The American Ideal: Embodiment and Othered Personification in *Captain America: Truth—Red, White, and Black* and *Captain America: Bicentennial Battles*

by

Brett Israel

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Thesis Committee:

Ben Saunders, Chair

Kate Kelp-Stebbins, Member

Michael Allan, Member

University of Oregon

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Brett Israel

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Title: The American Ideal: Embodiment and Othered Personification in *Captain America: Truth—Red, White, and Black* and *Captain America: Bicentennial Battles*

The character of Captain America has come to embody the values of the American Dream. Throughout Captain America's publication history, he represents the nationalist hero, the potential of the nation at large and the citizenry within. However, as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed White Adonis, Steve Rogers asserts a specific vision of the ideal in a racialized body. In the characters publishing history, Captain America engages with race and troubles hegemonic structures, both in different racial embodiment for the character and Steve himself reconciling and confronting the racist history of the nation, seen explicitly in *Captain America: Truth—Red, White, and Black*, and *Captain America Bicentennial Battles*. This thesis asks, how do the semiotic codes of nationalism resignify when we dress a Black body in this same iconographic costume, specifically in regard to *Truth*? This exploration engages with scholars such as Rebecca Wanzo, Consuela Francis, and J. Richard Stevens to assert that Captain America uses his position of reconciliation to point toward Black futurity. In order to extract this from *Bicentennial Battles*, this study uses the Brechtian reading practice of alienation to argue that Cap has always been a champion of the oppressed: a foundational aspect to the character's make up.

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DEDICATION

To my brother, Joe. For putting the comics in my hands when I needed it most.

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I

The iconography of Captain America is not difficult to interpret. The patriot clad in red, white, and blue, with the striped and starred shield symbolizing defensive nationalism, the physique projecting a traditional masculine ideal. The reader subliminally recalls that the square-jawed, muscularly built Steve Rogers is both an American Achilles and Adonis—a mythological warrior and an icon of "traditional" male beauty. But what if this "representative" body was not that of the blonde-haired, blue eyed, and White Steve Rogers? How do the semiotic codes of nationalism resignify when we dress a Black body in this same iconographic costume? This fundamental question drives the entire argument of my thesis.

When it comes to the understanding of racial difference, the ideological position of key Marvel creators such as Stan Lee attempted to oppose the painful history of racial intolerance through universalist rhetoric, asserting the idea that "all men are brothers under the skin."[1] Famously, Lee penned and published several columns in the editorial pages of Marvel's titles in the late 1960s advocating for the essential commonality of all men, and condemning bigotry against entire groups on the basis of racial phenotypes, ethnic affiliations, or religious beliefs. Lee (like many others during the period) would certainly have been inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. (evidence being Lee's most explicitly anti-racist columns appeared in the months following King's assassination, and were clearly inspired by the national anguish in the face of that loss). In *Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break Silence*, a speech first delivered in 1967 in New York City, King drew heavily upon the idea of universal brotherhood; one key idea of the speech is that collective spiritual growth would follow the acceptance of commonality in the face of more-or-less superficial differences. In the course of the powerful rhetorical climax of the speech, King make a rousing "call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern

beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation," and goes further to declare that this "is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind."

This idea of a universalist love which goes "beyond one's tribe" became a rallying cry of the 20th century liberalism and served as a central creative ideological direction within the Marvel comic book universe from the mid 1960s onwards. The heroes would protect and stand for *all* peoples, regardless of race or creed. That said, the majority of these heroes were developed prior to the aftermath of the ideological revolutions of the later 1960s and 1970s, and were almost all White and male, unintentionally promoting the hegemonic order through this narrow vision of heroism, and generating an arguably irresolvable tension between tolerationist ideals and racially delineated realities. Nowhere is this tension more visible than in the character of Steve Rogers as Captain America.

From the initial conception of the character in the 1940s comics of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America had been portrayed as standing for ordinary Americans, and for the ideals of the American Dream. While for the majority of his history, Captain America has been embodied by the White, male figure of Steve Rogers there is nothing *inherent* in the symbolic nature of the Captain America role that would require a White, male hero; the possibility that someone other than Steve Rogers might stand as the embodiment of American values,[2] someone of a different racial or gender-identification, was not an impossibility. In the last few decades, various creators have attempted to imagine Captain America as, quite literally, someone other. This study explores one of those stories: *Captain America Truth: Red, White, and Black* by Robert Morales and Kyle Baker. I will argue that this story, and others like it, attempt to reconcile the tension between Marvel's overt ideology of universal brotherhood and the all-White cast of the first generation of Marvel heroes, so that "Captain America" can more

successfully symbolize, and more literally embody, the nation and its history. It is in these moments where Cap and his creators attempt to rise to the ideals that Martin Luther King Jr. preached.

II

J. Richard Stevens' book length exploration of Captain America's publishing history, *Captain America: Masculinity and Violence,* is an ambitious work: an attempt to summarize over eighty years of stories that also places them within the broader political contexts of the era to show how Marvel attempted to mediate the given moment. Stevens maps the character's growth from a source of propaganda designed to encourage the fight against fascism both abroad and at home, to the "Commie Smasher" era of the 1950's, and into the modern Marvel age in the 1960's. He explores how Captain America engaged with national moments as a nationalist symbol. For example, he shows how Cap's creators more or less skirting around the subject of the Vietnam War directly, but hit the Watergate scandal head on in the seminal "Secret Empire" storyline by writer Steve Englehart. According to Stevens, the character would go on to embody a Reagan-era sense of consumerism and hyper-capitalism, the "Hypercommercialized Leader" (Stevens 124), in the 1980s, and would struggle to rearticulate national ideals following the "age of terror" in the turn of the 21st century.[3]

Throughout all of these shifts, Cap engages with issues of gender inequality, class struggle, and most importantly for this study, racial conflict and inequality. While those less familiar with Cap's longer history might imagine him as little more than a jingoist, hegemonic symbol who avoids engagement with issues of diversity and community, the reality is more complex. The character is constantly questioning aspects of the nation he is supposed to represent—particularly with the question of how a nation can think of itself positively as a racial melting pot but then subjugate and exploit citizens based on distinctions of race. It is this tradition of ongoing and uneasy engagement that leaves the Captain America concept open to fuller attempts to embody the nation and all its history, clarifying the ontological nature of the

character as a symbol for the *entire* population of the nation, and pointing forward towards a more utopian "collective" vision of the type espoused by King. I would also assert that when Captain America attempts to reconcile the troubling history of racial history in America, the character points us toward a Black futurity.

To return to a moment at the beginnings of the character: we can see Simon and Kirby's worldview bleeding into the early Captain America stories, beyond the clear confrontation with fascism at home. Both creators believed in the power of a pluralist patriotism that could span generations of citizens, young and old. This is most clearly seen in the incarnation of Bucky Barnes as Captain America's sidekick. James Buchanan Barnes, affectionately nick-named Bucky, is the "mascot" of the regiment where Steve Rogers is placed and on discovering that Steve is Captain America, Bucky becomes Captain America's sidekick.[4] However, Bucky is not the only child character from the earliest pages of Captain America stories. Introduced in a text piece in *Captain America Comics #4*, a youthful gang called "The Sentinels of Liberty" make their first appearance. In their first comic appearance in the following issue, we get a glimpse of the group, consisting of Knuckles, Jeff, Tubby, and Whitewash Jones. While the incorporation of a gang of street-smart children is a clear nod to the portion of the reading audience of a younger age, this group also features Captain America's earliest engagement with racial difference, embodied in Whitewash Jones

It must be stated at the outset that Whitewash Jones does not obviously serve my argument that the seeds of a "Black futurity" can be seen even in the early (pre-1960s) Cap comics. In his visual depiction of Whitewash Jones in *Captain America Comics #5*[5] Kirby still remains beholden during these early days to the dominant, and staggeringly racist, semiotic tropes that were employed to signal racial difference by almost all cartoonists of the era; in other

words he is, in appearance, an abhorrent racist caricature. That said, the larger contexts (both historical and within the narrative) suggest that Simon and Kirby's fundamental motives are anti-racist. Although visually "othered" to an unfortunate degree, the mere incorporation of a Black character into the Sentinels of Liberty suggests Simon and Kirby's desire to create a gang of kids who more closely resembled the diverse ranks of the readership (rather than simply pretend that all American kids were White). Led by the all-American Captain America, the Sentinels of Liberty embody the notion that when it comes time to face the existential threat of Fascism, the battle calls for all races to come together as one. For creators of the 1940s, this stance not only displays Simon and Kirby's liberal impulses but also shows their and the publisher's willingness to put their own politics front and center, even if it turned off potential readership. The Sentinels symbolize a "desirable national fantasy" as extrapolated by Bradford Wright in *Comic Book Nation*: "American Society as a great melting pot, free of racial, ethnic, and class conflict." (Wright 35).

