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The Falcon and the Winter Soldier's Reimagining of (Captain) America

This paper investigates the implications of the most recent iteration of Captain America's character in the Disney+ series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. The interest in this series is motivated by the assumption that pop culture can mediate geopolitical discourses about the nation's self-representation as an "imagined community."[1] Indeed, as World War II OWI director Elmer Davis argued, "The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized."[2] Similarly, Jason Dittmer and Daniel Bos observed how pop culture is "linked to identity – that of the people who produce it, the people who consume it, and the people who use it to their agendas. It is through popular culture (at least in part) that we decide who we are, who we want to be, and how we want people to understand us."[3] Hence, to fully understand the geopolitical agenda that motivates the contemporary reimagining of Captain America, one should take into consideration: 1) the origins of the character; 2) its intrinsic symbolic values; 3) its multiple projections (Captain America as a palimpsest) within and outside national borders; 4) the role of 'race' in the imagining of the nation, 5) the limits of a nationalist/liberal agenda; 6) the character's belonging to the contemporary "convergent culture;"[4] and 7) the interrelation between this mode of telling and old propaganda models.[5]

What does Captain America stand for?

The origins of Steve Rogers are first established by Joe Simon e Jack Kirby in *Captain America #1* (1941), and later revised and expanded by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in *Captain America #109* (1968), one of the first retcons of the character's origins. Horrified by the Nazi's ideology, Rogers attempts to enlist but is rejected as 4-F due to his frail body. Overhearing Rogers' resolution and earnest plea to fight for his

1 Anderson 1996 [1986].
2 Quoted in Koppes/Black 1987,64.
3 Dittmer/Bos 2019, 25.
4 Jenkins 2006.
5 Ellul 1962; Bernays 1928.

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country, General Phillips offers the young man the opportunity to become a test subject for an enhancing experiment, receiving a special serum made by Dr. Reinstein (retroactively changed to the scientist Erskine). The serum is a success and transforms Steve Rogers into a human being with peak strength, agility, stamina, and intelligence. A Nazi spy, who observed the experiment, murders the doctor, who dies without writing the Super-Soldier formula to paper, leaving Rogers the sole beneficiary.

On the cover of *Captain America* #1, which marks the title hero's debut, Steve Rogers punches Hitler in the face before the US intervention in what was considered a European conflict.[6] The comic was printed ten months before Pearl Harbor and promoted an interventionist stance, still unpopular at the time. Initially, *Captain America*'s political commitment was not well received by everybody: isolationists groups and Nazi sympathizers opposed its interventionist message,[7] and tried to harass its creators,[8] pushing New York's mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, to offer them protection.[9] Hence, comics became patriotic not only because of consumer demand, but also because these themes were encouraged by the institutions. Yet, Captain America was not commissioned by propagandists, but the creation of private citizens (both authors were Jews and tried to create a sense of urgency through the pages of their comics). *Captain America* mythologized the war, turned Hitler into a comic book character, and moralized the war narrative, describing it through biblical resonances, consolidating *de facto* the "good war narrative," which portrayed America as the champion of the free world. As Jewett and Lawrence observe, "as a typical embodiment of the American civil religion, offering regeneration of a helpless democratic society by selfless superheroism, Captain America stands squarely within [...] the biblical paradigms employed in the Indian captivity narratives."[10] They also maintain that the character embodies the tradition of "zealous nationalism," an idea that goes back to America's (puritan) origins and attributes the nation the role of redeeming the world by destroying its enemy. Captain America combines strength with moral principle, symbolizing America's ambition to be the "city set upon a hill," and the nation's military crusading to achieve that goal. Consequently, Captain America's ideas about foreign policy and war culture fall under the "Strict Father"[11] morality, based on the conceptual metaphor of

6 Simon and Kirby 1941 [2005].
7 Malson/Kantor 2013, 75.
8 Simon in Wright 2001,44.
9 Evanier 2008, 55.
10 Jewett/Lawrence 2004, 35.
11 Lakoff 1996.

Moral Strength, used by conservatives,[12] according to which, if there is to be a moral order in the world, American values must be protected and spread throughout the globe. Therefore, as Dittmer discusses, "superheroes are co-constitutive elements of both American identity and the U.S. government's foreign policy practices"[13] as they "serve as a crucial resource for legitimating, contesting, and reworking states' foreign policies."[14]

Steve Rogers was not the first superhero to fight against the Axis, yet he is the most popular comic character to embody American values through his red, white, and blue costume, and a shield of stars and stripes. Whereas heroes during the Great Depression served as metaphors to talk about the nation and its myths (e. g., Superman perpetuated the "ethnic narrative,"[15] reminding America about its formation through consent[16]), Steve Rogers was (and still is) not just a metaphor standing for the nation, but its embodiment, protecting its borders and values. Such identification of the character with the nation continued even after the end of WWII, as he managed to remain in America's and international public consciousness through its constant revocations and reinventions.[17] *Captain America* helped consolidate, in its readers, preconceived geopolitical notions and nationalist views of the world, which were (and are) often presented as unproblematic and commonsensical. These comics directed what consumers could see and provided them with linear interpretative patterns that simplified complex international crises. However, as much as Steve embodied and defended the American Dream, in time, he grew aware that the American reality did not often hold up to its ideals.

