

SUPERMAN SAYS YOU CAN SLAP A JAP: RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN
COMICS

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by

Margaret Elizabeth Woodbury

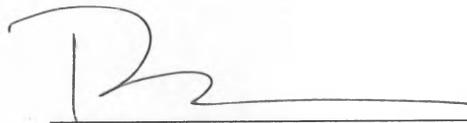
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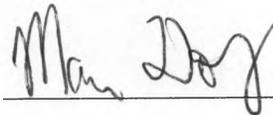
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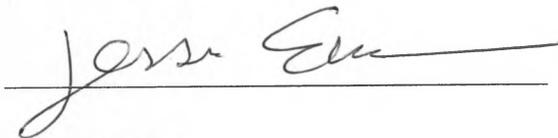
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SUPERMAN SAYS YOU CAN SLAP A JAP: RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN
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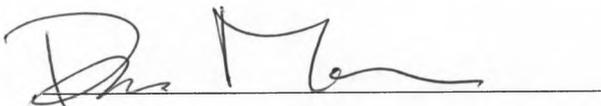
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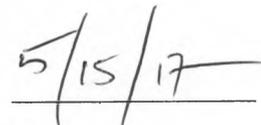
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This purpose of this project is to place mainstream American comics firmly in a historical context in order to analyze ideas of race, gender, and politics from the late 1930s to the end of the 1970s. Using popular heroes, the background of writers, and an understanding of 20th century U.S. history, this study argues that these comics were a racial project: a purposeful attempt by writers, distributors, and artists to shape discourse on race, identity, and a desired political and social structure. The racial project of comics shifted and evolved during this time period from a white supremacist world view to a more positive and culturally significant one influenced and shaped by white understanding of the civil rights movements that affected the United States in the mid-20th century. While the efforts of companies like DC and Marvel were meant to evoke a sympathetic view of minorities through representation and plot lines that revolved around social issues of the time, the subsequent stories and characters were still trapped within a framework of stereotypes and racialized ideas about people of color.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee



Date

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Introduction: “No Evil Shall Escape My Sight!” - Green Lantern

Recently, superheroes have returned to the American cultural consciousness due to the massive success of movie blockbusters like *The Avengers* and *The Dark Knight*. These onscreen adaptations, based on characters created in the 1930s to the present, bear little resemblance to their original form. Often dismissed as childish and inconsequential, comics have long been ignored as a source of cultural history. However, scholarship on their origin and place in the landscape of American culture proliferated. As comics historian Bradford Wright asserts, “the cultural history of comic books reminds us that historical inquiry need not be defined only by abstract ideas and distant personalities.”¹ To put this in perspective, comics have endured over a century of global events and a striking evolution of the modern world. They have both been shaped by the changing times and been a part of writers’ purposeful attempts to influence public thought. For academics in a diverse array of fields, such as history, American studies, gender, race, and art, they offer invaluable insight into the past.

This essay puts comics at the center of its analysis and examine their role in racial formation in the United States. As both an art form and a narrative, comics are a significant source to utilize in understanding American cultural history and deconstructing how racial ideas and ways of thinking were put forth in these stories and

¹ Bradford Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), xvii.

art. Comics were often used to provoke ideas about race that were uniquely American and crucial to understanding the evolution of racial ideology in the twentieth century. In Michael Omi and Howard Winant's groundbreaking monograph *Racial Formation in the United States*, they put forth their idea and definition of racial projects as "efforts to shape the ways in which human identities and social structures are racially signified, and the reciprocal ways that racial meaning becomes embedded in social structures."² Using this definition going forward, I argue that mainstream American comics, from their rise to popularity during World War II, have been a racial project. Writers used comics as a medium for promoting racial ideology, both negative and positive, since their inception. Their own racial biases and understandings, indicative of larger American society, were revealed as well. From their roots in white supremacy to later attempts to provide a more complex and diverse understanding of race, comics have been a part of a larger racial discourse. Representations of race in comics is a way to look at overall racial formation and cultural change in the United States.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, this racial project took the form of white supremacy through wartime propaganda that purposely dehumanized Japanese and Germans on the basis of their inferior race. Concurrently, the depictions of nonwhite characters revealed both racist assumptions by white writers and artists that reflected popular racial ideology but also underlying efforts to support and sustain white racial dominance at home. These

² Michael Omi & Howard Winant. *Racial Formation In The United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 13.

particular representations of race in comics are part of the larger racial formation in the United States. Although they were written supposedly as both escapism and social commentary for children, they reveal a specific and purposeful white supremacist racial project by comic book writers to advance a political representation of a desired racial and social structure. Michael Omi and Howard Winant wrote that while the biological assumptions of race were slowly declining after World War I, the rise of ethnicity-based theories of race based on culture and immigrant assimilation didn't completely erase the widespread acceptance of the racial inferiority of non-whites. Rather, "ethnicity-theory began as liberal challenge to religious and biologicistic accounts of race. It operated on cultural territory, between the parameters of assimilationism and pluralism. Ethnic groups were implicitly white (or becoming white) and religious differences were minimized. Thus the ethnicity paradigm challenged bedrock U.S. racial ideology only to a limited extent: It was more concerned with "whiteness of a different color" than with racialized "others," notably black people."³

Therefore, groups that had been in-between whiteness and non-whiteness like Greeks, Italians, and Jews were the beneficiaries of these changing notions of race in the United States and would eventually achieve full whiteness after World War II. However, before their full acceptance into this sphere of racial privilege, Jewish comic book writers and publishers took place alongside their fully white counterparts in making these

³ Michael Omi & Howard Winant. *Racial Formation In The United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 29.

wartime comics into a racial project. Their heroes were reflections of their own desires to be accepted into the mainstream and were therefore constructions of an ideal male whiteness. Comics were meant to both teach young Americans about the “natural” racial hierarchies and to warn of the dangers that could occur when non-whites resisted this structure. With the growing resistance by non-white Americans (especially black activists) to white supremacy in the early 20th century, these writers were echoing the national white sentiment of the necessity of fighting racism abroad while maintaining the status quo at home that emphasized the natural and good racial order. Comics were used as a seemingly positive source for distributing a widespread publication of this racial ideology.

After the triumph of the Allies, this shifted as Cold War politics no longer wanted to admit white racial dominance. As the United States championed their capitalist democracy as a cornerstone of freedom, justice, and tolerance, their brutal treatment of nonwhite Americans, especially black citizens, was both shameful and an impediment to convince other countries of the superiority of their ideology. Some series retained their nonwhite characters that relied on racist stereotypes. Many comics simply stopped showing any nonwhite characters whatsoever and put forth consensus comics that emphasized the American community over a sense of individualism. A vague sense of liberalism was attempted in some that preached racial tolerance and understanding of fellow Americans without featuring any nonwhite characters.

As the civil rights movement/ Black Freedom Struggle took shape and transformed the way Americans saw their own country, liberal comic book writers began to incorporate both antiracist messages and more positive nonwhite characters in the 1960s. While this was admirable, many were restrained from writing truly progressive stories by their understanding of race as white Americans and the limits of contemporary liberalism. These white writers published stories that either relied on stereotypes of nonwhite characters or pushed for a neoliberal colorblindness that ignored the realities of living as a nonwhite American. This continued in the 1970s as the rise of black nationalism, identity politics, and the failures of the civil rights movement fractured the left. Comics were still trying to add nonwhite characters—and giving them their own solo series—and include frank discussions of race. Unfortunately, this often meant writers were blaming racial discord in the United States on nonwhite Americans (especially militant black radicals). As the nation transformed from a system of white supremacist racial domination to a white racial hegemony that preserved structural racism in the postwar era, comics bore witness to and were an active participant in the massive social upheaval.

The origins of comics have been placed in the early 18th century in Japan. They are said to have begun in the United States in 1898 with R.F. Outcalt's "The Yellow Kid." Published in Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper *New York World*, it was distinguished from long-established political cartoons by its sequential form. Comics were mainly published

in newspapers and magazines until 1929, when Dell Publishing began to experiment with printing specific magazines for comics. The 1930s saw the increase in comic books from new publishers but it wouldn't become a mass market until the introduction of Superman in 1938. The inhumanly strong superhero became an immediate success helped the burgeoning comics industry become a powerhouse as well as inspiring the craze for superheroes that would come to define the medium. The context of the Great Depression and World War II meant that the popular comics characters were in a prime setting to both provide fantasy and relevance to their young readers. As Bradford Wright noted, "these stories offered an escape but remained within the reader's frame of reference."⁴ The war effort meant a solicitation of publishers to print propaganda for the U.S. forces but was also highly profitable for the industry as war comics became immensely popular.

While comics have varied in genre, writers, and popularity, this essay will focus on mainstream American comics. Although there have been progressive, low-selling independent publishers throughout comics history like All-Negro Comics, underground comics, feminists zines and others, the most popular and well-read comics distributed by mainstream publishers (mostly Marvel and DC) are most indicative of the national mood and understanding of race. Writers for these popular companies were both active

⁴ Bradford Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 13.

participants in promoting racial ideologies as well as mirrors for the dominant American discourse on race.

“Comic books emerged at a critical moment in the evolution of youth culture.” -

Bradford Wright

Scholarship of race and representation in comics has grown slowly but steadily in the last decade. With the recent growing popularity of comics and comics book movies by Marvel and DC there comes an outpouring of interest in analyzing their content and assessing their social implications. Using mainstream comics as a window into American society allows readers and scholars a unique lens into racial, political, and social thought and transformation. Throughout the publication span of comics, writers used offered racialized thinking that mirrors societal expectations and racial relations as well as critiques or espousal in later years to change these popular realms of racial thought.

However, there are not many comprehensive academic books on race and representation in mainstream American comics. While there are plenty of articles and essay anthologies discussing gender, race, sexuality, and their political and social meanings, there are few extensive looks into the world of comics, representation, and race in the United States. The three that stand out are *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books* by Joseph J. Darowski, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* by Adilfu Nama, and a 2011 dissertation entitled *The*

Captain America Conundrum: Issues of Patriotism, Race, and Gender in Captain America Comic Books, 1941–2001 by Richard A. Hall.

Superblack: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes takes an in-depth look at DC and Marvel characters like Black Panther, John Stewart of the Green Lantern Corps, and Black Lightning. Adilifu Nama is an associate professor and chair of the African American studies department at Loyola. His first toy he could remember picking out was the sidekick to Captain America and one of the first black superheroes in mainstream comic history: Sam Wilson, the Falcon. Inspired by his childhood fascination with a black man that could fly, Nama continued his studies in African American history and developed an interest in critical studies of race in popular culture. In *Super Black*, he argues that comic books are valuable to analyze, that “the most mundane, innocuous, and everyday offers some of the most provocative and telling cultural and ideological information about society...[comics are] a source of potent racial meaning that has substance and resonance far beyond their function and anticipated shelf life.”⁵

Using comics as his primary sources and a diverse multitude of analyses of pop culture and race, Nama’s deconstruction of the symbolism, contemporary cultural influences, and racial undertones (and overt racism) of various characters and phases like blaxploitation in the 1970s, civil rights movements, and conscious criticisms of social

⁵ Adilifu Nama. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 8.

problems like the prison industrial complex is immensely detailed and thoughtful.

Perhaps his best insights come into play with the Marvel character Black Panther, created in 1965 and the first mainstream black superhero. Nama notes that while his name is inherently tied to his skin color like other early black heroes, his character differs from the other popular creations. T'Challa is an African prince of a highly advanced nation, deviating from the norm of black characters having a criminal background and fighting in the ghetto or defending African-American problems. This Afrofuturist approach, as Nama calls it, is still occasionally plagued by racialized writing but is indicative of the influence of the civil rights movement and an attempt to bring black issues to a larger audience. These comics attempting to provide a better portrayal of black characters, while still often misguided, thus become a racial project in and of themselves.

While Nama is adept at bringing in social movements and cultural touchstones into his analysis of black characters in comics and comic book movies, he overemphasizes the symbolism of characters. He argues that Falcon being one of the first black men flying was symbolic of black individuals being able to lift themselves out of the ghettos; this was most likely not the intention of the creators. He also fails to pay enough attention to black female characters and the gendered notions of race in comics. He devotes merely a paragraph to Storm, one of the most well-known black superheroines and arguably one of the most important cultural icons, and often ignores the intersection of race and gender for black female heroes and characters. It would be

prudent to add more of a historical element to his analysis as well. However, his overall work is important for a poststructural look into the shifting political and racial landscape of the United States and how comics and racial identity were both influenced by and influence these changes.

At the time of his completion of *The Captain America Conundrum: Issues of Patriotism, Race, and Gender in Captain America Comic Books, 1941–2001*, Richard A. Hall was a Ph.D candidate for a doctorate in Philosophy at Auburn University. His dissertation was the most useful source for the intersection of comics and history. By examining the social and political implications of Captain America comics, Hall argues that comics are a valuable primary source for looking at history and that Captain America comics offer a look into American thought and society through the decades. They are both a portal for escapism and social commentary of their times. Though he doesn't explicitly argue that Captain America began as a racial project to show Nazis and Japanese as inherently evil and cunning, his work follows that line of reasoning.

Hall follows Cap's transformation from a propaganda machine during World War II as a symbol of white American patriotism, truth, and freedom to a symbol of what America should be in later decades. He notes the racist portrayal of Japanese and German characters in the war years and the one black background character. In 1941, this black character, initially given no name (later revealed to be mortifyingly named Whitewash) is drawn with the oversized lips, pitch-black skin, and exaggerated facial features that Hall

describes as “consistent with the traditional, demeaning, but widely-accepted Jim Crow, Amos and Andy-esque popular image of African-Americans in white American culture at the time.”⁶ Yet the inclusion of a black character at all, even in the background, shows racial inclusiveness despite managing to be wildly offensive by modern standards.

Hall moves through the decades of Captain America comics, analyzing female and minority characters through a historical and social lens, and notes the changing nature of what Cap symbolizes. From a symbol of American freedom to what America should be to a critique of American society and global relations, Cap also shows the evolution of mainstream ideas of women and minorities. Cap has female and black sidekicks and friends but is still wrapped up in the idea of white masculinity, protecting women who are often the damsels in distress or shown in traditionally domestic roles and minority characters (besides Sam Wilson) are often villains. This changes as Cap moves into the 1980s and 1990s but his formative years are defined by a dichotomous relationship of the writers wanting to delve into American racial and gender relations but often relying on stereotypes or white consciousness of racialized thinking.

Hall wrote by far the best analysis of comics book characters and historical context. His use of comics and a vast array of secondary sources analyzing pop culture, race in comics and literature blend well together. He also conducted multiple interviews

⁶ Richard A. Hall. *The Captain America Conundrum: Issues of Patriotism, Race, and Gender in Captain America Comic Books, 1941–2001*. (Dissertation: Auburn University, 2011), 76.

with Captain America writers that lent a personal touch to his writing and analysis. Focusing on one line of comics helps Hall to go in-depth and tighten his analysis although expanding his gaze could have allowed a more comprehensive look at American political and racial transformations through a more extensive look at the world of mainstream comics. Hall's dissertation thoroughly explores the racial politics and historical context of comics, one of the first to do so.

Joseph J. Darowski, an English professor at Brigham Young University, has devoted much of his academic career to writing and editing anthologies analyzing popular superheroes and their portrayal. His work includes sets of collected essays that examine different aspects of characters like Wonder Woman, Iron Man, and Superman. The book most relevant to this essay is his 2014 monograph *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*. Darowski attempts to dig deep into the social relevance and underlying themes of race and gender in the X-Men universe, from the 1960's to the early 2000's. Focusing mainly on the work of Chris Claremont's run from 1975-1991, he argues that while the X-Men are considered one of the most diverse teams in mainstream comics history, they are still a team dominated by white men battling mostly minority villains.

By concentrating on the correlation between X-men plot lines and current events and a desire to show the team as outsiders of society, Darowski explores the depictions of female and minority characters. He notes that female X-Men, especially in the early

years, were marked by their subservient or domestic roles. Storm, as one of the strongest female members and team leaders, was still often drawn in an over-sexualized manner. When female characters like Jean Grey or Madelyne Prior became villains, their personalities and costumes became more sexually aggressive as opposed to male characters becoming more muscular and physically powerful. Darowski argues that there was “a close intertwining of female sexuality and transformations into evil supervillains.”⁷ Female characters represent possessions men want to acquire whereas male characters are the heroes men want to be. The depictions of minority characters like Thunderbird and Sunfire were steeped in stereotypes of Native Americans and Japanese. Even though the relaunch of the X-Men run in 1975 was supposed to bring a new, diverse cast into the Marvel universe, the characters were racially drawn and full of stereotypes. Native-American mutant Thunderbird called the white characters “white eyes” and wrestled buffalo in the plains. The Kenyan-born character Storm has a criminal past as a thief and her African storylines were depicted as an exoticized land where the superstitious natives were convinced she was a goddess. Attempts to create more positive minority characters were still constrained by the racialized framework of the time.

While Darowski provides a detailed history of the X-Men characters and the storylines, he does ultimately fail to provide in-depth analysis of race and gender. His

⁷ Joseph J. Darowski. *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 102.

work is relatively shallow and often just describes who the characters were and what the overall story was. While he has an impressive grasp on the history of the X-Men, he doesn't dig deep enough and at one point even quotes an author who makes a crass, sexist evaluation that is insulting in a supposedly academic book. He does note the influence of the various civil rights movements on the writers but barely scratches the surface of how historical context played into the stories or what these depictions of women and characters of color meant in American society. Even with plenty of material and usage of previous studies of comic books, Darowski ultimately does not add much to the literature.

Together these studies offer a valuable look into the research done so far and the questions raised by scholars. Ultimately, Hall's analysis is the most historical in nature and helpful for evaluating racial relations in the United States. Nama brings a new perspective to black superheroes but still fails to provide an in-depth look at social and cultural events and their influence on comics as well as including the intersection of race and gender. Darowski's work is shallow and lacks any real insight into the nature of X-Men and their true power and influence both by and on social commentary of the time.

As for those writing about comic books in general, authors like Dr. Frederic Wertham, Joseph Witek, and Bradford Wright respectively wrote about the perceived detrimental effects of comics on children, how to use comics books in analyzing history, and the growth of comics in the youth market. Fredric Wertham, one of the most influential comics "experts" in the Cold War era led a campaign to end what he saw as a

moral degradation of American youths caused by the violent and sexual nature of comic books. A well-respected psychiatrist and author, Wertham became focused on juvenile delinquency and its causes. He became convinced, working with troubled youths in homes, that comics were making children violent and sexual deviants. With the popularity of crime, jungle, and horror books in the 1950's, he saw a future where children would be irretrievably affected by the sadism in these books and turn to a life of crime.

In 1953, Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, a full-length study and argument that identified comics as the cause of youth crime. Using interviews with children in youth homes and lurid court cases with child murderers, he vehemently argues that the violence, sexual fantasies, and homosexual subtext of comics were a nationwide problem. They caused illiteracy, desensitized children to violence, and corrupted otherwise good youths to commit violent acts. Though later accused of skewing his data and attributing causation rather than correlation to comics as the root of juvenile delinquency, he was also one of the first authors to address the racist and dehumanizing portrayal of characters of color. He noted that "some children take for granted these comics standards about races, with more or less awareness of their implications...in many children's minds mankind is divided into two groups regular men who have the right to be live, and submen who deserve to be killed."⁸ Wertham's writing is mostly

⁸ Dr. Fredric Wertham. *Seduction of the Innocent*. (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1954), 103.

dramatic and overstates the effect of comics, but his attention to racial depictions is significantly ahead of its time and useful for scholarly analysis.

In 1989, Witek published *Comic Books in History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*. One of the earliest books to approach comics from a historical, analytical nature, Witek uses the work of the aforementioned writers as alternatives to traditional, “childish” comics. Jackson, Spiegelman, and Pekar are more in line with literary talent of the time. Witek was writing at a time when comics had seen a reemergence in popularity, as well as a rise in graphic novels and non-traditional superhero works. He was attempting to shape the future field of comic analysis, arguing that they are a valid media form for scholarly attention, despite the “long decades of cultural scorn and active social repression, but the potential has always existed for comic books to present the same kinds of narratives a other verbal and pictorial media.”⁹

In choosing to focus on alternative comic writers, Witek firmly places what he calls “juvenile” forms of comics outside of respectable study. Jack Jackson, an underground artist and historian, Art Spiegelman, best known for his graphic novel detailing his parents experiences in the Holocaust, and Harvey Pekar, with his autobiographical graphic memoir, are all well-known writers and artists who brought

⁹ Joseph Witek. *Comics Books As History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 11.

graphic novels into mainstream comics before the rise of monumentally influential and popular graphic novels like *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. Witek advocates for the relevance of comics to history, to art, and to literature. It is infinitely easier to do this with respected writers than the superhero comics that had launched the genre.

Witek's monograph, while helpful for analyzing the visual nature of comic book art, is more of a starting point for studying the deeper implications of comics. He seems to be working from the shadow of Wertham's influence on wanting to prove the positive influence of certain comics.