In the case of Kirby, this ideological stance may also have been influenced by his upbringing, specifically as an Eastern European first-generation Jewish immigrant from a working-class family in the tenements of the lower East Side. This positionality appears to have fostered in Kirby a sense of comradery with America's "others."[6] Further, the inclusion of an African American child in *Captain American Comics* tracks with Kirby's ideological stance across future projects such as Sergeant Fury and the Howling Commandos—a series built around a fighting unit designed to reflect the diversity of the United States made up of Jewish-, Italian-, Black- and Irish-American soldiers.[7]

The creation of Whitewash Jones further displays how "Captain America" as a character and title can embody the current history of the nation within that given moment, and also how

that present is constructed by the actions of the past. As Walter Benjamin notes in his materialist essay "On the Concept of History", reflections and images of the past are fleeting, something that can only be referenced. What that translates to in the present, the "now time", is a "revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (Benjamin 396). In the current moment of *Captain America Comics #5*, a comic designed to engage nationalist energies toward the fight against Fascism both at home (the key villains of the story are members of the German-American bund) and abroad, Whitewash Jones is both an unfortunate racist caricature and a progressive—perhaps even "revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past." This Benjaminan interpretation might allow us to see Simon and Kirby's achievement, whether intentional or not. This achievement is the basis for the Captain America concept—one that includes a diverse vision of the United States at its core. In other words, Captain America's creators imbued or imprinted the character with Liberal Humanism, even in their unconscious.

Captain America's politics has generally been a version of liberal humanist universalism; and even during the war, where his utilization is explicitly propagandist and nationalist, Cap's opposition to Nazism positions him in broadly liberal humanist terms. Humanism is a vast and much debated concept, regarded with suspicion by many anti-humanist theorists over the last several decades. Here, I am following the thorough exploration of humanism and its detractors as laid out in philosopher Kate Soper's classic account, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*. Soper defines humanism in respect to anti-humanism at the outset of her book as follows:

> *Humanism*: appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood, thus (negatively) to concepts ('alienation', 'inauthenticity', 'reification', etc.) designating, and intended to explain, the perversion or 'loss' of this common being. Humanism takes history to be a product of human thought and action, and thus claims that the categories of 'consciousness', 'agency', 'choice', 'responsibility', 'moral value', etc. are indispensable to it's understanding (Soper 11-12).

A less valorizing definition of "humanism" drives the work of a writer such as Sylvia Wynter, for whom the term is tainted by the racist mindset of the settlers of North America who attempted to justify their expansionist, colonialist mindset with scientific racism while simultaneously proclaiming themselves as "enlightened." Appeals to "common humanity" are regarded as suspicious by many anti-humanists, on the grounds that all too often, too many people are apparently excluded from this category. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a final statement between "humanist" strains of thought and "anti-humanist" critique; however I want to posit that there is *something* fundamentally humanist to the Captain America concept; in fact, I believe the term "naïve Humanism" better encapsulates the way Jack Kirby thought about the character. Kirby's naïve humanism will be showcased in Morales and Baker's conception of the character in *Truth* as well.

III

Before the creation of the Black Panther in 1966, there were no Black superheroes in the Marvel Universe, and only a handful of supporting characters of color of any kind. As Esther De Dauw notes, Black characters that predate 1969 existed in a status of "minimal racial identity," or as she elaborates, citing Aldo J. Regalado: "In most cases… African American characters were objectified and employed to express white concerns" (De Dauw 141). The injustices of racial difference were cast aside in an effort to avoid discomfort for the largely white readership, and Black life was "flattened" in its presentation. Even as Marvel began to highlight social issues of the time, the civil rights movement was given a specific white gaze; as De Dauw explains: "Comics championed against civil unrest and framed racism as a problem that could be defeated only if everyone involved, including Black people, could be reasonable. Comics rarely, if ever, engaged with the civil rights struggle from the point of view of a Black person" (De Dauw 141).[8] Intriguingly, however, the first attempts to represent and embody an African-American point of view in the Marvel universe would appear in the pages of *Captain America*, with the introduction of Sam Wilson, also known as The Falcon.

In Sam Wilson's origin story, he (and his falcon "familiar," Redwing) saves a body-swapped Steve Rogers from a group called the Exiles. Sam is quickly convinced by Cap to don a costume and become a sidekick of a sort; the book eventually changed its name to *Captain America and The Falcon* (making Cap and the Falcon an early example an interracial action-adventure "buddy" team, a phenomenon that would be seen in numerous movies and TV shows during the 80s and 90s). While the invention of the Falcon raised the bar from the basement of zero heroic African American representation, Sam Wilson is positioned as having a less-than status relative to Steve Rogers. We come to discover that Sam Wilson has a criminal past, with a

former life as a mafia henchman, and comes to the side of the good through the cosmic intervention of the brainwashing Cosmic Cube. While the same could be said of some of Marvel's White heroes (such as Hawkeye or Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch, who also started out as criminal characters), the contrast with Cap's "inherent" heroism (played up so famously in the 1960s era retellings of his origin) can only point toward a negativity. The Falcon's "natural" connection with Redwing might also be seen as carrying some unfortunate associations, such as a long tradition of racist theorizing (from Aristotle to Voltaire to David Hume and beyond), who present Black subjects as less than human by emphasizing their supposed "closeness" to the animal world (McWilliams 57).

Sam Wilson's feelings of inadequacy next to the superhumanly enhanced Steve Rogers were thematized and addressed by writers such as Steve Englehart, who represented Sam as recognizing his inequality in the pairing, and seeking to level the playing field through science, enlisting the help of T'Challa, The Black Panther, and getting some functioning "wings." But Sam's struggle to match-up, in heroic terms, with the White hero in whose title he would take second billing might be read as an allegory for the problems of the Black superhero. It is against this background that I turn to *Truth* — a more ambitious attempt to reconcile the iconic superheroic symbol of the American nation, fraught as that nation may be by a history of racism, with a vision of Black futurity.

IV

Captain America: Truth — Red, White, and Black, a seven-issue mini-series from 2003, was written by Robert Morales and illustrated by Kyle Baker, two creators of color.[9] They came to the project determined to trouble Captain America's status as a representative icon of the nation, and the historical track record of the Marvel comics universe with regard to its treatment of America's racial history. Up until that point, Morales had not written any comics, his background being in journalism in both a writing and editing capacity. Baker, on the other hand, had been working in the comics industry for around two decades, as well as holding numerous animation jobs. Baker's satirical and highly energetic cartooning style had previously courted controversy,[10] and the combination of Morales' new voice in comics with Bakers unique style set up *Truth* as a "Big 2" book that would push the boundaries from its inception.[11]

Morales and Baker were presented an opportunity to tackle America's problematic past through a story about Marvel's iconic symbol of nationhood. Editor of the series, Axel Alonso stated in a later interview that this exploration of the traumas of history was foundational to the assignment: "I thought it would be a really interesting way to use the character to tell a larger story, a chapter of American history. [We used] Captain America as a metaphor for America itself" (Carpenter 54). In fact, Morales and Baker forced Captain America into an unprecedented encounter with the past.

