel due to a court order from DC Comics with the Captain Marvel franchise only resurfacing in 1973 after the purchase of all character rights from Fawcett Publications by DC Comics⁴ (Daniels 2003). Adam was revived by DC in 1987⁵, 1994⁶ and finally in 1999 as part of the re-launch and reinvention of the *Justice Society of America (JSA)* series⁷. Since his re-emergence in 1999 Black Adam had appeared in 127 comics until 2008 and has become one of the most popular and talked about characters produced by DC. The 1999 re-emergence went hand in hand with a new origin story for Adam. This new origin has Adam come from Kahndaq, an imagined nation of SW-Asia 'located' on the Sinai peninsula, a landlocked⁸ "...bridge between Africa and the Middle East..."⁹ bordered by Egypt, Israel and another imagined nation, the terrorist haven of Bialya (Shaheen 1994). This paper will look at some of Adam's use within the weekly comic '52'¹⁰ by DC-Comics which featured Adam as a main character who ultimately defeats a series of demi-gods hell bent on bringing forth the apocalypse.

I would like first to try and look at one comic specific definition of heroism and heroes by Umberto Eco (1979) wherein Villains act against systems of power resisting the dominant discourses of the 'Universes' they inhabit. In short, villains act as agents of change. By contrast Heroes exist to maintain the status quo, acting to normalize society in the event of unease and changes caused by their nemeses (Eco 1979; Gray 2008). This system however has limitations in that Eco cannot account for characters such as Punisher, Spawn, Judge Dredd and importantly Black Adam. They are portrayed with heroic intent but do not comply to classical heroic actions in the strictest sense. These instead require a category away from Eco's binary, either hero or villain, and instead must work around a third space that is neither hero nor villain having aspects of both; these are the anti heroes (Spivey & Knowlton 2008,

² Dc-Comics Official Forum, Superherohype.com Forum and Z-Cult FM Forum.

³ *The Marvel Family #1*, December 1945.

⁴ *Shazam #1* February 1973

⁵ *Shazam! The New Beginning #1-4*, Apr-Jul 1987, Thomas and Mandrake.

⁶ *The Power of Shazam*, 1994, by Jerry Ordway. DC Comics Publications.

⁷ *Justice Society of America Volume 2: 1999-2006*.

⁸ See projected map in *JSA #57*, Late Mar 2004, Johns, Kramer, Champagne, p4

⁹ *52 #Week 3*, May 24th 2006, p9

¹⁰ '52' was a weekly comic running from May 2006 till May 2007 by DC-Comics.

Alsford 2006). Anti-heroes provide a space in which to explore the boundaries of heroism in a number of ways. For this paper I am arguing the influence of discourses of orientalism and understandings of the cultural Other meaning our understanding of heroism is not just dictated to by pure action, cause and effect, the ends justifying the means, but instead is partly influenced by our greater 'understandings' and interactions with the world.

The Orientalist binary of Occident (Self/West) and Orient (Other/East) is built upon unquestioned and accepted Knowledges and stereotypes through which populations construct and interpret the world around them (Gregory 1995, 2004; Said 1978; Shaheen 1994, 2001, 2003; Taylor 2007). In many ways this Orientalist discourse can be seen as a kind of story, one which is so overused and performed that everyone already knows (consciously or unconsciously) the story. This system of knowledge relies heavily upon preconceived textual notions of reality passed down through stories, images and 'Sciences' of the East to create a singular fantastical ideal of what that region of the world, and its people, are like (Said 1978, 1994, 1997). In essence our knowledge of reality is greatly shaped by these imagined geographies (Gregory 1995; Said 1994) because we draw upon them rather than personal experience as we may never visit these parts of the world, and so rely on textual knowledge's to inform us about them. However these have been heavily criticised by numerous scholars who seek to expose the underlying racism and ignorance associated with Orientalist discourses (Said 1978, 1994, 1997; Shaheen 1994, 2003).