One of the better histories of the industry and contemporary historical context is *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, published in 2001, by Bradford Wright. An associate professor of European studies at Maryland University College, he writes from the viewpoint of a cultural historian. Wright's analysis is an invaluable resource for providing historical context for the changes in the comic book industry and its fans. He brings in a multitude of subjects to analyze, from racism in comics to contemporary gendered politics to the nature of comics writing itself. Wertham is a huge figure in his book, as his influence in the 1950's on comics was highly damaging to the industry. Wright argues that "comic books emerged at a critical moment in the evolution of youth culture...as young people spent more time in the company of their peers, they acquired new personal independence and a generational consciousness that struck some alarmed adults as evidence of diminishing respect for authority and

declining traditional values...comic book publishers bypassed parents and aimed their products directly at the tastes of children and adolescents.”¹⁰

Wright covers the beginning of the comic book boom in the late 1930s to 1980s and its transition to a fan subculture. Detailing each decade and the historical events of the time, he connects cultural history to the writers and how they translated this to the page and attempted to appeal to new generations of youths. The stagnant nature of the industry in the postwar era gave way to a major reevaluation of youth culture in the 1960s as the influence of the civil rights era gave rise to new heroes of color and attempts by writers to bring race back into comics— this time in a more positive manner. The problem with Wright’s monograph is that it begins to lack deep and insightful analysis after the mid-1960s. It seems as though the breadth of the subject was too large to consistently explore meaningfully. However, his work is a valuable starting point for anyone interested in the cultural history and effect of comic books.

As for works on whiteness and Jews in the United States, there have been four particularly notable monographs. The first of these to be published, Karen Brodtkin’s 1998 book *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, is both a personal look at her own Jewish identity while also attempting to decipher where Jews fit in in the racial makeup of the U.S. Brodtkin, an anthropology professor, is

¹⁰ Bradford Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 26-27.

more adept at analyzing racial relations and assumptions than truly understanding the historical context for these beliefs. Brodtkin argues that “as Jews came under increasing scrutiny in American racial discourse, however, they were often torn between their commitment to Jewish racial identity and their desire to be seen as stable members of white society.”¹¹ Like many almost-white immigrant groups, they wanted to be accepted into mainstream white circles but were also reluctant to let go of what they saw as a distinct and unique Jewish difference. Many also saw parallels between their historical experience of suffering discrimination and American-style racism toward non-white groups, especially blacks.

Brodtkin proficiently analyzes the role of gender in how groups were discussed in racial terms— Jews seen as effeminate and weak— but overall fails to grasp the specific nature of almost-white immigrant groups and their path to whiteness. As most of her sources on the historical periods are secondary, it becomes clear that her strengths are not in historical understandings of the complexities of American racial relationships. She downplays the confusing and often exhausting transition to whiteness of almost-white groups at points and attributes the ultimate Jewish acceptance into postwar white America to Jewish intellectuals developing a hegemonic version of Jews as a model minority. Missing from her analysis is specific biological racism in the early 20th century and how

¹¹ Karen Brodtkin. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 3.

programs like the New Deal and the G.I. Bill helped bring Jews into the economic circles of middle-class whiteness.

Eric Goldstein's *The Price of Whiteness*, written in 2006, is the best historical interpretation of the complex and complicated path of racialized Jewish identity. Goldstein traces what he calls the ambivalence of Jews with their original almost-white classification from the late 19th century to their eventual uneasy embrace of whiteness in postwar America. Arguing that "even as Jews pursued whiteness, they wrestled with its consequences and tried to preserve other cherished means of self-definition that resided uneasily within its confines...the need to identify as white made it exceedingly difficult for Jews to assert a minority consciousness in American society, something that was extremely central to many Jews' self-conception...acceptance came at a heavy price, belying the notion that the pursuit of whiteness conferred only privilege."¹²

This uneasy relationship with both white and black society is indicative of both the convoluted racial system in the U.S. as well as the complicated spot of Jews in the middle of a supposed black-white dichotomy. World War II provided an opportunity for Jews to both push against Nazi and advocate for American unity in the face of their outright racism but also claim their own unique space in whiteness. As Jews benefitted from New Deal benefits, the G.I. Bill, and an American reluctance to return to the

¹² Eric Goldstein. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 6.

biological racism that had been part of mainstream discourse in the early twentieth century. Jews were then in a difficult position with condemning anti-black racism while benefitting from newfound privileges as white Americans.

The next year, Melanie Kaye/ Kantrowitz published *The Color of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism*. Like Brodtkin, she is not a historian and is more interested in current Jewish politics and anti-racism. Wanting to overturn the “simplicity” of Jewish identity, she writes about the particular uniqueness of Jewish whiteness and the transformation of white and Christian American identity in opposition to people of color. Kaye/ Kantrowitz, a professor of Jewish, women, and queer studies, is also determined to overturn the stereotypes of Jews, especially the hegemony of Ashkenazi perspectives.

Her writing covers the tenuous and complicated between Jews and black Americans, arguing that Jews tend to overemphasize their liberalism and connections with their historical suffering and the current horrors of racism. Like Brodtkin, she argues that while many Jews sympathized with black Americans’ plight, they fell short of pledging to help as a monolithic group. While *The Color of Jews* is a helpful and fascinating book for exploring race and identity in current society, it would have been improved by a more in-depth and detailed look into the historical context of how Jewish whiteness came to be and the complicated path it took throughout modern history.

In 2012, Sherrow Pinder published *Whiteness and Racialized Ethnic Groups in the United States*, a monograph about the rise of whiteness in the United States in

opposition to any threat to white supremacy. Tracing the early 17th century commitment of white Americans to creating an Other with which to racialize non-whites, Pinder examines the emergence of whiteness to break class lines of solidarity for race. Using this frame of analysis, she argues that Americans racialized class and culture and pushed internal racism and colonialism early on. The legal construction of whiteness began with slavery and legalizing racism. Pinder focuses on citizenship, exclusion, and memory to trace how whiteness formed in the U.S.

Her focus on in-between white groups like Jews, Irish, Italians, and Greeks shows how this formation was complicated by ideas of immigrant being and non-being and the eventual (although uneven) route of acceptance for these groups. While the focus on whiteness is not solely on Jews and racial identity, this book is a great source to trace racial formation from the very beginning of U.S. history. Pinder, a political studies and multicultural gender professor, provides an important origin for race-making, even though the book jumps from topic to topic without a clear transition from each section.

Taking a step toward bringing early Jewish comic book writers and their unclear place in white society, Gerard Jones published *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* in 2004. Alternatively a history of the comic book industry itself and a mixed biography of the men who built it, Jones pays notable attention to the Jewish writers being outsiders and how this influenced their work and characters. While discussing the two creators of Superman, Jones argues that this “had always been Jerry

and Joe's special insight: You could want the invulnerability and the power, but you had to laugh to keep people from knowing how badly you wanted it."¹³ Comics provided an escape from reality, to daydreams of leaving behind powerlessness, while also mixing in social and political issues— at the beginning, this was World War II.

His work also notes an important part of American culture— the origins of the juvenile market and teenagers in the U.S. Though his writing leans toward the sensational at times, this is a valuable source for insight into the early years of the comic book industry and how its writers shaped it. As Jones notes, they were “all Jewish kids, the sons of immigrants, many of them misfits in their own communities. They were all two or three steps removed from the American mainstream but were more poignantly in touch with the desires and agonies of the mainstream than those in the middle of it.”¹⁴ These anguished writers, hustlers, and publishers were able to capture the minds and hearts of a generation that would change the face of pop culture for decades to come. Their distinctly tortured characters were shaped by their identities as Jews on the outside of societal boundaries.

Taken together, these studies into different aspects of comic books— their writers, the industry, historical context, artistic trends— provide an important component of the cultural history of the United States. What needs to be added to the scholarship is a

¹³ Gerard Jones. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. (New York City: Basic Books, 2004), 145.

¹⁴ Gerard Jones. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. (New York City: Basic Books, 2004), xv.

synthesis of these themes and ideas to truly understand what race and representation in mainstream American comics meant in historical context. Who were the writers that provided these characters and storylines and how they were influenced or were trying to influence American ideas of race? What did these depictions say about larger ideas of race in society? This essay will attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of race in mainstream comics from the birth of modern comics in the 1940s through the end of the 1970s. The nature of comics as a racial project evolved during this time period to reflect the evolution of how racial thinking, and public acceptance of ideas of race and acceptability changed.

Chapter 1: The 1940s: “Superman Says You Can Slap A Jap!” - Superman

In 1942, the United States may have been at war abroad but at home possessed a united front. According to the American Indian chief in the Whiz Comics strip Captain Marvel, “we white and red Americans should stick together!” After the tribe had been saved by their “great white warrior” from following a false Indian prophet who had secretly been a Nazi secret agent, the clear message was that no matter their race, Americans and allies had to band together to fight off their shared enemy. Skullface had tricked the tribe into believing in his racist anti-white, anti-American rhetoric but thanks to the heroism of white hero Captain Marvel, Americans of all colors came together to fight off the real enemy. Underneath this imagined camaraderie hid the underlying message that American Indians were superstitious, easily duped, and must be shown the way by their white savior they now called their “Big Chief Thunder-In-Sky.”¹⁵ While all Americans needed to stand together in a united front against the Axis powers, comics made clear that white Americans were inherently superior and meant to lead their lesser non-white brethren in the fight against tyranny and racism. This Captain Marvel strip displays the curious and often contradictory messages of early mainstream American comics as well as their place in cultural history and racial formation in the United States.

Comics have long been seen as juvenile or restricted to a subculture of geeks though they have occasionally experienced shifts in popularity or mainstream acceptance.

¹⁵ *Whiz Comics*, No 27. February 1942.

Their content, seen by many as either escapism or immature, reflects larger political and social themes and culture in the United States, from race to gender to sexuality to history. Much of the literature that exists focuses on newer comics and their place in modern-day society. However, from the introduction of Superman and their rise in popularity in 1938, comics have been indicative of both unconscious and purposeful ideas of race and race relations in the United States. From the outset, representation of minority characters in mainstream American comics has been rife with negative stereotypes and racist portrayals that mirrored the larger racialized thinking in the national mood. World War II brought new enemies and allies to be inducted into these spaces of racial thought through propaganda comics as well as continuing narratives of racial inferiority, paternalism, and gendered actions.

Mainstream comics offer an intimate view into the complexities of American racial ideology. With the introduction of Superman and superheroes in the late 1930s, their popularity grew at an exponential rate, giving the youth of the United States a space that put forth specific ideas about race, Americanness, and gender. As a look into both the unconscious white ideas of race and minorities and the deliberate attempts to influence racialized thinking—especially by way of dehumanizing wartime enemies—these comics provide a vital lens to critically analyze popular thought and culture during World War II. Not only do mainstream comics offer a visual and language-based source to analyze accepted forms of racism through wartime propaganda against the Germans and

Japanese, they also reveal more subtle forms of racialized thinking through degrading caricatured depictions of non-white characters, American paternalism toward “natives and savages,” sexual fears culminating in protection of white womanhood, and constructions of an ideal white maleness by mostly Jewish writers barely on the outside of social acceptance. As a hugely popular reading source for American youth, these comics contain insight into the dominant discourse on race and a cultural history of American social commentary and escapism.

This section will focus on the mainstream comics in the wartime years of the late 1930s early 1940s in an effort to provide an in-depth look at an era adjusting to changing notions of race and the transition of comics into the national spotlight. Professed to be written for the youth of America, these male superheroes, soldiers, adventurers, detectives and more revealed a darker side to the portrayal of these characters as an ideal construction of the white, heteronormative masculinity expected of Americans. The representation of non-white characters was composed of caricatures, either as simple, idiotic sidekicks or villains reliant on heavily racist stereotypes. Various racial concerns and ideas of the time, including the protection of white womanhood, defense of American male whiteness, Other-ing of foreign countries, and paternalistic views of non-white wartime allies like the Chinese were all reflected and heavily drawn upon in comics. In the decades following the civil rights movement, writers tried to fix these characterizations of non-white characters and move toward a more inclusive

representation (that was still often plagued by racial assumptions and stereotypes) but the initial content of comics in war period was rife with the dominant racism of the time.

Much of this was intentional, of course. Comics were a medium for American propaganda even before they entered the war. In Bradford W. Wright's writing on the youth culture of comic books, he notes that "government manuals encouraged the producers of entertainment to present American society as a great melting pot free of racial, ethnic, and class conflict—in other words, an image of American society that was far more united and integrated than American society really was. And, by their nature, comic books seemed well suited to perpetuate this desirable national fantasy."¹⁶ The racist depictions of African-Americans, Asians, and natives of foreign countries, meant to be playful and harmless, was neither. The similar adventure stories involving German Nazis and Japanese soldiers were meant to show their dangerous nature as well as dehumanize them as the enemy. However, the underlying racial project by these comic book writers was to promote and sustain the racial regime of white supremacy and non-white acceptance and compliance of this natural hierarchy.

This was doubly apparent in the realities of racism at home. As many African Americans noted, they had to fight a "double victory." Coined by a black cafeteria worker banned from enlisting in the segregated armed forces, James Thompson's phrase

¹⁶ Bradford W. Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2001), 35.

embodied the frustrations of black Americans who were called up on to fight fascism abroad while being discriminated against at home by their own country. As Ronald Takaki wrote “the army’s color line symbolized white domination in America.”¹⁷ The United States was waging war against Hitler and his racism while treating black Americans like second-class citizens with their Jim Crow army. The hypocrisy was also apparent with the treatment of Japanese Americans during the war. As John Dower noted, “the U.S. government incarcerated Japanese-Americans en masse, while taking no comparable action against residents of German or Italian origin... a characteristic of this level of anti-Japanese sentiment was the resort to nonhuman or subhuman representation... for many Japanese-Americans, the verbal stripping of their humanity was accompanied by humiliating treatment that reinforced the impression of being less than human.”¹⁸ Racism was inescapable as the United States discriminated against their own people while condemning Nazism abroad. It was in every form of popular media, and comics were no exception.

Comics have been traced back as far as 1842, but American comics became a popular form of media entertainment in the early 20th century, especially once comics strips became part of daily newspapers. Gerard Jones traces their rise of popularity to the growth of science fiction in the late 1920’s, writing that “for the first time, Americans

¹⁷ Ronald Takaki. *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II*. (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2000), 25.

¹⁸ John W. Dower. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 79-82.

were beginning to view the pursuit of novelty as an act of social duty and individual heroism.”¹⁹ Out of this fascination with heroes and otherworldly adventures came writers like Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster who created characters like Superman and reinvigorated the comics industry as a form of mass entertainment. In 1938, the appearance of Superman in *Action Comics #1* (and his secret identity as mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent) completely changed the industry, kicking off what many call the Golden Age of Comics. DC comics gained new, massive popularity as readers purchased comics in unprecedented numbers. Other publishers began to imitate the stories of a costumed hero fighting injustice at home and then in the war. Characters like The Bat-Man, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and Captain Marvel became hugely popular as well. Superheroes were not the only type of comics being written; detective stories like *The Spirit* and adventure stories like *Jungle Comics* and *Slam Bradley* were also widely read.

While not all of these stories revolved around criminal plots and wartime adventures involving German and Japanese antagonists, the majority of American mainstream comics included plots showing the triumph of patriotism and global unity against the Evil Axis. They operated both as a form of escapism as well as patriotic material. As Shirrel Rhoades, the former Marvel executive vice president asserted, “superheroes declared war on Germany and Japan long before the United States

¹⁹ Gerard Jones. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 33.

government did.”²⁰ With these stories revolving around foreign spies and insidious plots to harm Americans or to create conflict between the allies, they sent the clear message that no Nazis or Japanese could be trusted. Thus emerged the typical drawing of Nazis as evil, monstrous rat-like creatures and Japanese soldiers as inherently sneaky “Japs” with caricatured Asian features and stereotypically accented English. Clever and strong American troops or superheroes defeated by their racially inferior enemies by exploiting their natural stupidity. American identity in this war period was rooted in white racial superiority, benevolent guidance of lesser non-white Americans, and the overall united front against their enemies. This was complicated by Nazi visions of white supremacy and the general acceptance of German-Americans into the domestic sphere of whiteness, especially as writers distinguished between Germans and Nazis, but not between Japanese civilians and the Japanese army. Conflicted portrayals of these two groups were commonplace in war comics.

A typical phrase used in *Captain America* and other wartime comics was that of flushing out “Ratzi nests.”²¹ In these issues, *Captain America* and his sidekick Bucky Barnes easily flushed out these nests of Nazis using their superior tracking and fighting skills. The ultimate patriot, Cap symbolized the ideal white American manhood defeating anyone foolish enough to challenge the United States or their allies. Gleefully shouting

²⁰ Shirrel Rhoades. *A Complete History of American Comic Books*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 37.

²¹ *Captain America*, No. 2. April 1941.

“time for Captain America to go to work!” the hero always ensured a victory for the rightful country. The heroism of American soldiers was also the main theme of *Americommando*, a DC comic following the exploits of Tex Thompson, a regular Texan boy who donned a costume to fight for the U.S. In one such issue, Tex rescues a squadron of captured American soldiers by easily tricking the Japanese officials with the distraction of a music box and catching them by surprise. While fighting, he promises to make them “cry uncle: Uncle Sam!”²² In these war stories, it was obvious that Americans were superior in intelligence, morality, and race than their enemies. The writers incorporated this racial ideology into all of their war stories; in their view, American youth, especially boys, needed to understand the correct racial order of the world.

While both Nazis and Japanese characters were drawn with racialized appearances and speech, German characters could be redeemed but all Japanese characters were rendered as bad. Mirroring the hysteria and racism behind interning Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, all Japanese people— and consequently comic characters— were inherently evil and became exaggeratedly so after Pearl Harbor. An introduction to *Captain America No. 42* calls the Japanese officers who capture Cap and Bucky “murdering Japs,” while they taunt their captors with the slurs “yellow monkey,” and “nippo.”²³ There were no Japanese characters capable of

²² *Action Comics*, No. 71. April 1944.

²³ *Captain America*, No. 42. October 1944.

redemption in American comics. Their status as not just enemies of the U.S., but as non-white enemies, rendered their entire race as wicked. The most infamous Superman wartime cover was emblazoned with the valiant hero and a sign with the phrase: "Superman Says You Can Slap A Jap: With War Bonds and Stamps!" and a drawing of the typical caricature of a Japanese soldier.²⁴ Americans could see a difference between Germans and Nazis, but not between Japanese and the Japanese Imperial Army; to the American mind, they were one and the same.

Gordon Chang notes this as one of the failures of wartime liberalism. In his essay "Superman Is About To Visit The Relocation Centers & The Limits of Wartime Liberalism," he notes that the storyline where Superman and Lois Lane visit the Japanese internment camps shows the peculiar nature of racial politics in the United States during this time. Even those who declared themselves free of racism supported the rounding up and imprisonment of American citizens of Japanese descent. In the 1943 comic, an official at one of the camps tells the hero that "our main difficulty is that loyal Americans of Jap ancestry are indiscriminately mingled with enemy sympathizers who would be glad to sabotage our national welfare at the first opportunity. It's a delicate and difficult situation. Our government has done all but lean over backwards in its desire to be human and fair."²⁵ Superman agrees with the official and later stops a plot by one of the

²⁴ *Action Comics*, No. 58, March 1943.

²⁵ Gordon Chang. "Superman is About to Visit the Relocation Centers and the Limits of Wartime Liberalism." *Amerasia Journal*. 19, No. 1: 1993, 81.

internees to smuggle weapons out and escape. The message was clear: to ensure American safety, one couldn't take chances with any Japanese-Americans. The writers, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, were both Jewish authors advocating for their fellow Americans to be placed in camps while European Jews were being subjected to similar racial—although obviously deadlier—treatment abroad. They were including themselves in the sphere of American whiteness. Their loyalties were to their government and enforced the ideas that internment camps were necessary for the greater good. The idea of racial harmony could only go so far when faced with the supposed natural un-Americanism of Japanese. John Dower asserts that this portrayal of the Japanese was necessary to justify brutal American actions, that the “functional consequence of the pseudohistorical or pseudoanthropological notion of Japanese primitivism was to remove the perception of a savage enemy from the battlefield per se; to place it on the people, race, and culture as a whole; and to rationalize and legitimize thereby one's own savage acts of reprisal and retribution.”²⁶ By casting all Japanese—not just their soldiers—as essentially less than human, any American action against them was therefore absolved of any wrongdoing.

One of the themes of many wartime comics was that Hitler promoted evil, racism, and disunity but the allies had to resist this with global unity and understanding. As Richard Hall wrote in his Captain America dissertation, “The pages of these comics also

²⁶ John W. Dower. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 141.

exhibited racism consistent with the pre-Civil Rights Movement era, while simultaneously ignoring the irony of waging a war against such ideology...the United States was a racist nation fighting racism.”²⁷ This hypocrisy was most apparent in comics that featured Chinese allies. Though the Chinese were friends to Americans, they were still Asian and therefore portrayed by the writers and artists as simple, grateful imbeciles who were indebted to their paternalistic American allies for saving them from the Japanese. *Whiz Comic's* all-American hero Spysmasher and his Chinese sidekick Billy Li fought the Japanese together. In one issue, Billy Li speaks in halting English, proclaiming that “Confucius say...cannot win fight without fighting! As Billy Li say... We’re going to knock those Japs for a loop!” Spysmasher and his friend smile magnanimously down at him, remarking “Cute, isn’t he?” and “The Spirit of China!”²⁸

This attitude of American paternalism toward their political ally, the Chinese, who are portrayed as a naturally unsophisticated and naive Chinese race, was one that came out of the World War II context. As Wright noted, China “needed rehabilitation. Prior to Pearl Harbor, comic book villains had generally portrayed the Chinese as mysterious and sinister villains who schemed to promote racial domination...once events had made China an American ally, however, in comic books the Chinese became a peace-loving, albeit rather simple, people, and the Japanese became the standard bearers for the ugliest

²⁷ Richard A. Hall. *The Captain America Conundrum: Issues of Patriotism, Race, and Gender in Captain America Comic Books, 1941–2001*. (Dissertation: Auburn University, 2011), 37.