In at least three storylines this contrast is explicated. The first one is the mid-1970s, *Captain America and the Falcon*[18] storyline "Secret Empire"[19] which confronted a Watergate-type scandal to question the morality of the US government,[20] investigating simultaneously the existence of a corrupted branch of the government (a Neo-Nazi even infiltrated the Oval Office!), and the disillusioning effect of such revelation on Captain America, who started to doubt, for the first time,

12 The use of conceptual metaphors aims to inscribe the character into preexisting paradigms (or prototypes) to make his action seem commonsensical.

13 Dittmer 2013, 2.

14 Dittmer 2013, 2.

15 Klotz 2009.

16 Sollors 1986.

17 Hassler-Forest 2011; Murray 2011.

18 At the time, the character of Falcon was introduced to acknowledge the friction between the American Dream and 1960s-1970 revendications, problematizing the place African American identity occupied in the hegemonic narration of the nation.

19 Englehart/Friedrich 1973–1975.

20 Ahmed 2012.

his adamant beliefs in an idealized America. Traumatized by the realization that, in America, political corruption extended to the heights of the presidency, Steve Rogers resigned from being a staple of the nation, and assumed the identity of Nomad, a codename still rooted in national lore, which allowed him to embody 'dissent' and 'the errand into the wilderness,' that are foundational myths, that demand respect for private conscience, that go back to the Jeremiad tradition. This storyline also drew a clear distinction between the nation (the 'We the people' Steve represented) and the government through the voice of Peggy Carter (Rogers' World War II love interest), who reassured Steve: "we've had scandals, but we've exposed them—publicly—and gotten back on the right track!"[21] According to the comic, "the people" have the ability and duty to correct the flaws in the system, and Steve Rogers' role is to protect democracy by guiding the Americans thanks to his moral compass. His determination to protect the American people would later convince him to resume his 'Captain' identity. This storyline represented a metamorphosis for Captain America, who moved away from his soldier roots, as he no longer abided by the government but his conscience. He resigned from his role without abdicating his duty as a superhero. This dramatic choice aimed to signal the presence of a fracture within American society, and mirrored the growing disaffection of the citizens towards the institution that represented them: the Civil Rights, Anti-war, and feminist movements challenged the monolithic narrative of the nation, and the Watergate scandals questioned its morality.

The ability of private citizens to oppose a regulation deemed unjust is further developed in the comic crossover event *Civil War*.[22] This story shares key resemblances to the political events and debates that took place in America after 9/11. In the small town of Stamford, some superheroes and villains cause a blast that kills 600 civilians. Reacting to the event, the government introduces a Registration Act that asks superheroes to register their special abilities and their secret identities with the authorities, forcing them to be part of a centrally controlled security organization overseen by the U.S. government. Inevitably, the enactment of this law divides the 'superhero community' into two factions: one (guided by Iron Man, the pragmatic hero) supports the government's decision, and the other (guided by Captain America, the WWII champion) defies the rules, believing that national safety should not be held in contrast to individual liberties.

Finally, the 2017 *Secret Empire*[23] questioned America's identity in the aftermath of Trump's election. In this storyline, Steve Roger's personality is altered

21 Englehart/Friedrich 1974, #176, 12.
22 Millar/McNiven 2006 – 2007.
23 Spencer/Sorrentino, 2017.

by the Cosmic Cube, a Deus ex machina device, that turns him into a secret Hydra agent (the comic's version of the Nazis). Symbolically, the storyline ends with the original Captain America fighting against his Nazi *doppelgänger* created by the Cube, implicitly asking the reader which Captain represents the real America. This storyline was published in a historical moment in which prominent figures of the populist right (including Donald Trump) revived America First's brand of rhetoric, which originated with Charles A. Lindbergh, an anti-Semitic and Nazi sympathizer politically active in the 1940s. Needless to say, the echoes of this memory casts shadows on the good war narrative, popularized (also) by Captain America, as the dichotomic opposition of good Americans fighting evil Nazis Germans is, to say the least, complicated.

Interestingly, the three storylines hitherto discussed emerged when America's public opinion was polarized and torn: the aftermath of the Vietnam War, America's interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Trump's election (whose presidency would end with a mob of his supporters attacking the Capitol to protest the result of the vote). Thus, Captain America's continuous pledge to serve the American people, an abstract and never-defined entity, and not the government, is meant to reconcile existing fractures in the social fabric by restoring a sense of unity through his persona.