The series centers on the life of soldier Isaiah Bradley, an African American who signs up to serve following the Pearl Harbor attacks in 1941. Bradley's squad of Black soldiers, through the machinations of government scientists, are chosen as subjects in an experiment that we are soon told is an attempt to create the Super Soldier serum—the same serum that in established

Marvel history gives Steve Rogers the powers of Captain America in his famous origin story. Bradley's compatriots represent a cross section of Black American men of the time. For example, Maurice Canfield is from a relatively wealthy family and highly educated—representing the younger generation of the rising Black middle-class. His relative economic "freedom" and education have opened him to new forms of radicalization; his dialogue displaying his interest in the power of Marxist thought to challenge the hegemonic structures of society, as we see him (prior to his military service) encouraging workers to unionize. Maurice's articulate desire for social change makes him a forward or even "futurist" figure in terms of Black social politics, anticipating both Martin Luther King Jr., but also Malcom X.

Sargeant Lucas Evans, on the other hand, is a man adrift. A career soldier disillusioned by the systemic racism of the US military, Sarge has learned how to survive with American hegemonic systems, but at the cost of both equality and social mobility; lacking Maurice's hope for the future and caught in a sociological lock. It's the attack on Pearl Harbor, a call to arms for all three men in different ways, that saves Sarge from suicidal doom.

Together, Isaiah, Maurice, and Sarge represent a range of types, three possible directions for Black futurity, broadly defined by comics scholar Rebecca Wanzo as "the revolutionary, the nihilist, and the family man" (Wanzo 340 and 347). Through this status, Morales hedges against De Dauw's previously cited critique, by making it impossible for the reader to mistake a specific Black character's experience as *the* Black experience. This makes it all the more powerful when all three become subjects in the experimentation of the Super Soldier Serum; in the clutches of systemic racism they are again flattened into being simply "non-white," and therefore fodder for scientific experimentation. Morales and Baker are also folding an allegorical representation of the real-life Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment into the origin story of Captain America. Not only

causing discomfort, it attests to the creator's faith that the concept of Captain America can genuinely reflect a more complete history of the nation itself, warts and all.

Throughout *Truth*, the positionality of the Black soldiers, and Black citizens more broadly, evokes the theoretical framework put forth by Sylvia Wynter in her seminal piece "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument." In this essay, Wynter moves through the definitions of "Man" given during the beginnings of the Humanist turn in the sixteenth century. Wynter asserts the representations of "Man" as:

> The first was from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century; the second from then on until today, thereby making possible both the conceptualizability of natural causality, and of nature as an autonomously functioning force in its own right governed by its own laws (i.e., cursus solitus naturae) (Hubner1983; Blumenberg 1983; Hallyn 1990), with this, in turn, making possible the cognitively emancipatory rise and gradual development of the physical sciences (in the wake of the invention of Man1), and then of the biological sciences (in the wake of the nineteenth century invention of Man2). These were to be processes made possible only on the basis of the dynamics of a colonizer/colonized relation that the West was to discursively constitute and empirically institutionalize on the islands of the Caribbean and, later, on the mainlands of the Americas. (Wynter 264)

Moving further into the twentieth century, and explicitly in the era of the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s, "Man" came to be defined by socioeconomic standing within the hegemonic capitalistic order; the framework of Wynter appearing to assert this with an anti-humanist slant. This newest definition of "Man" enables liberal-bourgeois hegemony while dooming the poor, a class made up in large part but not exclusively by non-white people. This class strives for acceptance into liberal bourgeois society, but it's unachievable. The rules determined by the state, coming from the history of the pre-twentieth century Humanist justifications, necessitate Black and poor bodies to be used for the continuation of an unachievable "Man." The Tuskegee Syphilis experiments—and their allegorical equivalent in the

Super Solider experiments—are the kind of abuses that arise from the world as Wynter describes it.

In the third chapter of *Truth*, we see the direct results of the Super Soldier experiment. The implementation of the serum reflects a presentation of history along the lines of Christina Sharpe's "Wake Work," as defined in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, and applied to *Truth* by Michael Kobre in "Disallowed Truths: Race, Shadow Books, and Captain America", Wake Work is

> …a form of *consciousness*,' she [Sharpe] suggests, of being perpetually in the wake of slavery and its denial of Black humanity. By detailing the ways Isaiah and the others are routinely dehumanized and exploited, the events of *Truth* take place within what Sharpe calls 'the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding.' (Kobre 132)

The Super Soldier experiment is the ongoing event of an unending slavery in mid-twentieth century America. Through this experimentation, unnamed Black soldiers are mutated, and in many cases, killed. The less-than-human status of these Black subjects is concretized further by the cold, unfeeling responses from the scientist implementing the trials. The implication is that this is the same praxis as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, which involved taking hundreds of African American men who had syphilis, as well as a control group, and studying the effects of the untreated disease, even as the subjects were told they were receiving free medical care. This episode of American history is shown to be emblematic of the hegemonic structures that deem black bodies as inferior or waste, and prime subjects for experimentation without ethical code. And, as Consuela Francis aptly states, "…the men in *Truth* are subject to the Super Soldier program because they are part of an 'inferior' race but also because they are soldiers. They are *doubly* expendable." (Francis 146, emphasis mine).

This adds to the burden placed upon the Captain America concept. If Cap is supposed to symbolize or embody the nation, how can he suitably symbolize or embody the values and ideals of a nation whose wealth and culture is built upon a foundation of abused Black bodies—a foundation of corpses?

The fourth issue of *Truth* shows that the genesis of the superhero in the Marvel Universe is at the very least partially constructed on this racially driven experimentation. In the panel below, we see Isaiah reading *Captain America Comics* #1 in a self-reflexive insertion that shatters Marvel continuity. Isaiah comments on this directly, questioning how a book that came out "more'n a year ago" could directly reflect the implementation of the Super Solider Serum, when Isaiah and company have only recently been given the same serum, by the same scientist, with the serum still at the experimental stage. Sarge quickly dismisses the question, allowing the plot to continue, but this call out to the "real world" publication of a Captain America comic troubles the larger continuity. Somehow, Isaiah's trials now come both before *and* after the origin of Captain America (since the only reason for experimenting on the Black soldiers is to create the safe version of the formula to give to the White Steve Rogers; but the existence of the comic suggests that Steve Rogers' debut as the Captain predates the experiments on Isaiah and his squad).



Figure 1. Captain America *Truth* Page 84, panel 1. Morales, Robert, et al. *Captain America: Truth.* Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2003.

The effect of this confusion within *Truth* is reflective of the larger confusion of the Cap concept as a whole; how can the Captain America symbol incorporate Black history without prioritizing it to the extent of making Steve Rogers secondary? How to incorporate diversity—and racial trauma—into the myth without completely draining the White Captain America of all symbolic power?

Between the creation of Cap in 1940 and *Truth* in 2003 many creators worked to negotiate evolving and complex feelings about race within the nation. Morales and Baker confront the problem more directly than any other, and in the process left future Captain America creators with a new way of accessing the "naive Humanism" of Jack Kirby (which I will say more later in my reading of *Bicentennial Battles*). But their own work finds some precedent in prior attempt to incorporate the history of American racism into Cap's own story.

In a J.M. DeMatteis story from *Captain America* (Volume 1) 300, Captain America is confronted by Jesse Black Crow, also known as the Shaman from *Alpha Flight*, who demands that Cap must represent the entirety of the nation, all races included.

