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Heroes of the Past, Readers of the Present, Stories of the Future: Continuity, Cultural Memory, and Historical Revisionism In Superhero Comic

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by

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Dedication

Dedicated to my patient and loving parents, Martin and Phyllis Friedenthal, without whose financial, psychological, and emotional support I never would have made it this far.

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In the three years this dissertation has taken to write, and in the years of course-work and exams prior to that, I have built up an enormous amount of intellectual and emotional debt. Though I know that a simple "thank you" will never pay back what I owe to the following people, I hope that this is a start.

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Without the people listed above I would never have been a strong enough scholar to finish this project; without the people that follow, I would never have been a strong enough person. The many friends and colleagues in UT's American Studies, English, and Radio, Television, & Film departments commiserated with me on the many challenges of being a graduate student. The friends I have made in Austin outside of school (particularly the National Karaoke League and Friday game night folks –including the littlest one, Ginger Soy, who came *this close* to sharing a birthday with me) have reminded me of the importance of being a happy person, despite those challenges. My brothers, David and Brian, sister-in-law, Stephanie, and my extended family (especially Perin, Harriet, Jay, Gail, and Lena) have been unwavering in their vocal support and pride over the years, which has helped keep me going. Although I will keep her name

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Heroes of the Past, Readers of the Present, Stories of the Future: Continuity, Cultural Memory, and Historical Revisionism In Superhero Comic

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Supervisor: Janet M. Davis

This dissertation is a study of cultural memory, exploring how superhero comic books, and their readers and creators, look back on and make sense of the past, as well as how they use that past in the creation of community and stories today. It is my contention that the superhero comics that exist as part of a long-standing "universe," particularly those published by DC and Marvel, are inextricably linked to a sense of cultural memory which defines both the organization of their fans and the history of their stories, and that cultural memory in comics takes the twinned forms of fandom and continuity. Comic book fandom, from its very inception, has been based around memories of past stories and recollections about favorite moments, creators, characters, etc. Because of this, as many of those fans have gone on to become creators themselves, the stories they have crafted reflect that continual obsession with the histories – loosely termed "continuity" by creators, fans, and comic book scholars – of these fictional universes. Often, this obsession translates into an engagement with actual events from the past. In many of these cases, as with much art and ephemera that is immersed in cultural memory, these fans-turned-creators combine their interest in looking at the history of the fictional universe with a working out of actual traumatic events. My case studies focus on superhero comic books that respond to such events, particularly World War II, the Vietnam War, and 9/11.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1992, as Superman lay dying, a comic book fan was born. It was late July and I was in a local bookstore with my parents, using up a gift certificate I had received for my birthday. I had already picked out several young adult books – the latest *Goosebumps* by R.L. Stine, a new addition to the *Star Trek: Star Fleet Academy* series – and had only a few dollars left to spend. My dad came up to me holding a comic book, *The Adventures of Superman* #497, and explained, "This is part of that death of Superman storyline they were talking about on the news. It might be interesting to pick it up." Given the amount of money that my parents would come to spend on feeding the comic book addiction that began in that moment, I can only imagine that some part of my father regrets ever having brought the issue to my attention.

Now, over twenty years later, I remain a loyal comic book reader and still follow the ongoing adventures of Superman. My collection has expanded to over fifty boxes stacked full of comics, and it continues to grow every Wednesday when I visit my local comic book shop to pick up the week's new releases. In very real ways my life in the past two decades can be measured out in comic books: where I was living when I first read a major story, what comic book shop I was frequenting when some juicy bit of industry news dropped, which stresses I was escaping when I reorganized how I stored my collection, and so forth. My experiences as a comic book fan serve as a touchstone for important moments both in my life and in the larger public life I have been a part of. I remember the tribute comics that brought me to tears after the events of September 11th, 2001. I can point to the collections I've given as presents to friends and girlfriends. Perhaps most of all I look back to the innumerable hours of bonding with my father as he drove me to various comic book stores and shows all over Long Island, New York.

My account is not a unique one. Many comic book fans and readers can point to the friendships and relationships that have formed out of a shared love for the medium and its dominant superhero genre. Part of the fun of fandom is sharing it with those close to you, and creating treasured memories based upon these common interests. For me, as for numerous

others, comic books are inextricably linked with the process of memory, and what is true on a personal level is true on a cultural level, as well.

This dissertation examines how superhero comics, their readers, and creators engage with cultural memory and with their own historical continuity to provide a unique view into the cultural process of historical revision. As a medium, continuing comic book series, whether "mainstream" or independent, are particularly obsessed with continuity and history. They tell an ongoing story month after month, ultimately leading to a backlog of character and plot developments which influence a series' narrative. Thanks to the fantastical nature inherent within the superhero genre, which financially and culturally dominates the comic book medium, the narratives of superhero comics frequently feature revisions and rewrites of past stories, through a process known as "retroactive continuity," or "retconning." Retconning involves the revisiting of past stories, told in previous issues of superhero comics, and adding a new piece of information to that older story, literally rewriting the past. Because this is a process that is fairly unique to superhero comics – television shows, for example, may flash back to previous episodes, but they rarely deliberately change the content of the stories from those older episodes – it has become something of a defining aspect of the genre. Most superhero "universes" (the fictional worlds composed of all the superhero stories produced and owned by a particular publisher) have undergone retcons and revisions to individual comic book titles, and often to the entire publishing line.

As a result of this obsession with past stories, superhero comics have reason to visit the historical past in which those stories were set, thus working in a constant dialectic with historical events. For example, many superheroes that were created for the first wave of comics in the late 1930s are still part of ongoing stories today. Their origin stories, however – a point of constant revisiting in superhero narratives – are intrinsically tied to those Depression-era roots. As such, the repetitive cycle of retelling those origins involves constantly returning to stories that portray the 1930s and 40s. The vision and presentation of the 30s and 40s, however, often differs

dramatically in stories from later decades. The constant retelling of the origin of such a character creates a corpus of stories reflecting an ongoing negotiation with the past, as each subsequent retelling reveals how a particular era looked back upon the 30s and 40s, a vision that is always contingent upon the social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of the era in which that story was told.

This dissertation will use that body of stories to argue that historical revisionism is an intrinsic aspect of cultural memory. As with memorials and official commemorations, and even more saliently akin to novels, memoirs, films, TV shows, and other cultural effluvia, superhero comic books are popular products that can display how a particular set of producers and consumers envision the past, while simultaneously using that past as a method of commenting upon the present. Historical revisionism involves an ongoing mutation of the past alongside the present, looking at the past in new ways and through different lenses that make it continually useful to contemporary culture. Superhero comics, with their frequent return to the past and the literal rewriting/retconning of their own (fictional) history, are thus a particularly useful tool through which to examine these mutations and revisions, allowing us to explore how our views of the past generally, and specific historical events in particular, have evolved over time.

Because superhero comics engage with their own history in a way that is unique to their format and genre, they are an important cultural artifact to explore how members of the culture industry, and their audiences, negotiate changing views of the (real life) past. Situated somewhere between history, literary studies, cultural studies, and media studies, this is an interdisciplinary American Studies dissertation that productively crosses borders between all of these fields. Much as the comics that I look at use the past in order to create stories that look towards the future, my dissertation examines comic books from the past in order to point to future sites of analysis and learning. Specifically, I argue for focusing on long-term narratives – such as comic books, television shows, novel series, film franchises, and new media – as crucial sites for the crystallization of public history and cultural memory. An examination of these

narratives will lead to a broader, and important, understanding of how history is related in popular media, reflecting changing historiographies over time. These historicized stories comment upon the present and suggest productive actions for the future.

By examining ongoing narratives to see what they tell us about history, and the changing views of it, we are able to rethink how we tell stories in general, and how stories become a receptacle for historical knowledge just as a textbook or museum might. By drawing from the traditions of history, literary theory/analysis, and sociology in order to tease out the implications of these aspects of comics narratives, it is my hope that I will help scholars working in the field of cultural memory to look to comics as an avenue of study. Conversely, I hope to expose those working on and reading comics to the aspects of cultural memory that permeate the medium and industry. Bringing two such disparate worlds into contact with one another cannot help but yield intriguing results, and I hope that this study serves as but the opening statement in a much longer conversation.

COMICS CULTURE

The superhero narratives that have been unfolding since the 1930s in books published by DC Comics and Marvel Comics are long-term epics, larger in length, and perhaps scale, than the collected mythology of any known religion or culture.[1] Indeed, they have much in common with these ancient mythologies, tapping into the archetypes that Carl Jung noted as being essential to the subconscious mind, consisting of, "preexistent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which gave definite form to certain psychic contents."[2] These "psychic contents" manifest themselves both on a personal level, in the form of neuroses, as well as on a cultural level, in the form of mythologies, stories, and superhero comics. Such a mythologies are expressed not only through Homeric odes about Odysseus, but also in comic books about superheroes. As Joseph Campbell explains, mythology is as vibrant today as it has always been, "For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as

amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age."[3] In our own age, one such form this takes is in the "mythologies" of DC and Marvel Comics.

The variety of colorful characters – heroes, villains, and ordinary men and women – that populate these two "universes," and the number of stories that have been told about them, is staggering. Part of the appeal of these universes to readers is that characters from a wide variety of comic books under the same corporate banner, spanning the gamut of story type from cowboys to Vikings to space aliens, can all interact in one shared fictional realm.[4] As media critic and theorist Henry Jenkins notes, the superhero genre is so robust in comic book publishing because, by its very nature, it possesses the ability to envelop all other genres, absorbing any other genre into the overarching "good vs. evil" metanarrative that is so definitive of the superhero.[5] When such a fleshed-out fictional universe, or fiction network, exists for so many years, memories concretize both within the fiction network itself and in the external "real world," for the long-term readers and creators of the network.[6] Within the DC Universe, for example, characters remember the "death" and ultimate return of the iconic hero Superman as a traumatic event with worldwide repercussions, just as readers remember the event as an historic moment in the narrative of their fandom. Comic book characters, readers, and creators all share in a fully developed cultural memory, whether that memory relates to specific story events or to the meta-story of comic book reading and fandom itself.

Though many adult readers develop a collector's mentality, keeping their comic books in pristine collection, stored in temperature-controlled rooms in stacks upon stacks of specially designed boxes, most did not start out that way. Most of the fans and creators in this dissertation read comic books as children, something that (until the very recent expansion of comic books into digital media) is a tactile experience. Children are generally not very careful with their comic books, rolling them up as they read them, tossing them aside when they're done, and finding them crumbled and stained months or years later. It is an intimate experience of closely staring at tiny pictures and lettering, one that creates a strong bond between a young reader's

burgeoning imaginative world and the stories he or she consumes while developing ink-stained fingers. For those children who become lifelong readers and fans, this intimacy never departs, and in fact it deepens as they age along with the stories, following the same characters throughout years and decades of their lives. The fans thus develop a powerful emotional link to these characters that are already based on broad mythological archetypes in order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. This link provides fertile ground for the accumulation of memories; both memories of the stories themselves and of the time and place in which those stories were read.

Comic book fandom, from its very inception, has been based around memories of past stories and recollections about favorite moments, creators, characters, etc. Because of this, as many fans have gone on to become creators themselves, the stories they have crafted reflect this continual obsession with the histories – loosely termed "continuity" by creators, fans, and scholars – of these fictional universes. Often, this obsession translates into an engagement with actual events from the past. In many of these cases, as with much art and ephemera that is immersed in cultural memory, these fans-turned-creators combine their interest in looking at the history of the fictional universe with a working out of actual historically and culturally traumatic events, such as World War II, the Vietnam War, and the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Frequently, these creators will look back upon those events with an eye towards historical revision, making that history speak to attitudes and situations of the present day.

It is in these narratives, which reflect upon the history of the fictional universe while also dealing directly with events of major historical trauma, that we see the inherent cultural memory of superhero comics most directly in action. In order to deal with the past in the fictional universe while maintaining some amount of verisimilitude for readers, creators must also deal with the past of their *own* universe, explaining how the inherently positive, almost utopian, superhero narrative can coexist alongside such horrific events as war and terrorism. In fact, superhero comics are constantly justifying how such events often provide fecund ground for the

birth of superheroic figures. In the ways that they do this, superhero comics reveal a more general aspect about how we, as human beings, negotiate with the past, constantly returning to and re-envisioning these historical moments in keeping with contemporary beliefs and mores.

Cultural memory takes two primary forms in superhero comics – organized fandom and continuity. These two fields consistently overlap, and are reliant upon one another for their very existence. It is the fans, and the fans-turned-pros, who remember past stories and keep the continuity of those stories alive and active in the present day; likewise, it is this continuity which frequently engages and activates fandom, giving readers a shared body of past stories to hold in common. Since my dissertation focuses on the interaction of super hero comic continuity, comic book fandom, and cultural memory, I will examine each of these conceptual strands separately before exploring how they collide.

CULTURAL MEMORY

A buzzword amongst academics in recent years, "cultural memory" is actually rather amorphous to define. In its loosest sense, cultural memory refers to the ways in which a society recalls its own past, particularly via its present cultural productions, and the ways in which it uses those memories to negotiate issues in the present. Astrid Erill offers a more open definition, paving the way for a wide variety of cultural memory studies: "[Cultural memory] allows for an inclusion of a broad spectrum of phenomena as possible objects of cultural memory studies."[7] Cultural memory is thus a purposefully vague term, allowing for any number of different interpretations for a large array of purposes.

An even more all-encompassing definition is provided by American Historical Association president Carl Becker, in his 1931 address to the association: "memory of things said and done (whether in our immediate yesterdays or in the long past of mankind.)"[8] This is how Becker defines "history" in general, "reduced to its lowest terms," but it also applies to how I will be discussing cultural memory, in that he sees this history as serving to link the past with the future via the present. He notes that history, "becomes an integral and living part of our

present world of semblance."[9] For my purposes, this conceptualization of cultural memory will serve as a working definition – something *used* by people in the present, acting as a vital force in their daily lives, rather than as a body of writing "fully related in documents" that means nothing to the way life is lived in the present. For comics readers, creators, and fans, this is enacted both in terms of remembering past stories in order to enact some kind of change in current stories, as well as, on a broader cultural sense, to discuss real-world historical matters in relation to present-day society and politics.

I use "cultural memory" in two senses: 1) the ways in which comic book fans and creators remember the history of the comic book industry (including the real-world history with which it is inextricably linked), thereby creating a sense of community in the present; and, 2) the use of that history by creators to write new stories that reflect upon the past of both the fictional superhero universes and the real world that gave rise to them. Thus, in the context of superhero comics, "cultural memory" encompasses ideas as divergent as the creation of fanzines, historical panels at comic book conventions, discussions of older stories and characters in comic book letter columns, and contemporary stories rife with retconning, set in a historical milieu, and/or attempting to deal with moments of past crisis. Most importantly, I will be exploring how all these various forms of cultural memory come together to reflect upon a process of historical revisionism that can be viewed in ongoing superhero comic books.[10]

Renate Lachmann proposes that the "cultural memory of literature" can be found in literary intertextuality. As Lachmann explains, literature in general serves as, "culture's memory, not as a simple recording device but as a body of commemorative actions that include the knowledge stored by a culture, and virtually all texts a culture has produced and by which a culture is constituted."[11] More specifically, though, she notes that intertextuality, the "interchange and contact, formal and semantic, between texts,"[12] is a specific act of cultural memory for writers and readers:

> Intertextuality demonstrates the process by which a culture, where "culture" is a book culture, continually rewrites and retranscribes itself, constantly redefining itself through

> its signs. Every concrete text, as a sketched-out memory space, connotes the macrospace of memory that either represents a culture or appears as that culture.[13]

Superhero comics, enslaved as they are to decades of stories, feature this sort of continual rewriting and retranscribing in such processes as reviving seemingly forgotten characters and continually returning to the origins of popular characters.

Within this particular book culture, comic book continuity is inextricably linked to intertextuality, and thus is just as inextricably linked to the comics' cultural memory. From this point of view, those comic books and storylines that become the subject of intertextual rewriting are akin to what Pierre Nora describes as "*lieux de mémoire*, where memory crystallizes and secretes itself."[14] Though Nora is mostly speaking of actual physical locales, his description of "certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists"[15] can be extended to texts (and quite succinctly describe, in the context of comic book universes, the kind of "continuity nodes" I have previously denoted), since "*lieux de mémoire* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration."[16]

Whether referring to physical locale or to more abstract conceptualizations, Nora's general theory of *lieux de mémoire* relies upon the more universal context that memory and history are "in fundamental opposition,"[17] with memory as personal and mutable and history as societal, critical, and more removed. In comic book continuity, we see the "memory" side of this memory/history dialectic at work, with creators taking advantage of those facts that accommodate their stories and figuring out ways to rid themselves of other facts/stories which, though part of the history of the comic book universe, are no longer part of its memory.[18]

This memory is also created through the stories that fans and publishers choose to remember, either in fan writings or in authorized reprints. This preservation of past issues and storylines, like *lieux de mémoire*, originates, "with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives."[19] This leads to a condition that Nora laments, wherein personal/spontaneous/mutable memory – that which is flexible and alterable –

is seized upon by solidified, inalterable, monolithic history. He notes that, "Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image."[20] In relation to comic books, this archive is of crucial importance, as it forms the only memory available to new generations of readers and creators; thus, the archive of referenced/reproduced stories, which originated as the personal "memory" of certain fans and creators, becomes the "history" of today's fans and creators. As we shall see, it is this personal use of memory, of both comic book stories and real-world events, which comes to define both the continuity of comic books and the appropriation of historical traumatic occurrences as a part of that continuity. The continuity, itself, then, is akin to what Nora warns as "the acute effect of a new consciousness, the clearest expression of the terrorism of historicized memory."[21]

However, despite this warning, Nora also notes that *lieux de mémoire* do not become absolutely concretized once they are created, but rather are enmeshed themselves in the ever-changing process of memory. It is because of this that comic book continuity often feeds upon itself to tell "new" stories that are in actuality just cannibalizing those older stories that have been archived and "immortalized" as *lieux de mémoire*. This circularity of continuity is (unintentionally) summed up by Nora, noting that, "the *lieu de mémoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations."[22]

Thus, though we can think of continuity in terms of *lieux de mémoire*, it is also important to draw a much more direct, concrete association between the process of continuity in American superhero comic books and the general process of American cultural memory, as outlined in historian Michael Kammen's *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. His discussion of the ambiguous, dualist nature of American culture also rings true of the mainstream comic book industry, which constantly balances the weight and importance of past stories with a professed desire to move forward, narratively.[23] Once again,

although Kammen is speaking generally about the use of memory and history in American culture, all of his points can be equally applied to the community of comics fans and readers who engage in projects of memory/history.

Most importantly, Kammen notes that, "We arouse and arrange our memories to suit our psychic needs," and thus we should be wary of "taking for granted the cohesion, clarity, and retentiveness of either civic or popular memory."[24] This is something to be cautious about not just in the study of civic history, but also in the study of comics history. Although many older comics still exist, either in archives or in reproduced forms, we must be aware that every single issue contains traces of its cultural milieu, and even the most faithful of reproductions will alter those traces, simply by virtue of *choosing* to reproduce that particular comic (and not reproduce a different one) for whatever reason. No complete collection exists, or is practically possible, of every comic book ever produced by either DC or Marvel Comics, and thus there are gaps in the archival memory of these "universes." Though we can theoretically fill those gaps with the recorded histories of readers and creators, their memories are, as Kammen tells us, arranged according to personal psychic needs, as well as subject to the vicissitudes of cognitive recall. Furthermore, we need to recognize that public memory is inherently political, as it "shapes a nation's ethos and sense of identity."[25]

We thus must recognize that memory is always-already incomplete. Memory is a fraught thing, and it must be taken apart and parsed out just as any other cultural text might be. This history of comics is built on such fragile memories.[26] This project offers the possibility of constructing a historiography of comics – a history of how comics fans have looked at history. This dissertation will attempt to provide such a historiography, in terms of both of how fans have constructed a history and how creators have used history (both fictional and real-world) to tell contemporary stories that reflect upon the past and how it is envisioned and utilized in the present day.

These latter kinds of stories, those that deal both with comic book continuity and important historical events, often serve the same function of memorials, allowing/helping creators and readers to come to terms with the traumatic historical events that they are representing. Marita Sturken examines these kinds of memorials (specifically those for the Vietnam War and the AIDS crisis) in order to explore what it means for a culture to remember. Similarly, Arthur G. Neal expands upon this role of trauma in the formation of cultural memory, equating national traumatic events to individual ones. As is the case with individual memories, "The traumas of the past become ingrained in collective memories and provide reference points to draw upon when the need arises."[27] Though these reference points are "highly varied, collective responses tend to become standardized through the elaboration of myths and legends for defending the moral boundaries of society."[28]

In superhero comic books, this process is no different. DC and Marvel Comics produce books for a primarily U.S. audience, and as such their stories tend to reflect national history, national myths, and national trauma. Major events that are reflected and memorialized elsewhere in American culture find themselves undergoing the same process within the narratives of superhero universes. For this reason, I will be examining the cultural memory, as represented in superhero comics, of three traumatic periods – World War II, the Vietnam War, and the events and aftermath of September 11th, 2001 – that have produced rich superhero stories over the years. Because these creators are themselves comics fans who have worked their way into the field of professionals, they not only deal with American cultural memory when talking about these events, but also with *comics*' cultural memories. For example, in order to talk about the heroes of World War II, a creator must explain why those heroes were unable, or unwilling, to stop Hitler. Similarly, a comics story set in a superhero universe that deals with 9/11 must be able to reasonably explain why no hero was able to avert the tragedies of that day (a reflection of real-world reckonings with the divine that occur in the light of such trauma). The cultural memory of American society, which reflects upon national events, melds in these stories with the

cultural memory of comic books, as represented by fannish recollections of past stories and by the continuity created in those stories.

These comics stories strongly represent a relatively new form of cultural memory, as described by Sturken in refuting the belief in an American "culture of amnesia": "American culture is not amnesiac but rather replete with memory, [and] cultural memory is a central aspect of how American culture functions and how the nation is defined. The 'culture of amnesia' actually involves the generation of memory in new forms, a process often misinterpreted as forgetting."[29] Comic books, far from the traditional receptacles of cultural memory such as fine art and history texts, can certainly fall into the category of "memory in new forms," and are most definitely objects of cultural memory, for, as Sturken explains, "memory is produced not only through memorials and images but also through commodities."[30] Whether one chooses to view them as crass commodity or as artistic work,[31] comic books must be recognized as a viable and valuable receptacle of cultural memory, and thus of history, for as Sturken argues, cultural memory is "entangled" with rather than "oppositional" to history.

Because these repositories of memory are enmeshed with the commodity culture that is so part of daily life, Americans of all stripes feel a personal stake in the battle be the bearers of the nation's cultural memory. There is no all-inclusive "America" or "American identity," and as such there is no monolithic "American memory," either. As Sturken notes, the very image of America, as well as the memories of America, are contested ground, used for different purposes by different individuals and interest groups.[32] As a result, there is much at stake in the conversation over, and implementation of, cultural memory. For example, in the world of comic books, the creation of a form cultural memory in the 1960s led to a reinvigoration of the superhero genre that may never have occurred otherwise, directly resulting in that genre's domination of the industry to this day, a state of affairs that is lamented by many creators, readers, and commentators, both "mainstream" and "alternative."

Sturken reminds us that cultural memory, ultimately, "is unstable and unreliable. Its authenticity is derived not from its revelation of any original experience but from its role in providing continuity to a culture, the stakes in creating values in that culture, and the fundamental materiality by which that culture is defined."[33] Cultural memory inherently deals with the past, but it just as inherently deals with the present and the future. It is this aspect of cultural memory, in relation to superhero comics and their complex continuities, that I will be exploring in this dissertation.

CONTINUITY

When two distinct superheroes first teamed up to fight a common villain, comic book continuity was born. Very loosely considered, continuity is the metatextual web that is created when various superheroes and villains meet, either in a team book (such as *Justice League of America*) or by crossing over into each other's individual books, thereby establishing that they exist in the same universe wherein certain rules of logic apply. For example, if the character of Batman's sidekick, Robin, dies in a given issue of *Batman*, then, in the meta-narrative of the DC Universe, Robin cannot appear alive in an issue of *Superman* or *Wonder Woman* (unless that story specifically occurs before Robin's death, or, given the conventions of superhero stories, after his resurrection). Significant changes or occurrences in any single book that takes place within the DC Universe are, by the strictures of continuity, reflected in every other DC Universe title. Thus, a simple, working definition of continuity would be as follows: Continuity in a comic book universe is the meta-narrative created out of the sum total of meetings, relationships, battles, births, deaths, and other twists of plot and characterization that have taken place within that universe.

Given how many creators are constantly adding ingredients to this metatextual pot, however, confusion and inconsistencies frequently abound regarding comic book universe's "official" or "canonical" continuity. If Robin *did* turn up alive in an issue of *Superman*, for example, some sort of explanation for that appearance is necessary. As DC Comics is ultimately

a money-making corporation, it needs to cater to fans' demands, which in this case means that the editors and creators must constantly monitor and police continuity such that readers don't complain about inconsistencies.[34] As a result, continuity can also be burdensome to creators. Lance Parkin notes, in reference to the long-running multimedia *Dr. Who* franchise, which has its own, unique set of continuity concerns, "As a series becomes a long-running one, often the involvement of the original creators diminishes, and the weight of internal history and audience expectations begins to affect the stories themselves. Fashions and tastes change, and writers have to make choices about how the series will reflect that."[35] Indeed, as *Doctor Who* novelist Kate Orman admits, "from an authorial point of view, it always comes back to, 'what can I use, what should I try not to contradict?' A practical definition of 'continuity' or 'canon.'"[36] Creators, then, not just fans, find themselves immersed, whether they want to be or not, in the flowing tides of continuity that engulf the fictional realms they are writing for and about. To them, continuity often consists of a system of rules, of what can/can't be used and what can/can't be contradicted. It is, in many ways, a crucial aspect of storytelling within a serial universe, one that begs for exploration.

In the context of this dissertation, continuity is crucial because it *is* cultural memory for superhero universes. The mnemonic function of superhero comics provokes continuity procedures, or, the other way around, continuity produces and sustains superhero comics' memory. Furthermore, this memory is one shared amongst fans, and in fact is a constitutive element of comics fandom, itself, and particularly fandom's literacy/repertoire. As comics scholar Adam C. Murdaugh has noted, "the introduction of continuity to superhero comics marked a transition from individual or monomythic fantasy to *collective* fantasy . . . [C]ontinuity is of great importance as a focus for the expression of individual and collective fan identities . . . because the concept of continuity was in a sense authored by fans almost from the very beginning."[37] There is something comforting about continuity for readers, allowing them to fully invest themselves in characters' melodramatic adventures, all while knowing that the rules of

continuity will ultimately lead to a sense of cathartic closure.[38] Moreover, this comfort in the ability to tangibly handle decades worth of stories, in the forms of the books themselves, is sharable between fans, and creates a sense of cultural community amongst them through their common memories of past continuity. It is in this way that continuity and fandom work together in tandem to create superhero comics' cultural memory.

Perhaps the first sustained reflection upon the nature of superhero continuity came from semiotician and critic Umberto Eco, in his analysis of the first superhero, "The Myth of Superman." In the essay, Eco compares Superman to heroes of ancient mythology, noting that a key difference between the two is the fact that, while Superman's story is one of accretion, myths are stories with a beginning and an end, embodying, "a law or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us."[39] Eco's problem with Superman, then, is that at the end of any given story he, "has made a gesture which is inscribed in his past and which weighs on his future . . . [and he] has taken a step toward death, he has gotten older, if only by an hour."[40] Thus, "*To act* . . . for Superman, as for any other character . . . means to 'consume' himself."[41] In order to avoid this problematic situation, and to keep telling Superman stories in perpetuity, the writers of Superman, according to Eco, have devised a "shrewd" solution in which, "The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not aware at all—where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said."[42]

When Eco wrote his essay, in the early 1960s, the "oneiric climate" did, indeed, dominate superhero stories, as the earliest form of continuity – things had happened before each issue, and things would happen after each, but the links between events were loosely-knit, without relying upon direct cause-and-effect logic. However, this all changed with the advent of the Stan Lee-helmed "Marvel Age" in the mid-1960s, during which Lee (as writer/editor), along with a handful of artists, created a cohesive tapestry out of the Marvel Comics universe, in which

change did occur, characters aged, and the events of one comic book were reflected in future stories told within that universe.[43] With this new type of storytelling, the oneiric climate was shattered, leading to various solutions to the thorniest of continuity issues – the aging of superheroes, bringing them ever closer to "death." As fan Kevin Gould has noted, there were a multitude of solutions to this problem – real-time aging, time moving faster or slower than real time at different ratios, sudden aging or de-aging by decree of a writer or editor, or plot points (such as a magical serum, or a parallel universe) that give a character extended life.[44] Gould equates Eco's oneiric climate to what he calls "The Suspended Aging Method," wherein characters do not age at all. As he points out, though, since the Superman stories of the 40s through 60s, superhero comics have made a greater attempt at realism, and that, "a realistic world has replaced a fantasy world, and the reader is somewhat startled when they realize the Superman who was in his early 30s way back in 1938 is still that age (if not younger) 48 years later in 1987."[45]

Continuity, in its simplest form, is familiar to most audiences in even their youngest stages, as narratives forms in everything from children's books to soap operas rely on an accumulation of past events to create a background history for an ongoing story. Richard Reynolds views continuity in superhero comics a kind of all-encompassing intertextuality. However, he cautions that this intertextuality not exclusively of one kind, and that often "fans tend to conflate several different types of intertextuality when using the word 'continuity.' Picking these meanings apart, it becomes possible to address some of the different levels at which the pleasure of continuity has become an expected and integral part of the pleasure of the superhero narrative."[46]

Retroactive continuity, or "retconning," is particularly relevant to cultural memory in superhero comics. Retconning is the process whereby a comic book creator in some way alters some of the events of the origin, back-story, and/or history of a particular character – changing, for example, the identity of the mugger who killed Batman's parents. Retconning is most often

utilized to literally rewrite some aspect of a character's past, in order to keep that character more contemporary (Batman could not have been active during World War II, or else he would now be in his eighties), to erase stories from continuity that no longer fit by today's standards (Batman either as carrying a gun, in his first appearances, or as a goofy, often-spacefaring, well-adjusted father figure in the 1960's), or to create future story potential (adding a character into the life of Batman from before his parents' death, who then becomes an important ally or enemy of the hero in the present day). Retconning, in fact, is the key way in which comic creators are able to combat Eco's "oneiric" problems of serial storytelling, as it allows creators to rewrite the past of characters so that they pull back from an inevitable death. Retconning is revision of the comic book universe in order to make that universe fresh and exciting for contemporary readers, but it also involves the influence of the past, as it directly inscribes itself upon that past.

Continuity extends beyond a comic book's stories into its artwork, as well. A comic book, after all, is more than just a narrative, but also a visual medium where stories are told as much by pictures as by words. As such, comic books reflect aspects of visual culture where images can and should be viewed as texts, as objects responded to by readers (or fans), and/or as cross-pollinating pieces of culture.[47] It is my hope that, by examining how superhero comic book visuals are inseparably entangled with the narratives of those comic books, I will be contributing to an underexplored aspect of visual studies – the use of image as echo of story. Continuity is a *visual* process, as well as a narrative one, and the "visual echoes" that resonate throughout superhero narratives need to be considered as a part of the tapestry of their continuity.

As comic book writer and former DC Comics editor Denny O'Neil cautions, continuity can overpower storytelling by taking center-stage over plotting and characterization:

> I did not believe that . . . a story should be done simply to serve continuity. Something that happened in 1945 in some issue of some old comic book didn't make sense, and it has boiled in the soul of some fan turned writer and he gets a chance to correct it. That's a fine thing to do, provided you don't have to read the earlier story and provided you get a good story out of it. That was always the litmus. But as far as the rest of it went, I felt this is a tool that's in our kit and we should not ignore it, but the important thing is to deliver a good narrative, not to serve this kind of pseudo-historicity.[48]

To some, then, continuity is simply a writer's technique that amplifies a story. However, over the years, comic's writers and publishers have attempted to create stories which *forefront* continuity over every other aspect of the story, in order to rationalize various aspects of the chaotic fictional universe.

The biggest of these rationalization attempts was DC Comics' mid-1980s epic crossover story, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. In *Crisis*, writer/editor Marv Wolfman, working with all of the other editors and creators at DC, took the "multiverse" of alternate versions of the company's characters (each existing in a separate dimension) and brought it together into a single universe, without the many variants of individual characters running around. By creating this new cohesive universe that combined characteristics of the various worlds of the multiverse, *Crisis* was in many ways the ultimate retcon. It completely and literally rewrote the entire history of the DC Universe, making it so that those stories that occurred pre-Crisis had, for the characters, never actually happened. Although the readers and creators still remembered those stories, the characters within the fictional realm did not. The massive retcon of *Crisis* erased their original history and replaced it, rewrote it, with a new one.

Crisis, then, served, and still serves, as a crucial moment of continuity change, what I call a "continuity node," a moment that enacts a revisionist change on a superhero *universe*, not just within an individual story. When speaking of continuity nodes, I am referring to a literal kind of "revisionism" that rewrites the serial universe, an actual *event* of some magnitude which "revises" past stories, the possibilities for future stories, or, frequently, both. Continuity nodes need not be retcons, but are events which enact some fundamental, lasting change that is reflected across the publishing line,[49] such as the death of a major character or a crucial moment that becomes a part of that character's history and which cannot be ignored (except, of course, by retconning it out of existence).

Though most continuity nodes reflect a change of either serial or synchronic continuity – some major battle or change in a character's powers/costume that is then reflected throughout the

line – some, like *Crisis*, are also sites of retroactive continuity, wherein the story also serves as a re-telling, a re-writing, of past stories. It was out of a fondness for such older stories, and a desire to see them retold and retconned, and their characters revived, that comic book fandom itself was born.

FANDOM

A "fan," according to the Oxford English dictionary, is short for a "fanatic," and was first used to refer to, "a keen and regular spectator of a (professional) sport."[50] Comic book fans, then, are the "keen followers" of the hobby of reading and/or collecting comic books, with various habits and personal preferences associated with that process. Media scholar Matt Hills forefronts this massive variety fan types as being crucial to fandom itself: "My argument is that fan cultures cannot be pinned down through singular theoretical approaches or singular definitions."[51] Fandom, he insists, is performative in nature, not simply a "thing" but an essentially contradictory process, a dialectic of "betweens" rather than of "either/ors."[52] Cornell Sandvoss similarly insists on "a definition of fandom focusing on fan practices,"[53] which he finds much more fluid and open than focusing on the actual objects of fannish interest. Like Hills, this leads Sandvoss to point out the performative nature of fandom. "Fan" is not an easy cultural position to define critically, either in general or specifically in reference to comic book fandom, as it is a process and performance rather than a solidly defined identity.

Comic book fans are a multivarious lot, with a wide array of tastes, interests, activities, backgrounds, and performances of their fandom. It would be virtually impossible to explore how cultural memory operates for all of these fans, particularly since many of them may not share their hobby with anybody other than themselves. *Organized* fandom, though – the group of readers who turn their love of comics into a social experience, whether that be through fan-created periodicals (termed "fanzines"), online message boards, local stores and clubs, or large-scale conventions – is a bit easier to examine. It is this view/definition – individual readers of a cultural text whose interpretations and usage of that text contribute to its meaning – that I will be

referring to when I use the term "fan" in this dissertation. These are the types of fans who produce fanzines, organize conventions, and ultimately even become creators of the cultural product that they follow.

Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* offered one of the first sustained explorations of this sort of organized fandom, analyzing a community of romance novel readers and exploring not just the various ways of reading a text, but also the ways in which those interpretations prove meaningful to readers. The focus of the study is on how this community of women integrates the texts that they read for pleasure into their actual lived experiences. Though this could lead to a theoretically infinite number of possible real-life mobilizations of a fictional text, Radway argues that,

> In fact, there are patterns or regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location. Similar readings are produced … because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes that they bring to bear upon the texts that they encounter.[54]

Much like Radway's romance readers, comic book readers tend to fluctuate between a certain set of interpretations of the texts they encounter, which accounts for the very possibility of a shared culture built around those interpretations. As such, any analysis of comic books should, as Radway proposes, reflect the reading/interpretation system brought to the text by the readers themselves.[55] An understanding of fan *culture* is central to a full understanding of the fan-followed texts themselves, and the two are invariably linked.

For fans, as for readers, each encounter with a text brings different meanings to different (or even the same) readers, with a variety of influences on them, contingent upon time, place, situation, etc.[56] "Active" fandom is not just defined by those who write fan fiction, attend conventions, or start letter writing campaigns. Instead, fandom is *inherently* active in the ways in which it wrestles with texts and tries to not only understand them but also implement them in fans' live. Because of this, fans are not "cultural dupes," but rather a heterogeneous body of people, with various viewpoints and opinions, who are often aware of the ways in which cultural

objects can be manipulative, either deliberately or unconsciously. These fans are active ones even if they are just reading or viewing a text, because they are taking an active role in interpreting the text as a part of their being fans of that text. This is something that can be seen in comics fandom through the various, often heated, discussions and arguments in letters columns and on internet message boards regarding multiple ways of interpreting a particular comic.

In this vein, Henry Jenkins proposes a model of fandom wherein fans are not only not "duped" by mass culture, but also in fact become cultural producers themselves as a part of their fannish activity.[57] This model, organized around fans' cultural production, operates on at least five levels: "fans adopt a distinctive mode of reception,"[58] "fandom constitutes a particular interpretive community,"[59] "fandom constitutes a particular art world,"[60] "fandom constitutes an alternative social community,"[61] and fandom serves as "a base for consumer activism."[62] Jenkins notes that fans' activities, "pose important questions about the ability of media producers to constrain the creation and circulation of meanings. Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media."[63] He mirrors Jolie Jenson's contention that fandom has been pathologized in a way that is injurious to, "what it means to desire, cherish, seek, long, admire, envy, celebrate, protect, ally with others."[64] As a result, by insulting fans, society only hurts itself. Both Jenson and Jenkins stand against this pathologization, arguing instead that fandom needs to be explored very much *as* an exemplar of the kind of community-building that is so important to our common life.

Jenkins believes that audiences express their fandom, in part, through a collective repudiation of the "cultural dupe" or "mindless consumer" prejudices they may face. Indeed, he notes that, "fans often draw strength and courage from their ability to identify themselves as members of a group of other fans who shared common interests and confront common problems."[65] This collectivity, in and of itself, speaks against the idea that fans are individually

obsessive "misfits," and displays that to be a fan, "is to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic."[66]

There is, inherent in Jenkins' conceptualization of it, a communal aspect to fandom, which always has been tied to the organized comic book fandom that has created the kind of cultural memory/memories I will be discussing. Jenkins, however, goes even further, noting that a "fan" is also somebody who reckons with the object of his or her fannish affection, actively engaging with it through their own "cultural productions" which "poach" from their favorite cultural products. Likewise, the fans in my analysis are active, producing magazines about their favorite comic book stories, creators, and characters, and organizing conventions where they could meet face to face. Some even became professional comic book creators themselves, thus actively shaping the very object of their fandom.

However, the very same fans, in the process of this "poaching," have, at times, displayed an antagonistic attitude towards particular comic books, out of a desire to see that future comic books "improve" in a way that better corresponds with their view of what makes for a pleasurable reading experience. Jenkins argues that, "Because the texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them from their attention but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests.[67]" Because these fans wrestle with the meanings and interpretations, they "actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions."[68] This process is, as Jenkins explains elsewhere, akin to a "revitalization" of older folk cultures in response to the mass culture of capitalist society.[69]

I consider myself firmly ensconced in what Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jan Shattuc refer to as aca-fandom, an academic who is also a professed fan of the material she or he is studying.[70] I collected and read comic books long before I became a scholar, and will likely continue to be a fan after I have moved on to other academic projects. I go to a comic shop on a

weekly basis where I engage in conversation about my favorite books with other customers and with the staff. I have attended comic book conventions for fun, to present papers on academic panels, and to interview participants as a researcher. My interest in comic books is tied to my identities as both a fan and a scholar. This work will continually reflect my position as an "aca-fan." I approach comic books, creators, and fans with a personal knowledge of the medium, industry, characters, and creators gained out of a fans' love for the source material, but with the critical, interventionist modality of a scholar.

As we shall see when we take a look at the advent of comic's fandom, the comic book industry and medium *had* no history until fans developed a cultural memory for it. The early history of comics, and much of the history written, examined, and re-examined since those early days of fandom, was literally a product of the cultural memory of fandom, and the two have remained tightly interwoven ever since.[71] Comics studies is thus a fairly unique avenue of academia, in that it is impossible to separate what is "fannish" work from what is "scholarly" work. Although this will be a work of scholarship, it is also the work of a fan. It is made possible in the first place by my own fannish interest in the characters, creators, texts, and fellow fans I will be discussing.

This, however, is nothing new. From the beginning, comics historians were "aca-fans." Jerry Bails, for one, often considered the "father of comics fandom," was a college professor when he published the first comics fanzine. Fans typically did not let their nostalgia blind them to the problems of the texts they were looking at. In many ways, fannish histories of comics and academic histories of comics are practically indistinguishable. Gerard Jones' 2004 *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*, for example, has become a canonical text of comics history, but it was created by a professional comics writer, and a comics fan, for a popular, non-academic audience. In most ways, the difference between fan writing and academic writing, when it comes to comics, is just a matter of tone and audience. Thus, I will be

freely quoting from both kinds of writing throughout this dissertation, keeping in mind the tone/audience of each kind of source.

I do not, however, want to overstate the importance of the "aca-fan." Even fans who do not think of themselves as aca-fans are continually critical and interventionist in regards to the comic books that they are passionate about. Whether "fan" or aca-fan, as Jenkins notes, "fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings."[72] It is in this vein that comic book fans become the very keepers of cultural memory, constantly commenting upon and referring to old stories (both those fictional stories featured in the comics books, and the behind-the-scenes stories about the people and companies creating the books), and utilizing those stories and memories in order to create new cultural products that reflect upon their own history. Jenkins comments upon this sort of creativity, noting that, "there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives. Fandom celebrates not exceptional texts but rather exceptional readings."[73]

This type of "exceptional reading," of course, applies directly to comic book fans. Though portions of it are now sadly out-of-date due to the advent of the internet and the larger popularity that "geek" culture (typically defined by heavy doses of science fiction, fantasy, and/or horror) has attained in large-scale mainstream cultural productions, Matthew J. Pustz' *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* remains one of the most in-depth analyses of comic book fandom. Drawn largely from his own ethnographic observations at comic book stores and conventions, Pustz' book examines this culture through the lens of its internal and external conflicts: "Each group of comics readers maintains its own integrity, to some degree or another, but they all still share more in common than some of their members would like to admit. What they share is a culture, a body of knowledge and information."[74] The primary division amongst comics fans, according to Pustz, is between readers of "mainstream" comics (the books, primarily about superheroes, produced by DC and Marvel, as well as other large publishers such

as Image and Dark Horse) and "alternative" comics (a term so loose that it tends to refer to everything *not* produced by those companies).

As Pustz notes, though, this division is secondary to the larger one between comic book fans and non-fans.[75] Such a clear-cut differentiation between fans and outsiders, "promotes insularity and, to go along with it, a certain amount of postmodern self-referentiality that is the source of part of readers' pleasure in comic books," although at the same time it, "prevents people who might otherwise be interested in the medium from taking part."[76] This insularity is in part caused, Pustz argues, by a kind of "comics literacy," based on the visual grammar of the comics medium, the body of knowledge and back story related to particular texts, the intertextual continuity of comic book universes, and, in many cases, the knowledge and appreciation of the superhero genre possessed by regular readers.

Comics literacy is gained through experience with comics and their artistic and storytelling possibilities. Though it is a shared body of knowledge, each reader comes upon it by him or herself, as a skill accumulated over time. There is no ur-text that serves as a repository for comics literacy;[77] rather, that literacy is a practice embodied by each reader. The literacy and active dedication of the fan community has helped develop a cultural memory for both the comic book industry and the comic book medium. These types of fans are/were involved in their own forms of cultural production, creating their own comics, analyzing the comics they love and/or hate, and organizing conventions and other get-togethers. However, Pustz notes that these types of fans are less prevalent today, and that the "uninvolved" fan, the "regular readers who do not or cannot get involved with any of these activities yet remained devoted to and identify with comic books," should certainly still be considered an important part of fandom.[78] However, in considering the cultural memory of comic books and comic book fandom, as this dissertation does, it is the organized fans who *are* involved in such activities that need to be examined.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 will serve as a historical introduction to the topic, discussing the rise of comics fandom as a necessary precursor to the development of continuity in superhero comics. I argue that fandom and continuity work in combination to *create* a body of cultural memory within the comics industry, which allows for the kind of looking-backwards and retconning that would go on to become a definitive aspect of the superhero genre. Chapter 2 explores the first and most prominent example of superhero comics' obsession with the past, in the form of the continual reinvention of the first team of superheroes, the Justice Society of America. Because the Justice Society's origins are tied so inherently to a Great Depression/World War II milieu, stories featuring the team look back upon the 1930s and 40s even when they are set in the present era (though, frequently, they are set in the earlier time period outright). Examining several iterations of the Justice Society, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, allows us to see the American's changing cultural views in regards to "The Good War," including the rise of cultural studies and historical revisionism, which called the grand narratives of history into question. Chapter 3 follows the character of Captain America, providing a close reading of the multiple retellings of his origins as a "super soldier" of WWII. By modifying particular elements of the various iterations of Captain America's origin story, different creators have been able to craft varying, and sometimes contradictory, messages in regards to not only World War II, but also their own contemporary world. We can thus see not only the changing ways in which Americans have remembered their past, but we can also examine how those evolving memories have been used as commentary on present-day issues.

Chapter 4 moves from a World War II super soldier to two "ordinary" soldiers of that war, DC Comics' Sgt. Rock and Marvel Comics' Sgt. Fury. I look at the ways in which both characters, originally featured in "realistic" war comics, have been both integrated and separated from their respective publishers' superhero "universes" over the years. This back-and-forth between continuity and stand-alone stories shows the limitations of that continuity. Though it may provide for a continual looking backwards, it also ensures that characters like Rock and

Fury, who are part of the contemporary superhero universes, survive conflicts like World War II and the Vietnam War thanks to almost superhuman abilities. It is this tension between the fantastical and the realistic, explored both in and out of the superhero continuities, that certain creators have utilized in order to tell dark stories about the nature of warfare and its role in history. Chapter 5 considers the Punisher, a Marvel Comics character, to explore how superhero comics have dealt specifically with the Vietnam War. Frank Castle, the Punisher, is a Vietnam veteran traumatized by witnessing the deaths of his family who took his grief and channeled it into becoming an urban vigilante. However, future stories would transfer the source of that trauma to earlier in his life, during the war, itself. Though initially a part of Marvel's superhero universe, the Punisher frequently has been separated from that universe in order to tell out-of-continuity stories focusing on a darker, more realistic world in which the trauma of Vietnam on both individual veterans and the national psyche is unaffected by the existence of virtuous heroes. Portrayals of the Punisher from the 1970s through today have, much like Justice Society stories did with World War II, shown an evolving American view of the Vietnam War, especially in regards to its aftereffects.

Chapter 6 moves away from the "ordinary men" of the previous two chapters and focuses firmly on perhaps the most extraordinary, fantastical narrative in the entire history of superhero comics, DC Comics' massive mid-1980s mini-series *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. Though an attempt to make DC's publications more accessible to first-time readers, *Crisis* ultimately served to cement continuity as the most important element of superhero comics, serving as the birthplace of modern, obsessive superhero comic continuity. As such, it is important to examine *Crisis*, and the way in which it rewrote DC's fictional past, in order to show how superhero comics have come to view the past as entirely mutable. Chapter 7 explores this process, as initiated by *Crisis*, at work two decades later in a post-9/11 context. I examine both DC and Marvel Comics' reactions and responses to the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, through the following decade's worth of *Crisis*-inspired line-wide crossover stories. The stories show, in

varying ways, how the preponderance of technology and new media in the 21st century has created a new sort of cultural memory, one that memorializes the recent past while the effects of the events being memorialized are still being felt and understood. The post-9/11 crossovers perpetuated by DC and Marvel, through their increasingly complex continuity, validate obsession with the past by crafting narratives which can only be understood by those with specialized knowledge of the publishers' historical narratives. Through looking at these crossovers we can see how, more than ever, the way that the past is remembered is increasingly important to the present.

Coming out of these crossovers, both DC and Marvel have crafted major publishing initiatives designed to bring in new or lapsed readers. DC's "New 52," an unprecedented relaunch of their entire line with new first issues, is an attempt to dramatically break ties with the past, as a way of embracing the future. Marvel's "Marvel NOW!" initiative, though seemingly similarly obsessed with the new/now, is actually more conservative, embracing both narrative history and real-life history as a way of appealing to readers through grounding stories in the familiar. My conclusion will touch upon the publishers' approaches to show how the dialectic with the past – whether it be through ignoring or embracing it – is crucial to the constitutive continuity of superhero comics, and that those comics will therefore continue to be a fruitful site to explore as a way of gouging how American culture engages with its past.

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[1] "DC Comics" and "Marvel Comics" are the contemporary corporate names of the two leading superhero comic book publishers, which are the economic backbone of the comic book industry. Both companies have long histories, including several name changes and mergers. For the sake of clarity and ease, though, throughout this dissertation I will refer to each company's predecessor by their contemporary name, unless explicitly stated otherwise. For more on the history of both companies, though, see Gerard Jones' rich narrative Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book (New York: Basic Books, 2004), and Shirrell Rhoades' more sparse and diagramtic A Complete History of American Comic Books (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

[2] Carl Jung, "The concept of the Collective Unconscious," in The Portable Jung, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 60.

[3] Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Third Edition (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 330.

[4] This appeal is embodied in the excitement that fans and creators feel in the return of a favorite character – whether it is from the dead or from corporate limbo – to the overarching narrative of the comic book "universe." See, for example, the coverage of the return to the DC Universe of the character John Constantine. Venita Rogers, "Jonathan Vankin on the New DC Universe JOHN CONSTANTINE" (Newsarama.com, May 3, 2011),

http://www.newsarama.com/comics/jonathan-vankin-dcu-john-constantine-110503.html (accessed on June 14, 2011).

[5] See Sam Ford and Henry Jenkins, "Managing Multiplicity in Superhero Comics: An Interview with Henry Jenkins," in Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 13.

[6] For example, the geography of these fictional universes is so well defined that both DC Comics and Marvel Comics have, at different points, each published "atlases" of their worlds. See Paul Kupperberg, The Atlas of the DC Universe (Niles, IL: Mayfair Games Inc., 1990), and Michael Hoskin, head writer/coordinator, Marvel Atlas (New York: Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2008).

[7] Astrid Erill, "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction," in A Companion To Cultural Memory Studies, ed. Astrid Erill and Ansgar Nunning (Germany: De Gruyter, 2010), 2.

[8] Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian (Presidential Address delivered before the American Historical Association at Minneapolis, December 29, 1931)," The American Historical Review 37.2 (Jan. 1932): 227.

[9] Ibid.

[10] The origin of the general concept of cultural memory can be traced back to French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who first posited the idea of "collective memory" in his 1925 work, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* ("*The Social Frameworks of Memory*"). In Halbwachs' original formulation, these titular frameworks are, "precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society." Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory, ed./transl. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40.

[11] Renate Lachmann, "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature" in A Companion To Cultural Memory Studies (Germany: De Gruyter, 2010), 301.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," transl. Marc Roudebush, Representations 26 (Spring, 1989): 7.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid, 18.

[17] Ibid, 8.

[18] Much more on this idea of rewriting/forgetting memory in comic book universes can be found in chapter 7 of this dissertation, about the DC Comics series *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

[19]Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," transl. Marc Roudebush, Representations 26 (Spring, 1989): 12.

[20] Ibid, 13.

[21] Ibid, 14.

[22] Ibid, 24.

[23] See Michael Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 6.

[24] Ibid, 9.

[25] Ibid, 13.

[26] As an example of conflicting memories at work in the realm of comics history, there is an ongoing debate about the roles played by Stan Lee, as writer, and Jack Kirby (amongst others, such as Steve Ditko and Don Heck), as artist, in the creation of most of the characters and concepts that would come to populate the Marvel Universe. Some see Lee and Kirby as co-creators, others find Lee to be more important as the source of the plots and storylines, and still others believe Kirby is most responsible, as he would take Lee's loose plots and bring his own, original concepts to the table. All of these positions are supported by the conflicting memories of Lee and Kirby themselves, as well as those of others who worked at Marvel in the early 1960s.

This took on an immediate pertinence in the court case of *Marvel Worldwide, Inc., et al v. Kirby et al*, in which Jack Kirby's heirs claimed ownership of many of the Marvel characters that Kirby worked on. The case – ultimately won by Marvel – relied upon depositions of many of the key figures at Marvel in those years, including Lee himself (Kirby passed away in the early 1990s), and not all of their memories sync up. Much of the cultural memory of these books, insofar as who their "creators" are is concerned, is thus tied up in conflicting personal memories.

As Kirby protégé and comics historian Mark Evanier testified in his deposition (he was hired by the Kirby family as an expert on Jack Kirby's life and career), "I think there are things you can say that are simply common sense, because I don't think that either Stan's or Jack's accounts exactly match the physical evidence of the printed comic that resulted. But I think it is possible to come to a scenario . . . that allows for the fact that at various stages there's the Stan Lee version, and the Jack Kirby version, and they could in some cases both be true based on interpretation of certain words, certain verbs . . .. not to say either Stan's version was completely correct or Jack's version was completely correct, because I don't think either one of those tells the entire story. But they are not – it is wrong to say that they are in complete conflict." See Daniel Best, "Marvel Worldwide, Inc. et al v. Kirby et al – Mark Evanier Speaks," March 9, 2011, http://ohdannyboy.blogspot.com/2011/03/marvel-worldwide-inc-et-al-v-kirby-et_09.html (accessed July 18, 2011).

[27] Arthur G. Neal, National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience, Second Edition (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 7.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 2.

[30] Ibid, 11.

[31] As Sturken notes, "We live in a society in which commercialization and marketing tactics are so pervasive, in which the boundaries of art, commodity, and remembrance are so easily traversed, and in which merchandise is so often grassroots-produced that it no longer makes sense, if it ever did, to dismiss commodities as empty artifacts." See Ibid, 11-12.

[32] Ibid, 13.

[33] Ibid, 259.

[34] DC Comics is corporately owned by Time Warner.

[35] Lance Parkin, "Truths Universally Acknowledged: How the 'Rules' of *Doctor Who* Affect the Writing," in Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 13.

[36] Paul Cornell and Kate Orman, "Two Interviews about *Doctor Who*," in Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 36.

[37] Adam C. Murdough, "Worlds Will Live, Worlds Will Die: Myth, Metatext, Continuity and Cataclysm in DC Comics' *Crisis On Infinite Earths*" (master's thesis, Bowling Green State University, August 2006), 15, 32.