Captain America as a palimpsest

According to Linda Hutcheon, adaptations can be seen as: a) a "transcoding" that involves a shift of medium or genre; b) a process of creation that involves both (re-) interpretation and then (re)creation; c) a form of intertextuality, as they function as palimpsests, making our memory of other works resonate through repetition with variation.[24] Hence, the analysis of an adaptation generates questions about the authorial intention and rhetorical exigence. These questions are particularly relevant for a character, like Captain America, who goes through a continuous cultural restyling (encompassing retcons, adaptations across different media, new identities for Steve Rogers, the passage of the mantle to different characters, but also parodies, and memes) that aims to make a political statement: each reiteration of 'Cap', its origin story, and his legacy betrays a different vision of America, its present, its past, and its future projections.[25]

24 Hutcheon/O'Flynn 2013, 92 – 94.

25 Some of the reflections of this section build upon Dittmer's seminal analysis of Captain America, updating it.

For instance, rip-off characters like the supervillain Nuke[26] (a crazed Vietnam veteran with an American flag carved into his face) and the ambiguous US Agent[27] (a star-spangled antihero who does not hesitate to recur to violence to achieve his goals) are meant to show different shades of patriotism and nationalism when contrasted to the original Captain America.[28] Through this contrast, it appears clear to the reader how patriotism can be declined into different forms, that go from the banal exhibition, which aims to remind citizens of their national affiliations, to aggressive and ethnocentric manifestations, which betray revanchist or supremacist attitudes. Nuke and US Agent appeared after the Vietnam War, America's first military loss, and their ruthlessness represents a nation committed to achieving its goals by any means, implicitly echoing the body count tactics, as soldiers were no longer evaluated according to their morality, but their performance, their ability to 'get the job done.'

The criticism towards the nationalist values embodied by Captain America is further advanced by parodies,[29] among which Will Shetterly and Vince Stone's *Captain Confederacy*.[30] Indeed, discussing the origin of his character, Shetterly stated: "I started talking with my wife about who Captain America would be if the South had won. At the time, I thought it was just a funny idea, but eventually I realized it was an opportunity to write about what happens when patriotism and responsibility clash."[31] Captain Confederacy is set in an alternate world in which the Confederacy has successfully defended its lands and established its nation. Consequently, the United States is divided into eight States. The protagonist starts as a propaganda tool used by the Confederate States of America to maintain the status quo that casts Black citizens as distinctly second-class. However, he soon becomes aware of the injustices perpetrated by the country, and ends up trying to change it, advocating for the recognition of equal rights to all citizens. Whereas the first series still puts the primary focus on a White man trying to be a rescuer of a minority group, the story progressively allows a female Black character (Ms. Dixie) to take the lead (and mantle). The author offers some interesting insights on national symbolism as he argues that: "No flag should be banned. Make symbols taboo, and you

26 Miller/Mazzucchelli, 1987.

27 Gruenwald/Neary 1986.

28 For a further discussion on Captain America's uncanny doubles see Curtis 2019.

29 Garth Ennis' Homelander and Soldier Boy characters in *The Boys* can also be considered parodies, as they embody a grotesque version of the nationalist superhero, not driven by noble principles, but by adolescent and visceral impulses, like anger, lust, and greed.

30 Shetterly/Stone 1986–1987; 1991–1992.

31 "Captain Confederacy" full text at https://crustymud.paradoxcomics.com/?p=1241 (last access: 15 April 2021).

give them power. The way to weaken symbols is to subvert them. That was my intention when I wrote Captain Confederacy."[32] By playing with the flag and US history, Shetterly and Stone remind the reader that America's freedom has been created at the expense of minority and marginalized groups.

To correct this lack of representation, some contemporary adaptations of this palimpsest revisit the "body politics,"[33] the metaphorical representation of a nation through embodied images, embedded in the Steve Roger persona, which reflects prevailing gender, racial, and other cultural norms. The codification of Steve Rogers as a muscular, blue-eyed, blond-haired, White, heterosexual man replicated the image that America wanted to give about itself, and recurred to a thoughtful mixing of the vitality and heroism (codified as White) showed by US recruitment posters, and the strength and athleticism celebrated by the emerging commercial culture. Given the symbolic value of Captain America's body, recent reiterations saw the passing of the title to a diverse roster, including Black (e.g., Sam Wilson and Isaiah Bradley[34]), LGBT (e.g., Aaron Fischer[35]), and interracial (e.g.. Danielle Cage[36]) characters. The possibility (and implications) of having a non-White Captain has also been explored outside Marvel. In the short comic "Citizen," created by Greg Pak and Bernard Chang, featured in the anthology *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology*,[37] the president of the United States (Barack Obama) puts Citizen (an Asian Captain America rip-off) off his hibernation to protect the nation from Nazi gremlins. This solution allows the comic to comment on race and representation (in the institutions but also in pop culture), reminding the reader that a portion of American society did not accept a Black president.[38] The codename "Citizen" is also controversial as for a long time Asian immigrants were barred from naturalization. The decision of 're-casting' Cap as Asian also allows and invites meta-narrative reflections on writers' and corporate decisions to respond to growing public and interest groups' pressure for a wider representation of a diverse cast to avoid potential boycotts from consumers.[39] Of course, when dealing with ethnic/racial representation in pop cultural products, one cannot always clearly distinguish the private business intention, to promote change and positive attitudes towards diversity, from economic calcula-

