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Captain America and Social Movements

Civil Rights and Feminism in *Captain America* Comics from 1968-1989

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Department of History

Senior Honors Thesis

May 2022

Professor Jason Sokol, Advisor

Committee Members: Professor Janet Polasky & Professor Ellen Fitzpatrick

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As an eleven-year-old fascinated with American History, the superhero Captain America's virtue, patriotism, and World War II origins struck me. Never in my wildest dreams would I have expected to write a thesis on the brave male and female characters who broke racial and gender barriers and fought alongside him in the comics. I am incredibly grateful to my advisor, Professor Jason Sokol, for helping me take on this project and supporting my growth as a writer and historian. I would also like to thank Professors Janet Polasky and Ellen Fitzpatrick for serving on my committee and providing me feedback on my writing and research over the last four years.

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Introduction

“Cap, in his own magazine at last!” reads the line above the series title of *Captain America #100*, the first issue of the legendary character’s rebooted series.¹ The series that had captivated the nation during World War II had finally returned after almost two decades of being out of print. *Captain America #100* opens its present-day storyline with a dramatic standoff between a white female agent in disguise, Sharon Carter, and Captain America, Sharon’s love, affectionately called “Cap.”² Crouched beside him is the trailblazing superhero and leader of the African nation of Wakanda, Black Panther. Remaining in character, Sharon deliberately fires a bullet above Cap’s head and Black Panther pushes him out of the way.³ Sharon then destroys the villain Zemo’s solar control panel and removes her disguise to reveal herself as Agent 13 from the spy organization SHIELD. Zemo orders his lackeys to shoot Sharon, to which she boldly replies, “I’d face a thousand deaths to save the world from a madman like you!”⁴ The trio - Captain America, Black Panther, and Sharon Carter - make their daring escape through a vent, defeat the villain’s guard, and reveal that Zemo is an imposter. The imposter’s lackeys shoot him and turn to attack the trio, but Black Panther jumps in front, shouting, “lay down your arms!! No longer is there reason for you to fight! You are without leader, without cause!”⁵ Black Panther uses his regal authority to convince the henchmen to turn themselves in for “fair trial” and “the justice of the Wakanda.”⁶ While Captain America’s heroism is the focal point of the comic, Sharon and Black Panther - both holding identities historically discriminated against - showcase

¹ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Monster Unmasked,” *Captain America* no. 100 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1968).

² Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Monster Unmasked,” 5.

³ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Monster Unmasked,” 6.

⁴ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Monster Unmasked,” 8.

⁵ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Monster Unmasked,” 19.

⁶ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Monster Unmasked,” 19.

their talent and awe-inspiring virtues.

Captain America #100 debuted in April of 1968, just days before Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. died and five months before women garnered national attention protesting the objectification and unrealistic beauty standards of women in the Miss America Pageant. The series reboot also coincided with popular culture's increasing dialogue on social issues. Adilifu Nama, a scholar of African American studies and author of *Super Black*, writes that because of the several movements in the 1960s, the "bright line between the popular and political was obliterated as American pop culture began to shed its escapist impulses and boldly engage the racial tensions that America was experiencing."⁷ It is no accident that *Captain America #100* featured a white female agent and a Black king and superhero. Indeed, the female and Black characters in the rebooted *Captain America* series would engage in issues of rights and empowerment from its debut through the 1980s.

This thesis examines how two movements of the 1960s and 70s - the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement - are reflected in *Captain America* comics. Lillian Robinson, in her book *Wonder Women*, writes that comics "embody key themes in U.S. Society and reflect them back in ways that have helped shape that society."⁸ It is important to note that these heroes and their stories are subject to the ideologies of the times and their creators. Nama contends that "the heroes and heroines that a society chooses to make popular at any point in its history are those figures that best embody its dominant values."⁹ Given that all of the creators of *Captain America*'s initial Black and female characters were white men, the heroes and their stories reflected what the creators believed as much as what would sell, which provides a

⁷ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (University of Texas Press, 2016), 11.

⁸ Lillian S. Robinson, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (London, England: Routledge, 2006), 1.

⁹ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 67.

glimpse at the public's mindset towards the complex events and ideas of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements. These social movements catalyzed a wave of token representation in Captain America comics that symbolically grappled with the racial and gender dilemmas of the era in ways that both inspired readers and fell victim to stereotypes and the agendas of their creators.

The importance of representation can be traced back to at least Kenneth Clark's famous doll experiments from the 1940s and 50s, utilized in the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court trial. Clark's research established the notion that children are influenced by the racial makeup of their environment, and Black children needed positive Black role models to help recognize their own worth.¹⁰ Clark argued that through integration, black children would thrive in society.

Additionally, Professor Nama notes that superheroes allow children to see themselves as moral forces with the power to defeat injustice in all its forms, which is especially important for children who experience oppression.¹¹ Not only are Black and female heroes moral figures, they also exist in a world that primarily judges them on their merit instead of their race or sex.¹²

Gloria Steinem explains her experience reading *Wonder Woman* as "the sweet vengeance, the toe-wiggling pleasure of reading about a woman who was strong, beautiful, courageous, and a fighter for social justice."¹³ Beyond just the women and people of color represented in comics, Professor Carolyn Cocca, in her book *Superwomen*, argues that "diverse representation benefits everyone, because it shows all of us that anyone can be a hero."¹⁴ Comic creators used these

¹⁰ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* 10, 11.

¹¹ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 153.

¹² Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 154.

¹³ Charles Hatfield et al., "Wonder Woman," in *The Superhero Reader* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 203-210, 208.

¹⁴ Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 3.

symbolic figures, Black men, Black women, and white women, to both address current day injustices and illustrate a more equal tomorrow.

Comics themselves are worthy sources of study because of their unique style. They are a combination of words and art, strung together in panels to tell a visual and textual story. Comics are widely accessible and entertaining to people of all ages both in their form and cost. Such a medium has the power to shape the minds of millions of Americans. Because comics are meant to be easy entertainment for people of all ages, however, they rely heavily on stereotypes and extreme characterizations for simplicity. This can make it difficult for any Black or female character to break through the prejudices of white men and be portrayed as they truly are, complex and capable human beings with culture and dignity. It takes work, but the authors who compiled *The Blacker the Ink*, a series of essays about representation of Black people in comics, state that “comics, when created by a skillful and informed hand, can speak with the power of words and text combined... many times more potent than either mediation can achieve on its own.”¹⁵ It is in this tension between stereotype and possibility that the characters examined in this thesis are portrayed.

Captain America comics are an intriguing point of study because due to the main hero's name, popularity, and World War II origins, Captain America seems to symbolize American patriotism and ideals more than any other superhero. To place a Black or female superhero alongside Captain America provides a picture of an integrated America. Additionally, *Captain America's* comics feature Marvel's second Black, and the first African American superhero, the Falcon. Sam Wilson, known as the superhero the Falcon, debuted in September of 1969 in *Captain America #117*, just a little over a year into the series reboot. While Marvel had created

¹⁵ Frances Gateward and John Jennings, *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 4.

several notable Black male characters prior to the Falcon, including the famous African King T'Challa, the Black Panther, Sam Wilson was the first African American to become a traditional superhero, costume and all. Falcon also achieved enough popularity to rename the *Captain America* series as *Captain America and the Falcon* for almost 100 issues from 1971-1978. This historical timeframe makes *Captain America* comics very worthy of study in relation to representation and social movements.

It is important to note two important changes in the comics industry regarding content and sales in the 1970s and 80s. First, the Comics Code Authority, which governs the acceptable content for publication, relaxed its regulations in 1971. The Comics Code Authority arose from the paranoia about pop culture influences on 1950s teenagers. Specific targeting of comics for their supposed graphic and violent content culminated in psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham's 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham argued in excruciating detail every possible negative influence comics of the day could have on youth. While the validity of Wertham's research is shaky at best, it prompted Senate hearings later that year that decimated the reputation of comics. Seeing the trend of public opinion, comic publishers formed the Comics Code Authority (CCA), which April Snellings described as "a panel that would enforce a stringent set of guidelines meant to eliminate objectionable content."¹⁶ Through the rest of the 50s and early 60s, these guidelines were so strict that stories condemning racism were not allowed. The original 1950s Code stated that "ridicule of or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible," which the CCA initially interpreted as not allowing any acts of racism in comics, even if they were villainized.¹⁷ With social issues such as racism and sexism captivating national

¹⁶ April Snellings, "The Rise and Spectacular Fall of Midcentury Crime Comics."

¹⁷ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 167.

attention in the late 1950s and early 60s, the CCA interpreted its stance on racism more flexibly, and then eventually rewrote the Code to allow for characters like the Falcon and Sharon Carter to emerge.¹⁸ That said, comic creators were just testing out the new Codes in the late 1960s and early 70s, so a lot of the attacks on racism and sexism were either symbolic or less nuanced.

The second important change in the comics industry during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s is the sales and audience. With Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, the CCA, and the rise of television, comic book sales decreased steadily from their 1940s and early 50s monster numbers until 1979. After about a decade of struggle, Marvel used strategies of realism and fostering fan communities to increase sales. Editor Stan Lee captivated comic fans with his stories of powerful heroes dealing with real life problems.¹⁹ He used his witty and charming personality in the pages of the comics, asking fans for input and leaving references in the panels to other comics.²⁰ He engaged with the fan communities through interviews, speaking tours, and publishing fan letters and his (or another editor's) responses at the end of each comic issue.²¹ Fans began connecting through fan magazines, called "fan-zines," that included artwork, articles, and debates. The more direct engagement of fans meant that fans shaped the stories in comics and their published letters. Fanzines and fan letters also provide insight on how average people responded to the ideals of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements. As the fan base grew, it also matured in age and thought. The average fan by the 1980s was a young adult white male, yet these men were

¹⁸ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 7.

¹⁹ Jordan Philip Raphael, "Four-Color Marvels: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the Development of Comic-Book Fandom" (dissertation, University of Southern California, 2007), 110.

²⁰ Jordan Philip Raphael, "Four-Color Marvels: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the Development of Comic-Book Fandom," 112.

²¹ Jordan Philip Raphael, "Four-Color Marvels: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the Development of Comic-Book Fandom," 112.

often open to ideals from the Civil Rights and Women's Movements.²² They also asked for more depth to the stories and characters, which could mean more focus on Black and female characters, or more focus on the main white male hero.

In the 1970s, an estimated 175,000 issues of *Captain America* sold per month.²³ To add to the number of individual sales, there is the "pass around rate" for comics, where one person could buy a comic and then share it with a friend or relative, which multiplies the circulation of these stories and their messages significantly.²⁴ While sales figures for the 1980s are uncertain, it is safe to say that Captain America's stories had a large audience. The late 1970s and early 80s also saw the rise of "specialty stores" as the primary location for selling comics, meaning the fan base became increasingly homogenous (mostly consisting of white men).²⁵ These changes allowed for more "adult" content, whether it be revealing costumes or addressing racism, while at the same time resulting in more targeted stories and representation to the dominant consumers. Regardless of the changes in the comic industry, Captain America's solo comics enjoyed a substantial readership and he himself had a wide recognition among popular culture and the Marvel Comics community. He was a forerunner among Marvel's superheroes, and in the last decade and a half his character starred in several blockbuster movies. In the comics, Captain America is a staple member of Marvel's elite team, The Avengers, and his mantle has expanded to include several other characters in recent years.

The comics studied for this thesis include all *Captain America* issues published between 1968 and 1989 featuring Black and female characters. The primary focus in this time frame was

²² Jason Owen Black, "From Audience to Public: Comic Book Fanzines in the Seventies and Eighties" (ProQuest, 2014), 36.

²³ Neal Adams et al., *We Spoke out: Comic Books and the Holocaust* (San Diego, CA: Yoe Books, 2018), 15.

²⁴ Neal Adams et al., *We Spoke out: Comic Books and the Holocaust*, 15.

²⁵ Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, 10.

to examine the origins of minority characters in *Captain America* comics that have gone from comics to film in recent years: Falcon, Battlestar, Sharon Carter, Peggy Carter, and Sarah Wilson, and the ones who appeared regularly in the comics during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s: Leila Taylor and the female villains. These comics include countless examples of Marvel's response and distillation of ideals from the Civil Rights and Women's Movements. Additionally, fan letters included in *Captain America* comics and analyses of Marvel fanzines were examined to understand how consumers responded to and shaped the representation of the characters in this thesis. Primary source research will be supplemented with previous scholarship generally analyzing the Civil Rights and Women's Movements and representation in comic books.

This thesis will be divided into three sections: Black characters, female characters, and Black female characters. Rooted in the demands and events of the social movements and popular culture trends, the symbolic meanings of each Black male, white female, and Black female *Captain America* character in this thesis will be considered. The section on Black characters will examine the narratives and visual portrayals of the Falcon and Battlestar. The section on female characters will consider the characters Sharon Carter, her sister Peggy Carter, the Femme Force, Contessa Valentina Allegra de Fontaine, female villains, and the representation of other, less prominent female characters. The section on Black female characters will focus on Leila Taylor, Nightshade, and Sarah Wilson. While there are a handful more Black and female characters in *Captain America* comics between 1968 and 1989, the ones examined here are those that see combat, appear frequently, and - for the lucky few - have an enduring legacy. With the present discourses around representation in popular culture, including superhero stories, it is important to look at the roots of representation to see how it influenced and reflected the culture.

Prelude: Captain America: The Typical Superhero

Before diving into the analysis of *Captain America's* Black men, white women, and Black women, it is important to know the world in which these characters were created. Captain America first hit the scene in March of 1941, nine months before Pearl Harbor. He starts out as Steve Rogers, a skinny kid from Brooklyn with a lot of patriotism. After being rejected by the Army multiple times, he participates in the Super Soldier experiment, where he is injected with superhuman qualities, so his physical abilities now match his super-sized heroic morality. He is the only one who gets the Super Soldier Serum because the doctor and all hope of replicating the experiment is destroyed in an attack. Cap spends the next several years fighting his Nazi arch nemesis (Red Skull) and the Axis powers with his side-kick Bucky. Near the end of the war, Cap and Bucky crash-land a plane full of bombs into the ocean and are presumed dead.

Captain America is a hero who made political statements from his very first issue. In March of 1941, when many Americans were still against their country's involvement in World War II, Marvel showed Captain America punching Hitler in the face on the cover of his first issue. Cap quickly became the epitome of American patriotism between his World War II origins, military association, and stars-and-stripes uniform. Comic scholar Esther De Dauw, in her book *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits*, explains that "in the American cultural landscape, World War II is the good war. It was a time when American power was used to support values propagated as quintessentially America, such as democracy and freedom."²⁶ With World War II being the "good war," Captain America is instantly cast as a moral figure, perhaps more than some of his superhero colleagues. One need only to look at an image of Captain America in costume (or simply read his name) to realize the symbolic patriotism he exudes.

²⁶ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 41.

After World War II, the popularity of superheroes declined, and Steve Rogers' Captain America left the comic scene for about two decades. In a 1964 *Avengers* comic, Marvel's elite superhero team finds Captain America preserved in a block of ice from when he crash-landed into the ocean. De Dauw argues that because he is "recast as the man out of time, Steve kept his World War II origins, which allow him to function as a positive symbol of America's moral superiority and power."²⁷ Being preserved in mind and body, Cap continues his persistent legacy as the epitome of American heroism. Unfortunately for him, however, his partner-in-crime, Bucky, did not survive the crash. This tragedy became a central conflict in Cap's character development. Through the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, he struggled to let people into his life, including combat and romantic partners. He fears losing another person he cares for and being responsible for the person's death. Cap also is continually torn between his duty as a superhero and the desire to settle down, a conflict which ultimately tears his romantic relationships apart because he cannot give his girlfriends what they desire. Many of the Black and female characters analyzed in this thesis work within Captain America's great struggles of balancing a personal and superhero identity and protecting the people he cares about.

Captain America's visual depictions provide a baseline for the ideal male hero. By beginning as a nationalistic skinny kid, Cap shows that it is character that makes the hero, not the abilities. But, in the same vein, Cap does not become a hero until he fits the physical mold, muscles and all.²⁸ Since superheroes have been part of popular culture (which was at least a decade before Cap hit the scene), the heroes have been the image of perfection, which includes the extremely muscular body shaped in an "inverted triangle" - a massive chest and slim waist. As the ideal American hero, Cap must fit into this image, which he does in spades thanks to the

²⁷ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 41.

²⁸ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 41.

Super Soldier Serum. Over time, Cap's muscles, while the result of the same serum, are drawn larger and more defined. De Dauw connects this change to backlash from the Women's Movement. Once women enter every sphere that the man once controlled, massive muscles, particularly in the chest area, are the only place where the male can assert and prove his masculinity.²⁹ The problem is that such a body can only be achieved with steroids.³⁰ In the *Captain America* comics, however, his physique is shown as achieved and maintained through hard work through several panels depicting Cap training. This combination of unnatural muscularity displayed as naturally achieved harms readers because if they desire to achieve a physique like Cap's (or any other male hero for that matter), they will be either disappointed or expose themselves to dangerous chemicals. De Dauw notes that the side-effects of steroid addiction are paranoia and violence, the kind of characteristics heroes like Captain America strive to eliminate.³¹

Another important visual aspect of Captain America is his costume. Professor Blair Davis sums up the function of the superhero costume in his essay from *The Blacker the Ink* titled "Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros." He writes:

Being a superhero apparently connotes a certain sense of the ridiculous, perhaps given the colorful flamboyance of many heroes' costumes (with their capes, tights, masks, and exterior underwear, etc.). Yet such lavishness is apparently to be excused if accompanied by a display of one's powers, as if superheroes need to be made visually distinct from the general public so as to avoid the shock of an ordinary man or woman performing incredible, seemingly inhuman feats of strength or other such abilities. [The superhero] therefore intends his costume to serve as a sort of uniform, one that identifies him as a protector, rather than an offender, and as a member of a higher rank that typically carries with it a certain amount of social status, respect, and/or fear—much as the uniform of a police

²⁹ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 53, 54.