²⁸ *Whiz Comics, No. 42*. May 1943.

stereotypes of the yellow peril.”²⁹ The American heroes saved their little Chinese pals and then were thanked gratefully for their goodness to them. Brandon Seto noted that this was the wartime perception (pushed by the government) that “the Chinese needed U.S. support and assistance as Americans had a duty to guard their little Asian brother...not only did the United States have a responsibility to protect and to save its Asian charge, but also to uplift it.”³⁰

In the comic *Boy Commandos*, young Americans work together with a group of Chinese farmers led by Chang Pei to fight off a Japanese attack. After a successful fight, their ally proclaims “You fight for China. You enjoy Chang Pei’s hospitality. You owe nothing! We like learn American efficiency.”³¹ Comic book writers not only drew Chinese characters similarly to Japanese ones (as well as speaking the same broken English) but they were always deferential and humble to their white saviors. The political realities of wartime diplomacy necessitated comic book writers to include Chinese rehabilitation into their racial project.

Outside of wartime politics was the treatment of other minority or ethnic characters in line with American-style racism. African and African-American characters who were rarely even named were usually what Jeff Chang called “representations of

²⁹ Bradford W. Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2001), 49.

³⁰ Brandon P. Seto. “Paternalism and Peril: Shifting U.S. Racial Perceptions of the Japanese and Chinese Peoples from World War II to the Early Cold War.” *Asia Pacific Perspectives, Volume XIII*. (Spring/ Summer 2015), 63. <https://www.usfca.edu/center-asia-pacific/perspectives/v13/seto>

³¹ *Detective Comics, No. 99*. May 1945.

whiteness—the laughs were found in what whites were *not*...blackface design and minstrelsy.”³² Whiteness was constructed out of a superiority to Other-ed non-whiteness. African-Americans were bumbling, faithful sidekicks, drawn in the caricatured manner of other non-whites, with literal black skin, exaggerated white lips and ears, and short, monkey-ish bodies. Africans were savages, often called ape men in comics, and often depicted as threatening the “white men” that came to their land. There were also elements of sexual paranoia toward black men threatening white women that echoed white racial terror against black Americans.

Much like the “faithful souls” in the 1915 anti-integration and KKK propaganda film *Birth of A Nation*, African-American characters were portrayed as childlike, simple, and loyal servants or sidekicks to their masters. While missing from most war-based comics, these characters were very much a part of comics like *The Spirit* and *Whiz Comics*. They were either unnamed, as the devoted maid to in *Detective Comics* 38 who spoke in a minstrel show pattern of speech— “I’s e hurryin’ Miss Lora!”— or credited with offensively crude names like Whitewash of *Captain America* and *Young Allies* and Ebony White from *The Spirit*.³³ Much like the Chinese allies in war comics, African-American characters were written as grateful to their white masters and loyal enough to follow them into danger. In the detective series *The Spirit*, Ebony was a mix of sidekick

³² Jeff Chang, *Who We Be: The Colorization of America*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2014), 19-21.

³³ *Detective Comics*, No. 38. April 1940.

and servant to masked crimefighter The Spirit (Denny Colt). Drawn in the minstrel racial blackface style, Ebony invokes humor at the expense of a stereotypical idea of African-Americans while simultaneously advocating for a specific type of racial harmony. In the first issue of *The Spirit*, he protests his employer being framed for a murderer: “Mist’ Spirit *cain’t* be guilty!”³⁴ In issue No. 4, he also is shown to be ignorant and superstitious, never having heard of Cleopatra, and then being sold a love charm by a clever white salesman. Later, Ebony chuckles to himself having “sho’ put one over on dat man” before realizing the charm is (obvious to the readers) fake.³⁵ Ebony’s relationship with *The Spirit* was one of paternalism, contentment with his place, and obedience. This image of African-Americans as simple, deferent, and subservient to their white employers or companions followed white desires for what race relations should be rather than the reality of a growing dissatisfaction with how African-Americans were being treated by a nation that decried Nazi racism. In a changing social landscape with more and more tense race relations between black and white Americans, these comic book fantasies imagined an America where races coexisted peacefully— but with whites in their rightfully dominant place: leading society.

This was directly at odds with the reality of how black Americans felt about their treatment. Activist leaders like A. Philip Randolph were waging the Double Victory

³⁴ *The Spirit*. Vital Publications. 1944.

³⁵ *The Spirit*. Vital Publications. Spring 1946.

campaign to fight both European fascism and racism at home that called for black complacency in the face of white domination. In 1941, furious about the continuing inferior treatment of black Americans, Randolph met with President Roosevelt, “determined to make [him] do the right thing: translate the pronouncements of the democratic war aims abroad into practices of equality at home.”³⁶ Threatening a March on Washington by black Americans, Randolph pressed Roosevelt to end discrimination in the military and defense industry. The timing was perfect for black civil rights leaders; faced with a humiliating mass mobilization that could embarrass the United States on the global stage and set back war efforts, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 a week later. The order guaranteed that there would no longer be discrimination in the defense industry or government. Randolph canceled the march. In the end, however, the order proved ineffective in enforcing the desegregation of the industry. White laborers fought back against sharing jobs with black workers and the government made feeble attempts at decrying their actions. It was mostly the desperate need for labor and materials that helped black Americans gain employment.

Meanwhile, other comics focused on stereotypes of African as bloodthirsty savages or childlike natives in need of civilization. Fiction House’s *Jungle Comics* followed the exploits of white Tarzan-like characters living in the wilderness of Africa.

³⁶ Ronald Takaki. *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II*. (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2000), 40-41.

Characters like Kaanga, White Man of the Jungle, and Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, interacted with cannibals, slave traders (usually Arabs), and witch doctors. Drawing upon colonial mindsets, in one issue Africans were described as “ape-men” by Kaanga but kind, following his natural leadership as a white man as he fights off slave traders. Kaanga is shown as a hero who can lead the innocent natives out of danger.³⁷ In another issue, the introduction reads “a missionary and his daughter, teaching the doctrines of tolerance and goodwill toward men, is seized by the jealous witch doctor who incites the natives with savage hate and bloodlust.” The plot revolves around the witch doctor proclaiming his god as better than theirs and easily swaying the indigenous Africans to follow his wicked ways before being defeated by another white hero, The Red Panther.³⁸ Here, the innocent white Christian missionaries selflessly attempt to spread civilization to the primitive African culture; the justification of colonialism during the war is shown as benefiting the natives. At a time when Hitler’s racial ideology was explicit in its belief in Aryan superiority, colonialism of non-white countries was especially troubling with its racist overtones.

In another story, adventurer and hunter Roy Lance must rescue a film crew from the clutches of a dangerous leader of an African uprising. Billed as “the tribes of the African jungle, maddened by the blood cry of the fanatic Dawambo, lustful prince of the

³⁷ *Jungle Comics*. Fiction House. January 1940.

³⁸ *Jungle Comics*. Fiction House. February 1940.

Dark continent, rise up against the civilized world,” this story in particular showed the racialized thinking of white Americans. Not only was Dawambo described as an Oxford graduate, articulating white fears of educating black men, but also any opposition to Western countries was seen as opposing civilization itself. Dawambo and his naive “barbarians” are defeated by clever trickery by the film crew, showing the easiness of vanquishing foolish Africans. Black education is depicted as leading to challenging of both white supremacy of the “civilized” world and the imagined racial harmony. In segregated America, white resistance to black education was widespread and often enforced with defunding and violence. Another aspect of this plot line has movie star Joan being captured by the natives. The text read “suddenly, rough black hands grip Joan’s arms...she is dragged to the chief’s camp.”³⁹ The description of the native’s black hands manhandling a white woman echoed the narrative of black men lusting after white women and the justification of white violence against them in the United States.

Especially in the South, violence often erupted over white male sexual paranoia that black men wanted their women. In his study of black Southerners in the early 20th century, Leon Litwack noted that this “protection of white womanhood” was enforced by the idea that “blacks, after all, possessed a dual nature: They were docile and amiable when enslaved or severely repressed, but savage, lustful, and capable of murder and

³⁹ *Jungle Comics*. Fiction House. February 1940.

mayhem when free and uncontrolled.”⁴⁰ White comic book writers drew upon these fears and beliefs and recreated them as essential in the nature of African-American and African comic book characters. Sensationalized accounts of wild Africans kidnapping and threatening white women played into these ideas of inherent rapacious sexuality and were drawn upon for plots. In an issue of *Action Comics*, hero Brett Coleman embarks on a mission with his faithful sidekick Cottonball (yet another blackface caricatured character) to rescue the white woman Merna, kidnapped by savages in the South Sea. The image accompanying the short story shows Merna tied up and helpless, surrounded by pitch-black Africans threatening her. This playing on fears of black male rapists was used as a plot device as well as showing the “good” type of black character—loyal Cottonball, who obey his master’s every word and helps him save Merna.⁴¹ This dual nature of black men, as Litwack noted, was fine when African-Americans remained submissive to whites but shown as flawed and wild when left in the jungles of Africa. Colonialism and racism were intertwined in these comics. The gendered nature of this type of racism was shown in the duty of white men to protect white women as well as justify an American empire.

Along the same lines of sensationalizing and essentializing Africa was the treatment of non-white characters in foreign countries. Travel adventures as mass entertainment were popular and comic books often had storylines following a brave

⁴⁰ Leon Litwack. *Trouble In Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1998), 302.

⁴¹ *Action Comics, No. 1*. June 1938.

white, male hero navigating exotic places and people. Most Asian and Middle Eastern characters appeared in these plotlines as bumbling sidekicks or conniving, often white-hating villains. *Action Comics* had a plethora of these stories. The imagined adventures of Marco Polo were detailed monthly as the traveler explored the Orient, risking his life against “bands of howling savages” and emerging triumphant through his wit and skill.⁴² Another popular character was Zatarra, a magician who could cast spells by saying phrases backwards. He and his loyal manservant Tong were also explorers of foreign lands and experienced fantastic cultures and dangerous adventures. Tong, much like the African-American sidekicks in other stories, was portrayed as faithful and childlike. Apparently an East Indian character, he wore a turban and harem pants. Superstitious and speaking in broken English, Tong was easily fooled by Zatarra’s disguise in one story, exclaiming “You scare me master, acting like a ghost!”⁴³ Following Zatarra across the world, Tong and his “master” were exposed to different non-white cultures; throughout their exploits, Tong is deferent and willing to risk his life to save Zatarra.

The villains of these stories were drawn as greedy and conniving, but easily tricked or defeated by the white adventurers. In one story, Zatarra’s nemesis, Tigress, is kidnapped by an Arab slave trader who tells her “my beauteous one— your sale at Akka will bring a high price. Rarely is a white woman sold there!” The trader’s route is then

⁴² *Action Comics*, No. 1. June 1938.

⁴³ *Action Comics*, No. 2. July 1938.

described as thus: “the Arab stallions flit like ghosts over the desert toward the walls of Akka—”⁴⁴ Multiple layers of racialized thinking are portrayed through these stories. Once again, non-white characters fit into two stereotypes: evil, racist villains or the “good” type of minority, the faithful sidekick. Tong’s name, his speech, and his dress conveyed the ideal non-white person: simple but submissive to their white betters. The flip side of this was the non-white villain who lusted after white women and challenged racial subjugation. White womanhood was seen as the duty of white men to protect; even though Tigress was an adversary of Zatara, her virtue and freedom were imperative through their shared whiteness and her status as a white woman in danger from dark, rapacious men. These white conceptions of foreign races and people were shaped by what post-colonialist scholar Edward Said defined as Orientalism in 1978: “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes and remarkable experiences.”⁴⁵ This idea that foreign cultures were inherently different, exotic, and inferior trickled into American thought on culture in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa and therefore justified European and American empire building.

Characters like Zatara echoed imperialistic notions of foreign cultures that stemmed from ideas of empire and non-white inability to govern. In another story, he and

⁴⁴ *Action Comics*, No. 6. November 1938.

⁴⁵ Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. (New York: Random House, 1978), 1.

Tong traveled to Africa to suppress a native uprising of Zulus that had started a rebellion. Using his magic powers, Zatara overpowered the Zulus who called him their “white wizard” and promised to reform their ways.⁴⁶ Wright described these ideas as “the hero, though Western in Outlook, understood the ways of the savage land better than the native people. Their intervention was needed because the childlike nonwhite peoples—whether well-meaning or malicious—inevitably proved woefully incapable of self-government. Left to themselves, they fell prey to manipulation and domination by false prophets, evil chieftains, and hostile foreign agents.”⁴⁷ This last point was of no small importance during the war. The outgrowth of the Axis armies into neighboring countries enforced fear of their influence. Comics reinforced the belief that only Western thought and leadership could free these easily fooled, simple countries and guide them toward democracy and civilization.

Yet the writers behind these stories did not merely racially dehumanize wartime enemies or depict foreign cultures and non-white characters as inferior; they also projected a constructed ideal of American male whiteness. Female characters were few and far between; when they were included in a story they were usually white and needed rescuing from the male hero. Even plucky characters like Betty Ross in *Captain America* were ultimately shown the dangers of being too adventurous as women. Wonder Woman

⁴⁶ *Action Comics*, No. 7. December 1938.

⁴⁷ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2001), 36.

was an exception to this depiction of women as the star of her own comic and a strong, smart superhero. Yet even her stories often led to her being captured; her male creator William Moulton Marston projected his own fantasies of bondage and female captivity into her stories. In addition to this, non-white female characters were usually exoticized and stereotyped beauties. The white male protagonists of these comics varied in age, from young heroes and soldiers to older crimefighters and leaders, but all shared the an ideal of bravery, strength, cleverness, and inherent superiority from not just their race, but their status as white Americans. These white male Americans were inherently meant to make the world a better place. Jerry Siegel, one of the creators of Superman wrote “I wondered what I would do if I could make things better. What would I do if I weren’t so meek and mild, and if I were stronger than anyone else?”⁴⁸ Much of this was also due to the large number of Jewish writers and artists in the comic book industry in the early years.

Before the end of World War II, Americans Jews had been on the outskirts of whiteness. Described by historian David R. Roediger as part of the group of what were considered “new immigrants” (mostly from Eastern and Southern Europe), these groups in between accepted white groups and non-white groups like African-Americans and Asians were excluded from mainstream white society. Roediger noted that the New Deal “brought new immigrants more fully into the hopelessly intertwined traditions of

⁴⁸ Jerry Siegel. Quoted by Paul Levitz. *The Golden Age of DC Comics: 1935-1956*. (Los Angeles: Taschen America, 2013), 93.

exclusion-based white nationalism and inclusive efforts and reform” but full incorporation of Jews, Italians, Greeks and others included in this in-between category of whiteness wouldn’t take place until the postwar era.⁴⁹ Eric Goldstein argued that in the years before the war, American Jews were torn between their desire to achieve full acceptance into white society but also to maintain their essential Jewishness. They “experimented with their uncertain place in the “black” and “white” world as producers and consumers of popular culture.”⁵⁰

Navigating this uncertainty led most Jewish comic writers and publishers to embrace a more assimilative approach and leave out noticeable or outright markers of their Jewish identity. As many historians of the comic book industry have noted, the Jewish writers who created these characters and stories were influenced by this sense of almost-belonging and desire to be accepted. Gerard Jones argued that men like Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Jack Liebowitz, Bob Kahn, and Stanley Lieber who revolutionized the industry with superheroes were “all Jewish kids, the sons of immigrants, many of them misfits in their own communities. They were all two or three steps removed from the American mainstream but were more poignantly in touch with the desires and agonies of that mainstream than those in the middle of it.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ David R. Roediger. *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*. (Cambridge: Basic Books, 2005), 234.

⁵⁰ Eric L. Goldstein. “Contesting the Categories: Jews and Government Racial Classification in the United States.” *Jewish History*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2005), 80.

⁵¹ Gerard Jones. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), xv.

These writers brought their immigrant angst to their work and created the ultimate white male Americans that wished they could be. Paul Levitz attributed this to “the immigrant publishers and talent wanted to pass as part of the American majority and to have their characters pass, too.”⁵² There was little discussion of cultural identity, religion, or minority-based issues for their heroes. Jewish writers who often had changed their last names to more anglicized versions— including Bob Kahn to Bob Kane, Jacob Kurtzberg to Jack Kirby, Stanley Lieber to Stan Lee, etc— were quick to leave their Jewish identity out of their character’s self-identification or even discussion in their stories. Their heroes were invulnerable, clever, highly intelligent and more importantly, firmly secure in their place in mainstream society. They echoed the racialized thinking of the white America that they so desperately wished to be accepted into. If the Jewish comic book industry writers, publishers, and artists couldn’t be fully integrated into mainstream American culture, their characters could take their place.

Therefore, their part in the racial project of comics was to project this ideal white male Americanness that they were not allowed to be wholly accepted into. At a time when ethnicity-based theories of race were challenging the old biological theories that condemned Jews and other in-between immigrant groups as racially inferior, these writers created a world where whiteness was within reach. This aspect of racial depiction in comics then combined with political motivation, wartime fears, and desires to sustain a

⁵² Paul Levitz. *The Golden Age of DC Comics: 1935-1956*. (Los Angeles: Taschen America, 2013), 35.

racial hierarchy with whites at the top. Not only did the writers create plots and characters that could voice these demands, but they could market them to a young audience as a form of escapism.

As an outlet for propaganda for the war effort against Germany and Japan, comics sold patriotism as a cover for white supremacist political arguments. The interspersing of wartime plot lines with pro-imperialist rationales and depictions of non-white characters as suitable when deferential was part of the many-layered racial project that composed comics in the 1930's and 1940's. Far from the simple childish stories that many imagine them to be, comics are a way to understand the intricate, complex, and often contradictory political attitudes held by white Americans as well as the changing social and racial landscape. This was not limited to the context of World War II; race and representation in comics remains part of a racial project to this day. This era was simply marked by the blatant white supremacist characters, plot lines and rendering of its characters. After all, if Superman, the most powerful man on Earth, said you can slap a Jap, who would argue with him?

Chapter 2: The 1950s: “That Kind of Talk is Un-American!” - Superman

The immediate postwar era proved difficult for the comics industry. With the defeat of the world’s greatest enemy— Hitler and his allies— their characters had lost an antagonist that brought everyone together. Suddenly, the urgency of war comics, and every other genre that had drawn from reality for plots, was gone. As Bradford Wright noted, “collectively, comic books helped to reinforce the immediacy of the war to a young home-front audience fighting it largely on imagination alone.”⁵³ Without the easily recognizable evil of Nazis and their enemies and the supposed triumph of liberalism in postwar America, who would be the enemy? A multitude of problems came to plague the wildly successful industry. First, the lack of an obvious, real-life enemy contributed to the failure to draw in new readers. Superheroes declined as well. The glut of characters and publishers that had emerged during the war meant an over saturation of the market and a growing exhaustion with so many larger than life characters (many of whom were clear rip-offs of older heroes). Genres like westerns, romance, crime, and horror grew more popular, especially the gory horror and crime stories from EC Comics, led by the boisterous William Gaines.

⁵³ Bradford Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2001), 55.

Cold War politics also contributed to the larger confusion of how the comics industry would evolve. Though comics tried to paint Communists as a great of a threat to the world as Nazis, they simply weren't as popular nor as obviously villainous. The blatant racism of war comics was no longer acceptable. The United States was trying to prove itself a cornerstone of justice and equality, the leader of the free world, on a global stage. Meanwhile, it was battling domestic racism at home that was very much at odds with the American desire to be seen as a liberal democracy. How could the U.S. justify its global anti-Communist crusade when it was allowing its non-white citizens, especially black Americans, to be denied equal rights and treated inhumanely? The civil rights movement was gaining traction at home while decolonization efforts all over the world were doing the same. Thomas Borstelmann described this phenomenon as a "fundamental change in its race relations. Both at home and abroad, people of color mobilized in the late 1950s to overcome racial discrimination and colonialism. Most whites resisted this challenge to their traditional authority...[Eisenhower] took a few symbolic steps to accommodate the new realities of a changing global racial order, like desegregating Washington's public spaces and trying to avoid close identification with segregationism or colonialism...[but] remained in part blinded by their nostalgia for the stability of the white-ruled era now slipping away."⁵⁴ The tension of global, but

⁵⁴ Thomas Borstelmann. *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 133-134.

especially domestic, race relations affected comics directly. The effortless racism of the war era was not as easily accepted anymore. Furthermore, Americans wary of the growing call from black Americans for equality were unwilling to look to escapist comics for more mentions of race.

Another development in the confusing racial hierarchy of the United States was the progression of Jews into the sphere of whiteness. The early twentieth century biological racism that had followed Jews wherever they went was now linked with Nazi-style racism and deemed unacceptable. Almost-white immigrant groups (mostly southern and eastern Europeans) that had previously been seen a racial menace were now being accepted into this privileged status of whiteness. As Eric Goldstein argues, there was a “growing American consensus that the only true racial distinctions were those based on color.”⁵⁵ Jewish comic book writers, many of whom had served in the war (such as Jack Kirby and Stan Lee), now were being enveloped into the mainstream acceptance they had so desired. The urgency of turning public sentiment against Nazis and their anti-Semitism had mostly vanished with the end of the war. Many were still dedicated to the idea of American liberalism, but felt that they didn’t have to be as strident as before.

The comics industry had attracted so many Jews in the early days for multiple reasons. The war comics boom and the huge demand for material meant easy access to

⁵⁵ Eric L. Goldstein. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 203.

jobs that were not readily available in other trades. Being a comic book writer was not a particularly prestigious career, but for many Jews shut out of other industries it was a way to support themselves or gain entry into publishing. As Gerard Jones pointed out, for those “who wanted social acceptance, that meant an aggressive pursuit of respectability. The trouble was, there was suddenly a great deal of money to be made in comics that were not so respectable.”⁵⁶ However, as the comics craze died down and Jews were being accepted into white mainstream society, the overwhelming number of them in the industry began to fade. In the postwar era, many left comics to pursue more lucrative or reputable jobs. Jones noted that “when the comics collapsed, the cartoonists who’d been there from the beginning were entering their forties...most of them left the business, including many of the best. A lot went to advertising, where they had less freedom and control of their work but discovered the world gave a great deal more respect to men who drew car ads than those who made up superheroes.”⁵⁷ The evolution of writers and artists became more apparent in the 1960s when comics became popular again; older workers were pushed out as younger, more energetic fans clamored to write for the beloved comics they had grown up with.