Orientalist depictions of regions such as Southwest Asia rely heavily upon using 'Props of Authenticity' (Taylor 2007) to show a region in its 'reality', many of which have colonial roots as critiqued by Edward Said (1978). These props form part of literatures 'Reality Effect', wherein fiction is grounded with perceived 'real' elements making levels of fantasy acceptable to readers (Barthes 1986). '52' is a comic rich with these images wherein Adams world is filled with images from the dominant orientalist cultural imaginary of minarets, junk markets, black burqa'ed women and belly dancers¹¹ (Shaheen 1994, 2003; Taylor 2007). Adam himself is also presented in an orientalist fashion with semitic features forming an important part of his depiction (Shaheen 2003). Elements such as Race, and in particular skin colour, formed an important part of how comic audiences understood Adam and his actions.

¹¹ Source: 52 #Week 3, May 24th 2006, P8
Source: 52 #Week 1, May 10th 2006, p14
Source: 52 #Week 14, Aug 9th 2006, p.2-3

A – “I am not saying Black Adam was not "black" but he is from an arab country (see 52 or JSA) and more brown than black”

B – “True. Also arabs were given a vulgar term thats an offshoot from american one, they are referred as "sand n-word" for a reason, they have black parentage. I am not condoning the vulgarity it but again accordigng to Jim Crow and the American standard of race relations "one-drop rule", Black (Teth) Adam is "black". “

Quote 1: “Thread: Non Comic Book reader criticizes the name Black Adam saying it's racist”¹²

As we can see from Quote 1, elements of the audience were quick to designate Adam as Arabic in sometimes surprisingly racist ways. It was not just however skin colour that designated Adam as Arab. Physiological features such as Adams ears took up a lot of peoples time in helping them to understanding who Adam was. Responses to these ideas ranged from humorous reflections on the nature of using demonic features in artwork thus showing the audience “..he's EEEVIL!..¹³” to extratextual references comparing him with ‘Vulcans’ in *Star Trek*. Some however understood the use of pointed ears through discourses of race. For this group Adam’s ears could be “..because some Arabs do have rather pointy ears, to be fair..”¹⁴ with others suggesting we should accept him as “..pointy eared Arab..”¹⁵. We see here that audiences are thus debating the meanings of what Adam as ‘arabic’ means. Views on this as we have seen are extreme and analysis of the comics found discussion around this theme largely used this character trait in a negative fashion. His SW-Asian roots were used to dismiss heroic actions and overplay his more extreme activities. Being Arabic is today a value laden idea associated less with heroic action than with cowardice and suspicion, thus the reader is already directed to understand Adam not as hero but at most Anti-Hero (Shaheen 2003). The implications of these ideas were not lost on some of the

¹² DC-Comics Forum - July –August 2008 (last checked 30/08/2008)

¹³ Thread: Why does Black Adam have Pointy EARS? March 2008, DC Comics Forum (last checked 30/08/2008)

¹⁴ Thread: Why does Black Adam have Pointy EARS? March 2008, DC Comics Forum (last checked 30/08/2008)

¹⁵ Thread: Why Does Black Adam Have Pointy Ears?? 08-24-2006 , Superherohype Forum (last checked 30/08/2008)

readers of the comics and they took the time to express their dissatisfaction with their problems with their understandings of Adams racial profile (see quote 2).

“..What I find troublesome is the frequency and ease with which he kills innocent people...[..He seems a total sterotype of a radical middle eastern terrorist...[.. I'm not being politcially correct-but by making Black Adam into a character who was a Middle Eastern dictator, who would kill without thought or mercy, and detested personal rights and freedoms -doesn't it seem like he's been turned from a complex character into a one dimensional, negative middle eastern terrorist sterotype?....”

Quote 2: “Thread: Why did DC have to turn Black Adam into negative Middle Eastern sterotype?”¹⁶

What is interesting about this interjection by this forum is user is an acceptance that the comics are showing Adam as ‘Arabic’ in the wider understanding of the audience. So even if people have problems with the interpretation, the interpretation is still here and is a dominant and suggests a preferred reading of the character.