³⁰ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 45.

³¹ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 59, 60.

officer does.³²

Superhero costumes are both silly and a staple to the identity and representation of the ideal citizen. The outfit is always skin-tight to show off, objectify, and draw the reader's attention to the peak physical condition of these men. For men, however, the line of objectification is drawn by not drawing genitalia so the man can be idolized without being sexualized.³³ Instead, some costumes highlight the non-existent, but essential piece of manhood that Davis referred to as “exterior underwear” and what De Dauw calls the “Underwear of Power.” While Captain America’s Underwear of Power is essentially invisible since it is the same color as the lower part of his costume, his other white and Black male colleagues have one in their costume or a belt around the waist to serve the same function. For the women, the skintight costume remains, but the sexual organs are highlighted rather than diminished. Finally, three important additional aspects of the superhero costume are its flashiness, consistency, and identifiable logo. Captain America’s costume checks all these boxes, which allows him to have a lasting power that unfortunately other worthy, and often Black and female, superheroes do not enjoy.

³² Frances Gateward et. al, “Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros,” in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, 198.

³³ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 37.

Partner or Sidekick: The Black Men Who Fought Alongside Captain America

The 1950s and 60s ushered in a wave of activism for racial equality in the United States known as the Civil Rights Movement. Several organizations formed and used diverse strategies to fight segregation and racial injustice in schools, voting rights, housing, and economics. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) preferred legal means, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) utilized nonviolent, direct-action protests, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) practiced grassroots organizing, the Black Panther Party (BPP) used accountability and community outreach, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by the famous Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., relied on visible confrontations and protests to expose and correct injustices. Thanks to the collective and diverse efforts of these groups and countless individuals, white Americans could no longer ignore the racial injustices Black Americans experienced.

The Civil Rights Movement catalyzed a wave of racial consciousness in popular culture. Movies popularized the practice of blaxploitation: exploiting Black struggles and realities in stories for profit. These films exaggerated or oversimplified racism to revenge-driven physical fights between Black characters and overt white supremacists, or their symbolic counterparts. Black comic superheroes emerged in the context of rising social consciousness in popular culture and blaxploitation. Of the two major comic publishing companies - DC and Marvel - Marvel always seemed to be ahead of the curve. However, as much as they were at the forefront of representing Black men and women as heroes and moral forces, Marvel also incorporated several visual and narrative stereotypes of Black people into their comics.

The objectification of the Black body is something to which comic readers and creators must always be sensitive. In white Western culture, the Black body has been objectified for

hundreds of years due to the embedded practices of slavery. Enslaved Black men and women were sold and exploited based on looks and physicality. As Professor Davis explains in his section of *The Blacker the Ink*, “When slaves were sold at auction, their bodies became subject to close scrutiny by white bidders who sought to determine the strength of potential male slaves, who would be put to work, and the desirability of female slaves, who were often subjected to rape by their masters.”³⁴ While slavery may have officially ended in the United States in 1865, for at least the next century white people violently targeted Black men for their physicality and harassed and assaulted Black women. As old as the enslavement of African men and women is also the animalistic stereotype of Black men and women, which refers to their physical features and character. Because of the centuries of history of exploiting the Black body in white Western culture, in comics, although the physicality of superheroes is always exploited, it is that much more for Black superheroes. Professor Jeffrey Brown, in his section of *The Superhero Reader* titled “Comic Book Masculinity,” argues that the “Black male body is already ascribed as a site of hypermasculinity,” which coupled with already hypermasculine male heroes creates the dangerous ‘brute’ stereotype.³⁵

In 1969, just over a year after Martin Luther King was murdered, Sam Wilson, also known as the superhero The Falcon, appeared in *Captain America* #117. Over the course of three issues, Captain America trained Wilson and together the duo freed island natives from oppression and defeated the Red Skull. As the Falcon, Wilson would appear almost 200 times in the *Captain America* series as his partner, best friend, and a hero for the Harlem community. Wilson slowly faded out of the *Captain America* storyline, and returned for some guest

³⁴ Frances Gateward et. al, “Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros,” in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, 209, 211.

³⁵ Charles Hatfield et al., “Comic Book Masculinity,” in *The Superhero Reader* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 203-210, 208

appearances in the 1980s. In the late 1980s, another Black hero entered the scene, Lemar Hoskins, who would become Battlestar. These two Black male heroes ignited discourse within the comics and between fans about racism and Civil Rights. Looking back on these comics also unlocks rich opportunities to analyze the visual and narrative portrayals of these heroes amidst the history and ideologies of the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of blaxploitation, and the historical objectification of the Black body.

The Falcon

In 1969, the Falcon, also known as Sam Wilson, began his noteworthy run as Captain America's partner. Falcon achieved enough popularity to rename the *Captain America* series as *Captain America and the Falcon* for almost 100 issues from 1971-1978. By 1989, Falcon became more of a guest-star and appeared sporadically for certain comics and storylines where he is often left out of the fighting. He instead is featured flying innocents to safety, leaving to "check in on Harlem," or going to call in reinforcements while the white heroes get to do the punching. In the two decades following his debut, Falcon became a hero for Harlem and a symbol of integration, social mobility, and white anxiety of Black Power and Black men.

The Falcon's costumes consisted of a v-cut top that exposed his muscled chest and abs, conforming to the fashion of the times and the problematic objectification of the Black body. Falcon's body is objectified beyond that of a white male hero's because readers are drawn to his exposed chest by its size and the shirt's design. The inverted triangle of his chest is accentuated by the stylized red wings tapering down either side of his exposed stomach. Despite not having the super-soldier serum, Falcon is drawn with the same muscular build as Captain America, contributing to the problematic perpetuation of negative self-image and steroid use. In terms of costume consistency, Falcon's costume changed two years after his debut from green and yellow

to red and white, remaining relatively the same until the 2000s. His logo is always on his forehead, which is not as noticeable to the reader as the chest, and always yellow. The logo is more stylized in recent years, and when lined up next to other superhero logos, a Marvel fan could pick it out, but perhaps not any average person. Still, Falcon includes some of the qualities that make for a traditional, lasting superhero.

Symbol of Integration

Falcon is the embodiment of Martin Luther King's vision of harmonious integration and his commitment to activism. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, King envisions a friendship like Captain America and Falcon's. King hopes that one day "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and girls as sisters and brothers."³⁶ Cap and Falcon's partnership exemplifies an idyllic interracial friendship most prominently when Falcon declares "your skin may be a different color... but there is no man alive I'm prouder to call... brother!"³⁷ Even after Falcon fades in prominence in the late 1970s and becomes a recurring guest-star in the 1980s, he is portrayed as Cap's closest friend out of all his partners. Falcon also exemplifies King's activist ideology. Falcon has a righteous anger towards injustice and gravitates towards peaceful protests and community uplift to correct such problems within the American establishments. He best demonstrates his ideology through his day job as a social worker and when he asserts his faith in the justice system in the 1988 *Captain America* #338 even though he, Rogers, and their friends are in prison for trying to stop a group of villains in Las Vegas.³⁸

³⁶ Harvard Sitkoff, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop*, 124.

³⁷ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "The Fate of the Falcon," *Captain America* no. 126 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1970), 20.

³⁸ Mark Gruenwald et. al, "Power Struggle," *Captain America* no. 338 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1988), 7.

The temptation is to write off the Falcon as another victim of racism because he is Captain America's partner, instead of a standalone hero, however Falcon establishes his individuality throughout the series. Professor Nama acknowledges the very real trend of casting Black characters as "ultracool sidemen or wise-cracking partners to various white protagonists" to "symbolize, promote, and normalize their status as second-class citizens."³⁹ Certainly the Falcon's origins as a bird trainer and social worker named Sam Wilson, who Cap enthusiastically trained to stage a rebellion of native people against oppressive white rule, gives critical readers some pause. Falcon also tends to look to Cap for guidance on how to act, is often left out of the fighting, and strikes first, even when he is in over his head. In Nama's opinion, however, Falcon overcomes the side-kick stereotype because he "was a self-reflective and ambitious black superhero that consciously rejected being a sidekick to the white protagonist and constantly strove to assert his equality."⁴⁰ Captain America and Falcon engage in ongoing dialogue about their dynamic and race throughout the *Captain America* series, especially in the early years of their partnership, with the ultimate emphasis on respect and partnership.

Captain America and Falcon's partnership is not always sunshine and roses and Falcon is the first one to voice the problems. Discussions and conflicts about racism are at the forefront of Falcon and Captain America's partnership early on, but later into the 1970s they taper off until race is not brought up altogether, as aligned with the American public's focus on the Civil Rights Movement. Two confrontations about Cap and Falcon's partnership dynamic are particularly noteworthy. The first is in the 1971 *Captain America* #140 when Cap takes on a villain alone while doing reconnaissance. When Falcon arrives on the scene and realizes what is going on, he immediately says "we're supposed to be partners, or is that just for the headlines? I never

³⁹ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 67.

⁴⁰ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 70.

thought that even Captain America would have a token-” before Cap cuts him off.⁴¹ In the heat of battle, Cap explains how his actions were not intentional. Another time in 1973, the last time the two characters discuss race, Falcon confronts imbalance in his and Cap’s partnership after Cap gains increased strength. Falcon asserts “if I’m gonna stay your partner, I have to be something more than a costumed athlete!! Otherwise I am... a pet!”⁴² Each time there is a confrontation between the two about their partnership, Falcon takes time away from Cap to make a name for himself in his home, Harlem. On every occasion, Cap is understanding, trusting, and wishes Falcon the best.

After each disagreement, Captain America and Falcon always reconcile. However, it sometimes took some convincing. In the 1973 *Captain America* #165, Falcon had been on his own for a while and Cap had found himself missing his partner. Trying to find a way to make it right, Cap finds Falcon with his girlfriend, Leila Taylor in Harlem and proclaims:

There never have been and never will be any two humans exactly alike. Everyone knows that - and yet everyone distrusts differences. Variations seem threatening because they’re unfamiliar - because they indicate factors in life we know nothing about... If a person avoided everyone who was different from him, he’d avoid everyone... differences can be important - but the ones between you and me aren’t! We both have the same goal: ending injustice! Forget what sets us apart, Falc - and remember what pulls us together.⁴³

Several fans praise this speech in their letters, and certainly it is one of Cap’s most moving. It convinces both Falcon and Taylor to be open-minded to rekindling the Captain America and Falcon partnership. Still, as much as one should not let differences divide people that share such important values, it is important to recognize differences such as race. A person’s race influences

⁴¹ Stan Lee et. al, “In the Grip of Gargoyle,” *Captain America* no. 140 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1971), 7.

⁴² Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “The Yellow Claw Strikes,” *Captain America* no. 165 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1973), 5.

⁴³ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “If He Loseth His Soul,” *Captain America* no. 161 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1973), 10.

so much of his or her experience, which others should be sensitive to and willing to hear and work through. These difficulties and triumphs are a reality of interracial friendships that Captain America and Falcon regularly touch upon throughout their partnership.

Beyond his friendship with Cap, Falcon was a consistent symbol of integrating social groups. Over time, Falcon develops a platonic partnership with Sharon Carter. As Cap's closest allies, they share moments of anxiety over his well-being. Additionally, they teamed up in 1972 to defeat a racist and sexist Bucky imposter of superior strength. Also in 1972, a frame illustrates Falcon kissing Sharon on the cheek when dropping her and Cap off at the airport. Not too far behind them, the issue's artist drew an elderly white couple looking on. The woman gasps at the sight of a Black man kissing a white woman and the older man glares at them.⁴⁴ What makes Falcon and Sharon's friendship noteworthy is that seventeen years earlier, the young Emmett Till was murdered for *allegedly whistling* at a white woman. No doubt Falcon kissing Sharon on the cheek, even if it was consensual, would have put his life in danger. Marvel's deliberate visualization of Black and white friendships, including those of Black men and white women, in *Captain America* comics are serious symbolic statements that ignite Martin Luther King's dream in others.

Additionally, Falcon is one of the spy organization SHIELD's several minority characters to integrate the group's operations. Cap spends several years doing freelance work with SHIELD, run by the famous Nick Fury. In the 1971 *Captain America* #135, he brings Falcon along and with a good reputation and show of fighting skills, Falcon is accepted with the same status as Cap. Years later, Falcon even agrees to train SHIELD's Super Agents team. While Falcon does not mind working with SHIELD occasionally, he puts the needs of his Harlem

⁴⁴ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, "Captain America - Hero or Hoax," *Captain America* no. 153 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1972), 12.

community first. Fury often calls the Falcon when he needs help finding Cap, and after some time Falcon refuses to be at Fury's beck and call. On one such occasion in 1972, Falcon says, "my people... get at least one superhero to call their own," and declines the request to save Cap.⁴⁵ These instances show that although Falcon is willing to help organizations like SHIELD, he refuses to ignore the needs of other Black men and women.

Independent Hero

Professor Nama in *Super Black* contends that Falcon is self-reflective and asserts his independence, and the comics thoroughly support this argument. In 1972, only four issues after solidifying his partnership with Captain America, Falcon ventured to make a name for himself. When Cap takes out his frustration with his relationship with Sharon on Falcon, Falcon walks into Harlem and thinks, "anytime he wants'a trade gripes, I'll match 'him two for one. I figure any black man can."⁴⁶ He also refuses to be Cap's "whipping boy," a person that bears the consequences of another's actions.⁴⁷ However, Falcon's first attempt to not be the person that sits by and bears the brunt of Cap's moods turns into a reckless one. Falcon spends the next three issues trying to reveal Spider-Man's secret identity and makes a fool out of himself by taking Spider-Man's best friend and causing a three-way fight between himself, Spider-Man, and Cap. It was probably not the wisest move on Marvel's part to have Falcon's battle for independence begin that way since he is trying to capture one of Marvel's most beloved heroes.

The second time Falcon goes off on his own is after witnessing riots in Harlem and enduring repeated accusations from Leila Taylor and other Black Power activists of being an "Uncle Tom." This term is "a Black person whose behavior highlighted their acceptance of their

⁴⁵ Gary Friedrich and Sal Buscema, "Mission: Destroy the Femme Force," *Captain America* no. 146 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1972), 13.

⁴⁶ Stan Lee et. al, "To Stalk the Spider-Man," *Captain America* no. 137 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1971), 5.

⁴⁷ Stan Lee et. al, "To Stalk the Spider-Man," 5.

inferior status while worshiping or catering to whites as their betters.”⁴⁸ As a Black superhero fighting injustice, it would particularly hurt to be called an Uncle Tom by Black people in his community. In his solo arc, Falcon upgrades his suit, fights crime in Harlem, and asks for his community’s approval of him as their hero. Through the next several years, Falcon earns the respect of the people of Harlem to the point where they even rescue him from captivity. Like all traditional superheroes, Falcon has his own recurring nemesis, the crime boss Morgan. The *Captain America* writers title Falcon’s solo adventures as “The Falcon Fights Alone” and give him several moments of narration in issues describing his awesomeness. During his first solo adventures in 1972, Falcon realizes that he cannot impress everyone. *Captain America* #151 opens with a Black man calling Falcon a sellout in front of a group of kids who Falcon had recently saved.⁴⁹ Captain America’s plea for help interrupts Falcon’s internal monologue on the incident. Later, when Falcon is on the ground and the villain asks if he is afraid, Falcon realizes that he can only do what he thinks is right, and even when he is helping Cap, he is still helping his community.⁵⁰ After Falcon has this realization, he is the most powerful version of himself, boldly taking on the villain and then the crime boss, Morgan.

Many fans praised Falcon’s solo adventures and advocated for more comics that showcased his independence and heroics in their letters published at the end of *Captain America* issues. Some suggested he separate from Captain America and get his own book of adventures. However, not everyone agreed. One letter complains “that little run-in the Falcon had with the

⁴⁸ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 128.

⁴⁹ Gerry Conway, and Sal Buscema, “Panic on Park Avenue,” *Captain America* no. 151 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1972), 4.

⁵⁰ Gerry Conway, and Sal Buscema, “Panic on Park Avenue,” 18, 19.

slum-gang was a waste of space and slowed down an exciting story.”⁵¹ The writing team published their response below the letter, arguing that crime bosses like Morgan are good villains. After all, Marvel’s popular heroes, Daredevil and Spider-Man, fought an infamous crime boss known as Kingpin. The letter does have some merit since Falcon’s stories and characters like Morgan, because they were the subplot, could not be fleshed out. However, the symbolic importance of Falcon, despite being a Black “side-kick” to a white hero, having solo crusades to uplift his community that received overwhelming support cannot be overstated.

Falcon also solidifies his independence by partnering with Black Panther to upgrade his suit and gadgets. Most notably, a three-comic arc features Falcon and Leila Taylor visiting Black Panther in Wakanda to create the Falcon’s famous suit that allows him to fly. The ability to fly is unique because it shows that he is independent of Captain America, who cannot fly.⁵² Additionally, Professor Nama says that “by possessing one of the most venerated powers in the superhero universe, the Falcon’s flight symbolized black social and economic upward mobility that was right in line with real-world changes.”⁵³ Falcon represents the growing Black middle class that was a result of tireless efforts in the Civil Rights Movement activists.⁵⁴ When he is not the Falcon, Sam Wilson is a social worker, committed to uplifting his community. The Falcon himself says that “so long as there’s tragedy... and need... and injustice among my people... this is where the Falcon belongs.”⁵⁵ He cares for his fatherless nephew and expresses worry about the many kids in need of help that instead end up in crime and being bitter towards “the system.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Two into One Won’t Go,” *Captain America* no. 156 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1972), 21.

⁵² Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 73.

⁵³ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 73.

⁵⁴ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 73.

⁵⁵ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Fate of the Falcon,” 20.

⁵⁶ Stan Lee, “They Call Him Stone-Face,” *Captain America* no. 134 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1971), 20.