[38] Ibid, 31.

[39] Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," in Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium, ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 148. Emphasis in original.

[40] Ibid, 150.

[41] Ibid. Emphasis in original.

[42] Ibid, 153.

[43] For more information on this era, see Pierre Comtois' excellent, if somewhat hyperbolic, Marvel Comics in the 1960s: An Issue By Issue Field Guide To A Pop Culture Phenomenon (Raleigh, North Carolina: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2009).

[44] Kevin Gould, "Considering The Alternative: The Theories of Aging in Comic Books," Amazing Heroes 134, February 1, 1988, 43-48.

[45] Ibid, 47.

[46] Richard Reynolds, Superheroes: A Modern Mythology (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 38.

[47] See Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

[48] Alex Dueben, "Denny O'Neil Travels Back, Looks Forward," Comic Book Resources, July 27, 2011, http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=33579 (accessed July 27, 2011).

[49] Change in superhero comic books is rarely truly "lasting," as sooner or later every character appears to die and/or comes back from the dead. However, for my purposes, I'm discussing changes that last for at least several years, if not decades, thus having time to influence and be reflected by dozens, or even hundreds, of books that follow in the wake of that moment of change.

[50] Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, 1989; online version, June 2011. http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/68000 (accessed on June 17, 2011).

[51] Matt Hills, Fan Cultures (London: Routledge, 2002), xiii.

[52] Ibid, 182.
[53] Cornell Sandvoss, Fans (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 6.
[54] Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 8.
[55] Ibid.
[56] See Lawrence Grossberg, "The Affective Sensibility of Fandom," in The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 52.
[57] As Matt Hills notes, though, Jenkins has a particular motivation behind his project: "Jenkins's work . . . needs to be viewed not simply as an example of academic-fan hybridity, but also as a rhetorical tailoring of fandom in order to act upon particular academic institutional spaces and agendas. Fandom, for Jenkins, does not play the role of a cultural object that is to be understood and represented; instead, it is a community and a term that must be translated into the shape that will allow it to act on the academic community. Fandom is *used*. However tactically, it is cut to the measure of the space which cultural studies' discourses allow it." See Matt Hills, Fan Cultures (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.
[58] Henry Jenkins, "'Strangers No More, We Sing': Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community," in The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 209.
[59] Ibid, 210.
[60] Ibid, 211.
[61] Ibid, 213.
[62] Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 278.
[63] Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.
[64] Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," in The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 27.
[65] Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 21.
[70] Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, & Jane Shattuc, "The Culture That Sticks to your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies," in Hop On Pop: The Politics and Pleasure of Popular Culture, ed. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, & Jane Shattuc (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 9.
[71] For example, the terms "Golden Age" (comics produced in the 1930s through early 1950s) and "Silver Age" (the late 1950s through early 1970s) are often ubiquitous in conversations about comics history, even in scholarly works. However, these terms reflect an aesthetic judgment and not just periodization. Comics fans created these terms in the 1960s to differentiate the then-current revitalization of superhero comics from the superhero stories they had read as children, favoring the latter stories in part thanks to the workings of memory and nostalgia. Though the two "ages" do help comics fans, creators, and scholars to talk broadly about particular eras of comics creation, the terms are less helpful when trying to trace the complexity of the history of the industry, which does not easily break down into such simple periods. As such, unless I am directly quoting from a source, I will avoid the use of these terms throughout this dissertation, and refer to specific years/dates instead.
[72] Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24.
[73] Ibid, 284.
[74] Matthew J. Pustz, Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 22.
[75] This difference, it should be noted, is probably not as large as it was when Pustz did his study, due in large part to the massive wave of popular, big-budget movies based on comic books, which has seemingly increased the number of casual comic book readers, albeit without creating enough new regular readers and/or fans to significantly impact upon sales.
[76] Matthew J. Pustz, Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 23.

[77] Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994) probably comes closest. The analytical book, in the form of a comic, details McCloud's view on how comics work, and as such often serves as an introductory text to readers in academic comics courses.
[78] Ibid.

Chapter 1 – A Fandom Of His Own: Jerry Bails and the Birth of Comics Fandom

As the 1960s dawned, organized comics fandom was seemingly dead in the water. In fact, the entire comic book industry was in bad shape following a tumultuous decade. While the industry experienced a creative boom, along with the rise of a more mature audience, it also faced a repressive lockdown in the name of making comics safe for children once again. This boom and bust had centered around EC Comics, a company founded by comics pioneer MC Gaines as "Educational Comics," and transformed by his son William, after the elder Gaines' death, into the much more successful "Entertaining Comics."[1] EC's books, under William Gaines, focused on the lurid and the extreme, revolving around tales of horror, crime, and war. However, they weren't just designed to titillate,, but rather to critique and subvert American values through satire during the early Cold War. As such, EC's books appealed to an older reading audience, particularly veterans who had received comic books as part of their World War II care packages and became hooked on the medium, but craved more mature fare than superheroes or funny animal stories. This signaled the rise of a new group of comic book readers who were old enough to respond productively and constructively to the books' creators, and to their fellow fans.

Letters to EC Comics made mention of EC fan clubs and fan-produced magazines, known as "fanzines," including such titles as *Fantasy-Comics*, *The EC Fan Bulletin*, *The Complete EC Checklist*, and numerous others. These fanzines, following the style of science fiction fanzines, featured articles about favorite EC books and creators, a letters section where fans could correspond, and advertisements for trading and selling books between fans.[2] Inspired by these fanzines, EC itself started an official fan club, "the EC Fan-Addict Club, announced in its December 1952-January 1953 publications. Membership included a certificate, an identification card, a shoulder patch, a pin, and a subscription to the EC Fan-Addict Club Bulletin."[3]

Eventually, though, the other shoe dropped. Parents and "experts" were sickened by the amount of sex and violence they were seeing produced in a medium t hat they thought was exclusively for children. Thanks in large part to the pressure of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham and his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, an "expose" of the dangers that comic books posed to children, a 1954 Congressional hearing lead by Senator Estes Kefauver pressured the comic book industry into creating its own regulatory body, akin to the film industry's Motion Picture Association of America. The self-regulating Comics Code Authority set up a series of standards that a comic book had to meet in order to receive the CCA's seal of approval. Unfortunately for EC, those standards, such as eliminating particular words from the titles of books and forbidding police or other authority figures from being seen in anything other than a positive light, struck very close to home. With the coming of the Comics Code, EC Comics was essentially forbidden from producing the kind of edgy stories that had made it so popular. The company eventually folded, continuing to produce only its humor title, *Mad*, which was converted from a comic book into a magazine format so as to avoid the strictures of the Code.[4]

With no EC Comics to center around, EC fandom similarly floundered. What comics fandom there was, in general, similarly disappeared, as the Code demanded comics be geared specifically and solely towards children, without any of the subtleties of adult material. With the loss of those adult readers, the comic book industry also lost its first flourishing of fandom; children, after all, may enjoy the comics they read, but they don't tend to write letters to one another and organize fan clubs outside of the schoolyard. Thus, by 1960, comics fandom simply did not exist. Though science fiction fandom consisted of an active, eclectic group of people, science fiction's "cousin," the comic book, was once more seen as simple child's fair, not worthy of a second glance. Until, that is, the intervention of a university professor named Jerry Bails.

This chapter will explore how the comic book industry developed its own sense of cultural memory through the activities of organized fans in the 1960s. It begins with a look at the negotiations between producers and consumers of mass cultural objects – the kinds of

negotiations embodied by the practices of fandom. I then use Bails' specific fannish activities as a framework through which to view how comics fandom (and the kinds of comics continuity and modes of storytelling that arose out of the advent of that fandom) is a preeminent example of such negotiations, particularly in regards to cultural memory. Bails' fandom arose out of utilizing the mass culture of comic books to create a sense of social identity that, from its very inception, relied upon a shared history. I argue that cultural memory in the comics industry is a co-creation of fandom and continuity, both working together to create a genre that is continually looking backwards at its own past. It is this aspect of the genre that makes it fertile ground for the exploration of changing views on history over the past seventy-five years.

SCIENCE FICTION FANDOM

Though Jerry Bails is often called the founder of comics fandom, with his fanzine *Alter Ego* as the first fan-produced journal, there were, in fact, several predecessors to this publication. The most important of these was called *Xero*, and arose out of the world of science fiction (SF) fandom, which had a history of such publications. It was this fandom, in fact, which originated the concept of fanzines in the first place, with SF fan Louis Russel Chuavenent credited for first using the term in print around 1941.[5]

Fanzines, as the name implies, are magazines made for and by fans. They express a variety of fannish desires, from connecting and sharing information with fans across the country, to providing a creative outlet for fan-produced fiction and works of art.[6] As often literally homemade products, there is a highly personalized sensibility associated with these fanzines. Produced by and for fans, they are a shared, communal enterprise, one that enables and nurtures a sense of community and culture amongst fans. Even more importantly, these fanzines keep fandom, itself, alive, allowing fans across the country, or even the world, to stay in contact with one another and discuss whatever issues they feel the need to talk about.

Fanzines and fandom thus go hand-in-hand, one perpetuating the other in a cyclical process. This give and take began in 1930 (though the term "fanzine" wouldn't be used for

several more years, until the 1940s), with the publication of the first science fiction fanzine, *The Comet*. It was followed in 1932 by Julius Schwartz' (who would become an editor at DC Comics) *The Time Traveller* and, from Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster (the duo who would go on to create Superman), the plainly titled *Science Fiction*.

Young Jewish men such as Schwartz, Siegel, and Schuster dominated early science fiction fandom, much as the same demographic would dominate early comics. This was largely because, as comics historian Gerard Jones points out, the 1930s were, "a breathtaking moment for Jewish possibilities. Roosevelt had Jews in his Brain Trust and cabinet. Every intellectual and pseudointellectual in the word was citing Marx, Freud, and Einstein. The Jew haters were getting noisy again, but no one thought they could stand against the rising tide."[7] Jewish Americans dominated the country's culture industries during the Depression, running both the movie studios and Tin Pan Alley. Comics historian Danny Fingeroth expounds upon this situation, stating that, "The standard reason given for this is that Jews of that era, as immigrant outsiders or their children, could reflect a culture's values, concerns, and obsessions back at it in ways the dominant culture would find enjoyable, informative, inspiring, and entertaining. One could argue this was simply a way of making a living in a culture where many 'legitimate' avenues of advancing were still closed."[8] The avenues of expression and financial success afforded by popular culture, then, were both something that Jews in this era, as "outsiders" to mainstream American culture, held a special affinity for, as well as simply being a path that was open to them in a society that still contained anti-Semitic restrictions.

Because of this duel operation of restriction and opportunity, many Jews were not only producers of popular culture, but were also avid consumers of it. Thus, they became organized fans of that most starry-eyed and utopian of popular culture expressions – science fiction, with its overt concern with both the future and with the farthest extent of human (and superhuman) ability. As Jones puts it, "these kids believed in their power and right to create their own futures."[9] Most of the central figures in the science fiction fandom that preceded comics

fandom, the very same Jewish young men who would go on to become central figures in the burgeoning comic book industry, were thus utilizing popular culture as a way of formulating their own identities. Science fiction provided them with hope for a "better" tomorrow, one more accepting of Jews and rid of the international specter of Nazism, and comics gave them a way to make the money necessary to "escape" from the often-dangerous city streets they by and large grew up on. Fandom was something they could latch onto as a way of creating social bonds with other young men who felt the same as them, creating a subculture based around a popular culture that was more embracing of Jews than was the "official" civic culture of the United States.

XERO

Though some of the publications that arose from science fiction fandom occasionally and tangentially talked about comic books, it was the EC Comics fans who put out the first fanzines dedicated specifically to comics. By the end of the 1950s, though, both EC and its fanzines were on the wane, and there was no periodical, either fan-produced or professional, that was interested in talking about superhero comics. In 1960 that all changed with the production of a new fanzine, *Xero*, by Dick and Pat Lupoff, a young married couple who were active in science fiction fandom.

When the Lupoffs began *Xero*, they saw it as more than "just" a science fiction fanzine. Rather, according to Dick Lupoff, "Science fiction fanzines at the time were expanding their interests. Some fanzines . . . were becoming more journals of contemporary popular culture. Fans were writing about music, jazz, rock and roll, movies. That was the nature of my interest in comics."[10] In contrast to Jerry Bails, this eclectic interest was at the heart of Lupoff's fandom, which centered on a variety of different media and genres, not just superhero comics. Furthermore, he saw comics as an artifact of his youth, something to look back on rather than to implement as a part of his contemporary identity.[11] For Lupoff, comics were a part of his memory, but were meant to remain there – his cultural memory of fandom was a process of recollection, rather than of creating fertile ground for present and future comics, as it would

prove to be for Bails. The Lupoffs further differed from Bails by insisting on their status as "double fans" of both comics and science fiction, rather than as the purely comics fans, who were seen as "weirdoes." Bails, on the other hand, unafraid to be a weirdo, saw himself purely as a comics and superhero fan.[12]

Beginning with the first issue of *Xero*, Lupoff indulged his "purely nostalgic" comics fandom by creating (and for the initial issue, writing) a column entitled "…And All In Color For A Dime," specifically dedicated to excavating memories of cherished childhood comics. As he later explained, "I did no research whatsoever. It was just plumbing the depths of nostalgic recollection."[13] This was not out of carelessness on Lupoff's part, but rather out of necessity. Quite simply, before the column in *Xero*, there were virtually no research or reference works about comic books that he could even use.

"Nostalgic recollection," as the first stage of a developing cultural memory for comics, the first performance of the "repertoire" of fandom, was to become a staple of the column, which varied in tone from pure memory to careful criticism. As Lupoff (with co-editor Don Thompson) would explain in *All In Color For A Dime*, a collection of the column,

> [E]ach author, as they came around, dredged up memories of his own favorite childhood comic hero, and reinforced them with the aid of decades-old comic books . . . Each author was asked to be a three-headed monster, one head being that of a misty-eyed nostalgic, another that of a bibliographically inclined research scholar, and the third that of a social-literary-artistic critic. All of the authors succeeded, although the emphasis naturally varies from piece to piece—some are mostly critical, some are mostly nostalgia.[14]

In the first column, "The Big Red Cheese," appearing in the initial issues of *Xero*, Lupoff himself wrote about his childhood hero Captain Marvel, and set the tone for the articles to come. The nostalgic tinge to the column is reflected in Lupoff's opening line: "One balmy winter's day . . . [many] years ago, in the sunbaked village of Venice, Florida, two small boys dressed in tee shirts, short pants, and sneakers wandered into the town drug store."[15] This air of reminiscence is then specified to the experience of purchasing a particular comic book, featuring Captain Marvel. From its very beginning, *Xero*'s "…And All In Color For A Dime" was focused on the mixing of

personal memory and comics, especially superhero comics. As Bill Schelly would point out in an interview with Lupoff, "it's a very nostalgic article so the information was less important than the feel … and the memories." Lupoff would also note that the column's, "function is hindsight, not foresight."[16]

"The Big Red Cheese" created interest in reminiscing and writing about comic books amongst science fiction fans who had memories of reading them. As Lupoff recalls,

> I invited all and sundry to contribute articles to the series, hoping merely to get material for future issues of *Xero*. The response was just overwhelming! We had really tapped into something. Because nobody was paying any attention to comics in those days, especially to old comics. There was this whole generation of people walking around who had grown up on them, so once the spark was lit things just took off.[17]

Within the SF fandom that the Lupoffs were a part of was a group of comics fans who were just waiting for the chance to discuss and share their hobby, or at least to share memories of it as a youthful hobby long since past. They found their first outlet for this in "…And All In Color For A Dime," and many would go on to become prolific fan, and professional, writers. According to Lupoff, "most of the writers in *Xero* went on to professional careers – those who weren't already pros when they came to us. Several of them expanded essays they'd written for *Xero* into successful books."[18]

The articles in the column would maintain the tinge of nostalgia that Lupoff had inaugurated, often featuring reminiscences rather than hard research, and with an aim towards recalling the past rather than using that past for any present or future concerns. In part this was because, as has been previously noted, there were no other sources to consult for such research, as many of the comics themselves had become rarities over the years and virtually no second-hand sources yet existed. "…And All In Color For A Dime" was not just the first fan writing about superhero comics, but also the first *historical* writing about superhero comics, the beginning of comics' development of a system of archival cultural memory. Columns would include Ted White's "The Spawn of M.C. Gaines," providing perhaps the first general history of the superhero, with a focus on Superman and Batman; Don Thompson's "OK, Axis, Here We

Come," examining Marvel comics' World War II era characters; comics historian Ron Goulart's "The Second Banana Superheroes," surveying a huge swath of lesser known superheroes from the early years of comics; science fiction author Harlan Ellison's "Comic of the Absurd," featuring his memories of and thoughts about George Carlson's *Jingle Jangle Comics*; and Roy Thomas' "Captain Billy's Whiz-Gang!," a look at the other Fawcett Comics heroes besides Captain Marvel.[19] Meanwhile, as these columns started to appear, Jerry Bails, a man with little to no knowledge of science fiction fandom or of *Xero*, was in the process of jump-starting his own form of comic book fandom.

PROFESSOR BAILS

Jerry Bails was an active reader, writer, and artist practically from birth, though he would not become a "fan" until much later in life. Born in 1933, he was raised in Kansas City, Missouri, and became a life-long comic book fan when he first encountered DC Comics' *All-Star Comics* #6, featuring the world's first team of superheroes, the Justice Society of America. His love affair with the Justice Society would last his entire life, and ultimately change the face of comics fandom and, indeed, comics history.

His litany of fandom-related accomplishments included creating three fanzines (*Alter-Ego*, *The Comic Reader*, and *The Comicollector*), founding the first comic book amateur press association, establishing the Academy of Comic-Book Fans and Collectors, publishing the earliest comic book date indexes, and hosting the first sizable get-together of comics fans in a "proto-comicon."[20] All this arose out of a simple boyhood love of a superhero team that featured, according to Bails, "all of my favorite heroes teaming up in a book-length adventure, fifty-eight pages for a dime. That comic book had the most profound long-term effect on me. Spotting the covers of [*All-Star Comics*] #6 and #7 were ecstatic moments for me. I can still feel a rush of endorphins just recalling the covers. I bought every issue of *All-Star* and followed the members' adventures in DC's other titles faithfully."[21] Even decades later the memory of these comics brought Bails great pleasure, showing the immense impact this moment from his past had

on him. Comics would become such a part of his makeup and his values that, soon after asking his second wife to marry him, he would tell her, "There is something you should know about me before you make a final decision to marry me."[22] When he told her of his comics fandom, he made sure to explain that it was a part of identity, a core aspect of him that went, "Very deep—really very deep."[23]

Bails' initial, childhood interest in comics, however, waned with the coming of the 1950s, the disappearance of the Justice Society from the publishing roster, and his graduation from high school. He would specifically note that the end of the Justice Society (and its replacement in *All-Star Comics* by a series of western tales, with the name of the book changing to *All-Star Western*[24]) prompted him to lose interest in comics. By 1960, he was married, had attained his doctorate in Natural Science, and was a professor at Wayne State University. During the intervening decade, though, his affection for his boyhood comic book heroes didn't fade, and he struck up a correspondence with the writer of the Justice Society's adventures, Gardner Fox. Fox, in fact, sold Bails his bound collection of the entire run of *All-Star Comics*, thus allowing him to read each and every story featuring the JSA (as the Justice Society was called). Bails would later explain his love for the supergroup:

> The Justice Society was an egalitarian group of psychologically mature adults, not a pack of adolescent neurotics who needed a father-figure to keep them in line. While the JSA did elect a chairman, the chairman never bossed around the other members. In my youth, I didn't fantasize about being a kid with super-powers who was able to get away with murder and mayhem, I fantasized about being an adult superhero capable of putting the world in right order.[25]

He expands on this personal analysis, noting that the JSA appealed to him specifically as a child of his era, looking up to the superheroes as adult role models: "Obviously, for me, the JSA speaks to some very fundamental idealism in my generation. Or maybe it speaks to the idealism of the men of the generation that preceded me. Clearly, it is Camelot-inspired."[26] Bails would looks back on this childhood idealism as a clear influence on his future, a core part of his ultimate personal makeup. Reminiscent of Joseph Campbell (a scholar whose work he was

likely to have read in his professional career), Bails notes that, "A culture passes on its values through stories, and I credit comics with shaping many of my values."[27] He also pontificates that, "I've often wondered how my youthful idealism prepared me for the real world . . .. Maybe I can't answer that question objectively, but I do know that having a vision of a better world presented to me in such an engaging fashion must have had a profound impact on me."[28]

Having seemingly abandoned these feelings as he grew older, Bails' professed desire for order and idealism as embodied in the world of comic book superheroes was renewed when he noticed the appearance of a new version of Justice Society hero the Flash in DC's *Showcase* #13, in January 1958. He then began to consider the potential for more revivals of defunct superheroes, up to and including the full JSA. He was and would remain quite nostalgic about the Justice Society and his interest in the superhero comics of the 1960s was sustained by that focus on the past. What he ultimately got, however, was not the old JSA, but rather a different, updated superteam – the Justice *League* of America, first appearing in 1959's *Brave and Bold* #28. As Bails pondered ways to "support and encourage this exciting development," he received a letter from a young man who would come to be perhaps the second most important figure in first wave comic book fandom – Roy Thomas.[29]

Though younger than Bails by several years, Thomas, too, had grown up reading the JSA's adventures in the pages of *All-Star Comics* (albeit not at their time of original publication), and found himself enamored with the heroes of the book. [30] As he would later note in his introduction to a companion book dedicated to *All-Star Comics*, Thomas could not understand just why he was so drawn to the comic: "How to explain my lifelong love of *All-Star Comics*? Hard thing to do. Damn near impossible, in rational terms . . . Seven super-heroes were cavorting together in a book-length story, and that's all I needed to know . . . Already, on Day One of my JSA experience, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts."[31] As a teenager in the early 1960s, though, Thomas was still just a fan who treasured his memories of the JSA, memories that led him to contact Gardner Fox in order to see if he could obtain back issues. Fox

referred him to Bails, who sent Thomas some battered duplicate copies he had of *All-Star Comics* issues four through six, and a lifelong friendship was born. Their relationship initially took the form of a flurry of correspondences, with two or three letters a week passing between the two. They discussed their comics collections, proposed trades with one another, and most of all shared their admiration for DC's superhero revivals, a love that spread into public acclaim in the letters pages of books edited by Julius Schwartz, who spearheaded these reinventions of classic superheroes. According to Bails, the pair schemed to do whatever they could to keep the revival rolling: "We both bombarded DC with scores of letters. *JLA* #4 is filled with letters from me under different pen names. Don't blame Julie for this. I did everything I could to fool him, including mailing the letters from all across the country."[32]

Bails and Thomas would even work together to propose a new version of the Justice Society hero "The Atom" to Schwartz, with whom Bails had at this time struck up a personal correspondence. Bails and Thomas were clearly interested in not just reading and responding to their favorite DC comic books, but also in influencing editorial decisions and in bringing back concepts and characters that they remembered and cherished from their youths. In this case, they proposed a revival of the Justice Society member known as the Atom. Before there even was a comics fandom to speak of, they were playing the part of active, involved fans, with aspirations of becoming creators, themselves, the first generation of readers to hold such an ideal. However, the pair discovered from Schwartz that DC was already working on a new Atom, and bearing no ill will towards the publisher or the creators involved, Bails and Thomas gave up their own plans for the project and decided to use their energy and enthusiasm on an altogether different venture – *Alter Ego*, the worlds' first superhero comic book fanzine.

THE SECRET ORIGIN OF *ALTER EGO*

Before beginning *Alter Ego*, Bails was seemingly unaware of his auspicious science fiction fanzine forerunners. He would later note that, "I was never into science-fiction. Real science was more fascinating to me. So I never made any contacts with science-fiction fans until

after the first issue of *Alter-Ego*."[33] Independently, in a letter sent to Roy Thomas in early 1961, after the two had given up on the pitch for their Atom revival, Bails suggested a "JLA newsletter." In his description of the concept to Thomas, Bails appears to have little to no knowledge of the rich history of fanzines, and seems to be coming up with the concept from his own imagination:

> My thoughts for a newsletter are still pretty muddy . . . I don't want to charge for it, because that involves all sorts of complications and DC might not give their approval, and their approval is essential if I am to get the kind of advance info I need for a good sheet . . . The number of *JLA* fans over 18 shouldn't be so great that I couldn't afford the postage myself, and perhaps different issues of the newsletter could originate from different fans. In other words, any one at any time might get a newsletter off to other fans.[34]

Bails was, in Bill Schelly's words, "very close to conceiving of a 'fandom' on his own."[35]

It is important to note, though, that Bails was largely motivated by childhood memories of the JSA. stated that, "Right now I think I'll send *The JLA-Subscriber* (as I might call it) only to adult readers who write in to one of Julie's magazines. This audience would supply many new ideas and help to boost the *JLA* with the younger set. They would also be interested in gossip about old JSA stories and other DC comics, and might want to trade old mags, just as we have."[36] More than just the current *JLA* series, Bails was concerned with the older characters in the JSA whose adventures he had grown up reading. He not only wanted to keep *JLA* alive by "boosting" its sales, but also wanted a group of people with whom to discuss these older stories and trade books in order to further perfect his own archive. As Peter Coogan notes, "Bails directly connected his interest in the old comics to a generational nostalgia," both looking back on the joys of reading comics as a youth and, "simultaneously looking forward to the re-creation of some of that joy through the superhero revival."[37] Bails, in essence, was not only conceiving of a fandom of his own, but also of a *cultural memory* for superhero comics via that fandom. Bails wanted to keep the memory of his cherished JSA stories alive, as well as to see new ones, and he sought to do so through connecting disparate readers with his newsletter, thereby creating a culture of comic book fans to maintain that memory.

When happenstance allowed Bails to meet Julius Schwartz in person, the accomplished editor informed Bails that such a culture was nothing new. Schwartz, in fact, was no stranger to the world of fandom. His career as a comic book editor owed no small due to his younger days as a science fiction fan, a fact he acknowledged in dedicating his autobiography, *Man of Two Worlds: My Life in Science Fiction and Fandom*, to "science fiction and comic book fans—past, present, and future."[38] In his younger days, Schwartz had co-produced, with friend Mort Weisenger, *The Time Traveller*, billed as "Science Fiction's Only Fan Magazine."[39] From these humble beginnings Weisinger and Schwartz would move on to team up and form the first literary agency focusing specifically on science fiction and fantasy writers, before they were both hired by DC Comics, becoming two of their most prolific and powerful editors.[40]

Thus it was that, when Jerry Bails and Roy Thomas began corresponding with Schwartz, the editor saw something of his own past in their efforts, and encouraged them to begin a comics fanzine in order to share their love of the medium with other readers. Schwartz, always an efficient self-promoter, takes no small amount of credit for thus helping to "found" organized comics fandom:

> One of the things that I did in the letter columns of the series that I edited was print the addresses of the correspondents. . . . Two fans by the names of Roy Thomas and Jerry Bails started to correspond with each other after having read each other's mail in my columns. . . . So, not just satisfied to be one of the founding members of science-fiction fandom, I can also claim the honor of having been a seminal part of the founding of comics fandom, as well![41]

While Schwartz's claims are hyperbolic, his encouragement of Bails was essential to the latter's movement from a private fan and reader to one who reached out to others. Even more certain is that Schwartz enabled Bails and Thomas to start *Alter Ego* by printing the addresses of correspondents to his comics, beginning with May, 1961's[42] *Brave and Bold* #35. It was through culling these addresses that the pair of fans would have the mailing list for the first issue of their soon-to-be-groundbreaking fanzine.[43]

Alter Ego

If organized superhero fandom could be given an origin point, it would be with the publication of *Alter Ego*'s first issue in 1961. The fanzine was published right as DC's revival of the superhero was gaining steam, garnering interest both from lapsed fans of DC's superheroes of the 1940s and from the new wave of readers being brought in by Schwartz' updated superheroes. Though the EC fanzines had preceded *Alter-Ego* in their discussions of comic books, this was the first fan-driven work that was interested specifically in *superhero* comic books, and it gave fans of the genre a central publication through which to converse with one another. This focus on the superhero separated it from both *Xero* and from the existent scholarship on comic *strips* by scholars such as Gilbert Seldes,[44] and since its fate didn't rely on the fortunes of one particular publisher in the way that the EC fanzines had, it was mutably able to respond to changes in the industry and amongst the vicissitudes of fans. Just as superheroes were the defining genre of the medium in its early days, their fans would ignite comics fandom in the 1960s.

From the very first issue of *Alter-Ego*, Bails forcefully expressed his love for his favorite medium and genre. In an introduction to a collection of the "best of" *Alter Ego*, Bails notes that his primary interest was in stories, storytelling, and storytellers, proclaiming that, "fandom is not just about past glories or collector mania; it's about the possibilities of self-expression, today and tomorrow . . . bringing things alive today, and lighting the way for future talents. That's what comic fandom is really about."[45] He goes on to specifically differentiate "fandom" from "collecting," the former of which he ties both to storytelling and to a sense of community that enables future stories:

> A comic is not just an artifact. It is a medium of self-expression that invites the reader to write or draw a story of his or her own. . . . Stories do that, and comics are the fertile ground in which our storytellers are born. Comics fans are themselves creators. They are the readers who don't let that first spark of inspiration die. They *fan* it, if you'll excuse the pun.[46]

It was this love of both medium and fandom that fed Bails' writing in the early issues of *Alter Ego*.

In order to obtain subscribers for the first issue, Bails sent out letters to comic readers "by the dozens" whose addresses he encountered in Schwartz' letter columns.[47] The opening note of the first issue of *Alter-Ego* (a title which was at first hyphenated, though that hyphen was later to be dropped) was written by Bails, and called, "It's A Matter Of Policy." In this introductory editorial, underneath a Justice League parody cover by Roy Thomas, Bails provided general information about how to obtain future issues and he clearly stated the publication's dedication to superheroes, specifically:

> This is the first issue of *Alter-Ego*, a new comic fanzine devoted to the revival of the costumed heroes. As you can see, it features portraits of the great heroes and villains of the comic books, stories about their creators, fiction in the best tradition of the comics, and the latest news about coming events in the fantastic world of the good 'n' the bad guys. ALTER EGO also has the regular features of any serviceable rag – it has the usual classified section and column for readers' reactions, and the margins may be used for droodles [*sic*].[48]

Here, Bails hints at the most important aspect of the fanzine, to him – that it both discusses the past and looks towards the future.

In the issue's first column, "On The Drawing Board," focusing on that summer's upcoming releases (using information given to him by Schwartz), Bails even more directly displays this combination of memorializing while simultaneously looking forward. Fortuitously, the first issue of *Alter Ego* was released shortly before issue #123 of *The Flash* would be published, a landmark issue featuring a story that would reintroduce the characters of the 1930s/40s Justice Society through the conceit that they live on a parallel world, Earth 2, that exists in a different vibratory dimension than the revived heroes' Earth 1. Looking towards the issue, Bails expressed excitement over the "story . . . which I never expected to see."[49] Here we see the crucial difference between Bails' fandom/fanzine and its predecessors, embodied by *Xero*. Whereas the Lupoffs were interested in comics as a thing of the past, only, Bails was

constantly looking towards the future. He united his nostalgia with his pleasure in reading contemporary superhero stories and formed an amalgamated fannish attitude that fondly remembered the past while also finding excitement in what was yet to come from his favorite publisher.

The feature-length articles in the first issue also show Bails' JSA focus, as he provides profiles on classic villain The Wizard and the super heroine Wonder Woman, whom Bails notes is the only Justice League member who had also been a Justice Society member, providing a locus point for a fandom interested in the linkage between the two eras of superheroes. Roy Thomas' "Bestest League of America," which parodied the contemporary Justice League, and a prose story, "The Reincarnation of the Spectre," rounded out the issue.

The dual past/future-mindedness of *Alter Ego* continued in the fanzine's second issue. Still crafted mostly by Bails and Thomas, the issue featured such articles as a comedic "Where Are They Now?" about 1930s/40 superheroes, and a completists' dream, an index of, "comics in which members of the JLA and the JSA appeared during the 1940s." In addition, this second issue featured Roy Thomas' first published article of comics history, "Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here! – Part I: The All-Winners Squad." This essay displays his recognition of the growing body of comics fandom and fan-penned scholarship. He opens by noting that,

> A recent issue of the fanzine XERO spotlighted an excellent article by Don Thompson of Cleveland, Ohio on the subject of the Timely group of comic books . . . Fortunately for those others of us who like to write articles about comic-book heroes, Don left uncovered a few items of interest to fans. One of the most important of these, I believe, is the All-Winners Squad, an apparently stillborn JSA-type group . . .[50]

By the time of *Alter Ego*'s second issue, then, there was already a sort of cross-communication between it and *Xero*, a conversation taking place between two different, and central, fanzines. In talking about "those others of us who like to write articles about comic-book heroes," Thomas is noting that fandom's excavation of the archive of comics history is a group project, one that each article contributes to in its own way.

Thomas' contribution, in this instance, is an examination of Timely (the original name for Marvel) Comics' team of superheroes, the All-Winners' Squad, which only ever appeared in two issues of Timely's *All Winners Comics*, though at the time of this article Thomas only had managed to track down one of those issues, #21.[51] His examination was of one singular issue of a decades-old comic book that happened to hold particular value to him because it was one of only two occasions where the classic Timely characters of the Human Torch, the Sub-Mariner, and Captain America appeared side-by-side, inspired by DC's Justice Society. Thomas and Bill Schelly later noted the importance of such an article, stating that, "The fact that Roy would write, and Jerry would publish, an article about a single issue of a 1947 comic . . . shows how eager both were to fill gaps in comic book history, and how dedicated they were to the Justice Society and its various offshoots, past and present."[52]

Bails and Thomas were dedicated in *Alter Ego* to a project of "comic book history," of *creating* a written history for an industry/medium that had never had one. They understood that they were part of a movement to create a new identity, that of the "comics fan," and that in order to gain the respect of other, related fandoms, such as science fiction fandom, they needed to draw from the cultural capital of a rich history. The creation of such a history was thus one part of a larger project of creating a cultural identity for fandom.

This was the very beginning of the collaborative project of creating comics' cultural memory alongside comics fandom's identity. In future issues of *Alter Ego* that project would continue, with the roster of contributors expanding beyond just Bails and Thomas. However, it would be Bails' article in the third issue, "And Then There Was Light – The Light of the Green Lantern," that most clearly highlighted the devotion to chronicling comics' history. As the essay opens, Bails notes that, despite talk of "a revival of the costumes heroes," he is only seeing some, "long-dead heroes from the glorious forties . . . revived and updated for the modern comic book market, and a few 'new' heroes . . . a grand total of just about two dozen. This is nothing – but *nothing*!"[53] Bails wanted to see a return to "the days just before World War II, [when] more

heroes than this were created in a single month."[54] Ruminating on this, he states that, "Just for fun I sat down the other evening to see how many of these costumed heroes I could list from memory. When I hit a hundred I stopped; but as a preliminary survey of my files shows, I wasn't even halfway through the costumed heroes that were on the scene by the time America entered the war."[55] After noting that these heroes disappeared after World War II ("a story too painful to relate"), he finally arrives at the focus of the article to come: "My task is to tell you what I can about one of the most bizarre supermen of them all – the original Green Lantern."[56]

In this short, two-paragraph introduction to a much longer essay examining the history of the Green Lantern and his creators, Bails defines the parameters of his ongoing project more clearly than anywhere else. He is interested in looking back at the past of these colorful characters, providing a history of them and a retelling of their most important and potent stories, but also in seeing a present/future proliferation of heroes to rival the amount he encountered in his youth. As Thomas and Schelly note, "Jerry's piece, the longest to appear in *AE* up to that time, clearly shows his bent for research, and his talent for sharing it with others."[57]

Bails' memory of his boyhood heroes was not mere nostalgia, mired in the past, but rather a tool that he wished to use to spur on comic book publishers to create more superheroes, as well as to excite fans and readers about these heroes. The comics fandom he was conversing with is one that wants to recognize and archive its history, but that also looks to the future. He was engaging with a much larger culture of interest in (and even obsession with) the past, a process of memory that historian Raphael Samuels has described as being "an active, shaping force," "dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers," and "dialectically related to historical thought, rather than being some kind of negative other to it."[58] Samuels argues that this memory, as opposed to being the purview of academic historians, is something which all members of a culture contribute to: "history is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as postmodernism contends, a historian's 'invention.'

It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands."[59]

Bails, in this case, was providing two of those hands, contributing to a knowledge not just of older comic books, but also, through bringing those stories back to public consciousness, a broader contextual knowledge of the historical times in which those comics were created. Analyzing the original Justice Society stories of the 1940s in comparison to those stories of later decades can tell us quite a bit about the changing view of World War II over time, from the 40s to the present. The rediscovery of such stories is thus akin to another process of rediscovery from the same time period, as Samuel explains: "The discovery of printed ephemera and its incorporation into library holdings and museum displays – a phenomenon of the 1960s – has sensibly enlarged the notion of the historical, turning the spotlight of inquiry on to subjects which would have fallen beneath the dignity of the subject in the past."[60] Collectors and aesthetes, in addition to historians, have helped change our culture's understanding of its own history by memorializing "undignified" objects, such as Victorian illustrations of medieval antiques and comic books.[61]

Comics collectors/fans – especially those who would go on to becomes creators, themselves – belong in that list of "a thousand different hands." According to Samuel,

> Scavenging among what others are busily engaged in throwing out or consigning to the incinerator, [collectors] have been the true architects of our libraries, galleries and museums, and, if only at second or third remove, the Svengalis of historical research.[62]

Comics collectors and fans of the 1960s likewise felt that they were historical researchers, even if their research was fueled by personal passion rather than by academic interest in historical trends. Because of that work, recent years have seen multiple projects of comics history, along with projects of history using comics as archeological and ethnological objects of study. Jerry Bails was interested in using his own historical research for a duel purpose – not just preservation of comics' historical past, but also a utilization of that past in creating new stories that speak to a contemporary audience. In short, his was not a project of rooted, ossified

nostalgia, but of vital, fluid cultural memory, with cultural stakes in the formation of the identity of the "comics fan."

THE PROLIFERATION OF COMICS FANDOM

Bails and Thomas were not the only readers waiting for an organized movement of comics fans to develop. The reaction to *Alter Ego* was immediate and immense, spurred on in no small part by Julius Schwartz plugging the fanzine in one of his letter columns. By the third issue, Bails would need to note that, despite the fanzine being much lengthier than when it started and having a print run of over 300 copies, "As a result of the plug ALTER-EGO received in JLA #8, the demand for A-E now exceeds the supply . . . I will explore the possibilities of increasing the print run."[63] This was the full fruition of Bails' dreams for comics fandom, as he had either found or created interest in discussing superheroes amongst more fans than he could conceivably reach. However, it was not just demand for *Alter Ego* itself that had increased, thus increasing the workload of Bail's "hobby," but also the presence of other comics fanzines based on *Alter Ego*.

In reaction to these early issues of *Alter Ego*, other fans not only offered to contribute to the magazine itself, but also began creating a flurry of their own amateur publications. One such fan was G. B. Love, a motivated man in his twenties who had been born with cerebral palsy. Escaping into the pages of superhero comics as a youth, Love remained a lifelong fan, and decided to publish his own fanzine. As he recalls, "I was looking for something to occupy my time, and hoped to develop something that might eventually become profitable. My original idea was to combine sf and comics in a fanzine, but I quickly dropped the sf and concentrated on my first love, comic books."[64] Debuting in 1964, the resulting fanzine, *The Rocket's Blast*, was a true labor of love, in every sense – due to his palsy, Love would have to type each letter, one by one, using the eraser end of a pencil. Though the early issues of *The Rocket's Blast* were short (none exceeded five pages), they were nevertheless an expression of just how much comic books, and the memories of the comic books of youth, could mean to a person.

A different kind of fanzine debuted in 1962, one which was focused on something that would become a staple of comics fandom – the amateur comic strip. The first issue of *Komix Illustrated* was entirely written and drawn by Bill J. White, known by his nickname of "Biljo." White (whose other major contribution to fandom was his own "White House of Comics," a massive collection of comic books that many other fans visited and consulted), and featured his own super hero stories and creations. Later issues would contain work by writer-artists such as Ronn Foss and Richard "Grass" Green, who would become "big name fans" (a term borrowed, like so many of those in comics fandom, from science fiction fandom).[65] Other fanzines would continue to appear in the 1960s: *Batmania*, specifically for Batman fans; *The Yancy Street Journal*, focusing on Marvel Comics; and *Comic World* and *Slam-Bang*, both emphasizing longer articles.[66]

Following the creation of *Alter Ego*, Bails found himself at the center of an excited, burgeoning comics fandom. However, he was disappointed with how the fanzine had turned out: "My initial conception of *Alter-Ego* turned out to be unrealistic. I wanted well-researched articles and features, comic strips, news and ads. Each of these features demanded different deadlines."[67] As a result, Bails began creating "spin-offs" for specific purposes, such as *The Comicollector*, dedicated to advertising sales and swaps of older comic books, and *The Comic Reader*, specifically focusing on news of upcoming publications. Bails was possessed by a fervent energy in these early days of fandom, and when he found that one publication wasn't enough to do all that he wanted it to – to both look back towards the past *and* forward towards the future – he started new ones. Once again, we see that this was a fandom that wasn't content just to remember, but that wished to tie those memories into an excitement for future possibilities in the field of superhero comics. Bill Schelly notes that, with these three fanzines coming directly from his hand, Bails now, "took on the role of being the fan with 'the inside view,' due to his contacts in the industry."[68] However, for this very reason, in order to maintain those

contacts, "none of his fanzines (at first) contained strong criticism of comics, especially not those from the Schwartz stable."[69]

This would become an unfortunately constitutive aspect of comics fandom – the drive to celebrate rather than criticize. "Fannish" writing about comics is often seen as that which overly praises rather than analyzes with any great depth or critical eye, with this celebratory nature often being what differentiates it from "academic" comics scholarship. However, though such loyalty influences fan writing to this day, it is hardly a ubiquitous phenomenon, and was far more common in this first wave of fanzines. In recent years, some of the harshest criticism of comics has come from later fan publications, such as *The Comics Journal*. Though Bails, along with many of the other first-wave fandom writers, was undeniably celebratory, he was celebrating those comics and characters that he actually liked while quietly ignoring the rest. His was a critical sin of omission and exaggeration, rather than outright lying.

In and of itself, this process of critical selectivity was an aspect of Bails' wrestling with the mass culture of comic book production. By focusing his critical faculties, and his writing, on those books that he wished to praise, he was bringing those books to the attention of the readers of his publications. Ideally, this would increase readership and circulation of those books, making the publishers more likely to keep producing them. Though his self-censorship prohibited Bails from being able to openly criticize particular books, and thus engage with them on an individual level, on a wider scale he was engaging with the entire publishing line, championing certain books while remaining silent about others.

BAILS' ALTERED EGO

Celebratory in nature or not, Bails' three fanzines kept him extraordinarily busy, in addition to his full-time day job as a professor. It was only a matter of time before he would have to abandon one or more of these publications. After *Alter Ego* #4, Bails left the fanzine that had made him famous amongst fans, and which had jump-started comics fandom, itself. In an editorial titled "A Parting Shot," he revealed that, "this issue is my last as publisher and editor of

Alter-Ego . . . I am engaged in collecting data on artists and writers, and all costumed-hero comics published before 1948 . . .. I hope to publish a big index to DC titles before too long."[70] This indexing process was to become his primary contribution to fandom over the next few decades, as he photographed and stored on microfilm his extensive collection of 1930s and 40s comic books, gathered information on comics creators' full bibliography of work, and published that information so that those creators could gain the recognition they deserved.

For thirty years, Bails expanded on this index, finally producing *Who's Who In American Comic Books*, which was initially published in a 4-volume set in the mid-1970s, specifically geared towards serving as a reference work.[71] As his co-editor, Hames Ware, would later note, "The *Who's Who*, I'm told, has been used in libraries. Jerry sought out libraries to begin with, because he felt they would be the most logical purchasers. It's always meant a lot to me to know that a lot of libraries all over the world have those four volumes, and that they're still being used by professionals . . . and others who want a quick reference."[72] For Bails and for Ware, fandom and scholarship went hand-in-hand.

Many years later, Bails opted to turn his decades of research into an online database available for free at his web-site, where he introduced it as being, "Designed to document the careers of people who have contributed to or supported the publication of original material in the U.S. comic books in the years 1928-99." The database is vast in scope, providing, "a resume of a person's creative career . . . [for] anyone known to have contributed directly to or supported the field of original U.S. comic books." Even in his latter-day projects, it is clear that Bails remained interested in keeping the industry's cultural memory alive by providing reams of information about otherwise-forgotten creators. He directly states that, "The goal is to cover the careers of people creating original American comic books." Further, he realized that his project, which began long before the current era where comic book publishers reprint older "classic" stories, needed to take current practices into consideration, and in fact he turned that into an aspect of the database that focuses specifically on memory: "Many reprints have appeared in

abundance since this project began. Some of the more notable of these collections and reprints have been included here in order to give a feel for how a creator's work has been received and remembered."[73]

Unfortunately, the database, *Who's Who of American Comics Books 1928-1999*, has turned into a memorial of a sort, itself. A note on the homepage, which is anonymous (but presumably put up by Bails' family or colleagues), announces:

> On November 23, 2006, the "Father Of Comic Book Fandom" and creator of this database, Jerry Bails, passed away in his sleep. This website remains a continued tribute to his efforts at making sure that those who helped create our favorite four-color medium are given the credit that they richly deserve. The future of further updates to this project is pending. There is no timetable as to when, who, or how this will happen. In the meantime, feel free to continue to use Jerry's website. It will remain online for all of you to use for free. Thank you Jerry Bails, may the rest of us in comic fandom continue to do your example proud.[74]

Bails' final, and ultimately life-long, project remains a central archive of comics' cultural memory, as well as an ongoing memory of its own creator. Perhaps most importantly, Bails wanted this last piece of his life's work to be available for free on the Internet. To him, fandom was about community and the recognition of creative talent, rather than about making money. Other fans, however, did not quite feel the same.

THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF FANDOM

In 1970, long-time collector Bob Overstreet released the first edition of the *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide,* an event that played no small role in changing the way that comics were collected. Overstreet's guide was the culmination of a long-standing fan practice: gathering reams of data into indexes containing information about long lists of comics, including the prices that they traded for amongst collectors. This was, in fact, one of the reasons fans wanted to be in contact with one another in the first place."[75] This practice of indexing is, in fact, a driving force in most fandoms, from lists of science fiction publications to major league sports stats, as a way of creating a shared *textual* memory for fans who create and read these indexes. Out of this process in comics fandom arose Overstreet's guide, which was equally as dedicated to the

culture of fandom as it was to the commercial possibilities inherent therein. As Overstreet himself noted in his introduction to the first edition, "Everyone connected with the publication of this book advocates the collecting of comic books for fun and pleasure, as well as nostalgia, art, and cultural values. Second to this is investment, which, if wisely placed in the best quality books (condition and contents considered), will yield dividends over the long term."[76] The success or failure of Overstreet's guide hung on a combination of both aspects of collecting, pleasure and investment. It was a great commercial success and was frequently updated, charting the changing financial currents of what various comic books sold for amongst fellow fans and collectors. It is, in fact, still updated and expanded (now yearly) today. Although no longer the publisher of the book, Overstreet continues to serve as its primary author and editor, overseeing its annual publication.

Despite its popularity, however, Overstreet's price guide has received mixed reception from both collectors and dealers. On the one hand, as "big name fans" turned professional comics critics Don and Maggie Thompson have stressed, "After its publication, people knew what they were collecting and the budget they should set aside for it. It changed the world of comics collecting."[77] On the other hand, as Jerry Bails would note, "It meant a loss of innocence for fandom. Speculators with no interest in the comics themselves came out of the woodwork, and prices started soaring."[78]

The price guide turned comics collecting from a noncommercial, dedicated underground community of hobbyists into a legitimate collectibles market, one driven by economics, and sometimes greed. As fan publications evolved, they risked injuring or removing completely the very joys that had made people into comics fans, and led them to produce fanzines, in the first place. The medium of comics had always been commercial, from the comic strips meant to sell newspapers, to the superheroes marketed to children in the 1930s and 40s, through to the revival of those heroes in a post-Comics Code industry. Comics *fandom*, on the other hand, had by and large been focused around sharing a love of the medium with other people. The publication of

Overstreet's guide began to change that, and led to the commercialization and professionalization of comics fandom in a way that would, on the one hand, create larger organizations and meetings of fans, and on the other hand attempt to co-opt the self-made identity of "comics fan" and turn it into another market to exploit.

The *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* was also part of a larger cultural move, beginning in the late 1960s and early 70s, to commercialize Americans' nostalgic yearnings for a more "innocent" past—a yearning reflected in the ways that popular culture looked back at World War II as a "good war" in contrast to the contemporaneous Vietnam War. A *New York Times* article published in March of 1970, entitled "Nostalgia for Extinct Pop Culture creates Industry," focused on this very subject:

> …to those who look back to the days of yesteryear, the nostalgia industry is manufacturing products and marketing merchandise that its aficionados probably enjoy at least as much as anything else they buy. The multi-faceted components in the business world of nostalgia include . . . [v]intage comic books that are selling for up to thousands of times more than their original cover price, coupled with items designed for collectors.[79]

The article also quotes cartoonist Woody Gelman, then president of a publishing company called Nostalgia Press, who argues that, "The nostalgia market is an enormous market today. . . . Look at *Bonnie and Clyde*, look at the reversion back to the clothes of the Thirties—it's become a public obsession. Nostalgia is more emotional than historical. History is an accurate statement but nostalgia looks back at what seems to be the simple days. Nostalgia looks back at crime and says, 'Weren't Bonnie and Clyde colorful?'"[80] As Gelman notes, there is an important distinction between looking to the past in order to learn something useful for the future, to ascertain "accuracy," and a nostalgic yearning for a time and place that either never actually existed or else was not as wonderful as some would care to remember. A similar article in the *Los Angeles Times* would point out the comfort factor of this culture of nostalgia: "Maybe it's the tension of the Nuclear Age. Perhaps it's the *angst* generated by the 9-to-5 treadmill.

Whatever propels people to want to return to a simpler time and place has caused a dramatic resurgence in things dripping with collectible nostalgia."[81]

Near its conclusion, the *New York Times* article quotes none other than Jerry Bails, who seems to wistfully accept the fact that what started as a labor of love had become an industry: "There's obviously more commercial interest in these fields as people have found it profitable to go into them."[82] On a more hopeful note, however, he adds, "I suspect that there will always be nostalgic people interested in comic fandom."[83] The industrialization and commercialization of comics fandom was, by 1970, a large enough process that it warranted coverage in the national press as part of a larger culture of nostalgia for the popular ephemera of the past. Ironically, the final paragraph of the article would, though using a sarcastic tone, come to accurately predict the way this nostalgia boom would continue in the ensuing decades: "Perhaps at the end of the twentieth century, the personalities and paraphernalia of today will become the nostalgic items of that time. Can you imagine a sentimental look back at the Beatles, the mini-skirt, Barbra Streisand and the gasoline engine?"[84] Comics fandom was a part of this nostalgia boom, one that *did* last to the end of the twentieth century and ultimately come to look back nostalgically at the Beatles and the mini-skirt. Along the way, though, comics fans would develop a subculture that bound those nostalgic/economic interests to the building of a sense of identity and belonging.

FANDOM, FANZINES & CONVENTIONS

Fanzines were crucial to the development of fandom by allowing fans to share memories, information, and stories in an era before comic book publishers regularly reprinted or collected their older materials. As one fan put it, "those of us who loved the Justice Society of America, but who weren't sentient when it was still possible to acquire a complete set of *All-Star Comics* without taking out a second mortgage, had access only to the few JSA stories that were reprinted from time to time."[85] Fanzines like *Alter Ego* enabled fans like these to not only swap or buy older books, but also to pass on plot summaries, character descriptions, and fond remembrances of stories past. Eventually, however, the comics publishers recognized that these fans

represented a lucrative market, and thus, as Maggie Thompson and Dick Lupoff put it, "collectors began to have an influence on comics publishing."[86] One of the most important results of this was the eventual policy of and process of reprinting comics stories as a way of creating a permanent "archive" for readers of stories past. Whereas once reprints were rare, and the publication of them was spotty at best, today virtually every issue that a publisher puts out is eventually reprinted in a collection that stays in print for years to come. Influenced by the demands of fans (especially economic demand, as evidenced by the financial success of such collections), the publishers recognize that readers want to enjoy these stories over and over again, and no longer view them as disposable ephemera in the way that parents of young readers in the 1930s and 40s may have.

What *Alter Ego* spurred on, in its quest to have just such an influence, was the first truly organized fandom of superhero comics old and new, united by the back-and-forth of this flurry of fanzines. This organized fandom was not simply about nostalgia for long-gone stories, but equally about pressuring publishers to create new stories and, most importantly, about creating a sense of identity and community amongst fellow readers. So many fanzines were produced in the wake of *Alter Ego*, in fact, that a 1965 *Los Angeles Times* article about the increasing price of comic books as collector's items would exclaim that, "Fan magazines are booming, with avid fans doing extensive research into the backgrounds of their superheroes, analyzing various artists who draw the strips for aesthetic ability and compiling indexes of their heroes' appearances in other strips. . . . [These] magazines sometimes assume an almost fanatical tone."[87] This fanatical tone that seemed strange to the writer for the *Times* was the common ground from which these lovers of superhero comics developed their fannish subculture.

Alter Ego and the fanzines that followed it were the starting point for a world of fandom that would revolutionize the superhero comics publishers. Beginning with Roy Thomas, many prominent fanzine writers/publishers, among other fans, would go on to positions of power as writers, artists, and/or editors within the "hallowed halls" of the publishers they were so

enamored with. These fans would bring the interests and obsessions of fandom – especially a sense of continuity and memory of stories past – into the actual publishing of the comics. These small, seemingly innocuous fan-created magazines thus had a large impact on the history of superhero comics.