Beyond the orientalism of the artwork of the comic the audiences are also engaging with other orientalist traits of the character. Said argues that Orientalism is like a story that we, as Occident, have seen play out a thousand times and already know the ending to (Said 1978). Our engagements with classical paintings, magical stories such as Aladdin and engagements of SW Asia within cinema have created a set number of ways in which stories involving the other can play out and be understood (Shaheen 2003, Taylor 2007). Thus ‘Arabic’ storylines are temporally rigid, forever depicted as part of the past with progression and modernity ignored and displaced for the sake of the representation. The Other is thus unable to fully ever become like ‘us’ and is instead eternally stuck in the past. Additionally stories tend to focus upon the idea that if the Other attempts to become like us, all attempts are doomed to failure. Thus the Arabic prince always loses the girl to the heroic Westerner and Sheiks inevitably betray the heroes of Hollywood for camels (Shaheen 2003, Jhally 2006, Taylor 2007). This type of orientalism was encountered by readers of 52 (see quote 3 & 4 below).

¹⁶ DC-Comics Forum Mar 13, 2008 (last checked 30/08/2008)

“He is most at home as Black Adam, and not having to return to his other identity makes him feel safe. This will be his downfall..”

Quote 3: “Thread: Topic: 52 - Week 10 ***Spoilers***”¹⁷

“My thoughts. Intergang's going to kill Isis. Black Adam's family will be destroyed by the end of 52. Be it WWIII, or the Suicide Squad. Causing him to place Khandaq under serious lockdown in a fit of overprotective grief...”

“ I can't take this pu\$\$y-whipped Black Adam anymore. Can't wait for Isis to die horribly so that he comes back to being his usual self...”

Quote 4: “Thread: 52 - Week 26”¹⁸

Audiences thus expected Adam to fail from the very start of the story (see quotes 3& 4 above). His attempts at adopting western heroic qualities were dismissed as audiences played out the stories to their logical conclusions built upon previous engagements with orientalist discourses (Said 1978). These ideas were also alerted to and critiqued by other audience members who perhaps had a desire to see Adam as hero but understood that the very nature of being Adam meant he could never succeed (see quote 5 below)

“I wasn't too pleased when I saw ..[.].. in a recent interview that Adam COULDN'T have succeeded because ..[.].. a Black Adam story ends in tragedy ...[.]... But at the same time I don't think he sees him as a VILLAIN. I think he sees him as a character, which is more than anyone had ever seen him as before.”

Quote 5: “Topic: Books starring 52 characters that you want to see”¹⁹

The storyline of “52” relies quite heavily on intersections with ‘real world geopolitics’ in order for us, the reader, to interpret and understand its storylines. These ideas were also

¹⁷ July 2006 Z-Cult FM Forum

¹⁸ Nov 2006 Z-Cult FM Forum

¹⁹ Z-CultFM Forum (May 2007) (last checked 30/08/2008)

thought about by the wider audiences. For the audience Political reasoning was an important element of understanding Adams actions as being good or evil, mirroring academic readings. '52' featured heavy references to practical international relations theory with the establishment of embassies and creation and enforcement of international treaties. These further challenged readers to consider the heroic nature of Adam. In most cases treaties are considered peaceful acts especially ones enabling perpetual peace and co-operation between nations. How then as an audience do we consider one between the imagined Kahndaq and Syria, North Korea, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, China, Russia and Iran²⁰?

"In case anyone wasn't sure if Black Adam was good or evil, look at the countries he is allying himself with..[.. The Chinese heroes looked good, though by their associations I expect they'll only be used as villains in the DCU."

Quote 6: "Thread: 52 (probably spoilers at some point)"²¹

As we can see from quote 6, which talks about this treaty, an association with the 'Axis of Evil'²² could mean only one thing; Adam was not heroic in his quest for world peace. Further these nations condemned newly imagined Chinese characters to being understood as villainous. Heroes simply couldn't be seen as having to associate with the 'villains' of the real world political sphere.