Those closest to him recognize his dedication and defend this unwavering morality when it is questioned.⁵⁷ Falcon's independence and commitment to doing good make him an essential hero and symbol for Black Americans in comics.

Black Power Anxiety

A theme that continually surfaced in Captain America and Falcon's stories was anxiety about Black Power. The slogan and organizing initiative "Black Power" debuted in 1966 through the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and its meaning was rooted in SNCC's activism in Lowndes County, Alabama. After months of organizing voter registration for Lowndes' Black citizens, local activists worked with SNCC to form their own, all-Black political party called the Lowndes County Freedom Party, to nominate candidates for office that would actually fight for the community's needs. The county's population was overwhelmingly Black and felt that neither major political party truly represented them, as they were predominantly made up of white people that enacted racist policies. The new Party's success led SNCC to create the Black Power Project. Historian Hasan Jeffries, in his book, *Bloody Lowndes*, explains that "the program involved sending African American organizers into black communities to cultivate racial consciousness and build independent political parties."⁵⁸ Additionally, SNCC chose to only have African American organizers working in Black communities because Black power and beauty would sound strange coming from a white person.⁵⁹ The slogan "Black Power" was unveiled to a national audience during the March Against Fear, and was unique because it inspired African Americans to get into politics to end

⁵⁷ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "The Fate of the Falcon," 6.

⁵⁸ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 179, 180.

⁵⁹ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, 180.

their oppression.⁶⁰ As Black Power swept across the nation, criticism and fear rose among more conservative activist groups and liberal whites.⁶¹ The NAACP dubbed the ideology “reverse racism” and media outlets exploited the nation’s anxieties over it.⁶² However, Jeffries writes that “the confusion surrounding Black Power’s meaning... had less to do with what [SNCC] said and more to do with how skeptics and critics interpreted what [they] said.”⁶³ One only had to look to Lowndes county to understand that Black Power meant community control, not supremacy.

Marvel creators, like many others, did not understand the meaning and intentions of Black Power, and thus criticized it in their stories, including ones featuring the Falcon. In one 1970 issue, Falcon describes a gang called the Diamondheads as “a black version of the Klan! All they preach is hate white! They’re dangerous fanatics! They don’t care who suffers... or who gets hurt! They can set our progress back 100 years!”⁶⁴ This quote is in alignment with the fear of Black Power as violent and reverse racism. A white store owner also criticizes the gang as they take protection money from him. He says, “how can you bring prosperity... to your neighborhood... if you keep business out?”⁶⁵ This line of dialogue is ignorant of the idea that Black Power calls not for an end to business, but for recognizing the capabilities of Black people to run their own businesses. Additionally, white-owned businesses had a practice of economic exploitation in the Black community that historian Harvard Sitkoff describes in his book *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop*. Sitkoff writes “in what the Chicago Urban League termed the ‘color tax,’ black slum residents had to pay 10 to 20 percent more for inferior goods than what

⁶⁰ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, 186, 187, 188.

⁶¹ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, 188, 189.

⁶² Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, 188, 190.

⁶³ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, 189.

⁶⁴ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Fate of the Falcon,” 7.

⁶⁵ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Fate of the Falcon,” 12.

whites paid in suburban stores. African Americans knew this but, unable to afford a car, could not shop in the outlying areas not served by public transportation.”⁶⁶

Fear of race-fueled violence and rioting, and the subsequent critique of it, appears in several storylines with the Falcon. Although organizations like the Black Panther Party did not support rioting and not all Black Power advocates participated in armed self-defense, the connection between Black Power and violence, made from anxiety and misunderstanding, is clear.⁶⁷ Two 1971 comics, “Madness in the Slums” and “Power to the People,” show Captain America and Falcon quelling racial uprisings. In “Madness in the Slums,” while Falcon “can’t blame the brothers” who call for buildings in Harlem to be destroyed, he and Captain America ultimately condemn the violence and advocate for alternate methods of achieving equality.⁶⁸ When confronting the instigator of the destruction in Harlem, Captain America proclaims “they need a chance - - not chaos! Builders - - not destroyers.”⁶⁹

In “Power to the People,” activist Leila Taylor convinces Falcon to attend a Black Militia meeting where he witnesses masked leaders stir the crowd into a frenzy in support of plans to burn down Harlem and force leaders to open up decent housing for them.⁷⁰ History Professor Brian Purnell, in his book *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings*, explains that segregated housing and deliberate policies by landlords and city officials allowed Black and Brown neighborhoods to deteriorate in cities like New York. Purnell also highlights time and time again the practice of “white flight,” where white people rapidly move out of neighborhoods when people of color move in. “Power to the People,” recognizes the important role of institutional

⁶⁶ Harvard Sitkoff, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop*, 178.

⁶⁷ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, 50.

⁶⁸ Stan Lee, “Madness in the Slums,” *Captain America* no. 133 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1971), 14, 15.

⁶⁹ Stan Lee, “Madness in the Slums,” 19.

⁷⁰ Stan Lee, Gary Friedrich, and John Romita, “Power to the People,” 12.

racism in creating the harsh living conditions in Harlem, however it plays into white fears instead of exposing the unjust practices of white flight and the policies of landlords and city officials.

Curiously, the three comics that overtly critique Black Power, “The Fate of the Falcon,” “Madness in the Slums,” and “Power to the People,” have white people in disguises igniting race-based violence or confrontation. The leader of the Diamondheads gang is a white man in a diamond-armored suit. The creator of the robot that tears down all the buildings in Harlem is a half-white man, half-machine named MDOK (Machine Designed Only for Killing). MDOK, while observing the robot’s work, declares “I must blind [the people of Harlem] to the fact that they themselves will suffer most from violence,” a clear jab at rioting.⁷¹ Finally, the masked leader of the Black Militia is Captain America’s infamous nemesis Red Skull, who uses a slew of racist terms while detailing his evil plan to manipulate people in Harlem to riot and destroy Captain America. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, opponents insisted that outside agitators stirred local unrest to unnecessarily overturn the status quo. Having white villains stir race-fueled confrontation in *Captain America* comics reflects this fear in a way. Captain America even says “the world’s like a giant powder keg - - waiting for the slightest spark of hatred to set it off.”⁷² In these comics, the spark came from white villains, but many feared that the catalyst of the next riot could be anything.

“Snap” Wilson and the End of the Falcon

The 1975 *Captain America and the Falcon* comic “Mind Cage” rewrote Falcon’s origin story of a Harlem social worker fighting for justice to a man with a criminal past brainwashed to be the perfect hero. The comic opens with a full-page illustration of the Falcon standing like a statue, his eyes round and pupil-less. Red Skull boasts that Falcon is his “helpless puppet” while

⁷¹ Stan Lee, “Madness in the Slums,” 16.

⁷² Stan Lee, “They Call Him Stone-Face,” 20.

Cap tells Red Skull he's insane.⁷³ After forcing the Falcon to dance like a chicken, Red Skull dives into painstaking detail of how before Cap met Sam Wilson, Red Skull used a cosmic cube to erase Wilson's criminal personality, "Snap" Wilson, and left only the good characteristics. Red Skull intended for Wilson to be a worthy partner for Cap that would ultimately betray him. Cap repeatedly cries in disbelief, defending the Falcon's honor, as undoubtedly every reader did as they read this comic for the first time. Cap ultimately escapes from Red Skull, with an unconscious Falcon, who now has his "Snap" personality restored. This surprising alternation of Falcon's background six years after his creation not only pained fans but was problematic for many reasons that Professor Nama summed up well. He laments that while creating "Snap" Wilson may have been an attempt at cultural relevance, it ruined Falcon's unquestionable morality, and played into the fear that behind every respected Black man is a criminal, or criminal potential.⁷⁴

Scholar Esther De Dauw dives deeper into the issues Nama raises. First, it is not uncommon for superheroes to be criminals before they began crusading for justice. However, it is concerning when "the first African American superhero was given such a past *retroactively*" (emphasis mine).⁷⁵ Instead of cultural relevance or shocking conflict, the comic "establishes Sam as a *victim* of the Red Skull and frames Sam's heroism as unnatural," De Dauw argues.⁷⁶ For years Falcon was a hero because of his morality and skills nurtured over time, something that appealed to a wide audience, especially young Black boys. Now that image is shattered and

⁷³ Steve Englehardt and John Wolfman, "Mind Cage," *Captain America* no. 186 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1975), 1.

⁷⁴ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 77.

⁷⁵ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 120.

⁷⁶ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 119.

replaced with a Black man who would never have been a hero unless he was forced against his own will. Furthermore, introducing “Snap” perpetuated the stereotype of white paternalism. De Dauw says that “throughout history, the subjugation of Black men has been justified through the claim that Black men are inherently violent and need white paternal intervention to become civilized.”⁷⁷ After years of being a figurehead of Black heroism and struggle for justice, Falcon became a stereotyped victim.

Falcon’s “Snap Wilson” identity plays into the stereotype of Black men as criminals that even impacted the Civil Rights Movement. This stereotype contributes to the fear and profiling of Black men that in some cases led to their murder. For the Black Panther Party, profiling became a primary weapon to undermine their image. Historian Robyn Spencer, in her book *The Revolution has Come*, explains “police harassment of the Panthers had begun soon after they initiated their police patrols...the police knew which cars were driven by BPP members and would often stop them for traffic violations. Criminal laws were used as a pretext to arrest and incarcerate Panthers for as long as possible. This...created adverse publicity” for the Panthers.⁷⁸ “Snap” embodies a cynical consciousness towards the criminal justice system and America as a whole that the Panthers and many others worked tirelessly to expose. While on trial, attempting to sort out the Sam/Snap Wilson identity issue, he says, “Snap Wilson remembers how white courts treat blacks, mister!” and “I’m just an ex-slave fella - an’ this country ain’t never done anything worth a nickel for me!”⁷⁹ Coming from the mouth of an ex-gangster drawn with a crazed expression, these words have little effect in provoking readers to consider the struggles

⁷⁷ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 120.

⁷⁸ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, 55, 56.

⁷⁹ Bill Mantlo, Tony Isabella, and Frank Robbins, “The Trial of the Falcon,” *Captain America* no. 191 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1975), 4, 6.

Black Americans face. However, the Black Panthers successfully gained media attention with their “Free Huey” campaign to expose profiling and prejudice in the criminal justice system, using the experiences of the Party as examples. Ultimately, Falcon is put on parole after saving those in the courthouse from an attack and the “Snap” identity is brushed aside for several years.

In 1982 and 83, as the first Black women in Congress, Shirley Chisholm, ended her final term, Marvel created a four-part series in the *Captain America* issues that chronicled Sam Wilson’s campaign for Congress, where he confronts his past as “Snap.” The series begins with a newspaper reporter bent on exposing Wilson’s criminal past, unwilling to believe he is a worthy candidate because of it.⁸⁰ Wilson is so enraged over this that he “snaps,” and spends the next three parts of the series dealing with various triggers of his violent “Snap” personality. It is in this series that Sam’s sister, Sarah, tells Leila and Sam’s campaign manager Sam’s full backstory. As a young child, Sam watched his own father murdered while trying to break up a gang fight.⁸¹ After years devoted to doing good in his father’s place, Sam and Sarah watched a mugger murder their mother, and Sam spiraled into anger and crime.⁸² Reverend Garcia, while helping Sam confront his personality struggles, tells him that “you felt that your father’s ideals... had only succeeded in leaving you an orphan,” and thus drove him into crime.⁸³ Ultimately, Rev. Garcia helps Wilson reconcile with his past and realize that he is a good person who struggles, just like everyone else.⁸⁴

Before Sam Wilson ran for Congress, *Captain America* writers began phasing the Falcon

⁸⁰ J.M. DeMatteis, Mike Zeck, and John Beatty, “Yesterday’s Shadows,” *Captain America* no. 275 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1982), 9.

⁸¹ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Snapping Part 2,” *Captain America* no. 277 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1983), 2.

⁸² J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Snapping Part 2,” 3.

⁸³ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Snapping Part 3,” *Captain America* no. 278 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1983), 4.

⁸⁴ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Snapping Part 3,” 4.

out. As he was featured less and less, several fans begged for Marvel to showcase Falcon once again as an autonomous hero. One letter from a Black man from Rome, Italy says, “I feel it was a mistake to team him up with Captain America. The amount of exposure and characterization Cap needs will always prevent The Falcon from playing a bigger role than he does now. Since in the long run you will have to get rid of The Falcon, please do so now. I think The Falcon, properly handled, has the strength to carry his own book, but at the moment, both Captain America and The Falcon are being hindered by the team-up.”⁸⁵ In their responses to these fan letters, *Captain America* writers foreshadowed the potential end of Captain America and Falcon’s partnership, unsure if the two characters at this point in their development were suited to work together anymore. In a letter from *Captain America* #223, the editors explain that “virtually all the letters we received this month have clamored for [the Falcon’s] return to this magazine in a regular role, whether as Cap’s partner or solo in Harlem... we’re still not convinced there’ll be room in Cap’s life for a partner when the ultimate resolution of Cap’s quest is unveiled, but we’re open to suggestions for Falc’s future in this mag, other mags, or wherever.”⁸⁶

In 1978, *Captain America and the Falcon* became *Captain America* again and the Falcon went on to join other superhero teams and return to *Captain America* as a guest star. Marvel released a four-part *Falcon* mini-series the same year they wrote the series about him running for Congress. Otherwise, the Marvel team did not place their bets on giving Falcon his own book. There are no clear reasons as to why, but perhaps creators were no longer interested in confronting racism like they had been since many of the major Civil Rights organizations had faded from national prominence by 1980. While Falcon’s identity was not entirely rooted in

⁸⁵ Jim Shooter, Roger McKenzie, and Sal Buscema, “The Flame and the Fury,” *Captain America* no. 232 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1979), 18.

⁸⁶ Jim Shooter, Roger McKenzie, and Sal Buscema, “The Flame and the Fury,” 18.

Civil Rights, the majority of his solo work was about uplifting the Black community. Overall, in a time when popular media engaged with ideals from social movements like the Civil Rights Movement, *Captain America* comics captivated readers with its portrayal of the Falcon as an upstanding Black man fighting injustice in the Black community and American society. However, the comics also perpetuated the stereotypes of Black Power and Black men as criminals.

Battlestar

The second Black male superhero to find his origins in *Captain America* comics was Battlestar, also known as Lemar Hoskins. He began as a participant in a program that gave him “augmented strength,” strength that surpassed that of Captain America. Hoskins joined forces with two other participants to form the Bold Urban Commandos, the Buckies, and help John Walker (also known as Super Patriot) take the title of America’s hero from Captain America. Plans change when Steve Rogers forfeits the title of Captain America and John Walker is called in to replace him. Hoskins is selected as the obligatory sidekick and rises from being an unnamed, unrefined combat fighter to an independent hero.

Bold Urban Commandos

Battlestar’s comic journey begins in 1986 as an unnamed, incredibly strong leader and only Black man in the trio of Buckies. In public, they are an independent group claiming to act on Steve Rogers’ behalf, but in private they work to make John Walker look better. Hoskins and the other Buckies are high school dropouts from the inner city of Chicago who speak with “unrefined” English. On a crusade to boost Walker’s image, the Buckies terrorize a group of Middle Eastern college students, accusing them of being un-American spies because they were

foreign-born.⁸⁷ The trio debates over how to spell the word “foreign” and end up spelling it incorrectly as they write “forren scum” on the house sign and burn “forreners go home” on the lawn.⁸⁸ For a white man, if a few characters represent him negatively, he has other heroes to look to with better qualities. For Black readers, having one of the sparse Black characters in existence be unable to spell is a problem. It perpetuates the harmful notion of Black men and women as unintelligent.

Aside from their portrayal as dumb lackies, the Buckies are also the picture of hypermasculinity. On top of their augmented strength, the trio does not wear shirts. With Hoskins being the leader and only Black member, the reader’s eyes are naturally drawn to objectify his physicality. If that was not enough, the opening image of *Captain America* #327 is a full page of Hoskins’ face scrunched in anger, his teeth barred, with spit coming out of his mouth. The position of his arm and flexing of his muscle indicate that he is holding someone up, but the reader cannot see who. All the reader sees is Hoskins’ strength on display as he exclaims “your kind makes me sick.”⁸⁹ This image is a visual representation of the “Big Black Brute” stereotype. Ronald L. Jackson II explains, “the brute was almost always a tall, dark-skinned, muscular, athletically built character.”⁹⁰ Indeed Hoskins is all those things, even when matched up to his super strong counterparts. His excessive physicality also traces back to the practice of slavery and exploiting Black bodies for labor. Hoskins’ angered expression specifically portrays what De Dauw describes as the prejudice that “Black bodies possess an animal physicality that

⁸⁷ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Clashing Symbols,” *Captain America* no. 327 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1987), 2.

⁸⁸ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Clashing Symbols,” 3.

⁸⁹ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Clashing Symbols,” 1.

⁹⁰ Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 41.

white bodies do not”⁹¹ Although Hoskins hit the scene in 1986 - long after the Civil Rights activism faded, his early portrayals embodied several harmful stereotypes of Black men.

Bucky

When the American government chooses John Walker to replace Steve Rogers as Captain America, Walker asks for his Buckies to also join him in the spotlight. Only Hoskins has a clean background check and thus is given the role of Bucky. Several issues document Walker and Hoskins’ training and their partnership solidifies a genuine friendship between the two men. However, Hoskins is consistently drawn behind Walker and does not have any weapon or shield for several issues. While the duo does not have the same disagreements like Rogers and Wilson, Hoskins and Walker do symbolize Dr. King’s dream of interracial friendships. Through his time as Bucky, Hoskins still suffers from ignorant writing, but progresses into a more fleshed-out character and hero.

