

Running Head: STEREOTYPING HEROES

Stereotyping *Heroes*: Analysis of Racial Stereotypes
in the Television Show *Heroes*, with Emphasis
on Stereotypes of African-American Cast Members

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In recent years, a new genre has been propelled to the forefront of primetime television. Fueled by the outstanding success of *Lost* and *24*, NBC introduced a new serialized drama, *Heroes*, into its lineup for the 2006-2007 season. *Heroes*, featuring a diverse ensemble cast, tells the story of seemingly random people from across the United States and the world who discover that they have superhuman powers; flight, regeneration, telepathy, superhuman strength, precognition, and mind manipulation, to name a few. Viewers follow these people as they discover and learn to use their powers, and watch as the heroes use their powers to help save—willingly or unwillingly—or destroy humanity.

An Introduction to Heroes

Heroes tells the story of a group of people who develop superhuman abilities, using a comic book-style narrative. Each season has the heroes working together to solve a problem—usually an attempt to save the world. Each week provides excitement and intrigue, leaving viewers eagerly anticipating each subsequent episode. Answers to questions are given, but more questions arise, and more conflicts are presented.

In the first season, viewers watch as numerous characters discover and learn how to use their abilities. The heroes meet and interact, and ultimately converge on New York City, at the exciting season finale.

In the shortened second season, viewers are introduced to a new group of heroes, set out to prevent a group of villains from destroying humanity.

Throughout the beginning of the third season, entitled *Villains*, even more new characters are introduced as the heroes from previous seasons have to work together to protect themselves and humanity from the villains.

The show has progressed to show an earlier group of heroes and villains who have been working together to manipulate the world—with both good and bad intentions. These characters work together in an organization simply known as The Company, who has a bad reputation among the newly created heroes.

Heroes has become immensely popular, and NBC and the creators of the show have increased interest by having numerous websites that allow dedicated fans to learn more about the show, further increasing financial success for NBC.

Though the show consists of a diverse ensemble cast, many of the minority characters are portrayed in stereotypical roles. Two Asians, Hiro and Ando, are portrayed as nerdy and socially awkward. A Hispanic artist, Isaac, is a troubled drug-user. Two deeply religious Catholic South American siblings are forced to illegally cross the US border. In addition, many African-American characters are portrayed in stereotypical ways, which is the focus of my study. I will look at the stereotypical portrayals of these African-Americans and how they related to preconceived stereotypes in our society.

Racial Stereotypes on Television and Their Effects

Racism towards African-Americans in the media has changed over the past several decades, but research has found that African-Americans are still being misrepresented on television (Rada 2000). The media has shifted from previous images of overt racism to more subtle symbolic racism, specifically racial stereotypes (Rada 2000). When negative characterizations of racial differences are perceived as real, prejudice occurs (Mastro 2000). Many white Americans report that their primary source of information of African-Americans is through television (Ford 1997), so television portrayals of African-Americans have a very strong influence on the

perceptions of the general population towards African-Americans. White audiences see stereotypical portrayals of African-Americans on television, perceive them to be valid portrayals of African-Americans, and perpetuate the racial segregation between the two groups. Mass media shapes the knowledge and beliefs of the white majority about the African-American minority and, in turn, influences minority responses to the majority (Mastro 2000). Among these stereotypes are perceptions of African-Americans as violent and aggressive (specifically males), African-Americans as dishonest, unethical, and criminal, African-Americans having non-traditional, difficult family situations, and African-Americans as being naïve, unintelligent, and easily misled. There are also images of African-Americans as a slave figure, blindly following his master, and images of the African native, seen as “primitively noble, and [possessing a] simple dignity.” (Hall 1995).

African-Americans as Violent

The show’s foremost example of the stereotype of African-Americans as violent is DL Hawkins, one of the secondary heroes of the first season. Although he doesn’t appear until the sixth episode of the season, he is mentioned throughout the early episodes. Viewers discover that he had escaped from prison, where he’d been incarcerated for theft and multiple murders.

“DL is a criminal. He brought danger into our home.”