Meanwhile, by far the biggest threat to the industry was the anti-comics psychiatrist, Dr. Fredric Wertham. Convinced that comics were causing juvenile

⁵⁶ Gerard Jones. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. (New York City: Basic Books, 2004), 236.

⁵⁷ Gerard Jones. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. (New York City: Basic Books, 2004), 281.

delinquency through their depictions of violence, sex, and carefree crime, Wertham led a relatively successful crusade to convince the public that their children were being corrupted. He was also one of the earliest critics to point out the obvious racism in comics and the effect upon children. Using his own research on sociocultural behaviors, McCarthy-era fear tactics, and the general uneasiness over youth culture in America, Wertham even testified in front of Congress (along with editors like William Gaines in self-defense) of the dangers of comics. This, along with readers' waning interest in comics as they aged, hurt the industry greatly in the waning years of the 1940s and early 1950s. The combination of these postwar events and changes transformed how race was depicted in the the decades following, and helps to illuminate the nature of racial politics and thought in postwar America.

Although the barefaced racism of the war era was toned down following the Allied victories, it failed to disappear completely. As the interest in superheroes declined, comic book publishers pushed their other genres. Jungle Comics remained relatively popular until the mid-50s, continuing with their depiction of African natives as childlike and easily misled. There were fewer storylines about natives being turned against their white friends, but rather more of the white savior trope, in which white heroes like Kaanga saved their less intelligent counterparts. Even in 1960, popular heroes like Supergirl rescued hapless natives in an unnamed African jungle from wild animals. As she flew away, she even remarks offhandedly that "hmm...the natives are bowing before

us!”⁵⁸ In many stories, there was more of an emphasis on coming together in the face of the enemy— but the enemy was less clearly defined than it had been during the war. The racial project of WWII had faded, leaving behind mixed messages from different publishers.

The Spirit, with its already offensively drawn sidekick Ebony White, added another racially characterized character, Blubber, to its pages in 1950. Much like White, Blubber was drawn with exaggerated features. With the buckteeth, stilted speech, and cartoonishly slanted eyes that were typical of Oriental stereotypes of the past, Blubber was a loyal, bumbling sidekick like Ebony, establishing that these depictions didn't completely vanish after the war.⁵⁹ The two were used as comic relief, mostly through plot lines ridiculing their simple natures and ridiculous speech that were tied to racial caricatures.

Westerns were also becoming a larger part in pop culture, and comics proved no exception. Not only were Western-themed comics growing in popularity, but superhero comics were adding the theme to their own storylines. In these stories, American Indians were often being taken advantage of by villainous white settlers. White heroes would save them, in an oddly ahistorical retelling of the actual encounters that early Americans had with indigenous people. Superman in particular, had many plots in the early 1950's,

⁵⁸ “The World’s Mightiest Cat!” *Supergirl*, *Action Comics*. DC Comics. July No. 266.

⁵⁹ *The Spirit*. Vital Publications. January 1950.

where he and Lois Lane would somehow time travel into the past and save the “noble savages” from whatever unfavorable situation they were in. In one tale, Lois took the place of Pocahontas and Superman of John Smith and negotiated a peace treaty between tribes (while also playing the imagined historical roles). In the end, it was revealed that a white colonist had dressed up as a “great spirit” and tricked the natives into almost going to war.⁶⁰ There were advertisements for “straight arrow good luck rings” in Batman comics, as the superhero also had adventures with American Indians.⁶¹ American Indians were still the sidekicks of the white heroes and retained the loyal, noble savage trope of the war years.

In this vein, attempts to create a new war comics genre based on the Cold War met with mixed success. The immense popularity of the previous decade’s storylines were hard to duplicate. Timely attempted to bring back the nostalgia of the war days with a revamped Captain America in 1953, now dubbed “Captain America...Commie Smasher!” with storylines that placed sinister communists in the role of Nazis. Simply put, it was a failure and was canceled within a year. In spite of certain language that endeavored to paint the Soviet Union as an “atmosphere of oriental secrecy and conspiracy” like George Kennan’s Long Telegram, it proved improbable (and failed to

⁶⁰ *Superman*, No. 77. DC Comics. July/ August 1952.

⁶¹ *Batman*, No. 58. DC Comics. April/ May 1950.

meet the standards of success of the war years) to attack Soviets on the basis of race.⁶² This would not be the case with war comics based on the Korean War, full of racial stereotypes similar to those in WWII. Yet even these failed to gain much traction with readers. Writers like Harvey Kurtzman at EC Comics (already known for their more liberal and divergent comics) were determined to provide a gritty look at war and provide a more humanizing look at Korean soldiers. This refusal to buy into the “yellow peril” stereotype or blindly accept America’s wars was a theme often shown in Kurtzman’s comics. One such example was a panel that showed the aftermath of an American soldier shooting a Korean opponent— only to catch sight of the dead man’s photos of his loved ones.⁶³ This reminder of humanity and the artists’ refusal to draw Koreans in the exaggerated Oriental stereotypes of the past was an understated but important contribution to comics at the time. EC Comics were more committed to liberal ideas and anti-racist comics than any other company of the time, but their violent crime and horror comics would draw negative attention from anti-comics crusaders like Frederic Wertham.

For the most part, storylines with nonwhite characters were few and far between in the early years of the Cold War. It was a marked difference from the war years. Even though some publishers liked Allied Publications wanted to promote liberal values, they were more inclined to offer empty gestures. In a book cover released in 1949, Superman

⁶² George Kennan. Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall ["Long Telegram"], February 22, 1946. *Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers*. https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/6-6.pdf

⁶³ Harvey Kurtzman. “Enemy Assault!” *Frontline Combat*. EC Comics. 1951.

gives a PSA, reminding readers to “remember, boys and girls, your school—like our country—is made up of Americans of many different races, religions, and national origins, so...if YOU hear anybody talk against a schoolmate or anyone else because of his religion, race or national origin—don’t wait: tell him THAT KIND OF TALK IS UN-AMERICAN.”⁶⁴ This sentiment, while well-intentioned, wasn’t supported by the comics themselves. National Allied Publications had only white heroes with the occasional nonwhite sidekick. Unlike EC Comics, they stayed far away from storylines that talked explicitly about race or the state of racial affairs in the United States. Ignoring the devastating racism at home while claiming tolerance and freedom as fundamentally American was a cornerstone of Cold War consensus politics. It was easy to write such statements into their storylines or PSAs and embrace the community over individuality themes of the 1950s, no matter the divided state of racial affairs in the U.S. While comics depicted the United States as an egalitarian society to look up to, American politicians were torn between wanting to preserve the traditional white supremacist structure at home and claiming global leadership as a democratic country.

The next significant impact on the comic book industry was the efforts of Fredric Wertham. The influential psychiatrist that had worked with juvenile delinquents in his career and had become convinced that comic books were the cause of their behavior had

⁶⁴ *Superman*. Book Cover Art. (Nat’l Comics Pub. Inc. Distributed by The Institute For American Democracy Inc., 1949).

testified before Congress twice, in 1950 and 1951. Unsatisfied with the results (there were no conclusions from Congress about the reality of the basis of these claims or if any steps should be taken), Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. Using his research (although it was heavily skewed and later revealed to have fabricated stories), the almost 400-page book detailed the horrors of the comic book industry and the effects comics had on children. He argued that youth sexual deviancy, violence, and homosexuality all originated from reading comics. He even decried racism found in war-era comics although he failed to take into account anti-racist comics that had been coming out from EC. As mentioned before, Wertham's sensational work drew upon a heavily flawed idea of causation for juvenile delinquency. This didn't stop public pressure from yet another hearing being called in April of 1954. EC Comics in particular were targeted, with its publisher William Gaines testifying in court to defend his company's often graphic plot lines. In the end, no official action was taken by Congress.

Instead, the second Comics Code was created. A similar one had come around in the 1940s, intended to be a self-censoring code by publishers. The second one was meant to assuage public outcry over the more violent comics. Enacted in October 1954 by the industry-established Comics Magazine Associate of America, the code placed restrictions on every type of genre. Following the concerns of Wertham and other anti-comics advocates, the code provided detailed instructions on how to prohibit depictions of crime, violence, gore, profanity, sexual overtones, extramarital relations, and advertising. An

important part of the code noted that “ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible.”⁶⁵ Intended to revamp the comic industry’s image as a wholesome, American market for youth, it instead hurt them. Many publishers dropped out of the business as sales dropped. Competing with television and rock ’n’ roll would have been daunting without the advent of the code and the negative publicity surrounding comics. It would take a new kind of superhero to revitalize the industry— which came about with the arrival of Marvel’s Fantastic Four in 1962.

⁶⁵ General Standards Part B: Religion. Comics Code. *Comics Magazine Association of America*. 1954.

Chapter 3: The 1960s: “So long as love, not hatred, fills men’s hearts—the day of the tyrant is ended!” -Captain America

Diverging from the standard types of superhero who were straightforward, upstanding moral citizens, the Fantastic Four were created by Stan Lee to be emphatically human characters who were flawed and constantly fought with each other. As Marvel researcher Pierre Comtois noted, “the decade of the sixties was a time of vast social upheaval when many began to reappraise the status quo...the trends opened the public mind to the worth of such products of popular culture as comic books and the possibility that they could be more than disposable art created for children.”⁶⁶ The 1960s would be a decade marked by Stan Lee and Marvel (having evolved from Timely to Atlas to Marvel in 1961) transforming superheroes and the social relevance of comics. Pushing for liberal values and off-kilter characters that appealed to teens and college students in the midst of counterculture, Lee and his team changed the industry itself. Superheroes became wildly popular again, but for much different reasons than the Golden Age heroes they owed their existence to. National Comics Publications (formerly National Allied Publications and Detective Comics and eventually DC Comics) would follow suit, revamping their popular heroes to follow this trend.

⁶⁶ Pierre Comtois. *Marvel Comics in the 1960's: An Issue by Issue Field Guide To A Pop Culture Phenomenon*. (Raleigh: TwoMorrrows Publishing, 2009), 6.

What marked this period was not only the introductions of flawed, oddball heroes like the Fantastic Four, Iron Man, and The Incredible Hulk, and liberal social commentary, but also faltering attempts to create a new standard for characters of color. As the decade wore on, Marvel and DC ushered in nonwhite characters like Black Panther, Black Lightning, and the Falcon in the mid-to-late 1960s. Part of this was most certainly a marketing effort to gain new readers but Lee also was concerned with creating content relevant to his readers. Storylines involving anti-Communism, the civil rights movement, counterculture, and imperfect heroes striving to make the world better were rampant during this time. This didn't mean that racial stereotypes disappeared altogether. Well-meaning white writers strove to be more inclusive with their nonwhite characters (even finally drawing background crowds without an all-white cast) but often fell back on white racial understanding and offensive stereotypes; what Bradford Wright called a "belated but meaningful comic book illustration of American as a multiracial society."⁶⁷ The effects of the civil rights movement and general upheaval of American society and liberalism had a profound influence on the comic book industry, especially Marvel. There was still a propensity for heavily anti-communist rhetoric and unintentionally racist plot lines and characters, but the comics industry reflected racial ideology of the time and attempted to put forth their own ideas about American society and people.

⁶⁷ Bradford Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2001), 219.

One of the leading Marvel heroes to push anti-communist rhetoric and retain old-fashioned racial stereotypes and tropes was Iron Man. Introduced in 1963, billionaire Tony Stark was kidnapped by communists in Vietnam to work for them until his death before being saved by a Chinese scientist, Professor Yinsen. Yinsen, while a far cry from the Oriental tropes of the war years, is still drawn with a Fu Manchu mustache and follows the nonwhite sidekick path: being loyal to the white hero at the cost of his own life. As he buys time for Stark to transform into Iron Man, he desperately thinks to himself, “My life is of no consequence! But I must buy time for Iron Man to live!”⁶⁸ Iron Man comics were both a source of traditional Oriental tropes embodied by his nemesis The Mandarin and the Marvel viewpoint of the Vietnam War. Communist characters (usually Vietcong) were shown as manipulative and cruel to innocent Vietnamese villagers who were often rescued by the ultimate white savior: Iron Man.⁶⁹

A holdover from the early days of Orientalist villains who were cunning and mysterious by nature, Iron Man’s foe The Mandarin embodied all of the old tropes. He would even show up as a villain in other heroes’ books, using phrases like “By the shrine of my *ancestors*...he has *escaped!*”⁷⁰ With his Fu Manchu-style mustache, long fingernails, arrogance, and elaborate plans to take over the world, he muses that “it took

⁶⁸ *Tales of Suspense*, No. 39. Marvel. March 1963. Reprinted in *Marvel Comics in the 1960s: An Issue by Issue Field Guide To A Pop Culture Phenomenon*. (Raleigh: TwoMorrrows Publishing, 2009), 34.

⁶⁹ In the 2008 movie version, the villains are updated to be modern Afghani terrorists while Yinsen is played by the Iranian actor Shaun Toub.

⁷⁰ “Within the Castle Waits the Captive!” *Captain America*, No. 125. Marvel. May 1970.

all my supreme skills...my matchless genius...my oriental patience to achieve the impossible...only by combining the mystic secrets of the far east with the scientific wonders of the west...can such a feat be accomplished!"⁷¹ The traditional Other-ing of Asians from the "east" by juxtaposing them directly against the white "west" held onto the stereotypes of Asian characters being inherently crafty, patient, secretive, and shrouded in mysticism. Characters defined by their western nation (and who were overwhelmingly white) were predisposed to turn to science, rationalism, and reason. The Mandarin derisively calls Iron Man westerner and boasts of his "scheme which will weaken American defenses for my eventual conquest."⁷² Not only was he a foe of Iron Man himself, but also of American values that Iron Man represented.

The other common theme in Iron Man comics was that of communism versus capitalism. Capitalist nations were referred to as the "civilized world."⁷³ In storylines that involved Russian villains, they often spoke in language that mocked what writers saw as misguided confidence in their outclassed, bolstering competence. Russian communists were not drawn with exaggerated racial features, but their speech was often peppered with exclamations of "da!" and "comrade." In one plot, their brash arrogance is shown in their unwillingness to admit defeat, as one character declares that their nefarious plot is "a chance to *redeem* ourselves in the eyes of the world" and later

⁷¹ "Ultimo Lives!" *Tales of Suspense*, No. 77. Marvel. May 1966.

⁷² "Once More...The Mandarin!" *The Invincible Iron Man*, No. 10. Marvel. February 1969.

⁷³ "Victory!" *Tales of Suspense featuring Iron Man and Captain America*, No. 83. Marvel. May 1966.

exclaims that “our months of work...the millions of rubles we spent...must not have been in *vain!*”⁷⁴ While not as racially drawn as The Mandarin or the Nazis of the past, communists were shown to be overconfident and willing to risk anything—including the livelihood of their own people—in an attempt to show their power on a world stage.

Issues of Iron Man that addressed the Vietnam War followed the theme of communists putting the party over their own people. In general, Vietnam War was underplayed in contrast to the overwhelming plot usage of World War II in comics. Not only was Vietnam much more controversial, but many college students were avid Marvel fans. Iron Man embodied the Cold War assumptions of Marvel the most, but still attempted (for the most part) to distinguish communists from what they saw as the innocent villagers of Vietnam. One Vietnamese villain turned anti-hero named Half-Face ruminated on his past, observing in his monologue that:

“How much *younger* I was—those long years ago—when it first *started!* When the red regime hid me in this castle, deep in the vastness of Vietnam, to develop a new type of *explosive* for them! Even *then*, the peasants knew nothing of my true purpose! ...they had no reason to suspect the word of the communists—not *yet!* My wife—my child—both are far away—and I am forbidden to visit them! For the *party* is far more than any *man*—than any *family!* And yet, I cannot keep my

⁷⁴ “The Return of the Titanium Man!” *Tales of Suspense featuring Iron Man and Captain America*, No. 81. Marvel. September 1966.

thoughts away from the humble village of my birth—a village of peace, and contentment—before *they* took over!”⁷⁵

Iron Man’s heroic action then saves Half-Face’s family when his innocent village is endangered. The Vietcong’s reckless actions would have sacrificed the lives of everyone living there to advance their dubious cause. Iron Man convinces him to embrace democracy, and he exclaims “no longer do I serve the oppressors! From this moment on—I fight for freedom.”⁷⁶ This Marvel ideology reasoned that not only was there a stark contrast between Vietnamese communists and those stuck in the middle of war, but also that white American heroes would be able to rescue innocents from the horrors of war and were true defenders of democracy. Iron Man became the updated white savior for the Cold War, saving the peasants from their overlord oppressors, while spreading American democracy and values throughout the uncivilized world.

Captain America, brought back after the disastrous Commie Smasher line of the 1950s, also featured in many war storylines. Stan Lee and his writers explained that Cap had actually been frozen in ice in suspended animation after the war; the man who everyone thought was him in the postwar era was actually a zealous imposter. Hoping to draw in old readers with the nostalgic hero and update him for a new generation, Lee and

⁷⁵ “Back Again!! Stronger Than Ever!! The Titanium Man!” *Tales of Suspense featuring Iron Man and Captain America*, No. 93. Marvel. September 1967.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

his co-plotter/penciler Jack Kirby wanted a hero that embodied American values, liberalism, and freedom while remaining apart from the government. Wright wrote that this was in opposition to DC characters; that “the demands of World War II and the Cold war had subverted whatever individuality superheroes like Superman and Batman had once possessed for the sake of the national consensus.”⁷⁷ Like other Marvel heroes before, Cap was a morally upright person but still committed to questioning authority. He was also a man out of his time and trying to adjust to life in a new world.

The team behind Cap in the last half of the 1960s created storylines that both reinforced old racial stereotypes and challenged them. Vietnamese communists were usually drawn in racial caricature (though not as extreme as the war days) and several “flashback” comics that showed Cap’s war days retained the old epithets of “ratzis.”⁷⁸ There was even an issue that showed Cap reliving his war days (thanks to the villainous Adaptoid’s hypnotic sedative) when he references the death of his old enemy Fang the Warlord (an egregiously drawn Japanese villain from the 1940s) in the “blaze of battle—in *Hiroshima* when the *bomb* was dropped!”⁷⁹ By framing the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima in 1945 as a battle and noting that enemies were defeated by the controversial action, the writers justified American wartime policies. Ronald Takaki describes this as

⁷⁷ Bradford Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2001), 207.

⁷⁸ “The Fantastic Origin of the Red Skull!” *Tales of Suspense featuring Iron Man and Captain America*, No. 66. Marvel. June 1965.

⁷⁹ “The Maddening Mystery of the Inconceivable Adaptoid!” *Tales of Suspense featuring Iron Man and Captain America*, No. 82. Marvel. October 1966.

having started with Pearl Harbor; that “the sudden devastation of the Pacific fleet and the immense loss of life [had] set in motion a racialized rage that would lead to the mass internment of Japanese Americans and later the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.”⁸⁰

Yet even with these holdovers of racially insensitive comics, the first African-American superhero, Sam Wilson, was introduced in 1969 as an occasional partner or sidekick to Cap. Known as the Falcon, he was an intelligent, winged hero from Harlem that worked with Cap to bring order to the city. In the 1970s, he would also navigate racial tensions in New York City. There had been other significant black characters in Marvel history in 1963 with Gabe Jones as part of the Nick Fury-led team The Howling Commandoes, and in 1966, the Black Panther, an African King. These were significant leaps, even in the midst of traditional racial notions that informed the plot lines surrounding Vietnamese and Asian characters. Marvel was the first mainstream comics company to not only add nonwhite heroes to their lineup, but also to attempt to address racial tensions. This would be more prevalent in the 1970s but the 1960s showed the early efforts.

In the first year that Cap returned, he was featured in the *Tales Of Suspense* line first as a featured guest of Iron Man before getting his own individual stories. In January 1965, he faced off against the Vietcong as an independent soldier, hoping to bargain with

⁸⁰ Ronald Takaki. *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II*. (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2000), 19.

a general for the release of a POW friend of his. Immediately fired upon by reckless communists clad in traditional Vietnamese non la hats, he is brought back to their camp where he is forced to fight various men intent on proving the “yankee legend” and “jeering American” to be weak. He defeats them easily and moves forward to meet the fearsome general. His captured friend is appalled that Cap is there, crying out that “the entire free world *needs* you, Cap—!” In a confusing turn of events, the general turns out to be a sumo wrestler as the writers apparently confused Asian stereotypes and jumbled them into the story. The general then bows to Cap and says “Forgive the unseemly behavior of this unworthy person! I am the leader of these lowly ones...now that I have seen your noble person, we need waste no more time! *Guards!* Take both Americans out—and *shoot them!*” His speech that mocks ideas of Asian mannerisms immediately turns to cold-blooded murder.⁸¹ The idea that communists were naturally arrogant about their own abilities while also being cowardly and willing to murder POWs was countered with American bravery as Cap and his friend fight their way out of the camp unharmed. Much like in Iron Man stories, there is a clear racial component to the communists. Unlike the World War II Cap storylines, he wasn’t working with the government, perhaps speaking to the immense anger over the Vietnam War itself and Cap’s stance as an anti-establishment American icon.