32 Shetterly 2015.
33 Mirzoeff 2018.
34 Morales/Baker 2002; Remender/Pacheco/Immonen 2014.
35 Trujillo/Balzadua 2021.
36 Ewing/Davis 2015.
37 Yang et al. 2009.
38 McMurray 2008.
39 Baron 2001, Baron/Diermeier 2007, McDonnell et al. 2015.

tions. In this regard, it is worth reminding the success of Coogler's superhero movie *Black Panther,*[40] which featured an almost entirely Black lead cast in powerful and engaging roles, grossed almost $700 in domestic box office alone.[41]

Another form of adaptation is the retcon, a rewriting of what happened. This narrative solution has been used to either correct or question certain traits of the character, its morality, or even problematize certain historical events. For example, Japanese internment camps have been evoked in recent comics to question Steve Roger's stance and responsibility on the subject. In *Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man* #9,[42] the mutant Marnie confesses that she immigrated to the US from Japan in the late 1930s, and that she was interned along with other citizens and immigrants of Japanese descent from 1943 to 1945. Despite knowing that the detention of people of Japanese ancestry was a violation of *habeas corpus*, and recognizing that Roosevelt's Executive Order was un-American, Steve Rogers did not stop the unjust incarceration from happening. This narrative solution is extremely different from previous representations. In the 1940s, internment was presented as a legitimate solution to maintain order and security, as Cap and Bucky (Cap's sidekick) chased the Japanese from escaping the camps and stopped their plan to bomb American cities. Yet, in *Invaders #26–28* Bucky questions America's doing, "I dunno – maybe there are **some** spies among the Japanese living here on the West Coast – but they have rounded up kids – old people– **everybody!**"[43] Similarly, after learning about the existence of the camps, Captain America exposes the government's hypocrisies (the man who uttered 'the four freedom speech' was the same one responsible for Executive Order 9066), "While we have been fighting the **fascists** has our **country** taken a page from our **enemies** [...] these poor people are U.S. citizens– born right here in California [...] **Sure**, that's better than the **Nazis** treat some captive races – but that's nothing to **wave the flag** about!"[44] Hence, through time Captain America passed from being a law enforcer, to an advocate for Japanese (American) rights, to a bystander not rebelling against unjust laws.

The reimagining of this palimpsest is not triggered solely by a desire to critique a status quo, but also commercial reasons that testify to the McDonaldization of a brand. For instance, in the recent Disney+ series *What If...?*,[45] in one of the

40 Coogler 2018.
41 Mendelson 2018.
42 Taylor/Cabal 2019.
43 Thomas/Robbins, 1978 #26, 7.
44 Thomas/Robbins, 1978 #27, 14.
45 Bradley/Andrews, 2021.

alternative universes featured in this anthology, it is Peggy Carter who gets inoculated with the serum, instead of Steve. Interestingly, after the series aired, Disney's Twitter (now X) profile briefly referred to Captain Carter as Captain America, despite her being a Brit and her shield features the Union Jack.[46] Hence, the Captain America formula is not just a commercially successful model to be replicated, but it becomes a symbol and an extension of cultural imperialism: American values are depicted as intrinsically universal, a commodity to be sold, imitated, and adopted by other countries. This formula is so successful that it got replicated even outside the American cultural context (and Marvel). Fabrizio Capigatti created a series titled *Capitani Italiani*[47] [Italian Captains] adapting the Captain America concept to the Italian reality with an uncanny result, as the nationalist formula is complicated by the country's parochialism (each Captain embodies a city). This narrative solution allows the setting to change, moving from (inter)national (or even intergalactic) scenarios to street-level fights against local mobs, and become gorier.

Finally, in our contemporary digital and "convergent" [48] culture, this rewriting process is amplified by the constant consumption of pop culture through memes, and other forms of appropriation and sharing, that make the internalization of the mythic aspects of national identities even more unconscious. Captain America's iconography has been used by different users to comment on current political issues, comparing political leaders and scenarios to Cap.[49] Yet, the fans are not the only ones to recirculate this icon. The American Embassy in Rome (Italy) used its effigy on social media to communicate to the Italian comic artist Zerocalcare that his visa was approved.[50] This use of gifs testifies to the emergence of a "memeification of politics,"[51] but it also proves that complex issues can be synthesized through visual images that can potentially become viral, a process facilitated by our media environment, which allows the exchange, reproduction, alteration, and the potential everlasting circulation of images. This interplay of bottom-up and top-down processes complicates the assumption that propaganda is produced by cultural elites and injected into the consumers through pop culture. In contrast, the consumers claim a certain amount of property over the franchise by producing

46 The lapsus seems to reinforce and complete a trend started with characters like Captain Britain and Union Jack, which can be rightfully seen as projections of the *Captain America* formula overseas.