Whether fanzines are dedicated to superhero comics, movies, or music, they are what historian Teal Triggs calls a part of a "do-it-yourself" culture. They are designed specifically as a way for fans to engage with objects of mass culture via their own publications, focusing on fans' own individual fascinations and concerns. Furthermore, they help to constitute a community of fans, bringing them together around not just their shared enjoyment of a mass cultural object, but also around the creation of this fan-created text. Triggs notes that producers of fanzines, "are less concerned about copyright, grammar, spelling, punctuation, or the protocols of page layout, grids and typography, than about communicating a particular subject to a community of like-minded individuals … The authentic resides in the authorial voice, where the personal is political and not beholden to global corporations."[88] Fanzines are thus valuable as a place where those disenfranchised by the "official" mechanisms of mass culture can express themselves publicly.[89]

One person who saw the inherent value of these fanzines was none other than Dr. Fredric Wertham, the selfsame psychologist who dealt a mortal blow to the 1950s EC Comics fandom (and to EC Comics itself) with his Congressional testimonies and his anti-comics book *Seduction of the Innocent*. An older Wertham came to find something of value in organized fandom and the publications produced by these fans. In his 1973 book *The World of Fanzines*, he noted that fanzines are, "sincere and spontaneous," "something so positive and . . . not acknowledged as such," and "unpolluted by the greed, the arrogance, and the hypocrisy that has invaded so much of our intellectual life."[90] Wertham, a devotee of the anti-mass culture Frankfurt School, observed a popular vitality in such publications:

> In contrast to mass media and mass circulation publications . . . fanzines are intended for small audiences. . . .Their claim to attention, certainly not a small one, lies in the fact that

they belong to the American cultural environment, that they exist and continue to exist as genuine human voices outside of all mass manipulation.[91]

Lest this be mistaken for a utopian ideal that fanzines might provide the starting base for a new kind of grass roots popular folk culture, Wertham went on to note that, in his view, fanzines cannot, "play a significant role as a counterforce" or serve as, "an answer to the problems of society in any way, or a remedy for its frailties."[92] Nevertheless, "These unheralded voices, not loud and strident, not ponderous, but cheerful, deserve to be heard."[93]

The amateurish nature of these fanzines – their disconnection from professional modes of production and distribution – was what appealed to Wertham, and this is a key aspect of what differentiates these fanzines from later, professional publications about the comic book industry. Wertham also picks up on the shared nostalgic aspect of the fanzine, which was, as I have said, one of the crucial aspects in the development of comics fandom, and thus fanzines. However, he posits that fanzines also have an important present-day component, connecting this longing for the past with a desire for community in the present: "Most significant are the human, personal relationships fostered by fanzines. They prompt people of similar sentiments and interests to commune with one another – not only by reading their publications, but also by direct contacts. Subscribers are not merely numbers in a computer."[94] This in-person type of meeting, fostered by fandom and fanzines, is most consistently evident in the form of fan conventions.

Over time, such conventions, which started as small gatherings of a few dozen fans, grew and grew, until today the biggest, San Diego's Comic-Con International, has an annual attendance of greater than a hundred and twenty-five thousand, with nation-wide mass media coverage.[95] In recent years it has become a crucial location for Hollywood studios to present previews of multi-million-dollar productions, and it is the largest pop culture convention in the United States. It has become an internationally known pop culture convention, but it arose out of the simple desires of comics fans to get together and share their passion in person.

Starting in the 1960s, conventions have played a crucial role in comics fandom, and thus in comics' cultural memory. As Schelly notes, they, "introduced collectors to worlds outside

their immediate parochial interests . . . They hastened the speed of fan contacts, which had been previously only as fast as the US mail and the urge to write. And they exposed the fans to the pros who created the objects of their fascination."[96] Indeed, conventions serve as a physical focal point for fannish interests, and an area of immediate, real-time conversation and communication between large groups of fans, something which was especially important in pre-internet days when such debate could only take place over the course of months in the pages of fanzines' letters columns. Comicons facilitate the very existence of organized fandom, and contribute to the ability of fans to both share the body of stories and memories that make up the "repertoire" of comics' cultural memory and, to create texts, such as fanzines and special edition books, that contribute to creating an "archive" for that cultural memory to run alongside of the comics themselves (to say nothing of the ability of these organized fans to petition publishers to create literal archival editions of older stories).

CONCLUSION

During the first wave of comics fandom, hobbyists were invested in the history of their beloved medium. They used this history to analyze contemporary mass culture, thus creating a new popular culture for themselves, as well as a new community of fans. Today, that community survives, and indeed thrives, seemingly more visible than ever as superhero movies rule the box office and the ever-growing San Diego Comicon gains national news coverage every summer. Bill Schelly argues that, "Most of the aspects of fandom are still around, in modern form. Writing about comics in shared media, either free or for sale, still occurs . . . Comicons are still around, of course, and they still have the same basic – though much expanded – set-up."[97] Fans of the 1960s were not just creating a system of fandom, but also an entire *industry* of fandom that exits to this day, in updated form.

Just as important as this industry of fandom, though, is the structures of cultural memory that were *created* by this first wave of fans. Their efforts helped to bring back into consciousness, and even publication, comics that were created decades earlier, sometimes before

they were even born, and to prevent the comics of older times from fading into obscurity. Crucially, these fans wielded their influence to get publishers to pay attention to the things that mattered to them, such as continuity and older, "classic" stories. Schelly notes,

> Editors at both DC and Marvel began receiving lots of letters from outspoken fans who took them to task for "inconsistencies" in their comics. They really noticed if elements of a new story didn't jibe with previously established elements in a feature . . . The publishers, however, more or less felt the old stuff was inferior and dated, and my feeling is that they thought they were producing a product with much better art and stories. Eventually, fandom grew to the point that DC and Marvel have been reprinting those "ageless classics" in their Archives and Masterworks series.[98]

With the advent of the fan-turned-pro, this influence would only grow stronger and more vital to the type of storytelling featured at Marvel and DC.

As the comic book industry evolved under fandoms' influence, stories would come to constantly engage with past continuity, connecting writers' present as producers of these cultural products with their past as fan-consumers. The writers would not just reminisce about favorite stories from their past, but actively use the continuity established by those stories to create new storytelling opportunities. These stories from the past, however, are inextricably linked with the time and place in which they were produced and first encountered by readers and fans. To write back to stories from a creator's past as a reader means to re-engage with the memories of the cultural milieu in which he or she first read those stories.

To engage with these stories from the fictional history of the DC or Marvel Universe, then, inherently means to engage with the actual events of history that occurred as that fictional continuity was being created. Such an engagement allows for the illusion that the historical past can be controlled, mastered, reshaped, and "retconned" in the same way that the fictional past can. In multiple instances, comics creators crafted complex stories that utilized continuity to comment upon the past – both the fictional past and, more importantly, the actual past – in a way that reflected the larger cultural process of historical revisionism in the latter half of the twentieth

century. When comics look back on past times and places, they can only do so with the eyes provided by their contemporary world.

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[1] Bradford Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 135.
[2] See Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 13-14.
[3] Matthew J. Pustz, Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 39.
[4] Wertham, the Kefauver hearings, *Seduction of the Innocent*, and the Comics Code Authority comprise one of the most important moments in the history of the comic book industry, but it is a moment that is outside the scope of the current study. For much more, see Bradford Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 157-179; James Gilbert, A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Amy Kiste Nyberg, Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998); Bart Beaty, Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005); and David Hajdu, The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).
[5] Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 27.
[6] Fanzines originated in a pre-computerized era. As such, many of the purposes they initially served have since been taken over by Internet message boards, list serves, and web sites, making them a rarity today.
[7] Gerard Jones, Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 128.
[8] Danny Fingeroth, Disguised As Clark Kent: Jews, Comics and the Creation of the Superhero (New York: Continuum, 2007), 19.
[9] Gerard Jones, Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 130.
[10] Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 19.
[11] See Peter Coogan, "From Love to Money: The First Decade of Comics Fandom," The International Journal of Comic Art 12.1 (Spring, 2010): 54.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Quoted in Bill Schelly, "Absolute Xero: The Dick and Pat Lupoff Interview," in Comic Fandom Reader, ed. Bill Schelly (Seattle Hamster Press, 2002), 119.
[14] Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson, "Introduction," in All In Color For A Dime, ed. Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson (New York: Ace Books, 1970), 10-11.
[15] Dick Lupoff, "The Big Red Cheese," in All In Color For A Dime, ed. Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson (New York: Ace Books, 1970), 63.
[16] Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson, "Introduction," in The Comic-Book Book, ed. Don Thompson and Dick Lupoff (Krause Publications, 1998), 15.
[17] Quoted in Bill Schelly, "Absolute Xero: The Dick and Pat Lupoff Interview," in Comic Fandom Reader, ed. Bill Schelly (Seattle Hamster Press, 2002), 120.
[18] Ibid.
[19] All of which are reprinted in All In Color For A Dime, ed. Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson (New York: Ace Books, 1970).
[20] Bill Schelly, Founders of Comic Fandom (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company), 20. General biographical information on Bails comes from this text, pages 20-26.
[21] Quoted in Bill Schelly, "Interview with Jerry Bails," in Comic Fandom Reader, ed. Bill Schelly (Seattle Hamster Press, 2002), 133.
[22] Quoted in Jean Bails, "Memoirs of Jean Bails: Life With Jerry Bails And Comics Fandom," in *Alter Ego* (volume 3) No. 68, May 2007, 26.
[23] Ibid.
[24] See Ibid.

[25] Ibid, 21.
[26] Jerry Bails, "A Companion For Life: A Personal Preface," in The All-Star Companion, ed. Roy Thomas (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2000), 11.
[27] Quoted in Sean Kleefeld, "Of Fans & Fandom: The Jerry Bails Interview," in *Alter Ego* (volume 3) No. 26, May 2007, 15.
[28] Ibid 12.
[29] Bill Schelly, Founders of Comic Fandom (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company), 21
[30] General biographical information on Thomas comes from Bill Schelly, Founders of Comic Fandom (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company), 126-130.
[31] Roy Thomas, "All-Stars In My Eyes: A Personal Introduction," in The All-Star Companion, ed. Roy Thomas (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2000), 5.
[32] Quoted in Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 24.
[33] Quoted in Sean Kleefeld, "Of Fans & Fandom: The Jerry Bails Interview," in *Alter Ego* (volume 3) No. 26, May 2007, 10.
[34] Quoted in Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 24.
[35] Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 24.
[36] Quoted in Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 24.
[37] Peter Coogan, "From Love to Money: The First Decade of Comics Fandom," *The International Journal of Comic Art* 12.1 (spring 2010): 53.
[38] Julius Schwartz with Brian M. Thomsen, Man of Two Worlds: My Life In Science Fiction and Fandom (New York: HarperEntertainment, 2000), vii.
[39] Ibid, 13.
[40] See Ibid for this and other biographical information on Schwartz (as related through the often hyperbolic lens of Schwartz, himself).
[41] Ibid, 105-106.
[42] The cover dates of comic books and the dates on which they are actually published differ by about three months. Accordingly, the comics that had a cover date of May 1961 likely reached fans in February or March of 1961. As the difference between publication date and cover date fluctuates over time, though, comic book historians tend to rely on cover dates, as the actual publication date is often lost as years go by. I shall adhere to this standard throughout this dissertation.
[43] Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 24.
[44] See Gilbert Seldes, The Seven Lively Arts (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924).
[45] Jerry Bails, "Introduction," in Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Comics Fanzine, ed. Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 5.
[46] Ibid, 5-6.
[47] See Roy Thomas, "The Alter Ego Story," in Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Comics Fanzine, ed. Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 14.
[48] Jerry Bails, "It's A Matter Of Policy," in *Alter Ego* (volume 1) No. 1, Spring 1961, 2.
[49] Jerry Bails, "On The Drawing Board," in *Alter Ego* (volume 1) No. 1, Spring 1961, 3.
[50] Roy Thomas, "Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here! – Part I: The All-Winners Squad." In *Alter Ego* (volume 1) No. 2, June 1961, 2.
[51] As chapter 2 of this dissertation will show, Thomas would not let go of his fondness for the All-Winners Squad, bringing it back when he was a writer for Marvel in the 1970s, and creating that publisher's equivalent of the Justice Society in the form of The Invaders.
[52] Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly, "*Alter-Ego* #2 – Notes and Commentary," in Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Comics Fanzine, ed. Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 25.
[53] Jerry Bails, ""And Then There Was Light – The Light of the Green Lantern," in Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Comics Fanzine, ed. Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 32.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly, "*Alter-Ego* #3 – Notes and Commentary," in Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Comics Fanzine, ed. Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 31.
[58] Raphael Samuels, Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture (London: Verso, 2012), xxiii.

[59] Ibid, 8.
[60] Ibid, 20.
[61] Ibid, 21.
[62] Raphael Samuels, Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture (London: Verso, 2012), 19-20.
[63] Jerry Bails, in *Alter Ego* (volume 1) No. 3, November 1961, 30.
[64] Quoted in Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 35. General information about Love comes from this same source.
[65] Ibid, 41-42.
[66] Ibid, 89-91.
[67] Quoted in Ibid, 33.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Quoted in Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly, "*Alter-Ego* #4 – Notes and Commentary," in Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Comics Fanzine, ed. Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 47.
[71] Jerry Bails, "The Who's Who of American Comic Books – Personal acknowledgments," http://www.bailsprojects.com/about.html (accessed January 24, 2012).
[72] Quoted in Jim Amish, "'We Were A Wonderful Match!': An Interview With HAMES WARE—Jerry Bails' Co-Editor Of The 1970s *Who's Who of American Comic Books*," in *Alter Ego* (volume 3) No. 68, May 2007, 61.
[73] Jerry Bails, "The Who's Who of American Comic Books – Introduction," http://www.bailsprojects.com/about.html (accessed January 24, 2012).
[74] "Who's Who of American Comic Books 1928-1999," http://www.bailsprojects.com/whoswho.aspx (accessed January 24, 2012).
[75] See Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 120.
[76] Robert M. Overstreet, The Comic Book Price Guide: 1933-Present (Cleveland, TN: Overstreet Publications, 1970), inside front cover.
[77] Quoted in Ibid, 119.
[78] Quoted in Ibid, 122.
[79] Leonard Sloane, "Nostalgia for Extinct Pop Culture Creates Industry," New York Times, March 22, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), 171.
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[83] Ibid.
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[85] Dennis Mallonee, "More Mysteries of *All-Star Comics*: An Alternate View," in The ALTER EGO Collection, Volume 1, ed. Roy Thomas (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006), 13.
[86] Maggie Thompson and Dick Lupoff, "That's Right! We're Back Again!", in The Comic-Book Book, ed. Don Thompson and Dick Lupoff (Krause Publications, 1998), 8.
[87] Peter Johnson, "Early Comic Book Issues Bring High Prices as Collectors' Item," Los Angeles Times, June 7, 1965, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-1990), C1.
[88] Teal Triggs, Fanzines: The DIY Revolution (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 7-9.
[89] This is a role that is more and more taken over by the internet, though of course neither fanzines nor the internet were or are universally accessible by all social classes in the United States, let alone throughout the rest of the world.
[90] Fredric Wertham, The World of Fanzines: A Special Form of Communication (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 33-35.
[91] Ibid, 35.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid, 35-36.
[94] Ibid, 131.

[95] John Rogers, “President’s Message,” in San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., “Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends!” (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2009), 15. General information about the early San Diego Comic-Con comes from this same source, 20-23.
[96] Bill Schelly, The Golden Age of Comic Fandom (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995), 112.
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[98] Ibid.

Chapter 2 – High Society: Retroactive Continuity And Historical Revisionism in Justice Society Comics

In 1965, Roy Thomas made the leap from comic book fan to comic book professional. He worked briefly for editor Mort Weisenger at DC Comics before moving to Marvel Comics, where he became Stan Lee's confidante as an editor and a writer. However, because Lee asked Thomas not to reveal publicly any of the goings-on at Marvel, especially future plots and story concepts, he was forced to make a sudden, full-on transition between the worlds of fandom and professional comics creators. Though he maintained his friendships and contacts with fellow fans, Thomas's active participation in fanzines temporarily ceased.

Roy Thomas became the first of a new breed of comics creators – the fan-turned-pro, who had grown up reading comic books, had been active as a fan of them, and was now creating them for a new generation of readers. Far from being passive consumers of the "culture industry" which creates the comic books they read, these fans become an active part of their very production, effectively "writing back" to the comics that they enjoyed as readers, themselves. This was the ultimate expansion of Thomas' own belief, as summarized by scholar Peter Coogan, in "the mere proliferation of superhero titles as proof that fans were influencing the output of comics companies."[1] Now the fans were not only influencing the comic companies, but were a part of them, and created their own work that was included in the ongoing tapestry of stories they enjoyed.

Often this wave of creators who followed in Thomas' path crafted new work that drew upon the stories they had read as fans, recasting those older works in the context of new styles of storytelling, new rules of continuity, and new estimations of cultural memory. Their stories featured tighter, more complex stories that referred back to previous tales, asking readers to not just pick up an individual issue but to also be an ongoing audience of a particular title and a particular publisher. The advent of the fan-turned-pro was crucial for the evolution of continuity into a driving force behind the DC and Marvel "universes," and indeed behind this very

conceptualization of them as fully realized universes. In order to create a universe out of what had originated as disparate stories, though, these new creators needed to revisit older stories and figure out how they could fit inside of the "rules" established for contemporary stories which, playing to an audience of adult fans as much as to children, called for a bit more pseudoscientific realism in their explanation of superheroic happenings. As such, new stories frequently worked to actively rewrite older ones.

This "retconning" – retroactive continuity[2] – is a way for fans-turned-pros to engage with history and memory, both in terms of the fictional universe/continuity within which they are writing and the real world context in which those older stories were originally created. As a result, retconning that deals with specific historical instances, such as World War II, reveals how superhero universe narratives constitute a body of historiography. The ways in which historical events are narrativized in superhero comic books alter along with the prevailing historical modes of their time; thus the patriotic narratives of American exceptionalism told during in the aftermath of World War II slowly give way to revisionist, interrogatory stories in the 1970s and 1980s. I use the term "revisionism" here as a form of re-examining the past in light of contemporary mores, as well as the discovery of new data. As Aviezer Tucker explains,

> Historiography, our beliefs about the past, history, is in constant flux; our beliefs are constantly being revised. In that sense, all historians who conduct research are "revisionists." . . . Historiography is a progressive and innovative discipline composed of various dynamic research programs precisely because it is capable of revising itself, constantly improving itself, expanding knowledge and becoming relevant in new historical contexts.[3]

Though the chief example of historical revisionism for many people is Holocaust denial, there is an important distinction to be drawn between revision and denial. Denial does not rely upon the methods and standards of historical research, but rather explicitly rejects such processes, standing outside of actual historiography and relying instead on entrenched biases. Tucker explains, "When historians prove *using evidence and standard historiographic methods* that there was a Holocaust, the revisionists can and do fall back on disputing the epistemic standards

of mainstream historiography."[4] Furthermore, he points out, "A uniquely heterogeneous community of historians . . . agree that there was a Holocaust. 'Revisionist historians' who deny it compose a homogeneous community composed exclusively of Nazis or Nazi sympathizers."[5]

Historical revisionism is a cultural project, and not a conspiratorial or solely political one. This chapter will show that, through superhero comic books, and their reflection of the narrative construction of an ongoing "universe," we can see how historiography is not just a process which impacts text books and college professors, but rather an ongoing method of dealing with and reflecting upon the past, even in the most seemingly innocuous and "popular" of places. By looking at several creators' interpretations of DC Comics' World War II superteam, the Justice Society of America, we will show how the advent of the fan-turned-pro in the 1970s and 80s, culminating in Roy Thomas' *All-Star Squadron* series, led to an interest in constantly revisiting the teams' historical origins. This will not only display the literary uses of retroactive continuity in a superhero "universe," but also allows us to view the process of historical revisionism at work in stories that re-evaluate the meanings and complexities of the second World War. One way to begin examining the ongoing negotiation of these complexities is with the evolving answers that creators have come up with to the question, "Why couldn't Superman have won World War II single-handedly?"

SUPERMAN VS. HITLER

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Superman was already a cultural phenomenon. *Action Comics*, the home to the character, sold 900,000 copies a month; Superman's newspaper comic strip appeared in 250 papers; and the hero himself had become, "a ubiquitous comic art figure."[6] However, most of the readers of his comic book adventures were children, who rarely questioned the logic of the stories they were being presented with. As such, it posed little or no problem to them that Superman could be on the cover of a comic book selling war bonds while, on the inside, he was featured in stories where he dealt with mad scientists or mob bosses in the United States instead of joining the armed forces in battling the Axis powers.

However, Superman's creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, first-generation sons of Jewish immigrants, naturally wondered what it would take to stop the powerful forces of the Nazis and their Allies. In February 1940, Siegel and Shuster created a two-page strip in *Look* magazine, before America was even officially involved in the war, presenting how Superman would "solve the international situation."[7] In this short story, Superman flies first to Germany and then to Russia, where he scoops up Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, bringing them to the League of Nations where he pronounces, "Gentlemen, I've brought you the two power-mad scoundrels responsible for Europe's present ills." *Look*, normally in black and white, added an extra color, red, especially for the strip, in order to highlight the level of action being portrayed as Superman races through battlefields, engaging in such superhuman feats as twisting a cannon into a knot and tearing the tops off of concrete bunkers.

The most important aspect of this strip is the juxtaposition of Superman – a character created by two young Jewish men to stand in as the ultimate immigrant, having travelled to Earth from the distant planet Krypton – against Hitler and Stalin. The two powerful dictators are like ragdolls in the superhero's hands, with Hitler screaming, "Put me down! You're hurting me!" Superman is dismissive of them, infantilizing them by cheekily calling them by their first names and telling Hitler, while dealing with his guards, "I'll get around to you in a few seconds." Most importantly, though, Siegel and Shuster have Superman highlight the fact that he is standing in for what they wish *they* could do to Hitler, by having the hero proclaim, "I'd like to land a strictly non-Aryan sock on your jaw."

Hitler and Stalin are seen here to be no more than bullies, using their brawn to push people around until a more powerful force – Superman – comes to punish them. When he brings the pair to the League of Nations, their sentence highlights this portrayal, as they stand like two frowning children in front of a judge who announces, "Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin – we pronounce you guilty of modern history's greatest crime – unprovoked aggression against

defenseless countries." The story ends with this proclamation, and Superman stands behind the dictators, hands on his hips in an authoritarian pose.

Outside of this strip, one that wasn't even technically published by DC Comics, Superman was not involved in World War II within his contemporary comic book adventures. Instead, he was seen in cover images encouraging the purchase of war bonds, a real-world application of his popularity rather than a fictional representation of how he might use his powers during wartime. The *Look* short story was enough to show precisely how Superman would end World War II, were he to be involved – quickly and without difficulty.

Superman's compatriots in the Justice Society, however, were on the whole far less powerful than he. As historian William W. Savage, Jr. notes, although "the credibility, and ultimately the utility, of the heroes were to be maintained," in regards to explaining why they didn't end the war, the publishers did this not with one answer, but with several, each "according to the characteristics of their heroes."[8] In the June/July 1942 issue of *All-Star Comics*, the first to be produced after America's entrance into the war, all of the members decide to temporarily disband the super-team so that they can join the armed forces in their civilian identities.

After the bombing at Pearl Harbor, writer Gardner Fox brought his sense of outrage to the pages of *All-Star Comics*. The introductory page of the issue proclaims that, "The Justice Society of America explodes with righteous indignation. They, too, demand their chance to fight for the country they love best."[9] The story that follows portrays what happens when the members decide to temporarily disband the JSA in order to individually enlist in America's armed forces. The successes of the members leads to various branches of the military squabbling over which hero is best, until a ranking officer ultimately informs the heroes that, "the army needs you, but I can't have my officers squabbling because of divisional pride and loyalty—so I have wired Washington for permission to make you a special battalion . . . to be known as the Justice Battalion of America!"[10] With that, the matter, and the issue, is concluded, but not before

Hawkman provides the moral of the story for the reader: "We all do the job we're assigned in the best manner we can—and that's all anyone can ask!"[11]

Unlike Siegel and Schuster's short tale of Superman ending the war single-handedly, in this issue the Justice Society's members actively engage in battle with Japanese forces, coming out the winners in specific, small-scale battles, which, presumably, don't affect the long-term course of the war. Though they are able to help out in certain instances, they don't change the tide of war in the way that Superman could/would. Fox and Mayer are in this way able send their patriotic superteam can to war for the United States, but in a way that doesn't automatically mean that they would be able to end that war.

However, the problem still remains that any action the Justice Society could take on behalf of the war effort served as a fictional distortion of the actual war. As Roy Thomas sees it, to examine these stories, "is to lay bare the problems inherent in the comic books' early approach to total war. In the . . . Real World, of course, the embattled U.S. forces – unlike the JSA in *All Star* #11 – didn't manage to save the Philippines or Wake Island from the Japanese, let alone to liberate Formosa."[12] However, he finds an inherent value in these fictional victories: "Still, all that said, the JSA and their fellow super-heroes gave Americans hope – even if it *was* hope laced with a brand of cockeyed optimism [that] was quickly dashed."[13] The Justice Society's adventures may have been against fictional aspects of the Nazi threat, but there seems to have been a real concern, on the parts of the creators and the readers, of using the super-heroes to keep U.S. morale up and thus aid the war effort in the same way that, for example, covers of Superman selling war bonds might.

The stateside Justice Battalion was thus able to continue to be patriotic, fighting America's foes using their superheroic powers and abilities, while at the same time having little discernible impact on the "real" war being fought by the armed forces, many of whom were becoming avid readers themselves, since comic books were part of their care packages. Because the Justice Society could not go after the "real" villains of the war, such as the fascist dictators

behind the Axis powers or their ideological allies in the United States, Fox and Mayer were forced to create fictional threats for them to face while the war and its many atrocities continued as contextual background.[14] Readers at the time accepted this, since it would have been more unbelievable to them for the Justice Society to end the war and then continue on with peacetime adventure. As those readers matured and look back on the comics of their youths, however, they began to realize that such a circumstance made the Justice Society appear far less heroic and efficacious, even in the fictional context of the DC Universe. Thus, decades later, fans-turned-pros would turn to the Justice Society and retcon their wartime adventures so as to remove the tarnish from their heroic luster and "explain" why they didn't engage in World War II in any real, meaningful way. Chief among these fans was Roy Thomas.

THE INVADERS & CONSERVATIVE CONTINUITY

Though Thomas had wanted the chance to write further adventures of his childhood Justice Society heroes from the moment of his entry into the comic book industry, one major problem stood in his way – he worked for the wrong company. After personal problems with DC editor Mort Weisenger drove him to Marvel Comics, he worked with a stable of characters that were mostly created only in the current decade of the 1960s. Though he didn't have fond memories of reading their stories as a child, he did his best chronicling their adventures, learning the skills and techniques of a professional comic book writer along the way. Once he had established himself as a successful writer and editor, he was finally able to get as close to the Justice Society as he could while working for Marvel, by creating Marvel's own World War II superhero team, the Invaders.

Prior to Thomas' invention of the Invaders, the Marvel Universe's answer to the Justice Society had been a two-issue run of *All Winners Comics* in 1946 featuring the aptly-named "All-Winners Squad," a conglomeration of several of Marvel (then-Timely) Comics' most popular super-heroes. However, as Thomas notes, this was an extremely short-lived team-up: "in the late 40's, there were two adventures of an All-Winners Squad, featuring the Big Three [Captain

America, the Human Torch, and Namor the Sub-Mariner] (plus their side-kicks Bucky and Toro) plus the super-fast Whizzer and a bespectacled Miss America—then *Zilch*."[15] The squad was so short lived that, in an article in *Alter Ego* published before Thomas became a professional, he called it an, "apparently stillborn JSA-type group."[16] As a JSA fan working for Marvel, Thomas was interested in seeing a fully realized JSA-type concept for the Marvel Universe, but he would have to wait for a decade into his professional career before that idea came to fruition.

By the mid-1970s Thomas had become Marvel's editor-in-chief, succeeding Stan Lee, the co-creator of most of Marvel's popular characters. When Thomas eventually stepped down from that role, he found himself in the position of being able to create a new title, and he finally saw the opportunity to, in his words, "do the kind of superhero group I'd always wanted to find in those old wartime [Marvel] comics, but rarely did – and I'd do it with (inevitably, unavoidably) a 1970's perspective!"[17] What this 1970s perspective meant, in practice, was that Thomas would tell stories set in WWII that adhered to the demands of a more strict sense of continuity – a conservative sense of "realism" and maintenance of a particular status quo.

Comic book continuity is an inherently conservative notion, concerned as it is with establishing a set of uniform rules of verisimilitude for a fictional universe to which all stories told in that universe must adhere. The desire for consistency and fidelity is what lies at the base of comic book continuity's origins, when the first wave of fans in the 1960s demanded more "adult" and "realistic" explanations for such unrealistic concepts as super powers and alternate dimensions. Imbedded within this notion of a consistent continuity is a desire for control. In a world that frequently seems to be providing less and less control to individual citizens, there is a sense of comfort to be found in a fictional world that strictly, even slavishly, adheres to a set of rules. This is part of the appeal of a superhero universe where every story *must* fit into a larger picture and must make sense when held up to other stories in that universe.

Retconning often, though not always, possesses the same conservative sensibility as continuity itself. It can be used to square the fictional history of the comics universe with the

history of the real world, despite the immense deviation of the existence, in the former, of beings with superhuman powers. In other cases, retconning allows for a character to stay young despite appearing in decades worth of stories. Thus, Bruce Wayne never ages past the point at which he can still physically perform as Batman, despite the fact that he would likely be dead by now if he were to have aged in real time. Ultimately, superhero readers are fearful of anything that creates too much change to the mythology that they grew up reading, which they cling to nostalgically, and the resultant conservative impulse to embrace the traditional rather than the experimental is one of the hallmarks of continuity, retroactive or otherwise. Retroactive continuity allows for these fictional myths to remain ongoing and never-ending, forsaking the new in favor of the traditional, the fantastic in favor of the pseudo-real, and the historical aberration in favor of the historically accurate. This is the kind of retconning that would become Roy Thomas' stock in trade.

By the 1970s, the superhero revival of the 60s had grown to such an extent that superheroes dominated the comics industry in a way they hadn't since the early 1940s, with DC's revived heroes and Marvel's new wave of heroes taking the lion's share of both the sales charts and whatever mainstream media coverage there was of the medium. One of the most important tropes of this entrenched superhero genre was a more solidified approach to continuity than had existed in the 1930s and 40s. Fans who had enjoyed superhero stories as children with little concern about where they "fit" into a larger narrative now demanded that bigger picture. Just as many young radicals age into conservative voters, the children whose imaginations had no limit were becoming older and more conservative in their fantasy lives, and wanted their comics to abide by the set of rules that continuity provided. Particularly in the wake of the turbulence of the late 1960s, the demand for increased continuity in the 1970s was unprecedented.

When Roy Thomas set out to, "do the kind of superhero group I'd always wanted to find in those old wartime comics, but rarely did," he meant that he would create a group of World

War II superheroes who existed in a superhero universe that lived up to 1970s standards of continuity, more reliant on pseudo-scientific reasoning, logical consistency, and (relative) historical fidelity than the extremely loose continuity of the 1940s. Indeed, in the text page in the back of the Invaders' very first appearance, Thomas notes his abandonment of some of those older stories: "We're ordinarily not going to consider ourselves bound by anything which occurred in the old Timely mags unless we *also* verify it in the 'Invaders' tales themselves."[18] Here, Thomas deliberately sets out the "rules" by which he will be creating the book, indicating an adherence to continuity that had not been present in the "old Timely mags" he's drawing upon as a part of his retconning project.

In the Invaders' first full-length appearance, *Giant-Size Invaders* 1, Thomas sets out to provide an origin for the super-team, and a reason for them to remain together as a fighting force. This is something that the Justice Society itself did not even have at the time. Although initially the Invaders meet by chance, and fight against a common Nazi foe, it is none other than British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who advises them to stay together. After the heroes save his transatlantic ship, and thus his life, he tells them, "I implore you – swear to me you'll shelve your own petty squabbles for the duration! Surely, until our two nations are ready to invade Hitler's conquered continent – his 'Fortress Europa' – you five shall act as our own unofficial invaders, eh? Yes, yes . . . of course you shall."[19]

In comparison to the Justice Society's original 1940s adventures, these 1970s-penned stories of the Invaders featured the titular heroes actually going to battle in Europe rather than merely fighting threats on the American home front. Their ability to change history, though, is mitigated by three specific factors. First, the Invaders are, on the whole, a less powerful team than the Justice Society. Marvel's characters often fit into real-world geopolitics a bit more comfortably due to their more limited powers, as opposed to the almost god-like heroes published by DC. Second, DC's wartime heroes were far more numerous than Marvel's handful of Invaders. Finally, Thomas created a multitude of powerful WWII-era villains for the Invaders

to face; as he noted, in reference to the original Marvel stories of the 1940s, “where were the sensational *super-villains* which are such an integral part of today’s comics scene? Except for [Captain America’s arch-nemesis] the Red Skull, there was hardly a super-baddie.”[20] Thus, the Invaders could “invade” Europe and fight off these super-foes while the rest of the war ran true to history.

Thomas’ *Invaders* is a conservative piece of retro-active continuity which establishes a superteam in Marvel’s 1940s, but prohibits them, by the “rules” of continuity, from significantly altering the course of World War II in any way.[21] What worked for Marvel, however, would not work for DC, with its more numerous, and more powerful, heroes. When Thomas moved from Marvel to DC in the 1980s, he would find a different explanation for why the Justice Society did not end World War II, once again displaying how retroactive continuity can be used by a fan-turned-pro to “speak back” to the stories of his/her youth in a way that maintains the conservative continuity favored by vocal aspects of comics fandom, while at the same time providing a more liberal view of traditionalist historical narratives.

THE RETURN OF THE ALL-STARS

In 1975, Thomas’ friend Gerry Conway left Marvel to write and edit for DC Comics, home of the original Justice Society. After this switch-up, according to Thomas, he and Conway were, “kicking around some ideas for new projects he could initiate at DC. Gerry had plenty of his own concepts of course – but on a whim, I suggested a revival of *All-Star Comics*.”[22] Conway took this idea and ran with it, and in autumn of 1975 he brought back the Justice Society’s *All-Star Comics* title, restarting it at issue 58 (the final Justice Society *All-Star* story, before the book changed title and format to *All-Star Western* in 1951, had been issue 57). The series chronicled the adventures of the Justice Society in the 1970s. These stories, however, were set on DC’s “Earth 2,” an alternate dimension which featured the Justice Society and other of DC’s heroes from the 1930s and 40s, distinct from the present-day, revised versions of the characters who lived on “Earth 1,” featured in the rest of DC’s publishing line. This distinction

would prove important in later years, as Thomas would create stories altering relatively small historical details of World War II, with the excuse that this was how events transpired on Earth 2, as opposed to the more true-to-reality chronicle of history on Earth 1.

Conway, however, was not as interested as Thomas in the *history* of the Justice Society, but rather with continuing their adventures in the present day. As such, the original Justice Society members were older, most of them having come out of "retirement" to join together and fight the forces of injustice once again. They also added three new, younger members to the team. This emphasis on youth and newness, though, did not prevent Conway from pre-soliciting letters for the first issue from two Justice Society history buffs – Jerry Bails and Roy Thomas, standing in as the voice of Justice Society fandom. Bails exclaimed that, "You did it! You managed to breathe new life into the Justice Society of America without changing it beyond recognition . . . But I especially like the continuity with past stories. This is most important, and I thank you for it."[23] Conway's run on *All-Star Comics* began with positive notices from the two men recognized as being most closely associated with JSA fandom, allowing him to move forward, with their blessing, in continuing the Justice Society's ongoing story.

Conway's successor on the title was another fan-turned-pro named Paul Levitz, whose work on *All-Star Comics* was amongst his first professional writing credits. His run on the book proved him to be firmly entrenched in the traditions of fandom, displaying the interest in long-term continuity that was a hallmark of early fans. Within three issues of taking over *All-Star Comics*, Levitz began to downplay the book's title on its cover, instead making the font announcing the book's stars, "The Legendary Justice Society of America" much larger and more prominent.[24] Levitz would later remark about this change, "Guess I'm a traditionalist."[25]

Levitz would prove himself to be not only a Justice Society traditionalist, but also an innovator, as he became the writer who first provided the team with their "Secret Origin." This was an act of retconning at its finest, inserting a story into the narrative fabric of the DC Universe that had not been there previously in order to create a "logical" reason for the super-

heroes of the 1940s to join together in such a team. Levitz notes that he did, "enjoy fitting the retro pieces in," and, just as importantly, that he's, "a bit of a history buff."[26] These two interests collided in his origin story for the Justice Society, released in the summer of 1977 as *DC Comics Special Special* #29. This was the first time that the story of how the Justice Society came together as a team was "revealed," and it was set in the pre-World War II, New Deal America from which the original *All-Star Comics* stories had emerged. The caption on the opening page, appearing before even the story's title, clearly sets this timeframe: "In the winter of 1940, Adolf Hitler abandoned plans to invade England! To this day, no one knows why—no one but the ten heroes who battled across two continents to ruin those plans—and give birth to a legacy!"[27] Levitz culled this opening circumstance from historical fact – in 1940, Germany did, indeed, indefinitely postpone its plan, Operation Sea Lion, to invade the United Kingdom. While in reality this postponement was most likely due to Germany's defeat in the Battle of Britain, Levitz utilizes it as a historical curiosity, a "mystery" around which he could weave his story.

With the benefit of hindsight not available to writers of the original Justice Society stories, who were crafting their narratives as the war unfolded, Levitz was able, for the first time, to retroactively insert a JSA story into the actual fabric of World War II, without creating circumstances that would change the outcome of the war. This clearly displays a change in attitude amongst writers and readers from the 1940s to the 1970s; in the latter era, we see an increasing demand for realism in superhero stories, where suspension of belief allows for an audience to believe that a man can fly, but not that that flying man changed the outcome of World War II. Again, this change can be accounted for based on the fact that comic book audiences of the 1970s, or at least the vocal parts of the audiences (that is, organized fandom), were adult readers whose fantasy realms required an application of logic and realism to otherwise magical thinking and plotting, something which was not an issue for the mostly-child audiences of the 1940s.

This is, once again, the inherent conservatism of continuity in action. Fans demand not only fidelity to past storylines within the fictional universe, but also to past events in the chronicle of their own history. The massive superhero universes of DC and Marvel Comics, worlds of escapism for readers and writers both, conservatively reflect the "real world." They never diverge so far as to actually alter the fabric of lived history in the way that stand-alone, out-of-continuity stories are able to.[28] As comics creator John Byrne explains, after years of creating stories and characters for DC and Marvel, he yearned for, "a virgin 'universe,' one more like our own – the mythic 'World Outside Your Window.' . . . A world that would have trundled along, just like our own, until the day strange beings appeared – super-heroes for lack of a better term – which would forever alter the course of that world's history. Unlike traditional comic-book universes, it would change, and change drastically."[29]

While stand-alone projects are free to take their narratives to whatever extreme imaginable – up to, and including, the end of the world – stories that are set in the firmaments of DC or Marvel's "universes" adhere to a general rule that the events of history unfurled as they did in the world outside the windows of readers. Levitz' "Untold Origin of The Justice Society" is an exemplar of such conservative narratives. In the prologue, he takes great pains to set the historical moment in which the story takes place: "1940: The Nazi juggernaut sweeps across Europe, but "World War Two" has not officially begun…for American has not entered the war…yet. Franklin Delano Roosevelt has just been re-elected for an unprecedented third term as president, and he has promised America peace…a promise he is hard-pressed to keep."[30] In this context, Roosevelt is visited by a representative of "Intrepid," the codename for William Stephenson, the head of British intelligence for the western hemisphere during World War II. The representative comes bearing news of "reliable information" about Hitler's plans to invade England, and asks Roosevelt for American help. Roosevelt's response, in this pre-Pearl Harbor context, is that, "As God is my witness, you know I want to help, but I am the president of this great nation—not the king. And I have promised my friends, the American people, that I would

not lead them into war—not unless we were attacked!"[31] In order to avoid all-out war with Germany, but still provide assistance to Britain, Roosevelt thus gathers together a group of American superheroes to send into Europe and help stave off invasion. When the heroes ultimately save the day, the grateful president notes that, "it's a shame you can't stay together that way—you'd make a snappy Army regiment!"[32] Superman, though, has the final word over Roosevelt, proclaiming that, "We're not part of any army. We fight only in the cause of justice...and that'll give us our name…the Justice Society of America."[33]

President Roosevelt's bookend role as the figure responsible for calling the Justice Society together positions him as every bit as much of a hero as the team's members, with the story failing to question or interrogate his historical policies in any way. While the Justice Society members are fictional constructs who can always follow the most "moral" course, Roosevelt, like any other political leader, was a far more three dimensional figure. In 1977, though, just after the bicentennial, American exceptionalism would not allow for a story to criticize the president who had "saved" America from World War II. This even would mean that stories featuring Roosevelt would downplay his role in initiating the New Deal, a policy that was as controversial to many conservative Americans in the 70s as it had been during the war.[34] Roosevelt is portrayed as practically a full Justice Society member, using all the resources that he can to help the British while still keeping his "promise" to his "friends," the American people. It would be several more years before readers saw any actual questioning of Roosevelt's policies in a Justice Society story.

Nevertheless, in Levitz' final Justice Society story he *was* able to use the JSA's history to interrogate the politics of a different historical figure – Senator Joe McCarthy. The story reveals the moment of, as the title calls it, "The Defeat of the Justice Society!"[35] This tale is set in 1951, and is used, like the origin story, to add in a retcon, in this case explaining why the team disbanded and "retired" in the 1950s and early 1960s. The JSA is defeated here not by any evil scientist or power-mad supervillain, but rather by the United States Congress. After bringing in

a criminal to the Department of Justice, the JSA is summoned before a special hearing by "The Combined Congressional Un-American Activities Committee" into "the activities of the so-called Justice Society of America."[36] The committee is meant to evoke the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, famously used as a "witch hunt" against potential communist allies. Thus, the JSA is concerned when the unnamed senator who calls the hearing to order notes that the criminal they brought in was, "a known agent of a hostile foreign power,"[37] and demands to know their connection with him, claiming that the committee isn't directly accusing them of anything but does want them to undergo security clearance. The shadowed figure next to this senator is then revealed as a dead-on likeness of McCarthy, who agrees that, "We know nothing about you except the few facts that you've given reporters, and that is not enough. This is a closed session of a Congressional committee—and by that authority I ask you. If you are good Americans, you will show this committee your faces—and then we may begin the process of clearing you."[38] Aghast at this request, the Justice Society, through their chairman, Hawkman, replies that, "We respectfully decline, Senator. Our faces—our names—our lives, are our own business. Don't worry…you won't be hearing from us again."[39] With that, the team disappears and officially leaves the public eye for more than a decade.

Whereas Levitz had heroicized President Roosevelt to the point of having him found the Justice Society, in this story he portrays Senator McCarthy as a villain, the shadowy mastermind behind a vicious plot to attack the JSA on moral grounds. In the following scene, in which two younger members of the JSA are discussing the hearing, one of them notes that, "It was a different world then . . . a sick, sad world a few men had twisted out of shape," and specifically calls out McCarthy as, "Simply a madman who got himself a little power, and started to use it to crush people."[40] Levitz, like many comic book creators, reveals himself to be politically left leaning, heralding the architect of the New Deal while demonizing the anti-Communist crusader.

By 1979, the time this story was published, it was clearly possible for comics creators to use their stories in order to play in the fields of cultural memory. In two stories set in different historical contexts, Levitz evokes imagery of a beleaguered-but-heroic president who wants to do what's best for the American people and of a power-mad senator who set America on a vicious course. Celebration and critique are equally potent aspects of the way a culture remembers and shares its past, and these two stories show that process at work as a vital part of retroactive continuity. Such a process would come into play even solidly more in the very book that first provided the term "retroactive continuity," Roy Thomas' *All-Star Squadron*.

THE ALL-STAR SQUADRON

In 1981, Roy Thomas' lifelong dream finally came true, when he found himself the writer of a new, ongoing DC comic starring the Justice Society, as part of a larger team of "Earth 2" World War II-era heroes, the newly dubbed "All-Star Squadron" (named in honor of the JSA's old home in *All-Star Comics*). The series, *All-Star Squadron*, reflected Thomas' dual obsessions with both the 1940s superheroes and with the history of the war. As Thomas explains, he, "felt most 1940s DC stories should be counted as "canonical" (*i.e.*, as having "actually occurred" on Earth-Two), [so] the events of *All-Star Comics* #10-13 were woven in and out of the *Squadron* issues as the events recounted in them were reached chronologically."[41] In an introduction to a collected edition of several original issues of *All-Star Comics*, Thomas explains that, "*All Star Comics* and World War II . . . are forever linked in my mind."[42] When he first discovered the Justice Society in 1950, coming across a used copy of one of the team's early adventures, "two of my main interests of my later life – comic books and history – came crashing together with as much force as a couple of electrons in an atom-smasher!"[43] Once he was finally given creative control of his boyhood heroes, he continued to collide those two interests, interweaving the JSA's original continuity with retroactive continuity and the actual history of World War II. Fan historian Kurt Mitchell assesses this duel fascination, noting that, "The war itself was a major character . . . the series interwove authentic history with explorations of Golden Age continuity

and plenty of new storylines, providing the verisimilitude that rooted the Squadron's fantastic adventures in reality."[44] As Thomas would later put it, "Old super-heroes, like old soldiers, never die. They just get redefined."[45]

Thomas' redefinition of the Justice Society would nevertheless build upon the definitions of the past. In the opening moments of *All-Star Squadron*, he carried on the narrative tradition established by Levitz before him that President Roosevelt was a heroic figure, practically an honorary member of the Justice Society. The very first scene of the series portrays Roosevelt attempting to call the JSA at their headquarters, noting to his aide, Harry Hopkins that, "we've already waited as long as we dare…perhaps too long! But—why in heaven's name don't they answer? Why?"[46] The captions that close the story expand upon his concern, explaining that, "Meanwhile, from delivery trucks all over the capital, the next morning's newspapers are being delivered to anxious dealers…in these first moments of Sunday, December 7, 1941...a date destined to live in infamy…!"[47]

As the story continues we learn that a supervillain from the future has travelled back to this "infamous" date in order to specifically kidnap the heroes and prevent them from interfering in the attack on Pearl Harbor. This plot point meta-textually gestures to exactly Thomas' purpose with the story, to "finally" explain why the Justice Society, including Superman, were unable to protect Pearl Harbor from Japanese attack despite their massive and varied skills and powers. This piece of retroactive continuity is representative of just how retconning works. Here Thomas creates a story that is set in the past, both the historical past of readers and the narrative past of the superheroes he is writing about. In this "newly-revealed" story from history, the writer is able to provide an explanation for a question that taxes suspension of disbelief for adult readers. This is ultimately a conservative piece of storytelling, for it is created in order to maintain the equilibrium between the status quo of the fictional world and the real world – this story explains why, despite the ways in which the DC Universe (or, more precisely,

DC's "Earth Two" universe) radically differs from the real world, its grand historical narrative of America's direct involvement in World War II remains the same.

Retconning, here as elsewhere, arises out of a desire for continuity, control, and narrative logic, a conservative impulse when compared to the more fantastic and magical elements of stories that eschew reality completely, as many superhero comics in the 1930s and 40s had. Fans of a world filled with superheroes, especially those fans who become professional/official chroniclers of this world, demand the narrative closure afforded by explaining inconsistencies such as why those heroes could not prevent the Pearl Harbor attack. To simply have the heroes actually *stop* the attack, and then follow the chain of logic thereafter to a totally changed world, would stretch credulity too much in a superhero universe that touches upon so many different published books and stories, all set in a reality that is ostensibly the same as the one outside the reader's window. Thus the attack on Pearl Harbor *has* to occur. The ongoing narratives of the DC and Marvel universes are not interested in the alternate histories so often explored in science fiction, but rather with creating a "realistic" world in which the superheroes live and interact, but which also strikes a familiar cord with readers as being not too dissimilar from the one they know.

This desire to maintain historical fidelity via retroactive explanations continues in the fourth issue of *All-Star Squadron*, which explains why the Justice Society didn't simply invade Europe and put an end to the Axis forces using their superpowers. During the first storyline, President Roosevelt explains to the three uncaptured members of the JSA, along with several other heroes who have joined up with them on the way to the White House, why he had been trying to contact them the night before:

> I want you of the Justice Society to mobilize every one of this nation's costumed heroes—men and women—into a single, super-powerful unit—a sort of All-Star Squadron, so to speak—responsible to no one but myself! . . . You see, you mystery-men are one of America's greatest natural resources—which we must husband carefully, for the coming struggle with the Nazis![48]

Once again, Roosevelt is seen as a founder of a superhero team, this time one that included *all* of the heroes of the DC Universe active during the 1940s.[49] This becomes the founding concept of the series. The All-Star Squadron is composed of *every* World War II-era Earth 2 hero, and thus has a massive membership with the personnel on any individual mission or in any particular storyline constantly rotating. The speech also places Roosevelt as a heroic central figure in the history of the Justice Society, on par with Superman, Batman, and any of their cohorts.

Thomas was a grand admirer of Roosevelt and his politics, particularly his wartime leadership and the concern for the "everyman" espoused by his New Deal policies. It would seem to be no coincidence, then, that Thomas was heralding Roosevelt's heroism in an era where Ronald Reagan had recently been elected president on a platform that explicitly rejected many of those New Deal beliefs in favor of fiscal conservatism and "trickle down" economics. Part of the iconology that Reagan had used to win the election was associating himself with the mythologized "Good War," even if his own wartime efforts had involved acting rather than fighting. As historian Michael C.C. Adams notes, "Reagan's deep belief in the legitimacy of the movie version of America history made him a living symbol for many Americans of their best war ever and the magic formula for success that they thought was the special possession of the 1940s generation. He was the final embodiment of the movie star as war hero."[50] By espousing this symbolism, "As the grand old man who represented an earlier, simpler, stronger America, Reagan convinced Americans that they could have in the 1980s the world they believed existed in the 1940s, by sheer will."[51] In counterpoint to this image, Thomas associated Roosevelt with the unquestionable heroism of figures like Superman and Batman as a way of defending the politician, heralding him as a superhero among presidents, and recognizing that Reagan and the New Right were in the wrong to assail his legacy.

Indeed, as Thomas would later explain, "It was a privilege to be allowed to show how President Roosevelt would have called every super-hero he could locate into the Oval Office and ask them all . . . to join a single, unified, all-powerful anti-Axis organization 'for the duration.'

(Just the kind of thing FDR would've done, too!)"[52] The team, throughout the run of the series, unquestioningly follows Roosevelt's orders, and at the end of the third issue, on his command, they head to Pearl Harbor to examine the aftermath of the Japanese attack. Against FDR's order to investigate only, and remain on the home front, they head out after the Japanese fleet that they presume the attacking planes must have come from.

The attempt to take the battle to the Japanese forces ends in disaster. While the heroes are flying over the Pacific, Hitler and Japanese Emperor Tojo perform a magical rite, utilizing the Spear of Destiny and the legendary Holy Grail, which makes, according to one Japanese agent, "both Hitler's Fortress Europa and our own Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere totally impregnable to counterattack by America's most powerful costumed champions!"[53] In practice, this creates a sphere of magical influence over all Axis-occupied territory, anywhere in the world, within which those heroes with magic-based powers, or a special vulnerability to magic, end up turning against their allies and become Axis agents, themselves. Unfortunately for the gathered heroes, this includes all of the most powerful All-Star Squadron members, including Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Spectre. As a result, the entire squadron is forced to turn back.

This story serves two purposes. First and foremost, it provides an explanation to the long-held question, on the part of fans, as to why the Justice Society, and Superman in particular, didn't affect or change the outcome of World War II by shortening it significantly. Thomas creates a plot point which prevents the most powerful heroes – those who *could* have a significant impact on the course/history of the war – from entering the battle directly, thus creating a narrative reason for them to remain in the U.S. and "protect the homefront." Once more, we see a piece of retroactive continuity being utilized in order to maintain fidelity to historical reality, yet another moment of continuity as a conservative force. In addition, the story continues the aggrandizing of President Roosevelt, as the Squadron meets such disaster in the Pacific specifically because they disobeyed the president's orders to stay in the U.S. and protect

the home front. Roosevelt is portrayed as knowing better than the heroes themselves – he is their founder and leader, and he directs them to whatever action best serves their country. There are parallels here between how FDR leads the heroes and the ways in which Thomas sees him as having led the country: fairly, justly, and with the best interests of the American people in mind.

Thomas does not stop at Roosevelt in his portrayal of the Allied leaders as the "great men" of history. Early in the run of *All-Star Squadron*, he features several appearances by Winston Churchill, who proves himself to be every bit the heroic leader that Roosevelt is. When Churchill first appears in the series, and meets Roosevelt, a caption explains that, "With the self-assurance that belies his rotund frame, the man [Churchill] strides towards another who half-stands, half-leans against a dark limousine. As he did before, at the signing of the Atlantic charter, the Briton extends a firm hand…a hand clasped in friendship."[54] The meeting between "POTUS" and "Former Naval Person," as they call each other with tongues in cheek, causes one All-Star Squadron member to remark, "You know, All-Stars…I've got a hunch things are gonna go great guns for the Allies from here on."[55]

Even the superheroes, it seems, see Roosevelt and Churchill as the two "great men" without whom the war cannot be won by the Allies. Readers who held a different opinion, however, would not let this portrayal go unchallenged.

ALL-STAR COMMENTS

Roy Thomas did not become the editor of *All-Star Squadron* until almost its third year in publication, but from the start, he crafted its letters column ("All-Star Comments"), wrote text pieces, and responded directly to readers' mail. In the first issue, Thomas crafted an "open letter to the readers," wherein he asserts his longtime love for the Justice Society: "ALL-STAR SQUADRON, or something very much like it, is *the* single comic-book I've most wanted to do since I first discovered comics, a good third of a century ago."[56] He explains that the book will have a focus not just on character and plot, but also on history and, to an extent, education:

> [A] series set in the early 1940s requires a number of explanatory references not just to comics issues but to everyday events, military/political history of the period, etc….things that might be unclear to many newer or younger readers. . . . we've tried to keep things fairly factual when dealing with the events of the war itself.[57]

It was with such intentions in mind that "All-Star Comments," became a place for debate not just about the history of the Justice Society, but about the history of World War II. As such, it was a crucial component of the ways in which history was told in *All-Star Squadron*.

Though of a more insular nature than the discussion of historiography that would become a regular staple of the column, it is worth noting that "All-Star Comments" contains one of the first printed uses (if not *the* first printed use) of the term "retroactive continuity": "As for what Roy himself … is trying to do, we like to think an enthusiastic ALL-STAR booster at one of Adam Malin's Creation Conventions in San Diego came up with the best name for it, a few months back: 'Retroactive Continuity.' Has kind of a ring, don't you think?"[58] Thus, it was within this column that many of the concepts and processes used to create historical revisionism in superhero comics – the very introduction of "retconning" as a term and tool to a fictional universe – were first discussed.