⁸¹ “The Strength of the Sumo!” *Tales of Suspense featuring Iron Man and Captain America*, No. 61. Marvel. January 1965.

As the years went on, Cap would argue explicitly against racism, especially when facing his arch enemy, the resurrected Nazi Red Skull. In one such adventure, Red Skull and Cap battle, arguing over their ideas of race and superiority:

Red Skull: “You decadent, freedom-loving fool!...I am your *superior* in every way! I am a member of the *master race*!”

Captain America: “There *is* no master race— and you *know* it! We’re *all* human beings— all *equal* before our creator! Nothing you can ever say or do will *change* that!”

Red Skull: “*Equality*! You *fool*—equality is— just a *myth*!”

Captain America: “A *myth*, is it? Then *America* herself is just a myth—as are *liberty*, and *justice*—and *faith*! Myths that *free men* everywhere are willing to *die* for!...It’s *tyranny* which is the myth— and *bigotry* which is an *abomination* before the eyes of mankind! It’s *you* who are the fool! For, *humanity* has come of age— and, so long as *love*, not *hatred*, fills men’s hearts—the day of the *tyrant* is *ended*!”

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This debate between the two men showed Marvel’s commitment to showcasing a liberal vision of the United States as a haven for freedom, equality, and love while also taking a strong stance of anti-racism. This was easy to do with a cartoonishly racist villain like the Red Skull but was still a big step forward for the company. The influence of the civil rights movement and white liberals advocating for the commitment to love in

⁸² “The Weakest Link!” *Captain America*, No. 103. Marvel. July 1968.

the face of violence was apparent. William Chafe asserted that “as civil rights became part of the daily agenda of life for all Americans, and as more and more white students joined their black brethren in the Southern struggle, civil rights and racial equality became a focal point for the entire nation.”⁸³ The early years of the movement with SNCC and white students especially participating in the fight for equality had made the issue of racism unavoidable. Northern Jews in particular joined the movement in large numbers. Cheryl Greenberg noted that “it was in the post-war period, then, that a black-Jewish political alliance solidified within the broader context of an activist liberalism.”⁸⁴ The legacy of the Holocaust and Double-Victory campaign had brought a sense of urgency and opportunism to pushing for broader civil rights. Some politically active liberal Jews saw a shared history of oppression with African Americans and felt compelled to fight with them. Others saw the civil rights movement and a push for a more liberal society as advantageous for their historically marginalized group. Either way, the fight for equality was impossible to ignore. Marvel incorporated the more inclusive liberal messages of love and understanding in their comics. Lee and his writers often addressed anti-racism in their comics.

In one such 1966 comic, the Avengers were faced with a new villainous group that called themselves the Sons of the Serpent. An unabashedly white supremacist group, its

⁸³ William Chafe. *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 165.

⁸⁴ Cheryl Greenberg. *Troubling The Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 117.

members would beat nonwhite people while bystanders would watch without intervening, claiming “it’s none of our business!” They prey on Avenger Goliath’s black lab assistant Bill Foster, beating him unconscious then justifying their actions by proclaiming that “he got what he *deserved!* He refused to swear never to set foot in this neighborhood again!”

⁸⁵ A two-issue elaborate plot involving kidnapping Cap and blackmailing the Avengers to publicly support the Sons of the Serpent ensues. At the end of it, Goliath makes an impassioned speech imploring the public to “never forget the lesson we learned here today. Beware the man who sets you against your neighbor!” ⁸⁶ The Sons of the Serpent, a thinly veiled version of the KKK, were portrayed as an evil senseless group that “preached bigotry and racial hatred and an extreme form of nationalism, preying on people’s secret fears and insecurities.” ⁸⁷ Marvel came out strongly against such obvious forms of racism but also against those who would stand idly by and watch their fellow Americans be targeted. It was also clear that Lee and his writers wrote from a viewpoint that saw the essential goodness in people. They could be misled by manipulative groups like the Sons of the Serpent but would eventually prevail and do the right thing. The most important message was that Americans needed to come together, regardless of race— an idea very popular among white liberals in the 1960s.

⁸⁵ “The Sign of the Serpent.” *Avengers*, No. 32. Marvel. September 1966.

⁸⁶ “To Smash a Serpent.” *Avengers*, No. 33. Marvel. October 1966.

⁸⁷ Pierre Comtois. *Marvel Comics in the 1960s: An Issue by Issue Field Guide To A Pop Culture Phenomenon*. (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2009), 148.

This was rooted for some in a belief that American racism would be solved by enlightening racist whites through government reform; that Americans were inherently good people but needed guidance. For others, “pursuing civil rights in tandem with other minorities and willing whites and presenting them as American concern served, in part, to mask civil rights efforts’ ethic and racial “specificity” and helped buffer them from public criticism.”⁸⁸ As a company more committed to the idea of liberalism than actual activism, Marvel was firmly in the former category.

Marvel's first black superhero had been introduced in a Fantastic Four comic in 1966. An African king from a technologically advanced nation, the Black Panther was an unusual but revolutionary hero. He began as a supposed villain before being revealed as a hero. Not only was he written without the crime-riddled background of many black heroes (the Falcon, Luke Cage, Storm), T’Challa was given the scientific genius abilities like Mr. Fantastic that helped him keep his home of Wakanda safe from outsiders and ruled as a wise and powerful king. Adilifu Nama noted that T’Challa “not only symbolized a politically provocative and wildly imaginative convergence of African tradition with advanced technology, but he also stood as a progressive racial symbol and anti-colonialist critique of the economic exploitation of Africa.”⁸⁹ Wakanda and T’Challa were a far cry from the the stereotypes of Africans as childish and innocent. Wakanda was

⁸⁸ Shana Bernstein. *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 165.

⁸⁹ Adilifu Nama. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 43.

depicted as a nation of lush jungles and exotic animals and plants with a hidden technologically advanced side that was far beyond Western nations. T'Challa was a guest star in Fantastic Four and Avengers comics until he received his own starring line in 1973. Ironically enough, his name was not based on the actual Black Panther Party. For a year, Marvel tried to rename him the Black Leopard to avoid any association with the BPP but gave up. Yet while they were fine with embracing civil rights ideology based on nonviolence and more conservative ideas, they were hesitant to delve into the black pride movement and more radical ideas.

This was wildly apparent in the X-Men series. Created in 1963 by Lee and Kirby, they were a team of outcast teens with mutant superpowers led by the enigmatic Professor X. From the beginning, they were considered outsiders from society and a threat to regular humans. Much like the Fantastic Four and the Incredible Hulk, their powers were not a gift to them. They kept them from having a normal life. For the first couple of years, the X-Men faced off against a multitude of villains while also defending themselves from the fears of humans who didn't understand them. One of their earliest nemeses was the powerful Magneto, who could generate and control magnetic fields. In later years, the series would come to represent an allegory for the civil rights movement. Professor X and Magneto were unsubtle and oversimplified versions of Martin Luther King, Jr and Malcolm X. Professor X preached nonviolence and the necessity to make peace with and protect humans, even as they threatened their livelihood. Magneto was

convinced of the inherent superiority of mutants, even calling his team the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants and preaching mutant pride.

In 1964, the X-Men and the Brotherhood faced off as Magneto plotted to take over San Marco. In a mental fight between Professor X and Magneto, their conversation showed their viewpoints on humanity— and a cartoonish, extreme take on the civil rights leaders.

Magneto: “Only you and your X-Men stand between the mutants and world conquest?? WHY?? Why do you fight us?? For you too are a mutant!”

Professor X: “But I seek to save mankind, not destroy it! We must use our powers to bring about a golden age on earth—side by side with ordinary humans!”

Magneto: “Never! The humans must be our slaves! They are not worthy to share dominion of earth with us! You have made your choice—forevermore we are mortal foes!”⁹⁰

This would not be the only Marvel plot line to address the more radical aspects of the civil rights movement. In the 1970s, there would be multiple story arcs—especially with the X-Men and Falcon— that portrayed unflattering groups based on the Black Panthers and Malcolm X. As these groups departed from the failed universalism of earlier civil rights organizations and emphasized identity politics that split off from the mainstream civil rights groups, the liberal coalition began to fracture. Legal victories had

⁹⁰ “The Return of the Dreaded Magneto!” *The X-Men*. Marvel. March 1964.

not resulted in full equality. Many black nationalists argued that “the liberal struggle for full public integration—penetrating existing political, economic, and social structures—was simply covert assimilationism into a value system blacks ought to instead repudiate.”

⁹¹ Many white liberals felt betrayed at being pushed out of the movement they had been so involved in, even in the face of the systemic failures of their efforts. To the writers at Marvel, the only acceptable route to fight racism was based on preaching love, acceptance, and open-mindedness—regardless of the realities of racism in the United States. Nationalist and radical groups like the BPP were seen as damaging to Americans coming together and comic book parodies of them depicted them as racist against whites, violent, and just damaging to American values as white supremacists.

However, in the vein of Jews and liberalism in the 1960s, Stan Lee and the Marvel writers were consciously committed to providing comics that denounced racism in the strongest terms. As the years went by, Lee installed a monthly “Soapbox” section in the comics. In the beginning, Pierre Comtois notes that Lee began “modestly with a few paragraphs about such general topics as toleration, understanding and love, [he] eventually expanded his remarks to cover more weighty subjects...Lee lectured readers on the evils of racism, the problems of war and peace, pollution, drugs, and even religion.” ⁹² Their plots and characters still often committed racial gaffes but their

⁹¹ Cheryl Greenberg. *Troubling The Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 220.

⁹² Pierre Comtois. *Marvel Comics in the 1960s: An Issue by Issue Field Guide To A Pop Culture Phenomenon*. (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2009), 207.

intentions were admirable for mainstream comics at the time. While Lee's writers—most notably Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko— were often frustrated by the overwhelming presence of their editor, it was undeniable that his efforts and directions for Marvel worked. The Marvel approach was a commercial triumph. Wright wrote that “from 1962 to 1967, Marvel's average sales figures doubled while those of its competition remained steady or declined. By 1967 its total sales were a close second to DC's. More telling than raw sales, however, was the extent to which Lee's marketing had broadened Marvel's audience.”⁹³ As noted before, Marvel was attracting more than the young readers it had in the 1940s and 1950s. College students and old readers had remained faithful to the comics.

In the face of Marvel's immense success in tapping into readers' desire for social relevance, DC attempted to recreate these types of stories. DC also attempted to address these issues in the 1970s, though only adding their first nonwhite superhero, Black Lightning, in 1977. Their Green Arrow/ Green Lantern series faced racism head on starting in late 1969 and other series would also navigate more relevant issues as well. The growth of identity politics and awareness of multiculturalism also influenced the direction of both mainstream comic companies. The blatantly racist war storylines of the 1940s gave way to the consensus comics of the 1950s that avoided mentioning race at all.

⁹³ Bradford Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2001), 223.

The 1960s saw the proliferation of comics that had nonwhite characters and plot lines that addressed racism head on while still retaining certain stereotypes. The 1970s would be notable for the addition of more nonwhite characters while still being restrained by the framework of mostly white male writers. In many ways, it was burdened by the success of 1960s. The hope and idealism that had defined the decade for many liberals had been dampened by the Vietnam War and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr, and Robert Kennedy. This would be apparent in the storylines that discussed race in the years to come.

Chapter 4: The 1970s: "I knew exactly what kind of man would most appeal to your sniveling liberalism!" - Red Skull

The success from Marvel's revamping the nature of superheroes in the 1960s resulted in confusion once the 1970s began. Marvel and DC, as the top two comic book companies in the United States, had weathered the tumultuous 1960s with Marvel successfully navigating the mixing of fantastic characters with often socially relevant and critical storylines. DC had maintained the status quo with its continually popular characters like Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and other members of the Justice League. As they confronted the rising sales of Marvel, they decided to also attract readers with plot lines with social commentary. However, the end of the 1960s had brought a more somber atmosphere to the United States with the violent assassinations of civil rights leaders, the protracted and unpopular Vietnam War, and the pushback to liberalism. Mainstream comics reflected this change by introducing a darker tone to their storylines. The campy plots of DC lines like Batman switched to a brooding protagonist with an often macabre tone like that of the 1940s. Superman and Lois Lane confronted racism in their comics. The writers of Green Lantern and Green Arrow added storylines that dealt with issues like racism and drug abuse in an attempt to mimic Marvel, but with a much bleaker outlook. They also finally added their first black superhero with his own line in 1977: Black Lightning. These endeavors yielded more diverse characters and storylines

while still retaining the problems of older comics: offensively drawn nonwhite sidekicks, tone-deaf plot lines, and an overwhelmingly patronizing idea of nonwhite perspectives.

Marvel continued to produce stories that dealt with social commentary and struggle to keep up with the changing cultural landscape of the U.S. The rise of popular movies with blaxploitation and kung-fu led to the creation of characters like Luke Cage defending Harlem and Iron Fist as a white man brought up as a mystical kung-fu master. These comics were filled with their own brand of racial conversation. In addition to pop culture trends, the rise of multiculturalism, feminism, and identity politics of this era were all woven into comics as well. Liberalism at the end of the 1960s was fragmented and being challenged by the rise of neoconservatism; as white supremacy went underground and neoconservatives began using code words and accusations of reverse racism, many liberals began to adopt colorblind ideology as a strategy. As Sean Howe noted, “Stan Lee’s middle-of-the road liberalism, was in its own way, unmovable. He’d happily preach tolerance, but he was not going to get caught taking an unpopular stance.”⁹⁴

This was most apparent in the portrayal of black radicalism and feminism. Numerous female villains would declare their misandry before being foiled. Female heroes would often make sure to draw a clear line between themselves and “wild femmes.” Marvel plot lines that in the 1960s had called for tolerance and Americans of all creeds coming together had shifted to blaming bigots on both sides for the problems of

⁹⁴ Sean Howe. *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2013), 93.

the decade. Often, villains were caricatures of Black Panthers that spewed hatred of white characters and were depicted as being just as dangerous as white supremacists. Black characters like the Falcon and Power Man were often caught in between working with white heroes to defend their cities— or even the world—and being called “Uncle Toms” by black Americans. Black radicalism had challenged, and would continue to challenge, the idea that Jews shared the same oppression and history as black Americans. Eric Goldstein wrote that the “anger of blacks at white America seemed misguided, not “rational,” and the black nationalist tactics of sometimes using racial and ethnic slurs and even violence to assert themselves seemed like a betrayal of the liberal principles that had allowed Jews to enter the ranks of the white mainstream.”⁹⁵ This distaste for black radicalism by white liberals (Jews and otherwise) was often an integral plot point in stories—especially with Captain American and the Falcon.

The makeup of the industry had changed as well. The 1960s had seen writers jumping back and forth from Marvel and DC but also the influx of younger newcomers. As the years wore on, comic book fans were now becoming comic book writers. In the 1940s, the industry was filled with Jewish writers, publishers, and artists on the outskirts of mainstream society. The flourishing comics business had attracted more than these outsiders, though many of the old writers— Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, John Broome in

⁹⁵ Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 215.

particular— remained. The staffing remained overwhelmingly white and male but was no longer predominantly Jewish. Many of the writers remained committed to liberal ideology and storylines, particularly Stan Lee, Tony Isabella, and Don McGregor. The limits of this were shown in their work as they and other Marvel and DC writers attempted to bring in more diverse characters (breaking the black-white dichotomy of nonwhite heroes) while still operating within the framework of white liberalism. Their stories also reflected the national mood as the optimism apparent in the 1960s comics had darkened.

Much like the magician Zatara in the 1940s, Batman became a global caped crusader as his adventures often took him to faraway lands and “exotic” locales across the world. Moving away from the campy feel of his 1960s comics and tv show, he was thrust back to his roots as a looming and ominous figure. Some stories were intended to champion moral lessons and social relevance, but more often that not, he was placed in foreign countries filled with stereotypes of nonwhite persons that recalled Golden Age writing. One of the stories that exemplified the latter was the 1971 *Brave and the Bold* team-up where Batman traveled to an unnamed South American city to assist his war friend Sergeant Rock. Once there, he enlists a local boy to help him solve a diplomatic crisis. The boy, Angel Camacho, is an exotic matador and in awe of the American crimefighter, calling him “Bat-hombre” and peppering his speech with simple Spanish

phrases. Using his superior detective skills, Batman uses the boy to foil the anti-American villains.⁹⁶

In the next issue, Batman teams up with Wildcat, who he finds “boxing for pesos” in Mexico. What follows is what the writers assumed Mexican life consisted of: siestas, sombreros, calling white men ‘gringos,’ and an adventure to find the treasure of the fictitious god Choclotan. Batman and Wildcat (both white heroes) lead the native youth Luis Mercado on his lifelong journey to find the God’s resting site, battling greedy villains along the way. Wildcat, who has been living in Mexico under the assumed name El Tigre, faces off against a boxer, El Buey, who “drinks a native brew which will make him not feel pain or his foe’s blows.”⁹⁷ This commitment to exoticizing foreign cultures and propagating stereotyped ideas of their people was still going strong in the 1970s. Another one of Batman’s foes was Dr. Tzin-Tzin, so-called Master of Illusion, drawn with the long Fu Manchu-style mustache and pointed eyebrows of Asian villains (no matter their origins). He summons the giant called Fong Wu and other minions to attack Batman and a martial arts fight ensues.⁹⁸ Caught up in the kung-fu craze of the time, Batman became an expert in martial arts on top of his other abilities. This would be an all-too common trend in comics, with white heroes becoming martial arts experts and excelling in the traditionally Asian fields.

⁹⁶ “The Striped Pants War!” *The Brave and the Bold* No. 96. DC Comics. July 1971.

⁹⁷ “The Smile of Choclotan!” *The Brave and the Bold*, No. 97. DC Comics. September 1971.

⁹⁸ “The House That Haunted Batman!” *Detective Comics*, No. 408. DC Comics. February 1971.

In addition to the continuation of Other-ing nonwhite cultures in the tradition of early comics, Batman comics introduced one of the loves of his life— Talia Al Ghul— and one of his greatest foes— her father, Ra's Al Ghul. Talia and Ra's would be huge influences, both negative and positive, in Batman's life. The name Ra's Al Ghul was translated by the writers as Arabic for the "the demon's head." Yet according to one of the creators of Ra's, artist Neal Adams, the immortal adversary was meant to be devoid of any racial ties at all. Adams described him as "not tied to any race at all. It had to have evidence of a great many things having happened, a face that showed the man had the man had an awareness of his own difference at a very early age."⁹⁹ Ra's and Talia may have been drawn with light skin and relatively traditional white European features but their stories usually had a Middle Eastern feel to them. Their cronies would carry scimitars, call Batman an "infidel," or take place in some exotic desert. The writers may not have wanted to tie Ra's or Talia to any particular race but were still perpetuating the exoticization of an amalgamation of various foreign countries.

Like other comics of the time, Batman included plot lines about feminism and racial black movements. In one story, a group of mixed black and white radicals with matching berets called the Brave Barons come to Slum City to "fight the establishment" by setting off a bomb. In the end, the mastermind behind the plot is the unassuming girlfriend of one of the men. Shocked, a policeman exclaims "His chick— a femme

⁹⁹ Neal Adams. Quoted in *The Bronze Age of DC Comics: 1970-1984*. (Los Angeles: Taschen America, 2015), 71.

*lib???*¹⁰⁰ Although Batman is sympathetic to the plight of the poverty-stricken inhabitants of the slum, he is quick to dismiss violence as a solution. Radicalism is portrayed as detrimental to any liberal cause; the beret-wearing outsiders were a thinly veiled criticism of the Black Panthers and other radical groups. Feminists were not taken seriously at all as the “femme lib” character Kitty was seen as a joke.

The Black Panthers were mocked yet again in a 1972 story set during a prison riot. A few militant black prisoners were furious that Batman was attempting to free a white prisoner who was innocent, and blamed the “whitey establishment” for not giving their leader, “Brother Newley” a chance to plead his case. An uncomfortable discussion between Newley (a conspicuous reference to Huey Newton) and Batman shows the writers’ ideas of how black radicals thought. Batman argues that he is “hardly in a position to *debate* racial bigotry—*yours* or mine.” Newley demands to know why “everytime *you* say *my* name—it sounds like ‘*nigger*’?” In the end, Batman thwarts Newley’s plot to escape, and tells him that justice is color blind.¹⁰¹ This story alone showed multiple levels of racial ideas in the United States at the time, especially the growing distaste for black Americans protesting in a manner that made white Americans uncomfortable.

¹⁰⁰ “Take-over of Paradise!” *Batman*, No. 230. DC Comics. March 1971.

¹⁰¹ “Blind Justice...Blind Fear!” *Detective Comics*, No. 421. DC Comics. March 1972.

Not only did white writers (in this case, Frank Robbins) see black militants as unnecessarily violent and seeing racism everywhere, but they were also seen as being just as bigoted and racist as white supremacists. Discussions of institutional racism— perhaps too presentist for this time period— are dismissed by Batman’s assertion that justice is color blind. This is an early example of the color blind ideology that would be a central part of neoliberalism that would take form in the 1980s. Talking about race was seen as divisive and damaging to the ultimate goal of bringing Americans together. Newley, by attacking the establishment and institutional racism that had contributed to his being in prison, and by taking offense to the way white men said his name was now the racial problem in the United States. Additionally, as a white writer, Robbins using the ‘n’ word in a story ultimately critical of a black movement was also an uncomfortable and exploitative move. This story was yet another example of white writers “constructing “blackness” to serve hegemonic concerns.”¹⁰² In this case, it prompted, and ultimately justified, criticism of black radicalism.

