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It’s A Bird, A Plane, But It Is Not Superman

Introduction

During the earliest stages of comics production and distribution (referred to as the Golden Age of Comics), and while the industry was rapidly increasing in popularity and gaining its stride, hero-like characters were portrayed as primarily wealthy or educated, white men. Some characters, particularly those that depicted minorities, were at its crudest. The narratives were built on degrading and derogatory descriptions of certain ethnic groups. These were bathed in a negative light when writers and artists illustrated them onto their pages. As a result of the cultural, historical, or habitual pretenses that came from these stereotypes, images were often positioned to inform the recipient of both differences and similarities between groups. How characters are depicted correlates into likelihood of purchase and these are based on the connotative interpretation and denotative elements presented on the covers. Two depictions of the ethnic minorities from two 2000 mid-century first edition comic book covers, All-Negro Comics and Jon Juan.

All-Negro Comics and Jon Juan

The first cover is a single-issue, small-press American comic book created by John Terrell and George J. Evans Jr. titled All-Negro Comics (published in 1947). This comic is credited with being the first to be written and drawn solely by African-Americans and designed for members of their community. (Other than this, there is very little known about the distribution of press run.) Its sales did well enough to warrant the creation of a second issue even though it was more expensive than other comics at that time. Unfortunately, the second issue was never published. The failure to publish was due to vendors refusing to sell him newsprint to produce the next installment. There was speculation that the prominent publishers put pressure on wholesalers to block any intrusions into their established industry territories.

The second image is the first issue of Jon Juan: The One and Only Superlover. Created by Jerry Siegel (the originator of Superman), Jon Juan was released into the industry in 1950 by Toby Press. The comic was penciled and inked by Al Reid. Classified in the superhero/romance genre, the premise of Jon Juan focused on a pleasure-loving womanizer who spent his life wandering the world, leaving a trail of broken hearts and bruised male egos everywhere he went. As noted in the previous example, information about to its reception after publication is not known, indicating it to be a one-shot publication or failure after one issue for unidentifiable reasons.

Examination and Analysis

When examining the covers, the initial impression is relatively simple. The cover of All-Negro Comics is a collective series of images with movement, depicting the antics of a mischievous boy with a bow and arrow. This troublemaker seemingly interrupts the peace of the members of the African American community (which include a farmer, tribal warrior, and a man relaxing under a tree), causing one of them to chase him down to stop him from shooting more arrows at people. The other cover depicts a large Jon Juan, lording over a group of women from different backgrounds and ethnicities. There are three insets to the left of him depicting several of his antics. However, there are many other things one can take note of as one deciphers these images.

One of the many things that are noticeable on *All Negro Comics* cover is the use of colors. The two prominent examples are the color yellow on a black background. The color yellow used as a border to the community scene forces the reader's eyes to the center of the page. The lone red star drawn in the black background separated from the image and text symbolizes two things. The first is this comic's status as the first attempt to be the first comic book published, penciled and inked by African Americans. The second comes from the presence of the red star just left of the center top of the cover. It was a signifier since it was an essential element of the publisher's logo. According to historian Damon Fordham, the characters are representatively drawn. He argues that part of the reason why the comic was made was because negroes were not depicted accurately by other publishers. This cover shows a variety of dark-skinned individuals with different physical traits and attires. If the eyes flow in a counter-clockwise manner, the images of black persons become more modernized as the eyes move from one person to the next. These styles are adjacent to their historical placement, which may be playing on the idea of the poor troublemaking black child to the comically uneducated black man whose nature is either lazy, ignorant, or one that is of the wild. Lastly, other than the mermaid, there are no women shown on the cover. The lack of females may be due to the cultural belief that, at the time of publication, men fulfilled the role of disciplinarian when it came to their children. It was a man’s job to teach the children right from wrong, and it was a woman’s place not to interfere. This is very different in present times since many black households lack a male authority figure. The closest thing to a female figure is the small mermaid. She is covering her ears, blocking out the chaos around her while a male angel (of the same size) protects her. These two images reasonably reinforce the spirituality ingrained into their culture, with many myths, tales, and spiritual beings. This image is, in many ways, consistent with the socio-cultural beliefs of this racial group, all while protecting its integrity. This cannot be said for Jon Juan whose cover is quite different and tells a different story.

In this cover, the protagonist Jon Juan takes up more than half of the page. The amount of space he takes up signifies his importance as the central point of the book. His cover portrayal defines his personality and what he supposed to represent. The character is a spin on Don Juan, the main character in the Spanish play El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra (The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest) Tirso de Molina (1630). Instead of being Hispanic, the character appears to be an amalgam of cultures and ethnicities. His first name, Jon intimates an American connection by bastardizing the name of Don while his last name suggests that he is probably of Hispanic descendent. Even his face could be from a variety of cultures and ethnicities. Oddly, his entire garb appears to be of Arabic origin (including headpiece and weapons).

Physically, Jon is romanticized to adhere to the stereotypical beliefs of the ideal man, including having broad shoulders, muscular build, and good looks. This romanticization is seen from how Jon's position on the cover in addition to his size. He is placed on the right side of the cover, obstructing the bright yellow background. With the colors used in his attire, he stands out even more for the viewer, forcing their sight to the right side of the cover. Additionally, the stance of the character is one of power, hovering smaller women who stare up at him in awe and wanting. What matters about this is where the women are looking. Their eyes, regardless of position on the page, are directed towards his crotch. Juan also holds a long curved white sword (a phallic object) in both hands in front of his groin. This symbolizes women's passion for him, which supports his Don Juan like disposition. Lastly, the text boxes on the left of Juan, state: “He Fights," “He Loves," “He Dares." These define his relationship to the male characters of the story. There seems to be no camaraderie, only scenes depicting conflict (or the causes of it), which plays along with the notion that men physically settle disputes regardless of who is at fault. In the case of this cover, the men are most likely defending themselves and their women from Jon Juan.

A Question of Authenticity

In the case of these two comic covers, there is a question of authenticity. Whereas the All-Negro Comics cover appropriately represents, at least to a reasonable degree, the cultural aspects of black Americans of the time, Jon Juan does not represent a member of any ethnic group accurately. A note regarding the overall presentation of the covers needs to be mentioned. It can be envisioned that African Americans, past and present, may be inclined to purchase the All Negro Comics comic book because of its authenticity, the likelihood of identification with some of the characters, if not out of sheer curiosity. The same cannot be said that Hispanics or Arabs will desire the Jon Juan comic. Individuals in the Arab world would not appreciate the images of scantily clad women lusting for a man publically. Hispanics are not likely to appreciate the clothing or the play on the character's name.

References

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