One of the most problematic events in the new Cap and Bucky’s adventures is in 1987 when they visit John Walker’s hometown, the rural Custer’s Grove, Georgia. Shortly after arrival and some reconnaissance, the partners reconvene in the hotel where Hoskins voices his concern that “the people around here don’t take too kindly to fellows of my persuasion. I thought the lady who took my newspaper ad was going to call a lynch mob.”⁹² Walker responds: “they’re good people, just a bit provincial in some ways,” and the discussion ends there.⁹³ The story continues to spiral downward. As part of their plan to locate the racist and aggressively traditionalist Watchdogs, Hoskins dresses as a cheap pimp and conducts interviews for women seeking modeling jobs, all of whom are white.⁹⁴ Walker busts in and calls Hoskins a “filth peddler,”

⁹¹ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 131

⁹² Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Baptism of Fire,” *Captain America* no. 335 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1987), 13.

⁹³ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Baptism of Fire,” 13.

⁹⁴ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Baptism of Fire,” 13.

“temper,” “corrupter,” and “agent of Satan.”⁹⁵ Hoskins goes along with it, save for one moment of telling Walker to chill out, and is put in prison. Walker joins the Watchdogs because of his actions and watches them drag Hoskins out of prison to be lynched for “[enticing] good women to degrade themselves.”⁹⁶ What is worse, Walker debates and *leaves* Hoskins to get himself out of the situation while he captures the other Watchdogs. Hoskins does survive because his augmented strength snapped the rope, but the scene is not drawn and all he has to say is that the experience was “scary.”⁹⁷

This whole story is reminiscent of what historian Charles Payne calls “systematic racial terrorism.”⁹⁸ For decades after Reconstruction, police, the Ku Klux Klan, and white mobs and individuals brutalized Black men and women. While many attempt to identify reasons for the murders and assaults, such as activism, asserting dignity, or rumored rape, Payne argues that “the point was that there did not have to be a point; Black life could be snuffed out on whim.”⁹⁹ To depict something so traumatizing and pervasive in American society and essentially shrug it off is a massive blunder on Marvel’s part, and it did not go unnoticed. Harold Holt’s letter to Marvel was published in *Captain America* #341 and read:

I am a Black American from Chicago’s South Side, and I was totally appalled by the events portrayed in issue #335 of CAPTAIN AMERICA... Why is ‘Bucky’ portrayed as the ‘donkey’s tail,’ meaning why hasn’t he any backbone whatsoever? In the issue, he knows how people will react to him in a town like Custer’s Grove, Georgia, but still he adapts an OKIE-DOKE attitude toward the whole thing, and actually tries to wander around town alone, asking nosey questions! Not only is ‘Bucky’ portrayed as a literal black ass, but how does he help fish out the villains? By posing as a fast-talking pornographer who’s only one step from looking like a stereotyped pimp! Is this the image of the Black hero these pages will portray from

⁹⁵ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Baptism of Fire,” 13, 14.

⁹⁶ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Baptism of Fire,” 18.

⁹⁷ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Baptism of Fire,” 23.

⁹⁸ Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 7.

⁹⁹ Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, 15.

now on?” “The issue’s biggest insult was allowing ‘Bucky’ to be hung, or rather lynched. Does the Comics Code now approve of lynching as standard comic-action? After this nonsense, it wouldn’t surprise me to see T’Challa or Jericho Drumm or even Luke Cage strung up in some lonely forest, while their so-called superhero-partner stands aside, wondering whether or not the Negro’s life is worth as much as the mission that saving him might jeopardize.¹⁰⁰

The response from the editors did not directly address the problematic events of *Captain America* #335. Instead, they explained that they wanted Walker and Hoskins to be imperfect people who matured over time. For Hoskins, he would grow in intelligence (which perpetuates the Black is unintelligent stereotype). They wrote: “our intent was to present for the first time, a non-criminal, just plain folks sort of Black man, one in whom we could watch his growth into greatness, rather than having him achieve the idea the moment he puts on the costume.”¹⁰¹

Certainly their goals were well-intended, however they were flawed. Hoskins is not really a “plain folks” Black man. He committed a hate crime against Middle Eastern college students and his initially portrayed intelligence would not pass for average. Furthermore, a “plain folks” Black man in 1987 would probably not put up with a friend abandoning him during a lynch attempt.

Beyond the incidents in Georgia, Hoskins is put in his place through the inclusion of “Remedial English” and “civics” classes as part of his training to become Bucky.¹⁰² Certainly, everyone deserves a quality education regardless of age or background. As a public figure tasked with protecting the American people on behalf of the government, Hoskins should have some basic knowledge and skills necessary to take on the role. The issue ties to lack of representation in the first place and how the representation that does exist is portrayed. Hoskins taking extra *government* courses falls under the same stereotype as Falcon’s past as “Snap.” The Black man

¹⁰⁰ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Free Speech,” *Captain America* no. 341 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1988), 24.

¹⁰¹ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Free Speech,” 24.

¹⁰² Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Basic Training,” *Captain America* no. 334 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1987), 4, 15.

can only be a civilized hero through white paternalism. One letter from 1988 does not see this as a problem. The writer argues “I don’t think Lemar was portrayed as a dumb Black, but as someone who had failed in the school system of the USA. I hope Mark meant to show the illiteracy problem and that by going back and studying, he could conquer the problem. And this isn’t just a black problem; it affects all races.”¹⁰³ The editors thanked the writer for his defense in their response. What the writer and *Captain America* creative team did not realize however, is that Black children and other children of color did not fail in the American school system, the American school system failed them. Historian Brian Purnell in *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings* details the practices and policies that segregated and gutted the potential of inner-city schools. Real-estate practices forced people of color into certain neighborhoods. With the policy of the neighborhood school, city officials allowed schools in minority neighborhoods to go underfunded and under-resourced. In reality, Purnell argues, all children were capable of greatness, simply needed to be in a school that pushed them. As someone who came from an urban area, Hoskins probably would have experienced the same injustice.

Another act of racism against Hoskins is his name, Bucky. In an analysis of the recent Jordan Peele movie, *Get Out*, Adaeze Nduaguba explains that the buck or “deer serves as a motif for black men, in representing how they are perceived to ruin neighborhoods, how unassimilated they are and how they need to be locked up (or worse) for everyone’s safety.”¹⁰⁴ She defines “buck” as “a racist slur in post-Reconstruction America for black men who refused to bow to white authority and lusted after white women.”¹⁰⁵ For Hoskins to walk around the world of

¹⁰³ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Out of Commission,” *Captain America* no. 348 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1988), 23.

¹⁰⁴ Adaeze Nduaguba, “Feminist Guide to ‘Get out,’” *Feminist Guide to Get Out*, May 24, 2017, <https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/feministguidetogetout/2017/05/24/black-buck/>.

¹⁰⁵ Adaeze Nduaguba, “Feminist Guide to ‘Get out.’”

Captain America for two years with his name as an awful stereotype, and worse, be nearly lynched, was a mistake on the part of the authors that Marvel immediately corrected.

According to former Marvel editor, Gregory Wright, a Black man, the legendary comics creator Dwayne McDuffie, informed *Captain America* writer Mark Gruenwald that “Buck” was a racist term. McDuffie was afraid he would lose his job at Marvel for speaking up, but Wright encouraged him to say something and mediated the conversation.¹⁰⁶ Shortly after, the *Captain America* team published a fan letter from LaMont Ridgell regarding the existence of a Black Bucky, stating “what was going through your mind when you okay’d this piece of stupidity... it’s bad enough that there are very few black superheroes and the ones that *do* exist are very honorable indeed... and to add insult to injury, having the ‘new Cap’ say to [Lemar] something to the effect of ‘well, no one’s going to mistake you for the old one.’ C’mon, gentlemen, I think you can do better than that.”¹⁰⁷ Ridgell received an incredibly in-depth response, apologizing for the creative team’s ignorance and short-sightedness. It explains, “yours is hardly the only letter we’ve received regarding our casual decision” and “writer Mark Gruenwald turned a ghastly shade of purple when someone informed him that in some parts of the county, ‘buck’ is a derogatory name for a black man.”¹⁰⁸ In the following issue, Hoskins became Battlestar.

Battlestar

In the 1988 *Captain America* #341, Hoskins and Walker’s story opens with Hoskins showing off his new costume, inviting readers to observe. He wears a full-coverage red-white-and-blue costume with a mask over his eyes and carries a stars-and-stripes shield. On his chest is a white star, intended to be his logo no doubt. Hoskins explains that he changed his name and

¹⁰⁶ Brian Cronin, “Comic Legends: How Dwayne McDuffie Saved Captain America from Racism,” CBR, June 15, 2018, <https://www.cbr.com/captain-america-dwayne-mcduffie-racism/>.

¹⁰⁷ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Breakout,” *Captain America* no. 340 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1988), 23.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Breakout,” 23.

costume because during a recent mission, a Black male guard pulled him aside and said he “[appreciated] seeing another high profile black superhero.”¹⁰⁹ He explained that Bucky was an inappropriate name for Hoskins for two reasons: first it is a name for a kid and not “a black man who’s the same age as Cap, and has the same power as Cap and is bigger to boot,” and second, that Bucky is a slur the “government gave you...to keep you in your place.”¹¹⁰ With permission from his superiors, Hoskins changed his costume and his hero name to Battlestar.

Letters indicate that this change was received well. One says that “I’m glad you guys caught that [name problem] before you got in trouble and changed his name. Besides, as Battlestar he can do his own thing, whereas Bucky could never get too far from Cap’s side.”¹¹¹ Indeed, Hoskins goes on to do many things on his own as Battlestar. However, one fan in particular complained about the change and received no comment from the editors. He writes, “Battlestar? Come off it. ‘Son, our people don’t have that many heroes we can call our own.’ Right, sounds to me like he’s the bigot. He’s saying black people and white people are separate beings. We are all under the same skin, folks.”¹¹² Of course, the previous letters explain why this reader’s point of view is wrong. Additionally problematic, however, is his colorblind argument. The idea of representation may not have been as widely discussed in American culture as it is today, however it is important for people to see characters and leaders that look like them in all places and spaces, including comics. Certainly, everyone is a human being, but part of being able to believe in oneself as capable of success is seeing that success represented already.

Hoskins is soon sent off on his own to find Steve Rogers, who is in DC trying to stop the villainess Viper from turning people into snakes. Hoskins holds his own against Rogers’ friends

¹⁰⁹ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Free Speech,” 10.

¹¹⁰ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Free Speech,” 10.

¹¹¹ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Refuge,” *Captain America* no. 352 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1989), 22.

¹¹² Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Out of Commission,” 23.

but is unsuccessful at capturing the original Captain America. When Hoskins returns, he discovers Walker absolutely crushed after watching his parents be murdered. It is then that Hoskins assumes the role as the rational friend and must forge his own path as a capable and intelligent hero. He does what he can to help Walker cope with his loss and not violently lash out. Shortly after Walker loses his mind, he dies, but his body goes missing. Hoskins has two choices in the wake of his friend's death; he can take a job as a government hero trainer or go out on his own. Hoskins chose the latter, wanting to be his own person making a difference outside of Washington. He takes the murder mystery upon himself and for several issues leads the subplot in his search for Walker. Several pages narrate Hoskins' investigations, highlighting a mental and physical strength that he did not previously possess.

Hoskins' search takes him to Harlem, where he meets the Falcon, an event advertised on the cover of the 1989 *Captain America* #355. Hoskins goes to Falcon for help because Wilson's identity and location are public thanks to the "Snap" Wilson trials, and he knows the true Captain America (who has once again taken up the mantle that was rightfully his).¹¹³ Hoskins arrives at Wilson's social worker office to find him engrossed in a battle with several members of the band of villains known as the Serpent Society. The two Black male superheroes engage in classic hero banter with each other and their foes and win the battle. Unfortunately, the team-up ends there and Hoskins finishes his search for Walker several years down the line. While the moment is brief, the interaction of two African American heroes is monumental. 20 years after the Falcon premiered and 25 years after the Civil Rights Bill passed outlawing segregation, two Black men showcased their heroic capabilities, *together*. Because of their former roles as the Black men who fought alongside Captain America, and varied histories with racism, fighting for racial

¹¹³ Mark Gruenwald et. al, "Missing Persons," *Captain America* no. 355 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1989), 12.

justice, and protecting America and American values, a Falcon and Battlestar team-up have endless potential that has yet to be explored.

Through his appearances in the *Captain America* comics, Hoskins rises from being a sidekick to an independent hero. After years of problematic and stereotyped portrayals and storylines, Hoskins finally became the hero he was always capable of being. So much of his identity is certainly tied to his time as a Bucky and then *the* Bucky, but his adventures from May 1988 on were as the confident, skilled, and independent Battlestar. Although the Civil Rights Movement may have been in the rearview mirror for many Americans by the late 1980s, a general sensitivity to racism was not. While Marvel made mistakes in portraying Hoskins as an unintelligent brute and naming him Bucky, they corrected these issues by the end of 1989, showing that while prejudices may still exist, more people, particularly those in comics, were willing to discuss and fix them.

She is Beauty, She is Grace, She will Punch You in the Face: White female heroes, villains, and girlfriends

Women in comics have historically been love-interests that anxiously watched the male heroes from the sidelines. Apart from being damsels in distress, the female characters are left underdeveloped, and any depth to her character that does exist is an afterthought. In fact, the presence of any female character in comics has been an afterthought for decades. As a result, renowned activist and founder of *Ms.* magazine, Gloria Steinem, argues that “the female child is left to believe that, even when her body is as grown up as her spirit, she will still be in the child like role of helping with minor tasks, appreciating men’s accomplishments, and being so incompetent and passive that she can only hope some man can come to rescue her.”¹¹⁴ When the few women who do exist in popular culture are two-dimensional, spineless love-interests, it is difficult for women to be confident in their abilities and all people to see society as an integrated place where both men *and* women can contribute equally in a variety of ways.

The few superheroines that did emerge, Wonder Woman the most famous among them, provided a glimmer of hope for young female comic readers. In 1941, Wonder Woman inspired the notion that a superheroine could be heroic not just through her physicality, but also through her love, a stereotypically feminine (and therefore weak) trait. At the same time, however, several stereotypes of women plagued the stories and characterizations of superheroines. Visually speaking, characters like Wonder Woman had to be attractive if they were to be accepted as strong heroines. Esther De Dauw explains that Wonder Woman (and all female characters) had to be “as powerful as Superman, as sexy as Miss Fury, as scantily clad as Sheena

¹¹⁴ Charles Hatfield et al., “Wonder Woman,” in *The Superhero Reader*, 203.

the Jungle Queen, and as patriotic as Captain America.”¹¹⁵ Certainly, male characters had the burden of being in peak physical condition, but the pressure was nothing compared to what the female characters faced. Since the inception of comics, female characters have struggled to represent women and all their complexity under layers of stereotypes of being “irrational,” romance-driven, sexualized, and out of the action. That being said, many scholars argue that the mere existence of a female superhero disrupts the male superhero status quo.¹¹⁶ It is in this dichotomy of breaking gender barriers and conforming to stereotypes that female comic book characters would exist in for several decades, even with the emergence of the Women’s Movement, also known as Second Wave Feminism.

In the United States, women experienced increasing access to employment during the Great Depression and World War II. Due to financial strife, many women who had typically not entered the workforce took jobs to support their families. The number of women in the workforce accelerated during World War II because the United States was a major production power and the traditional labor force, men, were on the front lines. Although many of the jobs were in “traditional” feminine roles of caregiving and organizing, women were valued for their skills beyond the ability to create a family. In this context several superheroines like Wonder Woman emerged. With the 1950s, however, came a return to strict gendered expectations, which meant women were meant to be homemakers and not in the workforce. Despite the same number of women in the workforce in 1960 as during World War II, everything from advertisements to TV shows to guidance counselors to everyday conversations sent the message that success for a young woman was to get married young and care for her spouse, children, and home.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2014), 196.

¹¹⁶ Lillian S. Robinson, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*, 7.

¹¹⁷ Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Co, 2014), 14.

These societal norms came into question beginning in 1960. Amidst criticism of male-dominated politics, the 40th anniversary of Women's Suffrage, and his promise of a brighter future, President Kennedy established the Commission on the Status of Women at the recommendation of Esther Peterson, the head of the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor. While the Commission sought recommendations to end discrimination against women, Betty Friedan compiled her research into her famous book, the *Feminine Mystique*. Friedan surveyed her fellow Smith College alum, well educated women who had primarily embarked on the tradition of becoming housewives. What she discovered was a widespread silent suffering of women who wanted more meaning to their lives. Her book enthralled millions, putting the longing many American women felt into words.

These highlighted moments were merely the tip of the iceberg. American Women had become an essential economic demographic in post-war society. A rapidly expanding economy depended upon their skills and targeted them for advertising new home technology. The technology coupled with generally smaller family sizes decreased the demands of homemaking. Furthermore, with the Civil Rights Movement in full swing, Americans everywhere were confronting unjust social norms.¹¹⁸ What women needed was an opening to voice their desire for more, to recognize their second-class citizenship, and combat the discriminatory practices and policies they faced. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided one such opening. In the Bill was a clause that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race. Women quickly learned that it was up to them to enforce this legislation and raise the national conscience. The National Organization for Women (NOW) formed out of such a need.

In the late 1960s, a new generation of activists entered the budding Women's Movement.

¹¹⁸ Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, 104.

Traumatic events shaped the formative years of these young women, including the murders of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, watching their friends be drafted in the Vietnam War and being sidelined from other activism because of their sex. According to Gail Collins in her book *When Everything Changed*, the young radicals wanted more than to have a job and raise a family. Collins explains, “they intended to figure out what had kept their sex in such a secondary role. And then they were going to free women to be all they could be, even if that meant getting rid of capitalism or the nuclear family or the Judeo-Christian tradition, or anything else that got in the way. They were convinced that the things that were tormenting them in their private lives were really political.” With a decentralized organizational structure and protests that captivated the nation, such as the Miss America protest in September 1968, Americans everywhere discussed the roles women played in society and the world slowly opened up for women. Sexist comments, financial policies, and employment policies were challenged, women pursued careers and raised families, and everyone from newspapers to comics were sharing their two cents on the Women’s Movement and its ideas.