".. Black Adam is not an American superhero. It's far, far easier for Americans (and the world) to see him as the "enemy," the "terrorist" from far away countries that we fight against and not as one of our own. It's doubtful that the average citizen saw foreign leader Black Adam going on a rampage and equated that with Superman or Flash..."

Quote 7: "Thread: Advanced World War 3 #1-4 spoilers within"²³

²⁰ 52 #Week 6, June 14 2006, p14, 16.

²¹ Z-Cult FM Forum (May-July 2006) (last checked 30/08/2008)

²² <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> (last checked 30/08/2008)

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1796034.stm> (last checked 30/08/2008)

²³ Superherohype Forum (04-19-2007) (last checked 30/08/2008)

A number of comic fans clearly understood Adam as un-American, thus not being American was easy to associate with terrorist and villain (see quote 7 above). Here lay the clear division between heroism and villainy, these actions carried out by an American could be viewed as possibly courageous or explainable beyond simple “black and white” takes on the nature of good and evil. But because Adam is not American his actions can only have ever been hostile, and as such, Black Adam can be legitimately seen as an enemy of the USA. Thus even without direct conflict, the poster is clear that only “...seeing that there are ‘enemies’ like that..” rather than encountering or confrontation, that this would likely motivate “DCU Americans to support their heroes more..”²⁴.

The current political climate was also present with engagements on discourses of Terrorism. Within ‘52’ Adams heroic actions of saving the world are counteracted with plot twists leading him in a fit of rage, due to the death of his wife²⁵ at the hands of villainous demi-gods²⁶, to slaughter millions of men, women and children in his quest for vengeance. Destroyed cities filled with pools of blood²⁷ and piles of rotting bodies are presented to readers comparable to news media images of suicide bomb sites in Iraq and Afghanistan²⁸. When he is confronted by the hero, Martian Manhunter (disguised as a girl), we are forced to consider dichotomy of terrorism; innocent millions are targets for a cause against a specific few²⁹. Other images draw parallels to the collapse of the WTC on 9/11/2001³⁰ with innocent civilians running out of frame towards the reader away from a silhouetted, un moving Black Adam and a dark, roaring smoke cloud obliterating the view of the sky. The association of Adam as terrorist is most apparent in Tomasi’s “*Dark Age*” run³¹ following on from the main ‘52’ story. Here we see images of secret rooms wherein Adam is tied to a chair in front of a cloth-covered wall mirroring images used by real terrorist leaders such as Osama Bin Laden or within martyr and hostage videos³². Adam is also surrounded by loyal fanatical followers all too willing to martyr themselves at his command for Adam’s cause³³. Here Adam is similar in many ways to popular perceptions of terrorist leaders such as Osama Bin Laden,

²⁴ Superherohype Forum (04-19-2007) (last checked 30/08/2008)

²⁵ Source: 52# Week 44, Mar 7th 2007, p17

²⁶ 52 #Week 45, Mar 14th 2007, p13-14 and *World War III: A Call to Arms* #1, Jun 2007, p1-3

²⁷ Source: *World War III: A Call to Arms* #1, Jun 2007, p1

²⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/7460136.stm> (last checked 24/08/2008)

²⁹ Source: *World War III: A Call to Arms* #1, Jun 2007, p1

³⁰ Source: 52 #Week 45, Mar 14th 2007, p13; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1538199.stm> (last checked 26/08/2008)

³¹ *Black Adam: The Dark Age* #1-6, Oct 2007 – Mar 2008, Tomasi, Mahnke, Alamy..

³² Source: *Black Adam: The Dark Age* #1, Oct 2007, Tomasi, Mahnke, Alamy, p4.