47 Capigatti 2018.

48 Jenkins 2006, 17–18.

49 Schmid 2020.

50 See: https://www.facebook.com/54203027305/photos/a.10152241217352306/10157624094432306/. Last access: 15 April 2021.

51 Dean 2018, 4.

memes, and complaints when they feel that their beloved character has been mistreated. Indeed, during the launch of the *What If…* series, when the Twitter profile images of (Sam Wilson's) Cap got momentarily changed with the effigy of Peggy Carter (a White Brit!), fans started to complain. Interestingly, an embryonic phase of this new participatory culture was already developing during WWII, when wartime comics generated fan clubs.[52]

Captain America within the MCU: from Steve Roger to Sam Wilson

The continuous rewriting of Captain America is also visible within the Marvel Cinematographic Universe (MCU). The 2001 movie *Captain America: The First Avenger*[53] reworks the origin story of the character (and US history) to include the contribution of ethnic minorities, as they were almost absent in the original Simon and Kirby's 1940s run,[54] and when present they occupied marginal (and stereotyped) roles, functioning as loyal sidekicks or comic reliefs. Hence, the movie removes any controversial aspects of the old comics to comply with contemporary sensibilities, sugarcoating the past. In the movie, Jim Morita, a member of the Howling Commandos, an elite unit, is Japanese American, yet the implications of his participation are never investigated (during WWII, many Nisei felt compelled to serve in the Army to prove their loyalty to the US while their families were unjustly confined in internments camps[55]). This conscious erasure of complex historical events shields America's image, Steve Rogers' legacy (as both a staple of the nation and a product to be sold), and the memory of WWII as the "good war" from criticism.

Yet, what strikes the most is the absence of Cap's encounter with the Holocaust. In this regard, it is curious to notice how in 1945 *Captain America* comics attempted to portray not only Nazi camps, but also crematory furnaces.[56] This erasure is in near contrast to the process of Americanization of the Holocaust started in the 1970s, when the event came to be presented not just as a Jewish memory, but as an American memory, configured as universal.[57] Hence, the viewer is left to

52 Fertig 2017, 16.

53 Johnston 2011.

54 A notable exception is 'Whitewash Jones', a ghastly racial caricature of African Americans, derived from the Minstrel Shows. Sadly, this portrayal was in line with the racial depiction of the time.

55 Robinson 2009.

56 Schomburg 1945 # 46

57 Winter 2007, 371; Novick 2000, 207.

speculate on the absence of this event that, despite its complexity, helped America foster its image as the redeemer of the world. This peculiar choice might reflect the need to address a large audience, and the (un)conscious desire to avoid any discourse about race, as the overt address of the Master Race ideology might trigger questions about America's own hypocrisies. Whereas America presented itself as the champion of freedom, segregation was still in place, people of Japanese ancestry were unjustly incarcerated, and military units were segregated. Thus, the movie presents a uchronia where there are no visible racial, ethnic, or gender inequalities. This adaptation is not a faithful rendition of the source material (nor 1940s mentality) but rather "a container for present sensibilities about inclusiveness and diversity."[58] Through this rhetoric, color becomes invisible, and is assimilated into Whiteness, an identity historically constructed as universal and nonmarked. This (post-racial) fantasy reconciles America's democratic belief that all men are created equal with its social practices. Yet, this historical revisionism is detrimental to minority groups, as it erases the possibility to articulate a counter-hegemonic discourse that recognizes the existence and effects of systematic racism to address them.

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier[59] disrupts this racial fantasy, showing an awareness of the continuing plague of racial discrimination in the US. The TV series narrates the journey that makes Sam Wilson abandon his Falcon identity to take on the mantle of Captain America, complying with the desires of Steve, the original Captain, who retired after the events of *Avengers: Endgame.*[60] But this transition is not easy: whereas Steve became Captain America after receiving a serum, Sam must work through the internal and external visions of his super-heroic self, reconciling them. This "double consciousness"[61] becomes evident through Wilson's pondering of the significance for a Black man to carry the shield, in terms of reception from both White people and the Black community. After his retirement, Steve Rogers trusted his friend Sam Wilson to take over the role of Captain America, giving him his shield. Wilson, however, thought he could not fulfill Rogers' legacy and donated Captain America's shield to a museum. Still, the United States Department of Defense decided to hand the shield to John Walker, a White soldier, to present him to the public as the "New Captain America." Witnessing the scene, Bucky Barnes (The Winter Soldier) manifests a lack of understanding and support towards Sam's decision, seeing it as an act of betrayal towards Steve's legacy. Yet, his opinion betrays his racial privilege. Indeed, Sam is never hesitant to

58 Vernon 2016, 126.
59 Spellman 2021.
60 Russo/Russo 2019.
61 Du Bois 2005 [1903].

perform his role as a superhero, but he questions the national symbols, being aware that his country did not always uphold its democratic promises. His racial identity continuously reminds him of America's history of racism, segregation, and oppression.