Regarding World War II, though, much of the conversation in "All-Star Comments" would be about minutia, such as makes and models of wartime vehicles and weapons, but Thomas invited such discussion. In the sixth issue he notes that, "we invite *every* reader of ALL-STAR SQUADRON to send us any . . . goof they spot…whether it is a plane flying several years before it was built, or a song played on the radio before its time. Sure, we have to allow ourselves a lot of leeway in order to stop the mag from becoming a history text—but that doesn't mean we're indifferent to our mistakes."[59]

Whether or not Thomas wanted to prevent the book from becoming a full-on exploration of history, rather than historicized escapist entertainment, the column would quickly become a forum for weightier topics. One issue after the above comment, Thomas discussed how he intended the comic book to be celebratory of American history. In response to a letter exhorting him to not be afraid to "show the utmost pride in our American heritage," Thomas explains,

"Despite the well-intentioned and often dead-on-target iconoclasm of the 1960s and early 70s . . . our American heritage is something which we at DC have *never* been ashamed of. And, though ALL-STAR SQUADRON's future issues will deal perhaps with America's lapses as well as her successes, that's precisely the direction which the magazine will continue to go."[60]

By the tenth issue, though, Thomas was beginning question this celebratory narrative. Particularly to his credit is the fact that, though he chose which letters would see print, he would frequently run missives that criticized him and the way he chose to portray history. For example, in the first few issues of the comic book, several characters had used the word "Nip" to refer to the Japanese. In issue ten, Thomas notes that,

> a Japanese-American co-worker told [me] some years ago that the term was far less offensive than certain others, so it was used in issues #1-5. However, after thinking the matter over, we prefer not to use *any* term which may reasonably seem a racial slur, and sharp-eyed readers will have noted that the phrase has not reappeared since then. Nor will it do so again. We're interested in chronicling the wartime adventures of Earth-Two's greatest heroes—but not in keeping old prejudices and epithets undeservedly alive.[61]

Here we see that Thomas *does* recognize the "prejudices and epithets" of the era in which he has set *All-Star Squadron*, and he evinces an honest desire to avoid such hateful and hurtful language and sensibility. However, and perhaps contrary to his intention, Thomas *is* in a certain sense white-washing historical reality. In an effort not to hurt or offend contemporary readers, he is ignoring the pervasive linguistic bias against the Japanese during World War II.[62]

Thomas clearly wants to recognize the past for what it was – with a focus on the celebratory, but an acknowledgment of the regretful – but at the same time he does not want to offend readers' sensibilities. In dealing with such complicated issues, particularly in a popular medium that is meant to provide fictional narratives that are accessible to both children and adults, it is difficult to find a middle ground between historical fidelity and contemporary political correctness.

In a later issue a reader takes Thomas to task for his portrayal of the Nazi villains in *All-Star Squadron*. Heino G. Moeller, writing from California, argues that,

> No one denies the atrocities that were committed by *all* sides during the war, but the persistent focus on the tragic fate of the Jewish people in Europe shows a blatant lack of historical balance. It seems to have become popular in the U.S. mass media to present Germans to the American people as Nazis—brutal, vain, cynical, prejudiced, and above all, *evil*. This simplistic portrayal reinforces stereotypes that defame all Americans of German origin. This type of publicity only provokes a cycle of antagonism and intolerance among ethnic and racial groups.[63]

In Thomas' response to the letter he does not accuse Moeller of Holocaust denial, but rather explains his narrative choices based on his understanding of the history of the war. He notes that, "Pro-democratic Germans, at least in Germany proper, had little outlet for their voices or actions in the period covered . . . the battling All-Stars are unlikely to run into non-Nazi Germans."[64] He then goes on to opine that "the aptly-named 'Holocaust' so dwarfs most other atrocities of World War Two, that we can never apologize for considering, not Germans, but Nazism and those who espoused it, to have been among the greatest curses of mankind."[65] He then finishes his response by explaining that his own ethnic heritage, on both sides, is German, something that has, "never been anything he's been either especially proud of *or* ashamed of."[66] In this exchange, Thomas indicates that he is not blindly following one textbook or another, but rather considering the facts of World War II, as he understands them. From that understanding he has worked to craft a narrative that is at the same time "historically accurate" (insofar as his own interpretations are concerned), inoffensive by contemporary standards, entertaining to readers of escapist fiction, and respectful to those caught up in the many tragedies of the war. That is not to say, however, that he does not end up a bit too traditionalist and celebratory in certain parts of that narrative.

In a later letters column, Thomas is correctly accused of not finding the middle ground in regards to the two political leaders prominently featured in the early issues of the series – Roosevelt and Churchill. Throughout the run of *All-Star Squadron*, the two men are seen as heroes on par with any of the members of the Squadron, always having the best interests of their countrymen and allies in their hearts and minds. In the letters column of issue 34, reader Carlos Preston calls this portrayal, "cloyingly idolatrous," particularly citing the, "growing body of

historical evidence that suggests that FDR knew in advance that the Japanese were about to attack Pearl Harbor," and that he did nothing in response in order to finally have an, "'incident' that he could use as an excuse to draw America into the European war."[67] Similarly, he notes a claim from Churchill's secretary that the British prime minister, upon hearing of Pearl Harbor, "shouted hurrah and lifted a toast to his companions (brandy, his favorite drink, no doubt) and said merrily, 'Now we are saved!'"[68] He criticizes Thomas for his choices in heralding the two men as heroes:

> I realize that you are writing, essentially, fantasy. But I notice what great pains you've taken to render the historical background to your stories as faithfully and exactly as you can (for which you ought to be commended). Perhaps a little more historical research, perhaps a reading of some "revisionist" views of the war and of Roosevelt's and Churchill's roles in it would have shown a very different FDR and Winnie than the ones you have portrayed in your stories thus far. Perhaps not. But I think the real FDR and Churchill were considerably less benign, considerably less noble, than the good people who populate your stories of super-heroes.[69]

Thomas responds that, though he thinks, "free and healthy exchange of information and opinion is what democracy is all about," he disagrees with Preston's "assessment of many aspects of President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, that's all. But that's a lot."[70]

Thomas goes on to display his own reading on the subject of World War II, responding to Preston's comments with a specific reference:

> [N]either historian John Toland in his recent book *Infamy* nor the other, earlier accounts of the 'Pearl Harbor cover-up' that I have read has really convinced me (or a number of other persons with far more credentials in the field of historical research than either of *us* have, I'm sure) that FDR knew anything more on December 6-7, 1941, than that the Japanese were about to strike *somewhere*, quite probably against American positions. We're not saying he *didn't*—only that as far as we're concerned, the verdict is still very much *out*.[71]

However, despite the nuanced understand of historiography displayed by this statement – a recognition of uncertainty and the subjectivity of personal opinion – Thomas does become a bit overly defensive in claiming that, "Far from idolizing Roosevelt or Churchill, especially the former, I find them interesting and important figures whom no one could ever truly 'know.' . . . He could be the most charming and persuasive of men, and that's how I've played him in ALL-

STAR SQUADRON."[72] Thomas thus contradicts himself, stating that it is not his intention to idolize Roosevelt, but that he has nevertheless chosen to portray him as "charming and persuasive," to an almost supernatural degree, as we have seen. Thomas's subjective view of Roosevelt, it would seem, errs to the traditionalist opinion of the "great man."

This viewpoint is perhaps understandable given the 1980s context in which Thomas was writing *All-Star Squadron*. Ronald Reagan was being heralded as a similar "great man," one whose conservative values and policies were counteracting the legacy that Roosevelt left behind, a legacy that Thomas admired. By reinstating and reifying Roosevelt's "heroicism," Thomas was attempting to point out that the emperor had no clothes; that is, to hold up a historical "great man" to the present-day one, and thereby show that the former was worthy of greater praise.

Such views and conversations show that Thomas was clearly interested in, and educated about, the various facets of World War II and its political and social culture. He may have been accused of being too celebratory in one place, or too derogatory in another, but he certainly showed that he was willing to engage in debate about the issues in the letters column. This debate showcases a tension that is at the very heart of *All-Star Squadron*, and indeed of all historical narratives of the 1980s – the conflict between traditional history and "new history."

THE NEW HISTORY OF THE ALL-STAR SQUADRON

Throughout his run on *All-Star Squadron*, and its successor title *Young All-Stars*, Roy Thomas was, whether consciously or not, creating an ongoing conversation between traditional historical narrativization and the late 20th-century new/cultural historicism in the academy. In the former school of historiography, a narrative is constructed from the "great events" and "great men" of history, using them as a touchstone from which to expound upon the past. In the 1840s, Scottish writer and historian Thomas Carlyle popularized the "Great Men" theory, noting that:

> Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. . . . [A]ll things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.[73]

Well into the second half of the twentieth century, it was this version of history, focusing on kings and presidents and prime ministers rather than on the common man, which dominated historical thought and teaching, as well as much historical drama. Some historians, however, argued that this approach was too narrow. As Robert Brent Toplin explains, in relation to period dramas in film,

> The practice of reporting on good people's struggles against adversity, though it produces attractive drama, raises some problems. Personality-oriented movies give short shrift, for example, to the effect of Collective action or the impact of long-term economic change. Instead of recognizing subtle, complex factors that foster change, these portrayals show progress resulting almost exclusively from the actions of dynamic individuals.[74]

What holds true for historical movies, of course, also holds true for history-minded comics.

Cultural history, on the other hand, rejects the concept of a grand narrative, and instead focuses on the broad social/cultural/political picture. This French influence encountered fertile ground in American historiography, as the American Studies movement, which considered untraditional popular sources as a way of understanding American character and the "American mind," had been slowly gaining greater acceptance since its advent around the time of the Great Depression. Historian Eric Foner notes that the "new histories" that emerged from this crucible possess "an emphasis on the experience of ordinary Americans" and acknowledge that "'politics' now means much more than the activities of party leaders," rejecting the "presidential synthesis," a way of viewing the past that "understood the evolution of American society chiefly via presidential elections and administrations."[75] In its stead, the new histories, "devote attention to the broad political culture or 'public life' of a particular era; others stress the role of the state itself in American history and the ways various groups have tried to use it for their own purposes."[76] This new history, focused as it is on fragmentation rather than synthesis, also abandons objectivity as an end-goal, or indeed even a possibility, for historians, preferring instead to point out the subjective point-of-view of any historical narrative.[77]

Thomas' *All-Star Squadron* stories fluctuate constantly between these two ways of viewing the past. In keeping with the inherent conservatism of continuity, and particularly of

historical retconning to maintain the "integrity" of real-world history, the stories are obsessed with fidelity to the "grand narrative" of World War II. Stories that explain why the Justice Society couldn't halt Pearl Harbor, or why they didn't fight in occupied Europe, work to establish that real-world grand narrative as part of the DC Universe's history. Similarly, the heroicization of Roosevelt and Churchill, as described above, reflects a conservative, traditionalist respect for the "great men" of World War II whose individual actions were able to shape its outcome.

Thomas' stories *differ* from this conservative historicism, however, when they delve more deeply into the social and cultural history of World War II. While the original Justice Society stories of the 1940s solely told the stories of the superheroes and their various adventures, the *All-Star Squadron* stories, with a perspective of 1980s cultural historicism, explore the impact of the war on not just superheroes, but also average American citizens.

As historian Jill Lepore points out, accounts of wars are particularly fruitful territory in which to explore changing views on historical epochs. She notes that, "The words used to describe war have a great deal of work to do: they must communicate war's intensity, its traumas, fears, and glories; they must make clear who is right and who is wrong, rally support, and recruit allies; and they must document the pain of war, and in so doing, help to alleviate it."[78] Written accounts of war are thus as much of a battlefield as war itself, as most famously reflected in the adage that, "History is written by the victor." Lepore goes so far as to assert that, "wounds and words—the injuries and their interpretations—cannot be separated, that acts of war generate acts of narration, and that both types of acts are often joined in a common purpose: defining the geographical, political, cultural, and sometimes racial and national boundaries between peoples."[79] War is not only remembered in official, sanctioned histories, but also in a culture's broader public memory, which can be and is embodied in popular forms such as superhero comic books.

All-Star Squadron's interpretation of social issues during World War II reflects this sense of redefinition and reinterpretation, particularly in stories touching upon the Detroit Race Riot of 1943 and Japanese internment camps. These two storylines deal with minority groups that were either ignored, or else outright stereotyped, in the original Justice Society stories. The newer stories, with a greater sensitivity to racial inequality and violence, are exemplars of Foner's assertion, "If anything is characteristic of the recent study of American history, it is attention to the experience of previously neglected groups—not simply as an addition to a preexisting body of knowledge but as a fundamental redefinition of history itself."[80] In *All-Star Squadron*, the two "previously neglected groups" that Thomas focuses on are African Americans and Japanese Americans. In a storyline running from issues 38-40 of the series, a group of the Squadron's heroes watch a newsreel informing them of increasing racial tensions in Detroit, precipitated by "white residents . . . picketing the unoccupied houses of a new negro housing project—the Sojourner Truth homes."[81] The Squadron members take off for Detroit, where they come across a sign in a local diner exclaiming, "Help the white people to keep this district white. Men needed to keep our lines solid."[82] When they confront the locals about it, one man angrily says to them, "We'll see ya around—nigger-lovers!"[83]

Despite his earlier promise to keep racial slurs out of *All-Star Squadron*, Thomas is clearly using this vitriolic word in order to portray the depth of the hatred and tensions that ran through Detroit in this era. He is drawing upon the race riot at Detroit's Sojourner Truth homes in February of 1942. The riot was the result of protest over a government housing project that was moving black workers into a white neighborhood. Violence broke out when black homeowners tried to break through the picket-lines that their white neighbors were forming in front of the new houses. Thomas adds the Squadron members into this mix, along with a masked (in this case, the mask of a Ku Klux Klan hood) supervillain named "Real American" (an ironic name meant to pinpoint the hypocrisy of equating racism with what Thomas sees as real American values) who incites the crowd and gets into a battle with a local African American

hero named Amazing Man. When Amazing Man is defeated, the white police officers arrest him while Real American is allowed to go free. One of the heroes notes, during the riot, "That negro man doesn't even have a weapon—so how come three policemen are on him, and none on the white men who were attacking him a second ago?"[84]

In this story, the "official," celebratory narrative of American solidarity during World War II is called into question. The authorities are seen as being every bit as culpable in the mistreatment of African Americans as the members of the KKK-like group the Phantom Empire are. Such culpability goes all the way to the top, as well. In one of the few occasions where Thomas shows Roosevelt in a questionable light, the president explains to two of the heroes that, "My hands are tired, boys. There's a war on . . . that riot, regrettable thought it be, is a local matter. Nothing I can do about it."[85] Flying off afterwards, Justice Society chairman Hawkman notes that, "we may just be working to win one war—while setting the stage for another one—in America itself!"[86]

The final part of the three-issue storyline links the racism of the white crowds, spurred on by Real American and his Phantom Empire backers, with the Nazi threat. The first page of the issue features a quote from a real-life 1942 housing protest placard, stating, "Hitler Supports Housing Discrimination!"[87] When All-Star chairwoman Liberty Belle argues that the racists they have encountered don't represent all Americans, who oppose discrimination, teammate Johnny Quick counters with, "Sure—but they're all staying home! That's how a crudhead like Hitler took over Germany!"[88] Thomas is thus not only taking a stand against racist ideology, but also against the passive masses who refuse to take such a stand when confronted by it. Later in the issue, Liberty Belle makes the racist/Nazi equivalency even more explicit, exclaiming to Real American, "We're all Americans—black and white! You're using the same thug-tactics the Nazis used in Austria—Czechoslovakia!"[89]

Though it was easy, and non-controversial, enough for Thomas to stand against blatant racism in the 1980s, what is more unusual for *All-Star Squadron* is the demonization of World

War II victory culture, which is ultimately held responsible for the mistreatment and dehumanization of African Americans on the home front. Because of the singular focus on winning the war, the official state apparatus – from local, possibly racist police, up to a glorified and well-meaning, but ultimately (in this case) impotent president – is not prepared to protect at home the very rights that the country is fighting for overseas.

Thomas was not alone in his reappraisal at this time of the racial politics of World War II. Many scholars, in fact, have traced the beginning of the civil rights movement, which came to a head in the 1960s, with African American struggles and protests during World War II, as "the moment when the structures of Jim Crow began to crack and crumble and a nascent civil rights movement started to take shape."[90] However, as Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Truck argue, African American activist accomplishments during World War II have become embellished over time. It may even be possible that, "the war actually marked a *downturn* in black militancy. . . . because it was followed by the 'bad' years of the Cold War, when anti-communist paranoia at home served to restrict not just the movement of civil rights activists, but their vision for reform itself."[91]

Nevertheless, African American activists in the 1960s in many ways led the charge for reevaluating the contributions and struggles of American blacks during World War II, and the connection between that movement and the war itself had become part of accepted history by the 1980s. For example, A. Russell Buchanan's 1977 book *Black Americans in World War II* had as its explicit thesis that African Americans during the war, "continued their struggle to attain equality of status with other Americans. This narrative summarizes the progress made by Negroes during the course of World War II."[92] Scholars such as Buchanan linked African American gains in the military to the civil rights movement by pointing out that, "the war produced thousands of Negro veterans who returned home with a new concept of what life should be like."[93]

In the context of the 1980s, then, Thomas was relying on a body of literature that tied World War II activism with civil rights activism. Much of this focused on the "Double V" campaign advocated by the black press in the 1940s, a movement to fight for victory and democracy not just abroad in Europe, but also at home for African Americans. This campaign pushed African Americans to get involved in the war effort, and to follow up those contributions with a public relations campaign. Activists used protests and press to focus on these African American contributions and pointed out the hypocrisy of a country fighting against racist ideology while at the same time supporting that ideology with its own discriminatory policies and practices. Though, as Kruse and Tuck note, this campaign "did not herald a lasting change in black attitudes,"[94] it *was* easy to link to the later 1960s civil rights movement which employed many of the same tactics, comparing the treatment of African Americans to repressive regimes that were viewed as "the enemy" during the Cold War.

Thomas' storyline recognizing racial unrest during World War II was radical for its time. Although he was relying on a body of historiography that increasingly (and perhaps overly) recognized the value of African American struggles and gains during the war, these struggles had not yet been widely chronicled in popular culture. Even the now-famed Tuskegee Airmen has not made their way to either the silver screen or TV screens, nor had they been memorialized or recognized by the "official" culture of government public memory.

Thomas' interest in exploring the negative side of the American WWII home front was ahead of its time. It would not be until 1995 that wider American popular culture was to confront the struggles of African Americans during the war, in the form of *The Tuskegee Airmen*, an HBO film. *The Tuskegee Airmen* focused on the struggles of African American fighter pilots who would face not only America's enemies, but also their own superior officers and the politicians who dismissed them as inherently inferior to white soldiers. The film was a critical and commercial success, and for many Americans it provided the first exposure to stories of how WWII victory culture marginalized African Americans while at the same time decrying racism

abroad. The script was based on a story co-written by Robert W. Williams, one of the Tuskegee airmen, who had been trying to get the film made since as early as 1953 (a further indication of the struggle of black Americans to even have their stories told). According to Williams, he wanted to tell, "a story about black people and our struggle as a people to get the right to fight with dignity for our country," and one about, "overcoming stupid racially motivated roadblocks and succeeding in spite of them."[95] *The Tuskegee Airmen* would prove to be just one of several projects commemorating the experiences of black soldiers – including a 2004 book, *Brothers in Arms: The Epic Story of the 761st Tank Battalion, World War II's Forgotten Heroes*, coauthored by basketball superstar Kareem Abdul-Jabbar – and heralding how they overcame racial prejudice, while choosing not to focus on the discrimination they faced (especially at home) during and after the war.[96] Roy Thomas, on the other hand, was interested in focusing specifically on that home front discrimination in *All-Star Squadron*.

While the original Justice Society stories had been written in the context of a victory culture that wanted to (somewhat literally) whitewash the truth of discrimination on the home-front, Thomas' 1980s *All-Star Squadron* tales were written in a post-civil rights context that saw the struggles of African Americans during the second World War as a crucial building block towards the larger movements of the 1960s. His "Real American" story-arc reflects this view of history. With a nod to actual history, the story concludes with disappointment. Real American is revealed as android with a hypnotic ability that has spurred on the tensions of the crowd, though only in part.[97] As Thomas notes, the actual Sojourner Truth housing riot was helped along by miscommunication and mismanagement. According to "the 1979 book *State of War: Michigan in World War Two* by Alan Clive . . . on 2-28-42, Detroit's mayor halted the scheduled move by African-Americans into the Sojourner Truth Homes [until they could be safely escorted into the project], but 'that news did not arrive a the battleground in time to prevent another clash at about 12:15 P.M.' The move was put off till April."[98]

Thomas' research is in full force here, as both the storyline and the actual riot come to an uncertain and unsatisfactory end. As chairwoman Liberty Belle thinks to herself, "God, I hate leaving here—with so much unrest, so much racial hatred still unsettled. But there's only so much that even an All-Star Squadron can do. Maybe…next time…next place…!"[99] Racial hatred, still an issue plaguing America in the 1980s, was not like a fictional Nazi supervillain that could be subdued through valiant struggle, nor even like World War II itself, which eventually came to an end. Rather, the job of facing down such racial tension is left open-ended and unclear, indicating that each individual reader must do their part in the "next time/place" – that is, the present day – to fight against the menace that even the All-Stars could not defeat.

The next issue of racial complexity faced by the Squadron is, in fact, presaged in this story, with Amazing Man's fiancé yelling out, in sarcastic anger, "Maybe you ought to put all the other minorities in jail, too, til the war's over—Japanese-Americans, because of Pearl Harbor—Mexican workers, to protect our precious borders!"[100] Thomas uses this line to foreshadow the internment camps for Japanese citizens erected by the U.S. government during the war. The race riot story is, in fact, set less than two weeks after President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, creating Japanese "exclusion zones" along the Pacific Coast. In an earlier issue of *All-Star Squadron*, Thomas had portrayed a conflicted Roosevelt signing the order, feeling, as he does in regard to the Detroit riot, that his hands were tied.[101]

It was much later, in *All-Star Squadron's* successor title, *Young All-Stars*[102], that Thomas actually examined the issue in depth. One of the newest members of the Squadron introduced in the series is called Tsunami, a Nisei (U.S.-born child of Japanese immigrants) who was at first an enemy of the heroes but then realized she was being manipulated by imperial Japan into blaming all Americans for the internment camps. However, she comes to think, "I had respected the Americans I had fought . . . and I could not believe they would want to put innocent Issei [Japanese immigrants] and Nisei behind barbed wire. In fact, America and Japan should not be at war at all."[103] Though her name is a bit of a stereotype, playing off of one on of the few

Japanese words that Americans would be familiar with, Tsunami serves as a mouthpiece for Thomas to rail against the internment camps, a historical reality he clearly feels most harshly represents the dark side of America during the war. He points to the inhumanity and hypocrisy of the camps: "Many of those in the Los Angeles area were briefly interned at Santa Anita Racetrack, kept in stables that had previously housed racehorses. . . . Before long, most of these 'enemy aliens' (many of them born US citizens) were sent to barbed-wired camps in the Southwestern Desert."[104]

When the narrative conspires to bring Tsunami before President Roosevelt, himself, Thomas gives her an eloquent speech denouncing the camps:

> I am an American—and I have come to feel Japan was wrong when she attacked Hawaii without warning. I only want what is best for America—and for Japan—the end of the military dictatorship now governing Japan. But—I must also say this: even though this terrible war must go on, innocent people of Japanese descent—who are nearly all loyal to America—should not be sent to concentration camps, as is now happening on your west coast! I beg of you, Mr. President—rescind your order, which allows your army to place any resident Japanese—yes, even so-called Nisei, born in this country—behind barbed wire! Put me in prison, if you must—but free my people—and give them a chance to prove themselves true Americans.[105]

In response, Roosevelt momentarily loses his eloquence for one of the few times throughout the run of the two series, exclaiming, "Uh, nonsense, young lady. I have no intention of putting you behind bars."[106] Recovering himself, he then goes on to say, "I don't want any innocent person to suffer—no matter what their ancestry—and I promise to look into this matter, to see if it's really a military necessity, as many of my advisors feel."[107] When Tsunami thanks him, though, he immediately changes the subject, moving on to other matters.

In keeping with maintaining fidelity to the actual occurrences of the war, *Young All-Star*'s Roosevelt never does shut down the camps in response to Tsunami's pleas. In the next issue, the young Squadron members travel to California and go to the "relocation center" at the Santa Anita Racetrack where Tsunami's family is being held. The one clear image of the camp provided at the moment of their arrival, in *Young All-Stars* #4, as crafted by penciller Howard Simpson, shows a destitute, downtrodden group of Japanese citizens wandering aimlessly behind

a barbed wire fence. Thomas had provided Simpson with a diagram of the racetrack, and of the stables where the Japanese citizens were being temporarily interred.[108] In reaction to these abhorrent conditions, Tsunami shouts, "Armed guards—barbed wire—they're being treated like animals. Animals!! Is this how Roosevelt keeps his promise? Turning women—children—old men—into penned cattle?"[109] She then dramatically removes her costume and, nude, enters the camp to be with her family, stripped bear as a symbol of the way that America has stripped its Japanese citizens of their lives. In the next issue, she sits in the camp by herself, noting that, "18,000 people of Japanese ancestry are crowded like livestock into the unclean horse stalls of Santa Anita race track, just outside the city of the angels. . . . What good would it do to flee, she wonders...seeking peace for herself and for her family? For, when all the world's at war…peace is but an illusive dream, with no anchor in either time or space."[110] However, her friendship with the other Squadron members, along with a vaguely described desire to fight, "for justice for all people—everywhere," eventually draws her back to the team.

Once more we must make note of the fact that Roy Thomas was crafting this story in the 1980s, in the wake of four decades of Japanese American attempts to, as historian John Bodnar puts it, reclaim, "a more critical remembrance of their war experience to seek greater measures of equality and honor."[111] Immediately following the war, they focused less on their victimization at being displaced to these camps (which included the frequent loss of their homes and businesses, even postwar) and instead wanted to be publically remembered for their contributions to America's wartime efforts. With the advent of the modern civil rights movement in the 1960s, however, some Japanese Americans began to demand redress for their internment. In 1974, the Japanese American Citizen League (JACL) formed a National Committee for Redress, designed to get payment for the losses suffered by the interned families as well as to memorialize the camps as historic sites, so as to have official cultural recognition of the injustices suffered there. This sort of political pressure had, by 1980, forced the government to create the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment (CWRI). In 1983 (four years

before Thomas' internment camp story was published), they released their report, entitled *Personal Justice Denied*, which "concluded that government officials acted not out of military necessity but out of a sense of 'hysteria' and 'racial prejudice,' a public declaration that undermined decades of official and unofficial rhetoric of the virtue of the American war effort."[112] They recommended a one-time, tax-free payment of $20,000 to each survivor of the camps, finally providing official government recognition of the wrongs done to Japanese Americans during the war.

In addition to this official recognition of Japanese American hardships, popular culture had also come to recognize their plight. Miné Okubo's illustrated book relating her experiences in an internment camp, *Citizen 13660* (considered a graphic novel by some critics), had at that point been in print for four decades. The book focused on providing an almost documentary-like portrayal of the experience of the camp, without presenting any anger or bitterness towards the government. As such, it was presented as evidence to the CWRI in 1981. This led to a new edition, including a new preface by Okubo, being printed in 1983.[113] In 1987, Thomas' Justice Society tales were able to reflect this new standpoint of the official US public memory – that the camps had been an injustice and a misstep. These camps, however, though brought up from time to time, would never again return to become the central focus of *Young All-Stars*. Thomas had made his point about the inhumanity of the camps, of their inherent declaration of war upon the United States' own citizens, but his desire to remain consistent with historical happenstance maintained that though characters could complain about and the camps, they couldn't put an end to them any more than they could the camps set up by the Nazis in occupied Europe.

When faced, not with colorful villains, but with the implacable forces of bigotry and the politics that support it, the superheroes are proven powerless, and all they have to fight with is their words. It is these words, in fact, that are so important to these superhero stories that engage with the past, as they are the words used by writers to "speak back" to both the comic books of their youth and the past out of which those comics emerged.

SPEAKING BACK TO WORLD WAR II

The Justice Society stories of the 1970s and 80s are amongst the first examples of a phenomenon that is endemic to comic books – a fictional universe that has propagated for so long and with such narrative multiplicity that creators are able to look back on previous stories with the perspective of history and cultural memory. Writers such as Paul Levitz and Roy Thomas did not come into comics from the science fiction pulps, in the way that the first wave of comics writers saw themselves as "slumming." Rather, they were fans of comic books since childhood, and were eventually able to parlay that fandom into a career in the comics industry. Once they became creators themselves, their work with their favorite childhood characters reflected the memories of the time in which those characters, and their stories, were first published.

This second generation of writers would look back on their own histories, the histories of their characters, and the national/international contexts in which both of those histories took place in order to fashion stories that used contemporary historiography to re-envision the past. Thus, not only did the creators have a stake in working out a tighter sense of fictional continuity, so as to maintain fidelity to changing standards demanding increased "realism," but they were also able to add to this realism by utilizing revisionist views of the Great Depression and World War II. As mostly politically liberal thinkers and writers (this, at least, had not changed from the 1930s and 40s), comics creators such as Levitz and Thomas wanted to imbue the past of these characters with a sense of contemporary criticism about occurrences such as McCarthyism or home-front discrimination, in opposition to the growing New Right of the 1970s and 80s that wished to return to post-War values that hadn't been "undermined" by the gains of minorities and women during the civil rights era.

This tradition of using these older characters to talk about the past, and through the past to talk about the present, is one that continued into the 1990s, with writer James Robinson's award-winning, critically-acclaimed *Starman* series, focusing on a family of superheroes descended from the Justice Society member of the same name. As comics writer/critic Warren

Ellis notes of the series, "Robinson, with *Starman*, finds himself at a point in superhero comics where he can actually create a generational saga within the genre . . . set deeply within history itself, telling a tale of 1940s characters with modern skills, using them as a tool to dissect post-World War Two paranoias."[114] Robinson himself would take this a step further, noting in the letters column of *Starman* that the entire theme of the book was to forge a link between the present and the past, both in terms of superheroes and in general, as reflected in the main character's obsession with nostalgia via his job as a manager of an antiques shop. Robinson explains that the book is, "a discourse on the relevance of the past on the present...both in terms of actual events 'then' and the rippling ramifications of them 'now,' and in terms of the icons and things of times past that we carry with us into the present time. If the subtext of STARMAN is one of the discourse on value, then it is that value of the past to the present."[115] Such a direct acknowledgement of the influence of the past upon the present, especially in the world of superhero comic books, clearly owes much to Roy Thomas and *All-Star Squadron*.

By the 1980s, the stories that could be told about World War II varied significantly from the original Justice Society stories, enmeshed as they were within a patriotic fervor. In order to craft his narrative, Roy Thomas studied both "classic" and recent historical texts about World War II, and thus was aware of the advent of "new," cultural, revisionist histories. He directly stated that he wanted to answer questions such as, "How would such heroes have reacted, in a more realistic world than the early comics mirrored, to the injustices of the Japanese-American detention centers or to Jim Crow treatment of blacks?"[116] Though he still maintained an adherence to an overall celebration of American values (and especially the American president) during the war, he nevertheless did not shy away from issues such as racism and bigotry that were a part of those values, in the process exploring how his contemporary America was still dealing with those fraught tensions and attitudes. He was, in essence, able to examine the past using the present, and vice versa, forging a link between the two that opened doors to new possibilities – such as Robinson's "generational saga" – in superhero comics.

All-Star Squadron represents a way of "speaking back" to two kinds of history – both the fictional history/continuity of the DC Universe, and, more importantly, the actual, lived history of World War II. Through retroactive continuity, creators are able to literally rewrite the stories they read years ago as fans. In revisiting the past eras in which those stories were produced, they are able to remember, memorialize, and recreate that past with the narrative and political sensibilities of the present moment. In the case of Thomas' stories in the 1980s, he was able to use these retcons to create an opposition to the right-leaning Reaganite politics of that moment and point out not just the positive, national-identity-building aspects of World War II victory culture, but also its dark shadow on those who stood outside the mass consensus of that particular formation of American identity.

The ways in which the past is remembered in superhero comic books tells us something about the ways in which historical events, and indeed history itself, are viewed over time, and how that view can be influenced by (either directly or in opposition to) contemporary political and social concerns. This unfolding understanding of history can be seen even more linearly through the lens of a character whose story spans the first years of superhero comic books through to the present day, yet whose history is intrinsically and irrevocably tied to World War II – Marvel Comics' Captain America.

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[1] Peter Coogan, "From Love to Money: The First Decade of Comics Fandom," The International Journal of Comic Art 12.1 (spring 2010): 60.
[2] See my Introduction for a full description/analysis of retconning.
[3] Aviezer Tucker, "Historiographic Revisionism and Revisionism: The Evidential Difference," in Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989 (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 1.
[4] Ibid, 3. Emphasis in original.
[5] Ibid, 5.
[6] Ian Gordon, Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 132.
[7] Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, "How Superman Would End The War Drawn Especially For Look," Look, February 27, 1940.
[8] William W. Savage, Jr., Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954 (Middletown, CT: 1990), 10.
[9] Gardner Fox, writer, and various artists, "The Justice Society Joins The War On Japan," All-Star Comics 11, June-July 1942. Reprinted in All-Star Comics Archives Volume 3, ed. Bob Kahan (New York: DC Comics, 1997), 11.
[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.
[12] Roy Thomas, "'This Means War!': A Personal and Historical Note," in All-Star Comics Archives Volume 3, ed. Bob Kahan (New York: DC Comics, 1997), 7.
[13] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[14] British comic book writer Peter Mills and artist Kevin O'Neill, in their superhero parody comic, *Marshal Law*, point out the irony of how ineffective the heroes were in the context of World War II. In one story, the titular protagonist, a "hero hunter," notes of a Justice Society parodic stand-in that, "They were a bunch of Don Quixotes tilting at windmills! For all their boating, they did nothing about the real villains of the war." When one of the heroes notes, "We were *always* capturing mad scientists," Law responds, "Except the Japanese scientists whose medical experiments on G.I. prisoners were too useful to the allies . . . or our own mad scientists who dropped atom bombs after the war." He counters the argument that, "Most of our work was on the home-front—dealing with saboteurs and fifth columnists," with the question, "Why didn't you go after the famous American corporations who traded with the enemy and who were never brought to . . . justice?" See Peter Mills, writer, Kevin O'Neill, artist, et. al., Marshal Law: Blood, Sweat, and Fears (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1993).
[15] Roy Thomas, "Another Agonizingly Personal Recollection," in Giant-Size Invaders 1, June 1975.
[16] Roy Thomas, "'Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here!' – Part I: The All-Winners Squad," in Alter Ego (volume 1) No. 2, Summer 1961, 2.
[17] Roy Thomas, "Another Agonizingly Personal Recollection," in Giant-Size Invaders 1, Marvel Comics, June 1975.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Roy Thomas, writer, Frank Robbins, penciller, et. al., "The Coming of the Invaders!," Giant-Size Invaders 1, Marvel Comics, June 1975.
[20] Roy Thomas, "Another Agonizingly Personal Recollection," in Giant-Size Invaders 1, Marvel Comics, June 1975.
[21] A counter-example of a less conservative take on World War II history would be writer/director Quentin Tarantino's historically revisionist movie *Inglourious Basterds*, in which the titular heroes execute Adolf Hitler in a French movie theater and end World War II early. See Inglourious Basterds, directed by Quentin Tarantino (2009: Universal Pictures).
[22] Roy Thomas, "All the Stars There Are in (Super-hero) Heaven!", in Alter Ego (volume 3) No. 14, April 2002, 4.
[23] Jerry Bails, untitled letter, in All-Star Comics 58, DC Comics, Jan/Feb 1976.
[24] All-Star Comics, 66, DC Comics, May June 1977, cover, reprinted in Showcase Presents: All-Star Comics Volume One, ed. Robin Wildman (New York: DC Comics, 2011), 154.
[25] Interview with Roy Thomas, "All the Stars There Are in (Super-hero) Heaven!", in Alter Ego (volume 3) No. 14, April 2002, 17.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Paul Levitz, writer, Joe Staton & Bob Layton, artists, et. al., "The Untold Origin of the Justice Society," DC Special 29, DC Comics, Aug/Sep 1977, 1.
[28] For example, in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' much-heralded miniseries *Watchmen*, the appearance of just one superhuman so completely alters history that Richard Nixon is still president in the 1980s, flying cars are a readily available commercial product, and the Cold War comes precariously close to erupting into nuclear Armageddon.
[29] John Byrne, "Bullets, Bracelets and Byrne," in Wonder Woman: Second Genesis (New York: DC Comics, 1997), 4-5.
[30] Paul Levitz, writer, Joe Staton & Bob Layton, artists, et. al., "The Untold Origin of the Justice Society," DC Special 29, DC Comics, Aug/Sep 1977, 2.
[31] Ibid, 3.
[32] Ibid, 33.
[33] Ibid.
[34] See John Bodnar, The "Good War" In American Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 14.
[35] Paul Levitz, writer, Joe Staton, artist, et. al., "The Defeat of the Justice Society," Adventure Comics 466, DC Comics, Nov/Dec 1979, reprinted in Showcase Presents: All-Star Comics Volume One, ed. Robin Wildman (New York: DC Comics, 2011), 429
[36] Ibid, 441.
[37] Ibid, 442.
[38] Ibid, 443.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid, 444.

[41] Roy Thomas, "The Justice Society (And Friends) In The 1980s," in The All-Star Companion, ed. Roy Thomas (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2000), 199.
[42] Roy Thomas, "'This Means War!': A Personal and Historical Note," in All-Star Comics Archives Volume 3, ed. Bob Kahan (New York: DC Comics, 1997), 5.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Kurt Mitchell, "A Capsule History of Earth-Two," in The All-Star Companion: Volume Three, ed. Roy Thomas (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 96.
[45] Roy Thomas, "All the Stars There Are in (Super-hero) Heaven!", in Alter Ego (volume 3) No. 14, April 2002, 26.
[46] Roy Thomas, writer, Rich Buckler, artist, et. al., "The All-Star Squadron," Justice League of America 193, Aug 1981, reprinted in Showcase Presents: All-Star Squadron Volume One, ed. Robin Wildman (New York: DC Comics, 2012), 6.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid, 43.
[49] This included those heroes whom DC had not actually published during the 1940s, but were published by other comic book companies whose characters DC had later purchased.
[50] Michael C.C. Adams, The Best War Ever: America and World War II (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 16.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Roy Thomas, "'This Means War!': A Personal and Historical Note," in All-Star Comics Archives Volume 3, ed. Bob Kahan (New York: DC Comics, 1997), 9.
[53] Roy Thomas, writer, Rich Buckler, artist, et. al., "Day of the Dragon King," All-Star Squadron 4, Dec 1981, reprinted in Showcase Presents: All-Star Squadron Volume One, ed. Robin Wildman (New York: DC Comics, 2012), 112., 120.
[54] Roy Thomas, writer, Adrian Gonzales, artist, et. al., "Carnage for Christmas!," All-Star Squadron 7, March 1982, reprinted in Showcase Presents: All-Star Squadron Volume One, ed. Robin Wildman (New York: DC Comics, 2012), 211.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Roy Thomas, "An Open Letter To The Readers of All-Star Squadron #1," in All-Star Squadron #1, DC Comics, Sep 1981, 26. Emphasis in original.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Roy Thomas, "All-Star Comments," in All-Star Squadron #18, Feb 1983, 25.
[59] Roy Thomas, "All-Star Comments," in All-Star Squadron #6, Feb 1982, 28. Emphasis in original.
[60] Roy Thomas, "All-Star Comments," in All-Star Squadron #7, March 1982, 28. Emphasis in original.
[61] Ibid.
[62] For much more on the cultural demonization of the Japanese during World War II, see John W. Dower, War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York: Pantheon, 1986).
[63] Quoted in Roy Thomas, "All-Star Comments," in All-Star Squadron #14, Oct 1982, 25. Emphasis in original.
[64] Roy Thomas, "All-Star Comments," in All-Star Squadron #14, Oct 1982, 25.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[67] Quoted in Roy Thomas, "All-Star Comments," in All-Star Squadron #34, June 1984, 25.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Roy Thomas, "All-Star Comments," in All-Star Squadron #34, June 1984, 25.
[71] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3.
[74] Robert Brent Toplin, History By Hollywood (Second Edition) (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 7.
[75] Eric Foner, "Introduction to the First Edition," in The New American History: Revised and Expanded Edition, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), ix-xi.
[76] Ibid, xi-xii.
[77] For more about "historical narrativization," particularly as utilized by theorist Hayden White, see chapter 7.

[78] Jill Lepore, The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), ix.
[79] Ibid, x.
[80] Eric Foner, "Introduction to the First Edition," in The New American History: Revised and Expanded Edition, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), x.
[81] Roy Thomas, writer, Rick Hoberg, artist, et. al, "Detroit is Dynamite!," All-Star Squadron #38, October 1984, 15.
[82] Roy Thomas, writer, Rick Hoberg, artist, et. al, "Nobody Gets Out of Paradise Valley Alive!," All-Star Squadron #39, November 1984, 2.
[83] Ibid, 3.
[84] Ibid, 14.
[85] Ibid, 20.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Roy Thomas, writer, Richard Howell, artist, et. al, "The Rise and Fall of the Phantom Empire!," All-Star Squadron #40, December 1984, 1.
[88] Ibid, 9.
[89] Ibid., 12.
[90] Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, "Introduction: The Second World War and the Civil Rights movement," in Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement (Oxford University Press: 2012), 3.
[91] Ibid, 6. Emphasis in original.
[92] A. Russell Buchanan, Black Americans in World War II (Santa Barbara, CA: Clio Books, 1977), 1.
[93] Ibid, 134.
[94] Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, "Introduction: The Second World War and the Civil Rights movement," in Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement (Oxford University Press: 2012), 5.
[95] Quoted in John Bodnar, The "Good War" In American Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 179.
[96] See Ibid.
[97] One white member of the crowd, once the hypnotic spell has worn off, sees Amazing Man fighting Real American and proclaims, "What do you expect? They're all animals, aren't they?" Ibid, 16.
[98] Roy Thomas and Kurt Mitchell, "*All-Star Squadron* Issue By Issue," in All-Star Companion: Volume 2, ed. Roy Thomas (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006), 179.
[99] Roy Thomas, writer, Richard Howell, artist, et. al, "The Rise and Fall of the Phantom Empire!," All-Star Squadron #40, December 1984, 21.
[100] Ibid, 7.
[101] *All-Star Squadron* would never come to deal explicitly with the larger-scale Detroit race riot of June, 1943, because the book was cancelled before Thomas was able to reach that point in the historical timeline.
[102] Given that the entirety of Earth 2's continuity was wiped out in 1985 by DC's massive crossover series *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, Thomas elected to create a different title focused on newly created, younger heroes who "took the place" of Earth 2 versions of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and so forth, who "no longer existed." For more on this rewriting of continuity in the wake of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, see chapter 7.
[103] Roy Thomas and Dann Thomas, writers, Brian Murray, artist, et. al., "A Gathering of Heroes!," in Young All-Stars #3, July 1987, 5.
[104] Roy Thomas and Kurt Mitchell, "*The Young All-Stars* Issue By Issue," in All-Star Companion: Volume 3, ed. Roy Thomas (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 202.
[105] Roy Thomas and Dann Thomas, writers, Brian Murray, artist, et. al., "A Gathering of Heroes!," in Young All-Stars #3, July 1987, 21.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid, 21-22.
[108] Roy Thomas and Kurt Mitchell, "*The Young All-Stars* Issue By Issue," in All-Star Companion: Volume 3, ed. Roy Thomas (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 202.
[109] Roy Thomas and Dann Thomas, writers, Brian Murray and Howard Simpson, artists, et. al., "California, Here We Come…," in Young All-Stars #4, Sep 1987, 21-22.
[110] Roy Thomas and Dann Thomas, writers, Howard Simpson and Brian Murray, artists, et. al., "Hollywood Knights (1942 Model)," in Young All-Stars #5, Oct 1987, 24.
[111] John Bodnar, The "Good War" In American Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 189.

[112] Ibid, 192. Information on Japanese American remembrances of the war in general also comes from Bodnar, pages 189-193.
[113] Miné Okubo, Citizen 13660 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983).
[114] Warren Ellis, From The Desk of Warren Ellis (Urbana, IL: Avatar Press, 2002), 12
[115] James Robinson, letters column, in Starman #3, January 1995, 26.
[116] Roy Thomas, "Meanwhile…: Spotlight On…All-Star Squadron," running in DC Comics cover-dated September 1984.

Chapter 3 – Borne Back Ceaselessly Into The Past: Captain America and the Evolution of World War II

Captain America made his debut with a splash on his first appearance in 1941, shortly before America entered World War II. On the cover of *Captain America* #1 he is pictured punching Adolf Hitler in the face. The trope of the flag-draped, all-American hero fighting against the epitome of foreign evil was one that was not to go away any time soon, and Captain America remains a staple of the Marvel Universe, and the Marvel Comics publishing line, to this day. Because of his core connection to the very iconography of "America," in both his name and his red, white, and blue costume, Captain America has been used during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as a symbolic stand-in for American values. He is a soldier who, by and large, uses a shield rather than a gun, whose iconography is fundamentally defensive of American ideology. Indeed, it was with just such an intention that "Cap," as he's affectionately known, was created in the first place.

Other critics and analysts have examined the shifting ideology and iconography in Captain America's adventures through the years.[1] I am more interested in how those shifts have consistently and repetitively returned to the Captain's origins, including his early days fighting alongside American soldiers in World War II. This chapter will thus focus in on several important re-tellings of that origin story, examining how the origin is used to alter the character in ways that allow him to be used as a more potent metaphor for a particular time and place, with a particular way of looking back at the Second World War. Looking at these moments will help us to see how a direct connection to the past, and control over the ways in which that past is remembered and memorialized, becomes

crucial to the creation of political statements, critical commentary, and even propaganda in contemporary comic book narratives.

THE ORIGINAL ORIGIN

Captain America was the invention of two young Jewish men living in New York, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. Joe Simon was the son of an immigrant tailor who from boyhood found himself, in his own words, in a "life-long quest for the great American hero."[2] Jack Kirby, born Jacob Kurtzberg, was also the son of Jewish immigrants, and grew up on the streets of New York City, where he gained a life-long hatred of bullies and a burning desire to stand up to them.[3] Combining these two obsessions, the pair came up with what they saw as the ultimate, anti-bully American in the figure of Captain America. They hoped, as did many other Jewish creators of that time, that this hero would serve as an inspiration to other Americans in the fight for a justice, a fight that would take the form of involvement in the war overseas.

The specific invention of the Captain, however, began not with the search for a hero, but rather for a villain. As Joe Simon recalls, "The comics that were doing really well at the time were the ones with clever villains in them, so I started by looking around for the perfect villain . . . but then I realized we had the perfect guy right in front of us. . . . Adolf Hitler would be the perfect foil for our new character."[4] As Jews who were horrified by the Nazi takeovers in Europe, and who felt impotent about their country's initial isolationist neutrality (a policy Franklin D. Roosevelt heralded, at least publically, on a military level, providing monetary aid to England but no troops[5]) they channeled their emotions into this new character. Simon continues: "Even though the United States wasn't in the war, we read the newspapers. We knew what was happening in Europe, and we were outraged by the Nazis—totally outraged. We thought it was a good time for

a patriotic hero. . . . And that's how Captain America was created."[6] Thus, the Captain's origins were explicitly political ones, as a character designed to rhetorically fight the battle against the Nazi forces that Simon and Kirby were not yet able to engage in directly, themselves. Simon himself would note this, proclaiming that, "the opponents to the war were all quite well organized. We wanted to have our say too."[7] He and Kirby, "felt very good making a political statement . . . and taking a stand."[8]

Simon and Kirby were not the only cartoonists urging on American intervention in the war in Europe, though. Interventionists and isolationists were also battling out their beliefs in the pages of the nation's political cartoons. A *Washington Post* cartoon from February, 1941, featured Uncle Sam sitting on a branch, cut off from the rest of a globe which is littered with signs declaring it the property of Hitler, while a figure labeled "The Appeasolationsists" (combining "appeasers" and "isolationists") tells him, "Now isn't this lots better than getting mixed up in a nasty old war!?"[9] A month later, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* presented the opposite argument – that "Uncle Sam" indeed should *not* get mixed up in the war – via a cartoon portraying an airplane labeled "War Bloc" dropping bombs on two physical platforms labeled "Democratic Platform Promises" and "Willkie's Platform Promises," with a figure labeled as "50 Million Voters" left in the wreckage.[10] While this cartoon sides with the isolationists who supported either Democrat Franklin Roosevelt or his opponent in the 1940 presidential election, Republican Wendell Willkie, but who now found themselves sideswiped by a strong push to go to war, the *Washington Post* cartoon had an outlook similar to Simon and Kirby's, that without U.S. intervention the globe would soon belong to Hitler. From their standpoint, like it or not, it was the United States' duty to get involved.

Captain America was thus a political figure from his very inception, and was also very quickly Marvel's top-selling, most popular character.[11] Patriotism during the World

War II era was a valuable commodity for comic book publishers. A flag-draped character such as the Captain represented not just the American fighting spirit, but also the utilization of that spirit to attract American dollars. This innate connection to the fervor of the war, however, meant that once peace was achieved, Captain America virtually disappeared. It would not be until the 1960s that he was revived (in the narrative, he is literally rescued from suspended animation, having spent decades frozen in ice), and he has been published in one form or another ever since. However, Captain America has never lost his iconic and symbolic connection to American politics, and thus it is no surprise that various creators have used him to make political statements, the nature of which have changed with the time period in which the stories were produced.

Part of the reason Captain America provides such a resonant period for so many creators is the fact that his origin is directly tied to World War II, a moment still seen as foundational to contemporary American culture. The Captain began as Steve Rogers, a Brooklyn boy with a big heart but a small body. Though he wanted to enlist in the army, he was not healthy enough to pass the physical. However, his patriotic drive caught the eye of the scientists behind a secret army project to create a "Super Soldier" using a serum designed by a genius named Dr. Erskine. Though the serum successfully turned Steve Rogers into a buff, muscular figure, a Nazi saboteur killed Erskine immediately afterwards, and the secret formula for the serum died with the scientist. Rogers then enlisted in the army as Captain America, the one and only American "Super Soldier." The elements of this story are indelibly tied to World War II: the young boy growing up during the Depression, his frustration (shared by his creators) at being unable to join in the fight against the Nazis, the patriotism of using his powers to immediately enlist and drape himself in a red, white, and blue costume, etc. Captain America's link to the war is something that cannot be changed without significantly altering the character.

Because Captain America's early stories are so tied to the larger narrative of the Second World War, his origin has never been retconned in order to take place in an updated time period. The war that birthed Captain America has consistently remained World War II, whereas the war that led to the origin of his close compatriot Iron Man has slowly shifted, over time, from Vietnam to the Middle East, in order to maintain the character's youth. Captain America, however, spent an indeterminate amount of time frozen in ice, kept from aging by the "suspended animation" caused by the cold. This narrative trick allows him to maintain an origin rooted in the 1940s, and creators often use this connection in stories that compare the contemporary world with the earlier decade.

As Captain America stands in for the virtues and values of the generation who fought in World War II, the character has become contested terrain for writers, readers, and critics. He not only represents what "America" means in the present, but also how that present connects to a critical moment in our history. Captain America is perhaps the ultimate symbol of "The Greatest Generation," those Americans who fought in World War II, and he is directly tied in with our cultural valuations of that generation and what, if anything, their sacrifices were worth. To consider Captain America is to consider the ongoing legacy of WWII, a topic that has been a source of various arguments in the decades since the war's end.

In recent years, Americans have come to view World War II as, "The Good War," one that was a clear-cut case of good versus evil, and which didn't involve the same types of moral compromises as American wars ever since, especially the Vietnam War and the two wars in Iraq. Journalist Tom Brokaw solidified this image in the American consciousness in his 1998 book *The Greatest Generation*, which idealized World War II as the origin for post-war America. As historian John Bodnar has criticized, "War did

not lead to death and destruction in Brokaw's book but mostly to the reinforcement of values such as individualism, discipline, and self-sacrifice that created a great nation . . . Brokaw's memory . . . was deeply personal and nostalgic. It was grounded not only in his private experience but in a longing for a time that was filled with heroic ancestors."[12] This take on the war was reinforced by a similar work by historian Stephen Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, released in 2001. It is a view of the past that is purely nostalgic, longing for a mythically more "innocent" America that is impossible to return to, in part because it never existed in the first place. Both books overlook the death and suffering of America's soldiers, and the discrimination against minorities on the home front, in order to paint a picture of World War II that ignore the realities of warfare, itself. This depiction runs counter to many that have come both before and since, which attempt to more realistically estimate the cost of World War II on its participants.

This ongoing debate is reflected in the debates that have surrounded the approval, design, and erection of various official monuments to the war, such as the National World War II Memorial that would not be erected until more than half a century after the war. Nicolaus Mills, notes,

> Our reactions to the National World War II Memorial, particularly our quarrels over it, reflect both our current distrust of government as well as the need we have had since the September 11 attacks to come together as a nation.[13]

Similarly, even the National Park Service's own history of the development off the USS *Arizona* Memorial in Pearl Harbor notes that the evolution of the memorial was fraught with debate between veterans, historians, Japanese-Americans, and other interested parties over how to remember the attack, as a moment of horror or as a noble sacrifice: "Because [the story of the memorial] involved hundreds of people and spanned more than three decades, it necessarily includes conflict, confusion, and setbacks. This account

does not ignore or minimize those aspects. They comprise part of the historical record. They are included out of respect for the whole truth."[14] Though Captain America, unlike these memorials, is a piece of popular culture, rather than official public culture, his various, often conflicting, representations in the four-color world of Marvel Comics have been no less contentious.

CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE EARLY YEARS

Joe Simon and Jack Kirby told the story of Captain America's origin in his very first appearance, 1941's *Captain America Comics* #1. Given the pair's propagandist purpose in creating the character, it perhaps comes as little surprise that the origin story is fairly straightforward, patriotic, and not at all interrogative of the monolithic idea of American exceptionalism. The very first caption compares "the ruthless war-mongers of Europe" with "peace-loving America."[15] Furthermore, whereas in the DC Comics universe it had taken until the 1970s for Franklin Roosevelt to become a heroicized icon associated with the superheroes of his era, in this introductory story Simon and Kirby associate him with Marvel's biggest World War II icon right from the outset.

The tale begins with several military officials meeting with Roosevelt to discuss a growing problem of spies and saboteurs within their ranks, a meeting which results in the president revealing a secret project designed to create a "comic book" superhero, who will be under military control. That hero, of course, turns out to be Steve Rogers, and the secret experiment turns him into Captain America. The Captain becomes a national phenomenon almost overnight, enlisting in the army in both his civilian and heroic identities. Some time later, at the fictional Camp Lehigh, the base's "mascot," a young boy named Bucky Barnes, stumbles upon Private Steve Rogers changing into Captain America. Rogers then allows Barnes to become his sidekick, known simply as "Bucky,"

reflecting the early 1940s vogue for superhero sidekicks who young readers could identify with more than the adult superheroes. No questions are ever raised about just who is responsible for Bucky's well being, nor how exactly a child serves as a "mascot" of a military regiment. Since Captain America is a trustworthy hero, it is simply assumed that he will be a trustworthy guardian to Bucky.