³³ Source: *Black Adam: The Dark Age* #1, Oct 2007, Tomasi, Mahnke, Alamy, p15

asking for the honour of ultimate sacrifice from his followers to ensure his and his cause's survival. That is not to say that Adam is not willing to 'get his hands dirty' and engage personally in terrorist activities, such as plane hijacking, in order to complete his objectives³⁴. We are given here a number of visual signs and cues that lead us through current discourses of knowledge to disavow the outcomes of Adams actions, the defeat of numerous villains and ultimately the protection of the planet, and be drawn into uncomfortable parallels between the realms of fiction and the 'real' of the everyday. The stories 'hero' is culturally presented as terrorist thus making any heroic claims about him all the more difficult as readers to accept. All the more worrying is the fact that the 'authentic props' used for this SW-Asian character are those associated with SW-Asian terrorism, thus Adam represents an ultimate other, a super-powered terrorist fighting for distinctly un-western ideals.

The terrorist links also draw out another element of our understanding of heroism, uses of violence. Upon leaving the JSA in 2002 Black Adam suddenly becomes one of the most violent characters in DC Comics³⁵. Our first introduction to Adam within 52 has him tearing the arms off of terrorist at a political rally in Kahndaq. Adam acts to protect his people but does so in the most extreme manners possible. It's not just his fighting that is violent but also his judicial system after he takes control of Kahndaq; where the death penalty is personally carried out by him each Wednesday³⁶. All the more interesting, this violence is spatially specific on the whole however with violent acts primarily carried out outside of the USA except for one occasion at the Kahndaq Embassy in New York³⁷. Before this Adam's violence is restricted to outside the continental USA, instead predominantly manifesting itself in Southwest Asia, Europe and Australasia. However Adam is not on the whole engaged with as irrational Other for the majority of the '52' comics lifespan. Instead violent acts are carefully considered and violence only directed at those against Adam's sense of justice, thus murderers, thieves and despots are targets rather than ordinary citizens. This can arguably be seen as part of the reproduction of the Orient as being part of the past wherein Adams sense of justice, violence against and correction of the body, represents a more brutal part of the judicial systems of the west (Foucault 1977). This is at odds again with more traditional ideas of justice within superhero books wherein the heroes are 'culturally enlightened' never

³⁴ Source: *Black Adam: The Dark Age* #2, Nov 2007, Tomasi, Mahnke, Alamy, P15

³⁵ *JSA* #51 Oct 2003 Goyer, Johns, Kirk, Champagne, pp20-21 & *JSA* #53, Dec 2003, Johns, Cramer, Champagne. Source: *Infinite Crisis* #6, May 2006, Johns, Jimenez, Ordway, Perez, Lanning & Rapmund, p19

³⁶ *52* #Week 14, Aug 9th 2006, p1 & p19.

³⁷ Source: *52* #Week 3, May 2th 2006, p20

killing their adversaries and relying on the reformist institutions of their host cities to incarcerate and 'treat' rather than the disposal techniques associated with 'Other' societies.

My research suggests that there are indeed alternate cultural factors in our constructions and understandings of heroism. In particular my work shows the role of Orientalism, with reference to physiological features, stereotypical character traits within storylines make Adam distinctly Other influencing the readings (Academic & Audience) available of the character in determining his heroic nature. These ideas drew heavily upon 'real world' engagements with geopolitical discussions and discourses/popular perceptions of Terrorism being used extratextually by audiences to engage and critique the potential for Adam to be considered a hero, and ultimately used to legitimate his position as Anti-hero. I have tried to show that when we think of heroism and heroics that we need to start critically engaging with these ideas and begin to question why some characters, and more importantly real people, are considered heroes, whilst others are dismissed. It is naïve to believe that actions dictate status, audience were shown to condemn Adam at the start of the 52 storyline, predicting Adam would fail in his heroic transformation and he would abandon his newly westernized approach. The role of cultural discourse is just as relevant as what it was that Adam achieved during the course of the storylines. I would like to suggest that perhaps these ideas can be expanded upon beyond the realm of popular culture and into the wider realms of Heroism in academia. A more critical approach to our heroes would allow for a more in-depth and sophisticated understanding of our current, and future, interpretations and constructions of heroism.

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