Generally, the Holocaust was a topic often breached in pop culture in the decades following the end of the war. The late 1970s marked an evolution in how the United States treated both Holocaust survivors and the event itself. As Henry Greenspan wrote, this was “the emergence of Holocaust survivors in American public awareness. Through

¹⁰² Claire Oberon Garcia, Charise Pimental, Vershawn Ashanti Young. “What’s At Stake When Whites Writes Black?” *From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.

their participation in the newly forming commemorative activities and institutions—and particularly in their increasingly celebrated role as witnesses— survivors also began to be heard.”¹⁰³ Two Batman writers referenced The Holocaust during this time, one with a story involving the effect of the camps on a survivor, and one with a misguided story that appropriated war imagery. The first was written by Dennis O’Neil, who would become famous for his stories that revolved around social commentary, especially drug abuse and racism. In the 1971 story “Night of the Reaper!” Batman goes on the hunt for ex-Nazis who have been attacking each other and innocent bystanders. Aided by camp survivor Doctor Gruener, he tracks them down, thinking to himself, “unless brutes like that pay for their crimes, the thing we call civilization is a *farce!*” But at the end of the story, it turns out that Gruener had been seeking personal vengeance and accidentally killed an innocent man during his vendetta. When Batman confronts him, he furiously demands:

“Who has *better* right? My father and mother, my sisters...I saw the *Butcher* empty his pistols into their bodies...I heard him *laugh* as their blood poured onto the filth of the camp! Who are *you* to judge me? You- who have not witnessed the *horror* of those days! Still, I awake from sleep *screaming!* I feel the *agonies*... smell the smoke of the *execution* chamber...listen to the helpless crying of babies...”

As the doctor flees, he attempts to violently push a man out of his way. His weapon becomes tangled on the man’s necklace: the Star of David symbol on it gives him

¹⁰³ Henry Greenspan. “Testimony and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness.” *The Americanization of the Holocaust*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 46.

pause and he stumbles, whispering “w-what have I become?” before falling to his death. The last panel of the comic shows his prone body, with Star of David necklace starkly visible to the reader.¹⁰⁴

What is to be made of this story? The Nazis are clearly evil and must be punished, but the doctor’s revenge for his family is deemed unacceptable when he accidentally kills an innocent bystander. It is also notable that the brutality of concentration camps is discussed at all. Most comics that had Nazis in them (especially Captain America) shied away from discussing the actual violence against Jews. Nazis were easily recognizable villains for readers without the writers having to go into detail about the genocide or their anti-semitic nature. Rather than the easy black and white morals of most comics, O’Neil portrays both the immense suffering of Gruener during the war and his all-too-human failings when pursuing revenge as part of a historical experience. Thoughtful stories mentioning the Holocaust were few and far between, however, as evidenced by the next comic.

“The Rebel in the Streets” was a 1971 Batman and Teen Titans comic by Bob Haney. The Teen Titans had been created by Haney in 1964 to appeal to younger readers, and in this issue, a group of rebellious youths in the ghetto of Gotham City threaten to blow up the city unless their demands are met. They tell Batman that they “have had it with the adult world! We’ve had it with this crummy ghetto, poverty, injustice, pushers,

¹⁰⁴ “Night of the Reaper!” *Batman*, No. 237. DC Comics. December 1971.

and phony adult values that twist kids' lives!...*imperfect*? What a chicken, establishment world! We're determined to change things the only way we can...since adults *never* will!" The plot revolves around Batman and the Teen Titans trying to convince the youth terrorist group and the police department to try to understand each other and stop violence from both sides. The message (help the younger generation regain faith in adults and the future) is wholly undermined by the cover art, which shows Batman and other Gotham City adults being led behind barbed wire and a sign that declares "Concentration Camp For Adults Only."¹⁰⁵ This appropriation of Holocaust imagery and suffering, in an ultimately silly plot, was all the more offensive in a comic that had been created by a Jewish writer, Bob Kane. As the years went by, explicitly Jewish characters and stories that dealt directly with the Holocaust would become more frequent. This decade was marked by stories that verged on misguided at best.

Dennis O'Neil was also at the helm of the series Green Lantern/ Green Arrow that debuted in 1970. Pairing the more conservative Green Lantern with the socially conscious and radical Green Arrow—both white superheroes—the comics followed the pair navigating serious issues of the times. This was DC's attempt to follow in the footsteps of Marvel's successful stories of the 1960s. In a 1971 story, the two heroes confront the scourge of drugs in their city. The story follows the heroes trying to find heroin dealers in the city as well as the plight of junkies (called "snowbirds"). The pair

¹⁰⁵ "Rebel In The Streets." *The Brave and The Bold*, No. 94. DC Comics. February 1971.

attribute their reason for turning to drugs, as the Chinese teenager remarks that his father collects weapons because “all day long, he answers to *chink...slant*. At night he comes home and grooves on the armament...me, I’ve found another *escape!*” His friend, a black teenager, retorts “so you get *insulted*, hey? “*Chink’s*” nothin’ compared to the names *I’m* called. *Nigger* is for *openers!* *Then* they get *real* poetic. But it ain’t the names they call you, it’s what’s behind their *eyes*, baby. This is my reason for shootin’...it makes life more bearable.”¹⁰⁶

Although the attempts at understanding both drug addiction and how nonwhite teenagers felt targeted in a racist society were admirable for the time, this is another story that portrays Americans of color blaming their situation on racism. The story shows the death of one of the boys while the white heroes track down his “killer” and save their own (also white) ward that has been doing heroin with them. In the end, the two boys are used as props to show both the heroism of white saviors coming into a poor neighborhood with mostly nonwhite residents and to exemplify the dangers of using drugs to escape reality.

In the same year, the writers introduced John Stewart, the alternate Green Lantern. According to the rules of Lantern protectors, there always had to be an alternate Lantern in case the original Lantern was injured or killed. Stewart was meant to be a new, diverse addition to the mostly white series. As with other 1970s comics, his portrayal was racially

¹⁰⁶ “Snowbirds Don’t Fly!” *Green Lantern/ Green Arrow*, No. 85. DC Comics. August 1971.

loaded. Located in an “urban ghetto” (like most black characters), Stewart is quick to defend himself and his black peers. While scoping out his potential replacement, Hal Jordan, the current Green Lantern, is hesitant when he sees Stewart standing up to police harassment. The aliens who gifted him his powers remark dryly “He has all due qualifications! We are not interested in your petty bigotries!” As the two wildly different men work together, they are confronted by complicated racial situations.

Seeing a racist senator arrive, Stewart splashes him with oil and makes a blackface joke, asking the man if he picks cotton. Jordan protests his recklessness and the two have the following conversation:

Stewart: What’s to *worry* about? I’ve been dark all my life...and *I’m* surviving!...

Listen, whitey, that windbag wants to be president! He’s a racist...and he figures on climbing to the White House on the backs of my people!

Jordan: You *think* he’s a racist...*tough!* Nobody appointed you *judge*...as of now, I’m assigning you to *guard* Senator Clutcher! If anything *happens* to him...you’ve *had* it! One last thing! Don’t call me *whitey!* Something in that reminds me of that bit about “*he who is without sin*” casting “*the first stone!*””¹⁰⁷

By the end of the comic, Stewart has uncovered a plot by the senator to blame a fake assassination plot on a black killer and ride the wave of racial resentment to a political victory. Jordan apologizes for doubting him and the two share a moment of understanding. This seems like a story showing a black and white hero coming together

¹⁰⁷ “Earthquake Beware My Power! *Green Lantern/ Green Arrow*, No. 87. DC Comics. December 1971.

across racial lines, but it also shows the idea that Stewart's bigotry in the beginning (calling Jordan whitey) was just as damaging and hypocritical for a man condemning racism.

However, in another Green Lantern/ Green Arrow story, O'Neil tackles white indifference to racism. The more conservative Green Lantern is confronted by an elderly black man who questions his bravery when facing down intergalactic threats, but not defending American citizens. The man declares that "I been readin' about you...how you work for the *blue skins*...and how on a planet someplace you helped out the *orange skins*...and you done considerable for the *purple skins*! Only there's *skins* you never bothered with—! ...the *Black skins*! I want to know *how come!*"¹⁰⁸ Bowing his head in shame, Green Lantern answers haltingly that he can't. Ignoring for a moment the regrettable attempt to write a black dialect, here is a moment of real reflection by a white character: instead of arguing that the old man is holding onto a dark past, or stopping racial healing by dwelling on racism itself, Green Lantern is unable to answer. He has saved the world countless times from aliens and large threats, but he has ignored the suffering of minority Americans from a domestic threat from their own people. Clichéd and caricatured as some of his characters may have been, O'Neil was one of the most earnest and progressive writers at DC.

¹⁰⁸ "No Evil Shall Escape My Sight!" *Green Lantern/ Green Arrow*, No. 76. DC Comics. April 1970.

In one of DC's more misguided endeavors to address racism, they published the 1970 story "I Am Curious (Black)!" in the series *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane*. Seeking a Pulitzer Prize, journalist Lois Lane decides to venture into "Little Africa" in Metropolis. She is rebuffed by every black resident she tries to talk to and stumbles across a young black man giving a speech. He tells his audience to "look at her, brothers and sisters! She's young and sweet and pretty! But never forget...*she's whitey!* She'll let us shine her shoes and sweep her floors! And baby-sit for her kids! But she doesn't want to let *our* kids into her lily-white schools!...that's why she's our *enemy!*" As Lois walks away sadly, she thinks "He's *wrong* about *me*...but *right* about so many others!"¹⁰⁹ In a purely comic book twist, she somehow gets Superman to turn her into a black woman for a day so she can not only understand what it feels like to be black but also still get her story.

Immediately, Lois is denied a cab ride by the same driver who had helped her while she was white. She walks into a building to try to interview someone and sees the poverty that white writers assumed was common for all black people. An impoverished resident black mother there invites Lois into her apartment, complaining about the dangerous conditions and offering any sort of help that Lois could need. Moved by the woman's generosity in spite of her "misery", Lois tears up. As she leaves, the black man who had earlier given a speech about her white self is shot and she helps carry him to the

¹⁰⁹ "I Am Curious (Black)!" *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*, No. 106. DC Comics. November 1970.

hospital and donates her blood to save his life. When Superman visits them in the hospital, Lois demands to know if he would still marry her if she remained black (he never gives a straight answer). As she turns white again, she is fearful that the black man will reject her. Superman answers that “if he *still* hates you...with your blood in his veins...there may *never* be peace in this world.” The last panels ends with the man being surprised by his savior suddenly being white, but grins and shakes her hand, apparently easily accepting the idea that someone can change skin color at will.

The layers of racist ideology in this comic show the landscape of white liberalism of the time. Not only is it easy for Lois to understand what it means to be black in America by walking around a black neighborhood for less than a day, but she also literally embodies the white savior trope. In the end, she helps the unnamed black man overcome his own prejudices and gratify her selflessness by his acceptance of her whiteness. By using the fantastic nature of comics, writer Robert Kanigher could show a character literally walking a mile in another’s shoes. Racism could be solved easily if people developed empathy for others. Unfortunately, the burden of forgiveness (according to Superman) is on the black man. By claiming that if he couldn’t get over his distrust of whites even though a white woman had saved him, he and all blacks are at fault for racial lines not being crossed. While the story addressed problems that remained in the United States: overt racism, poverty, and the continuation of segregation in schools and housing, the overall message was that all Americans had to rethink their racialized

ways of thinking. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant write, this was significant for its “reframing of racism as a “race-neutral” matter. Racism was recast as something that affects anyone.”¹¹⁰ Ignoring the historical and structural nature of American-style white supremacy, this viewpoint emphasized the victimization of all Americans. Nonwhite Americans who complained of racism were the ones at fault for dividing the country. This was an early version of the colorblind ideology that would develop as neoliberalism’s response to neoconservatism.

Over at Marvel, the years of casual representation of nonwhite characters (even expanding their bystanders in the background to reflect a more diverse crowd) had begun to evolve into a more determined attitude to bring in prominent diverse characters at the behest of readers. Sean Howe described these varied endeavors as often a “portrait of white-liberal cluelessness—but still there was the sense that Stan Lee was seizing an opportunity rather than just exploiting a trend.”¹¹¹ Over the next decade, the company gave Black Panther his own series, created nonwhite heroes like Power Man and Shang-Chi, incorporated Falcon into the Captain America series as a full partner, created a global and diverse team for the revamped X-Men and introduced an assortment of nonwhite characters like Mantis from the Avengers, Colleen Wing from Iron Fist, and

¹¹⁰ Michael Omi & Howard Winant. *Racial Formation In The United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 219.

¹¹¹ Sean Howe. *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2013), 97.

Blade from *The Tomb of Dracula*. On the surface, it would seem as though Marvel was at the forefront of representation and continuing their liberal anti-racism of the 1960s.

Although they were more committed to diversity and comics directly discussing racism than DC, these characters and storylines were still plagued by stereotypes and white liberal perceptions of how nonwhite Americans saw society. Behind the scenes, Marvel had a limited number of female and nonwhite employees. According to Robin Green, one of the secretaries of the time, “the bullpen had become a kind of men’s den, with pictures of naked women, some playboy types, and some drawings of comic book characters as they will never appear in *Spider-Man*. Some of them were downright pornographic.”¹¹² This boys club was most obvious in Marvel’s approach to feminism, which ranged from bringing in (mostly unsuccessful at the time) characters like Ms. Marvel, Spiderwoman, and an all-female task force at S.H.I.E.L.D. (called the Femme Squad) to storylines that featured “wild feminists” as villains. In addition to this, radical black politics were often treated along the same line as DC: as detrimental to progressivism in the United States. Captain America and Falcon often navigated race and social hierarchies in their storylines, with Falcon often being caught between working with and defending his relationship with a white partner and helping the black residents who often called him an Uncle Tom. The Golden Age stereotypes had not disappeared either, as evidenced by Iron Man’s exploits.

¹¹² Robin Green, quoted in *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2013), 107.

Of all the Marvel lines— even the ones that seized upon the demand for kung-fu — *Iron Man* continued to retain most of the Asian stereotypes, Yellow Peril elements, and Cold War proclivities. Many of his adversaries were inexplicably Asian. In a 1971 story, he faces off against White Dragon, who is drawn with a similar headdress as the Mandarin and the harsh eyebrows and features of Yellow Peril characters, and uses white ideas of Asian speech; he thanks the “ancient gods” for his triumphant battle against his foes. He even sends an “oriental tailor” to spy on Iron Man’s secret alter ego, Tony Stark.¹¹³ In the next issue, White Dragon’s lover, Shara-Lee, is revealed to be the manipulative mastermind behind his plans, following the trope of what Ethnic and Gender studies professor Dr. Shoba Sharad Rajgopal calls “the hyper-sexual Dragon Lady who seduces then destroys.”¹¹⁴ Shara-Lee ends up betraying White Dragon in order to further her world domination plot.¹¹⁵ Depicted as arrogant, beautiful, and cold, Shara-Lee was a perpetuation of the Dragon Lady stereotype that had persisted since the late 1800s. In 20th century films, Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong had popularized the big-screen depictions of Asian women as “exotic, sensual, and mysterious. Villainous vamps to the core.”¹¹⁶ This was a common role for Asian actresses to be typecast in, though the specific stereotypes shifted to reflect political alliances, popular assumptions, and

¹¹³“A Twist of Memory -- A Turn of Mind!” *The Invincible Iron Man*, No. 39. Marvel. July 1971.

¹¹⁴ Dr. Shoba Sharad Rajgopal. “The Daughter of Fu Manchu: The Pedagogy of Deconstructing the Representation of Asian Women in Film and Fiction.” *Meridians*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 154.

¹¹⁵ “Night Walk!” *The Invincible Iron Man*, No. 40. Marvel. August 1971.

¹¹⁶ Deborah Gee. *Slaying the Dragon*. (New York: Women Make Movies), 1987.

changing relationships. These Asian stereotypes were especially damaging in a postwar era in which the United States was engaged in wars and violence in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Iron Man would continue to battle Asian villains, most notably The Mandarin. In a later issue, his foe disguises himself as “Gene Kahn” to fool the Avenger. When Iron Man finally figures out who he is, he exclaims “Gene Kahn— of *course!* A word-play on the name of your ancestor— *Genghis Khan!*” He then mocks him by calling him Fu Manchu, before defeating the villain yet again.¹¹⁷ Not only did this show Iron Man’s willingness to use racially charged insults, but it also showed the writer’s lack of concern that a hero throwing around racist slurs was perhaps not the ideal democratic role model. Of course, The Mandarin is also shown as being racist when he calls a white sidekick an “occidental moron.”¹¹⁸ This harkens back to the idea of “reverse racism” that was becoming a cornerstone of white reactionary conservative politics. Omi and Winant described this as how “the new right developed the ideologically grounded “reverse racism” allegation. This took shape over the 1970s...the implementation of civil rights policy was recast as an attack on whites.”¹¹⁹ This went hand in hand in the reframing of racism as race-neutral and just as damaging to white Americans.

¹¹⁷ “Strike!” *The Invincible Iron Man*, No. 57. Marvel. April 1973.

¹¹⁸ “Mandarin and the Unicorn: Double-Death!” *The Invincible Iron Man*, No. 58. Marvel. May 1973.

¹¹⁹ Michael Omi & Howard Winant. *Racial Formation In The United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 218-219.

Yet even as Iron Man was portrayed as the consummate American capitalist, the influence of Nixon's 1972 visit to China and its subsequent bettering of diplomatic relations with the country changed his mind. In an issue where he must face down a crowd angry with his actions of working with perceived American enemies, Tony Stark declares that "you expect *me* to believe sharing ideas with *Communist* countries is somehow *unpatriotic*— even if makes the prospect of *world peace* stronger— and *us*, therefore, much *safer!*"¹²⁰ This was in stark contrast to the hardline stance that Iron Man had taken against communism in previous years. As Bradford Wright asserted, "Iron Man began his superhero crusade as a self-assured champion of Communist containment, but is a far more reflective and troubled superhero who ponders the meaning of Vietnam in 1975."¹²¹ His willingness to work with the same people his character had declared enemies of America, democracy, and freedom shows how much Cold War politics had evolved over the decades. President Nixon had changed the way that the United States approached the Cold War. As Thomas Borstelmann noted, "this new respect shown to China by a president long known for his disdain for the Communists government in Beijing indicated the priority of power over ideology."¹²² The ultimate American capitalist now could see the benefits of working with Communists (namely China) for the

¹²⁰ "Mandarin and the Unicorn: Double-Death!" *The Invincible Iron Man*, No. 58. *Marvel*. May 1973.

¹²¹ Bradford W. Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2001), 243.

¹²² Thomas Borstelmann. *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 233.

betterment of the world. The Soviet Union was now the sole biggest threat to American democracy—or rather, its global hegemony.

This didn't mean the end of Asian stereotypes in comics, which had been predominantly linked to Communism. In 1973, writer Steve Englehart introduced the character Mantis, a mysterious Vietnamese woman with alien powers and bug-like antennae. Showing the sexist nature of Marvel at the time, Englehart revealed that he intended for her to be “a hooker who would join the Avengers and cause dissension amongst all the male members by coming onto them in turn. She was introduced to be a slut.”¹²³ Although this lovely vision of Mantis's character was toned down in the actual comics, she was still a highly problematic character. As noted in the 1987 documentary *Slaying the Dragon*, Asian American women in film had shifted in the 1960s alongside the Vietnam War; now Vietnamese women were onscreen, usually as prostitutes. The updated idea of Asian women was still exotic and sensual, but she “knows her way around men. She's unethical, manipulative, and not terribly wholesome.”¹²⁴ Mantis was written exactly in this manner.

Mantis was revealed to be the daughter of a German mercenary hired by French forces in Vietnam. Her father married a native woman whose powerful criminal brother had disapproved of his sister's miscegenation and sent assassins to kill the family.

¹²³ Steve Englehart, quoted in *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2013), 160.

¹²⁴ Deborah Gee. *Slaying the Dragon*. (New York: Women Make Movies), 1987.

Mantis's mother was killed, a "victim of her brother's insane *racial prejudices*."¹²⁵ Although she could not remember her past, Mantis had worked as a bargirl—a thinly veiled allusion to her working as a prostitute—during the war. During her time with the Avengers, she flits back and forth from Swordsman and Vision, attempting seduce each in turn and creating a rift between members of the team. She is aloof, exotic, and emblematic of not only the Dragon Lady trope but also of women of color often being portrayed as over-sexualized and drawn in an almost pornographic manner. Her costume is low cut and her skirt often flies up when she is fighting—something the male writers admitted that they loved to draw.¹²⁶ This was also yet another example of a nonwhite character showing "reverse racism" by attacking a white character and his mixed-race daughter.

Later, a bizarre twist reveals that Mantis must become a being called The Celestial Madonna and she questions this, proclaiming that she "*has been* a foolish, fickle child, *using* the man who *loved* her—in order to chase after *another* woman's man! *This one is no Madonna!*"¹²⁷ The Madonna-whore complex, first explored by Sigmund Freud, is taken literally here. Mantis doubts her ability to become a saintly being because of her sexual past and toying with men's affections. To achieve her ascendance to holiness, she must renounce her ways and attach herself to another man. In essence, she extinguishes

¹²⁵ "Vengeance in Viet Nam! —Or—An Origin for Mantis!" *Avengers*, No. 123. Marvel. May 1974.

¹²⁶ Dave Cockrum, quoted in *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2013), 160.

¹²⁷ "The Reality Problem!" *Avengers*, No. 130. Marvel. December 1974.

her past as a sexual being and settles down with a past lover she spurned. Was this a deliberate attack on second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution? Englehart was known as a liberal writer. He often created (or elevated to larger roles) female characters like Scarlet Witch, Mantis, and Hellcat, but they were often drawn in these dichotomies of over-sexualization—and therefore immoral—or in a committed relationship. Visibility of female characters was important, but too often they were caught up in white male fantasies or unconscious sexism.