The series' discussion about the legacy of racism and racial segregation is particularly poignant during Sam and Bucky's visit to Isaiah Bradley, a Black (super) soldier, who they hope can provide them with some information about the case they are investigating. The main antagonist, a group of anarchists named Flag Smashers, is using an updated version of the serum that transformed Isaiah into a super soldier. Bradley tells Sam that, during his service in the military, he unwillingly became a test subject for a secret governmental project that sought to replicate the super soldier serum that was inoculated to Steve. Variants of the serum were tested on other African American soldiers, and they led to mutation and death. He was the only one to survive the experiments. This origin story adapts Robert Morales and Kyle Baker's comic *Truth: Red, White & Black*,[62] retrieving some key elements to comment on the expendability of Black life in America, the need to incorporate the experiences and histories of Black folk, the difference between memory and historical representation, and, finally, questions about the price of (America's) freedom.[63] In the same vein as the comic, the TV adaptation uses Isaiah's story to cast doubt on the nation's morality, showing that eugenic experiments were also conducted in America. On this matter, it is worth pointing out that the source of inspiration for Morales and Baker's story was the Tuskegee Experiment, a study conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the United States Public Health Service. At the time, Black men were inoculated with syphilis without any information about the nature of the experiment. Interestingly, the racial implication embedded in this super soldier fantasy does not escape the (temporarily reformed) villain Helmut Zemo, who notes that "the desire to become a superhuman cannot be separated from supremacist ideals," implying that any super soldier (including Captain America himself) cannot be completely disconnected from supremacist impulses. This observation is not completely wrong: even though, in the MCU, Steve never gave in to such temptation, Walker, the new "Captain America" appointed by the government, does not hesitate to use his power to enforce the law, recurring to violence, and making his own determinations of death-worthiness, killing one of the enemies without a trial.

Even though the core elements of Bradley's story remain unchanged, it is important to remark a pivotal difference between the comics and the TV adaptation:

62 Morales/Baker 2003.

63 Nama 2011.

the timeline. The abuses on African American soldiers no longer occur during WWII, but the Korean War. The choice of his war is particularly interesting because it was the first conflict in which there were no segregated units.[64] This variation can be interpreted as the result of the authors' unwillingness to disrupt the "good war" narrative and Steve Roger's legacy. To dissipate any doubt, the series has Sam ask Bucky whether Steve knew about the experiments conducted on Black soldiers. The negative answer allows Steve Roger's origin story to remain in the eyes of the public a modern Horatio Alger story, a "poor but deserving kid makes good."[65] However, this answer creates some inconsistency in the historical continuity of the MCU as, without motivation, the racial harmony portrayed in *Captain America: the First Avenger* cease to exist in the 1950s.

Even though Isaiah's story motivates Sam, who now wants to correct the errors of the past and create new paths for future generations, as soon as he leaves Isaiah's house, reality reminds him of the obstacles he must overcome, among which racial prejudice. As Sam and Bucky are engaged in a vivid argument, a police car drives by, and two policemen intervene, assuming that Wilson was threatening Barnes. Yet, the policemen's attitude changes as they figure out that Sam is Falcon. This change of heart is not due to compassion, but to celebrity status. Hence the series shows how, despite his heroism, when Sam is not in costume, the country does not care for him, as he becomes the target of racial profiling. Given these premises, Wilson is asked to recompose a fractured society. When Wilson finally embraces the idea of assuming the role of Captain America, he comments to the government officials that he can feel that people will hate him for being both Black and Captain America. Yet, he still picks up the shield, using his power to save people, but also rewrite official history to give voice to marginalized groups, acknowledging the wrongs they had to endure. To achieve this goal, at the end of the series, Wilson invites Bradley to the Smithsonian, who gladly accepts. There, Bradley visits a memorial that includes a biography about his past, which makes him cry, finally seeing the sacrifices he made for his country being recognized.