Inspired by the Women’s Movement, female readership of popular comics increased as well as the quantity and quantity of female representation in comics. A 1980 *New York Times* article includes an interview of superstar Marvel executive Stan Lee, saying “These days, [Lee] said with a smile, three times as many girls are reading comics as did 10 years ago. In fact, a recent survey for Marvel by the Target Group Index showed that 46 percent of Marvel’s comic book audience was composed of girls.”¹¹⁹ Marvel debuted several superheroines leading their own books and the company joined its major rival, DC, in including several more well-rounded supporting female characters. However, as the fanzine “The Heroine Addict” debated, many of

¹¹⁹ Judy Klemesrud, “Female Superheroes Get Star Roles in the Comics,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1980, p. A14.

these female characters fell into two categories: “a whimpering girlfriend or a sadistic tigress.”¹²⁰ Professor Carolyn Cocca, in her book *Superwomen*, argues that a female character can and should be portrayed with more nuance than a whimpering girlfriend or sadistic tigress. She says, “rather than being alone, she can be surrounded by friends and allies and villains, drawn and written to be different from her and from one another. She can be drawn to be attractive without looking like she’s posed for immediate sexual activity with the reader. She can convey strength, heroism, leadership, and humanity in a female body.”¹²¹

Captain America comics between 1968 and 1989 included dozens of white female characters. Some had more principal roles than others and nearly all of them were love interests or villains. The only super-powered heroines who appeared were the occasional guest stars of female Avengers team members. All but four of the white women were involved in combat, which places these comics within the wider debate over the role American women were allowed to have in military combat. De Dauw explains that the Vietnam War and Women’s Movement ignited a conversation about allowing women in the field of battle, and the debate continued until 2005, when women were finally allowed in combat.¹²² Hero or villain, stereotyped or not, these women faced danger and held their own in varying ways, allowing readers to see women capable in combat. While the white women in *Captain America* did not have fantastical powers, they did show that with dedication, women could harness their natural skills to fight injustice. Unfortunately, as much as these women did have moments of asserting their strength and dignity, the authors also perpetuated stereotypes of whimpering girlfriends or sadistic tigresses through these characters. The white women explored in this section are Sharon Carter, Contessa

¹²⁰ Lester Boutillier and Ted Delorme, “Feedback,” *The Heroine Addict* #4 (April 1975), 16-17.

¹²¹ Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, 53.

¹²² Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 68.

Valentina Allegra de Fontaine, Peggy Carter, Bernie Rosenthal, and the villain organization the Serpent Society and their two leading women: Viper and Diamondback.

Sharon Carter

Sharon Carter is an agent of the fictional spy organization Shield and Captain America's primary love interest. She appeared in the *Captain America* comics nearly 100 times between 1968 and 1989 where she goes from being a feminist agent to a whimpering girlfriend to dying in service of Cap's character development. In most of her appearances, Sharon is the lone woman. She has no other women supporting her in representing half of the human population. When other female characters do show up, there is a tension that drives the two women apart. In terms of physical portrayal, Sharon is drawn as perpetually young and attractive despite being around for more than a decade. She maintains the ideal image of the female body, unaffected by the natural changes of the female body that come with age and motherhood. De Dauw refers to this as plasticity, a body with no "imperfections or excess."¹²³ Others refer to the artistic renderings of leading women like Sharon as "pin-up girls," photos or drawings of women posing to be ogled at, a popular trend of the 20th century. Male heroes are also victims of agelessness, but it is to preserve their toughness, whereas women are to preserve their beauty. Regarding her costume, Sharon's initial outfits from the late 1960s are flattering, but are not skin-tight to sexualize her. Throughout the 1970s, Sharon wore the standard Shield uniform, a skin-tight blue bodysuit with a utility belt. While the Shield men wear a similarly styled uniform, it is again to show off their strength whereas the bodysuit highlights a woman's curves. Compared to some of the more revealing outfits from the late 1970s and 80s, Sharon's uniform is modest.

¹²³ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 81.

Sharon in the Field

In her early portrayals as a field agent, Sharon is involved in a lot of combat, but this combat is fraught with sexist tension. In combat, she makes several bold and overtly feminist statements and actions. In the 1968 *Captain America* #100, when she, Cap, and Black Panther are confronted by an evil robot, she shouts “I can’t just stand by” and grabs a gun off the floor and fires it.¹²⁴ Two issues later, when she demands a piece of the action, her superior, Nick Fury, forces Cap to let her fight, saying “if she tackles the Sleeper with you - I won’t have ta listen to her moonin’ over ya all day long.”¹²⁵ While between the lines, Fury may be saying he trusts her to not die in the line of fire, what is read is she’s an annoying whimpering girlfriend. She spends the whole mission standing on the side, making exclamations, and asking questions that allow Cap to show off his heroism. Issue #103 resembles a combination of the feminist and sexist tension from issues #100 and #102. Sharon is captured, which baits Cap into also being locked up, but it is Sharon who frees them with a “capsule of powdered corrosive in [her] fingernail” and “micro flame thrower.”¹²⁶ She explains, “I’d have freed myself sooner but I waited knowing you’d be here!” to which Cap responds: “Good girl, I should have known that SHIELD wouldn’t leave you defenseless!”¹²⁷ While Cap’s comment was probably meant to bolster this feminist moment of showing how a woman can hold her own, the “good girl” comment leaves a sour taste. Furthermore, despite having plans to escape, she defers to Cap’s judgment the entire way.

A central conflict in the early *Captain America* issues is whether Cap and Sharon will be together. The relationship is in flux for nearly three years between the 1969 *Captain America*

¹²⁴ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Monster Unmasked,” 16.

¹²⁵ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Sleeper Strikes,” *Captain America* no. 102 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1968), 7.

¹²⁶ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Weakest Link,” *Captain America* no. 103 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1968), 17.

¹²⁷ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Weakest Link,” 17.

#114 and the 1971 *Captain America* #142 where they finally decide to be a couple. The process takes so long because Cap refuses to let himself get involved with Sharon unless she is not doing field work. The loyal fan would easily understand that after losing Bucky, he does not want to lose another person he cares about in combat. However, that is not as clear in the comics themselves. Despite both Cap and Sharon fearing the other's demise in battle, it is *Sharon* who has to quit her fieldwork. Initially, in the 1969 *Captain America* #114, Sharon refuses to quit and takes on a den of bad guys alone with some success. Ten issues later, Cap goes over Sharon's head and asks Fury to assign her desk work. Fury pushes back, saying "she's one of my best" but says he will allow it only with her consent.¹²⁸ She agrees, but discovers Cap is headed into a trap and saves him. Instead of thanking Sharon for saving his life, Cap says he can no longer trust her.¹²⁹ The icing on the cake for the whole situation is that while Cap claims to not want another person to die because of him, he is training a replacement for Bucky. Instead of a character grappling with survivor's guilt, this conflict symbolizes the dominant narrative of 1960 where women were expected to drop all hopes of a career to settle down.

The Whimpering Girlfriend

Sharon's potential to assert her talent in the comic universe and inspire readers to strive for gender equality is subverted in several ways in the course of her appearances in *Captain America*. Sharon is consistently classified as irrational and young. She faints when she thinks Cap is dead, and is constantly called "girl" by Cap and her co-workers. This characterization is continuously used in comics and allows male characters to exert their authority over her and ease concerns of her having any sort of dominance. Furthermore, Gail Collins explains that the 1970s

¹²⁸ Stan Lee et. al, "Stop the Cyborg," *Captain America* no. 124 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1970), 7.

¹²⁹ Stan Lee et. al, "Stop the Cyborg," 20.

ushered in a wave of pushback against sexist language, including calling grown women “girl.”¹³⁰ In the 1970s, Sharon spends increasingly less time as a field agent and more as Captain America’s whimpering girlfriend. At one point, Fury gives her work “so she wouldn’t walk into a bullet or somethin.”¹³¹ While Americans would be hard pressed not to hear about or discuss the Women’s Movement, *Captain America* comics used Sharon Carter to perpetuate stereotypes of the irrational woman who requires the taming authority of a man.

In 1972, Sharon quits her job at Shield. The comics immediately following give the impression that she could continue some freelance heroism despite not working for Shield. She and Cap go on vacation and a fake Captain America and Bucky confront the couple. The Falcon arrives and, with Sharon, defeats the fake Bucky. What makes this Bucky a foe is his embodiment of backwards, traditional 1950s ideals that are inherently racist and sexist. While in the fist fight, Sharon wears shorts and a button down shirt, more practical than the bathing suit she was wearing, but less protective than the actual costumes the men wear. The narration highlights her “dainty feet” while she runs fast enough that she “could out run nearly any man.”¹³² This dichotomy represents the balance all female heroes must maintain. They are tough and capable, but must look beautiful while fighting their foes. The primary focus for Sharon in this arc, however, is her strength as a woman and hero. In the midst of her and Falcon taking on the fake Bucky, she quips, “women have changed a lot since the 1950s - just like everyone else, right, Falcon?”¹³³ Indeed, a lot for women had changed between 1950 and 1972. Aside from the *Feminine Mystique*, the Miss America protest, and the rising feminist consciousness and

¹³⁰ Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, 258.

¹³¹ Stan Lee and John Romita, “The Badge and the Betrayal,” 11.

¹³² Steve Englehart, John Rothima, and Sal Buscema, “The Incredible Origin of the Other Captain America,” *Captain America* no. 155 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1972), 5.

¹³³ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Two into One Won’t Go,” 12.

grassroots activism, the famed Title IX Act - prohibiting discriminatory practices in federally funded education programs - had passed a few months before Sharon makes this statement.

Sadly, Sharon's heroism does not continue for several years. Much of her time away from Shield is marked by the frustrating back and forth with Cap about him quitting his hero business so they could settle down. Fans felt annoyed that after years of Sharon being a leading Shield field agent, she was slowly written into a small, frankly frustrating part. In 1979, one fan asked for "A true, honest-to-goodness romance between Steve and Sharon."¹³⁴ Another letter a year later argued, "I feel that a reinstated and expanded-upon Sharon is a must. I'm tired of Cap being a loner all the time. He needs a stabilizing force in his emotional life and Sharon can provide it if she isn't treated like excess baggage."¹³⁵ Characters are allowed to change and develop over time, however readers should be aware of the change as it unfolds, and stories should follow through with central characters like Sharon as they evolve. Instead, these fan letters indicate that readers were confused why Cap's girlfriend suddenly dropped out of the story. No person should or would simply sit around all day and do nothing. It was in a similar scenario that the Smith graduates Betty Friedan surveyed began struggling with their self-image and mental health. Unfortunately, this is exactly what the writers seem to have Sharon do.

Sharon's Return and Death

In the 1977 *Captain America* #209, Sharon finally returned to her hero work. While Layla Taylor cares for a bed ridden Sharon, a Shield representative approaches Sharon and asks her to return to save Cap and Falcon from a trap. After much debate, Sharon pulls herself together and takes the job. Leila protests, saying "winding up dead is no way to win equality

¹³⁴ Roger McKenzie and Sal Buscema. "Traitors All About Me," *Captain America* no. 229 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1979), 18.

¹³⁵ Chris Claremont, Roger McKenzie and Sal Buscema. "From the Ashes," *Captain America* no. 237 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1979), 18.

with men.”¹³⁶ Sharon argues that “it’s better than the trial of waiting.”¹³⁷ Due to the combination of the Women’s Movement encouraging women to pursue careers and the struggling economy, Sharon’s brave return to Shield celebrates the countless trailblazing women entering the workforce in the 1970s.¹³⁸ Sharon leaves her home, dons a new haircut and modest uniform, and asserts her professionalism as an agent. She confronts Red Skull, tases him, and makes a deal for him to lead her to Cap. Despite the deal, Sharon displays her strategic intellect by leaving a tracker on Red Skull and she threatens him with the statement, “I’m fully armed... make one move to rattle me.”¹³⁹ It is the Nazi Red Skull, of all characters, to acknowledge the dignity and power Sharon commands in this story arc when he says “I often regret that the Nazi philosophy excludes the strength of women.”¹⁴⁰ Despite the brilliant showcase of Sharon’s heroism, *Captain America* does not feature any more of Sharon’s work as an agent in the two years between this arc and her death.

In 1979, Sharon Carter dies with little fanfare. On an assignment to end the activities of a Neo-Nazi movement in New York City, the villain Dr. Faustus adds Sharon to his collection of mind-controlled minions. To avoid capture, she and the other minions incinerate themselves. Only Captain America defeats Dr. Faustus does he discover footage of Sharon going up in flames. The page where Cap watches the footage is the only memorial his girlfriend and symbol of female power receives. Readers never see the funeral and Cap never contacts Sharon’s sister or parents, all of whom he knows well, to inform them of the tragedy. Instead, Sharon’s death

¹³⁶ Jack Kirby and Frank Giacoia, “Arnim Zola - The Bio-Fanatic,” *Captain America* no. 209 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1977), 7.

¹³⁷ Jack Kirby and Frank Giacoia, “Arnim Zola - The Bio-Fanatic,” 7.

¹³⁸ Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, 100.

¹³⁹ Jack Kirby, “The Face of a Hero,” *Captain America* no. 212 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1977), 4.

¹⁴⁰ Jack Kirby, “The Face of a Hero,” 4.

catalyzed Cap's character development to become comfortable with settling down. After receiving the tragic news, Cap makes a valiant attempt at a normal life, moving into an apartment, getting a job, finds new friends, and gets a new girlfriend who he almost marries.

Sharon's death aligns with a phenomenon in stories called "fridging." Carolyn Cocca explains the term as "an accounting of the number of times in comics that female characters were victims of violence - particularly, sexualized violence - solely to show the violence's effect on male characters."¹⁴¹ Fridging comes from the list "Women in Refrigerators" created by DC comics writer Gail Simone, which includes all female characters who have been victimized by such tragic writing.¹⁴² Simone named the list after the 1994 Green Lantern story where a villain murdered Green Lantern's girlfriend and stuffed her remains in a refrigerator for Green Lantern to find.¹⁴³ While many male characters die or lose their powers, they rarely do so as often or for as long as female characters do. With the lackluster memorial for a staple character in *Captain America* comics and the stunning character development Captain America achieves in the years following, Sharon's death fits within the unjust practice of fridging.

Ultimately, Sharon Carter was a character who had a lot of uncapitalized potential. She debuted in the late 1960s, just as the Women's Movement entered the forefront of the national consciousness. The *Captain America* writers had good intentions with portraying her as a respectable Shield agent, however they did not develop the nuances of her character beyond feminist catchphrases and a whimpering girlfriend. This may have been because in the 1970s, feminist ideas were still disseminating and marinating in American culture. After Sharon's death, one reader requested "to avoid future Sharon Carteresque problems, why not make Cap's next

¹⁴¹ Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, 64.

¹⁴² Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, 64.

¹⁴³ Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, 64.

girl a costumed hero like himself?”¹⁴⁴ In hindsight, the writers had such a dynamic on their hands. Both Sharon and Cap were heroes, perhaps in different ways, but both put their lives on the line for what they believed. If anything, there should have been little conflict between the two of them about being in harm’s way all the time, because they knew the desire to fight for justice and the self-confidence to get the job done. Naturally, it would be difficult to raise a family in such an environment, however, with some sacrifices on both their ends, they could have made it work. Falcon and other New York and Shield heroes could have taken on more work so Cap could stay home, and Sharon could do “deskwork” to have more flexibility. Such a story, however, would have required the characters to be willing to make that sacrifice and support from the *Captain America* creative team.

The Femme Force and Contessa Valentina Allegra de Fontaine

In the 1971 *Captain America* #144, Shield’s Femme Force hit the scene. It was the writers’ attempt to capitalize on the Women’s Movement that was impossible to ignore. Sharon Carter led the team of female Shield Agents, called the Femme Force, that appeared for only three issues. The first issue follows the team’s “audition” for the government to authorize the team. As the women burst into the simulated battle, Sharon cries: “this is our big chance to prove we can be as valuable as the men.”¹⁴⁵ As the Femme Force decisively showcases their skill, Sharon states “if this doesn’t make you a believer in the women’s lib movement... I don’t know what will!”¹⁴⁶ The team is selected for a mission in the following issue, which Captain America tags along to supervise them. The women fight and the mission is successful, but they play more

¹⁴⁴ Alan Kupperberg and Paul Kupperberg, “Gang Wars,” *Captain America* no. 240 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1979), 17.

¹⁴⁵ Gary Friedrich and John Romita, “Hydra Over All,” *Captain America* no. 144 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1971), 6.

¹⁴⁶ Gary Friedrich and John Romita, “Hydra Over All,” 6.

of a “clean up role” and make the rookie mistake of allowing a traitor into their ranks. Furthermore, bickering between the two lead women, Sharon Carter and Contessa Valentina Allegra de Fontaine, plagues the three-issue arc. Overall, the *Femme Force* was a lackluster attempt at incorporating the Women’s Movement into the *Captain America* comics that portrayed all the reasons people would have found feminists annoying and women incompetent in the workforce.

This exploitation of feminist ideals is not uncommon for the time. DC Comics writer Gail Simone explained in a 2015 Twitter post that

The old guard comics are comfortable with feminism mostly under very strict guidelines. It has to be palatable to them. They are VERY comfortable with characters who spout faux female empowerment slogans while wearing skin-tight rubber bands or whatever. They are comfortable with characters who say GIRL POWER loudly, as long as they don’t actually accomplish anything or overshadow the hero.¹⁴⁷

Sharon and the *Femme Force* certainly fit this narrative. In skin-tight uniforms, the *Femme Force* punches villains and shouts feminist phrases, but are relegated to secondary roles in the plot and action by being under Cap’s watch. The team disappears after the three issues. Although Sharon sticks around, she is certainly a victim of these stereotypes because a lot of her combat is paired with “faux female empowerment slogans.” Then, in the mid-1970s, the writers seemed to have had too much of Sharon’s feminism and pushed her into the whimpering girlfriend stereotype.