The comic series *Doctor Strange*, featuring the eponymous white sorcerer who had been around since the 1960s, had long taken inspiration from both psychedelia and ideas of Asian mysticism. He often invoked made-up gods when casting spells, shouting things like “in the name of the eternal Vishanti!” or “By the Hoary Hosts of Hoggoth!” Centered in a world inspired by these exoticized notions and a good deal of LSD, the writers created fantastic worlds with trippy visuals. His mentor, The Ancient One (a mysterious and inscrutable Asian man with the usual Fu Manchu mustache and wise sayings) sacrifices himself so Doctor Strange can take over and become the Sorcerer Supreme. In his adventures, he is assisted by his sidekick Wong, who sustained another Golden Age role for Asian characters: the loyal sidekick. Their relationship is that of “faithful Wong” and “Master” Strange.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ “The Return!” *Marvel Feature: The Defenders*, No. 1. Marvel. December 1971.

Polite and servile to a fault, Wong is even questioned about his unwavering deference to his employer by a couple of Asian men in a market, who call him “boy” and ask “you’re the one who works for that *white doctor*, right? Now what kind of image is *that*? *Yeah!* Where’s your *pride*? I’d starve before I’d do what *you* do!” Wong replies calmly that “you and I are *different men* with *different lives*. In the land of my *birth*, *wisdom* was *respected*, and to be of service to a *man* of wisdom was a *high estate indeed!* I have *left* my land, but it has not left *me*.”¹²⁹ The writers explain Wong’s subservience to Doctor Strange as a cultural norm and make the strangers out to be prejudiced themselves: an updated racial project for the decade. Having a white writer (Steve Englehart again) justify an Asian character’s submission to a white master by invoking cultural expectations— in this case, Wong is later revealed to be from a mystical version of Tibet— shows that the Golden Age stereotypes were still alive and kicking. The commitment to liberalism was still limited.

This was evident with the X-Men series as well. The initial series had been canceled due to low sales in 1970. Stan Lee decided to reboot the comic with writer Chris Claremont at the helm. In 1975, Claremont and his team created a new team of mutants, a diverse group from around the globe. They wanted to both attract new readers and introduce nonwhite heroes into their lineup. The new team was made up of Storm, an African mutant who could control the weather; Colossus, a Russian man whose skin

¹²⁹ “Where There’s Smoke...” *Doctor Strange, No. 15*. Marvel. June 1974.

could turn to metal; Proudstar, a super-strong Native American; Sunfire, a Japanese mutant who could control fire and fly; Banshee, an Irish thief with a powerful cry; Nightcrawler, a teleporting German; and Wolverine, a Canadian mutant with bones and claws made from adamantium. Professor X and Cyclops remained part of the team to train the new recruits. At first glance, the commitment to diversity was admirable. Marvel had added three nonwhite characters, all strong and capable, to a comic that had been fully white in its initial form. Yet a closer look revealed the underlying racialized ideas that still operated within the limited framework of white liberalism.

As the only black member, Storm was revealed to have fooled naive Africans into believing that she was a goddess (thanks to her weather-controlling powers) who had grown up in Cairo as an orphaned thief. She was also yet another black character introduced by Marvel that had a criminal past. Her street thief teacher and Egyptian peers were drawn in an odd gray color and Middle Eastern-inspired clothing (turbans and fezzes, long fingernails etc) that exoticized and Other-ed them. Another disturbing aspect of Storm's depiction was that of her appearance. The artists constantly drew her in ripped or revealing clothing or even naked, covered only by her hair or the wind. No other team member of X-Men was drawn in this over-sexualized manner. Storm explains that she would be much more free without clothing, that "it is only for the professor's sake that I endure this land's strange taboos."¹³⁰ Her predilection for nudity or scant clothing is

¹³⁰ "Home Are The Heroes!" *The Uncanny X-Men*, No. 109. Marvel. February 1978.

attributed to her culture, as Claremont argued that this was to honor her African heritage.

¹³¹ Her male teammates comment on her appearance and ogle at her whenever she is “in the wild.” ¹³²

Even though Storm was a strong female character and intended to be a positive nonwhite addition to the Marvel universe, her criminal backstory, influence over easily fooled natives, and almost pornographic appearance at times hindered the progressivism of her creation. The tendency of comic book writers to make their nonwhite female characters dressed in less clothing, tighter costumes, and attribute this to cultural differences was troubling. The idea of black women as jezebels, immoral and inherently sexually loose, had roots in white imperialism. As bell hooks noted, this was a “society that was eager to impose on the displaced African the identity of “sexual savage.” As white colonizers adopted a self-righteous sexual morality for themselves, they even more eagerly labeled black people sexual heathens. Since woman was designated as the originator of sexual sin, black women were naturally seen as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust. They were labeled jezebels and sexual temptresses and accused of leading white men away from spiritual purity into sin.” ¹³³ This had also been used by white male Americans to justify rape of black women during slavery and in the Jim Crow

¹³¹ Interview with Chris Claremont, printed in *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 56.

¹³² “Wanted: Wolverine! Dead or Alive!” *The Uncanny X-Men*, No. 120. Marvel. April 1979.

¹³³ bell hooks. *Ain't I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. (Brooklyn: Southend Press, 1981), 33.

era. Here it was used to justify drawing Storm naked, her predilection for revealing clothing, and attributing this to the sexualized idea of Africa and black women.

Female sexuality in general was a problem for writers. When Jean Grey became more powerful and was leaning toward villainy (thanks to the nature of the force that possessed her), she is drawn in a corset and showed more cleavage than her older, more modest outfit. Female sexuality and strength was often linked to a darker power; female villains were often drawn in an hyper-sexual manner as well, especially in blaxploitation comics. Joseph Darowski noted that “some of the most famous storylines in X-Men comic books deal with a female character becoming more sexually active, gaining new powers, going mad, and becoming evil.”¹³⁴ From the Dark Phoenix saga to the Goblin Queen story, sexually empowered women are depicted as overwhelmed by darkness and on the track to villainy.

The other X-Men were plagued by these racialized ideas as well. Thunderbird, a Native American mutant, is discovered wrestling bison by Professor X in the Arizona desert. He is drawn with red skin and described thusly: “John Proudstar does not *like* the reservation. He does not like to watch the old ones, sitting slumped against their doorsteps, dreaming dreams of *glory* long gone. John Proudstar is an *Apache*— and he is *ashamed* of his people. The Apache were meant to be hunters, warriors— not sad-eyed

¹³⁴ Joseph J. Darowski. *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 95.

simpering squaws.”¹³⁵ Thunderbird goes on to call Professor X a cripple and “white-eyes” while blaming white men for the woes of him and his people. Two issues later, he sacrifices himself for the team in order to go out like a true warrior. Not only is he a caricature of Native Americans, drawn with literal red skin, but he is racially biased and prideful to the point of suicide. Claremont’s ideas of what different cultures felt and acted like are based on vague stereotypes that see Native Americans as a defeated people. Using squaws as an insult is an old white tactic as well— not only were Native American women depicted as drudges but here they are used as the worst level that a tribe could sink to.

The other nonwhite mutant was Sunfire, another prideful and prejudiced nonwhite character, recruited from Japan. Professor X begs him for help, even though he “knows your feelings toward the *Western* world.”¹³⁶ Later, Sunfire refuses to stay with the team, declaring that “once was quite *enough*. My duty is to my *country* and *emperor*. I care *nothing* for the world you offer. I want *none* of it...Sunfire bids you *farewell*, Professor; *you* and your pack of *idealistic fools!*” No explanation is given for his disdain of the X-Men or the Western world. He is just another angry nonwhite character with seemingly irrational prejudices.

¹³⁵ “Second Genesis!” *Giant Size X-Men*, No. 1. Marvel. May 1975.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

Claremont's team was diverse but his characters were hindered by his limited knowledge of the cultures he was borrowing from. Banshee, the Irish character, had leprechaun sidekicks in one story. Colossus, the Russian character, called everyone comrade and used phrases like "Lenin's ghost!" The only X-Men to defy stereotypes, was Wolverine as a violent and impolite Canadian. Yet *Uncanny X-Men* was Marvel's most diverse series and remains so to this day. They continued their commitment to social commentary with the storylines revolving around anti-mutant hysteria and trying to fit into a world that hated them. In one story, a pro-mutant activist's home is firebombed, recalling the violent white supremacist outbursts of the civil rights era.¹³⁷ Claremont continued the civil rights allegory with Professor X vowing to "bring mankind and its mutant children *together* in peace and harmony, and to *protect* humanity" against evil mutants that harmed the nonviolent mutants.¹³⁸ His commitment to nonviolence against humans, even though they hated mutants like him, maintained the comparison to Martin Luther King, Jr. The racial project of the 1970s saw writers bringing in more nonwhite characters than ever, even if the finished product was often offensive or misguided.

In 1969, Marvel had introduced Sam Wilson, the Falcon, as their first African-American superhero. He was partnered with Captain America and before long, a majority of their adventures revolved around either fighting racist villains or attempting to

¹³⁷ "Deathstar Rising!" *The All-New, All-Different X-Men*, No. 99. Marvel. June 1976.

¹³⁸ "Psi War!" *The Uncanny X-Men*, No. 117. Marvel. January 1979.

navigate talking about race with their wildly different backgrounds. This is both an extension of the liberalism that had marked Marvel in the 1960s and the writers (mostly Lee) advocating a deeper look at racial politics. Like other titles at the time, these stories often faltered at understanding a nonwhite perspective. However, there was a genuine effort to unravel both sides and place Sam at the forefront of championing equal rights and helping to bring white and black communities together.

In this era, the specter of Nixon, the Vietnam War, and general distrust of the government meant a new stage for the once ultimate patriot. As Bradford Wright wrote, “Captain America bore the burden of these political and cultural changes. As a sworn champion of patriotic values, [he] had to determine what those values now meant... in the early 1970s, Captain America reflected a nation weary of Cold War adventures and consumed with social problems.”¹³⁹ In one issue, Sam’s nephew is caught up in a gang scheme and must be rescued by his uncle and uncle’s partner. At the end, Sam and Cap discuss the state of youth disillusionment in the country:

Falcon: “I’m thinkin’ of all the *thousands* of kids *like* him—out *there*—kids who ain’t gonna *be* so lucky! Kids who’ve lost faith in the *law*—in the world around them— and in *themselves*! Kids with no one to *turn* to—no one to *trust*—with nothing but *bitterness* and contempt—for the *system*! Where do they *go*, Cap? What do they *do*? What *chance* do they have?”

¹³⁹ Bradford W. Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2001), 244.

Captain America: “That depends on *us*, Sam— on all men of good faith *everywhere!* The world’s like a giant *powder keg*—waiting for the slightest spark of *hatred* to set it off! But, so long as there are men willing to fight for *justice*— for *tolerance*— and for *understanding*— then maybe, just maybe— those kids’ll *make* it! Anyway, at least we *know*— what it is we’re *fighting* for!”¹⁴⁰

This story showed both the eternally optimistic preaching of Stan Lee but also the darkening tone of comics in the 1970s. Even Captain America had to acknowledge the changing state of affairs in the United States and the particular challenges of youths of color. Not only was he assuring young readers to have faith in the goodness of certain men, but this was also a call to action. The United States was experiencing a crisis of faith and it was up to its citizens to fight against injustice and bigotry everywhere. William Chafe wrote that “the 1970s became a microcosm of the unresolved tensions within American society between old and new. No longer driven by the faith and optimism of the postwar years, Americans faced a frightening array of prospects— political and military decline in the world at large, economic stagnation, the presence of a profound cultural cleavage about which values really counted, and above all, a sense that the core strength that had infused every American endeavor since World War II was now in the process of rapid erosion.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ “They Call Him— Stoneface!” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 134. Marvel. February 1971.

¹⁴¹ William Chafe. *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 413.

The dragged out end of the Vietnam War, in the midst of the Watergate scandal, had weakened public trust in American institution. Combined with the failures of the black civil rights movement to completely eradicate racism and inequality from society and the rise of black nationalism and identity politics that often rejected the idea of working within the system or with white liberals, the Left was becoming fractured. The recession and stagflation of the mid 1970s, escalated by various oil shocks, helped to contribute to general hopelessness along with the deteriorating conditions in the Middle East. The decade closed with the Iranian hostage crisis and a sense that Carter's leadership was weak and ineffective illustrated the widespread discontent and anger at American failures. Meanwhile, the conservative movement, which would come together to become the powerful New Right under Reagan, had not been sitting idly by during the last two decades. As Lisa McGirr noted, the strong grassroots campaign and "conservatives' successes, to be sure, were due in no small part to liberalism's foundering on the shoals of race, economic discontent, and its own internal contradictions. But just as significantly, conservatives' ability to build a powerful movement enabled them to pick up the pieces and profit politically from liberal failures."¹⁴² The battle for political power and general feeling of despair at this time manifested in comics as its heroes adjusted to the new decade.

¹⁴² Lisa McGirr. *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

Captain America and the Falcon stories often revolved around stories influenced by political battles and often revolved around race and discussions of liberalism. The Falcon himself was a social worker by day and superhero by night. He was also unafraid to call out bigots and assert his capabilities to Cap. Not content to be the nonwhite sidekick, Sam muses to himself that “I never signed up to be his *whipping boy*. Any time he wants’ a trade *gripes*, I’ll match him *two* for one. I figure *any* black man can.”¹⁴³ This was quite a departure from the traditional relationship between an established white superhero and a nonwhite character. Not only was Sam confident in his abilities and partnership with Captain America, but he was unwilling to be the loyal, deferential sidekick. He was almost self-aware of the historical nature of white-nonwhite comic collaborations.

Like many Marvel stories of the 1960s, villains were often racists. In a 1972 story, Cap and Falcon face off against the 1950s Captain America and his sidekick Bucky. When Marvel had decided to reboot the Captain America series in 1963, they explained that Captain America the Commie Smasher had been another volunteer posing as the patriotic superhero. The real Cap had crash landed during the war and been frozen in stasis for decades and his Golden Age partner Bucky had been killed. In this issue, the imposters return to take the place of the real heroes. They lure Sam into a trap by “roughing up some coloreds” and then lament the sorry state of the image of Captain

¹⁴³ “To Stalk the Spider-Man!” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 137. Marvel. May 1971.

America as they attack him. Sam is furious and calls them “costumed *bigots*.” The two imposters are revealed to be stuck in the mindset of obsessive Cold War hysterics and racism, calling Sam a “colored creep” and Cap a “*pinko* who’s *duped* the American public—who’s trying to *sell out* this great nation to the *reds!*”¹⁴⁴

The next issue explores the backstory of the two men and vehemently condemns the McCarthy-ism of past Cold War politics. The two imposters had been used by the government as stand-ins for the missing Cap until they took their passionate anti-communism too far: as one man says, “we seemed to *outgrow* the world. We began finding *Reds* where others saw *nothing*, like in *Harlem* and *Watts*. In fact, we found that *most* people who weren’t *pure-blooded Americans* were *Commies!*”¹⁴⁵ Here anticommunism and racism were melded together in the minds of zealots. Putting aside the fact that Marvel had published hordes of vehemently anticommunist stories in the past, the writer (Steve Englehart) was criticizing the fanaticism that had marred America’s relationship with liberalism and activists. The imposters had even worked for the U.S. government before being fired for their extremist views and actions. This story also showed the unique struggles that Sam had to deal with as a black superhero. Villains were often marked by their easily identifiable racism and intolerance.

¹⁴⁴ “The Falcon Fights Alone.” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 154. Marvel, October 1972.

¹⁴⁵ “The Incredible Origin of the Other Captain America!” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 155. Marvel, November 1972.

A later issue explores these themes more when Cap and Falcon must face their greatest villain: the old Nazi Red Skull. He kidnaps their friends Peggy Carter and Gabe Jones after seeing the two being affectionate. Peggy, a white woman, is a wartime friend of Cap. Gabe, a black man, was part of the Howling Commandoes, a team created by Marvel in 1963. His inclusion was notable at the time as part of the casual representation of nonwhite characters in Marvel. In this story, Red Skull is furious at their interracial relationship and calls Gabe a dog before threatening to torture the couple. As Cap and Sam rush to find their kidnapped friends, Cap is shown as angry at the bureaucrats hampering their search. The narrator notes that “once, Steve Rogers would not have been so quick to anger—would not have become so impatient with the red tape—but that was before 1974. Now, he regards his world with a healthy skepticism—and an overriding desire to learn its truths for himself!”¹⁴⁶

Not only did this story demonstrate the widespread disillusionment with the government after Watergate and Nixon’s resignation but it also normalized an interracial relationship. Red Skull is shown as being hateful and bigoted for opposing Peggy and Gabe— even though anti-miscegenation laws in the United States had only been ruled unconstitutional by the *Loving v. Virginia* case in 1967. Marvel was at the forefront of mainstream comics in introducing interracial couples. While Gabe and Peggy were affectionate, the first interracial kiss (between M’Shulla and Carmilla Frost, a black man

¹⁴⁶ “Scream the Scarlet Skull.” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 185. Marvel. May 1975.

and a white woman) in comics actually appeared two months later in a different Marvel comic. As Don McGregor, the writer who wrote that story, dryly noted:

“Stan Lee really did want Marvel to be the first thing in comics; he liked the avant-garde reputation Marvel had built up over the years. I knew the only way I could do something like an interracial kiss there was if it was okayed by Stan...[he] was concerned that some Southern states would hold the comic up at a PTA meeting, protesting what their kids were seeing...but here’s the thing: the sky did not fall on anyone’s head. That kiss did not have hate mail flooding the offices...now, interracial couples had been introduced to Marvel comics, and it would be easier to have people of different diversity be represented in the medium.”¹⁴⁷

There was still a fear of white backlash but Marvel’s commitment to diversity and its own reputation helped bring about characters and storylines that were progressive for their time. The message was clear concerning the Red Skull, Peggy, and Gabe: those who opposed interracial couples were bigots and behind the times. Even though the villain was a cartoonishly evil Nazi, Marvel’s stance was firm on this issue. Unfortunately, for each step forward they took with the Falcon, they often took two steps back. In this very same issue, Sam Wilson is revealed to be both a pawn of Red Skull’s schemes and an ex-criminal.

¹⁴⁷ “One on One: Don McGregor, Part 1.” Don McGregor, interviewed by Cliff Galbraith. *13th Dimension: Comics, Creators, Culture*. <http://13thdimension.com/don-mcgregor-pt-1-marvels-first-interracial-kiss/>

Up until this point, the writers had avoided the pitfall of giving almost every black character a criminal backstory. Sam had been depicted as a social worker who was passionately committed to looking out for his community. For some reason, Englehart decided to change this and write a new past for Sam as a hustler named Snap Wilson who had been kidnapped, brainwashed, and controlled by Red Skull to be his spy. Red Skull reveals that he changed Sam's nature, declaring that "I knew you *well*, Captain America! I knew *exactly* what kind of man would most appeal to your sniveling *liberalism*— an *upright, cheerful Negro*, with a love for the same 'brotherhood' *you* cherish!"¹⁴⁸ This was intended to show the evil machinations of Red Skull, but it also stripped Sam of his agency in becoming the Falcon and a full-fledged superhero on his own. His confidence in himself and his abilities had all been engineered by a white supremacist; his very personality itself was not his own.

A central theme in the series was the navigation of black neighborhoods and racial politics. In one issue, a group called The Diamond Heads cause mayhem in Harlem. Sam tells Cap that "they're like a black version of the *Klan*! All they preach is *hate whitey*! They're dangerous *fanatics*! They don't care *who* suffers—or who gets *hurt*! They can set our progress *back* a hundred years! The black community *fears* them...but seems *powerless* against them!" In the end, the Diamond Heads were being manipulated by the Maggia (a Marvel version of the Mafia). Sam tells Cap that "your skin may be a different

¹⁴⁸ "Mindcage!" *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 186. Marvel. June 1975.

color— but there’s *no* man alive I’m prouder to call— *brother!*”¹⁴⁹ The obvious references to the Black Panthers and other black radicals were meant to once again criticize what were seen as their divisive tactics and departure from the nonviolent strategies and mixed participation that white liberals preferred. As Adilifu Nama noted, this was a “tacit critique of essentialist notions of racial identity advocated by Black Power nationalists.”¹⁵⁰ Sam was used by the writers as emblematic of racial progressivism. Only by coming together, could the United States move forward— and black radicals would be blamed if it couldn’t.

Racial strife within black communities was explored even more with the addition of Leila Taylor. Introduced in 1971, Leila was portrayed as an extremist black radical, constantly pushing Sam to be more militant. In her first appearance, she tells him that “Our people need *heroes*, man, not *handouts!*...we don’t *need* no more *social workers*. We need *fighters*—to give our people *pride!*” Conflicted, Sam thinks to himself that “I ain’t sayin’ we don’t *need* to make it hot for the ones who been *steppin’* on us for years— but, maybe it’s *just* as important to some of us to cool things *down*—so we can *protect* the rights we been *fightin’* for.”¹⁵¹ Once again, here were the limits of liberalism in the 1970s. By advocating black pride and dismissing community work, Leila and her ilk were believed to be damaging black-white relations and isolating more conservative

¹⁴⁹ “The Fate...of the Falcon!” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 126. Marvel. June 1970.

¹⁵⁰ Adilifu Nama. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 72.

¹⁵¹ “The Badge and the Betrayal!” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 139. Marvel. July 1971.

black Americans. White criticism of extremism took on a more central role in the next two issues titled “Power to the People” and “Holocaust in Harlem.”