> You are America as it was—and as it shall be! You are Black Crow! See now the vessel for the power of this modern age! He, too, is protector of the dream! He is America as-it-is—and as it shall be! He is Captain America! You are two in body—two in color—one in purpose! You are brothers—and your brother is dying. (Quoted in Dittmar 61)

As Black Crow aids Cap in this issue, he refers to him as "brother," which Jason Dittmar notes "links ethnicities of America in a horizontal fellowship rather than a hierarchical set of power relations." (Dittmar 61). The creators of this series are attempting to negotiate racial representation and the national symbol as collective embodiment. What's most striking about this assertion that Captain America come to represent the embodiment of the Native American past as well as the multicultural present, is that it is made at all—that DeMatteis wants Cap to be able to carry such a representational weight. As we saw with the earlier example of Sam Wilson in the 1970's, the creators of Captain America frequently seem to feel this burden of responsibility and work to incorporate a more diverse America into these stories—successfully or not. While these stories may be failures with hindsight, their existence is foundational for Morales and Baker, and their resetting of the timeline of how Captain America came into being may be the most radical of such attempts to date.[12]

In my previous consideration of Whitewash Jones, I argued that Captain America and his creators attempted to include Black characters as early as 1940, when that level of inclusion was unheard of. This is another precedent on which *Truth* is built, an act of representation that helps to open the door to its more radical and sophisticated representation of the trauma and perseverance of Black Americans. One may even find here a loose application of Thierry Groensteen's concept of General Arthrology: the representation of Black and White alliance in Captain America comics is a specific motif of the series that recurs throughout the title's long history. Racial representation places itself as continuous beyond the hyperframe of any single

Captain American work, as persistent in the larger hyperframe of Captain American's publishing history. It is this persistence that gives creators of color an opportunity to find their own Captain America tales (which may be why Black writers continue to be attracted to the character; for example, the recent run by Ta-Nehisi Coates).

The question of whether the Captain America concept can bear the burden of racial history without breaking is further highlighted by an unexpected character within the text—Adolf Hitler, in his dialogue with Isaiah, who is captured following a raid on a Nazi camp.[13] Hitler questions Bradley's willingness to represent a nation that refuses his personhood, and suggests that by working together, Bradley and the Nazis can set the future correctly for Black bodies in a global context. As Goebbels states in this scene, "Private, we want to offer you the **opportunity** to help your people and yourself" (Morales 130).



Figure 2. Captain America *Truth* Page 130. Morales, Robert, et al. *Captain America: Truth.* Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2003.

The obvious unbelievability of this offer from Hitler elicits a dismissal in the reader at the outset—but several of the arguments Morales puts into Hitler's mouth ring true throughout the rest of the story. How does Isaiah reconcile fighting for a nation that subjugates him on the basis of race? The posing of this question leaves the reader with no satisfactory answer within the text itself, but forces a larger discussion centering on Captain America's capacity to embody the American nation. Where are we at, as a nation of readers and citizens, when the leader of the Nazi party appears to be making a point about American racism that cannot be refuted?

This sequence further stands out from the larger narrative in that Kyle Baker's style becomes slightly more realistic. Much of *Truth* showcases Baker's ability to render bodies of all races in a heightened cartoony style, often fully in the world of caricature. Baker's command of his line enforces a clearness of storytelling even as his human figures frequently contort into odd or grotesque representations. This style lends itself well to the display of bodies disfigured and contorted by scientific experimentation, highlighting difference, but situating that difference in a world that is a heightened version of our own. In addition, when the heightened caricature style is applied to some of the most virulently racist White characters, this flips the racist history of caricaturing itself on its head. Baker's techniques find their theoretical articulation in Rebecca Wanzo's *The Content of Our Caricature* and in Qiana Whitted's introduction to *Desegregating Comics*. In reference to a Kyle Baker piece displaying Thomas Jefferson with a heavily racially stereotyped and troubling image of a black child, Wanzo describes the piece as, "the caricature is the most visceral representation in the image, it *disrupts* the framing (in all senses of the word), foregrounding black injury in the nation's founding" (Wanzo 2). In *Truth*, Baker "yes and"-s Wanzo's findings on how caricature has come to weaponize black representation, placing the outlandish and borderline non-human aspects specifically on the worst of the worst of the White

cast members.[14] This play with the form of caricature weaponizes the racist tradition of caricature by reversing it, rendering these racist characters as sub-human, a source of ridicule. Baker's techniques also allow Isaiah's body to become the traditional ideal of masculine beauty in a way that is not problematically fetishized (as so many masculine black bodies have been, historically). What we have come to associate with Steve Rogers is shown here in Isaiah Bradley—who, as we now realize in the troubled continuity of *Truth*, may or may not *precede* Steve. Baker thus idealizes a Black body, subverting the expectations of Whiteness in another nod toward the futurity of Black superheroic embodiment.

The subtle difference of style in the scenes featuring Hitler heighten both the tension and representation of the best and worst of America. In Isaiah, we see an ideal image, while Hitler and Goebbels also are shown as semi-realistic representations of reviled historical figures. Following this sequence, we then see Steve Rogers' questioning Merritt in the present day. Merritt, now an old man, is a racist soldier we had seen throughout *Truth*. In his present day confrontation with Cap, we come to discover he was not only involved in the death of Dr. Reinstein (the inventor of the Super Soldier Serum, who is killed after administering the serum to Steve, in the classic origin tale), but also a neo-Nazi who has stolen the Captain America costume worn by Isaiah Bradley in his time during the war. Merritt is rendered as a gross, scheming, oblong man who becomes more and more abhorrent as he spouts racist drivel at Steve and Agent Spinrad. Merritt's seeming devolution into a near-demonic form contrasts Isaiah's idealized strength. With the physical ideal embodied in Blackness, Baker utilizes the comics form to promote the power of caricature. It's not necessarily *racial* difference that caricature enhances and highlights, here, but differences in idealization—the superheroic body need not be locked into a specific race.

Of course, Bradley dismisses Hitler's offer without much thought, in one of the funnier episodes of this bleak story. "Guys. No**. My wife would kill me**" (Morales 130). But in his rejection of Hitler, Bradley shows that the inherent values that he embodies as a person mirrors Steve Rogers's values, those that Marvel would choose to promote as the basis of the national ideal; he's not just a racial disruption of traditional white superhero structures, he is a fleshed out, real Black man who can recognize the value of American idealism (if not American reality) in the face of Nazism. These are values that Baker subtextually emphasizes in his stylistic choices.

To reiterate: Morales and Baker are acknowledging the challenges, the fundamental implausibility of a Black American superhero in America, while also suggesting the possibility of a Black superheroic past, dating back to World War II, that, when acknowledged, can open the field for a Black futurity. There *is* a path forward for Black superheroic idealism that the history of the nation seemingly negates, and it requires the insertion of a Black superhero into Marvel's past. Bradley's heroism as Captain America therefore supersedes everything else, and in that way Captain America *can* be both the national ideal and the reflective symbol of the nation. Wanzo asserts something similar about Isaiah and Black superhero's ability to reflect this idealized status in her statement that Isaiah is possessed of "an African American patriotic identity founded on an investment of having full access to the rights guaranteed by the state or the mythology of the American dream" (Wanzo 116). As we see in this confrontation with Hitler, Bradley's "melancholic patriotism" reflects his ability to hold onto the possibility of a future and better life based on the ideals of the United States. But the first step toward this futurity is an acknowledgment of history, and a beginning of reparative progress past it. Morales and Baker re-write the past in the name of the future.