Jason Black, in his essay “From Audience to Public,” further examines the harmful trend of exploiting feminist ideologies in two-dimensional stories with a letter written by Margaret O’Connell to the Fanzine “The Heroine Addict.” The letter argues that writers were “so overcome with self-consciousness at the thought of writing a female character... that they lose most of their common sense and frantically throw in some of the most ridiculous plot devices

¹⁴⁷ Gail Simone (Twitter, August 13, 2015), <https://www.twitter.com/GailSimone/status/631846086710132736>.

known to comicism.”¹⁴⁸ In the case of the Femme Force, the “ridiculous plot device” is the cattiness between Contessa Fontaine and Sharon Carter. It begins in *Captain America* #145 when the writers devoted several pages to Sharon and Fontaine’s bickering about who is in charge. Fontaine made the Femme Force late to a mission so Sharon would look bad, and both women argued their side of the story to their boss, Nick Fury. Fury silences the fight stating this was why he did not want the Femme Force in the first place. On the mission, Fontaine proceeds to flirt with Captain America (who is very much in a relationship with Sharon at this point) while spouting more feminist catchphrases. After galvanizing the Force to help Cap win the battle, she says to him “as a liberated woman... I don’t think much of your attitude... but I can sure dig on the way you throw your weight around” right in front of Sharon, naturally.¹⁴⁹ Sharon cannot rise above Fontaine’s clear attempts to get a rise out of her and as a result, Cap has to remind her to be a professional. Between Fontaine’s antics and Sharon’s jealousy, nearly all the empowering potential the Femme Force had went down the drain. Furthermore, the Femme Force is a missed opportunity to show two strong women developing a sisterhood.

Fans were unhappy about Fontaine’s portrayal. One male fan wrote,

I was quite surprised, and happily so, to find... the reappearance of an old favorite of mine... My delight almost instantly turned into dismay when I saw what she had been changed into. Although she was never really developed [before], she came across then as purposeful and strong, but, good lord, never CATTY! Now we find her slobbering over Cap’s body and mouthing au courant lib phrases at the same time...My objections also reaches the handling of the ‘liberated’ women in general. A few wisecracks about sexism do not negate the picture that has been given of the characters. Unlike the males, the females seem to be more interested in cattiness and oneupmanship than getting the job done. Compared to the businesslike and sensible attitude of Cap and Fury, the women seem petty and silly. A few ‘right on’s’ and references to male chauvinism cannot change this, and in

¹⁴⁸ Jason Owen Black, “From Audience to Public: Comic Book Fanzines in the Seventies and Eighties,” 42.

¹⁴⁹ Gary Friedrich and John Romita, “Skyjacked,” *Captain America* no. 145 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1972), 16.

fact, degrade the magazine itself to a position of exploiter of a current social trend.¹⁵⁰

Evidently, at least one fan recognized the painful exploitation of the Women's Movement and despised it. Even worse, a good character turned into a sadistic tigress that flirted with every male when she got the chance (even though he was clearly taken). What was meant to be a moment of empowerment better resembled a fear of what "liberated women," any woman who has freed herself from the influences of the patriarchal society, would become. The *Captain America* creative team owned up to their mistake, and did their best to correct a bad situation, but ended up creating stories that were just as problematic. Sharon and Fontaine reconcile and support each other, but it is catalyzed by Fontaine accidentally falling in love with Cap.

In the 1972 *Captain America* #152, Fontaine approaches Sharon while she works out. A panel devoted to women exercising to maintain their strength in this period is rare and a major accomplishment on Marvel's part for alluding to the reality that women, as well as men, have to train to be the heroes they are. The moment is overshadowed, however, when Fontaine confesses that she was flirting with Cap to make Fury jealous and has now accidentally fallen for Cap, an unfortunately common trope for female characters.¹⁵¹ Sharon immediately takes on the role of sympathetic sister and tries to help Fontaine share her feelings with Fury. Coincidentally, Fury confronts Cap, accusing him of courting Fontaine. Despite Falcon telling Sharon to stay out of the fight, she calls Fontaine, and the women break up the fight. The sisterhood between Sharon and Fontaine is a great change and showcases their uncompromising intuition in the face of

¹⁵⁰ Gerry Conway, and Sal Buscema, "All the Colors of Evil," *Captain America* no. 149 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1972), 22.

¹⁵¹ Gerry Conway, and Sal Buscema, "Terror in the Night," *Captain America* no. 152 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1972), 10.

conflict. However, the circumstances around the events are strange and steeped in the stereotype of women existing in stories for romance only.

Fontaine only appears a few more times between *Captain America* #153 and the last issue of 1989. Her last two appearances are first, when the seductive Black female villain, Nightshade, hypnotizes the Shield facility, and second, during Falcon's trial. In the former appearance, Fontaine is the only one with a level head, because she is the only woman and therefore immune to Nightshade's seduction. What on the surface appears as a moment for Fontaine to assert her talents as an agent turns into another story laced with fears about female sexuality. In the following issue, however, Fontaine dons a uniform similar to Nightshade's, a bikini with a utility belt around her waist. These comics were published in 1975, as the sexualized outfits for female characters hit the comics scene. It is a jarring contrast between Fontaine's last two appearances and ends her features on a sour note. As talented and capable as Fontaine is, between her seductive tendencies, romantic interests, cattiness, and skimpy costumes, she cannot seem to avoid the fears of the weaponization of female sexuality.

Peggy Carter

In 1973, Captain America's first love, the former French spy Peggy Carter, entered the *Captain America* comics. She had been added to Captain America's World War II backstory in a 1966 issue of Marvel's *Tales of Suspense* but remained mostly a mystery until 1973. Her introduction to the *Captain America* storyline begins with Sharon's solo investigation to find her family. Sharon, despite a brilliant showcase of her agent abilities, is captured with her family in a mansion/mental hospital as a trap for Captain America. When the star-spangled hero arrives, he learns that Sharon was trying to rescue her sister, Peggy, the woman he once loved who had been bed-ridden with grief since his passing in 1945. The villain, Dr. Faustus had promised Sharon

and Peggy's parents to fix Peggy's mental state, when in fact he wanted to use Cap to jog Peggy's memory to find his weakness. Peggy's memory is indeed restored and the now 40-year-old former spy leaps into action, defeating Dr. Faustus and saving Cap.

The strangely large age-difference between the sisters aside, Sharon and Peggy's bonds with each other and with Cap invite some strange conflicts. Through revealing her relation to Peggy, Sharon explains that she had fallen in love with Cap through the stories her sister told her from the war and to protect Peggy, she kept their connection a secret. It seems strange that after all the time Sharon and Cap spent together, Sharon had fallen in love with the idea of him instead of the man she came to know years later. However, it is a more recent phenomena for women in stories to cultivate romantic feelings through actual encounters rather than imaginative ones. Sharon's love for Cap aside, the couple decides to keep their relationship secret from Peggy as she struggles to adjust to the present day. Cap rejects Peggy's advances, but they only drive Peggy to further prove herself, and thus create more tension between herself, Sharon, and Cap.

In 1974, Peggy joins Shield to win Cap over. While she is unsuccessful, it proves a fantastic choice for her character development. She eventually goes on missions, although primarily receiving less taxing fieldwork, and proves herself a tough and capable agent. Additionally, it is with Shield that Peggy catalyzes some of the most radical symbolic messages in the *Captain America* comics. First, Peggy subverts the narrative that heroines must be young, traditionally attractive, slim, and show no signs of battle. From the Miss America protest in 1968 calling America to today, feminists fought against the suffocating beauty stereotypes that characterized the 1950s and implore people to see women for more than their attractiveness. Peggy is a trailblazing middle-aged woman with graying hair, some facial wrinkles, and a curvier figure that holds her own in a fight. A couple times she is also drawn with a lingering black eye,

a rarity for any hero, especially female. She shows some self-awareness with her dialogue, too. In the 1975 *Captain America* #185, she comments to her companion Shield agent, Gabriel Jones, that “these guys are always amazed that a woman in her 40s isn’t completely helpless.”¹⁵² Unfortunately, the *Captain America* writers do not capitalize on the opportunity to show Sharon and Peggy in combat together. As sisters and respected agents, the two could have easily fought side-by-side against villains. But the writers chose not to work around the problems of Sharon no longer working for Shield and her secret relationship with Cap to display a genuine sisterhood for readers to admire.

Even more groundbreaking than Peggy’s visual portrayal, however, was her romantic relationship with a Black man, Gabriel Jones. Like her, Jones is a Shield agent and World War II veteran. Their relationship begins with Jones serving as a more of a chaperone while Peggy goes looking for Cap. The two then are paired in combat together and steadily grow in romantic affection for each other. Peggy and Jones bond over their shared experiences in World War II as minorities loathed by the Nazis.¹⁵³ Peggy and Jones’ relationship slowly develops because they are secondary characters in *Captain America* and the two are not immediately in a place where they are ready for a relationship. Peggy is readjusting to the present day and Jones is just getting out of a long-term relationship. These circumstances allow for the two characters to get to know each other over time and build ample support for their eventual romantic relationship.

A letter from *Captain America* #190 provides a glimpse at the impact of Marvel portraying a Black man and a white woman in a romantic relationship. The letter comments on issue #185 where the Red Skull explains that he must put an end to Peggy and Gabe’s

¹⁵² Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Scream the Scarlet Skull,” *Captain America* no. 185 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1975), 9.

¹⁵³ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Scream the Scarlet Skull,” 9.

relationship. At the end of the issue, he captures and tortures them. The couple stubbornly endures the torture and vow never to bow to Red Skull's backward's ideology. The fan praises the *Captain America* creative team for this story, saying:

The capture of Gabe and Peggy portrayed just how sick, demented, and perverted the Skull is. To endanger a plan which could lead to world domination just to stop an interracial romantic relationship from developing is exactly what the Red Skull would do... the sickest thing of all is that there are probably people out there rooting for the Skull to forcibly prevent Gabe's and Peggy's relationship. I suppose it's a sad reflection on the state of the world.¹⁵⁴

The creative team responds to the fan's letter, explaining that many letters had arrived at Marvel indicating disgust with Peggy and Jones' relationship. This racism is likely rooted in the unfounded fear of Black men, seeing them as criminals and rapists that target white women.

Historian Charles Payne, as mentioned in the Battlestar section, explained that a mere rumor of a Black man raping a white woman would catalyze a white mob uprising and the lynching of the accused Black man.¹⁵⁵ Although Payne notes that rape was not as prevalent an "accusation" for the men that were lynched, the fear of Black male sexuality did fuel the murder of Emmett Till that pierced the national conscience. Most of the generation in the South that believed an alleged cat call from a Black male teenager to a white woman warranted brutal murder was still alive two decades later in 1975, when *Captain America* #185 premiered. Although the fear of Black men violating white women was not displayed so violently anymore, it could not have instantly disappeared with the Civil Rights Movement.

The *Captain America* creative team did explain that although they had received many negative fan letters about Peggy and Jones' relationship, after seeing Red Skull torturing the two

¹⁵⁴ Tony Isabella and Frank Robbins, "Nightshade is Deadlier the Second Time Around," *Captain America* no. 190 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1975), 19.

¹⁵⁵ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, 12.

for being together, the fans had changed their minds.¹⁵⁶ This example is clear evidence for the power of symbolism. Peggy and Jones represent the world as it ought to be, where people love each other based on character, not by the color of their skin while Red Skull embodies all of the racism from the Ku Klux Klan, white mobs, and angry fans. *Captain America* #185 shows readers how unjust it is for racist people to prevent genuine love between two good people because of their race. This story was successful, and it is stories like these that inspire writers, critics, fans, and scholars to analyze the power of popular media.

Overall, Peggy was a beloved and groundbreaking character in the later stages of the Women's Movement. She grew from being a love interest to her own woman who adapted to a new life and held her own as a 40-year-old agent, showing that with time, *Captain America* writers can create a feminist female character beyond catchphrases. Through her relationship with fellow agent, Gabriel Jones, Peggy showed that genuine romance knows no racial bounds. Unfortunately, she did not get the opportunity to show the power of sisterhood with her sister and fellow trained agent, Sharon, but that did not outweigh the powerful impact Peggy had on subverting stereotypes of women and romantic relationships. Fans loved her; Marvel received several angry letters when it appeared that Peggy had died in a car crash.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, before her identity was revealed in the *Captain America* comics, a fan won a coveted "no-prize" for guessing that she was Dr. Faustus' veiled patient. He expressed his love for the character and excitement for her to finally return because her whereabouts had been a mystery.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Tony Isabella and Frank Robbins, "Nightshade is Deadlier the Second Time Around," 19.

¹⁵⁷ Roger McKenzie and Sal Buscema, "Crossfire," *Captain America* no. 233 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1979), 18.

¹⁵⁸ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, "Night of the Lurking Dead," *Captain America* no. 166 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1973), 20.

Bernie Rosenthal

Bernie Rosenthal entered Captain America's life just shy of a year after Sharon Carter's death. She first appeared in 1980 in *Captain America* #248 as a new tenant in Cap's apartment building. When Sharon Carter was on her way out, fans claimed Cap "needs [a woman] that will stand by him... a woman who knows who she is and what she wants, and accepts her man for what he is. She should be a woman who isn't afraid to die for her man, if it came to that."¹⁵⁹ To many fans, Rosenthal was exactly what they were looking for. She may not have been a superhero, but she was confident and driven. She had her own identity outside of her relationship with Cap. Although she followed many of the classic superhero's girlfriend stereotypes (worried about his well-being, captured by villains, etc.), she navigated the relationship with a dignity previously unseen in the *Captain America* comics. Rosenthal emerged when comic companies flooded their universes with female heroes, strong women who were more fleshed-out, in response to the Women's Movement. As DC Comics' Jenette Kahn explained to the New York Times, "'We're now seeking actively to put more and stronger women in comic books.'"¹⁶⁰ Now that the Women's Movement ideals had marinated in American culture, writers had a better grasp of how to reflect them in their stories beyond catchphrases.

Rosenthal co-owned a glass menagerie in New York City and occasionally taught art classes. She also is devoted to pro-wrestling, a love she shared with her father. The comics show her dealing with business troubles such as affording rent, which ultimately lead her to closing the shop and using her skills for other career paths. She starts her "unemployment" by managing Cap's finances and starting a hotline for people to call when they need help. She decides to

¹⁵⁹ Peter Gillis et. al, "Snowfall Fury," *Captain America* no. 238 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1979), 18.

¹⁶⁰ Pamela Brandt, "Comic Books Seek Female Readers," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1980, p. F16.

attend law school, and the comics follow her preparing for law school and struggling to find a good environment to study in. Realizing she cannot be successful living in New York and distracted by her relationship with Cap, she explains that she is going to move to a house on campus, stating “I want to be strong and self-sufficient.”¹⁶¹ Unfortunately, because the relationship becomes long-distance, it eventually fades out and Rosenthal ends her relationship with Cap. However, she was quite significant because she was around consistently for five years and on-and-off for several more. Such a consistent and powerful presence cannot be ignored, especially when the fans regularly expressed their love for her.

Rosenthal is a woman who knows what she wants in a relationship. She is often the one to take the emotional leaps first and holds Cap accountable to prioritizing their relationship. She is the first to say “I love you,” and although she does not require Cap to immediately say the phrase in return, she demands that her feelings are at least validated. When she proposes to him, he initially declines because he is afraid to make a lasting commitment only for her to get hurt, but she convinces him to take the leap of faith with an incredible speech. Rosenthal says, “Steve, you of all people know that you can’t spend your life in a hole, avoiding the dangers... hiding from the risks, so why don’t you do what you do best: be a hero. Marry me.”¹⁶² The tone of the conversations between Cap and Rosenthal are more realistic, less campy, and show the two on more equal footing. Gone are the patronizing and chastising lines that Cap used on Sharon, and in their place are ones that respect the other person for who he/she is. Although Rosenthal may not be a costumed hero, she does not back down from a fight. When Cap is captured, she rallies the Falcon and Nomad to find him. When she is tricked into thinking a clone of Cap is her real

¹⁶¹ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Creatures of Love,” *Captain America* no. 316 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1986), 3.

¹⁶² J.M. DeMatteis et. al, “The Measure of a Man,” *Captain America* no. 294 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1984), 21.

boyfriend, she convinces the clone to stop hurting others and distracts him long enough for Cap to shut him down.

Captain America #289 includes a creative way of having Rosenthal grapple with the reality of being Captain America's girlfriend. The couple had plans to meet Rosenthal's family, but Cap got pulled away to hero duties. That night at her parent's house, Rosenthal dreams that the roles were reversed, that she was Captain America and Cap was just Steve Rogers. The mini-story titled "Bernie America: Sentinel of Liberty" is a witty dream sequence that pokes fun at the stereotypes of dating a superhero and imagines a world of female superhero leadership. The story opens with Bernie America, She-Hulk, and the Wasp discussing men who could not be smooth if it hit them in the face. Then a strange hybrid villain breaks into the Avengers compound and only Bernie America can save them. After the battle, Bernie America has a conversation with her "ever-loyal, sheeping, and not-extremely-bright love-interest, Steve Rogers."¹⁶³ He cries over the constant separation from her, an extreme representation of Rosenthal's legitimate concern that Cap cannot prioritize their relationship. Bernie America reminds Rogers that he knew what he was getting into when they started dating. After that, Rosenthal wakes up to find Cap at the front door. She runs into his arms, confessing that reality is much better.¹⁶⁴

The "Bernie America" story, and Rosenthal's character in general, shows that although Rosenthal is the superhero's girlfriend, she is not powerless. She is intelligent. She places herself in Cap's shoes to work through her problems with his absence. She pursues a career and uses her skills to help others. When needed, Rosenthal is not afraid to step up and do her part in a fight. Unfortunately, often being the only woman in the *Captain America* comics at the time left her

¹⁶³ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "Bernie America, Sentinel of Liberty," *Captain America* no. 289 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1984), 4.