In subsequent stories, this same sort of moral simplicity would continue. This is part and parcel of the comics' propagandist goal, delivering the message that the Nazis were an evil, immediate threat to U.S. interests, which ever American had a moral duty to combat in whatever way they could.[16] Prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, Captain America's adventures served as an ongoing argument from Simon and Kirby about why it was so important for the U.S. to become involved in the war and defeat the Nazi threat. Once war was declared, the stories continued to present a patriotic fervor that was on par with the gung ho spirit of the "official" World War II American united front. Of course, this "official" front was undergirded by acts of segregation and racism against any and all minorities who did not fit the image of the idealized American patriot, coincidentally as personified in the blond-haired, blue-eyed, strapping young Captain. This was reflected in Captain America's adventures. Hidden behind the stories of Captain America's battles against the Axis forces, we find Asian foes portrayed as "sinister and subhuman,"[17] with "German Americans [portrayed] as loyal and patriotic, in contrast to [the] images of Japanese Americans, who usually appeared treasonous."[18]

The stories never question these portrayals, but rather espouse the values of patriotism and morality while at the same time serving to marginalize, ridicule, and alienate minority groups. Within a larger metanarrative calling for tolerance, fraternity, and unity, we find racial stereotypes that counter such beliefs. World War II patriotism, in the stories of Captain America and other flag-draped heroes, would seem to apply

primarily to white Americans, to whom all unpatriotic themselves, working against the war effort and the support of a government spurred on by the comics' insistence of an irredeemably evil enemy.

With the loss of this absolute enemy after the war ended characters like Captain America, who relied on the fundamental Allies/Axis, good/evil dichotomy, floundered. In the aftermath of the war, sales on *Captain America* plummeted, thanks in part to a growing disinterest in superheroes amongst soldiers returning from Europe as avid comics readers. Ironically, the very soldiers who had been motivated and energized by the Captain's ultra-patriotic message were, once home, the audience that turned its back on such simplistic, jingoistic narratives.

The Captain's postwar troubles reflected those of the American GI upon returning home. Although the psychological traumas of warfare had been in explored in much of the "Lost Generation" writings of the 1920s, the aftermath of World War II led to such a widespread awareness of what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder[19] amongst returning soldiers that it was inevitably explored in mass culture, and not just modernist literature. One of the most famous examples of these cultural explorations of readjustment is the 1946 film *The Best Years Of Our Lives*, which won an Academy Award for Best Picture. The film, directed by William Wyler and produced by Samuel Goldwyn, tells the story of three servicemen, who meet on a transport plane, returning home to the same fictional city. Though ultimately ending on a hopeful note, the film seriously explores the numerous problems that the men face as they return to peace-time living, finding themselves alienated from loved ones and asking themselves if their loved ones on the home front actually understood what viewing, and being a part of, the horrors of warfare had done to them.[20] One of the film's most powerful scenes features one of the men sitting in the cockpit of a bomber jet that is slated for destruction, feeling

impotent and useless in the face of an unfaithful wife and little future prospects. As Doris Milberg points out, the similarity between the obsolete war hero and the obsolete plane (surrounded by several other junked planes) is an intentional commentary on what American culture wished to do with its returning soldiers – junk them and forget them.[21] For GIs, and for Americans in general, this scene potently sums up the period of readjustment following the war – the country needed to redefine itself and its values as it shifted from an obsession with defeating the enemy to an obsession with returning to "normalcy" by enforcing cultural standards and mores that were often harmful to the very soldiers (especially minorities and/or those traumatized by what they had seen and done) who had fought in the war.

Like many ex-soldiers facing this dilemma, Captain America did not fair so well, as he proved to be as "obsolete and useless" as the junked planes in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Marvel tried to keep up with their GI audience, by turning *Captain America Comics* into an E.C.-like anthology horror book titled *Captain America's Weird Tales* for two issues, focusing on horror stories to catch the zeitgeist of appealing to the traumatic post-war feelings of soldiers, but the change didn't catch on.[22] Captain America was retired from Marvel's publishing stable when his book was cancelled in 1950.

In 1953 and 1954, though, the Captain, along with other of Marvel's war-time heroes, was briefly revived by the publisher as an anti-Communist fighting force every bit as aggressive as he had been against the Nazis. This revived Captain America, alongside of Bucky, fought Communist enemies just as if they were the Nazis that the pair had originally battled, simply seeing them as sneaky, irredeemable "bad guys" trying to subvert American society, without any consideration of their politics or other issues of the Cold War.[23] The Captain's simplistic propagandist narratives had returned, only this time directed against an enemy far more amorphous and indirect than the Axis powers

had been. The American public, however, had changed since the war. The audience of more mature comic book readers (from the soldiers who had returned home to the comic-reading kids who had turned into comic-reading teens and young adults) was not naïve enough to accept the idea that the Cold war could be won through the same modes of direct conflict that had won World War II.

The audience for comic books, thanks to their popularity amongst American soldiers, had finally grown up some, and these readers, unlike the children of the 1930s, demanded more nuanced stories that didn't see communism, or its agents (whether physical or cultural), as able to be defeated by a simple sock to the jaw. As a result, those comics that approached the Cold War and anticommunism with a more sophisticated, or even metaphorical point of view (such as the EC Comics horror and war comics) succeeded where the revised Captain America stories did not. The character was retired once more, this time for almost a decade.

THE COMING OF AN AVENGER

By 1964, the Marvel Universe was a far different place than it had been in the 1940s. Under the editorship of Stan Lee, who also wrote most of the comics, Marvel had burst forth in creativity, critical acclaim, and major sales, as Lee and artists such as Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and John Romita created, practically from scratch, a shared universe of new characters and concepts. As comics historians Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs note, "Lee innovated as if he were racing against time, as if he weren't bringing enough frantic energy to beating his deadlines and hyping his comics, but had to rewrite the rules of superhero comics with each passing month. Now he was trying to unify the whole 'Marvel Universe,' trying to sell not just a set of comics, but an entire line to his fans as one inseparable unit."[24] With a plethora of new heroes and villains abounding, Lee and

Kirby tried their hand at creating Marvel's version of DC's Justice League (the 1960s successor to the Justice Society, and the apex of DC's post-Comics Code superhero revival). The book that they came up with, *The Avengers*, combined Marvel characters Iron Man, Thor, the Hulk, Ant-Man, and the Wasp into a fighting force of heroes, and proved to be as successful as many other books in the Marvel stable.

By the fourth issue, however, the unstable Hulk had departed from the roster, and Lee felt the need to bring in another "heavy hitter" character. Thus in March 1964 Captain America was revived and brought back to the forefront of the Marvel Universe in *The Avengers* #4, drawn by the character's co-creator, Jack Kirby. Lee concocted a convoluted reason for the Captain's decades-long disappearance, explaining that in trying to stop an "explosive-filled drone plane" from being launched by an Axis operative, Captain America was dropped into freezing cold water off the coast of Newfoundland, while Bucky was caught (and presumably died) in the plane's explosion. With the naïve certainty in pseudoscience of the early 1960s Marvel Universe, where a seemingly endless array of heroes were empowered by otherwise-deadly radiation, the Captain explains that, "by some fantastic stroke of fate, I must have been frozen in an ice flow . . . Then, all those years being in a state of frozen suspended animation must have prevented me from aging!"[25] This explanation ignores Captain America's brief "Commie Smasher" period, a roll that would later be retconned as having been filled by a different American soldier temporarily wearing the Captain America uniform.

This period of suspended animation would become crucial to the "legend" of Captain America. Whereas he had originally been envisioned by Simon and Kirby as a piece of propaganda to spur on American belief that the country should get involved in stopping the Nazis, with this revival he became more than just a jingoistic super-soldier, but rather a "man out of time." The Captain's present-day adventures and experiences

would forever be compared (by the characters, the creators, and the readers) to his World War II exploits. He instantly became a piece of ongoing commentary, one that could be used to compare present-day America to the "Greatest Generation" of World War II or to note the changing historiographic views of that war. More to the point, because of the pseudo-science of being suspended in ice, Captain America could remain anchored to World War II in a way that few other characters could, simply by retroactively lengthening the amount of time he spent "on ice." Thus, Steve Rogers was a man out of time in the 1960s *Avengers* comics every bit as much as he would be a man out of time in the 2012 *Avengers* movie, allowing creators in both time periods to talk about World War II and reveal the politics and mores of the present.

In *Avengers* #4, the revived Captain America is immediately encumbered with the weight of history – even the people who revived him, Earth's mightiest heroes, the Avengers, look upon him as an iconic figure. When he later finds himself wandering the streets of New York City, every citizen he passes by recognizes him, either from their youth or from stories told to them by their parents or older siblings. A police officer, decked out in his uniform as a symbol of authority, is brought to tears by the very sight of his boyhood hero, crying out that, "all these years—all of us—your fans—your admirers—we thought you were dead! But you've come back—just when the world has *need* of such a man—just like *fate* planned it this way! Forgive me, Cap, willya? I-I seem to have something in my eye!"[26]

Despite the adulation, even idolization, that he receives, Captain America finds himself wondering what his place is in the modern world, as a man out of time: "What happens next?? Can't return to my career as Captain America—it would be meaningless without Bucky! I don't belong in this age—in this year—no place for me."[27] He finds the meaning that he is looking for, however, in the fellowship of the Avengers, and their

ongoing fight for peace and justice. Heroism, Lee argues, will always reveal itself, and thus the Captain finds renewed purpose by officially joining the Avengers and becoming a superhero one more.

Having been reestablished as a major player in the Marvel Universe, it was only natural that by the end of the year (a year spent serving with the Avengers), the Captain was given his own series once again. With November, 1964's issue #59, Captain America debuted in an ongoing feature, by Lee and Kirby, in the book *Tales of Suspense*, splitting it with fellow Avenger Iron Man. Iron Man was a hero whose origin was, at this point, tied to the Vietnam War, and thus imbued with ideologies focusing on the growing military-industrial complex, which complimented the more "traditional" pro-government ideology tied to Captain America. With the two counterpoised in one book together, it would seem only natural that sooner or later Cap would find himself enmeshed in the politics of Vietnam.[28]

By issue #61 of *Tales of Suspense*, the Captain found himself acting as a wartime soldier once more, dispatched to Vietnam to rescue a POW. This story is an important one because it goes out of its way to both explain why Captain America does not get more directly involved in the Vietnam conflict, as well as to link the current war to World War II. The Captain is there to rescue a helicopter pilot whose brother had at one time rescued him decades earlier during World War II. The pilot, named Jim Baker, seems upset that Captain America is there, putting himself into enemy territory because, "The entire free world *needs* you, Cap!"[29] Thus, the Captain travels to Vietnam solely to pay off a World War II debt, and the soldier he rescues admonishes him for even being there in the first place.

The short Vietnam story does not in any way address the ideology behind the war, focusing on stereotyping the Northern Vietnamese as part of the "Yellow Peril" trope

rather than exploring their political beliefs. Indeed, Captain America's dialogue with them could be spoken to Nazis or gangsters just as well as to communists. In many ways they are recycled from a multitude of World War II comics, which featured dehumanized Asian characters meant to create an alien "other" for Americans to despise. Just as American propagandists stereotyped the Japanese during World War II, the North Vietnamese enemy provided an opportunity to create inhuman, animalistic mockeries crafted from the worst Orientals tropes – sinister eyes, clawed hands, and buck teeth. By and large, though, the superheroes stayed out of Vietnam, due to the war's moral ambiguities. Thus, the return of the "Yellow Peril" villain was not quite as widespread as it had been in the 1940s, when comics creators were representing the Japanese.[30]

Only two issues after this brief sojourn to Vietnam, Captain America returns to war – but to World War II, rather than Vietnam. For a run of nine issues, Lee and Kirby create a series of stories featuring Cap in his original WWII setting, complete with sidekick Bucky and archnemesis the Red Skull. In the first of these stories, March, 1965's *Tales of Suspense* #63, Cap's origin is retold. Though related in the more current Marvel style – heavier on dialogue and tongue-in-cheek humor, with less captions – the story of the Captain's origin remains relatively unchanged here from its original telling.

One significant difference from the original Simon/Kirby story, however, is a greater focus on Captain America as an adventurer and hero, rather than as a patriotic soldier. Certainly, some of the patriotic fervor associated with the character does remain. He is described as, "spurred on by an unquenchable love of liberty" and as possessing "the dazzling speed and power of a red, white and blue rocket!"[31] Gone, however, are the comparisons between peaceful America and war-torn Europe, and instead of being seen as soldiers, Cap and Bucky are described as, "the two most honored names in all of adventuredom!" In part this is because, with the benefit of hindsight, Lee and Kirby were

able to contextualize Cap's origin within the inevitability of America's entrance into the war. As a result, they did not have the same propagandist drive that Simon and Kirby had in the 1940s.

Instead, Lee and Kirby were more intent on creating World War II adventures of Captain America that would bring the character's history in line with their current Marvel Universe. The banner at the top of the first page boldly announces this goal, proclaiming the Captain America strip as, "destined to become the most honored series in the Marvel Age of comics."[32] The final caption makes this linkage between the World War II adventures and the contemporary Marvel stories even clearer: "Each following issue of *Suspense* will feature a new adventure of Cap and Bucky, based on their World War Two exploits! You'll see them as they were in the past—fighting Nazis, spies, saboteurs, bringing the majesty of the Golden Age of comics into this—the new and mighty *Marvel Age*!"[33] Lee was thus using Captain America to unite his present day Marvel universe with the stories and characters from the company's history, creating a legacy of heroism to rival DC's revival of its Justice Society characters.

True to Lee and Kirby's word, the next eight issues featured stories of Captain America and Bucky fighting in World War II. The desire to connect the "Golden Age" and the "Marvel Age" in these stories showed how Lee was undertaking a deliberate project to make the Captain's World War II adventures connect with and appeal to a contemporary audience.[34] As a part of this, he brought back Captain America's arch-nemesis, the Red Skull, and turned him into Hitler's second in command. Much as Roy Thomas had done in making Franklin Roosevelt a hero, an official member of the Justice Society and All-Star Squadron, here Lee and Kirby were making Hitler into a supervillain, as the close mentor of Captain America's nemesis. The creative team's use of Hitler, the ultimate "bad guy" of World War II, tying him so closely to the "Marvel

Age" reinvention of the Red Skull, is important because it represents a kind of certainty as to the unmitigated "evil" of the two villains. Conversely, there was no such direct evil to be found, either for a comic book villain or even just in general, in the Vietnam War.

Tales of Suspense #65 was published in the middle of 1965 during a period that Tom Engelhardt has called "The Era of Reversals." The national confidence in America's economic, political, military, and moral superiority which had defined the national spirit in the post-WWII era was eroding during the 1960s, due in large part to the ongoing, and increasingly unpopular, Vietnam War. National debate raged across America, with liberals and, especially, students (many of whom were the college-aged crowd that were purchasing Marvel Comics) protesting the war. Meanwhile, televised images of the conflict provided Americans with the first "real-time" glimpse of war as it was fought, something which looked far less glorious and stirringly patriotic than John Wayne versions of World War II had seemed.

Vietnam was thus no place to set superhero comics, which, though dealing with more complex personality types than they had in the 1940s, still functioned on the basis of a Manichean morality or absolutes. Such a clear-cut conflict, however, *could* be found in these Captain America stories set during World War II – Captain America was goodness personified, while the Red Skull and Hitler were evil personified. This was important for American readers who found themselves confronted with a war completely lacking in moral certitude. In the adventures of Captain America set during World War II, these readers *could* find a clear cut sense of justice and righteousness, allowing them to feel connected to a kind of patriotism they simply could not get out of the Vietnam War.

This was similar, in many regards, to the reception of the 1970 film *Patton*, a biography of the famous World War II general. Although the movie was about WWII, its

audience was unable to separate its narrative from that of Vietnam, which aroused debates about the U.S. military establishment.[35] The producers attempted to negotiate this debate by crafting an intentional public image of the general that showed him as both war hero and as an over-aggressive seeker of glory, focusing specifically on him as an individual personality and not as a stand-in for the leaders of the current conflict in Southeast Asia.[36] Many critics disagreed with this choice, and felt that the movie needed to reflect contemporary issues concerning Vietnam, in the way that films like *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *Kelly's Heroes* (1970), and the film adaptations of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1970) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1972) had done or would come to do – using World War II to talk about the most cynical and absurd aspects of war, which the audience could directly correlate to Vietnam. Peter Schjeldahl, writing for the *New York Times*, denounced *Patton*'s, "fidgety refusal to deal with any of the issues it raised along the way."[37] Toplin notes, however, that this ambiguity is what allowed for *Patton* to actually resonate with its Vietnam-era audience, who were able to read their own messages – whether pro- or anti-war – into his personal story.[38]

The film's opening monologue, famously recited by George C. Scott playing General Patton standing in front of a giant American flag, speaking directly to the audience (who stand in for the troops he is rallying just before the D-Day invasion), allows for just such ambiguity:

> Men, all of this stuff you've heard about America not wanting to fight, wanting to stay out of the war, is a lot of horsedung. Americans traditionally love to fight. All real Americans love the sting of battle. . . . Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time. I wouldn't give a hoot in hell for a man who lost and laughed. That's why Americans have never lost, and will never lose, a war because the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans.[39]

For those who supported the conflict in Vietnam, this could be read as a stirring speech and a rallying cry to put the same effort and energy into that the as the country had done during World War II. Those who were opposed to Vietnam, however, could view Patton as a militaristic tyrant, a man whose kind of thinking had led the U.S. into the mess in Southeast Asia in the first place. Though the speech is directly referencing America's entrance into World War II, it remains open-ended enough to allow audiences to choose what they think it is saying about Vietnam, just as readers of *Captain America* at this time could choose to take his World War II adventures and interpret them as commentary about the current war. Both audiences would have to reckon with the texts in the context of Vietnam, a war that received much less attention in fictionalized popular media than World War II. Americans thus freely used stories like *Patton* that talked about WWII in order to debate Vietnam, and thus was the fate of both *Patton* and *Captain America*.

Captain America, unlike Patton, was not a real-life historical figure. Like Patton, though, his very character is tied to World War II. He stands in for "classic" America values and ideology, and is often used to personify these contestations and debates of what "America," both as a nation and as a concept, means, does, and stands for. Here, that conversation is only able to occur thanks to the World War II setting, and the implications that setting has for patriotic "goodness" and "moral certitude" in comparison to the compromised Vietnam conflict. Even when Captain America's stories, with *Tales of Suspense* #72, returned to the present, the narratives would find themselves continually cycling back to his World War II origins. The Captain faced a seemingly endless stream of villains and situations with connections either to the war or the Nazis. Constantly, he was drawn back into the past.

THE EVOLUTION OF WORLD WAR II

One thing that had not changed in these 1960s Captain America stories was the popular view of World War II. Particularly in comparison to Vietnam, the war was seen as a righteous one of good versus evil, Allies versus Axis, superheroes versus supervillains. This is the view that would continue for some time in other comics, such as Roy Thomas' 1970s *Invaders* series.[40] Nevertheless, the portrayal of the war in Captain America's adventures was starting to change. Steve Rogers was a man haunted by his past, constantly fighting the same foes he had during the war. He was unable to break free from his own history, and from America's historical connection to World War II as a touchstone of morality. This was something that Lee ultimately realized, and he allowed it to have a psychological impact on the character, revealing a darker side to the legacy of World War II than just the clear-cut values of the "Good War."

By November, 1968's *Captain America* #107 (which *Tales of Suspense* had been renamed as with issue 100), Captain America was dealing with probable post-traumatic stress disorder, akin to the problems faced by the returning soldiers in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. As the story opens, he finds himself in the midst of an ultra-realistic nightmare where he is attacked on a battlefield, finding himself accosted by Bucky, who is screaming, "*You* killed me, Cap!" atop a grave-stone that notes, "Here lies Bucky Barnes! He died—while Captain America lived!"[41] Upon waking, the Captain exclaims to himself, "How long must I suffer—how long must I pay—for that one terrible instant???"[42] Though the traumatic dream proves to be brought about through the psychological manipulations of an evil psychiatrist named Dr. Faustus, the image of a pajama-clad Steve Rogers holding his head in his hands while sitting up in bed, filled with despair, is reminiscent of the contemporary televised images of shell-shocked Vietnam veterans.

In the late 1960s, Captain America's stories were effectively utilized as a not-so-subtle way of commenting upon the trauma of the war without engaging directly in its politics. Because Vietnam was televised to Americans' households, they were able to see the true violence and horror of warfare in a way they hadn't during World War II. Rather than just reading dispatches, watching black-and-white newsreels, or listening to the stories of returning veterans, American civilians during Vietnam were able to see nightly, in-color, graphic evidence of the bloody war-in-progress. Thus, imbued with this new cultural sensibility of how visceral war actually is, even the glimpses backwards at the "Good War," though still maintaining pride in moral justification, began to focus upon how traumatizing that war was to its combatants.

In *Captain America* #109, Lee and Kirby retold their titular hero's origin once again, but this time with some important changes that differentiated it from the original Simon and Kirby story, as well as from Lee and Kirby's own version three years earlier. . The biggest departure is that Rogers tells his own story, while earlier versions relied upon an omniscient narrator. Here, Rogers explains his origins to fellow war veteran Nick Fury. The Captain explains to Fury that, "It was all true—every last, tragic, soul-searing detail."[43] As he then begins to tell the story, Fury thinks to himself, "Man! Is *he* carryin' a king-size chunk of memories inside'a him! Ya can almost see the past comin' back—wrappin' itself around 'im—trapping him like it always does—never lettin' 'im go free!"[44] Even Rogers' friend, a soldier who had also fought in World War II, can see how helplessly tied in to the past the man is. Rather than ending his tale with the promise of further Nazi-smashing adventures featuring Captain America and Bucky, the Captain adds a concluding note: "And so was born the famous fighting team that battled tyranny and crime in every corner of the world--! --Until…Finally, during the last days of the war—Bucky's luck—ran out!"[45] Fury then reassures him that, "I guess every Joe who's

seen combat hadda watch a buddy die—some time or other! There's some things ya can forget—but that sure ain't one of 'em!"[46]

This new version of Captain America's origin, created in response to the Vietnam-engendered lack of faith in patriotism and the realization of the horror of warfare, focuses less on the patriotic vigor and drive of the young Captain and far more on the trauma experienced by the hero who was born and baptized in death. The hero's life had begun with the murder of the professor whose serum gave him his powers, followed by spending years in a warzone and watching his best friend die. As historian Matthew J. Costello explains, another key addition to this version of the origin is the present of radiation: "Rather than simply drinking the formula, Rogers is then bombarded by 'vita-rays.' The introduction of radioactivity into the Captain America origin brings him into the modern Marvel continuity, under the shadow of the bomb."[47]

This new origin led to a darker period for the character, one heralded by a change in the look of the series – the clean-cut, bombastic art of Jack Kirby was replaced by the darker, moodier artwork of first Jim Steranko, then later Gene Colan. With the departure of Cap's co-creator, Lee took the character into territory that was more focused on characterization than on superheroic exploits. The writer was interested in exploring the differences that Rogers experienced between his 1940s upbringing and the social unrest of the present day. The Captain was experiencing a kind of identity crisis on par with the one that the nation, rocked by anti-Vietnam protests, civil rights movements, and free-love, pro-drug hippies (or so conservative and older Americans viewed them), was undergoing. Neither Captain America nor America itself were sure any longer about just what they stood for, and what their role in the world was.

The first storyline of this new era intertwines issues of identity crisis with comparisons between the 1960s and World War II. It features Captain America taking on

Rick Jones, friend to the Incredible Hulk and an instrumental player in the founding of the Avengers, as a new sidekick. Their relationship is fraught, however, as the Captain keeps mentioning Bucky Barnes, which makes Rick bristle. The Captain, wracked with survivor's guilt, ultimately rejects Jones, agonizing that, "I couldn't bear to lose someone close to me—a second time!"[48] The trauma of World War II, and of being its preeminent "survivor" as a man who missed out on two decades of post-War America, is thus reinforced and reflected in the Captain's relationships with those closest to him, still influencing him years after the war has become nothing but a memory.

The effect that war has on Captain America is explored yet again a year later when he returns to Vietnam.[49] Unlike the earlier Vietnam-set Captain America story, though, this one does not simply portray the North Vietnamese as recast Nazis with "yellow peril" stereotyping thrown in for good measure. Rather, Cap, himself, recognizes that each side of the battle is to be questioned, morally. Once on the ground in the foreign nation, he is targeted by a Vietnamese sniper, and reflects, "It was a mistake to wear my costume! It stands out like a beacon here!"[50] Even Captain America, when confronted with war-torn and morally ambiguous Vietnam, rejects the ultra-patriotism reflected by draping himself in the colors of the American flag. At the end of the issue, Cap again reflects that the war in Vietnam is a result of two colliding interests, not simply "good" versus "evil." However, going onto the battlefield once more has struck him more darkly on a personal level, as he thinks to himself, "I've nothing to face but…tomorrow!...And all the tomorrows to come…with nothing but loneliness…and strife—and the knowledge that, one day, even Captain America must surely face—defeat!"[51]

During the 1960s, Stan Lee had transformed Captain America from a patriotic WWII super-soldier into an *anti*-war figure. The traumas of the Captain's life came

about through his constant mental haunting – and sometimes literal haunting (in the form of returned enemies) – by the ghosts of the battles he had fought. The effect of Vietnam on the American psyche was so complete that ultra-patriotism was no longer seen as a virtue in a superhero; the evolution of superhero comics allowed for a multi-dimensional Captain America who suffered from virtually chronic PTSD. Other than for brief rescue missions, the Captain never got involved in the Vietnam conflict, and even when he did he ultimately reflected upon the futility of war.

This world-weary version of Captain America continued even after Lee left the book. Especially under the pen of writer Steve Englehart during the early 1970s, Captain America fought for social justice in America's city streets alongside his new partner, the African American hero the Falcon. One particularly important storyline featured the pair battling a fascist organization called the Secret Empire, which had political ties up to and including the White House itself. The Secret Empire story was a clear response to the Watergate scandal that enveloped President Nixon at the time. Englehart noted in the book's letters column that he originally conceived of the storyline before the scandal grew as big as it ultimately would:

> [A]fter I locked myself into this plotline and began work on it, Watergate did break wide open, and each day's new revelations have slowly but surely changed America's understanding of itself. One very minor side-product of this change is to make the underlying assumptions of my plot obsolete. Crises of confidence in much bigger men than Cap have become not only commonplace, but old-hat, by now.[52]

Shortly after the storyline concluded, Nixon resigned, making this connection even more apparent, given the way in which the narrative concludes with the Secret Empire's "Number One" committing suicide in the Oval Office.

The following issue, August 1974's *Captain America and The Falcon* #176, features a disillusioned Captain pondering his continued existence as a "super soldier."

Here, we once again get a retelling of his origin story, but this time one that focuses on the man, Steve Rogers, rather than the icon, Captain America. In fact, the Captain begins the story (spoken aloud to himself) by shouting, "Blast it! I'm no legend! I'm a man!!"[53] When describing himself as a young boy growing up in New York City, he notes how clear-cut the Nazi's immorality was: "I knew the Nazis were rotten, from the minute I set eyes on them. They were suppressing—then murdering—the people of Europe, weren't they? They had spies here, didn't they?"[54] It was this moral assurance that led him to volunteer for the experiment that would turn him into Captain America, a moment that, he notes, "Nothing else . . . before or since, has ever even come close to."[55] Following this, he explains how, "For the first time, I fully realized what had been done for me! Fight for America? Man, I was *Captain* America!"[56]

Immediately following his reminiscence of this glorious moment, though, is a double-paged montage of images leading diagonally across the page, from an active Captain fighting Nazis, through to his frozen body surrounded by the faces of his greatest allies and enemies, down to the memory of Number One's recent suicide and finally the despondent, downward-looking Cap who has been telling the story. Across the page, each word individually separated, is the sentence, "But so much has happened since then!"[57] He explains further that, "I've seen American rocked with scandal—seen it manipulated by demagogues with sweet, empty words—seen all the things I hated when I saw those newsreels."[58] Later in the same issue, he responds to an argument that he inspires the entirety of the United States:

> America is not the single entity you're talking about. It's changed since I took my name. There was a time, yes, when the country faced a clearly hideous aggressor, and her people stood united against it! But now, nothing's that simple. Americans have many goals—some of them quite contrary to others! In the land of the free, each of us is able to do what he wants to do—think what he wants to think. That's as it should be—but it makes for a great many different versions of

> what America is. So when people the world over look at me—which America am I supposed to symbolize?[59]

This question of just what "America" means was a reflection of the loss of confidence Americans felt in their government following the Watergate scandal and its intimations of a wholly corrupt government. Vietnam had created doubts about America's moral role in the world, and now Watergate created questions about whether or not the whole country was rotting from within. Struggling with these questions, and with his ability to embody an America he can't understand, Steve Rogers quits as Captain America, taking on the costumed identity of "Nomad." Eventually, though, in response to the reemergence of the Red Skull, he returns to being the Captain, after realizing that, "If I'd paid more attention to the way American reality differed from the American dream—if I hadn't gone around thinking the things I believe in were thirty years out of date—then I might have uncovered number one, and stopped him, before it was too late! . . . Whatever the threat—wherever it originates—I won't be blind again!"[60] Captain America thus regains faith in himself and in America by realizing that the values and morals he had learned fighting in World War II are the exact thing America needs at the current moment that. He draws strength through his connection to the "Good War," and uses it to spur him on in his contemporary battles to save America from any threat, internal or external.

Lee and Englehart's retellings of Captain America's origins, and of his early days in World War II, differ from each other in crucial ways. For Lee, the influence of Vietnam was such that he could no longer glorify the older war or its patriotism, and he created a Captain who was living with constant trauma and battle fatigue from all that he had seen and encountered in his years as a soldier. Englehart, on the other hand, returned to a view of World War II that saw it as a morally clear-cut example of America at its

finest. In reaction to Watergate, and the seeming corruption of the American system from the top to the bottom, he looked to the war as a reassuring example, of how America had not always been like this. It was what had happened in the intervening years that had brought about the moral rot that led to Watergate, and Captain America, embodying that earlier time, should serve as a herald of those values for present-day readers.

In contrast to Englehart's excoriation, Nixon saw himself as reflecting the values of World War II. He ordered frequent viewings of John Wayne films In the White House, and called upon his service record to win support from pro-military voters.[61] It was from the war that he felt it wise that he, as John Bodnar explains, "adhered to the necessity of destroying enemies in Southeast Asia and sacrificing men and materiel for American victory."[62] Like the legacy of World War II itself, then, in the late 1960s and into the 1970s Captain America's origin was clearly contested terrain. The fact that this origin was so directly tied into World War II allowed writers to use that story – and thus the character, himself – to comment upon the differences and similarities between the past and the present. For Lee, that past became "tainted" by the present, and he looked back with a revisionist eye at a war that, "good" as it may have been, was still a bloody, deadly affair. For Englehart, World War II became more valorous and exceptional in comparison to the corrupted present, and it possessed a set of morally clear-cut values that contemporary America would do well to emulate. This metaphorical battle – between the "Good War" and the bloody war – would continue to the most current stories featuring the character.

STERN, BYRNE, AND BRUBAKER

In the early 1980s, Roger Stern and John Byrne, two respected veterans of superhero comics, yet again recast Captain America's origin, this time removing as much

as they could of the explicit politics attached to the character in order to solidify his role as a super*hero* as opposed to a super *soldier*. This origin story appeared in March, 1981's *Captain America* #255, labeled on the cover as "The Special 40th Anniversary Issue." The addition that the issue contributed to the mythos of the character was to make the experiment that turned him into a super soldier the direct result of a similar Nazi experiment that had created the Red Skull. Thus, the birth of Captain America in this version is connected less to the threat of realistic fascism (as his "real" creation by Simon and Kirby was) as it is to the colorful, fantastical world of heroes and villains.

Stern's description of how the issue came to be indicates that the story was indeed meant to be a special celebration of the heroic character, rather than, as had been the case in past retellings of the origin, a commentary about a changing present or a changing view of the past. According to Stern, editor Mark Gruenwald had,

> challenged us to tell the legend of Captain America in a single cohesive issue. . . . We'd take the readers back to the very beginning of Cap's career and tell-once and for all—the complete saga of Cap's origin! We could reveal *why* Steve Rogers was given the proud red-white-and-blue inform! . . . John suggested reproducing the story directly from his penciled art, to suggest the rougher feel of the 1940s. I insisted that we use Franklin Delano Roosevelt as narrator, to add to the authenticity. And with John conjuring up images from Depression Era movies and the original Kirby-drawn comics, I dove back into my research books.[63]

This description shows that the creative team of Stern and Byrne was not overtly interested in the political aspects of Captain America's origin, but were using the hero's World War II background as a way to create a mise-en-scène for the "legend" and "saga" of the character. Stern's "research" seems focused only on creating a sense of historical accuracy and a narrative voice for Roosevelt, rather than on commenting in any sustained way upon the actual politics or social circumstances of the war.

Mythology, here, was more important than history. For Stern and Byrne, World War II was nothing more than a backdrop for a heroic origin, a time of struggle akin to the Trojan War serving as a setting for Homer's *Odyssey*. Here, as Christopher Murray posits, "all the political complexity and rhetorical texture that had once accompanied the comics in their role as propaganda [was] reduced to the smooth surface of everyday myth. Here was the final transformation performed by the process of mythologization: the emptying out of all political significance to complete myth's transfiguration into nature (that which goes without saying)."[64] Thus it was that by the 1980s, the association of Captain America with World War II was simply a part of the character's mythos, not used for political or propagandist purposes, or even for purposes of character development, but as background dressing for the character's on-going story. During the course of the 1980s and 1990s the character was mostly in the hands of writers Mark Gruenwald and Mark Waid, both of whom had long runs on the character which explored various social and political issues, but generally focused on the character as a "mythic," superheroic do-gooder. Neither author spent any great amount of time revising, or even retelling, Captain America's origin story.

It would not be until the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, that the Captain's origins were next revised in a way that re-emphasized the political importance of his connection to World War II. In 2005, following a brief post-9/11 iteration of the character that focused on ultra-contemporary Bush-era politics and government distrust, writer Ed Brubaker took over *Captain America* and immediately did what had up until then been considered the greatest possible taboo for the character – he brought Bucky back to life.[65] Bucky was one of the very few characters whose death had lasted more than a few years in either the DC or Marvel Universe, and bringing him back proved to be controversial amongst fans. Brubaker's first storyline focused on a

mysterious Soviet assassin called the Winter Soldier, who turns out to be Bucky, having been brainwashed by the Soviet army, kept in suspended animation, and only released from time to time in order to serve as an assassin. The Winter Soldier is brought out of storage for good as part of the Red Skull's latest evil machinations, which involves using an all-powerful weapon called the cosmic cube to torture Captain America with images of Bucky so as to make his reappearance as a soulless assassin all the worse.

Brubaker thus creates a narrative reason to keep looping back to stories and scenes set in World War II. In his very first issue, he brings Captain America back to the haunted, traumatized, PTSD-suffering figure he had been in the late 1960s. Rogers tell his girlfriend, "You know what I see when I dream, Sharon? I see the war. My war. After all this time I still dream about foxholes in the black forest… Still hear the screams of terrified soldiers, smell their blood and tears… I still dream about Bucky. Him and all the others I couldn't save… It hardly seems fair. After so much time has passed in the world, that in my dreams it's still 1949."[66]

The ensuing flashbacks to World War II show a much grittier, dirtier war than had ever been seen before in Captain America stories. Brubaker's version of the war owes much to Stephen Spielberg's influential film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), one of the first films to treat World War II in the same way that other films has viewed Vietnam – messy, bloody, and full of moral compromises. Ultimately, though, the film engages in the same kind of justifying of World War II that works like Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*. It features the story of a group of soldiers tasked with rescuing one young man – the eponymous Private Ryan – who has lost three brothers to the war. Along the way, most of the soldiers are killed, though they also liberate a French village and save a strategically important bridge from falling under German control. The German soldiers fluctuate between being faceless enemies and individualized human souls; a captured

German whom the Americans threaten to kill desperately tries to save his life by explaining, in broken English, all the things that he loves about America, culminating in a desperate declaration of, “Fuck Hitler.” The film ends, though, with Captain Miller, played by lead actor Tom Hanks, whispering to Private Ryan to “earn this,” a statement being made as much to the character as to the younger generations of Americans watching the film. In the final framing sequence, Ryan, now an old man visiting the graves of the soldiers at Normandy, asks his wife if he’s led a good life, and she assures him that he has. Two generations of his family stand in the background, indicating that he has, indeed, earned the soldiers’ sacrifice by going on to father future generations of Americans (an ending reminiscent of Spielberg’s other serious World War II film, *Schindler’s List*, which concludes by showing the multiple generations of Jews that survived and were able to be born thanks to Oskar Schindler). Just as Miller and Schindler’s sacrifices are justified, so is the war itself.

The famous opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan* presents a somewhat different story, as it portrays the most graphic film version of the D-Day invasion of Normandy beach ever attempted. As Roger Ebert noted in his four-star review of the film, “The movie's opening sequence is as graphic as any war footage I've ever seen . . . because in the bloody early stages the landing forces and the enemy never meet eye to eye, but are simply faceless masses of men who have been ordered to shoot at one another until one side is destroyed.”[67] The invasion is brutal, bloody, and shows soldiers fighting not for ideology, but for sheer survival. In the face of such an inhuman circumstance, they are utterly humanized, and utterly terrified. Similarly, other moments of the film show the American soldiers as less than idealized – one of the most likable characters, Corporal Upham, is entirely unprepared for the reality of battle, and he folds under pressure,

allowing one of his comrades to die and only shooting his murderer after the battle is done, when the German soldier has already surrendered.

Brubaker's Captain America has much in common with the soldiers of this film, as well as those in other recent film and television projects focusing on the traumatic experiences of the "everyman" soldier, such as Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), Clint Eastwood's interrelated Iwo Jima films *Flags of Our Father* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2007), and the Spielberg-produced TV series *Band of Brothers* (2000) and *The Pacific* (2010). A *New York Times* review of *Band of Brothers* could just as easily be speaking of Brubaker's *Captain America*, when it notes that the series, "balances the ideal of heroism with the violence and terror of battle, reflecting what is both civilized and savage about war."[68] Similarly, Roger Ebert evokes the image of the soldier popularized by these films in his review of *Letters from Iwo Jima,* when he describes, "the 'expendable' soldier on the ground, the 'poor bastard' who is only a pawn in a war conceived by generals and politicians, some of whom have never come anywhere near a battlefield or a combat zone. . . . Life or death, heroism or folly: It all comes down to which side you're on, and which piece of ground you're occupying, at any given moment in the battle."[69] Like these all-too-human soldiers, fighting between the civilized and the savage, Brubaker's Captain America is also highly flawed. He argues with Russian allies and unapologetically kills enemy soldiers in the heat of battle.

Most importantly, this Cap has a very different relationship to Bucky. Brubaker's Bucky, rather than being Captain America's sidekick, is every bit the hero's partner. The idea that he was a "camp mascot" who stumbled upon Steve Rogers' secret is retconned away, explained as a "cover story" for the truth – that he was Captain America's darker half. The Captain explains that this was,

> the real secret of what Bucky was. The official story said he was a symbol to counter the rise of the Hitler youth… and there was some truth to that, but like all things in war, there was a darker truth underneath. Bucky did the things I couldn't. I was the icon. I wore the flag…but while I gave the speeches to the troops in the trenches… he was doing what he'd been trained to do…and he was *highly* trained. He wouldn't't've [sic] been out there with us if he wasn't.[70]

Underneath the captions featuring this description, we see Bucky sneaking into a Nazi-held village, slowly surprising and silently killing several German soldiers.

With this change to Captain America's early continuity, Brubaker returns a certain humanization to Steve Rogers that had been lacking for decades. Captain America had become a myth, an iconic superhero whom everybody knew, but Brubaker stripped this away to return to the war that gave birth to the hero and show how that war, "like all things in war," was much darker than it had been portrayed in earlier stories. The darkest aspect of this was that Bucky, a teenager, was able to accomplish things that Rogers could not. Because Captain America had to uphold the ideals of patriotism and virtue that he symbolized, his young partner had to do the dirty work that was necessary in their missions against the Nazis.

Brubaker provides the bleakest look at World War II yet, showing how warfare, and the spy games that accompany it, can corrupt even the young and idealistic, turning them into cold-blooded killers. There is very little "good" about this version of the war, one that focuses on the deaths both experienced and caused by American soldiers, and doesn't concern itself with the broader ideologies of fascism and democracy. This war, Brubaker is saying, like Vietnam, or indeed like *any* war, is a hellish, painful, haunting experience. Brubaker's work on the title ads another wrinkle to the Captain's already guilty conscious, and another aspect of his history to keep drawing him back to the misery of his past. As Brubaker's run continued, he would take this concept to its most extreme, yet, by killing Steve Rogers and making him literally relive his greatest failures.

THE MANY DEATHS AND REBIRTHS OF CAPTAIN AMERICA

In addition to resurrecting Bucky, Ed Brubaker's run on Captain America was also notable for a much-heralded 2007 story featuring the character's "death" at the hands the Red Skull. The story became a temporary mainstream news sensation, with media pundits chiming in on what the death of the icon meant to contemporary America. With the country divided by George W. Bush's presidency, and suffering from an unstable economy and unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Captain's death was mostly lamented as a sign of the times, an indication that the old "America" which its citizens knew and loved was now dead and gone. Joe Simon himself summed up these feelings most concisely: "It's a hell of a time for him to go. We really need him now."[71]

Simon was far from the only commentator to react to Captain America's death, however. In a piece written for the *New York Times*, author Austin Grossman noted that Steve Rogers' continual struggle over the years to live up to the iconicity of his costume showed how the vibrancy of the character depended on the man inside the suit, not on his role as a representative of all things patriotic. Grossman argues that, "In death, Captain America's been given back to the marketing department – everyone acting as though he's Uncle Sam, murdered before our eyes, when what he'd become over the years was something much more interesting."[72] He then laments this state of affairs: "Making the late Captain America the legend he never was in life, or trying to read into his demise some allegory for our country's current crises, misses the point. Behind that vibranium shield, behind that kitschy Fourth of July mask, Steve Rogers was still just this art student who got drafted into a special assignment that lasted 65 years."[73]

Grossman indicates through his knowledge of the character's back story that he is a reader and fan. His analysis focuses on the character of Steve Rogers, rather than the icon of Captain America. Others, responding to the news of the character's

death, saw him solely as a symbol. In a letter to the *Washington Times*, U.S. Army Captain Luis Carlos Montanan argued that, "Captain America is not dead, nor will he die so long as there are those who would stand up for America, protecting her and freedom across the world. Shame on those who think that he or what he stands for is dead. The ideals for which he was created and has lived and fought for transcend death. America's captains are very much alive and will continue his fight."[74] Likewise, Jacob Heilbrunn, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, noted that, "Gunned down by a mysterious sniper in the latest issue as he's entering a Manhattan federal courthouse to be arraigned, Captain America symbolizes the death of the American dream. Can he and it come back? Of course! Captain America will no doubt be resurrected as soon as the country has recovered from its current fiasco."[75] Jonathan V. Last, writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, noted the Captain's passing was an important moment because, "Captain America's death still meant something."[76] Last also presumed (ultimately incorrectly), that, "Marvel now seems poised to use his death as the focus of a large-scale debate on the balancing of freedom and security."[77]

Although Marvel chose to take the story in a different direction, focusing on the burden of being Captain America rather than his utilization as a symbol of freedom, the important thing to note is that the character's death *did* lead these various commentators to focus on his meaning in a post-9/11 world. Through many decades, the majority of Americans had taken the iconic hero for granted, assuming him to be a staid and "square" representation of an American patriotism that was outdated and deserved to be relegated to its' World War II roots. The largest exposure the character had received outside of comics since those days had arguably been the ironic appropriation of his name and imagery by a freewheeling hippie biker (played by Peter Fonda) in the 1969 film *Easy Rider*, which pointed specifically to how the Captain's vision of America was outdated.

With Steve Rogers' death, though, cultural commentators began to examine the comic book's source materials to realize that the character *had* changed over the years. Writing for the *Washington Times*, Neely Tucker summed up how, as superhero comics evolved from being stories solely directed at children, they began to argue that, "The good guys were flawed. And so was Captain America, much like his country. He started out a true-blue patriotic icon, but in recent years grew more complex. He had gone from always fighting for the government to sometimes fighting against it. The battle for American ideals had changed."[78] Tucker goes on to surmise that the character would likely be reborn, but, "Who he will be by then, and who we will be, is an open question. We change in these little ways, in our myths and fables, and bit by bit we wake up to see a different nation, and different heroes, looking back out of the mirror."[79]

True to the superhero genre, and Tucker's supposition, Captain America turned out to not be dead after all. Rather, his consciousness has been severed from his physical body and he has become, shades of Kurt Vonnegut's anti-war science fiction novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "unstuck in time." Thus, his consciousness travels uncontrollably back and forth through his own timeline, and he experiences some of the most tragic, trying, and notable moments of his past – from the D-Day invasion, to fighting alongside the Invaders, to Bucky's death – without being able to alter their outcome. As in his earlier stories, Brubaker maintains a gritty take on World War II. This is reflected in the artwork; the colors are muted and the pockmarked explosion of bullets and grenades dot the landscape.

The fragmented memories Rogers faces while trapped this way are presented similarly to those of protagonist, and veteran, Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Both Rogers and Pilgrim flash back and forth across their lives, living out a double-consciousness inside their head. They can see and understand everything that

they are doing, but they are unable to interact with it any meaningful way. As John Bodnar points out, Pilgrim "never could recall exactly what happened in World War II . . . [and] struggled . . . to remember exactly what he had been through," a fractured memory designed to make Vonnegut's point, "that coherent remembrances of the war were not possible and not trustworthy."[80] Similarly, Brubaker shows how Captain America's memories of the war are fragmented and untenable. Even a man trapped by his own past is subject to the vicissitudes of incoherent memory that prevent a clear, monolithic picture of "World War II" from ever truly emerging.

The Captain's reaction to forcefully reliving these wartime battles is reflective of the battle-shocked trauma that Stan Lee had given him in the late 1960s. While fighting supervillain Captain Nazi, he thinks about how he would eventually stop him, "With the help of these soldiers…most of who die today."[81] Later, after reliving the experiment that gave him his powers, and finding himself unable to save Dr. Erskine's life, he thinks about how, "My actions this day were always futile…I was always too late. God…this is torture."[82] Repeating the past, filled with recriminations of what he could have done better in each instance (reminiscent, in a way, of the portrayal of the afterlife in Thornton Wilder's classic American play *Our Town*), causes him to muse, "If this is the Skull's doing…it's his most effective bit of torture yet. Seeing all my lost and dead friends, seeing the battles I lost…unable to do anything about it all."[83]

Fortunately for his sanity, Captain America's colleagues are able to foil the Red Skull's schemes and return his consciousness to its proper time and place. In the aftermath of the experience, he considers how "The Red Skull couldn't have thought of a better torture if he'd done it on purpose. Reliving so many days…great days *and* tragic days…it puts so much into perspective. Thinking how long I've worn this uniform. So long that I've forgotten sometimes what it's cost."[84] While Steve Rogers was "dead,"

Bucky Barnes took up the mantle for him, and Rogers considers whether or not to take it back, as this experience has made him realize just how much of a burden being Captain America can actually be.

This burden is one that always has been, and always will be, tied to World War II. Rogers reflects that, "It's always the war, isn't it? That's what everyone thinks of when they hear the words Captain America…they think of World War Two. Even after all this time in the Avengers, all the other battles…it's still the war that defined me. . . . It's still the place I go most often in my nightmares."[85] He then thinks back on a wartime interaction with Bucky where he told his sidekick that, "I was supposed to be the first of a whole army of soldiers like me…so I have to live up to that." Bucky responds that, "That's an awful heavy weight, Steve…But I guess your back's strong enough, ain't it?" Rogers gives him a weary glance and simply replies, "It *has* to be."[86] During his earliest days in World War II, Rogers already knows that being Captain America will be a lifelong struggle, as he is the only one strong enough to *be* Captain America, and thus (in the present) he eventually takes the title back after Bucky needs to fake his own death in order to escape from danger.

The title of "Captain America" proves to be about more than just wearing a costume and carrying a shield, but rather about changing and evolving along with America, itself, representing certain unyielding ideals of freedom and liberty while also reflecting how those ideals can be expressed in the present day. Through all of Brubaker's run, Steve Rogers must face almost all of the men who have temporarily taken the name Captain America, as well as the various sidekicks that he, himself, has worked with. This thematic tie carries through from Brubaker's very first issue, which introduces the concept of the Winter Soldier, through to his final one, published in 2012,

where Rogers confronts William Burnside, the retconned "commie-smashing" Captain America of the 1950s.

Throughout this final issue, which features Rogers talking to Burnside as the latter lies in a hospital bed, Brubaker refers to being Captain America as a burden. Rogers explains that, "I hadn't wanted to wear the flag and carry that burden… I just wanted to do the right thing."[87] He notes that he never thought he would have a successor because he, "never thought about the *symbol* needing to live on. And never realized *my burden* would be taken by others."[88] Meeting Burnside for the first time made him feel like he was, "facing my own twisted legacy… Knowing I couldn't control what people *thought* I stood for."[89] Ultimately, though, he comes to realize that, "The mission isn't just mine…the mission goes with the symbol. And if I don't wear this uniform, then someone else will… Someone else always will…because that's the hardest thing about being Captain America…understanding that the mission is too big…and it'll never end."[90] The last section of Rogers' monologue, and the last piece of dialogue Brubaker writes for him, once again returns to this central concept that carrying the weight of Captain America's symbolism is a burden for any man, and a burden that only Rogers has been able to successfully bear thus far: "You don't have to be Captain America anymore, William. You have my eternal gratitude…but someone else will carry that burden from now on…for as long as I can."[91]

Brubaker's entire run on *Captain America* is thus about the weight and burden of history. To be Captain America is to represent the past and the present simultaneously. The Captain is inextricably tied to his World War II origins, and that makes him an icon, no matter who is carrying the mantle. Such iconicity, though, is a tough burden for a person to bear, and Brubaker examines at length its effects on the men who have carried the mantle. Throughout Brubaker's tenure on the title, other men who have temporarily

assumed Captain American identity, in addition to Steve Rogers and Bucky, show up traumatized and broken by the experience. Only Rogers has the ability to literally soldier on, because he has the most history behind him. For Brubaker, World War II isn't a moral bedrock from which Rogers draws strength, but rather it is *all* of the experiences in the character's long history, good and bad, that empower him. By drawing upon moments of strength and learning from moments of weakness, Rogers is able to be Captain America in a way no other character can.

Steve Rogers is thus seen as a greater hero for continuing to shoulder the weight of being an icon. This serves as a commentary to readers on the need to keep from becoming trapped by history and to constantly move forward. In the fractured decade following 9/11, this burden is especially tough to bear, as Americans feared further terrorist attacks, either rallied behind or bristled against laws like the Patriot Act, and found themselves increasingly divided against one another by a controversy-hungry media over issues ranging from the "war on terror" to gay rights. Rogers is forced to represent both of these Americas (in fact, "Two Americas" is the name of one of Brubaker's storylines), and must do so without breaking, as a way to show the nation that it can survive such divisiveness if it doesn't allow itself to get bogged down in past conflict but instead moves forward without any venom or vindictiveness. Just as Rogers fought his way back to the present, and back to life, following his "death," Brubaker is arguing that we all must accept and utilize the past as a tool for the good works that we can accomplish in the present, rather than simply drowning in our own grudges, memories, and miseries. He is, in short, advocating for cultural memory over nostalgia.

First Avenger, Last Soldier Standing

In 2011, Captain America received the largest of mass recognition in his 70-year history, thanks to a big-budget summer movie, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, produced by Marvel Studios (the publisher's own, highly successful, film and television production company). As is typically the case in the first film of a hoped-for superhero franchise, the movie's plot told Captain America's secret origin. Rather than focusing on the "man out of time" aspect of the character that Stan Lee had popularized, the entire film, save for a framing sequence, is set during World War II. Fittingly, Marvel hired director Joe Johnston, who had previously made a commercially and critically successful superhero film set during the same time period, *The Rocketeer* (1991).

Captain America: The First Avenger was the first exposure that many audiences had to the character, since Marvel's films attract many more consumers than their comics. The origin that Marvel Studios chose for the movie was an amalgamation of the various origin stories featured throughout the character's history. Steve Rogers, played by Chris Evans, is a scrawny, emaciated young man who tries several times to enlist in the army but finds himself consistently denied.[92] However, he catches the eye of Dr. Abraham Erskine, a German ex-patriot working for the American government to establish a technique of developing "super soldiers," a project that, before he had escaped from Europe, had been co-opted by the Nazis to create the Red Skull. The process that Rogers undergoes involves injection of a serum into his muscles followed by bombardment with "vita-rays," a pseudo-scientific procedure that he emerges from superhumanly strong and fast. Following Nazi sabotage of the laboratory where the experiment took place, including the death of Erskine and the loss of his miraculous serum, he becomes something of a military mascot, selling war bonds and serving on USO tours. When he eventually proves his merit as a soldier and a hero, he is given a

special squadron of men to go on missions with, including his best friend – Bucky Barnes.[93]

The origin story told in *Captain America: The First Avenger* is thus a combination of various story points that have accreted in the comic books over the years, from the original super serum, through to the "vita-rays" introduced in the 1960s, the connection with the Red Skull of the 1980s, and the presentation of Bucky as a serious soldier, rather than a sidekick, seen in the 2000s. The cinema version of Steve Rogers bears the weight of the character's history, as well as the important moments of national history that have shaped the character and reshaped his origins in the three quarters of a century since his creation.

The decades-long story of Captain America shows the constant impact of the past upon the present. His stories are continually reflective of both the changing view of history (especially of World War II) and contemporary political changes. From a patriotic propagandist, through to a boisterous superhero, a traumatized war veteran, a disillusioned ex-patriot, a mythological hero, and finally a world-weary, all-too-human soldier who feels the effect of all these changes upon him, Captain America has evolved along with America's political currents and its popular understanding of the past.

Steve Rogers can't escape his own past because creators, readers, and commentators continually use the character for the purpose of cultural critique and of looking back upon history. He is forever representative of "The Greatest Generation," and thus forever usable as a way to either reinstate or critique that particular portrayal of World War II so as to comment on contemporary politics or society. Much as he may struggle towards the future, Captain America continually finds himself drawn back into the past.