This futurity is summarized perfectly in the final sequence of the book, as we see Steve Rogers finally come face to face with Isaiah Bradley in the present day. We come to discover that the narrator of the series is Isaiah's wife, the aptly named Faith, discussing Isaiah's life with Steve Rogers, who is determined to uncover the true history of his own origins, and attempting to set right the wrong on which his own career is based. In a heart-rendering scene, we come to see that the Serum not only sterilized Isaiah, but in a delayed reaction has caused his mind to deteriorate to that of a child; in addition, he can no longer speak. We also learn he has spent years in solitary confinement after being arrested for stealing the Captain America uniform while serving—an injustice that also underlines the powerful forces that would keep the Cap identity reserved for White Steve Rogers. The series ends with Steve handing the old Captain America costume that Isaiah wore back to him; the two then stand proudly side by side as Faith takes a photo of them together. As Rebecca Wanzo states:

> The African American patriot seen here is indelibly a postrevolutionary body: his uniform in tatters, he stands next to a representative of the establishment that denied him full citizenship. Mentally wounded, he can no longer articulate a protest or ask questions. In an era when the military is desperately trying to fill a volunteer army, *Truth: Red, White, and Black* seems a cautionary tale not only for African Americans but for all citizens. (Wanzo 360)

This reading is undeniable and heart-wrenching—the nation's need to deny its Black subjects their agency and contributions to society has shattered the life of not only Isaiah, but his entire family. In a broader sense of American representation, Wanzo argues further that "If constitutional patriotism for the abstracted universal citizen is represented by the flag or the uniform, attempting to erase what it has been used for or what it could mean, then the last image of *Truth* is the paradigmatic representation of the black patriot" (Wanzo 358). Morales and Baker make an impactful ending in representation of the history of Black bodies in America. The

surface of the final image, shown in figure 3, promotes the sense of futility that Wanzo asserts, but also offers a false comfort for white America, as shown through the smiling Steve Rogers.



Figure 3. Captain America *Truth* Page 164. Morales, Robert, et al. *Captain America: Truth.* Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2003.

However, there is another more optimistic reading of the scene that points toward a vision of futurity for Black superheroes within the Marvel Universe and beyond. This acknowledgement of American history expands the symbolic capacity of Captain America in a necessary fashion; it is *because* of the traumas and injustices of the past that the figure of Captain America needs more than ever to promote the values of equity and inclusion for all citizens regardless of race. Consuela Francis contextualizes this narrative move succinctly when she writes that "here, Marvel seems to give in to a radical impulse, the impulse to have Captain America be "analogous" not only to those parts of America we hold dear (democracy, rugged individualism, freedom) but also to those parts we would rather forget or ignore (systemic racism, violence, disregard for human life)" (Francis 150).

Within Francis's point is not just the idea that Steve attempts to right a historical wrong, but the scale of the wrong itself is one that can seem so great that we would prefer to forget or repress it than acknowledge it; but that acknowledgement is an essential first step. At the same time, the many photos of Isaiah with prominent black figures of twentieth century American history that start the final montage of the series insists that Black life, even in the face of persecution, is able to thrive. Isaiah Bradley's lived experience, now part of the life and history of Steve Rogers, too, is what enables the possibility of a "post-Wynterian Captain America."

This vision of Captain America looks toward a new kind of "universalist" approach to the American symbol—an attempt to recover a positive humanist universalism in the face of Wynterian critique. *Truth* attempts to promote something that Wynter implies might be impossible, the positive idealization of Blackness before the White gaze. The ascension of Isaiah to the status of an ideal and aspirational antecedent for Steve Rogers suggest an alternative to the long racist tradition of "Man" (Man1, Man2, and beyond) in Wynter's account of the development of Western humanism. What was once locked down by racist and classist precedent is released with the possibility that Captain America can be a hero for all Americans, because "Captain America" does not name one person; the White figure of Steve Rogers does not even necessarily come first chronologically. But this vision is rooted in the naïve Humanism that Kirby and other creators imagined—the legacy of previously failed but sincere attempts to make Captain America comics sites of racial alliance.

In current Marvel continuity, Isaiah Bradley's grandson has taken up the mantle of The Patriot, becoming a foundational member of the Young Avengers. Elijah Bradley's role on the team, as the embodiment of an American leader, gives physical form to the thesis that the post-Wynterian Captain America of *Truth* first proclaimed by suggesting that later generations of

Black American superheroes can also bear the national mantle. Elijah's reconciling of the past of his grandfather while continuing to be a vital role within the larger Young Avengers team is potentially an allegory of generational upward mobility. Like Captain America, he wears the symbol of the national flag as his costume and his shield, while his actions point toward the possibilities of futurity.

As Ora C. McWilliams states in an essay on racial history in Captain America comics, "The modern-day characters seem to overcome the shackles of racism imposed by Aristotle and Voltaire. The example set in modern Captain America's comics allows characters to flourish apart from race, and it overcomes its own early racist history." (McWilliams 77). While I would agree with the latter assertion, I would argue that it's not *apart* from race where modern representation from The Patriot and other Black superheroes succeed, but *because* of their acknowledgment of racist history. The significance of such sequences as when Elijah saves Steve's Captain America in *Young Avengers* (volume 1) #12 is not only a representation of a historic "other" simultaneously protecting and embodying a symbol of America—it is also a generational embodiment of national and spiritual growth. There is a literalization in Elijah, the grandchild, becoming a symbol only made possible by the actions and national ideal of his grandfather Isaiah. That Elijah can carry this legacy without going through what Isaiah went through suggests genuine progress, and positive futurity.[15]

V

While *Truth* forced Captain America into a direct confrontation with real-world history that had rarely been engaged with head on, as I have suggested, the roots of that engagement run deep through the publication history of the character. The "Secret Empire" storyline is an obvious touchstone here, casting President Nixon as the leader of an evil cabal. This socially conscious approach was reflected in many Marvel titles in the 1970s, partly as the result of a second generation of young, left-leaning writers coming on board at what remained an otherwise small company (which did not yet have its own legal division to worry about possible blowback or litigation). The insertion of national and global conflicts of the time into Captain America's world went hand in hand with the references to prison riots, student protests, environmentalism, and racism in Gerry Conway's *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the political satire of Steve Gerber's *Howard the Duck*, or the anti-racism of Don McGregor's *Black Panther*.

When Jack Kirby arrived back at Marvel after years away at DC Comics creating characters like *The New Gods* and *Kamandi*, to return to characters he had created such as Cap and the Black Panther, his fantastical and operatic style was seen by many readers as a retrograde step—an unwelcome reversion to fantasy in the face of the relative social engagement of books by younger creators. Readers' letters after Kirby's return to *Captain America* reflected the resistance to Kirby's storytelling style, despite his status as one of the creators of the Marvel Universe. His bombastic operatic dialogue was particularly criticized as "childish", and his baroque, anti-realist art seemed jarring in contrast to the realist approach of prior writer, Steve Englehart (author of "Secret Empire", and several decades younger than Kirby).

Today, however, it's possible to see this as a somewhat superficial take, particularly with regard to politics. While Kirby's style was certainly different, his approach to Cap's politics—his naïve Humanism—was at core no different from that of Englehart's; further, Englehart's ability to position Cap as outraged by the events of Watergate arguably depended on a political vision of Cap that Kirby had been channeling since Kirby's earliest Marvel work. Kirby's storytelling shatters the norms of conventional comics, especially of the time, so a Captain America under his purview is bound to challenge the readership. A look into Kirby's signature artistic direction can shed light on why this would be challenging, and how the culmination of his first Captain America storyline in *Captain America: Bicentennial Battles* is just as progressive—and future oriented—as the work of the younger writers who helmed Cap in the early 1970s.

Kirby's storytelling method through his artwork has always pushed the boundaries, but by the mid 1970s and his return to Marvel, he had entered his most mature, anti-realist phase. But even as Kirby's artistic style morphed through the years toward an anatomical abstraction, at no point do the core values of emotional impact leave his work. Kirby's career has been broken up into several phases by Charles Hatfield in his seminal look at Kirby's career in *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby*. As Hatfield contends, "Kirby's work… evolves through its major identifiable stages—the obvious signposts being S&K, then the early sixties at Marvel, then the later sixties and on into the seventies (*The Demon*, etc.)…" (Hatfield 62).[16] I would argue that these phases show the progression of Kirby unshackling himself from not only his inspirations, but also from any concern with the dominant trends of comics book storytelling as he pursued his own individual path.