¹⁶⁴ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "Bernie America, Sentinel of Liberty," 5.

with the burden of representing all women and thus showing that women are not interested in fighting. However, Rosenthal does show that whatever gifts women have, they can and should be nurtured as a force for good. Furthermore, she displays an inspiring confidence and pursues a life for herself beyond becoming a wife and “settling down.” In the late 1970s and 1980s, the ideal woman mirrored much of Rosenthal’s portrayal. A woman pursued a career and romance and although many women still experienced discrimination, the new standard for women subverted the countless stereotypes of the previous decades. Rosenthal is a much-needed breath of fresh air after years of struggling to give female characters of all kinds proper strength of character without being a victim of stereotypes.

The Serpent Society

The *Captain America* comics feature several female villains. All of these women are seductive tigresses, adding a sexual element to their evil ideals and actions. Of the dozen or so female villains, the Serpent Society and two leading women of the organization, Viper and Diamondback, are excellent examples of the depiction of female villains in *Captain America* comics from 1968-1989. The Serpent Society debuted in 1985 as an association of freelance villains with snake-like abilities formed by the white costumed male, Sidewinder. The Society is dominated by women and Black men. Of the eleven members, two are Black men, and five are women (all are white women except one with gray skin). Another two women and two men attempt to join the organization later. With so many women in the organization, a lot of the Society’s activities feature women holding their own in combat and in conversation. Additionally, because of the dominant representation of women, it would be easy to associate the leadership of women with villainy, or women in combat with being evil. This certainly also resembles the backlash and perception of Women’s Movement activists as crazed women with

baseless accusations that would unnecessarily turn society upside down.

The Serpent Society exemplifies the impact of the Women's Movement in comics in relation to the depiction of women. More fleshed-out female characters appeared in comics, but because the Comic Codes also relaxed, artists pushed the boundaries of costumes, drawing women in increasingly sexualized outfits and poses. According to a 1980 *New York Times* article, "Marvel publishes all of the comics starring female heroes except Wonder Woman."¹⁶⁵ Marvel icon Stan Lee explains that "for years, we were never able to make any of our female characters sell well... the main reason is that historically, more boys than girls have read adventure comics."¹⁶⁶ DC Comics' Jenette Kahn disagrees with Lee's argument about the fan demographics. In another 1980 *New York Times* article, she says "A strong alert woman working for the traditional superhero ideal - abolishment of evil and natural disaster - is many men's fantasy.' She blames the bad sales on 'bad scripts. They haven't been done as well, and minority groups have to be better to be successful... It also takes more exposure."¹⁶⁷ She argues that poor writing and excessive pressure resulted in the downfall of many leading female characters. With the Women's Movement, creators were finally exposed to elements that create a well-rounded and engaging female character and rushed to include them in their stories.

However, these new female characters came with increasingly revealing outfits and seductive poses. Most of the women in the Serpent Society wore revealing bathing-suit-type costumes that accentuated their curves. With a costume of that design combined with combat, the women are bound to be drawn in more revealing poses than if they had more modest costumes. For example, a somersault would be less of an issue in a more loose-fitting, full-coverage

¹⁶⁵ Judy Klemesrud, "Female Superheroes Get Star Roles in the Comics," p. A14.

¹⁶⁶ Judy Klemesrud, "Female Superheroes Get Star Roles in the Comics," p. A14.

¹⁶⁷ Pamela Brandt, "Comic Books Seek Female Readers," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1980, p. F16.

costume, but in a bathing-suit, readers get an exposed shot of the woman's rear. The Serpent Society women existed in this conflicting depiction of empowerment and objectification. This dichotomy is best summarized in a quote from a *New York Times* interview with Stan Lee. "When asked why Miss Walters (She-Hulk) wore pants in the first two issues of the comic, Mr. Lee smiled and said: 'Because pants tear best into the kind of skimpy costume Jennifer wears when she turns into the She-Hulk.'"¹⁶⁸ Why would comic creators draw these powerful women in such a sexualized way? The answer is simple and has remained unchanged for many decades in comic book history. In the words of a *Captain America* fan letter, "pretty women wearing not a lot sells comics, friends."¹⁶⁹

The concern of oversexualized superheroines was debated in fan circles. The second issue of the fanzine "AFTA" had a seven-page discourse about sexism in comics. Some argued that the characters were good, but their costumes were ridiculously revealing while others asserted that readers were the problem if all they saw was the superheroines revealing costume.¹⁷⁰ Esther De Dauw makes two points regarding the ethics of giving the heroine a sexualized costume. First, she reminds readers that women are almost never choosing the outfits for these female characters.¹⁷¹ If a woman is wearing a revealing outfit as a testament to her body confidence, she would have to choose it herself. Because white men primarily choose the outfits for female characters in comics, they become objects of pleasure, not symbols of empowerment. Second, De Dauw says that "there is something suspect about a society where women are surrounded by images of naked women and encouraged to dress provocatively to please men

¹⁶⁸ Judy Klemesrud, "Female Superheroes Get Star Roles in the Comics," p. A14.

¹⁶⁹ Mark Gruenwald et. al, "Reawakening," *Captain America* no. 354 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1989), 23.

¹⁷⁰ Jason Owen Black, "From Audience to Public: Comic Book Fanzines in the Seventies and Eighties," 44.

¹⁷¹ Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 72.

while claiming that they feel empowered by being (almost) naked.”¹⁷² An argument can be made that male characters are also victims of objectifying costumes. Carolyn Cocca quickly diffuses that argument, however with her statement that male superheroes “were drawn in an exaggeratedly muscular way. They were not, however, drawn scantily clad or with excessive attention to their sex organs, nor were they posed in ‘broke back’ fashion or in sexually submissive poses as their female counterparts often were.”¹⁷³ As much as men were objectified in comic art, women were objectified that much more because of the decisions of their creators.

The Serpent Society women were groundbreaking in showing several women harnessing their diverse talents. Although these women were villains and dressed in sexualizing outfits, the Society’s storyline engaged *Captain America* fans. Many expressed their love for the Serpent Society and their desire for the Society to finally encounter the star-spangled hero. For analysis purposes, these women also represent the impact of the Women’s Movement in comics. More female characters appeared with more exciting stories, but also in more sexualized ways.

Mme Hydra/Viper

The villain Mme. Hydra first appeared in *Captain America* comics in 1969. She is the first in a long line of female villains that vie for leadership roles in typically male-dominated villain organizations. She is as cruel as male villains, killing noncompliant henchmen and setting her mind on killing Captain America and taking over the world. In 1969, Mme. Hydra wears a revealing costume for the era, skin-tight and green with no coverage on her back. Although she leads a force of the evil organization Hydra, she is not evil by nature, but because of her tortured past. In *Captain America* #113, she laments that both her parents died in a revolution, and she

¹⁷² Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books*, 72.

¹⁷³ Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, 40.

grew up fighting for her survival through a life of crime.¹⁷⁴ Part of her face is also disfigured and she therefore struggles with her self-image.¹⁷⁵ Mme. Hydra took these tragedies and channeled them into her superb villainy, killing her way to the top of Hydra. Like all villains, her plan fails and a bomb explodes near her and she is not seen from again for several years.

Mme. Hydra reappears in 1974 and murders another villain called the Viper. She takes on the Viper's costume and name and adds poisonous fangs to her evil abilities. The change from Mme. Hydra to Viper is in line with demands of many feminist comics scholars. Female characters are often rebranded male characters that have their femininity identified in their name. Not only does the name constantly invite readers to compare the character to her male counterpart, but it also places her as secondary to the male hero or villain. With the name Mme. Hydra, Mme. Hydra would always be associated with Hydra, which she is not after 1969. Additionally, she would always be compared to the Red Skull, the founding leader of Hydra that was dead while Mme. Hydra was in charge. Now as Viper, however, she is a free agent of chaos. Although the name is taken from a male hero, she is the Viper for much longer. She asserts her authority as the Viper in two other ways. First, with the statement "you think my sex makes me soft... I am the hardest person you will ever encounter."¹⁷⁶ Second, by altering the costume to be more form-fitting and revealing. While both actions have their pitfalls, as mentioned earlier with the cliché feminist rhetoric and sexualized costumes, Viper is a character to put her money where her mouth is.

In 1989, Viper did just that. If her tough past was not enough to prove her seriousness as

¹⁷⁴ Stan Lee et. al, "The Strange Death of Captain America," *Captain America* no. 113 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1969), 3.

¹⁷⁵ Stan Lee et. al, "The Strange Death of Captain America," 4.

¹⁷⁶ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, "The Mark of Madness," *Captain America* no. 181 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1975), 5.

a villain, Viper stages a full-scale civil war within the Serpent Society and nearly succeeds in turning everyone in Washington D.C. into snakes. She is a self-proclaimed nihilist, which the *Captain America* creative team defines as “she believes in nothing, not liberty for the people, nothing - just the destruction of everything.”¹⁷⁷ Viper is a force to be reckoned with, very few villains have been able to pull off such elaborate schemes for as long as Viper has. Furthermore, she is special because she reappears in the comics. Most female villains are a one-and-done during this time, but Viper has several appearances and shows her brutal capabilities each time. One fan even praised her as “Captain America’s best villain after the Red Skull.”¹⁷⁸

Diamondback

Diamondback takes the tragic female villain story and puts a redemption spin on it. Like Viper, Diamondback grew up in a life of crime. She explains to Captain America that “I’m not so bad once you get to know me. I just had a very unhappy childhood.”¹⁷⁹ She looked up to her brother who was a criminal and later murdered, and thus was on a path of villainy. Debuting in 1985 with the Serpent Society, Diamondback is a villain whose talents are hand-to-hand combat and throwing acid-tipped diamonds. She wears a full-coverage pink bodysuit with black diamonds accentuating her figure. For a long stretch of issues, however, Diamondback wears a revealingly-cut leotard because she was working out. She does not take a few minutes to change into her costume despite having several opportunities to.

Diamondback fits the misunderstood bad girl trope perfectly. She constantly says things like “I’m really not a bad person, Cap. I just never had any good influences on my life” and promises that she would “go straight” for Cap.¹⁸⁰ However, she makes these statements while

¹⁷⁷ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “The Great Bear,” *Captain America* no. 353 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1989), 23.

¹⁷⁸ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Out of Commission,” 23.

¹⁷⁹ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Overkill,” *Captain America* no. 319 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1986), 12.

¹⁸⁰ Mark Gruenwald et. al, “Overkill,” 14.

flirting and posing seductively. She seems so set on reforming her ways, but never has the gumption to actually do so until she has Caps' approval. Certainly, making such a big change in one's life is daunting, but there is a stereotype that women need to be fixed by men and Diamondback plays into it. Fans respond with their opinions that Diamondback and Captain America should become a lasting couple. One fan writes "Tone down her come-ons... LET CAP 'REFORM' HER."¹⁸¹

Diamondback begins her long-run of appearances in the *Captain America* comics as a misunderstood villain in 1985, but the majority of her character development occurs outside the timeframe of this thesis. That being said, four years show a lot about this character and who she will become. She is a woman who holds her own, but for the wrong causes. She is incredibly seductive, flirting with many of the men around her despite having her heart set on Cap. Her costume accentuates her curves to further the seductive depiction. Diamondback is a victim of bad influences and needs morality like Captain America's to help her see the light. It is these "bad girls" that are a male reader's fantasy and have the potential to inspire women who have had traumatic experiences and struggled to do the right thing. However, Diamondback falls short of the latter message because so much of her identity revolves around pining for Captain America.

¹⁸¹ Mark Gruenwald et. al, "The Great Bear," 23.

The Forgotten Trio: The Three Black Women in *Captain America*

By virtue of having the identity of being both Black and a woman, Black women are often overlooked for their essential contributions to history and popular culture. Particularly in popular media, Black women are often excluded from stories because of their multiple identities. To be progressive, comics and other stories would add a character with a minority identity, but to not disrupt the status quo beyond what fans can handle, the character will often have only one underrepresented identity. In *Captain America* comics, the creative team included Black characters to show solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement, but these Black characters with speaking roles were almost entirely men. To prove awareness and support of the Women's Movement, *Captain America* creators included white women in featured roles. Including a Black woman in comics in the late 20th century would challenge writers to grapple with the multiple ways Black women experience discrimination. For these reasons, very few Black women had speaking roles in *Captain America* comics from 1968-1989. The three standout characters from this time period of the comic were the villain Nightshade, Leila Taylor, the activist and girlfriend of the Falcon, and Sarah Wilson, the Falcon's sister.

The visual and narrative depictions of Black women vary in their acknowledgement of Black and female identities and how they impact a Black woman's experiences. According to Professor Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, in her book *Black Women in Sequence*, argues that Black female characters fall on a spectrum of reaffirming American ideals of patriotism and freedom without calling attention to their race, also known as colorblindness, and challenging societal structures.¹⁸² Additionally, Black women in comics often affirm stereotyped categories of "tragic

¹⁸² Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2016), 16.

mulatto, sexual siren, masculine matriarch, vindictive femme fatale, and asexual mammy figures that have informed the image of black women on television and film for decades,” as Professor Nama explains in his book *Super Black*.¹⁸³ Another stereotype of Black women, which is essential to analyzing *Captain America* comics, is the Angry Black Woman. According to Janice Gassam Asare in her article “Overcoming the Angry Black Woman Stereotype,” this stereotype characterizes black women as bad-tempered, hostile and overly aggressive.¹⁸⁴ Through navigating these stereotypes and ideologies of both the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements, Whaley argues that “comic book writers have used illustrations of and ideologies about the Black female body to signify the fetish, fear, and fabrication of” Black women.¹⁸⁵ In *Captain America* comics, Black women were objectified more than white women and left out of the main plot and action. They also questioned racial and gender norms but were characterized as irrational and unfortunately lost their potential to educate and inspire readers.

Nightshade

The villain Nightshade appeared twice in the *Captain America* comics. She debuted in 1973 in *Captain America* #164. Although Nightshade breaks barriers by being the first and only Black woman villain in *Captain America* from 1969-1989, her portrayal is riddled with sexualization and the fear of women’s sexual power. Furthermore, her attempts to call out and oppose unjust systems of oppression are subverted through her childish characterization. Her costume was a black leather bikini with a holster and thigh-high boots. Of all the female villains in *Captain America* from 1968-1989, Nightshade had one of the most revealing outfits. To make

¹⁸³ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, 99.

¹⁸⁴ Janice Gassam Asare, “Overcoming the Angry Black Woman Stereotype,” *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, May 31, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2019/05/31/overcoming-the-angry-black-woman-stereotype/?sh=50fb02e61fce>.

¹⁸⁵ Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*, 96.

her sexualization more jarring, she debuted with this costume several years before the other female characters wore clothing remotely as revealing. Given the centuries-long history of exploiting the Black female body through slavery and assault, drawing Nightshade in such a sexualizing outfit perpetuates the exploitation of Black female bodies. Furthermore, Nightshade's visual portrayal adds to the stereotype of fetishising people of color because they are "exotic." *Captain America* creators double down on Nightshade's sexualization with her ability to control humans. In her 1973 appearance, she controlled werewolves and in her 1975 appearance she hypnotized men. Especially in her 1973 appearance, her manipulation had a sexual connotation to it as she referred to her werewolves as "my darlings."

Whatever respect and power Nightshade could have commanded as a villain is subverted through her characterization as childish. In her 1973 debut, Captain America comments that she is "like a little girl posing, playing grownup."¹⁸⁶ This characterization is further reinforced through her continuous giggling and emotional outburst when her plan fails. Because the readers are told to dismiss Nightshade as childish, her continuous assertions that although the odds are stacked against her, she will persevere lose their resonance. Although she is the primary villain of *Captain America* #164, the reader learns that she works for another villain, but plans to overthrow him. As her plan unravels and she loses her superior's trust, Nightshade makes a last-ditch effort to take on the Shield agents that had arrived on the scene. When she realizes she's fighting a losing battle, she escapes with her werewolves to a cliff and says "the world wants to grind us down... it put me in a prison of hopelessness... we can never be free! The world dooms people like us to failure before we begin" and jumps.¹⁸⁷ Any reader aware of the Civil Rights

¹⁸⁶ Steve Englehart and Alan Weiss, "Queen of the Werewolves," *Captain America* no. 164 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1973), 9.

¹⁸⁷ Steve Englehart and Alan Weiss, "Queen of the Werewolves," 18.

Movement can easily identify the double meaning of Nightshade's words. She identifies and refuses to comply with the discriminatory system she lives in, but because the *Captain America* writers characterized her as childish, her statement comes off as one of a psychopath rather than a self-aware woman. Whaley argues that Nightshade's situation is a trend among Black female characters. She says that Black women in comics like Nightshade "repeatedly [question their] marginalization and the lack of acknowledgement of her potential... but because her questioning remains within the realm of irrational rhetoric, it is easy to dismiss [their] claims as grandiose and delusional."¹⁸⁸

Nightshade returns two years later in *Captain America* #190 and attempts to take over the Shield base. She sports the same revealing costume and reveals that she faked her death and killed her superior. She then proceeds to make all the men at Shield submit to her through weaponizing her sexuality. Thanks to a revealing costume and several seductive poses, Nightshade puts almost everyone at the Shield base under her control. The only exception is Contessa Fontaine, the only woman at the base, who foils Nightshade's plan. Nightshade's weaponization of her sexuality for evil resembles the anxiety of many Americans in response to the sexual liberation of the Women's Movement. Activists in the Women's Movement combatted the objectification of women, the pervasive crimes of harassment, assault, and rape, and promoted the use of contraception. These ideals stemmed from the belief that a woman's body was her own to control, not someone else's. The backlash on these issues was often rooted in the longstanding fear of female sexuality and its supposed power to corrupt men. With a woman like Nightshade drawn in such a revealing outfit and using her exposed body to take over a Shield base, the fear of women weaponizing their liberated bodies to destroy men is clear.