-Niki, episode 1.11

Police officers visit the home of Niki, his wife, and Micah, his son, and tell them that DL has escaped and was spotted in the area. Officers are stationed in the neighborhood, but DL gets into the house and is seen hiding in the dark before he sneaks up on Niki, speaking to her in a menacingly calm voice. Throughout the

episode, DL is seen as violent and dangerous, with “dangerous” music adding to the effect. Viewers eventually learn that DL had been framed, and was innocent of the charges filed against him. Throughout his time on the series, DL performs heroic actions—saving a woman from a car fire, becoming a firefighter and saving a child from a burning house—but the plague of his arrest still haunts him. He has to hide from police, who are still looking for him despite his innocence. Though he is presented in a positive light on the show, viewers still perceive him as a violent criminal, and the underlying story supports their perceptions. DL uses his power—the ability to phase through objects—to attack both his wife and Linderman, who had been manipulating the family for years. DL is shot and killed very early on in the second season, making him only the second main character to die; the first being the Hispanic drug user named Isaac Mendez. In fact, numerous cast members are shot, but DL is the only character to die without being reincarnated, despite his ability to phase through bullets.

In the third and most recent season, a group of new characters are presented as villains, one of whom is Knox, whose superhuman ability allows him to gain great physical strength by feeding off the fears of his opposition.

"Your fear is making me strong, girl!"

-Knox to Daphne, episode 3.07

Knox’s ability is the most obvious presence of the long-standing stereotype of African-Americans as violent—an angry black man who feeds off the fear of others, who will naturally fear him because of his race. In fact, his ability can *only* be used in a negative way; there is no way his power can be used to help or save someone. Viewers first meet Knox with him locked up in Level 5 of The Company, a holding cell for “more dangerous” individuals with abilities. Throughout the season, Knox is shown as an

angry, violent man, first escaping from Level 5 and participating in a robbery, killing a guard in the process, then being recruited by The Company as a villain.

Baron Samedi, another escapee of the Level 5 breakout, uses his ability—impenetrable skin—to convince his Haitian followers that he is a demi-god in their religion; Vodou. Samedi then creates an army based on fear, and practices drug trafficking, kidnapping, and slavery. The violent egomaniac is first seen in episode 3.10, where Peter and Nathan meet The Haitian, who tells them that the Baron is his brother, and he has come to stop the violence being committed. The Baron attacks and kidnaps Nathan, forcing Peter and The Haitian to rescue Nathan and the Baron's other captives, two young sisters who were to be sold into slavery. After a violent battle, The Haitian uses his power of mind manipulation to kill Samedi.

Throughout the series, numerous African-Americans playing minor characters are stereotyped as violent. A group of gang members, played by African-American men, steal Micah's backpack, then kidnap and nearly burn Monica to death. Two African-American actors portray criminals in Matt Parkman's police exam. The man who attempted to rob Monica's fast food restaurant is an African-American, and a repeat criminal offender. Tuko, one of Peter's captors in early season two, is seen as the physical threat towards Peter. Tuko is shown beating and punching Peter while Peter's other white captors are the "brains" of their group of thugs.

African-Americans as Thieves and Criminals

The story arc of Niki and DL throughout the first season focuses on DL's escape from prison and Niki's theft of \$2 million, and their subsequent criminal acts as a result of their initial status. DL is shown using his ability to break into locked buildings and rooms. We later discover that DL used his ability to escape from prison;

when asked how he'd escaped, DL replies, "I just walked out." DL uses his ability in the final episode of season one to break into Linderman's room to confront and ultimately kill him. Again, as DL tries to change his image and become a hero, he is ultimately shown in a negative light and ends up killed after committing a criminal act.

DL's son, Micah, has developed the ability of technopathy, which allows him to communicate with and control machines. Though generally portrayed in a positive light, Micah uses his ability to steal and cheat. We first see Micah's thievery in episode 1.13, where he tries to help his financially struggling family by stealing money from an ATM. Micah, 11 years old at the time of the ATM theft, seems to have a terribly underdeveloped sense of right and wrong, though his criminal acts always have good intentions. The supposedly very intelligent boy seems naïve about morality, perhaps an example of the stereotype claiming African-Americans are just not as intelligent as their white counterparts. Micah is manipulated by Linderman, who tells the boy to commit mass voter fraud by telling voting machines to vote for Nathan Petrelli.

"How would you like to save the world?"

-Linderman to Micah, episode 1.19

Micah is naively led to believe that changing the votes will help "save the world." Once again, in the fourth episode of the second season, Micah illegally steals pay-per-view cable for his cousin, Damon, in order to get into the older boy's good graces. When reproached by his older cousin, Monica, Micah does apologize for the theft.

Damon, Micah's cousin and Monica's brother, has a very minor role in the second season, but viewers get a good sense of his attitude. He is shown as rude, lazy, and disrespectful. His biggest role in the show has him stealing Micah's backpack, which contains a collection of rare comic books and a medal of valor given to DL upon

his death. Damon then takes the backpack to a group of African-American men to have the comics appraised, but the men beat up Damon and take the contents of the backpack.