The foundational points of inspiration for Jack Kirby's early work were newspaper strip cartoonists Milton Caniff (*Terry and the Pirates*), Hal Foster (*Tarzan*), and Alex Raymond (*Flash Gordon*). While all three worked in slightly different genres, from swashbuckling pirates to pulpy adventure, and toward science fiction—these three strip artists are realists in their approach to anatomy and perspective. This drive towards realism is apparent in Kirby's early career (peaking at some point in the late 1950s) and can even be seen in the "juvenilia" of his pre-war work such as *Captain America Comics* #1, where we see Steve Rogers looking more like a traditional strongman. This early style also included an overly complicated layout system; the comics form was still in its infancy, and creators were looking to establish the language of the form and Kirby's earliest layouts are wildly experimental, using weird panel shapes and arrangements that would sometimes require extra-diegetic guidelines like arrows to guide the eye. Elements like centered, circular panels often break the narrative flow. Even though Kirby would come to eschew all this for a traditional comics grid, these earliest formal experiments establish an approach to pacing that Kirby would carry with him his whole career. As Ben Saunders notes on these earliest, pre-1940's comics, "Kirby employed complex quadrilaterals to convey dynamic energy—trapezoids and rhomboids that rarely managed to contain the drama within their bounds—while fearlessly yanking the reader's gaze back and forth across a single page…" (Saunders 27). As Saunders makes clear here (a point Hatfield is in agreement with), Kirby's work is all about narrative propulsion. The economy of the hyperframe of the page was the first aspect to contend this, but this quickly began to take shape within the human figures of his work as well.

The most well-known period of Kirby's work—his first decade at Marvel—is also where one can see his style at a moment of flux. The birth of the modern Marvel universe and the

launch of characters like the Fantastic Four and The Avengers were defined by Kirby's bombastic style (as well as Stan Lee's verbosity and marketing acumen). These works begin to show Kirby's shift toward the symbolic rather than the literal, with an abandonment of mimesis for the sake of emotional expression and impact. The Fantastic Four represent this shift perfectly, as Reed Richards, Sue Storm, and Johnny Storm are drawn in a more realistic style while in their everyday scenarios, but the explosions of form and energy crackle to the fore in both the display of the team's powers, as well as the rocky form of Ben Grimm. As Saunders notes about this period in his introduction to the Penguin Classics Captain America collection, Kirby was "moving further away from conventional representational standards of form and proportion in favor of expressionistic exaggeration and overwhelming spectacle" (Saunders xxxiv). On top of Kirby's extraordinarily prolific output, his approach by the mid 1960s was unlike anything found in contemporary superhero comics of the time—and was a pivotal factor into Marvel's success. By this stage, as Hatfield notes, "Kirby's narrative drawing represents a complex fusing of mimetic, symbolic, and graphic qualities…" (Hatfield 38). But as Kirby progresses, the mimetic gives way more and more to the symbolic, and even the abstract.[17]

By the late 1960s, at home in the framing of the traditional comics grid, Kirby's body forms contort and bend in ways no human body could in the service of narrative impact and emotional force. While uncredited, Kirby was often plotting these stories as well as drawing them, and his fascination with the superhero genre as a vehicle to explore Romantic notions of sublimity in the human encounter with God-like beings emerges as a motif.[18] Even with these larger-than-life ideas of "Source Walls" in space and alien bug soldiers, the heart of Kirby's storytelling was human relatability, human vulnerability, human feeling. His arch dialogue can seem clunky, but exhibits a similar straining towards the ineffable. As Hatfield explains:

> By the latter sixties Kirby had developed (and would continue to develop) a very personal and distinctive way of reconciling cartooning's mimetic impulse—its never-ending striving toward realism and pictorial fullness—with its symbolic and indexical, hand-crafted qualities. In the process he sacrificed loveliness and naturalism and went for sheer vaulting energy: as Kane once notes, he went from figures to 'just the idea of a figure,' in the process of becoming more abstract and more immersed in his own mannerisms, his own hieroglyphics. (Hatfield 75)

This development makes Kirby's late return to Captain America in 1976 particularly fascinating. As I have mentioned, the work was polarizing with fans at the time, and even some critics have repeated the conventional wisdom of the period uncritically. For example, J. Richard Steven's states this in his generally useful history of the character that the *Captain America* series lost its socially relevant edge with Kirby's return. But I would argue this takes the readers' letters of the period far too seriously (like taking contemporary hostile reviews of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* as the last word on the subject).

Kirby's *Bicentennial Battles,* an oversized, one-shot Captain America story created for the Bicentennial celebrations of 1976, and one of his last, strangest, and greatest Captain America stories, is a perfect example of Kirby's late attempt to bring social relevance to Cap in his own way.

In my own reading of *Bicentennial Battles*, I want to employ a Marxist reading approach modelled on the work and thought of the playwright Bertolt Brecht, and specifically the concept and praxis of the Verfremdungsefekt, usually translated as "alienation." As Terry Eagleton writes in his *Marxism and Literary Theory*, "The task of [Brecht's] theatre is not to 'reflect' a fixed reality, but to demonstrate how character and action are historically produced, and so how they could have been, and still can be, different." Further, the Brechtian actor "employes a set of gestures which convey the social relations of the character, and the historical conditions which

make him behave as he does; in speaking his lines he does not pretend ignorance of what comes next, for, in Brecht's aphorism, 'important is as important becomes'" (Eagleton 65-66). The combination of these aspects and their presentation result in "alienation effects", which make the audience unable to emotionally connect with the characters in a method that distorts a dialectic, but also opens up the play itself to a critical discussion as a relation or reflection of society. What the text of the play, or really any work, is attempting to communicate about socioeconomic/ideology/cultural is brought to the fore. Brecht's infamous cigar-smoking spectators are now left to reflect and discuss.

Brecht's ideal audience member engages with the work with the open-mindedness of a child. This mindset does not force the work into childishness but rather opens interpretation of the work when perceived without the intervening screens of ideology. As Terry Eagleton explains, "The revolutionary questioner sees the world with the astonishment of the Child…and refuses to be fobbed off by the adults customary Wittgensteinian justifications of their practices" (Eagleton 636). Kirby's approach in *Bicentennial Battles* encourages an audience to enter his work with this mentality. His "clunky" dialogue and contorted, acrobatic figures make the characters seem almost not of this world. In a Brechtian play, a character may routinely break the fourth wall, winking at their actions or portray societal cyphers instead of fully fleshed characters. Both Kirby's style, and Brecht's method, achieve the same goal—the audience utilizes the art in front of them to reflect on the real world due to character detachment from the audience. It's through this understanding of Kirby's work that one can also see the persistence of his naïve Humanism. The story asserts a progressive universalism that in its own way may be as radical as even the most overtly political Captain America stories that came before.

In the first pages of *Bicentennial Battles*, Steve encounters a mysterious being called Mister Buda, who appears to have the power to send him to key moments in American history, both past and future. In the course of this journey, Steve comes face to face with figures such as Ben Franklin, an encounter creating an almost existential crisis when it becomes clear that Captain America's costume is the "original" inspiration for the American flag. He witnesses the struggles of working-class immigrants in numerous disasters (mining accident, the Chicago fire) and also confronts the history of racial relations in America head on twice, once in an interaction with a freed slave, and again in an interaction with Geronimo. It's in these encounters that Kirby attempts to employ Cap as a symbol to heal the wounds of the nation; it's a project that is entirely in the spirit of a later work such as *Truth*, and that may even enable it; regardless of the approach being mythic and dreamlike rather than socially realistic.