¹⁸⁸ Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*, 101.

Leila Taylor

Leila Taylor is the primary Black female character in the *Captain America* comics from 1969-1989. She first appeared in 1971 in *Captain America* #139 and her final appearance was in 1983, in *Captain America* #278. She embodies the stereotypes of Black Power and the Angry Black Woman but transforms into a more traditional whimpering girlfriend in the late 1970s. However, her questioning of Falcon's heroics motivates him to be an independent hero and her regular appearances communicate that Black women can also be girlfriends of heroes and on the front lines of the action. It is rare for the Black partner of a white hero to be independent like the Falcon, let alone have a romantic arc like he has with Taylor. Their early conversations, however, are riddled with objectifying banter. Falcon, also known as Sam Wilson, calls Taylor a "centerfold pinup" and on the next page says, "one thing I dig is gettin' told off by a dynamite doll."¹⁸⁹ Taylor does not permit such objectification, and responds with "you can call me never."¹⁹⁰

Taylor's dialogue in general is packed with slang. Frances Gateward and John Jennings in *The Blacker the Ink* sum up the use of slang during this time period well. They argue that it is "an attempt of a white writer to create authentic street slang for a character that was born and raised in a space where he had likely never visited."¹⁹¹ Taylor constantly refers to white people as "honks" and with stereotypical African American grammar such as her sarcastic statement in the 1971 *Captain America* #143 "ah done come to collect ma welfare check."¹⁹² What makes her dialogue additionally interesting is the fact that the Comics Code Authority banned slang in its

¹⁸⁹ Stan Lee and John Romita, "The Badge and the Betrayal," *Captain America* no. 139 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1968), 5, 6.

¹⁹⁰ Stan Lee and John Romita, "The Badge and the Betrayal," 6.

¹⁹¹ Frances Gateward and John Jennings, *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, 1.

¹⁹² Stan Lee, Gary Friedrich, and John Romita, "Power to the People," 34.

early regulations. Jordan Raphael, in his dissertation, explains that the Comics Code Authority “[banned] slang words since there was a public feeling that comic books should feature good grammar so that the medium could have some educational value.”¹⁹³ The Regulations officially relaxed in 1971, allowing Marvel and other publishers to include slang.¹⁹⁴ In *Captain America* comics, Black characters, especially Taylor, used slang. Furthermore, Taylor talked in riddles and analogies that appeared to be an attempt to increase her cool factor, but ultimately played into the prejudice of Black men and women being unintelligent and unrefined.

Most of Taylor’s appearances involved her protesting racial and gender discrimination. Her polarizing views opened dialogues with Sam Wilson about what it means to uplift the Black community. She embodies the distorted perception of Black Power - complete distrust of the government, institutions, and white people - while Wilson is the personification of Martin Luther King’s ideals - believing that change can be made working within the system. The early conversations begin with Taylor showing up at Wilson’s Social Work office to argue with him. In *Captain America* #139, Taylor claims that “our people need heroes, man not handouts” while Wilson argues that you can be a hero when you have a stable source of food and income.¹⁹⁵ The next page follows Wilson as he walks through Harlem and people praise him for his help. Wilson believes that everyone fights “in [their] own special way.”¹⁹⁶ His thoughts explain his view further, stating “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 for some of us to cool things down so we can protect

¹⁹³ Jordan Philip Raphael, “Four-Color Marvels: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the Development of Comic-Book Fandom” 89.

¹⁹⁴ Jordan Philip Raphael, “Four-Color Marvels: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the Development of Comic-Book Fandom,” 115.

¹⁹⁵ Stan Lee and John Romita, “The Badge and the Betrayal,” 6.

¹⁹⁶ Stan Lee and John Romita, “The Badge and the Betrayal,” 7.

the rights we been fightin' for."¹⁹⁷ While the first half of this statement affirms his commitment to fighting injustice, the second half is a response to the rise of Black Power and white anxiety about it. Several American leaders, the media, and Civil Rights Movement figureheads addressed Black Power advocates, asking them to be content with the Civil Rights they had gained and to not stir the pot too much. What these people, including the *Captain America* creators, did not acknowledge was that the institutional systems of racism such as segregating real estate and police brutality were pervasive and robbed Black men and women of basic rights like safety and shelter.

Taylor embodies the pervasive white stereotype of Black Power. In addition to her distrust of institutions and white people, she wears her hair in the afro style which Blair Davis explains as "a fashion statement" and "a form of political expression in the 1970s" associated with Black Power and the slogan "Black is beautiful."¹⁹⁸ Taylor also has a generally short temper, which perpetuates the Angry Black Woman stereotype and the fear white people had that Black people would riot at any moment. Earlier examples of Taylor's temper occur in the 1971 issue #142 when she barges into a room announcing a rumor that Captain America had beat a local Reverend (which was untrue) and declaring "if we find out that's true, this slum's gonna burn, baby."¹⁹⁹ Later, in the 1975 issue #188, she demands to see Falcon in the hospital. The attendants order her to leave, claiming they are sick of her "verbal abuse."²⁰⁰ Carolyn Cocca explains that "calling out her anger marks perhaps her feminism or perhaps her blackness or their

¹⁹⁷ Stan Lee and John Romita, "The Badge and the Betrayal," 7.

¹⁹⁸ Frances Gateward et. al, "Bare Chests, Silver Tiaras, and Removable Afros," in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, 203.

¹⁹⁹ Gary Friedrich and John Romita, "And in the End," *Captain America* no. 142 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1971), 11.

²⁰⁰ John Warner and Sal Buscema, "The Assault of the Alchemoid," *Captain America* no. 188 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1975), 6.

intersection, as the stereotype of the ‘angry black woman.’”²⁰¹ The perception of Black women as short tempered, according to Janice Gassam Asare, can be traced as far back as “the 1950s radio show Amos ‘n’ Andy, which depicted black women as sassy and domineering” and persists in the commentary on and marginalization of Black women today.²⁰²

The Black Panther Party was the most prominent Black Power organization when Leila first appeared in 1971, and consequently, the Panthers were misunderstood and bore the weight of negative stereotyping as “angry.” In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the BPP in Oakland, CA on a 10 Point Platform that took on a whole host of issues that plagued the Black community. The Panthers gained publicity from their stance on police brutality as they organized armed patrols that asserted the legal rights of Black people to own guns and to not be subject to police harassment. Sharply dressed Black men carrying guns and asserting their rights stirred nationwide debate about the place of violence in the Civil Rights Movement. What got lost in the press coverage, however, was the community survival programs the Panthers organized, including the free breakfast program, the community school, and escorts for the elderly, all of which were running by 1971, when most of the *Captain America* comics addressing Black Power were published.²⁰³ Certainly, the BPP had negative opinions towards the police and other American institutions because of the oppression they experienced. They also unapologetically held communist ideals during the Cold War. However, the Panthers worked with white people, unlike other advocates of Black Power.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, the Party, according to historian Robyn

²⁰¹ Carolyn Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, 206.

²⁰² Janice Gassam Asare, “Overcoming the Angry Black Woman Stereotype,” <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2019/05/31/overcoming-the-angry-black-woman-stereotype/?sh=50fb02e61fce>.

²⁰³ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 117.

²⁰⁴ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, 78.

Spencer in her book *The Revolution has Come*, “did not call for the overthrow of the government but instead sought to make the government antiracist and responsive to black citizens.”²⁰⁵

Unfortunately, the public, specifically white people, seemed to only latch onto the “anger” of the BPP, resulting in the “angry black man,” or in Leila Taylor’s case, “angry black woman” stereotype that Black Power advocates in *Captain America*, mainly Taylor, embodied.

As much as Taylor personified the Black Power stereotypes and fears, she asserted her independence as a female activist and matured to hold less extremist views. Shortly after their debate in issue #139, Sam Wilson takes Taylor with him as he helps people in the Harlem community with going to school and getting a job. When Falcon is captured in the 1972 issue #154, she convinces the people in Harlem to rescue him. Not one to be left on the sidelines, she goes with the men to break into the warehouse and free the Falcon. At this point, she develops an attraction to the Falcon because he is a fighter for the Black community she can get behind, but she refuses to date Sam Wilson (his secret identity) because of their conflicting ideals. She begins to nurse the Falcon when he is injured and trusts him to be his own person, even if she does not agree with his partnership with Captain America. The turning point for Taylor from being aggressive toward the partnership to being understanding is in the 1973 *Captain America* #161, when Cap gives his monologue about how he and Falcon are meant to be partners. Taylor threatens to end her relationship with Falcon after Cap’s statement, but Falcon says “I’m trying to help all people- not just ours!” and that she cannot be the only one that is right.²⁰⁶ She voices her discontent with the situation, but chooses to accept it and be the Falcon’s girlfriend.

Taylor’s general temperament mellows after an incident where she and Falcon both are

²⁰⁵ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, 32.

²⁰⁶ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “If He Loseth His Soul,” 10.

possessed. After a long recovery period, Taylor leaves the hospital a more positive and understanding girlfriend. She and Falcon go on double dates with Captain America and Sharon Carter. While Sharon fights with Cap about his heroic lifestyle, Taylor simply says “I’ll take him as he is.”²⁰⁷ Taylor’s characteristic “anger” is eliminated and she is a more nuanced activist, not concerned with fighting every point and seeking instead to support Falcon in all his endeavors, including running for Congress. This shift occurred in 1977, nine years after Martin Luther King Jr. had died and as the Black Panther Party was plummeting in membership and coverage. It allowed for her to be relatable across racial and gender lines because her entire identity was not overtly rooted in extreme activism. She cared for people through her actions when she tended to a wounded Falcon or an ill Sharon and with emotional availability as she expressed sympathy for Cap and Sharon’s relationship troubles. On the other hand, this shift also made her dangerously close to a white character in blackface. This is a common critique of the Black female X-Men leader Storm, as Kenneth Ghee argues these Black characters are “represented as black in color only while operating in all-white cultural context or world view.”²⁰⁸ Taylor does not display activism on behalf of her race after 1977, but she does for her gender by developing a sisterhood with Sharon and refusing to sit and do nothing. She also is not completely isolated from a Black community thanks to her relationship with Falcon and work with Sarah Wilson on Falcon’s Congressional campaign. Overall, Taylor’s portrayal in the *Captain America* comics perpetuated stereotypes of Black women while showing a strong character who does not tolerate injustice.

²⁰⁷ Jack Kirby, “Face to Face with the Swine,” *Captain America* no. 206 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1977), 6.

²⁰⁸ Sheena C. Howard, Ronald L. Jackson, and Kenneth Ghee, ““Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?” A Critical Analysis of the Mythological and Cultural Significance of Black Superheroes,” in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 223-238, 232.

Sarah Wilson

Sarah Wilson, the sister of Sam Wilson/the Falcon, made only a handful of appearances in the *Captain America* comics. Sarah's primary identity is that of a caring mother of two teenage boys. Because her husband is not around, Sam offers to be a role model for the boys and the comics mainly follow him trying to keep the boys from getting involved with crime. Unfortunately, Sarah is sidelined when it comes to the parenting of her own children. While there is limited space in comic issues, it would make sense to devote a panel or two to show her feelings about her sons getting involved in gangs as they do for Sam. Given that the gang her eldest son was involved with held extremist Black Power ideals, it would have been intriguing to see Sarah's perspective as a Black mother in Harlem as it compared to Sam's and Taylor's. Instead, Sarah's opinions are left to the reader's imagination.

Most Sarah's appearances are during the "Snapping" series when Sam is campaigning for Congress. She works alongside Taylor and the white female campaign manager, Carol Davis, to help Sam get elected. In this three-part series, Sam struggles with managing his double identity of the criminal "Snap" and the upstanding social worker, Sam. When he storms off to figure things out, Taylor and Davis convince Sarah to give the backstory on how "Snap" came to be. Reluctantly, Sarah explains how Sam watched his preacher father be murdered while breaking up a gang fight. In the wake of his father's death, Sam assumes his father's role in uplifting his community with love and service. A few years later, Sam and Sarah watched a mugger shoot their mother, and then Sam "snapped."²⁰⁹ Although Sarah is adamant that Sam was never "Snap," she explains that Sam's personality changed.²¹⁰ He was more hostile, he and Sarah

²⁰⁹ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "Snapping Part 2," 3.

²¹⁰ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "Snapping Part 1," *Captain America* no. 276 (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1983), 4.

fought often, and then he moved away. The series reveals that Sam had lost his faith in making change through service because in his mind, all that did was get his mother killed. With the help of Reverend Garcia, Sam reconciles with his criminal identity and heals the emotional wounds of losing both his parents so violently.

Sam's story closely follows the arc of the Civil Rights Movement as it is traditionally told. The Movement narrative begins with *Brown v. Board*, follows Martin Luther King's civil disobedience that shocked the nation, notes the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, and portrays a downward spiral after 1965 into riots and Black Power. Sam shares the humanitarian nature that King is known for, which is closely tied with religion for both of them - given King's preacher background and Sam's father's religious leadership. When Sam witnesses his mother's murder, he loses faith in the system and creating a better life through service and turns to crime. The typical narrative of the Civil Rights Movement portrays a similar disillusionment with nonviolence and the slow-moving legislative gains. However, Black Power in its origins sought to uplift the Black community through pride and involvement in local politics. Certainly, many activists were disillusioned with the lack of tangible change brought about through nonviolent activism. While the national laws enfranchised countless Black men and women and removed overt forms of segregation, it did not eliminate institutional racism. Black and white children could legally attend school together, but with segregating real estate practices, redrawing of school districts, and white flight to private schools, true integration did not happen in most places. These structural issues existed in the job market and other areas of society. Most white Americans, including political leaders and the media, did not understand these injustices and instead perceived Black Power as angry rioting and reverse racism. The *Captain America*

creators villainized Sam Wilson's lack of faith in the system rather than show its complexity and had him return to the optimistic citizen readers knew him to be.

The comics do not consider how Sarah Wilson felt about these traumatic events. She too lost her father and watched her mother die, yet she remained committed to her upstanding character. Instead, the comics suggest that Sarah sat and watched as all these things, her parents' deaths, and her brother's mental breakdown, happened around her. She tells the story as a mother would teach her child about the Civil Rights Movement as if she had no part in it. The truth is that Black women were foundational to the success of all the leading activist groups in the Civil Rights Movement. Black women did not sit and let the men combat racism, they stepped up. Ella Baker was the visionary veteran who brought together the young activists that formed the SNCC. When SNCC organized voter registration in Mississippi, women stepped up and tapped into their social networks to support SNCC however they could. Vera Pigeon was a mother, self-employed beautician, and locally renowned organizer for the NAACP, particularly with Youth Councils in Mississippi.²¹¹ In the Black Panther Party, historian Robyn Spencer argues that women revived the organization and transformed its focus to community outreach.²¹² Women like Kathleen Cleaver took the lead when co-founder Huey Newton was in prison, organizing the Party's activism and "Free Huey" campaign.

For many of the Black women in the Civil Rights Movement, the fights against racism and sexism were not mutually exclusive. As Black women, they experienced what Francis Beal called "Double Jeopardy," the discrimination of being Black and a woman, respectively, and the

²¹¹ Hamlin Françoise N., *Crossroads at Clarksdale the Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 5.

²¹² Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, 4.

combined struggles of being both at the same time.²¹³ Black women were also in the best position to propose solutions that would address both racism and sexism so that all may flourish in society. Black women are rarely highlighted in discussions about the Civil Rights or Women's Movements because they experienced harsh sexism in the Civil Rights Movement, and their unique feminist activism went unnoticed until recent years. Within the Civil Rights Movement, the SCLC, Martin Luther King's organization, is known for its sexism. Before leaving to support SNCC, Ella Baker was the only woman in leadership for SCLC, and often spoke of her struggles with being ignored and assigned secretarial tasks because of her gender. Additionally, the Black Panther Party struggled with sexism. Although the organization's platform did not condone sexism, and Newton spoke in support of the Women's Movement, female members experienced several acts of discrimination such as being assigned chores of cooking and cleaning.²¹⁴ These women did not passively submit to the discrimination, but the media at the time did not recognize the hard work and struggles of these Black women.

Within the Women's Movement, Benita Roth details the feminist activism of Black women and why it was misunderstood for so long in her article "Second Wave Black Feminism in the African Diaspora." She argues that Black women had been fighting for feminist ideals within the Civil Rights Movement, and formed their own groups while prominent white women organizations like NOW captivated the nation's attention.²¹⁵ Roth explains that many Black women went this route because "some felt white feminists were insensitive to the economic

²¹³ Frances M. Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." *Meridians* 8, no. 2 (2008): pp. 166–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338758>, 166.

²¹⁴ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, 95, 96, 98.

²¹⁵ Benita Roth, "Second Wave Black Feminism in the African Diaspora: News from New Scholarship," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 58 (2003): pp. 46-58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2003.9674493>, 47.

survival issues that concerned Black communities; some felt white feminists were personally racist; some felt that they were accomplishing good by working in their in community organisations; and others felt that what was needed was a Black feminist movement.”²¹⁶

Although some Black women joined predominantly white organizations, their activism was not traditionally recognized in the Women’s Movement narrative until later in the time frame. Roth points out that recent scholarship indicates the opposite, Black women were just as bold, if not ahead of their time because they intersected the causes of Black and female justice.

Leila Taylor, being the featured Black woman in the *Captain America* comics during the two major movements, is the main symbol of intersectionality. She fights against racism, albeit within a stereotype of Black Power, and sexism, never accepting any unwelcome advances from Sam Wilson or other men. Unfortunately, Sarah Wilson did not join Taylor in showing the multiple possibilities of intersectional activism. As a mother, Sarah had the potential to show another side of Black womanhood that was not as short-tempered but did not stand for injustice. Instead, Sarah tells the stories of the injustice that happened around her and sits by while her brother Sam handles her son getting into a life of crime.

²¹⁶ Benita Roth, “Second Wave Black Feminism in the African Diaspora: News from New Scholarship,” 48.

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