[1] See, particularly, Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Matthew J. Costello, Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America (New York: Continuum, 2009); and Christopher Murray, "Propaganda: The Pleasures of Persuasion in *Captain America*," in Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods, ed. Matthew J. Smith & Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 129-141, all of which I draw from in this chapter. In addition, Pierre Comtois' two "field guides," Marvel Comics In The 1960s: An Issue By Issue Field Guide To A Pop Culture Phenomenon (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2009) and Marvel Comics In The 1970s: An Issue By Issue Field Guide To A Pop Culture Phenomenon (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2011) provide concise descriptions of many Captain America stories in the 1960s and 70s, focusing on those that were most central to the ongoing continuity of the Marvel Universe that Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and other writers and artists were establishing at that time.
[2] Joe Simon, Joe Simon: My Life In Comics (London: Titan Books, 2011), 8-9.
[3] Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 35.
[4] Joe Simon, Joe Simon: My Life In Comics (London: Titan Books, 2011), 87.
[5] For more on isolationism in this era, see Ronald E. Powaski, Towards An Entangling Alliance: American Isolationism, Internationalism, and Europe, 1901-1950 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), especially chapter 2, "Republican Isolationism, 1921-1933," 27-57 and chapter 3, "Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Isolationists, and the Aggressors, 1933-1939," 58-88.
[6] Ibid, 87-88.
[7] Quoted in Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 36.
[8] Quoted in Ibid.
[9] Reprinted in Roy Douglas, The World War 1939-1943: The cartoonists' vision (London: Rutledge, 1990), 106.
[10] Reprinted in Ibid, 107.
[11] Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 36.
[12] John Bodnar, The "Good War" In American Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 200-201.
[13] Nicolaus Mills, Their Last Battle: The fight for the National World War II Memorial (Basic Books: New York, 2004), xii.
[14] Michael Slackman & National Park Service, Remembering Pearl Harbor: The Story of the USS Arizona Memorial (Honolulu, Hawaii: Arizona Memorial Museum Association, 1984), 9.
[15] Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, "Meet Captain America," Captain America Comics 1, March 1941, 1.
[16] See Christopher Murray, "Propaganda: The Pleasures of Persuasion in *Captain America*," in Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods, ed. Matthew J. Smith & Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 132-133.
[17] Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 47.
[18] Ibid, 51.
[19] It was, in fact, in the wake of World War II that clinicians first started widespread investigations of the mental trauma veterans suffered from, a problem that would become even more pronounced during and after the Vietnam War. For much more on PTSD and the veteran, see William E. Kelly, M.D., ed., Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the War Veteran Patient (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985).
[20] See Doris Milberg, World War II on the Big Screen: 450+ Films, 1938-2008 (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2010), 146.
[21] Ibid.

[22] See Phillip L. Cunningham, "Stevie's Got A Gun: Captain America and His Problematic Use of Lethal Force," in Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 184.
[23] See Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 121-123.
[24] Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, The Comic Book Heroes (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1997), 89.
[25] See Stan Lee, writer, Jack Kirby, artist, et. al., "Captain America Joins . . . The Avengers!," Avengers 5, March 1964, 7-8.
[26] Ibid, 10. Emphasis in original
[27] Ibid.
[28] For more on the general treatment of Vietnam in superhero comics of the era, see Chapter 5.
[29] Stan Lee, writer, Jack Kirby, artist, et. al., "The Strength of the Sumo!," in Tales of Suspense 61, Jan 1965, 5.
[30] For much more on American stereotyped visions of the Japanese (and vice verse) during World War II, see John W. Dower, War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).
[31] Stan Lee, writer, Jack Kirby, artist, et. al., "The Origin of Captain America!," in Tales of Suspense 63, March 1965, 6.
[32] Ibid, 1.
[33] Ibid, 10. Emphasis in original.
[34] I credit this to Lee rather than to the "Lee and Kirby" team because the artwork in the story does not significantly differ from the other Captain America stories in this run, and that difference is mostly noticeable in the text. As part of the controversial "Marvel method," Lee and his artist would co-plot a story, which the artist would then completely pace and draw, with Lee adding dialogue and captions afterwards. However, there has been much debate, to the point of legal action, as to just how much work was done by Lee, especially in the plotting stage.
[35] Robert Brent Toplin, History By Hollywood (Second Edition) (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 7.
[36] See Ibid, 164.
[37] Quoted in Ibid, 171.
[38] See Ibid, 1175.
[39] Quoted in Jeremy M. Devine, Vietnam At 24 Frames A Second (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 71-72.
[40] See Chapter 3 for more on *The Invaders*.
[41] Stan Lee, writer, Jack Kirby, artist, et. al., "If The Past Be Not Dead--," in Captain America 107, November 1968, 3. Emphasis in original.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Stan Lee, writer, Jack Kirby, artist, et. al., "The Hero That Was!," in Captain America 109, January 1969, 7.
[44] Ibid, 8. Emphasis in original.
[45] Ibid, 20.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Matthew J. Costello, Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America (New York: Continuum), 2009, 96.
[48] Stan Lee, writer, John Romita, artist, et. al., "The Man Behind The Mask!," in Captain America 114, June 1969, 18.
[49] Stan Lee, writer, Gene Colan, artist, et. al., "Capture—in Viet Nam!," in Captain America 125, May 1970.
[50] Ibid, 11.
[51] Ibid. 20.
[52] Steve Englehart, "Let's Rap With Cap," in Captain America and The Falcon 173, May 1974.

[53] Steve Englehart, writer, Sal Buscema, artist, et. al., "Captain America Must *Die*!," in Captain America and The Falcon 176, August 1974, 2.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid, 5.
[56] Ibid. Emphasis in original
[57] Ibid, 6-7.
[58] Ibid, 8.
[59] Ibid, 15.
[60] Steve Englehart, writer, Frank Robbins, artist, et. al., "Nomad: No More!," in Captain America and The Falcon 183, March 1975, 17-18.
[61] John Bodnar, The "Good War" In American Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 130.
[62] See Ibid, 238.
[63] Roger Stern, "Remembering Cap," in Captain America: War & Remembrance (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007), 5.
[64] Christopher Murray, Champions of the Oppressed: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America During World War II (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2011), 248.
[65] I am purposely skipping over a rather crucial Captain America story, a seven-issue series by writer Robert Morales and artist Kyle Baker titled, *Truth: Red, White, & Black*. This story reveals the retroactively "first" Captain America, a black man named Isaiah Bradley who had been a part of Tuskegee-like experiments on African American soldiers in 1942 to test the effects of the super soldier serum. *Truth* is a fascinating story in its own right, and one that clearly engages historically with racial politics and revisionist views of America's own "innocence" whilst the Nazis were occupying most of Europe. However, as this chapter is tracing the history of *Steve Rogers*' specific origin, and how it was altered over time, *Truth* falls outside of my purview here, although it deserves larger consideration as a piece of superhero cultural memory.
[66] Ed Brubaker, writer, Steve Epting, artist, et. al., Captain America (volume 3) 1, in Captain America By Ed Brubaker Omnibus Vol. 1, ed. Mark D. Beazley (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007).
[67] Roger Ebert, "Saving Private Ryan," RogerEbert.com, July 24, 1998, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/saving-private-ryan-1998 (accessed December 4, 2013).
[68] Caryn James, "TV WEEKEND; An Intricate Tapestry Of a Heroic Age," New York Times, September 7, 2001, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/07/movies/tv-weekend-an-intricate-tapestry-of-a-heroic-age.html (accessed December 13, 2012).
[69] Roger Ebert, "Letters from Iwo Jima," RobertEbert.com, January 11, 2007, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/letters-from-iwo-jima-2007 (accessed December 4, 2013).
[70] Ed Brubaker, writer, Steve Epting & Michael Lark, artists, et. al., Captain America (volume 3) 5, in Captain America By Ed Brubaker Omnibus Vol. 1, ed. Mark D. Beazley (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007).
[71] Quoted in Jim McCann, "In The Trenches," in Captain America By Ed Brubaker Omnibus Vol. 1, ed. Mark D. Beazley (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007).
[72] Austin Grossman, "Star-Spangled Schlemiel," New York Times, March 17, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/17/opinion/17grossman.html?_r=0 (accessed December 17, 2012).
[73] Ibid.
[74] Luis Carlos Montalvan, "Captain America soldiers on," Washington Times, March 26, 2007, LexisNexis Academic (accessed December 17, 2012).
[75] Jacob Heilbrunn, "Captain America Was Us," Los Angeles Times, March 9, 2007, A-29.
[76] Jonathan V. Last, "As A Superhero, the Captain Changed Along With America," Wall Street Journal, March 13, 2007, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB117373749114034585.html (accessed December 17, 2012).
[77] Ibid.

[78] Neely Tucker, “O Captain! Our Captain! Hero’s Day Is Done: Killing Off a Patriotic Icon, Marvel Comics Turns the Page On A Fading American Era,” Washington Times, March 8, 2007, LexisNexis Academic (accessed December 17, 2012).
[79] Ibid.
[80] John Bodnar, The “Good War” In American Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 1.
[81] Ed Brubaker, writer, Bryan Hitch, artist, et. al., Captain America: Reborn 2, August, 2009, 3.
[82] Ibid, 24-25.
[83] Ed Brubaker, writer, Bryan Hitch, artist, et. al., Captain America: Reborn 4, November, 2009, 6-7.
[84] Ed Brubaker, writer, Butch Guice, artist, et. al., Captain America: Who Will Wield The Shield?, December, 2009, 13.
[85] Ibid, 1-3.
[86] Ibid, 5.
[87] Ed Brubaker, writer, Steve Epting, artist, et. al., Captain America 19, December 2012, 12.
[88] Ibid, 14. Emphasis in original.
[89] Ibid, 16. Emphasis in original.
[90] Ibid, 18.
[91] Ibid, 20.
[92] As Evans was cast as Captain America in part due to his muscular physique, his appearance in the first part of the film was digitally altered to make him appear miniscule.
[93] Captain America: The First Avenger, directed by Joe Johnston (July 22, 2011; Manhattan Beach, CA: Marvel Studios, 2011).

Chapter 4 – The Rock & The Fury: The Integration of War Comics Into Superhero Continuity

Though DC and Marvel Comics are synonymous with superhero stories, both companies have historically diversified across a variety of genres. They have each produced westerns, romances, funny animal comics, and, particularly, a plethora of war comics. With their built-in adventures and battlegrounds, war comics have continually proved popular to the adolescent male audience that is traditionally the target audience for comic books. These war stories differ from superhero comics in that they present the adventures of ordinary men (and, far less frequently, women) involved in real-world battle against enemy. Rather than putting on a costume and transforming into an alternate identity with a mission to do good and fight supervillains, the heroes in these stories put on a uniform and take on the rank of a soldier to fight against specific war-time enemies of similar, human-level powers and skills. However, readers often ignore war comics in favor of the ever-popular superhero comics that dominate the industry. Thus, to help keep their war titles afloat, DC and Marvel have incorporated the most popular ones into an ongoing continuity, integrating them into the publishers' superhero universes.

This process has both benefits and drawbacks. On the plus side, comics that tie into DC or Marvel continuity tend to find a bigger audience, sell better, and last longer. This allows for an expansion of other genres, such as war stories, within the larger genre of the "superhero" universe. However, this diversity is, in some ways, a surface-level one. Any story set within the ongoing continuity of a comic publisher's superhero universe is equally as interested in building that universe's continuity as it is in telling compelling, individual stories, and they tend to feature recurring characters. As a result, the stories lack some amount of suspense in the same way that superhero comics do – just

as Superman isn't going to die in a given issue of his own book, the same is true of a continuing war story character. The ability to tell a story where the lead character or characters are threatened by death, though, is one that is often necessary for a war story that wishes to show just how deadly and costly actual warfare can be.

Two of these ongoing war characters in particular – DC's Sgt. Rock and Marvel's Sgt. Fury – would evolve from war-book soldiers into full-fledged heroes, standing side-by-side with the likes of Superman and Captain America. They both shared many similarities – as historian David Huxley notes, they held the same rank, they both lead "multi-ethnic" squads, and they each possess "virtual invincibility," with "only minor wounds possible."[1] By examining the different ways in which both characters have changed over more than half a century, we will be able to see how these two figures, representing a particular type of World War II-era masculinity and morality, have (like Captain America) been used as part of a debate about the cultural memory of American warfare in the twentieth century. In addition, we will see how the superhero universes' own system of cultural memory – continuity – draws upon the past with an eye towards storytelling and sales possibilities rather than direct cultural commentary. Thus, the histories of the two sergeants will show how superhero universes negotiate between the history and memory of the real world and the history and memory of continuity, with often-fraught tensions between the two. It is this tension between the fantastical and the realistic, explored both in and out of the superhero continuities, that creators have utilized to tell dark stories about the nature of warfare and its role in history.

EARLY WAR COMICS

Pre-Comics Code war stories ran the gamut from square-jawed, Nazi-fighting patriots to morally questionable, brutally violent tales. The first comic book war stories,

like the first superhero stories, were largely reactions to the Axis threat in Europe, created by Jewish writers and artists who wanted to spur on US involvement. Though these stories first appeared in anthologies, often backing up the superhero cover stories, the first book dedicated exclusively to war stories appeared in 1940. *War Comics*, published by Dell Comics, featured the short, recurring-character stories characteristic of early comic books, including such characters as Sikundar the Robot Master, Sky Hawk, and Scoop Mason, War Correspondent, as well as nonfiction stories about real-world war heroes.[2] However, the war books that were developed in the *War Comics* mold were not entirely innocent of their own kind of villainy. As comics journalist/historian Mike Conroy notes in *War Stories*, a history of war comics from the 1940s through to the early 2000s, "the vast majority of early 1940s war comics were gung-ho, jingoistic, and—at least in their depiction of the Japanese—blatantly racist to 21st century eyes."[3] This was no different from the majority of movies at the time, and in the immediate aftermath of the war. The kind of World War II film epitomized by movie star John Wayne, and heroic soldier-turned-actor Audie Murphy, focused on American skill, bravery, and camaraderie, which always led to noble triumph over the faceless and/or villainous enemy soldiers. This was perhaps most epitomized by the 1955 film *To Hell And Back*, which took Murphy's memoir about the war and added a sense of glory and nobility that had not been present in the book. However, because it starred Murphy, an actual war hero, many young men would be inspired by the belief that this was what war was actually like, an illusion that would only be broken when they went to war, themselves, in Vietnam.[4]

With the end of World War II, the popularity of superhero comic books decreased drastically, since the returning soldiers who had become comics readers simply didn't find much exciting about super-powered individuals who were never risking life and limb

in the way that America's fighting forces had. Additionally, because of the return of comics creators who had been drafted into the army, many of these stories were now being created by men who had actually fought in the war, thus imbuing their tales with a bit more realism and fewer "over-the-top antics."[5] The veteran creators were far less likely to blindly heroicize their war story protagonists, and reckoned with the physical and psychological scarring that was a result of all they had seen and done in Europe and the Pacific.

These realistic war tales flourished during the Korean War era. The war comics of the time, unlike the heroic-centered war stories of the 1940s, showcased ordinary American servicemen, who could and would die in the line of duty. Compared to their World War II-inspired forbearers, these newer, Korean War-inspired comics were grimmer and darker, fueled by frustration and the fear for one's own mortality, all for the sake of vague principles that the soldiers on the ground didn't quite understand. Clearly, these war stories differed from the straightforward adventures of Scoop Mason, War Correspondent. It was, in fact, during this "renaissance" of the war comic that EC Comics was also at its zenith,[6] which included three ongoing war titles – *Aces High, Frontline Combat*, and *Two-Fisted Tales* – that are amongst the best produced in the 1950s.

With the advent of the Comics Code Authority, these realistic EC war comics died along with the rest of the EC line. Due to the increasing distance from both World War II and the Korean War, war stories in general were falling out of popularity, particularly as DC's (and later Marvel's) reinvigoration of the superhero genre began to dominate the market and the industry by returning to comics' foundation and appealing to children. The war comics that arose in the late 1950s and early 1960s were also aimed to this audience, bringing back the much less gritty "boys' adventure" war stories that had

dominated during World War II, featuring recurring characters. These characters were, in practice, not altogether different from their superhero brethren – they seemed impervious to permanent injury or death, their experiences were highly episodic rather than on-going, they never aged nor were rotated out of the battlefield,[7] and in general their wartime battles were more high adventure than they were horrifying or traumatic. They were also, in large part, set during World War II, seen as a "Good War" of clear-cut morality as opposed to the murkier battlefronts of the Cold War.

Two of these WWII warriors, Sgt. Rock and Sgt. Fury, would become integral parts of DC and Marvel's superhero universes, respectively. This chapter will explore how this process has worked over time and will showcase how superhero comic book continuity has been used to remember and/or forget the historical warfare out of which these characters arose.

A Rock And A Hard Place

When DC Comics' *Our Army At War* debuted in 1952, America was fighting the Korean War while EC was in the midst of producing its heralded line of realistic war comics. Compared to the grit of *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*, *Our Army At War* was relatively banal. In the first issue alone, all four of the stories were set in World War II and were action-focused. Three of those four focused almost humorously on soldiers' acrobatic and technical innovations, or just plain blind luck, which resulted in no American casualties. Eventually the series would feature some stories that had a darker or more psychological focus, and in which the protagonists did not survive. By and large, though, *Our Army At War* focused on action-adventure rather than on asking questions about the causes and effects of warfare. As this formula proved commercially successful, it endured.

Eight years later, in April 1959, *Our Army At War* #81 was still set in this mold, with the stories taking place during World War II and featuring soldiers' heroic, victorious exploits. However, one of the issue's stories, although similar in structure and tone to the majority of those that had come before in the book, had the longest-lasting impact of any story yet published in *Our Army At War*. "The Rock of Easy Company" introduced a hard-as-nails soldier nick-named "the Rock." Written by Bob Haney with pencils by Ross Andru (a DC war book stalwart), this tale was seemingly intended from the start to introduce a recurring character. The opening caption states, "Here is the first of many stories of the fabulous fighting E Company and of their rugged sergeant."[8]

This, then, was the introduction of the character that was to become DC Comics' preeminent war hero – Sgt. Rock. Two issues later, Rock's story had been taken over by war comic mainstay Robert Kanigher, who would go on to write, according to DC historian Robert Greenberger, "every Rock story from 1959 through 1988, one of the longest runs on a single feature by any comic-book writer or artist."[9] By the time of its cancellation in the late 1980s, *Our Army At War* had officially changed its title to *Sgt. Rock* and was the single remaining title from DC's once-expansive line of war comics. Indeed, the character was even popular with America's fighting forces, themselves. As Vietnam veteran Rocky Olson notes in his memoirs: "Sooner or later most grunts picked up a nickname. My squad leader had started calling me 'Sergeant Rock" ... He was a popular cartoon character among the budding warriors of the 1960s. My actual military rank was private first class, which is toward the bottom of the military hierarchy."[10]

Sgt. Rock's lasting popularity can be attributed in part to his stories' similarities to the superhero genre. Though Kanigher never introduced any super-villains for Easy Company to face, Rock's role as a headlining, recurring character meant that he was essentially impervious to harm. Readers could return to his ongoing adventures each

month secure in the fact that both he and his supporting cast of major Easy Company members would find some way to attain victory even against overwhelming odds. As Conroy notes, he truly, "personified his name; he was a granite-faced Titan, and indomitable and seemingly invincible infantryman who, through sheer force of will, always won the day."[11]

Over time, Kanigher added a full back-story for Rock, including a father who had been killed in France during World War One and several siblings who died. He enlisted on December 8, 1941, the day after the Pearl Harbor attack, and was promoted to sergeant after the 1944 D-Day invasion. Though his many successes, and seeming invulnerability, would logically have led him to multiple promotions, he consistently turned them down, stating that his place was with his men, earning him the nickname "the General of Sergeants."[12]

Even at the outset of the Vietnam War, Rock remained a morally virtuous hero, despite the American public's growing disdain for warfare. Sgt. Rock stories in the mid-60s never questioned American values or the American serviceman in the way that the contemporary 1960s counterculture did. This was part of a broader trend amongst the major early-60s publishers (DC, Dell, and Charlton), who, in war comics and others, re-affirmed the dominant American cultural narrative of Cold War consensus.[13] By the mid-1960s, however, this consensus had fractured, with massive nation-wide protests against both foreign and domestic policies. While much of American culture, including the relatively progressive Marvel superhero comics, was addressing these changes, DC's war comics were behind the times, still crafting adventure stories for children that served to valorize the US Army as a moral, interventionist fighting force around the globe. To bring up Vietnam would mean to tear apart that monolithic point of view, and so DC's war stories remained set in WWII, by and large ignoring Vietnam. Kanigher would note

in a 1967 letters column that he didn't see much story potential in the Vietnam War: "I think there is such a small audience to Vietnam fighting, because even if it is current, and the most important at this writing, the war essentially, on the ground, is small and large scale guerrilla action, and the action does not lend itself to continuous illustrating."[14]

By the end of the 1960s, however, DC's avoidance of Vietnam subsided, and even Sgt. Rock's stories, though still set in World War II, attempted to portray warfare in a more brutal, realistic, and questionable light. The artist most associated with Sgt. Rock, Joe Kubert, describes these stories as,

> ones where we felt that we were trying to show realistically as possible within the context of a comic book that war is not a great thing, that you don't run around with a cigar in your face and run over and kill people. What we tried to do was to show that people are in the Army and people do what they have to do as required of them . . . where you are in a position in wartime where you can get killed in order to defend yourself very often, and the fact is that you feel [you] are doing the right thing but not for the glory of it and not for the killing of it.[15]

Kubert was a long-time comics professional who, like many of the young Jewish men who had created the comic book industry, felt that World War II was a necessary and justifiable war. By 1968, he came to realize that this was not at all how he felt about the Vietnam War, and he related these feelings to readers when he took the reins as editor of *Our Army at War* and introduced an anti-war theme, ending each story with the catchphrase, "Make war no more." In issue #196, he expressed himself even more clearly on the issue by writing, illustrating, and editing the lead Sgt. Rock story, "Stop the War—I Want to Get Off," which, for the first time, showed Rock giving into despair about the loss of his men.

Increasingly, this despondency about war itself became a part of Sgt. Rock's ongoing narrative. Fan historian Jim Kingman explains that, "By the early 1970s, Rock and Easy Company . . . were no longer a company of combat-happy Joes; they were

growing war-weary, emotionally spent, at times scared, in some instances unstable."[16] This was aided by the growing relaxation of Comics Code restrictions, such that, "The horrors and atrocities of war, though not graphically depicted, were allowed heavier implications. And the grim realities of the Vietnam War were no longer kept at a distance."[17] One such story, "Head-Count," in June 1971's *Our Army at War* #233, revolves around a new recruit to Easy named Johnny Doe. Rock narrowly prevents Doe from massacring innocent German civilians, but the young recruit nonetheless receives a medal for outstanding heroism. The town in which this occurs is a fictional village called Alimy, which, Kingman notes, is an anagram of "My Lai," the site of an infamous US massacre of Vietnamese civilians.[18]

It was in this way that Kubert and Kanigher turned Sgt. Rock from a boy's adventure hero into a commentary on Vietnam. The cultural reaction to the war was so strong that it influenced the way in which people remembered and utilized World War II, turning it from a "good war" full of an endless supply of stories with clear-cut moral victories into a situation fraught with death, tension, and contestation about the line between right and wrong. The stories came to use the World War II setting to comment on the psychological and physical toll of Vietnam upon the soldier fighting it, complete with atrocities.[19] *Our Army at War*, and its successor *Sgt. Rock*, became what David Huxley describes as, "war comics, set in another war, which appear not to be about Vietnam, but which are nevertheless a comment on the Vietnam conflict."[20]

These stories, in fact, were engaging in a broader aspect of American culture at that time, comparing World War II to Vietnam in order to find similarities between the two. As John Bodnar explains, "Many of the stories told by Vietnam soldiers took the mythical version of World War II as a foil to construct their personal stories that they thought were in some ways unique. They assumed that the patriotic version of World

War II was the only version that Americans held. . . .Yet it is clear that soldiers in both wars saw their experience in critical terms and raised questions about heroic and patriotic views."[21] The experiences of returning soldiers from Vietnam caused many Americans to reconsider the "patriotic version" of World War II. Suddenly the "morality" of a war seemed to pale in comparison to the horrors it inflicted upon the soldiers fighting it. At the same time, by equating their experiences with that of their World War II forebears, these soldiers linked the two wars in a way that focused on the troops and shied away from questioning the politics or ideologies of both. The Kubert and Kanigher Sgt. Rock war comics accomplished the same thing, by focusing on the commonalities of war's dark side without looking into its causes or culpabilities. The pair increasingly focused on these mature themes through the years, including stories that would comment on "the soldier as a mental, emotional casualty, in effect mirroring the helplessness and suffering Vietnam vets . . . struggled with."[22] Some DC creators, on the other hand, seemed to still favor the original version of Rock, the one who was impervious to both physical and mental harm, and who in many ways seemed less like a soldier and more like a superhero.

SUPERMAN'S ROCK

Simply by surviving so many battles, Sgt. Rock became a steely-faced, square-jawed, larger-than-life hero. For some DC writers, he would prove to be an irresistible addition to the universe's ongoing continuity. Although Kanigher himself kept Rock's heroics plausible (if unrealistically free of death amongst the main characters), the sergeant eventually found himself face to face with many of DC's familiar superheroes. By and large, rather than providing any kind of meaningful critique about the connections between superhero and soldier, or the differences between high adventure and ground

warfare, or even comparisons between contemporary America and the 1940s, these comics were simply adventure-story team-ups featuring Rock as a superhero who wore a different kind of uniform.

In one such story, July 1971's *The Brave and the Bold* #71, Batman meets Rock in a United States embassy in South America, where the former soldier is, "Military Attaché and Chief of Embassy Security," giving a hint at his civilian life after the war.[23] As a result of stories like this, however, Kanigher grew tired of his war hero appearing alongside super-powered heroes. He was also skeptical of speculation as to what happened to Rock postwar. Accordingly, in 1978's *Sgt. Rock* #316, he made it clear that the Sgt. had not survived World War II: "'It is inevitable and wholly in character that neither Rock nor Easy survived the closing days of the war."[24] He explained further that Rock had no life after World War II, and in fact died on its last day, thus negating-via-retcon any of the post-war stories featuring the character teaming up with superheroes.

Kanigher, at least, clearly wanted Sgt. Rock to remain a soldier, a hero of World War II who may have been luckier and pluckier than most, but who nevertheless lived in a world without the presence of superheroes. However, as DC's most iconic and recognizable war hero, the temptation to subsume Rock's story and world into the publisher's larger continuity proved too much to resist for some creators. Once Kanigher retired and lost the power that he wielded within the company, his desire to keep Rock free and clear of the rest of the DC Universe was completely lost.

After his series' cancellation with issue #422 in 1988, Sgt. Rock appeared sporadically, in reprints, specials, anthologies, and the occasional time-traveling crossover. Although Easy Company did appear in DC's epic 1985 crossover series *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, which deliberately set out to unite *all* of DC's continuity,[25] including the company's war books, the series' writer, Marv Wolman realized it was best to

somewhat follow Kanigher's advice, and not focus overly much on the war story characters:

> [I]s it right for Sgt. Rock to be facing intergalactic menaces? . . . I would not request that the war books reflect the Crisis . . . As it is, we featured Rock . . . We're trying to alert readers who may only buy CRISIS that we have war books, and they may be interested in these characters. But it would really be wrong to alienate the fans of the war books. . . . there is certainly a problem with Earth-shattering plots in SGT. ROCK.[26]

As Adam C. Murdough points out, however, the brief appearance by Rock and Easy Company in *Crisis* was a use of the iconicity of the character, and of World War II, to make claims to the importance and the stakes of *Crisis*. The death of a peace-loving Easy Company soldier named "Flower" is what affords this comparison:

> Although death in war—and even in comics *about* war, of which DC Comics has published many—is hardly unusual, such an eerie, "unnatural" death against the backdrop of the much-idealized "last good war" creates a strong impression that there is another "war" afoot on a higher plane (i.e., the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*), a war exhibiting outlandish differences from any before seen, in which the stakes are frighteningly high.[27]

As Murdaugh hints at, the Easy Company that appeared in *Crisis* was straight out of the 1940s, thanks to a plot that involved time travel, and not an aged version of the soldiers from the 1980s. This linked them and their superheroic compatriots explicitly with the "good war" of World War II in the midst of the fictional, cross-universal war of *Crisis*.

It was not until 2001, in fact, that Sgt. Rock made a full, contemporary reappearance in the "modern" DC Universe. In *Superman* #166, the titular hero's nemesis Lex Luthor has just been elected President of the United States, and he appoints "General Frank Rock" as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For half a year, General Rock's character and position serves as background dressing for the story of President Luthor, who abuses the presidency to lord over Superman. This story, helmed by writer Jeph Loeb, is a not-so-subtle critique at the way in which the Military Industrial

Complex has become corrupted over the years, to the point where it as been infiltrated at its highest level by one of the world's worst villains. Just what Rock's role is in this critique, though, doesn't become clear until *Superman* #173. In this issue, the entirety of the planet Earth finds itself fighting for survival against a cosmic force of extermination called Imperiex, in a crossover storyline entitled, "Our Worlds At War." Earth's greatest scientists devise a plan to defeat the almost god-like being, involving Superman, his inexperienced protégé Strange Visitor, and a plane carrying thirty hydrogen bombs, which Rock volunteers to pilot. On the flight into space to confront Imperiex, Loeb creates a two-page scene between a frightened and neglected Strange Visitor and a confident, cigar-smoking, bushy-eyebrowed Rock.

It is this conversation that proves to be the key for Loeb's choice to bring back Sgt. Rock in the present day. Rock tells the anxious superheroine that, "In wartime, no one is better than anyone else. Every life counts."[28] When she replies, "That's pretty easy to say coming from the man who 'single-handedly won World War II,'" Rock explains that, "I was more than happy to live out what was left of my life with most folks thinking I was dead. That's right. Sergeant Frank Rock died from the last bullet fired at the end of World War II."[29] This line, inspired by Kanigher's assertion that Sgt. Rock did not survive the war, adds a mythological element to Rock's journey, even if it is recognized in-story as no more than a myth. He then notes that, "My country called and I answered. Even if it was Luthor," thus separating his heroism and his die-hard patriotic connection to the United States from the villainous, corrupted machinations of Luthor.[30] This heroism is further accentuated by his closing speech to Strange Visitor, where he notes that the personal glory he attained as a hero of World War II is overshadowed by the horrors of war that he experienced to gain that glory:

> I wouldn't give ten cents for any rank or medal they wanted to pin on me—if I could get back one life of those kids in the Easy Company—or in anybody's Easy Company who died in service for their country. You want to know what a "Red Badge of Courage" really is? It's a stain that every soldier gets on himself from every battle that won't come off. Believe you me…I'd trade anything to be forgotten in exchange for my forgetting what they want to remember me for.[31]

Rock's speech, lit cigar, and overall body language and mannerisms suggest a cocky masculinity very different from that of the soft-spoken farm boy at the heart of Superman. The storyline surrounding this scene features the superhero full of doubt, overcome by the horrors of intergalactic warfare. Rock, however, remains true to his name, stolid and stony. He represents the confidence of World War II America, a confidence lacking in an America that hasn't been battle-hardened by such a conflict in recent years.[32] However, he also adopts a realistic attitude about the sacrifices that must be made along the way to this confidence.

In this way, Loeb can use Rock to stand in for the rigid morality perceived to be a part of World War II, but also is able to espouse a generalized anti-war sentiment that wishes such fighting weren't necessary. In a similar vein, the Loeb-penned issues throughout the "Our Worlds At War" crossover feature running captions that quote famous political speeches, including the Gettysburg Address, Franklin Roosevelt's address to Congress following the attack on Pearl Harbor, and John F. Kennedy's inaugural address. Loeb is thus trying to set a fanciful science fiction story about interglobal warfare against a patriotic backdrop of America's history, to provide commentary about wartime sacrifice.

Rock apparently sacrifices himself to stop Imperiex, and in an epilogue issue Loeb symbolically returns him to the war story genre, as a soldier buried in Arlington Cemetery without any fanfare. In a scene at Rock's unremarkable grave, President Lex Luthor tells his "Secretary of Metahuman Affairs," Amanda Waller, "The man could

have a ticker tape parade down Pennsylvania Avenue for what he's done for this country."[33] She replies,

> Mr. President, if he wanted a ticker tape parade—if he wanted hot and cold running showgirls, I would have gotten him that. But he most certainly did not. To you and me, sir, he may have seemed like one of a kind. But to him, sir—to him, he was just another dog face who wanted to be buried with all the other men who gave their lives for the U.S. of A.[34]

She then lights a match on his small gravestone, lights a cigar, and says, "S'long, ya ol' warhorse…"[35] As in the scene with Strange Visitor, the cigar stands in for 1940s masculinity, a final salute to go along with his burial as "just another dog face."

By now, however, Sgt. Rock had become a part of DC's modern continuity, and as such he lived and died by the rules of the superhero genre, rather than the war comic genre. Whereas a soldier killed on the battlefield is dead for good, a superheroic warrior who died saving the world from an alien menace can easily be resurrected. Thus, merely one month later, in November, 2001's *Suicide Squad* #1, Rock returns to life, as the head of DC's government-sponsored team of supervillains. Rock remained a main character throughout the series, which lasted for twelve issues, accompanied by a fellow impossibly well-preserved Easy Company veteran named Bulldozer, who serves as his second-in-command. The series, helmed by writer Keith Giffen, features several flashback issues that continue to weave Rock into the tapestry of DC's decades-long continuity, but the final issue throws doubt over all those stories, as well as on Loeb's run. An imprisoned Rock escapes from government custody, leaving behind a mask that he had apparently been wearing as his face, and the final line of the series is Amanda Waller coldly stating that, "Frank Rock and Bulldozer died in 1945."[36]

With this twist ending, which doesn't entirely make sense in the context of the series or the Loeb stories preceding it, Giffen re-validates Kanigher's assertion that Rock

died at the end of World War II. A decade later, long-time DC writer Len Wein reinforced this story in a mini-series titled *DC Universe: Legacies*. The series was designed specifically to provide a chronicle of the history of the DC Universe. In a back-up story, with art by Joe Kubert himself, Wein relates a story that occurred on, "the last day of the war. Germany had surrendered, but the word hadn't reached all the troops yet."[37] In the midst of a firefight with German forces, Rock spies a little girl directly in the line of fire. As a member of Easy Company relates, "Rock crossed the town square like a wide receiver and scooped up the kid like she was a fumbled football, clutching her to his chest—and then, just like that, the shooting stopped. The Germans had finally gotten word of the armistice. . . . Easy learned later…the bullet that took out Sgt. Rock was the last shot fired in the war."[38] Thus, just as Kanigher had desired, in Wein's story Rock dies on the last day of World War II and never sees a postwar life. He dies a war hero, but not a superhero.

POST-CONTINUITY SGT. ROCK

Keith Giffen and Len Wein were able to do, via "official" continuity, what Loeb had done metaphorically with the scene at Rock's grave – take him out of the "DC Universe" and return him to the realm of "war comic hero." As a result, other creators have since taken on the character, using him in out-of-continuity, pure war comics that utilize the World War II setting to talk about both historical interpretation and the process of historical revisionism.

The first of these stories was an original graphic novel released in 2003. *Sgt. Rock: Between Hell & A Hard Place* was illustrated by Joe Kubert, and written by Brian Azzarello, a critically acclaimed comic book writer best known for dark, ultra-violent crime noir stories. True to form, his take on Sgt. Rock is bleak, realistic, and mature (the

book was released under DC's "mature readers" imprint, VERTIGO). As Kubert himself explains in his introduction, "Brian has given a new life to all the Easy guys. A credibility that both Bob [Kanigher] and I always felt they should have."[39]

The story focuses on the murder of several SS officers who have been captured by Easy Company, and Sgt. Rock's drive to discover the killer, in addition to tracking down the one prisoner who escaped the massacre. While on this mission, the men of Easy Company discuss weighty issues of war – what the difference is between killing in battle and cold-blooded murder ("Rock? It's no big deal…they were Germans. What happened to 'em—boiled down? It's what we're here to do."[40]; "Do I have to spell it out for you? Killing ain't murder if you're fightin' a war. It just can't be…can it?"[41]); questioning seemingly ridiculous, and dangerous, orders from above ("This is chicken crap! I mean, is it lost on everyone else we just upped an' blasted a bunch a Krauts while we were huntin' for one to bring back alive!"[42]); and even the likelihood of survival ("I don't think Ice believes he's meant to survive this war." "That's crazy." "No, *you're* crazy…believing you *are* going to survive."[43]). In the end, despite the distrust within Easy, it turns out that the Germans were killed by the one escapee, who was taking revenge on them for raping a French woman he had fallen in love with. Even within the ranks of the Nazis, *Between Hell & A Hard Place* argues, we can find identifiable passions and pathos.

Azzarello and Kubert use this historical milieu to talk about war and its effects on soldiers. As such, World War II, as viewed from the turn of the twenty-first century, is the perfect setting to philosophize about war in general. In *Between Hell & A Hard Place,* there is never any political doubt about the war in which the soldiers are engaged, a clear moral imperative to fight that cannot be found in the Vietnam War or the American military conflicts in the Middle East. This, however, allows for the creators to

ask questions about those fighting even a "righteous" war. Azzarello and Kubert explore how there are good men and bad on either side of the battle, and showing the ways they are horrifically affected by the carnage they are privy to.

The cultural memory of World War II that is represented here is different from the patriotic, jingoistic, gung-ho sort seen in John Wayne movies or early war comics, where virtuous heroes fight for both physical and moral victory. Rather, it looks back on the war as just that, a war, and one which was as filled with as many on-the-ground moral compromises as any war before or since. This is consistent with the outlook of a spate of American war movies produced during the Vietnam era and beyond.[44] These films collectively led to a different way of remembering World War II for the average American. Cutting back on the patriotism and jingoism, they acknowledged the massive loss of life in the war, including innocent civilians, uncertain enemy soldiers, and morally bereft American soldiers. Vietnam changed how America viewed war; in its aftermath even portrayals of "the good war" were transformed.

Between Hell & A Hard Place ultimately comes out as anti-war, noting that even in World War II, the costs of battle on soldiers from both sides is too much to bear. The SS officer asks Sgt. Rock, "So, Sergeant…you have come across the world to kill me…because of what I believe in?" Rock replies to this, in a rare moment of doubt, "Ain't so much about what *you* believe in, as it is what *I* believe in. And...I don't *want* to kill you."[45] With the unusual softening here of the hardened Rock, Azzarello and Kubert indicate that though wars are fought over ideologies, the lives that are lost should not be subsumed by these much larger currents of history. The SS officer furthers this argument when he asks, "In the midst of this horror...have you not something set in your mind to return home to?" When Rock says "Victory," the officer exclaims, "Victory! Victory is shared…even with generals and civilians. I'm speaking personally."[46] Rock's only

answer is to pull out a "souvenir" he had earlier obtained from the officer: "My reward for surviving the war. A luger. Off an officer."[47] When Rock later uses the luger to kill the officer, he drops it to the ground, indicating that there *is* no reward for him for surviving the war. For the men on the ground, war, even righteous wars, are a zero-sum game – at best they can survive, in the name of a greater ideology that they may not even believe in.

In 2006's six-issue mini-series *Sgt. Rock: The Prophecy*, however, written and illustrated solely by Joe Kubert, ideology takes center stage. The series tells the story of Easy Company's 1943 mission to pick up a valuable package in Lithuania from partisan fighters and deliver it to a city in Estonia for extraction by a U.S. helicopter. This package, it turns out, is a young Jewish rabbi named David. At first, David is presented as an actual religious prophet. The partisan leader explains that, "His people believe he is the messiah…sent to save his people…and the world. He is God's angel…*he* is the prophecy. In America he can speak to the world. Give hope to those under Hitler's heel. His people imprisoned in concentration camps all over Europe will hear…Now passive, they will fight back."[48]

As the story progresses, however, and Rock, Easy Company, and David travel from one war-torn hellhole to another, it turns out that David is less of a prophet and more of a political figure. He is being taken out of Europe not to preach, but rather to inform the world about the Nazi "final solution" – the many ghettos and concentration camps that have been established throughout Europe. As he later proclaims, standing outside of a concentration camp, "The stories we heard of the death camps…are true! Hitler…the Nazis…mean to kill us all. Now…I have seen it with my own eyes. I will tell the world…and the people everywhere will rise…to stop this slaughter. That is the prophecy. That is the word."[49] However, the political nature of accomplishing such a

task – of convincing an unbelieving world that the unthinkable has happened – is pointed out shortly thereafter by a member of Easy Company, who asks, "How's he gonna convince anyone onna outside, Rock? Nobody'll believe what we just saw."[50]

Although at first the members of Easy Company find David to be arrogant and spoiled, once they encounter horrors like a synagogue that has been locked shut and then burnt down, a Jewish mother and children forced to hide in the barn of their own property so their neighbors don't turn them in to the Nazis, and even an abandoned concentration camp, they come to respect both him and his twice-daily prayers. Kubert, himself Jewish, validates David's devout, orthodox Judaism as a necessity connected to his political action. In one particular scene, near the end of the story, David receives a vision of trains carrying thousands of Jews across Europe, the cattle cars the Nazis used to transport millions of people to and from the ghettos and concentration camps: "I see…I see…long lines of my people—men, women, old young…led to the slaughter. They try to escape their tormentors…but no one will help. They are turned away…even at the door of freedom. Millions…millions will die. Innocent children in the arms of helpless parents…they will all die. I-I have seen it…my burden. I must tell the world…tell of my prophecy."[51] In one of the last lines of the story, Rock further aligns the Jews of Europe with the American soldiers, when, as David escapes on the helicopter, the sergeant tells him that they will stay behind, because, "There's a little thing like a war comin' up this way from Italy. Me an' easy're gonna be here to greet our buddies...an' give 'em a hand. You do what you can to stop the killin', David…for your people…an' mine."[52]

Whereas Azzarello's take on Sgt. Rock had centered around the pointlessness of war, Kubert, writing his own story, rebuffs this argument. By providing graphic portrayals of concentration camps and of Jews and other minorities left hanging from trees in the Lithuanian forests, he uses the familiar character of Rock to argue that World

War II actually *was* a necessary war that required the involvement of American forces. That Kubert reflects a somewhat more traditional view of the war, the kind of view that Joe Simon and Jack Kirby presented in their early Captain America propagandist stories, is no surprise, given that he was, like them, a young Jewish man in the 1930s and 40s, one who saw the Nazis as outright villains that needed to be stopped.

This does not, of course, prevent him from also reflecting upon the losses suffered as a result of that righteous goal – three members of Easy Company die along the way of delivering David to Estonia. As Kubert explains of his own army service: "Bob Kanigher and I used to discuss this at great length. He'd been in the army, as I had been. Neither one of us was in combat or anything like that, but we knew a lot of people who were. It ain't fun. It ain't fun at all. What we wanted to do was to portray that the people involved in these situations weren't there because they enjoyed it, but because they were called upon to serve."[53] In *Sgt. Rock: The Prophecy*, Kubert uses his famous war character to make this point, one that he can only make through a story that remembers World War II as a "good war" fought for the right reasons – the point that war isn't fun or glorious, but it is sometimes necessary.

The most recent major Sgt. Rock story, writer/artist Billy Tucci's *Sgt. Rock: The Lost Battalion*, is another example of a serious story featuring the soldiers of Easy Company. What differentiates Tucci from Azzarello and Kubert, however, is that rather than using Sgt. Rock to tell a story that comments upon the nature of war, or upon the reasons and necessities for World War II in particular, Tucci's goal is much more specific – he wishes to educate his audience about a particular story, that of the 141st Infantry "Lost Battalion," and, more importantly, their valiant rescue by the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which consisted of Japanese-American second-generation Nisei soldiers. He simply inserts Sgt. Rock and the rest of Easy Company into the 141st as a way to tell

this story using DC's iconic war hero, thus obtaining a certain guaranteed audience that a totally "non-fiction" approach would not have.

In this way, Tucci's story is uniquely concerned with cultural memory. *The Lost Battalion* is a memorial text, one to commemorate the men who lost their lives in the 141st and the 442nd, as well as to educate about the role that Japanese Americans played in the frontlines of World War II despite being kept in internment on the home front. The last few pages of the series are a series of a text-heavy captions over sketches of several of the involved soldiers, noting the ways in which they were remembered and forgotten by both the military and the public. One such caption notes how the Nisei soldiers were mistreated by the press, explaining, "that the battle of the 'Lost Battalion' was immediately heralded in the free press by identifying all involved units and individuals by name—all but the men of the 100th/442nd," the battalions made up of the Nisei soldiers. "After all," the caption notes, "in a time of war, how can one tell the truth about the sacrifice of valorous Americans in Europe while their families are erroneously kept behind barbed wire at home?"[54]

The goal of *The Lost Battalion* is to bring attention to the heroic soldiers in this famous story whose contributions had previously been overlooked, if not outright suppressed, by official government and military commemoration of WWII. In an afterward to the collected edition of the series, one of the Nisei members of the 442nd, Sgt. Junwo "Jimmy" Yamashita, explains that, "little is known about the soldiers who participated in the rescue . . . This comic series is historically accurate, and I admire Billy for his tenacity in illustrating a part of history often overlooked in history books."[55] Another soldier who saw action in the battles that Tucci chronicles, Lt. Erwin Blonder, a member of the "Lost Battalion," explains in his introduction how the character of Sgt. Rock was a useful vehicle through which to reveal this little-known piece of history:

"Sgt. Rock is the personification of all those involved in this action. You could point to many soldiers in both the 141st and the 442nd and say, 'There goes Sgt. Rock.' . . . Sgt. Rock is very real. I want to thank Billy Tucci for telling this story and helping to give the 442nd the credit they deserve."[56] Tucci, who traveled to Europe and conducted many interviews in the process of creating the series, thus has a vested interest in telling the unexpurgated version of this story, complete with Nisei soldiers. The members of the Lost Battalion, as well as the overlooked rescuers, shared in this storytelling desire.

Given this goal, it is perhaps unsurprising that *The Lost Battalion* is not as concerned with the development of the specific characters of Sgt. Rock and the members of Easy Company as previous stories have been. Rather, Sgt. Rock is representative of the bravery and iron will inherent within all of the American soldiers involved in this battle. This is not *his* story, but rather a story of real soldiers that has not found its way into "official" history, a story that Tucci tells with the help of Rock's iconicity,

Staring out as a reoccurring war character in clear-cut action-adventures in the 1950s, Sgt. Rock slowly became more heroic by simply surviving so many battles, and was thus embraced as part of the superhero universe. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, in the wake of September 11th, 2001, and the horrors of warfare being brought to the American home front for the first time in modern history, Sgt. Rock was returned to his roots as a "war comic" character, separated from the modern superhero universe by his definitive death at the end of World War II. Once back in this role, creators like Kubert, Azzarello, and Tucci were able to use him in order to tell stories that looked upon the war as a background with which to explore the nature of warfare in general and its traumatic after-effects. The "war comic" to the place it occupied prior to the implementation of the Comics Code, as a serious genre, more

interested in asking probing questions about the historical role of individuals in warfare than in providing entertaining action-adventure set pieces.

While the iconic character of Sgt. Rock may be separated from the larger DC Universe, the inclusion of war comics into the line of superheroes continues. With a much-heralded relaunch of their continuity called "The New 52" in 2011[57], DC Comics released a present-day war book called *Men of War*, which featured a mix of realistic stories and ones dealing with soldiers' jobs in a world of superheroes. Amongst the latter was a multi-issue story starring hardened soldier Corporal Joseph Rock. In the first issue introducing the new character, we learn from a general about his family background: "I knew your granddad, corporal. Frank Rock was one of the best who ever wore this country's flag. Think of the shoes you have to fill."[58] Sgt. Rock has thus returned to the DC Universe through his grandson, a soldier as tough and sometimes superheroic as his grandfather once was.

Though a character may have historical resonances, superhero continuity is a voracious beast that will frequently consume that character. While Kubert, Azzarello, and Tucci utilized Sgt. Frank Rock to talk about the nature and role of war in American history, *Men of War* uses Corporal Joe Rock to talk about the nature and role of war in the DC Universe. Real-world cultural memory and the "cultural memory" of a comic book universe's continuity pull at these war characters in a perpetual give-and-take, occasionally allowing for serious, realistic stories, but also leaning towards over-the-top superhero-dom. This process unfolds even more forcefully through the history of Marvel's premier war hero, Sgt. Nick Fury.

THE SOUND AND THE FURY

Unlike Sgt. Rock, who began his publishing history as an independent recurring war character who was eventually taken into DC's larger continuity, Sgt. Fury and his team of "Howling Commandoes" were always meant to play a role in Marvel's continuity. Created by the prolific team of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, who had also chronicled Captain America's 1960s adventures (amongst many others), *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* debuted in May, 1963, a book that Conroy describes as, "keeping one foot grounded in reality, while still treating combat with an over-the-top-exuberance."[59] On the cover of the first issue, Lee worked to set the book apart from other war comics, and to associate it with Marvel's burgeoning line of superhero comics. The cover blurb notes, "Think you've read war stories before? Mister, wait till you see what's in store for you here! It's only the greatest!"[60] Another proclaims the book to be, "Another big one from the talented team that brings you the famous 'Fantastic Four!'"[61]

From very outset, *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* was meant to appeal to readers of superhero comics, not readers of war books like *Our Army At War*. The rag-tag group of soldiers, consisting of an Italian American, an Irish American, an African American, a southerner, a New York Jew, and a young Ivy League graduate who would be replaced, after his death, by an English fop, were of the same multivalent constitution as Lee's other team books, such as the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, and the X-Men. What's more, the Commandos represented a bit of 1960s radical idealism reflected back onto World War II. As Conroy notes, the inclusion of African-America Pvt. Gabriel Jones was an anachronism (black soldiers were separated into their own units during World War II), but one added deliberately to provide diversity to the unit, a reflection of the contemporary civil rights movement rather than an act of historical fidelity.[62] In addition, Lee would note years later that Pvt. Percival Pinkerton, a flamboyant

Englishman, was gay. As Lee explains, "One member of the platoon was called . . . Percy Pinkerton. He was gay. We didn't make a big issue of it. . . . He's just a colorful character who follows his own different drummer. He follows a different beat."[63] Conveniently, Pinkerton's sexuality is never directly raised at all in the original run of the comics, particularly since being openly gay in the military, in the 1960s as in the 1940s, meant being subject to a dishonorable discharge.

Though their adventures may have been so over the top that they verged on the superheroic, the Commandos were at least a *diverse* group of heroes. Lee and Kirby chose to focus on representing what they saw as the multiculturalism of their own time (and their own space, New York in the 1960s) and on creating a reflection of it in a World War II setting, rather than pursue historical accuracy. This would be the case not just in the series' portrayal of diversity, but also in its relationship to the present-day Marvel Universe continuity which Lee was working so hard to develop at that time.

In *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* #8, not only was Percival Pinkteron introduced, but so was "Dr. Zemo," a villain who also appeared the next month in a present-day book, *Avengers* #6. Given this early move to connect the 1940s adventures of the Commandos to the contemporary Marvel Universe, it perhaps comes as no surprise that later that year, in December, 1964's *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* #13, Captain American and Bucky guest-starred, in reaction to, as the cover blurb described, "the greatest reader demand in Marvel's history!"[64] Whether or not this team-up between Captain America and the Howling Commandos was reader-demanded, it *was* clearly a part of Stan Lee's project to create a cohesive continuity for the Marvel Universe. As fan historian Pierre Comtois notes, "Although a connection between the World War II era and Marvel's present continuity had already been hinted at in smaller ways . . . Captain America's appearance in this issue left readers in absolutely no doubt that the inter-

related history of the Marvel universe stretched father back than *Fantastic Four* #1," the first major Lee/Kirby superhero collaboration.[65]

This was a crucial part of what Comtois has called "The Years of Consolidation" (roughly 1964-65) at Marvel, wherein Stan Lee and the cadre of artists he worked with took what elements had led to the successes of their early Marvel comics, such as *Fantastic Four* and *Amazing Spider-Man*, and consciously utilized them towards expanding their publishing line. This era of Marvel Comics was characterized in large part by a deliberate unification of the "Marvel Universe" as a cohesive construct, with internal logic and consistency.[66] Lee and Kirby used *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* #13 as a deliberate step in this process, allowing them to connect the continuity they were establishing for their modern-day Marvel Universe with the continuity of 1940s characters, both those that had actually existed back then, such as Captain America and Bucky, and those which were retconned into being a part of the events of the era, such as Sgt. Fury. By forging this connection, Lee was attempting to focus on Marvel Comics' "now"-ness in a way that he contrasted to DC's legacy stretching back to the 30s and 40s, while he was also pointing to this "now"-ness' linkage to Marvel's history.

Nick Fury was created with a very different goal than Kanigher had in mind with Sgt. Rock. While the latter was meant to represent an idealized soldier, stolid amidst the demands of the battlefield, he was still intended to be relatively realistic, existing in a world without superheroes. Lee and Kirby, on the other hand, used Fury to tie together elements of Marvel's continuity. Fury and his commandos were always meant to stand side-by-side with superheroes like Captain America, and they were every bit as square-jawed, heroic, and undefeatable as the patriotic hero. Whereas Rock has been created in order to tell adventuresome war stories through the eyes of an ongoing protagonist, Fury

was created to star in superheroic adventures against super-powered Nazi villains, all set amidst a World War II backdrop. While neither character at first commented upon the war or the memory of it, Rock at least had the opportunity to do so. Fury, on the other hand, would evolve for decades before creators would use him to speak about his wartime service in World War II and the Cold War.

POST-WAR FURY

Though *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* continued telling World War II adventures for almost two decades, very early on Fury was shown to have survived to the 1960s, albeit with an eye patch over his left eye. He first made a guest appearance in December, 1963's *Fantastic Four* #21 as a CIA agent, but it was in August, 1965's *Strange Tales* #135, yet another Lee/Kirby collaboration, that he received his own solo strip. Cashing in on the spy craze jump-started by the successful James Bond film franchise, Lee and Kirby cast Sgt. Fury into a new role – "Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D," an acronym for the "Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-Enforcement Division."

For Lee, turning Fury from soldier into spy not serviced the writer's obsession with developing Marvel's continuity, but also provided a key function of the character's use in future years. Now Fury was no longer just a member of World War II's fighting forces, as Sgt. Rock had been, but he was also engaged in the high-stakes Cold War espionage game. Fury now bridged the gap between the two eras in American history, the confident victory culture of World War II and the confusing experience of a long Cold War that slowly broke down America's liberal consensus. As such, in ensuing years he would become an important character for creators who wished to comment on the country's transition between these two periods.

Even in the earliest days of Fury's adventures with SHIELD, Lee was making constant connections back to World War II. As his series continued, similar to Captain America, Fury faced an array of villains who had ties either to his own history with the Howling Commandos or to the Nazis in general. The evil organizations that SHIELD faced, Hydra and AIM, collectivist organizations in a Soviet mold, were both headed by former Nazi supervillains, which linked Cold War threats with the more cut-and-dried evil of the Nazis (an association that, historian Matthew Costello notes, rendered the U.S. position in the Cold War as morally superior as it had been in World War II.[67] Much like Captain America, Fury's linkage to World War II was used as an important moral signifier of the character. The World War II G.I. had been seen as an upstanding young man fighting for his country. The contemporary Vietnam War servicemen, on the other hand, was often portrayed as a "baby killer" who massacred innocent Vietnamese civilians. Fury was an intentional call-back to the former soldier, one who was fighting for what was right, not just killing for blood-lust's sake.