From the outset, Mister Buda takes on a Brechtian characterization in his literal otherworldly omniscience. The groundwork for the positionality of Buda becomes clear in his specific speechifying, for example in panel 3 of the third story page: "The doors to eternity fly **open!** Thus, you can view things with a **universal** eye—such as a symbol of your country—you could view it as you never have before. Destiny and duty—**wills it!**" (Kirby 41). This less than subtle statement of Kirby's themes situates the reader into a position of the Child, while Buda's alien nature literalizes alienation, both linguistically and subtextually. As Captain America hurtles through history, it is Buda's voice which resituates the reader and Cap at each moment in time. Buda's language and overall physicality—a bald man that seemingly expands within the panel frame in a non-human manner—further encourages us to regard the narrative with Brechtian, alienated awareness rather than as an act of pure mimesis.



Figure 4. Captain America *Bicentennial Battles* page 3. Kirby, Jack. *Captain America Omnibus*. Marvel Worldwide, 2010.

The alienation effect continues beyond Buda as a single character. Steve's "manifesto" like dialogue, and monumental physicality position the character as a symbol rather than a psychologically fully realized individual. The world of this comic, and the characters within, like Buda and Steve, connote Kirby's growing disinterest in the straightforward "good versus evil" binary of superhero comics, and his desire to use the genre as a vehicle to explore the sense of being "overtaken by a sense of vast and ineffable forces" (Hatfield 170). In short, Kirby became fixated on the "sublime", and this fixation often defamiliarizes or alienates the reader from the contents of the comic itself, at least in "immersive" narrative terms.

In the third chapter of the story, Cap comes face to face with Geronimo, as he and the men alongside him are about to be attacked by a group of White soldiers. As the two come to a détente after initial mistrust, Steve and Geronimo have a discussion on the status of right and wrong, and a veiled look at personhood. Steve proclaims at the start of this sequence, "I'm a man

who **seeks the rule of peace!!**" (Kirby 63). As Geronimo responds by explaining his desire for self-determination, he comes to embody the values of the twentieth century American nationalist hero—a point affirmed when Steve states (almost in the manner of a Brechtian chorus)—"**Liberty or Death!** Those words are **Truly** American, Geronimo! Sometimes I wonder how we can be **brothers** and **strangers** at the **same time**. / --and yet, we **are!** We are Americans who must **find** each other—and, in doing so, become as **one people!**" (Kirby 64). Kirby portrays Geronimo and his fellow fighters with a stoicism that might begin to approach caricature—but in relation to the rest of the cast of the book, it is no more outlandish than the approach he takes to everyone else, including Cap himself!



Figure 5. Captain America *Bicentennial Battles* page 26. Kirby, Jack. *Captain America Omnibus*. Marvel Worldwide, 2010.

Kirby clearly felt that, as the country entered its bicentennial, the comic book embodiment of America needed to grapple with aspects of history that were shrouded in the grim

facts of supremacist hegemony. Kirby's tools—a refusal of psychological realism for Brechtian commentary combined with a naïve Humanist faith in American values and ideals that persists in the face of the injustices he confronts—results in text that aspires toward an odd sense of healing.

Further, the standoff between Geronimo and Steve Rogers's Captain America works much in the same way as that between Isaiah Bradley and Steve Rogers's Captain America in *Truth*. Both Geronimo and Isaiah are written in such a way as to embody the ideals of the nation, in both their self-determination and stoicism which are presented as rooted in unshakable core beliefs. The story logic is also essentially the logic of *Truth:* when you take Captain America and place him in moments of American history where the country committed a shameful act, or a group acted poorly, Cap will *always* side with the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized, the victims of history. Geronimo's struggle is the struggle for what's right, so it must *become* Captain America's struggle in that moment. Recognizing when the idea of nation is failing, while holding on to the idea of nation, is the struggle Kirby's Cap faces throughout *Bicentennial Battles*.

Captain America is once again forced into a confrontation with the history of racism when he's transported back to a farmstead and sees a Black abolitionist being harassed by a group of White bounty hunters. As Cap pummels the bounty hunters and aids in the abolitionist's escape to the North, Steve's actions once again promote the naïve Humanist values that one would expect from Kirby. In their parting words we even see an echo of Steve's previous interaction with Geronimo, showing the characters' growth through reconciliation. The abolitionist is surprised by Steve calling him a "friend", but Steve responds, "Not **my** kind—**our** kind, **brother!**" (Kirby 84).

This scene with the abolitionist gives the reader a chance to reflect on what the actual praxis for the futurity of Black life in America will be—and should be. Whether Kirby consciously made this choice or not, the dialectic pushes the work into a progressive worldview that surpasses the disillusionment that is commonly credited as the more politically impactful "Secret Empire" storyline. With this scene with the abolitionist, Steve, as well as us as readers, are left to ask: What is the future of the nation to be for black citizens? And, relatedly, what do we want the superheroic symbol of our nation, the cypher of the ideals we strive for, to do to promote Black futurity? Captain American's borderline comedically universalist response to the abolitionist ("our kind") lays bare the issues of a flattening universalism that would negate difference. That said, the language achieves the same end as Mister Buda, it places the reader as the Brechtian Child. Kirby's approach strips the scene of all pretense and points only toward what the future will hold. It asks us to imagine a world where people of different races can evoke the idea of "brotherhood" without seeming corny or clueless—a world were such a sentiment can be *meant*, with all the sincerity of a child.

The culmination of the alienation effect can be seen in Buda's pushing of Captain America's continued need to witness. Shocked and exhausted by his adventures through time, Steve asks for the experience to stop. Buda replies, "So, the great Superhero is **uncomfortable** with the sharing of human events. You want to lead a **parade** and smile to the crowds! You think this kind of thing is the **total** sum of your country! / **Is this the shallow façade that is Captain America?**" (Kirby 77). Buda forces the issue of what an honest celebration of the nation might require but the proclamatory style of the dialogue asks the same question of the reader/audience as well. Discomfort, we are reminded, is a necessary function for growth in this instance. In an unexpected connection, we might even see in *Bicentennial Battles* an echo of Saidiya Hartman's

praxis of critical fabulation. To give voice and tangibility to the ghosts of the archive, to the numbers in the ledger, is to truly engage with the historical troubling of the past (Hartman 11). The entire plot of this story, and Mister Buda's intentions, are Hartman's method given form. This positioning does not merely give a voice to the past, but enables futurity. It is only by knowing what the people of America have been through—as something Hartman does in both "Venus in Two Acts" and *Wayward Lives* and as Kirby insists Cap must do in this story—that a national symbol like Captain America can be reshaped to accommodate a fuller, diverse future embodiment.

In a postscript, *Bicentennial Battles* concludes with an image of Cap back in the present, surrounded by a diverse cast of children—clearly promoting the future of the nation as one of universal personhood and respect (figure 6). The dialogue again has that Brechtian, chorus-like function, even as the imagery literally takes us back to the pure (pre-ideological) perceptions of the child. But Kirby's weird, hyper-stylized approach at this stage of his career gives the image an unsettling quality. It's slightly otherworldly, and potentially can only be seen as a case study—something to be used as a model for futurity.