Differently from Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson's role is not just military, defending U.S borders and values, but also social, advocating for a 'more perfect union,' aware that America has not lived up to its ideals. By taking on the mantle, he hopes to give voices and models to the people living at the margins of American society. This act does not aim to erase the traumatic past of African Americans, but paves the way to a different and more inclusive America where Sam Wilson's

64 Piehler 1995.

65 MacDonald/MacDonald 1976, 249.

nephews can rightfully aspire to hold the shield without the weight of its past. Hence, it is no coincidence that *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* spends a lot of time establishing and exploring Sam's relations with his sister Sarah and the community. When not on a mission, he often returns to his hometown in Louisiana and helps his sister (and two nephews) to make ends meet, running the family fishing business, and attempting to repair their parents' boat and legacy. Interestingly, he and Sarah would only succeed in solving their financial problems thanks to the support received from the local community, who in the past got help from the Wilsons. Sam's neighborhood represents a positive model of society where everybody helps each other, despite their poor conditions and financial struggles. The repairing of the boat through a network of solidarity is clearly a metaphor for a nation that needs to fix the inequalities it generates through its policies.

Indeed, this positive model of society, where people realize themselves through positive relationships with others and their contribution to their community, is set in neat contrast to the socio-political context depicted in the series. Indeed, after Thanos snapped his fingers while using the Infinity Gauntlet, causing the extermination of half of all life, the human survivors decided to live without borders, supporting each other through hardships. However, when the Avengers undid the Snap, bringing back the other half of humanity, the world fell into chaos, as national governments tried to revert everything to its initial state, also by reinstating borders. The attempts of the Global Repatriation Council (GRC), a transnational, but US-led, organization, to reestablish the old borders created a huge number of refugees living at the margins of society. These people felt left behind, as the governments cared much more for the people who were brought than those who lived through the Snap. Hence, the series portrays two types of "governmental belonging"[66]: "active" and "passive." The active belonging pertains to those who returned after the 'Blip' and White people, whereas those who were not 'snapped'[67] and racial minorities can only perform passive forms of belongings, as they are subject to the managerial will of hegemonic groups. The resentment towards the GRC led Karli Morgenthau to found the Flag Smashers, an anarchist organization dedicated to helping the refugees by stealing medicine and food from government organizations. Yet, the opposition and antagonism towards world governments would soon escalate, as the Flag Smashers radicalize. They do no longer hesitate to recur to terrorist attacks to perpetuate their aims.

The series shows that the lack of care about marginalized communities has severe consequences, as the dispossessed by capitalism might be lured by the

66 Hage 1998.

67 Russo/Russo 2018; 2019.

promises of anarchism and terrorism. The stress on empathy, bonds, caring, and self-discipline in the service of nurturance signals a shift in the paradigm used to talk about the nation, which moves from the Strict Father model to the Nurturing Parent model. This passage can be observed in the way in which Sam decides to deal with the enemy, towards whom he develops "negative empathy."[68] Because of his race, Sam understands Karli's pain and acknowledges her suffering. However, he firmly condemns the means she chose to realize her utopia, a cosmopolitan world with no boundaries, and tries to stop her before it is too late. In the last episode, Sams tries to negotiate once again with Morgenthau and refuses to fight her even as she furiously attempts to kill him. Until the last moment, he tries to persuade her about the existence of a non-violent resolution to the problem of the disposed. Yet, when she raises a weapon at Sam, Agent Carter fatally shoots Karli.

Even though Sam, like Karli, believes in cosmopolitanism and humanitarian values, in his opinion, the State is the only frame in which geopolitical decisions can be legitimately made, and, at the end of the series, he urges GRC senators to consider the effects of their laws, especially when profit generates inequalities and marginalized groups, warning them that the next Karli Morgenthau would soon rise should they fail to represent marginalized people. He also reprimands GRC representatives for their plans to forcefully relocate millions and rejects the label "terrorists," used to describe Karli and her supporters, as it betrays a lack of empathy and understanding of the Flag Smasher's sufferings and motives, while it allows the government not to be held accountable for creating displaced and marginalized groups. This apparent paradox in Sam's political standing (he embodies nationalist and universal values) can be easily solved if one considers that America's identity has not been constructed through precise territorial borders (America's Frontier expanded throughout its history), but rather through the preaching of Enlightenment values (freedom, individualism, pursuit of happiness, etc.) perceived to be universal.

The connection between American nationalism and universal values is also reinforced by the exceptional character of the nation, which is simultaneously exemplary and exempted. Indeed, personal conscience functions as an excuse to break or not sign international accords (like in *Civil War*[69]) or adopt interventionist stances that go beyond one's legal jurisdiction (as in the series *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*). Indeed, the alleged "defense of freedom" allows Sam and Bucky to move across borders unproblematically, as if other nations were extensions of the US. In the series, the heroes travel through different European countries without receiv-

68 Russo/Russo 2018; 2019.

69 Russo/Russo 2016.

ing any official authorization, and they even break international accords or laws (e. g., when they free Baron Zemo from prison) to pursue a higher goal, the tracking down of the Flag Smashers in Madripoor.