Fury's term as a Cold War superspy lasted through to the end of the 1960s, culminating in his own fifteen-issue series, which featured innovative and groundbreaking storytelling by writer/artist Jim Steranko. It was only with these Steranko stories, late in the decade, that the moral certitude of Fury's World War II connection began to erode. The spymaster now faced enemies with no linkage to Nazism but rather ties to the Cold War, such as Chinese villain the Yellow Claw. Steranko's tenure on the title, although extremely influential to the next generation of comic book artists thanks to a pop-art style and sensibility, only lasted for a brief time, and the series was cancelled in 1969.

In the ensuing years, Nick Fury and SHIELD continued to make appearances throughout the present-day Marvel Universe, particularly in *Captain America*. In one

such story, Fury and the Captain get into a battle over personal jealousy issues and Cap rejecting a job offer from SHIELD. However, during their fight, Fury lashes out verbally at Captain America, hinting towards a greater ideological divide between the two characters who each are linked to World War II and the Cold War:

> Pal, do you know I used to be your age before you got yourself frozen solid for twenty-years? I kept on livin', fightin' for my country. Through World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War, I lived those 20 years, getting' gray for America. And then you pop up, all blond, blue-eyed and young. When people think of American heroes, they don't see old, unsung types quietly bustin' our backs for 'em. No, they see you, glory-boy![68]

Fury thus becomes much more solidly linked with the Cold War than Captain America, growing gray hair as well as morally "gray." Fury's heroism was tainted by having to live through the moral compromises that had followed World War II, while Captain America was suspended in ice, only to eventually emerge as the uncompromised figure that Fury is now unable to be. This would become important to future writers, who were able to use Fury as a cipher, standing in for World War II soldiers-turned-Cold Warriors who would become morally compromised by all they had seen and done.

At the same time as Fury played the role of recurring guest star in *Captain America,* his adventures with the Howling Commandos continued in a series of extra-sized specials chronicling their reunions for brief missions during the Korean and Vietnam wars, cementing the Cold War link explained in Fury's speech to Captain America. However, as with the World War II Howling Commandos tales, these specials provided opportunity for action and battle in exotic settings without additional political or historical commentary. The comics give in to "yellow peril" stereotypes that dehumanize the enemy, portraying them as mindless drones who follow orders without espousing any ideology. Essentially, they stand in for the indelibly evil Nazis the Commandos had fought in World War II.

For example, in a Vietnam-set story, from 1967's *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos King-Size Special* #3, the Commandos are able to overcome a pair of guards by playing their "anthem," which automatically causes them to unthinkingly stand to attention and ignore the Americans as they sneak by.[69] Later, a North Vietnamese soldier is shown to be so unable to think for himself that he can't decide whether to flee from a bomb or to stay and die: "We—we cannot desert our duty—yet, we will all die if we remain! We cannot leave—for desertion is the highest crime! But…would it be disloyal merely to save our lives? There is so little time to decide! We must…we must—flee!"[70] Whether in World War II or Vietnam, in the 1960s Nick Fury and his Commandos were simply generic action heroes, not fully rounded characters used to comment upon either of the two wars, or even on war in general.

By the 1980s, many Marvel characters born in the Cold War saw those origins subtly shift so as to be more timeless and ageless. Even Captain America, whose ties to World War II remained consistent, was freed from his post-War suspended animation at a later and later date. For Fury, however, in order to maintain his own connection to World War II without the convenience of suspended animation, another solution needed to be devised. In a 1976 story from writer Jim Starlin and artist Howard Chaykin, this solution arrives in the form of the "Infinity Formula," a neat piece of retroactive continuity. Fury has been consuming the formula since shortly after World War II, paying the French doctor who devised it to keep sending him booster shots: "With the booster, I might live almost forever . . . And I wanted to survive! Survival…that's the name of the only game we poor humans have got to play."[71] Even as the head of a worldwide crime-fighting organization, SHIELD, Fury thus remains tied to his roots as a soldier, fighting for survival against even the slow degeneration of his own body. Survival at all costs –

physical, psychological, and moral – would come to be a definitive aspect of the character in the coming years.

It is thanks to the Infinity Formula that (narratively) a sergeant from World War II is able to survive into the 1980s and still be in fighting shape. Unlike Captain America, whose link to World War II means, as the years go on, that he missed the Cold War entirely, Fury maintains a direct link to both eras. This comes into play in 1989's six-issue series *Nick Fury vs. S.H.I.E.L.D*. In the story, by writer Bob Harras and artist Paul Neary, the corrupt council that controls SHIELD plans to replace all of the organization's agents with life-like robots known as Life Model Decoys (LMDs). The agents who resist this infiltration all either have personal ties to Fury, or, like Fury himself, fought in World War II. It is the SHIELD agents her were trained and fought only in the Cold War who fall prey to the plot, creating a contrast between them and those with a connection to the stronger central morality of the "good war," who are thus imbued with the ability to clearly identify the enemy.[72] In the wake of this miniseries, a new *Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD* series was launched, attempting to reforge the World War II/Cold War connection with the miniseries had shown to be broken. This new series once more equated Cold War evil organizations with Nazism in order to show the Cold War as a byproduct of World War II. However, the connection seemed extremely forced in an era that was seeing the Cold War come to a close. What had been acceptable during the contentious 1960s – a linkage between Communist "evil" and Nazi "evil" – was no longer believable in the early 1990s, by which time most Americans looked back on Vietnam as a mistake and a national tragedy, one which made them question whether the Communists had been as viable a threat as the Nazis.

By this time Marvel seemed to have lost their vision of what SHIELD stood for precisely, as indicated most strongly by a change in meaning of the acronym to "Strategic

Homeland Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate." As a result, *Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD* ended with the destruction of the titular organization. After the Cold War, Fury and SHIELD had no monolithic enemy to fight against, and so both went into a sort of retirement. In subsequent appearances, Fury became a "man out of time" like Captain America, albeit one without the politeness and manners of Steve Rogers. He was a throwback to an earlier time of unencumbered masculinity, one that did not fit into a more politically correct America that was increasingly cognizant of identity politics. Though such a disposition for a Marvel universe mainstay character was not ideal for a comic book publisher wishing to always move forwards with its stories and continuity, it *did* provide a starting point for a popular comics writer named Garth Ennis to use the character to explore new ways of viewing both World War II and the Cold War.

GARTH ENNIS' FURY

By 2001, Garth Ennis had established a name for himself in comics. The Northern Irish writer had started his career working in British comics, rising to fame by taking over the influential "Judge Dredd" comic in the sci-fi weekly anthology *2000 AD*. Moving to the American comic market, he co-created the series *Preacher*, with frequent artistic collaborator Steve Dillon, for DC's Vertigo imprint. *Preacher*'s popularity and critical acclaim propelled Ennis to superstardom within the comics industry, allowing him to pick and choose projects at DC and Marvel and provide his own offbeat, violent, and darkly comic take on those characters which interested him. Because he disliked the superhero genre, he preferred characters such as the gritty vigilante the Punisher and the long-lasting Cold Warrior, Nick Fury.[73]

In 2001's *Fury,* created for Marvel's mature-readers "MAX" line of comics, Ennis and artist Darick Robinson told a story about Nick Fury that didn't quite fit into

Marvel's continuity, but which still used the character's rich and varied history to comment upon his ties to the Cold War. In the six-issue miniseries Nick Fury, the ultimate Cold Warrior, comes up against the corporatized, politically correct world of the twenty-first century, where the US no longer has any standing enemy (the series was written and released prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001). His own government consequently has no further use for him as a soldier; instead, it uses businessmen, as represented by an Asian-American SHIELD bureaucrat named Mr. Li. Li wears a tailored suit, in comparison to Fury's long black trench coat, and has slicked-back hair tied in a ponytail, whereas Fury sports a military crew cut. Li is much shorter than Fury, and Robinson continually highlights these physical differences, essentially effeminizing Li in comparison to the ultra-masculine, ultra-macho Fury.

Li's effeminization throughout *Fury* is part of a much broader historical practice of what Edward Said calls Orientalism, whereby, "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."[74] When European explorers first encountered Eastern cultures, they viewed them as foreign, mysterious, and exotic, and clothed their descriptions in gendered terms – the masculine explorers "penetrating" the interior of the new lands they had discovered. Western masculinity was reified by its comparison to the stereotype that developed of weak-willed, impotent, and altogether slippery Asian masculinity of the kind displayed by Mr. Li. Ennis and Dillon use these Orientalist tropes almost as an updated form of the older "Yellow Peril" villain, insinuating that lifelong soldiers such as Fury can only see their antagonists in essentialized terms. The fact that Li's brother appears later in the series as a fully-rounded, completely capable and confident Asian American confidant to Fury indicates that the creators are deliberately employing this modern-day Orientalism in order to make a point about Fury's outlook on the world.

For Fury, Li is much like the Japanese he fought in World War II: he is not a real human being with hopes and dreams, but rather a repugnant walking stereotype. In this case, Li represents what Fury sees as the effeminization and bureaucratization of military culture. Early in the story, he tells Fury that the Cold Warrior has become a thing of the past, noting that warfare in the twenty-first century is accomplished more by machine than by man. Fury has much more in common, both physically and ideologically, with his Soviet equivalent Rudi Gagarin – another Cold War spymaster who finds himself without a war. Gagarin suggests to Fury that they work together to create international tensions just so that they can continue to play at the game of spying which had so come to define their lives. Though Fury turns him down, later that night, after wearing out a half dozen Asian escorts (thus tying them into Mr. Li, and the whole "effeminized" culture he represents), he admits to himself that he wants another war.

The rest of the series revolves around Fury and Gagarin's final war, precipitated by Gagarin setting himself up as an advisor to the military ruler of a small nation, Napoleon Island, located, "between the U.S. mainland and Hawaii—and of course the strategically vital naval base at Pearl Harbor."[75] The mention of Pearl Harbor, though serving as a plot point to highlight the importance of the nation Gagarin has targeted, also functions as a way of tying the story to Fury's World War II military roots, in addition to his Cold War era spy background. Despite Li's reservations, the nameless and faceless politicians running SHIELD decide to fight fire with fire, and green light Fury to form a paramilitary team of agents to go into Napoleon Island and take down Gagarin.

Although Ennis and Robertson's *Fury* is, in many ways, a satire of the kind of action-adventure spy story that Nick Fury had been appearing in for decades, it stays true to certain conventions, and the story climaxes in a man-to-man brawl between Fury and Gagarin, during which the Russian proclaims, "The world is such a lie, Nicky. All that's

true is you and me. And the beautiful game we play. . . . Be honest with yourself for once. Admit the final, awful truth. . . . If I hadn't come down here and started this, you would have done it yourself."[76] When the mission is finally over – technically a success, as Fury kills Gagarin, though it costs the lives of his team of soldiers and (when he afterwards assaults Mr. Li) likely cost him his job, too – he finds himself finally breaking down, remembering Gagarin's words and exclaiming, "Oh god."[77] The implication is that he knows Gagarin to have been speaking the truth – that Fury wanted this war, a war fought by men and women on the ground with guns and not by stealth planes and computers, a "masculine" war compared to Li's "effeminate" one, every bit as much as Gagarin did.

While the series began as satire, leading the reader to side with Fury's masculine world-gone-by over the effete world run by people like Li, it ends by calling Fury's values into question. The comedy disappears from the story's pages as the bloodshed continually builds, leading to final shot of a distraught Fury who no longer has any illusions about himself and realizes that he is every bit the bloodthirsty warrior that he perceived his enemy to be. Though Ennis' body of work has a certain tendency to glorify masculine tropes and military prowess, in *Fury* he is able to show that such an attitude comes at the cost of, perhaps, one's own humanity.

This theme is something that Ennis and Robertson explore further in their prequel to *Fury,* a 2006 story called *Fury: Peacemaker* set during World War II. *Peacemaker* is, perhaps, the first "realistic" war story to feature Sgt. Fury – he is portrayed as a tougher-than-average soldier, but by no means a superhero, and he is flanked by similar grunts, rather than the broad stereotypes of the Howling Commandos. In the first two issues, set in 1943 Tunisia, Fury loses all of his men in a surprise attack by German forces, led by Field Marshall Stephen Barkhorn. Barkhorn spares a dazed, shell-shocked Fury,

explaining to him, "A word of advice, sergeant. If you want to be good at this? Learn to enjoy it."[78]

The remaining four issues, set a year later, display just how much Fury has taken this advice to heart. He is part of a joint American and British mission to assassinate Barkhorn, but when they arrive at the German estate he is using as his headquarters, his second-in-command informs them that he has gone to assassinate Hitler and end the war, with the full backing of the Wehrmacht high command. Fury and his British compatriot, Peter Kynaston, then have a private conversation where Kynaston asks him directly, "Do you actually want the war to end?" He goes on to explain, "We're fighting the good fight, of course, freedom and all that. . . . I fight for the chaps beside me, Nick. As good a company as you'd find in all Valhalla. . . . I love my men—" Fury then cuts him off to complete his thought, clearly one shared by Fury: "But you love the war more . . . If…Barkhorn died before he started giving orders…our mission was to kill him. No one told us the guy just shot Hitler."[79]

The implications of this short conversation are staggering. Kynaston and Fury are directly plotting to keep the war going when they have the power to help stop it, simply because they have become so in love with fighting in a war. We see in this prequel the birth of the bloodlust and lust-for-war that Fury exhibited in the first Ennis series. More importantly, though, we also have a much more compelling view of Fury's experiences in World War II than any we have seen before. *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* told the story of a group of virtuous men who fought because they had to, in order to halt the Nazi menace. *Fury: Peacemaker* shows a young soldier hardened by war, who discovers that the only way to survive is to learn how to love it so much that he can't ever let go. This is, essentially, Ennis' "origin" story for Nick Fury, showing why he will forever be unable to simply return to civilian life, and why after World War II is over he

will join up with the CIA, and later SHIELD, in order to continue fighting one war after another his whole life.

Ennis and Robertson portray World War II more ambiguously than previous stories. This might in part be attributed to the fact that neither creator is American – Ennis is from Northern Ireland, Robertson from England. For their families and cultures there was nothing "great" about a war that saw bombings, air-raids, and massive casualties. Irish and British personal and cultural memories of the war are much more intimate than those of America, which (with the exception of the attack on Pearl Harbor) had the luxury of an ocean on either side between the home front and the battlefront. The war was not a quest to rescue people or a valiant struggle of good against evil, but instead it was a bloody flight for survival against a voracious aggressor. For Ennis, in fact, ongoing violence remained a fact of life, as he grew up in Northern Ireland during the heyday of the Irish Republican Army's bombing campaigns. In the endnote to a previous work, a one-issue story entitled *Heartland*, Ennis revealed a bit about how this upbringing affected him, as he reflected on a ceasefire that began in 1994 but seemed to be slipping away by 1996, when he wrote the story: "To be able to go shopping without a bomb scare closing off half the town, or get a job in what used to be a dwindling economy, or just have breakfast without hearing the night's body count over the radio—I thought these were things that no one would ever want to do without again."[80] Ennis, then, is no stranger to this sort of violence. He cannot glorify it in the tradition of American boys-adventure war stories, and thus his Nick Fury must grapple with its horrific consequences.

Unlike in *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos*, in *Fury: Peacemaker* the Allied soldiers never fight against Nazis or the SS, but rather against the rank-and-file German army, who are not trying to further fascist ideology but are, from their point of

view, protecting their homeland and fighting to survive. Though a flashback shows Barkhorn as being sickened by an SS officer casually murdering innocent Russian civilians simply because they are Jewish, ultimately it is revealed that he has not turned traitor to Hitler. When Fury then asks him if the story of the massacre of Jews in Russia is a lie, he explains, "No. No, that is the reason I fight on. The Russians will rape Germany for what we did to them. It is my duty to prevent that. I will lock the back door against the British and Americans, here—then return to the East, to try and fight the Soviets to a standstill. They cannot be allowed to put one foot on German soil."[81] Though he is an enemy combatant, Barkhorn is revealed to be a humanized figure, opposed to Nazi ideology but still fighting against the Allies in defense of his country and his people. This is in direct contrast to Fury, himself, whose battle-lust is most important, and who is willing to prolong the suffering of millions in order to continually provide himself with an active war to fight.

Throughout *Peacemaker*, the "good war" is shown to be every bit as bad as any other war, before or since – the "heroes" are morally compromised, traumatized soldiers who will go to extreme lengths to keep the war (the only world they now understand) ongoing, while the "villain" is a loyal, patriotic German man who wants to protect his home and his people. In the story's epilogue, after the war has ended, Fury says to Kynaston, "Hard to believe we…tried to do what we tried to do, I guess."[82] However, Kynaston consoles them both by noting,

> [T]his isn't the end. If anything it's the exact opposite. . . . This has been the greatest war the world has ever seen. It's changed *everything*. The European powers are exhausted. It's going to be your lot and the Soviets now. The old empires will fall apart, there'll be rebellions and revolutions, all manner of trouble and strife…Look at the French, for instance. They're completely buggered. They haven't a hope of hanging onto Indochina. . . . Oh, what is it the locals call it? Vietnam.[83]

He then toasts their champagne, “To the end of the war, Nick. And the beginning of many more.” Fury replies by toasting him back, “Well, I will by God drink to that.”[84] Though the pair failed at extending the war in Germany, they end the series as battle-crazed as they were in the midst of it, having gained a lust only for further warfare. For these two, and for millions of real-life soldiers and civilians similarly traumatized, physically and psychologically, World War II was certainly anything but “good.”

This more ambiguous take on the war is also connected to the Cold War. In this simple progression of logic, with European power giving way to American and Soviet power, those two countries will have to battle for leverage across the globe. Ennis is able to show how World War II was *not* a separate entity or era from the Cold War, but rather the first act in that decades-long conflict. War, Ennis is telling us, feeds upon itself, and one war will lead to another just as each of those wars will create the kind of men who will want to be a part of the bloodshed. This is quite different from the sharp distinction earlier writers, such as Lee and Kanigher, had drawn between the “clear-cut” World War II and “messy” Vietnam. To Ennis, *all* warfare is one long, messy war.

Ennis’ next series featuring Fury, 2012’s *Fury: My War Gone By*, with artist Goran Parlov, rejoins the character in Indochina in 1954, showing that Fury did, indeed, involve him in whatever war was available to him following World War II. The series focuses on Nick Fury in the Cold War, and it complicates the moralities and motivations of its combatants in the way that *Fury: Peacemaker* had done for World War II. In the second issue, Fury tells his lover that his most fervent desire is to be a part of a shooting war against the Soviets. This admission connects back to his love of war as explored in *Peacemaker*. Fury’s words here resonate later in the series when he explains to his right-hand man why they must tolerate an ex-Nazi training commander named Steinhoff at a French outpost in Vietnam. Fury coldly explains,

> The war's been over for nine years, Hatherly. Can't you see the way the world's falling into place? . . . Everyone's gearing up for another war. Skills are at a premium. . . . The French don't care about Steinhoff's past, not so long as he can fight like he does . . . The last thing Steinhoff wants is to redeem himself. He wants to keep on fighting. Because he's a soldier and it's all he knows.[85]

This is a crucial moment in the story, as well as a radical retelling of the linkage between Fury's World War II experiences and his time as a Cold Warrior. Here, not only is Fury's own mentality shown to be the same as a Nazi soldier's, but the link is also again being made between Nazis and Cold War combatants. However, in this case it is the French and the Americans, the "heroes" of the older *Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD* stories, who are aligned with the Nazis, rather than the Communist forces or even fictional terrorist organizations like Hydra or AIM.

The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, are portrayed as freedom fighters, who simply want independence, without interference from the United States or the Soviet Union. Shortly after the fall of Dien Ben Phu, the French outpost that Fury is stationed at also falls. A North Vietnamese soldier named Letrong Giap informs Fury of his greatest fear:

> [M]y country's future lies in the hands of men from far beyond her borders. If that is true…such men should know that this is not a place the West can come and work out its frustrations. Not without incurring a dreadful price in blood. This is not French Indochina, Colonel Fury. It is not French anything. This is Vietnam.[86]

Later in the series Giap, now a North Vietnamese general, captures Nick Fury alongside the army sniper who has been assigned to him, Frank Castle, who later will become the vigilante known as the Punisher. He threatens the two men by explaining that he intends to expose corruption in the American government and in the CIA's dealings with Vietnam so that the American people will demand that President Nixon remove all troops from the country.

Much as Kynaston had served in *Peacemaker* as a human face for the German army, a good man who wanted what was best for his people, Giap's role in *My War Gone By* is to humanize the Northern Vietnamese. When Fury intimates that he expects Giap to torture him, the general responds by asking,

> Shall we discuss the . . . question of the notion of moral warfare, and where the use of napalm on infants figures in it? You are not naïve, colonel. Don't pretend that this is your old war, your European cataclysm where good triumphs over evil. Be honest: you are here because for Nick Fury any war will do.

This speech not only calls into question Fury's morality, but also America's claim on moral superiority when it engages in highly questionable military strategy. In addition, Giap sarcastically mocks the "good war" view of World War II, noting that it was a "cataclysm" in the same breath as talking about good defeating evil. When Fury asks Giap why that would excuse his own behavior, Giap replies, "I will do anything, commit any atrocity, embrace any evil, to end the war and free Vietnam from American aggression. Because I love my people and my country." Whereas Fury simply loves war, Giap loves Vietnam and its citizens, and will go to any lengths to protect them. Just who is "good" and who is "evil" in this dichotomy is impossible to sort out. Ennis' interest, once again, is in crafting a revisionist way of looking at these wars, calling into question just who and what can be called "good" or "evil" under such circumstances. The series provides no easy answers – Fury is still the ostensible hero of these stories, who readers root for, even though he is almost a bloodthirsty villain in comparison to the reasonable, reasoning German and North Vietnamese representatives he battles.

Taken as a whole, Ennis' view of World War II shows it as the turning point of the twentieth century, from which point ideology takes a backseat to bloodlust and the ravenous war machine that the conflict created throughout the world.[87] Fury's connection to World War II and the Cold War allow Ennis to comment upon the

evolution of warfare across the second half of the century and the ways in which it became a self-perpetuating force by which every war begot another in a seemingly endless string of carnage. Ennis uses Fury as a man who straddles the century, jettisoning his complicated continuity in order to focus on the man underneath all that, and explore the devastating effects that modern warfare can have on both the individual and on the world. Rather than telling a war story starring Nick Fury, Ennis places Nick Fury at the center of the story of war.

CONCLUSION

While Ennis created his trilogy of Fury stories, the character continued to appear in Marvel's ongoing continuity. Most notably, he served as the protagonist in an intricately plotted, extremely complicated series called *Secret Warriors*, which featured him putting together a team of untested superpowered youths, along with his old Howling Commandos (those who had survived the many years since World War II, that is), to put an end to Hydra and other Cold War/terrorist secret societies once and for all. The larger story of the series helmed by writer Jonathan Hickman, is bookended by scenes featuring the moral center of the Marvel Universe, Captain America. In the series' prologue, Fury remembers a speech that the Captain gave to him and the Howling Commandos during World War II. Preparing them to storm the beach at Normandy, Captain America calmly and confidently states,

> These are dark and desperate times. I know that some of you are afraid. It's all right—it's perfectly natural. But I want you to know that I am not. . . . I believe in an idea…an idea that a single individual who has the right heart and the right mind…that is consumed with a single purpose…that one man can win a war. Give that one man a group of soldiers with the same conviction…and you can change the world.[88]

Throughout *Secret Warriors*, Fury refers back to this speech, using it to motivate himself and his team in their battle against sinister forces. In the last issue of the series, Captain America finally tells him that, "I wasn't there at the end of the war. I wasn't there for what followed, and I wasn't there when the world changed. Understand? It wasn't me—it never was…it was you. You were always the one man."[89]

The Fury of *Secret Warriors* is thus clearly a very different character from Garth Ennis' vision of Fury. Here he is a noble superhero, one fully enmeshed in the Marvel Universe, fighting alongside Captain America and many others. Within this fictional realm, in contrast to Ennis' realistic world, he can fight in a war and remain psychologically unscathed; consequently, he can continue to "fight the good fight" into the twenty-first century without compromising his moral center. Such resilience is what makes for a superhero. As Ennis' stories tell us, though, in the real world heroes are much harder to come by, and much more easily broken. He looks back at World War II and sees not a starting point for heroes, but rather a breaking point for good men.

Ennis took Marvel's Sgt. Fury out of the ongoing continuity of the superhero "universe" in order to tell an affecting story of war, history, and trauma. Azzarello, Kubert, and Tucci had done the same at DC with Sgt. Rock. Within the continuities of the DC and Marvel universes, Rock and Fury are "war heroes," with the emphasis on the word "hero." They consistently try to do what they think is the right thing, and they are impervious to lasting physical trauma and the currents of time and aging. They are, essentially, superheroes in military uniforms. Once taken out of those continuities, though, the emphasis can shift to the word "war," and the focus is on the battlefields upon which the two characters find themselves eternally fighting.

The difference between the two characters lies in the nature of memory, itself. Sgt. Rock, in his more serious tales, dies at the end of World War II. He stands in for the

American serviceman who gives his or her life in a time of war, sacrificing themselves either for a greater good, for meaningless ideologies, or for nothing besides the bloodlust of war itself, depending upon what creator is telling the story. Either way, he lives on in *memory*, rather than in contemporary stories, and represents (usually) noble sacrifice and heroism in the face of war. Sgt. Fury on the other hand lives on, surviving World War II and remaining young and healthy to the present day. He is part relic, part superheroic freedom fighter, and part violent sociopath who has been psychologically damaged by so many years of war.

Sgt. Rock and Sgt. Fury's stories show us several different viewpoints of World War II. Some of these stories condemn the war while others defend its necessities. Still others reveal the after-effects of that war, both personally and politically, on the two men and their allies. The important thing to remember about both characters is that their very longevity, and the ways in which they have danced in and out of superhero continuity during their long publishing histories, have given them a certain iconicity that allows creators to tell such stories (dealing with trauma, the dehumanizing impact of war, the complicated motivations of historical factors and figures) using recognizable characters that readers already identify with as protagonists, thus setting the readers up for new and diverse ways of viewing the history of modern warfare through the eyes of those familiar "heroes."

Through looking at the treatment of these two characters, we not only see how superhero continuity can simplify and flatten the complicated real-world stories and motivations behind warfare, but more generally we see how any war can only be viewed as "good" in memory. Living through a war, and living beyond it, is a traumatizing experience that scars a soldier for life. Memories of wars, such as World War II, may ennoble the conflict, but these memories are fraught with tension and hindsight. They

rely upon a present-mindedness that sees the value in what was accomplished by that war (echoing Tom Hanks' whisper of "Earn this" at the end of *Saving Private Ryan*), and thus discount the necessary brutalities that occurred along the way in order to reach the war's endpoint. Even more so than with World War II, this tension can be seen in the ways in which Americans have remembered and memorialized the Vietnam War through Marvel universe's preeminent Vietnam veteran, Frank Castle, also known as the Punisher.

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[1] David Huxley, "Naked Aggression: American Comic Books and the Vietnam War," in Tell Me Lies About Vietnam: Cultural Battles for the Meaning of the War, ed. Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 91.
[2] Mike Conroy, War Stories: A Graphic History (New York: Collins Design, 2009), 12.
[3] Ibid.
[4] John Bodnar, The "Good War" In American Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 240.
[5] Ibid.
[6] For more on EC Comics in the 1950s, see Chapter 2.
[7] This is similar, in a way, to the old joke/observation that the TV show M.A.S.H. lasted longer than the Korean War in which it was set.
[8] Bob Haney, writer, Ross Andru, artist, et. al., "The Rock of Easy Co.!," in Our Army At War 81, April, 1959, 1.
[9] Robert Kanigher, "Sgt. Rock Goes to War," in Millennium Edition: Our Army At War No. 81, June, 2000.
[10] Rocky Olson, Sgt. Rock: Last Warrior Standing (Zeroed-In Press, 2010), 7.
[11] Mike Conroy, War Stories: A Graphic History (New York: Collins Design, 2009), 79.
[12] John Wells, "The Rock of Easy," Fanzing 36, July 2001, http://www.fanzing.com/mag/fanzing36/feature4.shtml (accessed June 15, 2012).
[13] See Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 199.
[14] Quoted in Jim Kingman, "Sgt. Rock Of Easy Company in 'The Longer Shadow,' Back Issue, December 2009, 3.
[15] Quoted in Ibid.
[16] Jim Kingman, "Sgt. Rock Of Easy Company in 'The Longer Shadow,' Back Issue, December 2009, 5.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] See Ibid, 6.
[20] David Huxley, "Naked Aggression: American Comic Books and the Vietnam War," in Tell Me Lies About Vietnam: Cultural Battles for the Meaning of the War, ed. Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 88.
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[22] Ibid, 7.
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[24] Quoted in Ibid.
[25] For much more on *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, see chapter 7.
[26] Quoted in Patrick Daniel O'Neill, "*Spotlight*: Crisis on Infinite Earths," David Anthony Kraft's Comics Interview #26, 1985, 13.
[27] Adam C. Murdough, "Worlds Will Live, Worlds Will Die: Myth, Metatext, Continuity and Cataclysm in DC Comics' *Crisis On Infinite Earths*" (master's thesis, Bowling Green State University, August 2006), 61.
[28] Jeph Loeb, writer, Ed McGuinness, artist, et. al., "The Red Badge of Courage," Superman 173, October, 2001, 8.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid, 9.
[32] Ironically and tragically, it would be during this war storyline in the Superman comic books that the attacks of September 11th, 2001, would occur.
[33] Jeph Loeb, writer, Bill Sienkiewicz, artist, et. al., World's Finest: Our Worlds At War 1, October 2001, 20.
[34] Ibid, 20-21.
[35] Ibid, 21.
[36] Keith Giffen, writer, Paco Medina, artist, et. al., "Swan Song," Suicide Squad 12, October 2002, 22.
[37] Len Wein, writer, Joe Kubert, artist, et. al., "Snapshot: Remembrance!" in DC Universe: Legacies 4, October 2010, 26.
[38] Ibid, 27-28.
[39] Joe Kubert, "Forward," in Brian Azzarello, writer, Joe Kubert, artist, et. al., Sgt. Rock: Between Hell & A Hard Place (New York: DC Comics, 2003).
[40] Brian Azzarello, writer, Joe Kubert, artist, et. al., Sgt. Rock: Between Hell & A Hard Place (New York: DC Comics, 2003), 54.
[41] Ibid, 64.
[42] Ibid, 61.
[43] Ibid, 75-76. Emphasis in original.
[44] For a full discussion of these films, see the previous chapter.
[45] Ibid, 120. Emphasis in original.
[46] Ibid, 126.
[47] Ibid, 127.
[48] Joe Kubert, et. al., Sgt. Rock: The Prophecy (New York: DC Comics, 2006), 32. Emphasis in original.
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[51] Ibid, 127-128.
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[55] Sgt. Junwo "Jimmy" Yamashita, "Remember Them," in Billy Tucci, Sgt. Rock: The Lost Battalion (New York: DC Comics, 2009).
[56] Lt. Erwin Blonder, "Surviving the Battle of 'The Lost Battalion,'" in Billy Tucci, Sgt. Rock: The Lost Battalion (New York: DC Comics, 2009).
[57] For more on the New 52, see this dissertation's conclusion.
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[59] Mike Conroy, War Stories: A Graphic History (New York: Collins Design, 2009), 80.
[60] Stan Lee, writer, Jack Kirby artist, et. al., Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos 1, May, 1963, cover.
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[66] See Ibid, 57.
[67] See Matthew Costello, Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America (New York: Continuum, 2009), 70-71.
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[71] Jim Starlin, artist, Howard Chaykin, artist, et. al., "Assignment: the Infinity Formula," in Marvel Spotlight 31, December 1976, 6.
[72] See Matthew Costello, Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America (New York: Continuum, 2009), 187-188.
[73] For more on the Punisher, including Ennis' take on the character, see chapter 5.
[74] Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1-2.
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[81] Garth Ennis, writer, Darick Robertson, artist, et. al., "The End of the Beginning," Fury: Peacemaker 6, September, 2006, 9-10.
[82] Ibid, 20.
[83] Ibid, 21. Emphasis in original.
[84] Ibid, 22.
[85] Garth Ennis, writer, Goran Parlov, artist, et. al., "And Some People Left For Heaven Without Warning," Fury: My War Gone By 3, August, 2012, 3-4.
[86] Ibid, 20.
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Chapter 5 – The Horror, The Horror: The Vietnam War and the Punisher

DC's Sgt. Rock and Marvel's Sgt. Fury were both characters originally associated with World War II. Similar fictional soldiers and superheroes came into existence as a way for comic book creators to fight back against the Axis forces and/or to memorialize the war. Comic book publishers were much more hesitant to represent Vietnam, however. Not only were few war stories set in Vietnam while the war was still ongoing, but extremely few superheroes or villains were created that had origins tying them to the conflict. The Vietnam War, seen nightly on American television sets in lurid color, did not lend itself easily to the kind of mythic, heroic narrative embodied by superhero power fantasies. *Newsweek* commented in 1966 that comic books were, "having much the same kind of trouble holding reader support for their war that the Administration is having rallying support for the real war."[1] Furthermore, comic books avoided Vietnam settings because such settings did not sell like World War II stories.

Nevertheless, one prominent "superhero," or rather more of an antihero, maintains crucial ties to the conflict in Vietnam – Frank Castle, the Punisher. In a certain light he is Marvel Comics "Vietnam version" of Captain America, in that his origins are inextricably tied to the war and his psychology is forever influenced by its memories. Beginning as a Spider-Man villain, the Punisher proved incredibly popular in the 1970s and 80s, becoming a Marvel Comics mainstay as well as a continual beacon of controversy, thanks to his bloody vigilantism. The Punisher has changed form over the years – from *Death Wish* rip-off, to urban commando, superheroic villain-fighter, and

even supernatural angelic assassin – but one thing that has remained consistent is his status as a Vietnam veteran.

This chapter will explore the ways in which the Vietnam War has been utilized and remembered in superhero comic book continuity. After exploring other superheroes and villains who fought briefly in Vietnam, the rest of the chapter will focus on the Punisher, examining how various creators have explored the ways in which memories of Vietnam led him to become a violent, borderline psychotic anti-hero who has remained popular for almost half a century. The evolving portrayals of the Punisher from the 1970s through today serve as a reflection of the evolving American view on Vietnam, especially in regards to its aftereffects on the soldiers who fought in the steaming jungles of Southeast Asia.

THE SUPERMAN IN VIETNAM

Tony Stark, alias Iron Man, was one of the few well-known heroes whose origin tied directly into the Vietnam War. In his first appearance, Stark is a wealthy business owner and weapons manufacturer who, inspecting some of his munitions in Vietnam, is wounded and captured by communist guerillas. As a piece of shrapnel digs dangerously close to his heart, his captors force him to build them a state-of-the-art, weaponized suit of armor, which he uses to both keep the shrapnel from his heart and free himself from captivity.

For the first few decades of his existence, Iron Man served as the ultimate Cold War entrepreneur/scientist/warrior, a symbol of American military and scientific might. His archnemesis was a Chinese descendent of Genghis Khan known as the Mandarin. Thus, Iron Man repeatedly battled a Chinese villain, but one whose own surface-level back-story tied him more strongly to historical Yellow Peril stereotypes of a conquering

Mongol horde than to actual Chinese communists. This served to once again tie together Communist foes with the Axis enemies of the 1940s, completely ignoring the political ideologies at the heart of international tensions of the 1960s. This was largely how Iron Man functioned throughout the Cold War. Though he stood for American values such as unbridled capitalism (he was an extremely wealthy playboy industrialist) and scientific advancement, and even though his foes were frequently international villains, for the most part the stories themselves stayed away from a West-versus-East, or democracy-versus-communism, dichotomy.

By the time that such issues were addressed directly in Iron Man's ongoing narrative, national opinion had changed so much that it made sense to his creators to have him come out *against* the war. In 1975, he renounced his support of the country's blanket anticommunist crusade and shut down his company's weapons division, focusing its resources instead on consumer goods and environmentalism. One of the key issues that expresses this turn in Iron Man's thinking, September, 1975's *Iron Man* #78, begins with Stark musing about the matter:

> As Iron Man, you beat the commies for democracy without ever questioning just whose democracy you were serving—or just what those you served intended to do with the world once you'd saved it for them! Vietnam raised all those questions, didn't it, Tony? . . . Like: 'What right had we to be there in the first place?' Even if we could've answered that question, I was still left with some of my own…like: if I suspected even then, that the war, or at least the manner in which we were fighting it, was wrong? That suspicion grew each and every time I found myself staring into the eyes of hundreds of war-weary front-line GI's…What kind of man was I to keep designing weaponry for that kind of war?[2]

He then remembers a moment during a visit to Vietnam in which he saw the brutality of his own weapons at work, killing soldiers and innocent Vietnamese citizens alike. His self-recrimination in the moment, however, is followed by a bit of jingoism, when he encounters a sole Viet Cong soldier: "Your black pajamas spell it out, commie! . . . Get

up, commie! You're going to see what a man looks like when he dies in battle! I want you to look closely at the war you reds have brought to this country!"[3] When he discovers that the soldier is just a scared, blind boy, from a village his own weapons destroyed, he realizes that this "enemy" was simply fighting for his life and his family, rather than adhering to any "red" ideology. This moment causes him to reevaluate his duel role in the world, as a Avenger seeking justice while at the same time producing weaponry enabling such wrongs to occur.

This special one-issue story features one of Stark's most important moments in his political transformation from hawk to dove. However, throughout most of the story, the dichotomy of American democracy and Vietnamese communism is used fairly generically as a representation of two sides of *any* conflict, without exploring the meanings behind capitalism and communism. One of the key pieces of dialogue inherently rejects this exploration, noting that the boy caught in the midst of the warfare doesn't understand the meaning of the words used to express either side's beliefs. Rather, the story, and the warmonger-versus-peacemaker conflict that is at the heart of Tony Stark's character, reflects more generally upon warfare itself.

Iron Man, as both a hawk and a dove, frequently stands in for political positions, but the character does *not* typically comment upon the specifics of any real-world conflicts or ideologies. Though his origins tied him to the Vietnam War, Iron Man's ongoing adventures bore little relation to his time there and are concerned with broader issues of war and peace. Thus Iron Man has no inherent connection to Vietnam in the way that Captain America does to World War II. Indeed, Iron Man's origin has been retconned several times, each iteration moving it further away from Vietnam. Most recently, as part of the ongoing process of a continuity that keeps most superheroes perpetually young (or at least middle aged), the location of the initial injury that turned

him into Iron Man has been moved to the Middle East, with generic communist "bad guys" turned into generic Arab terrorist "bad guys." It is this version that was used in Marvel's highly successful film adaptation, *Iron Man*.

With notable exceptions such as Iron Man, DC and Marvel generally avoided stories set in the Vietnam War while that conflict was ongoing. The superhero mostly directly engaged with Vietnam was an original creation for a very small publisher. Super Green Beret was something of an absurd, surreal character, blending the magical realism of innocent child-focused superhero Captain Marvel with the jungles of Vietnam. The hero was Todd Holton, a young boy who turns into a fully-grown, super-powered Green Beret soldier when he puts on a magical green beret. The beret gives him a variety of super powers and magically transports him either to present-day Vietnam or to historical battlefields. As Vietnam is largely used here as a backdrop for whimsical children's stories that idealize the Green Beret as a superheroic figure, there is little to nothing in the way of actual social commentary on the Vietnam War or its politics. As Mike Conroy summarizes, it was, "a World War II comic in everything but setting."[4] Super Green Beret's adventures, and the publisher who created them, only lasted a few months.

Several other comics, as well as several films, tried to capitalize on the heroicism of the Green Berets, most prominently the hawkish 1968 John Wayne film *The Green Berets*, which tried to directly make audiences associate Vietnam with World War II via the posturing of the aging action star. The film strenuously tries to avoid wartime politics when a Green Beret sergeant tell a reporter "Foreign-policy decisions are not made by the military; a soldier goes where he is told and fights who he is told to fight."[5] This was the only big-budget film made during the Vietnam War that has anything positive to say about U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. It is only able to accomplish this by avoiding discussions of the ideologies behind the war and instead focusing on the heroic actions of

the soldiers against stock-villain communist enemies.[6] This re-glorification of the American soldier was the impetus for the film, inspired by Robin Moore's 1965 novel of the same name and Sergeant Barry Sandler's 1966 hit song, "Ballad of the Green Berets." Tired of the antiestablishment, anti-war protests sweeping the nation, John Wayne (himself a political conservative) co-directed the film. He received massive support – in the form of helicopters, uniforms, extras, and advisors – from the U.S. military, owing to a letter he wrote directly to President Johnson. However, in exchange, the film was banned from referencing Vietnam as a civil war, from showing brutal treatment of prisoners by the U.S. or its South Vietnamese allies, and from portraying the Green Berets as engaging in covert operations.[7]

In all but location, *The Green Berets* functioned like any other John Wayne World War II film. However, it failed to recognize that American tastes had changed, in large part because Vietnam itself had altered the stomach that audiences had for cinematic warfare. Historian Maarten Pereboom notes, "the conventions of war films did not suit the subject, as *The Green Berets* . . . demonstrated in 1968, in large part because the war itself . . . was a painful and divisive subject."[8] Just as *The Green* Berets was structurally a World War II film set in Vietnam, *Super Green Beret* was ultimately one of many comics stories which was set in the later conflict but simply (and unsuccessfully) reworked formulas that had worked for publishers during World War II.[9]

DC and Marvel made only occasional references to Vietnam. DC's superheroes were generally less in touch with current events than Marvel's, but their most famous hero made a brief appearance in the war. In May 1969's *Superman* #216, the hero travels to Vietnam in a story by Sgt. Rock's writer, Robert Kanigher. The introductory caption to the story clearly sets the scene in the Vietnam War: "In the midst of the Vietnam War, the Man of Steel comes up against an opponent who threatens to wipe out the American

forces…unless Superman wipes him out first! That will be the outcome of this confrontation between the jungle-fighting giant and…'The Soldier of Steel!'"[10] However, the setting is apolitical, essentially another generic war story with Superman thrown in its midst.

The story's mash-up of the war and superhero genres begins with an opening scene set in, "war-ravaged Vietnam, as enemy shells erupt in fountains of flame amid battered G.I.'s crouching in their foxholes."[11] It's within this traditional war-story backdrop that the unfamiliar appears – a super-strong, super-tough giant in an American uniform who is apparently working for the Viet Cong. This prompts several American soldiers to write to the Daily Planet (where Superman works as a reporter in his secret identity of Clark Kent) with "complaints against Superman for not helping the troops in Vietnam!"[12] Responding to this criticism, Kent explains to his editor, Perry White, that he'd, "like to go to Vietnam…mingle with the troops in the front lines…find out about their beef with Superman! Not as a reporter…as a fellow soldier! But I don't like killing…so I'll go as a medic!"[13] There is a brief comedic scene where he must fool the doctor providing his army inspection into not realizing he has super powers (itself a reference to a famous newspaper strip from 1942 in which Clark Kent was declared 4-F for the World War II draft because he accidentally read the eye chart in the next room over). Thereafter, Kent travels as an army medic to Vietnam and accomplishes his mission. By the very next issue, though, Clark Kent is back in Metropolis, with no explanation given for his discharge.

For a story that was seemingly designed to answer the question of why Superman doesn't intervene in the Vietnam War, "The Soldier of Steel!" is incomplete. Throughout the story, American soldiers and even Vietnamese orphans long for Superman's involvement in the war, and though he does answer their prayers in this brief tale, the

question remains as to why he does not do so on a larger scale. Lending a hand against one super-powered enemy does not help to win the war any faster, and by the next issue the hero is once again a remote observer on the home front who rarely, if ever, thinks about or mentions Vietnam again.

Although Superman's time in Vietnam was brief, a future DC character possessed intimate ties to the war. The mercenary known as "Deathstroke the Terminator" was first introduced by writer Marv Wolfman and artist George Perez in their popular *New Teen Titans* comic in the early 1980s. For over forty issues he remained an on-going nemesis for the team of young heroes, even though they never learned his history or origins. In July, 1984's *Tales of the Teen Titans* #44, that history was finally revealed by his ex-wife, Adelaide, who began the story by setting the timeframe as, "the early 1960s. Vietnam was still several years away. It was before the deaths of the Kennedy brothers and King, when your wildest hopes and dreams were possibilities that could be plucked like ripe fruit from the vine. It was time when defending your country was an honor, and a military career a goal worth pursuing. So much has changed, and very little for the better."[14]

With this introduction, reflecting a nostalgic yearning felt by many for a more "innocent" America that existed before the upheavals of the mid-1960s, Adeline Kane begins the tale of Slade Wilson, the man who would become Deathstroke. At first, she relates the story of a heroic soldier, one who "became the youngest decorated Korean War hero" and "an army legend"[15] before traveling to Camp Washington for special training, headed by Kane. It was there that the pair fell in love and married, but, as she explains, "We didn't have much of a honeymoon. President Johnson escalated the conflict in Vietnam. Slade was assigned there. It was what the army had trained him for.

I would have been at his side except I was busy elsewhere…Grant Wilson was born the night Slade landed in 'Nam."[16]

The fact that Wilson fought in Vietnam while Kane sat it out, as a mother, leads to a rift between them, one that widened when Slade, who "did whatever the army asked of him . . . volunteered for a medical experiment for resisting truth serums."[17] The experiment apparently went wrong, making Wilson unfit for active duty, but then eventually its effects stabilized, granting him superhuman strength and reflexes. His inability to serve as a frontline soldier, however, led him to become "morose, purposeless, almost suicidal,"[18] a condition compounded by being discharged from the army after going on an unauthorized mission to rescue his best friend from a POW camp. He only manages to find some kind of inner peace by using his newfound powers to become a professional assassin, and indeed becoming one of the best assassins in the world.

The fact that Slade Wilson's turning point from patriotic soldier to self-driven mercenary came with the Vietnam War is striking. It is his time in Vietnam, while his wife remains in America, which changes him, and starts him on the path that leads to him becoming an out-and-out supervillain who will do anything for money. In the case of Deathstroke the Terminator, the trauma of the Vietnam War turns a good man, and good soldier, into a mercenary and a villain. This, in many ways, was DC's response to superhero comics' strongest and longest-lasting commentary on the aftereffects and cultural memory of Vietnam – Marvel Comics' the Punisher.

FROM SPIDER-MAN TO VIETNAM

The Punisher is the comic book character singly most associated with the Vietnam War, and with the plight of Vietnam veterans. The character, complete with the

distinctive and ominous skull-face icon emblazoned on his chest, first appeared in 1974's *Amazing Spider-Man* #129 as a hired assassin who, in his own words, only kills, "those who deserve killing."[19] As he seems to think that the heroic Spider-Man is one such person, he initially appears to be a villain. By the end of the issue, however, writer Gerry Conway and artist Ross Andru present a more complex motivation for the character. It turns out that he has been fooled by one of Spider-Man's enemies, the Jackal, into believing that the hero is actually a murderer. During his battle with Spider-Man, he begins to reveal that he espouses an extreme right-wing take on the corruption of moral authority in America:

> Your kind of scum has ruled this country too long, punk—and I'm out to put a stop to it—any way I can! . . . You're all alike...using whatever means to get control of the public…drugs, gambling, loan-shark operations…some of it legitimate…all of it evil. Sometimes I wonder if that evil's rubbed off on me…but I know that doesn't matter. All that matters is the job.[20]

However, when a drugged Spider-Man almost falls to his death, Punisher realizes that the Jackal is trying to turn him into a common murderer without any ideological beliefs. He decides to save the hero and explains that, "If I'm ever to life with myself, I have to know I'm doing the right thing…and letting a man die by accident doesn't qualify."[21]

From these exchanges, we gradually see that the Punisher is more an anti-hero than villain, a protagonist who is not an archetypal hero in the way that a Superman or Spider-Man is, but who tends to fight for good rather than evil. The Punisher was intended to be an ultra right-wing version of Spider-Man. Both men are out to rid New York City of its crime, but Spider-Man does so through wit, good-heartedness, and, when necessary, a minimal amount of force. The cold and humorless Punisher alternatively uses deadly weapons, ranging from knives to guns to explosives, attempting to end the city's crime permanently by executing its criminals.

It is no coincidence that the character's first appearance occurred in 1974, the same year as the release of the film *Death Wish*, which featured an architect, played by Charles Bronson, who becomes a violent vigilante in New York City after his wife is murdered and his daughter raped by vicious thugs.[22] The movie became a cult classic, seen as a response to a rising crime rate across the nation in the 1970s. In his review for the *Chicago Sun Times*, however, Roger Ebert noted that the film clearly exaggerated these dangers: "This doesn't look like 1974, but like one of those bloody future cities in science-fiction novels about anarchy in the twenty-first century. . . . Urban paranoia is one thing, but *Death Wish* is another."[23] Though the Punisher's New York is not quite as extreme and crime-infested as *Death Wish*'s, his paranoia is the same as Bronson's, as is his violent response through the wholesale slaughter of the criminal element. Similarly, the appeal of the character is much like the appeal of Bronson's character, as Ebert explains, noting that the movie has "an eerie kind of fascination" and that Bronson is, "a steely instrument of violence, with few words and fewer emotions."[24] The Punisher's co-creator Gerry Conway's own words show how the two characters ascribe to similar belief structures:

> The Punisher's view of the world is a simple one – there are good people and there are bad people, and the bad people deserve to die. Some of us might have a problem with that, recognizing that there's a gray area. Almost every "good" person can act in a destructive way at times, and even the worst scum can have a redeeming quality. I think in the Punisher's world-view, redemption isn't possible. I guess he's something of a Calvinist.[25]

Whereas heroes like Spider-Man fight against injustice out of a sense of responsibility, the Punisher is clearly fighting out of a sense of revenge that leads him to far more violence than traditional superheroes, utilizing lethal force against his enemies more often than not. In this first story, though, we don't learn the source of this anger, obtaining only the slightest of hints as to where it comes from.

During their second encounter, the Punisher reveals to Spider-Man that he is a marine. After the super-hero convinces the Punisher that he's been framed for yet another crime, he asks, "What's this whole kick you're on? You said you were a marine—so howcum you're fighting over here?" Punisher responds, "That's my business, super-hero, not yours. Maybe when I'm dead it'll mean something…but right now I'm just a warrior…fighting a lonely war."[26] Thus, we begin to see a tiny piece of the Punisher's psyche revealed – he is a U.S. Marine fighting what he sees to be a private war, one that is more important to him than the ongoing conflict in Vietnam (the unspoken "over there" contrasted to Spider-Man's "over here").

What is most important to note here, then, is that in his very first appearance, before his name or his origin is revealed, the Punisher is subtly linked to Vietnam, and is cast as a soldier and a warrior in an ongoing war against the vague foe that is "evil." This link would be reinforced in the next few appearances of the character, in a pair of Conway/Andre Spider-Man story collaborations. The Punisher was steadfast in his war against crime and corruption, which sent him against Spider-Man, both times, in a series of misunderstandings. Interestingly, the villains that the pair would ultimately team up to fight in these stories would, themselves, contain military backgrounds: the Tarantula, who had been, "a member of a revolutionary band working to free a South American country from its oppressive dictatorship;"[27] and Moses Magnum, who used soldiers who "don't wear clearly identifiable uniforms" to kidnap scientific test specimens from an unnamed country in the "South American jungle."[28] In this latter story, we also get to see the Punisher utilizing what he calls his "War Journal" for the first time, wherein he tape records himself recounting the specifics of his particular missions and assassinations.

It was not until later appearances of the character that readers would learn the full extent of the character's history. Conway's full exploration this origin, would, as Pierre

Comtois explains, “have to wait until other artists who were better able to portray the gritty, violent nature of the character had the chance to handle him.”[29] The first such artist would be Tony DeZuniga, with whom Conway worked on *Marvel Preview* #2, featuring the Punisher’s first starring role. DeZuniga’s darker, more impressionistic and shadowy artwork would prove to be a perfect fit for Conway’s gritty, mature tale. In the course of the story, we finally learn the Punisher’s history, which, as the previous tales had hinted at, ties into Vietnam. Two FBI agents, exploring the Punisher’s past, uncover a military dossier which notes that he, “was twice promoted in the field, in recognition of his extraordinary combat ability—an ability which won him the medal of honor, the bronze star, the silver star and the purple heart—four times! He was about to be awarded the presidential medal of freedom—when he deserted. . . . It seems his wife and two children were killed—and that’s what drove him mad.”[30] Their discussion then segues to the Punisher, himself, thinking about the death of his family: “I’ve heard people call me crazy, and maybe they’re right. . . . I only know there’s a war going on in this country—between citizen and criminal—and the citizens are losing—just as my family lost—just as I lost—so long ago.”[31] The Punisher’s thoughts lead to a flashback, showing how he and his family, on his first day home from Vietnam for a vacation, witness a mafia execution, and are then shot for being witnesses. The man who would become the Punisher survives, but his wife and children do not. Back in the present of the story, he thinks to himself, “After a thing like that, I suppose a man does go—mad. But at that point the war—it doesn’t really matter.”[32]

A second Conway/DeZuniga solo Punisher story, published in early 1976, cemented the link between his traumatic experiences as a soldier and the extreme trauma of witnessing the murder of his family. In this story, which expands upon his origin, including his initial hunt for the mobsters who killed his wife and children, he explains of

their murder that, "What had begun as a picnic…ended as a massacre! I survived it…just as I had Hue, Khe San, and all the other places the corps sent me."[33] After speaking to the police officer investigating the family's murder, who tells him that the men responsible are too well connected to organized crime to be able to prosecute, the frustrated Punisher (whose name had not yet been revealed) exclaims, "I guess you're a good cop! Just like I'm a good marine…only I've been fighting in the wrong war!"[34] By the end of the story, the Punisher has killed all of the men responsible for his family's death, but he still feels unsatisfied: "Every time I go after any kind of criminal scum, I always wonder: 'Is this the time I feel my family's avenged…?' And every time…it never seems enough!"[35]

Though it took about two years, the Punisher's origin was finally revealed, and it was intimately connected to the Vietnam experience. He was a disciplined, exemplary marine, one of the United States' best, who had survived various battles and massacres only to come home and see his own family massacred in a similar manner. He realized that the "real war" he needed to be fighting was against crime, corruption, and urban blight in the United States, not against foreign enemies in Vietnam. This is something of an extremely right-wing anti-Vietnam stance, based around the idea that there are enemies at home who need to be hunted down and executed rather than focusing on political foes in a foreign nation. The Punisher is not, then, anti-war, but rather a proponent of urban warfare, an isolationist focused on the irredeemable enemy at home rather than the irredeemable enemy oversees. He continually hopes to get some kind of satisfaction out of his ongoing anti-crime campaign, but forever finds that satisfaction and catharsis denied to him. The trauma of losing his family – and, underneath that, the trauma of the war he had fought in – was too much for him to bear, turning him into the Punisher permanently, with no end in sight other than his own eventual death.