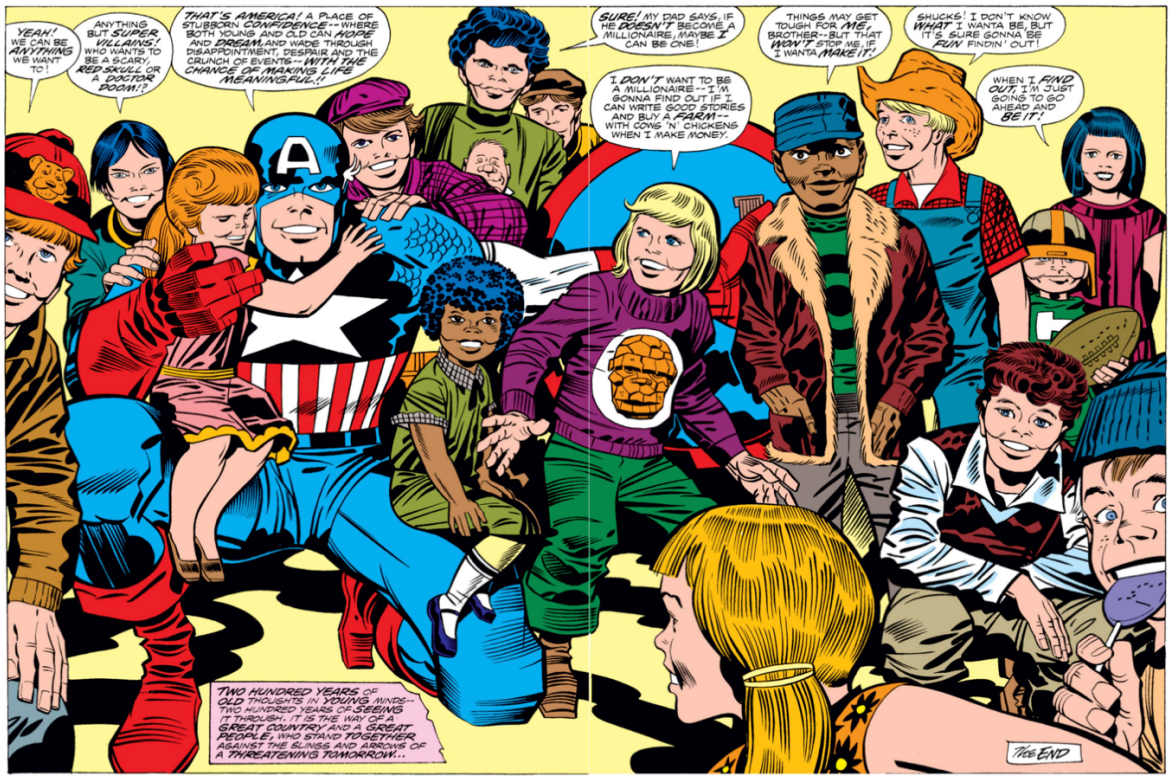


Figure 6. Captain America *Bicentennial Battles* pages 76-77. Kirby, Jack. *Captain America Omnibus*. Marvel Worldwide, 2010.

VI

The current and future publication history of Captain America will now continue to need to acknowledge the wounds of history—and of the present moment (it is significant in this regard that Cap has met every president since 1940, except for Donald Trump). But the capacity of any story to affect an accommodation or reconciliation with the past will derive in part from the impact of works such as *Bicentennial Battles* and *Truth*—works that (in very different ways) insist that "Captain America" must somehow, impossibly, stand for *all* Americans. Regardless of critical reception, the simple action of having Sam Wilson take on the Captain America role in both the Marvel comics universe and the cinematic universe suggests just how powerful this demand remains. The naïve Humanism of Jack Kirby is where this possibility begins. As the nation changes, the landscape and the character will assuredly change as well, but established canon and precedents dictate: Captain America must always be on the side of the victims of history, not necessarily victors.

Notes

[1] As an example, the following is pulled from a comic cover dated November 1968, so presumably written at some point in the summer of the same year, “Sooner or later, if man is ever to be worthy of his destiny, we must fill out hearts with tolerance. For then, and only then, will we be truly worthy of the concept that man was created in the image of God–a God who calls us ALL—His children” (quoted in Miller 1). This was placed in the “Stan’s Soapbox” section of the book, a direct line to readers from the whims and opinions of Lee himself.

[2] It might be reasonable to ask what I mean by “American values.” This is, of course, a loose, baggy, and historically contingent concept, and many books have been written about the transformations of American values over the past two centuries. But at the time of Cap’s creation, the external threat of European Nazism meant that the inherent contradictions and injustices of US society could be to some degree overlooked; the supposed unity and rhetorical value of "American values” was therefore perhaps never greater than during the early 1940s.

[3] While Stevens’ arguments are persuasive, these are merely referencing his broader chapter mapping, and I would argue that there is more nuance to these eras than his book asserts on the surface. For a compelling dive into the subversion of the Marc Gruenwald era of Captain America in the 1980s and 1990s, see Brannon Costello’s “Southern Super-Patriots and United States Nationalism: Race, Religion, and Nation in *Captain America*.”

[4] Showcaseed in *Captain America Comics* #1, which was reprinted in the *Penguin Classics Captain America*.

[5] Following this initial appearance, the Young Allies branched off into their own title, but neither Simon nor Kirby were involved with that title, outside of pencils in the first issue. For this study, I will be focusing on Whitewash within the context of *Captain America Comics*, in specific relation to Simon and Kirby’s worldview.

[6] There is something to be said for the ability of Whitewash to also broaden the appeal of the comic and the comics advertisement for the war effort to specific audiences. As Nicholas Yanes notes, “Whitewash Jones is a message that all Americans, regardless of race, will have to be willing the fight for the country to win” (58). Having Jones present in the book, and present in the ads for sending aid toward the war effort, allows for universal American inclusion in the fight against fascism and an expansion of the audience for the publishers.

[7] For an in depth look at the *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* title, see “Wah-Hoo!” by Mark Alexander in *Jack Kirby Collector* #24. The title was subverting the expectations of an army troupe in such a way that Gabe Jones, a Black man, was colored as white by mistake. “In any event, Gabe's inclusion in the Howlers was a bold move, and when Jones appeared colored pink in the first issue, Lee was obliged to send the color separation company a detailed memo to make it clear that Gabe Jones was a Black man” (Alexander).

[8] The veracity of this claim is debatable, but De Dauw’s point here displays a perception of the stories of that time, so it’s worth referencing and generating conversation around. It could be argued that *when* Black characters began to appear within Marvel titles, there was an attempt at reconciling societal issues immediately.

[9] There have been BIPOC creators that have worked with Captain America as a character and title before and after Morales and Baker, but *Truth* still maintains a pioneering status. Creators such as Christopher Priest and Dwayne McDuffie, wrote Steve in Avengers or other Marvel Universe titles, while Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote the main *Captain America* title from 2018-2021 to name a few.

[10] Famously, Baker wrote and drew a ten-page short story for DC called “Letitia Lerner, Superman’s Babysitter,” which featured a baby Superman crawling into a microwave. As a result of the outrage that followed, DC pulled and pulped as many copies of the book that featured the story as possible.

[11] “Big 2” refers to Marvel Comics and DC Comics, the two largest comic publishers in the United States by a hefty margin.

[12] This resetting was actually later changed itself, as Ed Brubaker's run on Captain America reset the timeline so it was clear that Isaiah came after Steve Rogers. The timing of this "clarification" with the rise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe does not seem like a coincidence.

[13] This chapter was titled "Whitewash," which may or may not be a reference to Whitewash Jones. I would hazard a guess that it's most likely referencing a whitewashing of history, but with the self-referential nature of comics and this comic specifically, it's possible it's the former.

[14] At least, the fictional white cast.

[15] This is further asserted with Sam Wilson taking over the mantle of Captain America when Steve steps down briefly. There is power in these symbols becoming displayed through blackness, and the shift reflects a nationalist liminality that tracks from the New Deal politics to the modern day. Representation is effective toward empowering readership in general, but when making the nationalist symbol a Black man, and simultaneously not eschewing the historical pain that the country has caused Black bodies, possibilities are opened up.

[16] "S&K refers to "Simon and Kirby", referencing not only their work together on Captain America, but also their pioneering romance comics of the 1950's, as well as numerous other Superheroes like *The Fighting American* and *The Newsboy Legion*.

[17] In his privately produced artworks and collages of the later 1970s, Kirby sometimes abandons representational art altogether for pure abstract forms.

[18] Please note that I take great care to leave open the prospect that he was writing his work at Marvel as well. The contentious battle of ownership on the work he did with Stan Lee continues to this day, and while I have my opinion on it, it's not in the scope of this paper. For a chronology of this conflict during Kirby's life, see Mark Evenier's *Kirby: King of Comics*.

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