As writer Gary Friedrich—a self-described hippie— temporarily took over the Captain America title, he intensified the racial politics facing Cap and Sam. In an uncomfortable exchange between Sam and Leila, gender politics also make an appearance:

Sam: “I’ve got a feeling you’re not as *tough* as you *seem*...that there’s a real *woman* lurking beneath that militant *exterior*! So why don’t you *loosen up* and—?!”

Leila: “*Hands off*, Daddy! You’re not only an *Uncle Tom*! You’re also a *male chauvinist*! But I’ll give you a chance to prove I’m *wrong*— if you’ll go to a *meeting* with me—*tonight*!”

Sam: “You mean a *people’s militia* rally no doubt! Afraid that’s not my *bag*!”

Leila: “Okay— then I’m *splittin’*!”

Sam: “Hang *in* there a second— I could change my *mind*— if you’d try to show me you can think about something besides *black power*—like that I’m a man, and you’re a *chick*—!”¹⁵²

Not only do the panels show Sam roughly grabbing Leila during their argument, but it is heavily implied that she sleeps with Sam to get him to come to the rally. The depiction of Sam as a sexually aggressive, rough black man harkens back to the white fear of black male sexuality and early comics that exploited this anxiety. He would never have been drawn doing the same to a white female character. Leila, in spite of her initial

¹⁵² “Power to the People!” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 143. Marvel. November 1971.

reluctance, is shown as being willing to overlook him grabbing and propositioning her. Emblematic of the angry black woman trope, Leila is also drawn as more sexual than other white female characters in the comic. This is in stark contrast to Cap and his white girlfriend Sharon's chaste romance. In addition to the insinuation that women like Leila can be overcome with asserting male dominance is the underlying criticism of feminism that was rife in comics at this time.

After completing their deal, Sam attends the Black Power rally with Leila. He is verbally attacked by black radicals over his partnership with Cap. They tell him that "we been reasonable *too long!* You tell that to your pale-faced boss next time you're lickin' his *boots!*" As the night continues, a masked man leading the rally tells his black audience that they will burn Harlem to the ground and punish whites and "honkies" for their racism. The black spectators are drawn in a viciously animalistic manner as they cheer and scream phrases like: "Right on! This is the start of the black revolution!" "Black is beautiful!" "Power to the people!" When Sam tries to calm the crowd and stop the impending violence, they turn against him and beat him, calling him a "traitor" and "whitey-lover."¹⁵³ A riot breaks out when the black radicals attack the police and start burning the city. In the end, Red Skull (of course) is revealed to be the masked man and the mastermind of a plot to destroy the city using black anger. The last page shows both Sam and Cap rethinking their relationship with each other and their communities. Cap is

¹⁵³ "Burn, Whitey, Burn!" *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 143. Marvel. November 1971.

convinced Leila (“that militant girl”) has come between him and Sam and tries to convince the black radicals to pursue more peaceful avenues of protest in the future. Sam is torn between his friendship with Cap, who has trouble understanding black anger, and how to move forward with two different ideas of how to protest.¹⁵⁴

Even though Cap is criticized by Sam as insensitive to black frustration over racism, the bulk of this issue is devoted to blaming militant black activists for racial problems in the United States. Even though Sam understands where their anger is coming from, he is shown as the voice of reason in a black community. Another troubling aspect of this story comes from the easiness in which black Harlem residents are tricked by a white racist—in this case, Red Skull—to commit crimes and riot. Much like the jungle comics of the 1940s, they are shown to be easily fooled by a clever criminal and quick to engage in violence. Usually, in jungle comics, a white hero would intervene and show them the error of their ways. In this updated version, it was a white man and a reasonable black man—that they had denounced as an Uncle Tom and a whitey. Much like the African natives of jungle comics, they are drawn with animalistic and brutish faces. By framing angry blacks as both unable to control their feelings and easily misled, any black protest could be delegitimized. Perhaps this was meant to be a warning of the dangers of

¹⁵⁴ “Red Skull in the Morning...Cap Take Warning!” *Captain America and the Falcon*, No. 143. Marvel. November 1971.

radicalism, but the message was clear: black activists needed to watch themselves and stay within the designated lines of white liberalism.

While the theme of radicalism was central to a fair amount of Marvel stories with black characters in the 1970s, writer Don McGregor was carving out a wildly different and progressive niche for himself with the Black Panther in the *Jungle Action* series. As he declared, “Jungle Action was basically blonde jungle gods and goddesses saving the native populace from whatever threat. It was pretty racist stuff and I couldn’t believe Marvel was publishing it.”¹⁵⁵ Determined to change the approach to both the series itself and how Marvel treated its black characters, McGregor rebooted the series with Black Panther as the main character and an all-black cast. This was unheard of at the time in mainstream comics. The artist for much of the Black Panther run was Billy Graham, one of the first black comic book artists at Marvel. He had been hired in 1972 to work on Luke Cage. The two men worked together for years with Black Panther, creating one of Marvel’s more unique and thoughtful titles.

Although Black Panther had been around since 1966, he didn’t receive his first starring title until 1973 under McGregor. Unlike other black characters, T’Challa wasn’t centered in an urban ghetto. He was the king of the fictional African nation of Wakanda, described as “a nation of paradoxes. Technology coexisting with primitive tradition.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Don McGregor, quoted in *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2013), 132.

¹⁵⁶ “But Now The Spears Are Broken.” *Jungle Action Ft. The Black Panther*, No. 9. *Marvel*. May 1974.

Although the series often stumbled in its depiction of African imagery and cultural understandings, Adilifu Nama wrote that “T’Challa struggled to come to grips with the responsibilities of being the Black Panther and consolidating his power to establish his reign in Wakanda...*Jungle Action* was progressive in the way it avoided many of the ghetto-centric clichés of the “black experience.”¹⁵⁷ T’Challa was a regal and thoughtful ruler, but also a ferocious fighter that gained strength from powerful herbs that put him in touch with the Black Panther spirit that had assisted his ruling family for centuries. There was often exoticizing of African culture with references to “ritualistic fires,” witch doctors, and mystical herbal remedies but for the most part, McGregor avoided the pitfalls of past jungle comics.

In a 1976 series, T’Challa and his American girlfriend Monica Lynne travel to her hometown to investigate her sister’s mysterious death. In a turn of events, the Klan and another fictional white supremacist group, the Dragon’s Circle, are revealed to not only be behind Angela Lynne’s murder but have also infiltrated the political life of her city. As one reporter laments, “the Klan’s a lot more *subtle* about its *activities* these days—*rallies* and such are their big *shindig*. Hit the middle class and lower class where they *live*...and believe me, they’ve got their recruiting shtick down pat. They use everything. *The recession...liberalism*. I tell ya, they even have a great sense of *drama*...what with their

¹⁵⁷ Adilifu Nama. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 44.

burning crosses...but they try to keep any violence *quiet* and not traceable back to them. They aren't *overjoyed* by bad press.”¹⁵⁸ A Klan meeting even shows the leaders manipulating the fears of poor whites by framing blacks as their enemy, as the reason for their poverty and misery. The story follows T'Challa and Monica as they are threatened by white supremacists, face down police brutality, white mob violence, political corruption, and even failed liberalism. At one point, T'Challa is kidnapped and narrowly escapes being burned alive on a Klan cross.

In no other mainstream comic were there storylines like this. White supremacists were always part of Klan knockoffs like the Sons of the Serpent or Nazis like Red Skull. Not only was this bringing to light the dark past of American history, McGregor was arguing that the Klan and their ilk had merely gone underground and secretly political with their racist plans. This was a direct attack on both conservative claims of reverse racism and liberals who wanted to move on from the civil rights era. Neoconservatives could change their rhetoric with code words and covert racism but this was an outright condemnation of this. Omi and Winant called this the “system of racial hegemony [that] was substituted for the earlier system of racial domination...this incorporation required that tangible concessions be made without altering the underlying structural racism that was characteristic of the United States.”¹⁵⁹ Neoliberals, tired of fighting and alienated by

¹⁵⁸ “Blood and Sacrifices!” *Jungle Action Ft. The Black Panther*, No. 19. Marvel. January 1976.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Omi & Howard Winant. *Racial Formation In The United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 15.

black solidarity, found it easier to embrace the colorblind ideology and pretend that racism had ended with the legal gains of the black civil rights movement. McGregor and his team were determined to illuminate an uncomfortable truth rather than write about yet another fictional Nazi white supremacist.

Meanwhile, Marvel was struggling with its nonwhite characters and their sales. As editor-in-chief Roy Thomas grumbled, “it’s kind of a shame. You could get blacks to buy comics about whites, but it was hard to get whites to buy comics in which the main character was black. And it was even harder to get boys to buy comics about women.”¹⁶⁰ Even in the face of lackluster sales and the possibility of cancelation, Don McGregor flat out refused to have the Avengers cameo in his comic. He was being pressured by his editor and the sales team, but argued that “it was important for a black hero not to have to have white heroes come in to save the day.”¹⁶¹ Another one of Marvel’s black heroes, Luke Cage (Power Man) had been struggling with sales as well. He had been created in 1972 to latch onto the blaxploitation craze. As a young black man framed for a crime he didn’t commit, Cage was a rough but proud hero for urban black youth. He spoke in what white writers assumed was urban dialect (“Sweet Christmas” was his main catchphrase) and often was a stereotype of what white writers assumed black men were like. When his

¹⁶⁰ Roy Thomas, quoted in *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 1991), 161.

¹⁶¹ Don McGregor, quoted in *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2013), 181.

sales declined, they paired him with Iron Fist, a white martial arts hero that had been created to benefit from the popularity of kung-fu in pop culture.

The two men became the Heroes For Hire and protected the poor neighborhoods from crime. With the assistance of Misty Knight, a black ex-policewoman with a bionic arm, and Colleen Wing, a Japanese martial arts expert, they were one of the more diverse Marvel teams in existence. Mary Jo Duffy, one of Marvel's few female writers, was put in charge of the team-up, with Billy Graham often assisting with the art. *Heroes For Hire* was a mixed success— on one hand, the two female characters, Misty and Colleen, were no damsels in distress and were as capable in battle as the two men. Misty and Danny were a casual representation of an interracial couple and were often shown kissing. On the other hand, Duffy's dialogue for the black characters was often cringeworthy. Luke especially was prone to violent outbursts and often called Danny and other white characters "white boy," "honky," and his enemies "jive turkeys."

Yet Danny and Luke fought for the weak, illuminating actual problems for poor Americans. One story follows the plight of those let down by the government, in the form of "*Liberty Towers*, a high-rise, low income *housing project* begun in the heyday of *federal anti-poverty programs*. The project was hailed as a *masterpiece* of enlightened urban planning. It was also *rotten* to the core. Of every *dollar* budgeted for construction,

over half was *ripped off*. Within a year of the project's dedication, the city had *condemned* every building. Today, Liberty Towers is just another dream gone *bust*.”¹⁶²

Luke also had to make sure that Danny, a billionaire, understood that their clients couldn't afford high rates and they had to take care of the poor clients as well. Their enemies often got out of jail easily as the two heroes lamented the state of the criminal justice system. However, this didn't stop the influx of ridiculous characters like Nightshade, a blaxploitation villain who wore a bikini and used robots to try to take over Harlem. As she explained, growing up in the ghetto had taught her that “the only two ways out were learning and crime. I decided to master both.”¹⁶³ The fantastic plots mixed with attempts to show the realities of urban life was a staple of white comic writers. Bradford Wright asserted that “even open-minded white writers found it difficult to portray minority characters in a way that was not offensive or patronizing.”¹⁶⁴ This was especially apparent with DC's first black superhero to receive his first title: Black Lightning.

Already behind Marvel in terms of nonwhite representation, DC decided to create a black superhero in 1977. According to Black Lightning's creator and writer, Tony Isabella, it was a nightmare. He had worked on various titles for Marvel years before, creating black characters like Misty Knight and Black Goliath and wanted to bring in

¹⁶² “A Night On The Town.” *Power Man and Iron Fist*, No. 51. Marvel. June 1978.

¹⁶³ “Death-Plunge!” *Power Man and Iron Fist*, No. 51. Marvel. October 1978.

¹⁶⁴ Bradford W. Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2001), 249.

another positive hero for DC. However, the first concept that editors came up with was a racist white Vietnam vet who was chemically altered to be black to blend in better with the jungle. Isabella was horrified and begged them to change their offensive idea, demanding “Do you want your first black superhero to be a white bigot?”¹⁶⁵ Determined to both have more African-American representation in DC comics and provide a good role model, Isabella got his way and was allowed to launch his idea for Jefferson Pierce, an ex-Olympian, who worked as a teacher in a poor neighborhood and used his athletic prowess and moral compass to become a hero for the downtrodden as Black Lightning.

For all of Isabella’s good intentions, his comic often ran into many of the same pitfalls as other black characters. Pierce’s neighborhood was regrettably named Suicide Slum and he was called “Uncle Tom” or “Sammy” by his foes. His speech was written with the same urban dialect all white writers used: he called his villains “turkeys” and used phrases like “suit yerself, chuckles.”¹⁶⁶ But Pierce fought drug pushers, gang members, and defended his students. He also was never given a criminal background. He worked for the greater good as part of both of his identities: hero Black Lightning and teacher Jefferson Pierce. Writers like Isabella were committed to providing a positive nonwhite hero for both white and nonwhite young readers. As he recalled, “it didn’t seem fair to me that there were so few African-American heroes in comics...I wanted a

¹⁶⁵ Tony Isabella, in the introduction for *Black Lightning, Volume 1*. (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016).

¹⁶⁶ “Deadly Aftermath.” *Black Lightning, No. 8*. DC Comics. April 1978.

character to whom our young readers could relate, a character who would inspire them as Superman and Captain America had inspired me.”¹⁶⁷

Therefore, the racial project of mainstream comics in the 1970s had wildly diverged from their origins in the 1940s. The decade was marked by a push for representation and inclusion of nonwhite characters but also the conservative pushback against the racial politics of the United States. Of the past four decades, this showed the limits of liberalism the most. It was easy to condemn blatant and cartoonish racism, but systemic and disguised racism was harder to ferret out. White liberals felt betrayed by the rise of black power and identity politics that they believed didn't acknowledge their past support. Activists that continued to fight for racial justice after the legal triumphs of the civil rights era were seen as limiting progressivism and unification of the nation. However, unlike the initial racial propaganda of comics in the 1940s, there was no collective agreement on how to depict nonwhite characters. While most comic book writers considered themselves liberals, they differed greatly on how they would portray their characters.

Some, like Stan Lee, pushed for more inclusivity and representation while operating from within a limited framework of white racialized thinking. Others, like Gary Friedrich, chose to demonize those they saw as detrimental to a united liberal front, and others, like Don McGregor, tackled unpopular racial topics head on. All of them were still

¹⁶⁷ Tony Isabella, in the introduction for *Black Lightning, Volume 1*. (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016).

constrained by a white liberal framework that saw their unconscious biases and ideas about nonwhite Americans realized in their characters. The push for more positive nonwhite characters was met with mixed results, especially in an era of fractured liberalism.

Conclusion: “Corruption and injustice and racism can infiltrate authority structures all by themselves, without a super villain's help.” - Ms. Marvel

From their rise to massive popularity in an era marked by wartime racial propaganda to a decade reeling from social upheaval and cultural uncertainty, mainstream American comics have both reflected societal racial hierarchies and ways of thinking and been part of a racial project to directly influence their readers. These have often overlapped when writers attempted to positively shape the way their readers thought about race, while still being constrained by their own racial biases. The 1940s were marked by the white supremacy dominant in American life as well as the overwhelming support for World War II and easy racial propaganda that went along with it. The racial project of the time was concerned with both dehumanizing Germans and Japanese and promoting nonwhite compliance and deference to white Americans. The racial stereotypes of this era didn't disappear with the victory of the Allies. The dawn of the Cold War saw a shift in representation of nonwhite characters— and many of them disappeared completely from comics altogether.

The United States, locked in an ideological and proxy war with the Soviet Union, was being forced to come to terms with their new responsibilities as the leading democracy in the West and the most powerful Western superpower, while violently suppressing the rights of black and minority Americans at home. The civil rights struggle in the 1950s clearly illustrated this hypocrisy at a time when the U.S. desperately wanted

to project a vision of American freedom, justice, and democracy. This meant comics that “emphasized responsibility to the community over individualism.”¹⁶⁸ Mainstream comics began to reflect this and dropped many of the racially charged plot lines. This didn’t mean a complete reimagining of nonwhite characters, but rather a concerted effort to have popular white heroes tout tolerance and understanding. More broadly, this meant putting forth comics that advocated for liberalism and acceptance but removed all nonwhite characters from the comic. Many writers completely stopped talking about race altogether. As the fight for black civil rights grew more intense and impossible to ignore, the focus on nonwhite characters shifted again. The 1950s had seen the comic book industry’s racial project evolve from white supremacy to ignoring race. By the latter part of the decade, comic book writers would push for anti-racism and greater liberalism.

The 1960s was marked by the dominance of the two companies—Marvel and DC—of the industry. This was followed by Marvel’s rise in popularity, mainly due to their socially relevant storylines. The influence of the civil rights struggle was obvious in the multitude of storylines revolving around discussions of racism and the addition of nonwhite characters. Led by Stan Lee, the racial project at Marvel was aimed at advocating anti-racism and attempting to attract more readers through socially relevant plots. The stereotypes of the past decades were still unmistakable, but many (especially

¹⁶⁸ Bradford Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 185.

Asian characters) had been updated to reflect the fears of the Cold War. The Cold War, while less restrictive for writers than the past decades, still loomed over the comics industry. While open-minded white writers were attempting to update their comics for a new era of optimism and equality, they were limited by the framework of white liberalism. In the midst of their attempts to showcase minority characters and denounce racism, they produced often patronizing work and empty messages of tolerance. As the decade came to a close, the legal gains made by black activists had failed to overhaul the systemic racism of the United States. Combined with exhaustion over the Vietnam War, the assassinations of high-profile activists and politicians, and a growing emphasis on identity politics had fractured the left. This was apparent in the storylines that emerged in the next decade.

The 1970s saw the proliferation of both supporting and leading nonwhite characters. As DC strove to catch up with Marvel's sales, the two companies battled over attracting readers with socially relevant storylines that dealt with race. DC had been lagging behind Marvel for years with nonwhite representation and spent the decade trying to catch up, with limited success. While both companies were trying to present a racial project that would bring nonwhite characters to the forefront of public consciousness and feature storylines that dealt with racial issues facing the United States, their writers often showed their own internal biases. White liberals were either convinced of the end of racial injustice after the limited legal victories of the 1960s or felt left out of the

deepening chasm between mainstream activism and identity politics that included black nationalism. The proliferation of stories that criticized black power or equated it with white racism, and black radicalism was reflective of the neoliberalism and neoconservatism that would come to dominate American racial politics in the years to come.

And what of the Jewish writers, publishers, and artists that had been such a substantial part of the comics industry in its formative years? The war years had seen a disproportionate number of Jews working for various comics companies. They brought their almost-white immigrant angst into their comics. Quite a few—including Jack Kirby and Stan Lee—went to work for the war effort. In the postwar era, some of the most important figures remained working in comics, but many left for more lucrative careers. Stan Lee, one of the most well-known comics figures, worked for Marvel for decades, bouncing around as a writer, publisher, and president. Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegal never recovered from losing the rights to Superman but wrote for years for different publishers. As the status of Jews became unofficially white after the war, they were accepted into mainstream American society. Comics had never been a particularly well-respected or well-paying field and many Jews moved on to different careers, no longer restricted by their almost-white status. After the decline of comics in the 1950s and their fundamental change in the 1960s, the industry changed as well. Now fans were coming to work for the companies they had idealized in their youth and older writers were pushed out. The

comics industry and its writers had evolved greatly from its origins in the 1940s. As the 1970s ended, it became more of a fan subculture, losing the mass appeal it had held before.

In the decades following, Marvel has remained relatively committed to social relevancy in their comics, mostly in series like *X-Men*. In the 1980s, Magneto was revealed to be a Jew and a Holocaust survivor whose whole family had been murdered in concentration camps. A Jewish X-Men member, Kitty Pryde, argued with a black friend over the similarities of oppression facing black Americans and mutants. Gay characters were added over the years and real issues like the AIDS crisis were addressed in its pages. As these types of characters and stories become more marketable and desirable to a wider audience, Marvel has responded. Recently, Marvel has gone through a renaissance; they are creating more nonwhite characters, hiring more female and nonwhite writers and artists of color, and replacing their old white characters with younger, more diverse heroes. Ms. Marvel, the first mainstream Muslim character to have her own title, is written by Muslim writer G. Willow Wilson and tackles issues like racism, gentrification, and colorism within the Muslim community. Marvel specifically sought out queer Latina writer Gabby Rivera to write a new series for Ms. America, a queer Latina character. They hired their first black female writer, Roxanne Gay, this past year to collaborate with noted black writer Ta-Nehisi Coates on a Black Panther spin-off revolving around an African lesbian couple. DC has had side characters like Alysia Yeoh

coming out as trans and heroes like Batwing (an African member of the Batfamily) given their own solo series. There have been missteps along the way— notably the new Iron Man character RiRi Williams, a black teenage scientific genius, being drawn in an oversexualized manner— but the comics industry has vastly evolved from its roots in white supremacy.

Throughout its history, comics have been an invaluable source for understanding the particular racial politics of the United States. Comic book characters have participated in almost every American war, tackled social issues that have developed in every decade, and been part of a complex cultural history. Along the way, writers participated in a large-scale racial project that both reflected the overarching racial ideology of American society and strove to influence it. The heroes and larger-than-life characters that emerged from these pages bore witness to and participated in the cultural transformation and the evolving racial formation of the United States.

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