As mentioned previously, Knox had been a criminal before being sent to Level 5, and upon escaping, proceeded to violently rob a bank with his fellow escapees. Several other African-American men are portrayed as robbers, including the man who attempted to rob Monica's fast food restaurant, a drug dealer captured and killed by Suresh, and two muggers who attempted to steal from Suresh in the premiere episode of the third season.

African-Americans in Non-Traditional Families

DL, Niki, and Micah are the prime example of a biracial family in a very non-traditional situation. The series starts off with DL being imprisoned and Niki having to manage a website as she used her sexuality to earn extra money. The family is also being manipulated by Linderman, who has had them do his illegal bidding for an unknown period of time, and constant threats of violence plague their every move. Once DL returns to the family after escaping prison, Niki begins having severe multi-personality symptoms, a side effect of her ability. She has a dangerous, violent, and very physically strong personality named Jessica appear when Niki is particularly weak. Jessica has very little regard for the law or basic morality, and will kill without regret. DL takes Micah away from Jessica to prevent the two from getting hurt. Micah wants to return to help Jessica, even running away from DL to prove a point.

"Do you know how scared I was?"

"Now you know how it felt when you left us.

If you still love her, you'll help her."

-DL and Micah, episode 1.09

Finally DL concedes and the two return to Jessica, who restores Niki with the assistance of her family, and Niki is then sent to a treatment center for her disorder. While Niki is gone, DL and Micah struggle to make ends meet, and Micah is unhappy with DL's parenting style; "you're not as good as mom." Micah's two parents finally work together and go get Micah from Linderman, who had taken Micah so he could change the election. But their happiness only lasts a few months before Niki exhibits a new personality and DL, who had come to help her, gets fatally shot.

Micah then moves in with his Nana and cousins in New Orleans while Niki continues treatment. Monica, his oldest cousin and the family's caretaker, had had her life destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Her mother had died, forcing Monica to drop out of college and support her new family. The unstable family life prevented Monica from getting a promotion at her job, where her manager tells her she is 'not qualified' despite performing well on exams and being motivated and hard-working. Many viewers complained about the inclusion of Monica and her family in the second season because her story was only vaguely relevant to the story as a whole and seemed to be stunt-cast as a family who had been victimized by Hurricane Katrina. This is noticeably present in episode 2.04 as images of the disaster of New Orleans are artistically played next to an image of Monica. Monica talks repeatedly about wanting to be something and thinks "God is punishing [her]" for being selfish. Once she discovers and learns to use her ability (adoptive muscle memory), Monica attempts to get Micah's backpack back, only to be captured and nearly burned to death. Monica is saved by Niki, who died in the fire. Monica wanted to "be" something, but in the end, she is just a victim being helped by a white hero, showing the stereotype that African-American women are helpless and need "saving."

Simone, an African-American woman viewers meet in the first season, is shown to be successful and intelligent, but in a series of unhealthy and unfavorable relationships. At the beginning of the season, Simone is dating Isaac Mendez, a drug-addicted artist. Despite Simone's best efforts, Mendez continues to abuse her kindness and use drugs, claiming they help him paint. Then Simone, hurt by the difficult relationship with Mendez, has relations with Peter Petrelli, whom she'd met while he cared for her dying father. Although Peter hopes the night of romance will blossom into a full relationship, Simone denies his request and goes back to Mendez, making her one-night-stand look very promiscuous. Nathan, who sees Simone with Peter, looks down upon the woman because of her loose behavior. Simone is fatally shot by Isaac, whom he'd assumed to be Peter, in the ultimate karmic payback for her sexual indiscretions.

African-Americans as the Mysterious "Other"

The most well-known African-American hero, The Haitian, is not African-American at all, but rather from the island nation of Haiti, as his name describes. He is portrayed as a mysterious, silent creature, with tribal music accompanying his presence. Many suspect that The Haitian cannot speak at all, and he indeed remains silent for the first ten episodes of the first season. His silence adds to his aura of mystery—he is seen as a torturer, only appearing when the man in the Horn-Rimmed Glasses tells him to manipulate a victim's mind. He is described by the man in the Horn-Rimmed glasses to be, "special, too," when interrogating Matt Parkman about his new-found abilities. Viewers discover that The Haitian has the ability to suppress the abilities of other evolved humans, erase memories, and perform other mind-

manipulation acts. Halfway through the first season, The Haitian finally speaks, but not before sneaking out of Claire's closet like an abductor.