Finally, Sam's journey is not shaped exclusively by his confrontation with the enemy, who threatens the unity of the nation, but also by his rivalry with John Walker, with whom he contends the right to wield Steve Rogers' shield. Yet, it is worth remarking that Sam's animosity is not caused by his anger and confusion towards the U.S. Government's decision to appoint a new Captain America, against his desire to honor Steve's legacy by having his shield displayed at the Smithsonian, but Wilson's and Walker's understanding of Captain America's duty and legacy. When Bucky, Steve's long-time friend, coldly remarks to Walker that the fact he was appointed to carry the shield did not imply he was Captain America, the latter replies that he had put in the effort and hard work required for the position, as, during his time with the United States Army, he jumped on a grenade four times in an act of valor (somehow replicating a heroic gesture performed by Steve in the first movie). Yet according to Sam (and Bucky), the worthiness of wielding Captain America's shield is not determined by the military results achieved, but one's morality and ability to represent the people.

Initially, Walker's arrogance prevents him from understanding the line separating the ends from the means. He simply sticks to what he perceives to be the government's mandate without self-questioning his actions. He evaluates his actions only in terms of performance, abiding by the same moral code he followed during his service in Afghanistan, and that had led him to receive three Medals of Honor and guide missions in counter-terrorism and hostage rescue. Whereas Steve and Sam use the shield defensively to either protect themselves from bullets or incapacitate the enemy, John Walker uses it offensively, viciously beating a Flag Smasher to death, despite the enemy's begging for his own life. Bewildered witnesses and onlookers record the event with their phones and share it through social media, giving a new meaning to the title of the episode, "The Whole World Is Watching": America is no longer the city upon the hill that provides a model to the world to follow; in contrast, thanks to the media, the nation is being held accountable for its misdeeds. This narrative is somehow reminiscent of how the media exposed the conduct of American soldiers in Vietnam, but also how the evaluation of a soldier's worth through his performance on the field (the body count) led to slaughter in My Lai. As during the winter soldier investigations, the government does not take responsibility for its actions, and uses Walker as a scapegoat, even though he was simply abiding by his mandate. So, the role of Captain America is not just fighting the bad guys, but providing a moral compass, able to guide America to its predetermined path, also known as Manifest Destiny, by following one's conscience. As previously discussed, Captain America does not simply follow

the government's dictates, but often functions as the errand into the wilderness, correcting the path taken by the nation.

In the last episode, despite their differences, and after having accepted Wilson as the new Captain America, John Walker collaborates with Sam and Bucky, aware that they share a common goal, the protection of national borders and innocents, now threatened by the Flag Smashers, who moved from Europe to the US, violating US borders and democratic institutions. Hence, the series implies that different visions of America can come together when faced with a common external threat. Yet, John Walker does not completely reform. After the national security crisis is resolved, Walker meets with Valentina Allegra de Fontaine, the Director of the CIA, who gives him a new version of his former star-spangled suit, now completely black. After he wears his new outfit, de Fontaine states that the world is getting weirder and that people no longer need a Captain America, but rather a "U.S. Agent," implying a ruthless version of the superhero acting in the shadow to get the work done without the exposition, public scrutiny, and moral compass of the official Captain. Hence, the series hints at the existence of another America that might not identify with Sam's values and that might justify a less idealistic (and ruthless) approach to justice and thus feel legitimized to operate under cover due to a lack of trust towards the institutions. After all, Walker was let down by the same institution that previously granted him his job as a staple of the nation.

Conclusions

What is interesting about this reiteration of Captain America is the limited space within which the story operates: Sam Wilson is still protecting the status quo, despite adopting a more liberal agenda. Even though the series manages to incorporate dissenting voices and indict injustices, Sam continues to embody the national exceptionalism and the American Dream, which is not situated in the present, but dislocated in a future yet to be constructed, and that he must ensure for his nephews and other (Black and dispossessed) kids. It is precisely Sam's ability to dissent and correct the path that America is walking that reinvigorates the faith in the American Manifest Destiny. Indeed, in his speech after the final battle, Sam remarks, "I might fail [...] but we built this country. Bled for it. I'm not gonna let anybody tell me I can't fight for it." [70] At the same, Sam's journey highlights his status as a minority, as he feels the pressure to prove his worthiness to both the majority

70 Spellman, 2021

and oppressed communities. Simultaneously, society constantly reminds him of the presence of lines, determined by one's color, gender and class, separating Americans. In contrast, the White characters who occupied the role (namely Steve and John) never had such a burden, as if their whiteness came with universal values, extendable to any group. Finally, it is worth remarking that the Sam Wilson featured in the series adopts more cautious stances than his comic book counterpart, who does not hesitate to voice out his dissent towards US policies on migration.[71] Yet, this difference might be justified by the fact that, in the comics, Steve Rogers is alive and, thus, at least one Captain still protects and embodies the status quo.

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