GOOD, BAD & TECHNOLOGY: ANALYZING THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS OF MARVEL’S IRONHEART

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INTRODUCTION

• Riri Williams, aka Ironheart, 15 year-old engineering genius created by Brian Michael Bendis and Mike Deodato.

• Despite “diversifying” Marvel’s superhero line-up, early iterations of Riri entailed several intersectional failings (e.g. backstory, art, fan reception)

• A fan-led Twitter campaign contributed to Eve Ewing being hired to write a new solo series in collaboration with artists Kevin Libranda, Luciano Vecchio, Geoffo, Matt Milla and Clayton Cowles.

• *Ironheart* does a lot of great things but today we are gonna focus on only three
BANALITY OF EVIL

- *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* by Hannah Arendt

- Arendt did not think it was sufficient to chalk Eichmann's crimes up to remarkable monstrosity—the guy was *incredibly* mediocre
  - She still DEFINITELY thought he was guilty!!

- But she wanted to know how we account for crimes on such a scale when you are dealing with a whole population of seemingly "normal" people

"Evil isn't something you are or are not. Evil is something that any human can do or not do, given the circumstances. That's why we have to choose. To do the right thing."

-- Nadia Van Dyne (@rrome58's The Unstoppable Wasp), as written by @veeewin in ironheart #6
BANALITY OF EVIL

• Arendt concluded that Eichmann was not mindless, instead he quieted his own moral reasoning in favor of the example set by “respectable society”—which in this case means Nazis.

• Eichmann was swayed by the compliance of his peers, by the behavior of the “best people” and by the fact that the law ALLOWED for the murder of Jews.

• For Eichmann:
  • Doing what is right=performing one’s duty=abiding by the law
  • Remember, law and all “best people” say murder is OK

By Adam Zyglis
BANALITY OF EVIL

• The banality of evil demonstrates that where the regime is criminal, motives are superfluous and a demonic character unnecessary: only mendacity and conformity to the law are required.
With respect to *Ironheart*, this is important on two levels:

- First, the US seems to *really, really* need a reminder of Arendtian ethics.
- Riri is a good model NOT because she is unwavering, but precisely because her struggle makes it clear how doing the right thing in tumultuous times is HARD WORK and requires community.
• The Arendtian ethics of the book are also important because they disrupt racist and sexist stereotypes.
• Riri’s relationship to advanced technology also provides a notable example of how *Ironheart* defies racist norms and stereotypes.

• Within mainstream pop culture and literary texts then, “blackness is [often] constructed as the antithesis of technology” or as entirely absent from “discourses of technology and digital spaces” (Jones 2018).
CAN I HELP? I’LL BE THE GUY WHO TAPES THE PICTURES OF SUSPECTS TO THE WALL AND TIES A BUNCH OF STRINGS BETWEEN THEM.

THAT ONLY WORKS WHEN YOU HAVE A LIST OF SUSPECTS, WE AIN’T GOT THAT.

FINALLY, THE GANG’S ALL HERE.

SO LISTEN, HERE’S WHAT WE NEED TO DO. SHURI!

SILHOUETTE-- DID YOU JUST CALL US SHURI?
TECHNOLOGY

Riri as “Afrogeek”
TECHNOLOGY

• Technology also reintroduces moral ambiguity to the book, even as Riri establishes for herself what is right and good.

• Riri’s treatment of Daija runs the risk of demonstrating what Michel Foucault called biopower.
YOU'RE GONNA DO WHAT?! FIRST OF ALL, THAT'S INTRUSIVE. AND LOOK AT YOU! YOU'RE ALL BEAT UP! MIDNIGHT'S FIRE ATTACKED YOU-- WOULD YOU KEEP IT DOWN?

YOU'RE NOT ANSWERING? HOW ARE THE TRIALS GOING?

SOME OF THEM ARE STILL RESPONSIVE, SOME NOT SO MUCH. SOME HAVE PRETTY BAD SIDE EFFECTS AND SOME... ER... EXPIRE.

SO WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THIS OFF-THE-BOOKS PILOT PROGRAM WON'T BE ON THE BOOKS ANYTIME SOON. I KNOW MY RIGHTS, LET ME OUT!

PROBABLY NOT, TOO BAD FOR ALL THESE NOBODIES.
VIOLENCE & FEMINISM

• With respect to superhero comics, depictions of violence are often critiqued for being particularly indicative of the problems outlined in concurrent popular discourse.

• US feminism has had an uneasy relationship with violence. Because of the staggering rates of violence women experience at the hands of men, many theorists have argued that the use of violence is antithetical to feminism.

• Can superhero comics in which female protagonists use violent fighting techniques and advanced weaponry still be read as feminist?
VIOLENCE & FEMINISM

- McCaughey asserts that “aggression is a primary marker for sexual difference...The construction and regulation of a naturalized heterosexual femininity hinges on the taboo of aggression, and often what challenges femininity is labeled ‘aggressive’” (1997).

- Refusing to consider the use of any form of violence by women may inadvertently reinforce sexist stereotypes of women’s bodies as passive and to-be-acted-upon.

- Rethinking defensive fighting and aggression can, McCaughey argues, change “what it means to be a woman,” and “throws open for critique the gender ideologies to which we have all become more or less habituated” (1997).
FIGHT LIKE A GIRL

- The violent altercations Riri finds herself in are consistently defensive.

- The creators make this obvious by virtue of the fact that Riri tries alternative tactics first: humor, dialogue, deflection, etc.

- Only when it becomes necessary to protect herself or others does she engage in aggressive fighting maneuvers.
FIGHT LIKE A GIRL

• Even the use of advanced weaponry is limited to defense (well, mostly, there are those questions about surveillance)
FIGHT LIKE A GIRL
Recent shows like HBO’s *Watchmen* and Amazon’s *The Boys*, as well as numerous op-eds, and seemingly endless interviews with Alan Moore or Eric Kripke, suggest that the superhero genre is enduring a new wave of scrutiny.

Even if far fewer in numbers, intersectional feminist superhero comics DO exist! Ignoring these kinds of books acts as another form of marginalization.

Some superhero comics may indeed contribute to our current problems, but others may help us to imagine solutions.
I used to think everyone was one type of person or the other.

But I guess I'm... I'm both. I am so afraid, all the time.

I have lost so much.

And yet...

Courage.
WORKS CITED