"I work for your father. He sent me here to make you forget."

-The Haitian to Claire, episode 1.11

We learn that The Haitian has been working with the man in the Horn-Rimmed Glasses—Claire's father, Noah Bennet—to capture humans with abilities and take them to a mysterious Company. The Haitian is seen throughout the show following the orders of his superiors, usually older white men, a stereotypical role of African-American individuals. As the series continues, viewers begin to learn more about The Haitian and begin to have positive emotional responses towards him. He cares for Claire and her family, and refuses to erase her memory when her father demands that he do so. When questioned, The Haitian responds, "I answer to someone higher than you...in your daughter's life." Later, The Haitian is ordered to kill Mr. Bennet, but he erases the man's memory instead, protecting the Bennet family. The Haitian then takes Claire to safety so she won't be taken and abused by The Company. In the second season, viewers find The Haitian inflicted with a virus that has suppressed his powers. He says the virus has come as God's punishment for the abuse of his powers, and refuses to take an antivirus. However, he is eventually convinced to take the antivirus, which successfully heals him. Throughout the remainder of the second season, The Haitian is shown working with Noah Bennet to interrogate his opposition, threatening them with the erasure of their memories. In the third season, The Haitian works with Angela Petrelli to kill her evil husband, Arthur, who ends up reawakening, forcing Peter and The Haitian to work together to kill Arthur again. We also learn about The Haitian's past when he returns to his home nation of Haiti to stop his evil brother, Baron Samedi.

Usutu, a new character introduced in the third season, lives in a small hut in an uninhabited area of Botswana, Africa, showing the stereotypical image of Africans being uncivilized and superstitious. Usutu's ability allows him to paint the future, like Isaac Mendez, but he uses an "old family recipe" to bring him into another mental state, allowing him to create visions of the future. Usutu teaches his visitors—first Matt Parkman, then Hiro and Ando—about "spirit walks" that allow them to see the future as well. Usutu is seen as a wise character, providing some comic relief, but is killed by the villain Arthur Petrelli only a few episodes after he is introduced.

Color Biases of African-American Characters

Characters in the series tend to have either intellectual abilities or physical abilities. Peter and Sylar, two of the series' main characters, have cerebral abilities—their superhuman powers stem from their great intellectual power—while others, like Knox and DL, have purely physical abilities. A trend within the show gives more "intellectual" abilities to lighter-skinned characters and "physical" abilities to darker-skinned characters, adding to the stereotype that African-Americans and other dark-skinned individuals aren't as intelligent as their white counterparts. DL is a dark-skinned African-American man whose ability to phase through objects has allowed him to escape from prison, break into buildings, and perform violent acts, is portrayed in a conflicting but negative light. Knox, whose ability can only be used in a negative way, was specifically cast as a black man, showing that the creators of the show had bought into the stereotype as African-American males being dangerous and causing fear. Monica's family is shown as conflicted and unhappy. Her brother Damon is disrespectful, her mother had died, and Monica, despite her best efforts, can't seem to

find success. Do viewers see this family and suspect that all Hurricane Katrina victims are helpless?

Conversely, Micah, who is half-black, has an ability that uses his mind, but he chooses to use it negatively by stealing and cheating. White viewers may see Micah's behavior and assume the "black" part of him decided to do the misdeeds, but the "white" side was given the good power.

In general, lighter-skinned African-Americans are shown in positions of power. Detective Fuller is Matt Parkman's boss as a police officer. Nathan Petrelli's campaign manager successfully helps Mr. Petrelli win his elections. Simone is shown as a successful woman with a "normal" American accent, but she is shown as weak in her relationships.

Darker-skinned African-Americans are usually shown as body guards and criminals—not in positions of power, rather positions of being controlled, or being "evil." They also tend to have strong accents, whether they are southern accents or accents typical of "black culture," or what would be heard in rap music. These images say that anyone who is darker-skinned or has a non-white American accent is uneducated or dangerous, and viewers buy into these false ideas.

Conclusion and Discussion

In the hit NBC show *Heroes*, producers use stereotypical images of African-Americans in their roles for various "heroic" characters, which serves to perpetuate long-standing stereotypes of African-Americans as violent, dishonest, uncivilized, and unintelligent. My research for this show has led me to wonder what stereotypes are present in other serialized dramas and in the superhero genre; on television, in film, and in comic books. The subtle way these stereotypes are presented in the show leaves

only the most critical viewer aware of the racial prejudice present. Most viewers don't even notice the subtle insults towards African-Americans, but take the stereotypes to be true for all African-Americans.

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