It would take many years, a series of guest shots, and a great deal of loosening of Comics Code restrictions before the Punisher gained his own series, but it became immensely popular once he did. The period of "grim and gritty" heroes (as the late 1980s and early 1990s has come to be known amongst comics fans) was at its zenith when the Punisher's ongoing series began, and he served a large role in contributing to that trope by taking no prisoners and pulling no punches (or bullets) in his war on crime. The ability to portray greater violence, thanks to the gradual loosening, and direct-market bypassing, of the Comics Code allowed other writers to make explicit the fact that the Punisher – whose name was eventually revealed to be Frank Castle – was as traumatized by Vietnam as by the murder of his family (fan historian R.A. Jones notes that the character's "psyche has run through the complete gamut of emotional traumas"[36]). The skills that the Punisher used on the streets of New York were clearly linked to the training he received and experiences he underwent as a marine, especially in Vietnam, providing a kind of dark continuity between the breakdown of the liberal consensus in the 1960s and 70s with these vicious heroes of the 1980s and 90s.[37]

The Punisher would prove to be so popular in the 80s, in fact, that in 1989 a movie version, simply called *The Punisher*, was released, featuring action star Dolph Lundgren in the title role. A 1988 *Los Angeles Times* article, looking towards the soon-to-be-released film, along with the Tim Burton-directed *Batman* of 1989, focused specifically on how dark superhero comics had gotten during the decade. The article calls the Punisher "near-psychotic," and features a quote from the character's then-current writer/editor Carl Potts that, "He's doing what the reader wishes he could do. He's fighting back."[38] The article also quotes Batman writer/editor Denny O'Neil, speaking to the darkness in the comics as a reflection of the dark outlook permeating urban America as the decade wore on: "We do seem to reflect the preoccupations of our

readers."[39] A 1989 *New York Times* article exploring the darkness of late-80s comics similarly quotes writer/artist George Perez, "There seems to be a great market for catharsis, for a 'Nightmare on Elm Street' type story. There seems to be a market for the real jugular story."[40]

The link between past traumas and the kinds of contemporary breakdowns and societal ruptures these comics were "cathartically" reflecting is a theme that Punisher stories explore time and again. In 1980's *Captain America* #141, the Punisher meets the titular super-hero, one whom he used to idolize but now finds himself at odds with. Moments before preventing the Punisher from murdering a minor criminal, the Captain saves himself from falling to his doom by using a flagpole to leap to the next building, thinking to himself, "this maneuver has worked since 1941…and there's no reason...why it should stop working now!"[41] The confrontation between the two is thus preceded by a reminder that Captain America was forged in World War II, with an ideology that will soon come into conflict with the Punisher's, spawned as it was by the more politically troublesome/turbulent Vietnam War. The Punisher, as a former soldier, indicates that he used to idealize the Captain, before encountering the traumas that turned him into the vigilante he has since become: "I've followed your career for years, sir—and I can admire what you stand for—but this is none of your business! Either back off—now—or I'll be forced to deal with you as I would any criminal scum!"[42] This dialogue indicates that Castle once admired Captain America, and believed in what he stood for, but no longer can pursue those "admirable" ideals himself, and instead finds himself morally compromised by a morally compromised world.

The story continually references Captain America and the Punisher's ideologies as two types of war. This links each character to the respective wars that formed them and their beliefs and explores the difference between the "good war" of World War II and

the "bad war" of Vietnam. The Punisher exclaims to the Captain, while shooting at him, that, "This is war, and crime is the enemy! There's only one way to fight it!" Cap responds, blocking the bullets with his shield (visually striking a defensive pose to the Punishers aggressive, and deadly, offense), "Wake up, soldier—you think you're the only one who's ever lost a loved one? Sure it's a war—but if you fight on their terms, you're no better than they are!"[43] After the Punisher escapes at the end of the story, the Captain makes this connection, and the contrast between the two, even clearer as muses aloud that, "We're…very much alike, the Punisher and I…each of us are fighting a very personal war. But he's got to be stopped. If we should meet again."[44] Despite the similarities between the two – both of them were re-born in war – the different moralities of the times and places of those wars created entirely different soldiers, one who still believes in America's ultimate virtuosity and another who sees America as nothing but a once-great nation that has started to decay.

Though writers were using the metaphor of warfare to describe the Punisher's psychology from the very beginnings of the character, and later began to specifically use his roots as a U.S. Marine in Vietnam as background for both his murderous skill-set and his kill-crazy demeanor, the actual Vietnam experiences that formed Frank Castle into the hardened vigilante went unexplored for over twenty years. The path to a series of stories that finally took a look at those years of Castle's life began in 1986, with the return – for the first time since the conflict had concluded with U.S. defeat – of the Vietnam War comic.

***THE 'NAM*, THE "REAL VIETNAM," AND MEMORIALIZATION**

Following the end of the Vietnam War, stories about the conflict quickly disappeared, reverting to World War II tales that seemed more distant, traditional, and

safer to handle for readers and publishers.[45] This would change in 1985 with the coming of *The 'Nam*, a watershed in the history of war comics – the first Vietnam-set comic to look back on the war with any kind of hindsight, chronicling its memory and its legacy more than its contemporary politics.

Created by writer Doug Murray, a Vietnam veteran, and artist Michael Golden, *The 'Nam* was a different kind of war comic from the ones which had come before – neither a "boy's adventure" series like the World War II-era stories, nor a dark morality tale like EC's war comics, and especially not a superhero-in-disguise story like the original tales featuring Sgt. Rock and Sgt. Fury. Rather, *The 'Nam* attempted to take a realistic look at the Vietnam War, trying to come as close as possible to chronicling the experience as lived by the actual soldiers in the field. As such, the story unfolded in real time, featured the death of lead characters, and existed firmly outside of the Marvel Universe's continuity. The series proved to be a surprise hit, but like the majority of Vietnam War comics it ignored politics and governmental ideologies to instead focus on the situation on the ground for soldiers.

Murray himself explained that one of his goals with *The 'Nam* was to educate readers about the Vietnam experience of American soldiers: "One of the things I knew about Vietnam by the '80s was that a lot of vets, and I include myself in the group, just were uncomfortable talking about experiences. I wanted a way to at least tell a part of the story to the kids and maybe get other people to talk about it as well."[46] Furthermore, he wanted to provide a well-balanced view of the soldiers, neither demonizing nor sanctifying them in all their actions: "I think that writers of all kinds have a responsibility to be even-handed. Not all soldiers are bad guys, not all soldiers are good guys. You kind of portray it that way. If you look at the *Sgt. Rock* comics where he's a

hero, and everyone in an American uniform is essentially a hero, I don't think that was right either. I think you need a balance."[47]

Murray specifically contrasts this style of war comic from the heroicized Sgt. Rock (and, by implication, Sgt. Fury) comics. In another interview, he expands upon why such characters are problematic in a realistic war story:

> The basic problem with doing a war book with some continuing character, be it Sgt. Fury or Sgt. Rock or whatever, is that you're stuck with a situation where you just can't do what happens in war and kill off one of the main characters. In World War II there was a fairly high mortality rate amongst people in a given company or platoon, you're just not going to have the same guys go through four or five years of war and come out the other end, it just didn't happen. . . . You get characters who are effectively invulnerable, even though they are not superheroes, and that automatically kind of takes them out of being realistic war comics and takes them into a different subgenre. It makes them *typical* comic war stories rather than *realistic* comic war stories, and I don't think you can do a realistic comic war series with continuing characters.[48]

This lengthy quote shows how, for Murray, *The 'Nam* was a chance to tell *realistic* stories of Vietnam battles, mixed in with his own experiences on the ground. It became a process of memorializing, of creating a memory of the war that could help those who weren't there to better understand it and its lasting, traumatic impact upon veterans. In many ways it was a comic book equivalent of such Vietnam memoirs as Michael Herr's journalistic *Dispatches*, published in 1978) and, especially, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

O'Brien, a Vietnam veteran who would go on to graduate school at Harvard University, published *The Things They Carried*, a collection of semi-autobiographical short stories about his time in Southeast Asia, in 1990, several years after *The 'Nam* began publication. The collection in certain ways melds together two of his earlier works about Vietnam, the 1973 memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* and the 1979 novel *Going After Cacciato*, to create a hybrid form that, instead of

focusing on truthful recollection or absurdist plot twists, attempts to relate the experience of the grunt soldier in Vietnam through a series of fictionalized perspectives based on O'Brien's own experiences. He was less concerned with faithfully telling his own personal story as he was with creating something experiential, to help readers understand the soldiers' experience of living in and through Vietnam.

Like these O'Brien, Murray was concerned with this sort of experiential reality – creating a *mise-en-scène* that represented what life as a Vietnam grunt was like – as well as with factual and historical fidelity. As the text piece at the back of the first issue (which may have been written by either Murray or by editor Larry Hama) elaborates,

> The 'Nam is the real thing—or at least as close to the real thing as we can get—in a newsstand comic bearing the Comics Code seal. Every action, every fire fight is based on fact . . .. Furthermore, the events in the 'Nam happen in real time. When thirty days pass for the reader, thirty days pass for the characters in the story. When a full year—12 issues—have gone by of the 'Nam, characters introduced in issue #1 will all have rotated back to the states, just like in the real world . . . I will promise that we will show, in basic terms, what the War was really like for those who fought in it.[49]

This interest in telling the "real truth" of the Vietnam War, rather than creating glorified adventure stories, was one shared by other cultural reminiscences about the war, particularly in what Marita Sturken generally classifies as the Vietnam docudrama, "a melding of historical fact and dramatic form . . . in essence a mimetic interpretation of the past. In the cultural reenactment of the original drama, coherence and narrative structure emerge, and fragments of memory are made whole. . . . Like a memorial, the docudrama offers closure, a process that can subsume cultural memory and personal memory into history."[50] *The 'Nam* serves as one such docudrama, turning Murray's research and personal reminiscences about the war into a narrative that he claims to be "the real thing." The comic is important for the same reason that Sturken sees movies about Vietnam as

being important, "precisely because of their capacity to create popular interpretations of the war. Although they are necessarily less complete and less accurate than historical texts, they have greater cultural significance because they reach mass audiences and younger people who may have little prior knowledge of the war."[51]

In its self-presentation as the real thing, as a way of experiencing the war for those who were not there or were too young to have been there, *The 'Nam* is similar in tone to the 1986 Oliver Stone film *Platoon*, which critiqued the futility of the Vietnam War while at the same time attempting to recreate it as faithfully as possible. Ostensibly based on Stone's real-life experiences of as an infantryman in Vietnam, he made the movie to directly counter the glorifying depiction of the war in *The Green Berets*, and it would go on to win the Academy Awards both for Best Picture and Best Director. Stone's depiction of the U.S. soldier is much less flattering than John Wayne's had been, but in many ways it is more sympathetic. *Platoon* features the darker side of Vietnam, and sees the soldiers fighting amongst themselves, murdering civilians, burning villages, and contemplating suicide. This kind of unflinching portrayal of the sheer brutality of war garnered the film rave reviews, with *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby proclaiming it, "possibly the best work of any kind about the Vietnam War since Michael Herr's vigorous and hallucinatory book *Dispatches*."[52]

Like any piece of work about such a contested national event as Vietnam, however, *Platoon* has had its share of detractors. Michael Lee Lanning, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who had experienced Vietnam himself, writes of the film that, "What is a shame for the viewer and an insult to every Vietnam veteran is that the vast majority of those who see it believe it is the ultimate true story of what really happened in the war. In reality, it is an excellent picture but poor, extremely biased history."[53] Lanning is correct in asserting that such a wide variety of dark incidences were extremely unlikely to

have all occurred within one sole platoon, but Stone never claimed that the movie was a direct relation of his experiences; as with *The Things They Carried* or *The 'Nam*, it is intended to be a distillation of events from the war, in this case with an emphasis on the most horrific aspects. In his extensive look at filmic depictions of the war, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, James M. Devine explains that,

> The controversy the film engendered . . . concerned the accusation that once again the soldiers were portrayed as undisciplined, racist, substance-abusing fraggers and baby killers. . . . The debate was very animated. Some veterans proclaimed that finally someone had shown what it was really like to be in Vietnam. Others condemned the portrait and said that they had never seen anyone kill civilians and that morale had not been nearly this bad.[54]

Despite this controversy, though, for many members of the audience the unflinching brutality of the film led to it an aura of verisimilitude; after all, it was written and directed by a veteran, who should know what the experience was like. As Marita Sturken notes, "In self-consciously presenting itself as a historical document, *Platoon* establishes its ideology as naturalized."[55] Because this "naturalized ideology" shows just how horrific the Vietnam War was for the previously "good men" who had to fight it, *Platoon* comes off as extremely anti-war, as indicated by its marketing tag line, "The first casualty of war is innocence."

Like *Platoon*, *The 'Nam* is stringently anti-war, while at the same time remaining vehemently pro-soldier. Both works explore how war can drive men to the depths of great despair and/or evil, but they do so by staying removed from the political ideologies that drove the war. Their treatment of the Vietnam War ironically, "dehistoricizes it so that it becomes all wars" and focuses not on politics but on "the American soldier as the ideological center of the war."[56] Stone, with *Platoon*, and Murray, with *The 'Nam*, each have a deliberate goal – to refocus American memory of the Vietnam War on the trials and tribulations of the troops, particularly focusing on how most were good men caught

up in the madness of battle. Furthermore, both argue that only a rare few succumbed to that madness and committed unjustifiable massacres, an anti-soldier notion that had become a popular image in American culture. The attempt in both mediums is to restore a sense of valor and nobility to Vietnam veterans akin to that attributed to veterans of World War II. Because they were fighting in what many saw as an unpopular, unjustified, and immoral war, the veterans returning from Vietnam were frequently treated with contempt by the American people. By telling the story of their experiences and their sacrifices, both Stone and Murray want to remove this stigma. To do so, they must ignore the ideological implications of that war, and focus not on policy-makers but on individual soldiers. Indeed, most fictionalized narrative representations of Vietnam focus on the "real" war as the one fought on the ground, by grunt soldiers. This can be seen not just in *The 'Nam* and *Platoon*, but also in filmic representations including Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and Brian de Palma's *Casualties of War* (1989).

These stories all needed a certain amount of chronological removal from the war in order to be effectively told, as they were attempts not just to tell "a" story of Vietnam, but rather to tell "*the*" story of Vietnam. By turning the experiences of the soldiers into "the" story, the memorialization of the war and its remembrance by the American public becomes about those individuals, rather than about what is seen as a failed, misguided, and perhaps immoral policy on the part of the U.S. government. These narratives proliferated in the 1980s owing to public discourse regarding how Vietnam should be historicized, including the debate surrounding the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

In 1979, a group of Vietnam veterans formed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund in order to raise money for a memorial to the war in Washington D.C. They gathered enough funds, successfully petitioned Congress for the land, and in 1981 held a public design competition that was to determine what form the memorial would take. The winning design, that of 21-year-old architecture student Maya Lin, was a set of black granite walls set into the ground as a V shape, with the names of those who lost their lives in the war inscribed in order of their date of death. It is notably a memorial, rather than a monument – it does not commemorate a victory, but rather mourns the deaths of those who were lost. The choice of Lin's design, however, led to a flurry of debate regarding how to view this official piece of public history remembering the war. Some critics, for example, saw it as a slap in the face to those who had fought, serving as a recognition of shame; others felt it was too abstract and modernist, and would never be understood nor impact upon the American public; still others pointed to Lin's Chinese-American heritage, painting her as an Asian outsider who felt more sympathy with the Vietnamese than with her fellow Americans. Other reactions, though, were altogether positive, finding the memorial subdued, moving, and effective.[57]

What is important about the monument in the context of narratives such as *The 'Nam* and *Platoon* is that, like these fictional stories, it resists talking about the politics of the war. Sturken argues that, "The history of the Vietnam War is still being composed from many conflicting histories, yet two particular elements within the often opposing narratives are uncontested—the divisive effect of the war on American society and the marginalization of Vietnam veterans."[58] The memorial, by focusing on these two aspects of Vietnam's memory and history, sidesteps the thorny question of the politics involved in the war, choosing instead to look towards a healing process that recognizes the difficulty of confronting the past.[59] The narrative of the memorial is ultimately one of

using the memory of tragedy in order to heal from that tragedy; it does not attempt to open up old wounds, even if those wounds might conceivably be used in contemporary politics to avoid making future mistakes along the same lines as Vietnam. Instead, the memorial becomes a repackaging of nostalgia for the 1960s and Vietnam, focusing on healing and forgiveness rather than political activeness.[60]

The 'Nam follows in this process of rehistoricizing the war, through its dedication to telling "the" story of the grunts on the ground in order to commemorate their experience while at the same ignoring the war's creation of a culture of national political and social divisiveness. Although *'Nam* artist Michael Golden also wanted the book to educate readers about the Vietnam experience by telling "the" story of the soldiers, he took an opposite approach from Murray's narrative realism. From an artistic point of view, Golden felt that the best way to approach experiential reality was *not* with photo-realism, but rather with a looser, more cartoony style that allowed for greater amounts of expression, confusion, and surrealism. As he would later explain in a retrospective interview:

> The Vietnam War wasn't something that can be approached from some sort of nostalgic photo-realism. It wasn't this great national cause like World War II was, where we can all go in and we can do all of these Norman Rockwell moments. It was a confused, nasty, embarrassing moment for this country. And almost to the point of being surreal for those of us who lived through it.[61]

Murray's narrative verisimilitude combined with Golden's artistic looseness to create an ongoing piece of public history – a monthly comic book series that endeavored to memorialize the experiences of US soldiers in Vietnam, educate about the war's progression, and entertain readers, all at the same time. That they did so in a way that created a commercial and critical success is a testament to the way in which their two styles complimented one another.

Another factor that contributed to *The 'Nam*'s success was its distance in time from the Vietnam War. According to Murray, "I tried to do the same sort of thing for DC some years back. It just wasn't time – '72 was a bad time to do Vietnam stories because Vietnam was still going on, to a certain extent, and we were in the Nixon years and that was not a good subject. It was a really taboo subject.[62] It was the distance in time from the actual conflict that allowed for Murray to tell the soldiers-view story of Vietnam without having to also tackle its politics and unpopularity, which was what primarily had made it into such a hot subject. Part of *The 'Nam*'s success arose from this distance, and from its work as a chronicle of fictionalized real-world cultural memory.

This success was reflected in the comics' letters column, which featured a multitude of notes from readers, including veterans, who appreciated the series' realism and its attempt to inform its audience about the actual conditions in Vietnam. In the very first letters column, in issue 3, James J. Berryhill, PhD, notes that, "It's about time someone told the folks back here in the world just how dinkee dow the whole scene over there really was. I did my turn in '67/68 as an O-2 at Trai Duc Co camp on the Cambodian border."[63] Marine William Krull presents a similar appreciation for the series, sharing his own childhood memories of the war and expressing a desire to learn about the memories of others:

> It's about time somebody in the comic world created an honest, insightful Vietnam series like this. . . . People need to know and remember Vietnam. It *did* happen. . . . My own brother was drafted and reluctantly went. . . . Obviously, I know a little, perhaps from you I'll learn something more. I don't judge the rights and wrongs of our government. I just hope she's right. Vietnam was all over when I joined the Marines (or is it), but I do remember.[64]

Still another letter, from a reader named Malcolm Warren, notes his appreciation that the series is not a traditional war comic, and especially unlike the stories of Sgt. Rock or Sgt. Fury: "THE 'NAM is different from any war comic I've ever read. It bears a closer

relationship to some recent war films than it does to Sgt. Fury or Sgt. Rock . . . It's no wonder that Viet Nam, a war which changed our whole perception of war, couldn't be shoehorned into the standard 'war comic' genre."[65] The series spoke to a wide audience, as comics historians Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs note, becoming a hit, "not just with GIs and war buffs who'd been reduced to *Sgt. Rock* and no other war comics, but with fans who loved Michael Golden's art, critics who wanted to see comics grapple with reality, and the mass media."[66]

As *The 'Nam* progressed, however, it evolved away from those reader-praised aspects that defined its initial mission and success. After twelve issues, Michael Golden left the series, but Doug Murray stayed on. Five years later, a series of editorial shifts led to Murray moving on from the book, as well. He explained that, "Basically we changed editors several times and . . . they wanted a book that was a regular comic book. They didn't want real-time, they wanted to include superheroes, and I just didn't want to do that."[67] It was after Murray's departure that, as Conroy notes, "the real timescale was dropped [and] the jingoism ramped up,"[68] thus moving the book away from Murray's goal of a real-time chronicle of actual Vietnam history and experiences.

The clearest departure from this came very shortly after Murray left the book, with a storyline in issues 52 and 53 of *The 'Nam* entitled "The Punisher Invades The 'Nam." Seeing an opportunity for crossover storytelling – as a way to boost sales by drawing the attention to of superhero readers to the war book, and vice versa – Marvel editorially decided to place Frank Castle into the midst of *The 'Nam's* ongoing story. Marvel editor (and '*The Nam*'s final editor) Tim Tuohy would explain,

> So into an era of war protests, civil rights demonstrations, Woodstock, presidential assassinations, school segregation and police actions, why bring the Punisher? . . . Whether or not we like to admit it in today's world of blind political correctness, we like the Punisher. The thought of a crime-free society deeply

> appeals to us. The Punisher's methods may give you pause, but the end result is intriguing. What if the same theme which drives the regular Punisher books—get the job done and ask questions later—was applied to the Vietnam War.[69]

Besides the commercial appeal of placing the Punisher in *The 'Nam*, Marvel editorial claimed to also have had an artistic purpose for the move – the possibility of exploring what an extremely violent, extreme right-wing vigilante crusader would do in full-out wartime battle.

When Murray refused to feature The Punisher, and left the book, writer Roger Salick, along with artist Mike Harris, told the story instead. These two issues show Sgt. Frank Castle as already being every bit the skilled fighter that the Punisher would prove to be. An expert sniper, he is sent against "The Monkey," his opposite number from amongst the Viet Cong. As he hunts this enemy down, he leaves his mark etched into trees and on the bodies of killed soldiers – as one Viet Cong soldier describes it, "The symbol of the skull!"[70], which is to one day become his "superhero" icon. Frank Castle is already a proto-Punisher, even down to utilizing the telltale skull symbol that will one day define his uniform as an urban vigilante, as well as painting the symbol on his own chest to foreshadow that uniform. Rather than acting as a frightened, confused soldier – as the realistic soldiers in the early *'Nam* stories had – he is a rough-and-tumble, hyper-masculine hero, no different from Sgt. Rock or Sgt. Fury save for the fact that he is more violent. The story ends with his internal monologue reflecting this impervious swagger: "Maybe [the Viet Cong]'ll think twice before crossing their next marine sniper. And if they don't, fine. I'll be around."[71]

Cleary, this was not *The 'Nam* that Doug Murray envisioned. However, it was a *'Nam* that readers enjoyed, as the storyline proved so popular that it spawned several sequels. In the first of these, by Chuck Dixon (who was a regular *Punisher* writer) and

artist Kevin Kobasic, we find out that Castle was a hard, powerful, take-control super soldier from his first days in Vietnam. One soldier relates this story to another:

> It was his third day in country. Kid was still a teenager. . . . Tough kid from Brooklyn. Never ran from a fight. But he was never in a fight like this one. They were choppered in to support a convoy stalled by V.C. on a supply road. They never got to see the road. [Castle] was too dumb or too cold to be scared. Maybe he was too *scared* to be scared. . . . He went on automatic. He did the job they paid him to do. He covered his approach. He found them. He took them out. He punished them. He kept it together and got the survivors out of the bad place. Every one of those men would be dead if not for [Castle]. He done good.[72]

The word "punish" is used intentionally here, as it is repeated throughout the two issues, particularly in relation to his revenge upon corrupt soldiers murdering weaker members of their unit in order to steal money from them. The story ends with an explanation that, after his tour in Vietnam, Castle re-upped for several more tours, having found his calling, his duty, to "punish."

In the third and final "Punisher Invades The 'Nam" story we see how Castle has now become so attached to his violent calling that, when he is temporarily sent home, he discovers that he, "wasn't ready for home life…for Maria, Christie, or little Frankie."[73] The rest of the story is a fairly by-the-numbers action-adventure tale of Frank Castle rescuing American POWs. In its epilogue, though, a present-day Castle at the Vietnam War Memorial hands his Congressional Medal of Honor over to another vet, in a wheelchair. The Vet exclaims to his nearby friend, "I'm in a wheelchair…but at least my injuries are only physical…His, my friend, on the other hand, go much deeper."[74]

In this final Punisher/'*Nam* story, Frank Castle acts suspiciously like Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo character from the *Rambo* series of films, a right-wing franchise that reacted to Vietnam through the reiteration of violent masculine action-hero tropes. The series' first installment, 1982's *First Blood* (based on David Morrell's 1972

novel of the same name), finds Rambo, a Medal of Honor-winning veteran, coming to a small American town, looking for a comrade from Vietnam who, it turns out, has died of cancer caused by Agent Orange. He butts heads with the town's sheriff, leading to flashbacks of his time as a prisoner of war, which causes him to snap and use the skills he learned in Vietnam to take on an increasingly huge police and military force. At the movie's climax, surrounded by police, Rambo breaks down crying, recalling a gruesome story of a friend's death at the hands of a Viet Cong child operative. He pointedly notes that the war never ended because "somebody would not let us win" before finally turning himself in to the police. Although *First Blood* is ultimately a showcase for Stallone's strength as an action star, its politics become clear with this ending – Vietnam was lost by bureaucracy, when it could (and should) have been won by dedicated soldiers. Rambo, then, comes home to America still believing that he is fighting a war, and when he finds none to engage in he must start his own, just as Franck Castle does with his war on crime and urban blight. Michael Lee Lanning notes that, "Although [Rambo] is a sympathetic character, he does veterans no favors by establishing the superhero-vet film genre."[75] This genre would prove to be so popular that *First Blood* would spawn three sequels, all written (and the fourth directed) by Stallone, with each of these focusing on Rambo as an action hero rather than a troubled veteran. This was only possible, though, thanks to a crucial alteration between the novel and the film; in Morrell's book, Rambo dies at the end. Rather than maintaining the artistic statement that this makes regarding the doomed fate of the veteran, the movie chooses to keep him alive to appear in further adventures, much like a superhero comic book would.

Although the *First Blood* established the "superhero-vet" on film, he certainly preexisted Rambo in the form of The Punisher. Much as Vietnam is the origin point for Stallone's action hero, the series of Punisher *'Nam* stories attempt to explain how the war

served as an extended origin for the vigilante. The first story shows how he was already a skilled, powerful killer and hunter of men before leaving Vietnam; the second shows him as a toughened soldier from his first moment in-country, who learns to display that toughness via unleashing his rage against those who need to be "punished"; and the third story shows how, once he has given that anger free reign, he can no longer fit in at home with his wife and kids, and finds his true "family" to be his fellow soldiers, at "home" amidst the carnage and battles of Vietnam. Brought together, the stories show how the hellish warzone of Vietnam turned Frank Castle, a tough Brooklyn boy, into the Punisher, a figure who simply used the death of Castle's family as an excuse to vent his rage and live in a perpetual state of war. They serve as commentary on the ways in which a war can break a man down and turn him into a haunted shell, concerned not with living a good or fulfilling life but only with punishing both himself and others.

THE PUNISHER MAX

The notion of the Punisher's origins lying in Vietnam, rather than with the murder of Castle's family, was one picked up again in the mini-series *Born*, by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson, the same team who redefined a mature, violent, continuity-free Sgt. Fury.[76] Ironically, although the original Punisher *'Nam* stories were told as part of a process of bringing a non-continuity book into the continuity of the Marvel Universe, Ennis and Robertson's exploration of similar themes in *Born*, as in *Fury*, picks and chooses what it wants from continuity as a jumping-off point for a more realistic war story. *Born* was, in fact, something of a spin-off mini-series from Ennis' non-continuity Punisher series, entitled *Punisher MAX* to indicate that it was part of Marvel's mature readers "MAX" imprint. Though Ennis had initially created several Punisher stories that, despite their over-the-top (often cartoonish) violence, were set within the Marvel

Universe, he used *Punisher MAX* as his opportunity to explore more mature themes, free of the strictures of superhero continuity. In *Born*, he and Robertson took this approach to Frank Castle's days in Vietnam.

Born is told from the point of view of a draftee named Stevie Goodwin who is counting down his remaining days in Vietnam. Goodwin introduces us to Frank Castle with a full-page spread of the square-jawed soldier, containing the single caption, "I will not fall in love with war like Captain Castle."[77] Goodwin talks about the future he hopes for when he gets home, married to a beautiful women who will give birth to masculine sons. He fantasizes about how he will take his sons camping and, "show them the greatest country in the world: the Promised Land that is their birthright. The good America. The real America. And not this tragic misstep into darkness."[78] The use of the word "good" hardly seems incidental or unintentional here, associated as it is with World War II, the "good war." The "tragic misstep" of Vietnam is contrasted to the earlier war, and is shown to have birthed, as Goodwin later calls it, "Americans through the looking-glass, lost in Vietnam."[79] In illustration of what makes Vietnam so tragic, and of how inhuman it has made its participants, Goodwin's romanticized speech is shown via captions that appear above US soldiers massacring Viet Cong troops, beheading them, scalping them, and turning a nearby river red with their blood.

For Castle, such occurrences have become all he knows, and the only kind of life he can handle. A U.S. general explains to Castle that the base he is stationed at is soon to be closed and all of the men stationed there will be sent home. Castle then tricks the general into revealing himself to a Viet Cong sniper, essentially murdering him. An internal monologue, a caption of white text on a black background (reminiscent of the Punisher's white skull on a black bodysuit), speaks to Castle:

> Very clever, Frank. You got your war a stay of execution. But it won't last. You know that. The things the General said are true. This wonderland of yours is coming to an end. I know you love this. Talk all you want about your duty about stopping Charlie . . . we both of us know that isn't it. When did you ever feel so alive? I can fix it so you can do this forever, Frank. There'll be a price to pay, but you can keep on going and never have to stop. Just say the word I can fix it.[80]

Castle – much like Nick Fury in Ennis' take on the character– has fallen in love with war, and will not let anyone keep him from it.

The final issue of the four-part series begins with Goodwin's most poetic monologue, revealed in captions over the image of a soldier slowly dying in agony, his eyes turned to bloody red pulp running from his eyes. In this speech, Ennis finally has the chance to present his view of the specifics Vietnam War, and why it was so individually tragic for America (beyond the sense of all war being tragic) and especially for the soldiers forced to fight in it:

> There is a Great Beast loose in the world of men. It awoke in dark times, to fight a terrible enemy. It stormed through Europe, across the far Pacific, and crushed the evil that it found there underfoot. But when it was victorious, when the crooked cross and the rising sun were done with, the Great Beast's keeper found that it would not go back to sleep. The Beast has many heads, and on its heads are written names: Lockheed. Bell. Monsanto. Dow. Grumman. Cold. And many more. And they are very, very hungry. So the Great Beast must be fed: and every generation, our country goes to war to do just that. A war for war's sake, usually. And one that could have been avoided. But there must be blood, in extraordinary quantities, and whether it is foreign or American is of no consequence at all. And so, today, at Firebase Valley Forge, our turn has finally arrived. Today is the day we feed the Beast.[81]

Goodwin's monologue transforms *Born* into one of the most politically charged Vietnam War comics ever produced by a mainstream publisher. In this one speech, Ennis implicates the entire international military-industrial complex in creating a war for financial reasons. There is no exploration of the philosophy of democracy versus capitalism, as he does not see that as being the cause of the war; rather, from the perspective of history (and from the perspective of an Irish, rather than American,

education and upbringing), Ennis looks back and sees *money* as the cause of *all* of America's wars since World War II. Although in *Fury: Peacemaker* he showed the political nature of the so-called "good war," denying that there was much good or clear-cut about it, here in *Born* Ennis compares even that war favorably to those that have followed it, wars fought to make men wealthy rather than to stop a perceived evil.

It is this "Great Beast," this unnecessary war fought for greed's sake, which unleashes the darkness within men like Frank Castle. His eventual change into the Punisher thus becomes symbolic as an extreme case of post-traumatic stress disorder[82] – he is a soldier who was so changed by the kind of brutal warfare created by the military-industrial complex that such violence became a core aspect of his very being.

The moment at which the Beast takes Castle over comes at the end of the issue, after Goodwin and all the other soldiers at Valley Forge have died in a surprise Viet Cong assault. The internal monologue returns as a battered and bloody Castle fights alone against the enemy forces: "I can give it to you, Frank— There'll be a price, but nothing's free. . . . I'll give you what you've wanted all these years. . . . A war that lasts forever, a war that never ends, *but you have to say the word, Frank*—" Finally reacting to the voice only he hears, Frank seethes with rage and simply states, "Yes." [83] When he returns home from the war and sees his family, he can't quite seem to remember this moment, or even how he survived, but suddenly the voice returns, and it causes him to see his family inside of the skull shape that will soon become his trademark. The voice says to him, "You remember I mentioned there'd be a price…?"[84] Though Castle responds with a horrified look, the voice, whatever it may be, is clearly more powerful than him: "Too late, Frank. Nothing you can do about it . . . And who am I? Let's just say we're in the same line of work, Frank. And I've been at it for a lot, lot longer than you. Let's just say we'll be good friends, although you'll never hear from me again, and you'll keep me

busy doing what I like to do."[85] This speech is wildly open to interpretation – it could indicate that the voice in Castle's head is the spirit of the Punisher, finally awakening, or it could be some kind of devil figure. On a symbolic level, though, the internal monologue represents the voice of the "Great Beast" with which the issue opened, the disembodied hunger for war that has lasted through the ages and is now represented by an endless series of war to feed the hunger of the military-industrial complex. Ennis' own proposal for the series reinforces this idea, noting that, "Frank might represent the grim, unstoppable, end-in-itself U.S. war machine at its worst."[86]

For Ennis, the Punisher is inextricably linked to Vietnam. He represents the impact of the U.S. industrial warfare machine that became a huge business following World War II, as well as the haunted veteran who returns home only to lose his family to divorce because he cannot become re-accustomed to domestic life. Ennis, though, goes even further than just critiquing the Vietnam War. Rather, he connects the Punisher to a particular early twenty-first century view of Vietnam which sees it as one in a series of meaningless, unnecessary wars leading up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that were ongoing at the time of *Born*'s publication. It is the spirit of that endless need to be at war that takes over Frank Castle as he becomes the Punisher, and thus the Punisher's private war becomes forever attached to the "Great Beast" of war, which was born in World War II but finally fully awoke in the jungles of Vietnam.

JASON AARON'S VIETNAM

When Garth Ennis moved on from *Punisher MAX*, the series had multiple writers before it was restarted with the creative team of writer Jason Aaron and artist Steve Dillon. Aaron, though likely chosen for the title thanks to his popular and gritty take on such "darker" Marvel characters as Wolverine and Ghost Rider, was also a strong fit for

the character because of the critically acclaimed series that launched his career – a Vietnam War story with artist Cameron Stewart called *The Other Side* which looks at the war not just from the point of view of American protagonists, but also through the eyes of a North Vietnamese soldier. The title of the series refers only to the "other side" of death that the characters are constantly worrying about, as well as the "other side" of any conflict. We see the motivations and fears of two enemy soldiers who come into conflict with one another because they bear personal animosity but simply because larger, impersonal forces are telling them to fight.

While *The Other Side* revealed Aaron's interest in, and knowledge of, Vietnam, he would continue to explore in the war, and its ramifications in the present day, in his superhero work that was to follow. It is in the afterward to the collection of *The Other Side* that we learn where this ongoing theme in his work emerged from – his relationship with his cousin, Gustav Hasford, whose Vietnam memoir *The Short-Timers* became the basis for Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. For Aaron, working on Vietnam stories is an aspect of personal memory that he wants to make public (the title of the afterward to *The Other Side* is "Semper Gus: A Remembrance of Gustav Hasford"), sharing the stories of his cousin and other soldiers like him that may not otherwise be revealed publicly. In much of his superhero comics work, Aaron has taken this interest in the soldiers and stories of Vietnam and, using the tropes of the genre, explored the ramifications of the war on the psyches of individual soldiers as well as on the American psyche. To examine the latter subject, Aaron utilized the flag-wearing Captain America in his 2011 *Ultimate Captain America* series, with frequent collaborator Ron Garney as the artist.

Ultimate Captain America, set in Marvel's alternate "Ultimate" continuity where many of the characters have been given slightly more modernized origins, tells of Captain

America's conflict with a man named Frank Simpson. A government agent tells the Captain that Simpson was, "Once upon a time a guy a lot like you. A kid raised on apple pie who loved his country and wanted to do his part. In the years after you disappeared, the government kept looking for someone to take your place. Frank Simpson answered that call."[87] Simpson volunteered himself to undergo treatments that would make him into a new Captain America, but, lacking the original formula that had worked on Steve Rogers in the 1940s, the government scientists had to resort to painful implants and steroid supplements. This updated Captain America, created through more aggressive procedures, was then placed into a more aggressive war – Vietnam:

> Poor kid signed up thinking he was gonna be like Steve Rogers storming the beach at Normandy, machine gunning Nazis. Instead he found himself in places like Dak To, Khe Sanh, and the A Shau Valley. They dumped him into a meat grinder and left him there. For five years . . . They figured their new Captain America was gonna turn the tide of war. But then . . . one day in 1972 he just walked into the jungle and was gone.[88]

Unlike Steve Rogers, who fought in a "good war," Frank Simpson was sent to the "meat grinder" of Vietnam, and paid the price for it by losing his faith in the America he grew up believing in.

When Simpson reemerges in Southeast Asia, trying to create an army of super soldiers like him, he comes into conflict with Captain America. The battle between the two is every bit as much ideological as it is physical. In their initial contact, Simpson defeats Rogers, and in the process gives a speech that could be directed at America in general, especially America's post-World War II "Cold War consensus" vision of itself, rather than specifically at the Captain:

> You don't even realize how much the rest of the world despises you. Don't realize or don't care. You're not a hero to them . . . You're reviled . . . You wear that flag on your chest and you don't even know what it means . . . Captain

> America of World War II, meet the Captain America of Vietnam. I'll show you what America *really* stands for.[89]

The World War II/Vietnam War distinction is made explicit here, and it's this dichotomy between the two soldiers that defines the remainder of the series. Rogers eventually tracks Simpson to the jungles of Cambodia, where Simpson and his army of super soldiers capture him. Simpson then proceeds to torture Rogers, in an attempt to "reeducate" him about the many horrors and acts of war perpetrated by the U.S. government and its agents. In a long preamble to these torture sessions, Simpson outlines how he views himself not as a traitor, but as an idealist who was betrayed by his country, a country given over to something akin to Ennis' "Great Beast":

> I never slaughtered any civilians. Never raped anyone. Never killed a single baby. All I ever did was fight. I went where they told me to go. Killed who they told me to kill. I believed every one of their lies. I imagine you've read their file on me. I bet it says I snapped, says the war made me crazy, pushed me over the edge. Probably uses words like 'post traumatic stress disorder.' But they're wrong. Vietnam didn't make me crazy. It made me *sane*. For the first time in my life. Vietnam opened my eyes to the truth. I still love our country. I know you won't believe me when I say that, but it's true. I have never betrayed the United States of America. It was the federal government who betrayed *me*. Who used me as their thug, to try and remake the world in their image. Just like they're now using you. . . . It's not your fault you're so naïve, Rogers. You were trapped in that ice for a very long time. Let's begin to catch you up on some of what you missed, shall we? Today's lesson…Richard Milhous Nixon…the most *evil* man who ever lived.[90]

This extreme speech vilifies not just Richard Nixon, but also the entire United States government. In a world of superheroes and supervillains, Simpson posits that the worst villain of all is a government that betrays and abuses its own soldiers, as he feels the U.S. did in Vietnam. As a result of this argument, Rogers, though never giving in to Simpson externally, begins to doubt himself and his country. However, when he finds salvation in the form of a snake in his cell, which he uses to attack Simpson and escape, he attributes

it to a miracle sent from God. The final coda of the series brings into question whether or not Captain America is correct to believe in the inherent goodness and morality of his country. When he tells his teammate, Hawkeye, about the snake, Hawkeye responds by pointing out that the snake has a Biblical association not with God but with Satan: "For as many people as there are around the world that love us, there are just as many, if not more, who'd be happy to see us dead. So…I guess my question would be…Why are you so certain it's *God's* work we're doing and not, you know…the *other* guy's?"[91] *Ultimate Captain America*, as much as it is a superhero adventure, is the story of a conflict between three Americas – the America that fought World War II, the America that fought Vietnam, and the America that exists today in the aftermath of both. Aaron resists giving a clear-cut answer as to who is in the moral right in the story; although Simpson is clearly a villain, it was the American military machine that led him to that path. Though Captain America, espousing a 1940s mentality and morality, would like to believe that God is on the side of America and her patriots, the more modern warrior, Hawkeye, brings into question whether that is an accurate assessment.

Ultimate Captain America's conflicted ending is yet another way of superhero comics remembering Vietnam. In this case, the Vietnam War is a catalyst for moment in which the American dream, as represented by its super-soldier, is called into question. Steve Rogers finally comes to realize that a point of view based on his experience in World War II is no longer reliable. Vietnam, Aaron argues, shattered the American psyche. While the Punisher represents the ways in which the Vietnam War broke individual soldiers, *Ultimate Captain America* uses a series of metaphors to speak to how the war impacted upon *all* Americans, not just those who fought on the ground. The image of American as a flawless paragon of virtue "making the world safe for Democracy" in the aftermath of its "rescue" of Europe during World War II was revealed

to be a piece of propaganda which Vietnam thoroughly refuted. Aaron looks back on the Vietnam War as a conflict that not only destroyed the post-World War II image of the noble American soldier, but which also deconstructed the myth of America as an inherently noble nation.

In his final run of *Punisher MAX* Aaron shifts this focus to the way in which the war shattered Frank Castle's psyche. Through a series of flashbacks Aaron treads on much the same ground that Ennis did in *Born*, showing how Vietnam gave Castle an unquenchable desire to be at constant war, killing his enemies with righteous fury. However, Aaron then puts this changed figure up against the world he has returned home to, where he feels distant from everything and everyone, especially his family. Castle only manages to feel alive when he visits violent retribution upon the mobsters who are threatening his coworkers at a meatpacking plant. When given the opportunity to join up with the government and fight a sanctified war against crime, he takes the offer. He brings his family to New York's Central Park in order to tell his wife that he wants a divorce, which (in grand ironical-tragic style) turns out to be the very afternoon that they are killed in the park.

While Ennis' *Born* showed that the Punisher came into being in Vietnam, before Castle's family was murdered, Aaron's *Punisher MAX* series calls into question whether their deaths actually played a role at all, or if Castle would have become the vigilante, anyway, and used their deaths as an excuse. His internal monologue asks this very question: "I don't know at exactly what point I first became what it is that I am now. Maybe it was Vietnam. Maybe that day in the park. Or maybe I'd been that way all along. All I know is, once I finally embraced it, I quickly realized…I was never going to stop."[92] What Aaron is saying here is that the Vietnam War was every bit as traumatic for Castle as witnessing the murder of his wife and children. While *Ultimate Captain*

America looked at Vietnam as a national tragedy, one that altered America's belief in itself, *Punisher MAX* views it as a personal tragedy on par with the death of family members, a tragedy that was able to alter, and even alienate, a man's very humanity. The war, combined with his personal losses, killed Frank Castle, turning him from a man living a normal life into a machine fighting an unending, unwinnable war. This war, at the conclusion of Aaron's run, finally kills Castle physically as well as mentally.

CONCLUSION

Unlike World War II, the Vietnam War was not the birthplace of superheroes. Whereas the former conflict brought forth Superman, Captain America, the Justice Society, and a panoply of other iconic heroes still starring in their own comic books to this day, Vietnam was too controversial to serve as the crucible for a spandex-clad crusader. Rather, Vietnam primarily brought forth two story types – the realistic remembrances striving to tell the "true" story, such as Doug Murray's run on *The 'Nam*; and the fictionalized tales of traumatized veterans, such as the Punisher.

As with World War II, however, comics' own "Great Beast," the ravenous figure of "continuity," was, with enough time, able to gobble up both sorts of Vietnam stories and turn them into part of a comic book universe by dulling their political and cultural implications. In the case of *The 'Nam*, Murray's real-life stories were eventually pushed aside by editors' desires to feature Marvel Universe characters, such as the Punisher, in the book. Conversely, in the case of the Punisher's own title, creators needed to break free from the constraints of Marvel's continuity in order to tell truly searching, and bluntly and graphically violent, stories that probingly examined the ways in which Vietnam shaped Frank Castle.

Continuity, we have seen, can be a double-edged sword. Though it requires that stories must adhere to a common denominator, the superhero "universe" that itself lacks any sort of sustained realism beyond pseudoscience, it also provides the opportunity to utilize the embodied memory of that fictional universe to comment upon and revisit moments of real-world history. Continuity, for all its faults and flaws, allows for writers to easily revisit the past again and again. Since the 1980s, though, it has also allowed creators to completely and literally *rewrite* that past, as the next chapter will show.

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[2] Bill Mantlo, writer, George Tuska, artist, et. al., "Long Time Gone," Iron Man 78, September 1975, 2-3.
[3] Ibid, 18.
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[5] Quoted in Michael Lee Lanning, Vietnam at the Movies (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) 237.
[6] See Ibid.
[7] Quoted in Jeremy M. Devine, Vietnam At 24 Frames A Second (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 38-39.
[8] Maarten Pereboom, History And Film: Moving Pictures and the Study of the Past (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011), 92.
[9] See David Huxley, "Naked Aggression: American Comic Books and the Vietnam War," in Tell Me Lies About Vietnam: Cultural Battles for the Meaning of the War, ed. Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 97.
[10] Robert Kanigher, writer, Ross Andru, artist., et. al., "The Soldier of Steel!," Superman 216, May 1969, 1.
[11] Ibid, 2.
[12] Ibid, 4.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Marv Wolfman, writer, George Perez, artist, et. al., "The Judas Contract: Book Three – There Shall Come a Titan!," Tales of the Teen Titans 44, July 1984, 3.
[15] Ibid, 3.
[16] Ibid, 10.
[17] Ibid, 11.
[18] Ibid, 12.
[19] Gerry Conway, writer, Ross Andru, artist, et. al., "The Punisher Strikes Twice!," The Amazing Spider-Man 129, February 1974, 2.
[20] Ibid, 9-10.
[21] Ibid, 14.
[22] Both *Death Wish* and the Punisher would come to have tragic real-life echoes of urban (and suburban) vigilantism, in such publicized cases as Bernhard Goetz' 1984 shooting of four young black men who had allegedly tried to mug him on a New York City a subway, and "neighborhood watchman" George Zimmerman's 2012 fatal shooting of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida for "suspicious behavior." In both cases, some pundits viewed the shooters as heroes, while others merely saw them as

violent, and potentially racist, gun-lovers who viewed themselves as above the law. Both men were found not guilty of the most serious crimes they were charged with.
[23] Roger Ebert, "Death Wish," Chicago Sun-Times, January 1, 1974, http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19740101/REVIEWS/401010313 (accessed January 8, 2013).
[24] Ibid.
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[26] Gerry Conway, writer, Ross Andru, artist, et. al., "The Punisher Strikes Twice!," The Amazing Spider-Man 129, February 1974, 2.
[27] Gerry Conway, writer, Ross Andru, artist, et. al., "Shoot-Out in Central Park," The Amazing Spider-Man 135, August 1974, 10.
[28] Gerry Conway, writer, Ross Andru, artist, et. al., "To Sow The Seeds of Death's Day," Giant-Size Spider-Man 4, April 1975, 8.
[29] Pierre Comtois, Marvel Comics in the 1970s: An Issue By Issue Field Guide To A Pop Culture Phenomenon (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2011), 157.
[30] Gerry Conway, writer, Tony DeZuniga, artist, et. al., "Death Sentence," Marvel Preview 2, August 1975, 14-15.
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[32] Ibid, 17-18.
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[44] Ibid, 17.
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[46] Quoted in Brian Jacks, "Memorial Day: A Tribute," SlushFactory.com, May 2001, http://www.slushfactory.com/features/articles/052502-murray.php (accessed June 22, 2012).
[47] Quoted in Ibid.
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[50] Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 85.

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Chapter 6 – Crisis Control: *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and the Creation of A Unified Comic Book Universe*

In 1985, DC Comics recognized its fiftieth anniversary.[1] To celebrate this landmark event in comics publishing history, the company put out a twelve-issue miniseries, titled *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* which promised "major and permanent changes to the entire DC line."[2] For once, such promises proved to be something less than hyperbolic. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (referred to hereafter as "*Crisis*") brought lasting change to DC Comics from a narrative point of view, and heralded even further-reaching changes for the comic book industry and fan community. As the first multi-part, universe-spanning comic book crossover of its kind[3], *Crisis* showed the two major superhero comic book publishers how they could utilize the continuity established by decades-worth of stories to weave together a cohesive, metatextual tapestry that appealed to long-time readers and made huge profits.

For comics creators working in the industry at the time, the success of the series displayed how epic narratives could be created out of this metatextual history in order to up the stakes for the superheroic protagonists of the stories. Moreover, the series suggested that these same epics could enact lasting change that affected not just individual characters, but entire universes. The series, according to Adam C. Murdough in an in-depth analysis of the metatext of *Crisis*, "functioned as a powerful mythological mediator in the introduction of new ways for superhero stories to interact with their own fictional and historical contexts and with their audience,"[4] one which ultimately, through "the intermingling of characters from different genres and different 'parallel Earths,' constitutes a violent regurgitation of the entire 'cultural memory' of DC Comics fans, in preparation for the 'new Creation' to come."[5] As a financial and, to a lesser extent, critical success, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* thus taught the makers of superhero comics that the rules were literally being rewritten, and that these fictional realms were

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* Portions of this chapter appeared as "Monitoring the Past: DC Comics' Crisis on Infinite Earths and the Narrativization of Comic Book History" in *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* (Volume 6, Issue 2, Spring 2012).

constantly in conversation with their own histories and past narratives – that is to say, their cultural memory.

Crisis, as perhaps the ultimate example of a comic book universe retcon and the largest superhero "continuity node," deals intimately with the history of DC Comics' characters and its entire universe. *Crisis* writer Marv Wolfman, editor Len Wein, and artist George Perez had all come out of the second wave of comic book fandom, and used their encyclopedic fascination with the DC Universe to craft a tale that dealt obsessively with touching upon all aspects of DC's history in order to create a definitive "DCU" tale. *Crisis* was the first attempt to tell a story about an entire superhero *universe*, rather than an individual hero or team of heroes. As part of creating a narrative about the DC Universe, Wolfman and his co-creators would come to engage with the entire history of that Universe – both its publishing history and the ongoing narrative embedded within those publications. *Crisis* used the history of the DC Universe to "forever" change its future, thus engaging in the form of literary cultural memory defined by Renate Lachmann as, "the process by which a culture, where 'culture' is a book culture, continually rewrites and retranscribes itself, constantly redefining itself through its signs."[6] *Crisis* was an epic rewriting and retranscription of DC Comics' history, and it turned this kind of revisioning of past stories into a tool that defined a new way for comics to engage with their history – by willfully ignoring, forgetting, and/or negating it.

As a text that stands at the crossroads of corporate interest in redefining a comic book universe so as to make it more salable, fannish interest in creating ordered continuity out of a chaotic publishing history, and readers' interest in understanding what all of these changes meant and how they would come to be, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is awash in cultural memory, and must be examined as a crucial text in exploring how creators and fans of superhero comics consider and utilize the past. *Crisis* shows how the literary sensibilities of superhero comic books, the ways they "rewrite" and "speak back" to their own textual antecedents, aligns with their implementation of history as a part of their narrative, allowing creators to revisit the past with an

eye towards crafting new visions of that history, both real and imagined. As such, the work of literary theorist Hayden White on historiography can be usefully applied to an examination of *Crisis* in order to display how it serves as a sort of "Rosetta Stone" to how superhero comic books have come, in the past three decades, to view the presentation of the past, which would prove crucial to how DC and Marvel Comics would respond to September 11th, 2001.

Though an attempt to make DC more accessible, *Crisis* also functioned to cement continuity as the most important element of superhero comics, serving as the birthplace of modern, obsessive superhero comic continuity. As such, it is important to examine *Crisis*, and the way in which it rewrote DC's fictional past. Superhero comics have come to view the past as entirely mutable, which has shaped how they approach public memory ever since. In this chapter, I will examine *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as a historical text and as piece of historical writing; that is, a text relating a history, itself. *Crisis* was a turning point for both of the duel aspects of cultural memory in comics. It showed the fans that there was a new and different way to view comics history, and it did so by showing that continuity could, and henceforth would, always be open to massive, often apocalyptic, fluctuation and frustrations.

CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS: A CORPORATE HISTORY

In 1985, DC Comics was feeling its age.[7] After five decades of storylines that involved multiple Earths across a panoply of alternate dimensions, including several conflicting versions of such iconic figures as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, DC's top editorial staff felt that the DC Universe was a confusing mess of contradictory narratives that was gruelingly inaccessible to new readers. They saw the company's golden anniversary as an opportunity to make the kinds of sweeping changes that might draw in new readers and create fresher stories that weren't as directly mired in the past, while at the same time celebrating the parts of the past that long-term fans treasured. The way to accomplish this difficult task, they thought, was through a proposal, then called *History of the DC Universe*, created by two of DC's writer/editors, Marv Wolfman and Len Wein.

From the outset, though, *Crisis* was a project that was driven by editors more than creators. The first inkling that fans and readers of DC Comics got about this project was found in Executive Editor Dick Giordano's "Meanwhile . . ." column that ran as a text page in comics throughout the DC line. In the column that appeared in those comics with a June 1984 cover date, Giordano noted that:

> We felt it appropriate to save this blockbuster maxi series [*Crisis*[8]] for this anniversary year because the changes in our universe and the startling events that will unfold within its pages will alter forever the DC universe and provide some wonderful stepping-stones for the next 50 years. Clue: look for odd occurrences in DC titles from now till the end of the year. They'll provide additional clues as to the who, what, where, when and why of the DC universe maxiseries.[9]

Behind the scenes, these "odd occurrences" were the cause of a new kind of line-wide editorial wrangling that had not been seen before. In fact, the entirety of *Crisis*, from inception to publication, would include vast amounts of editorial control, imposed from the very top, over the creators of individual DC superhero books. Though in previous decades the relationship between creators and editors had been an extremely collaborative one, *Crisis* was the starting point of a new dynamic, one where creators were often (though not always) made to carry out the story whims of editors who were shepherding an entire "universe" of characters rather than just a single book.

This new era began in earnest with a memo to all DC editors and writers, in which the mandate was given that, "Because this series involves the entire DC Universe we do ask that each Editor and writer cooperate with the project by using a character called <u>The</u> <u>Monitor</u> in their books twice during the next year."[10] In a follow-up memo to the entire editorial staff, Giordano reiterated that, "The need to include the Monitor in your plans is not optional but absolutely required for all designated titles."[11] However, only three months later, the editorial staff was notified that plans for *Crisis* had changed: "after you use the Monitor twice, please do not use him again. He'll be gone by next summer."[12] *Crisis* thus revealed the full and confusing extent to which editors, and particularly senior editors, were beginning to impose their demands upon

the writers of superhero comics, so that the fuller universe of the characters would (ideally) become more united and cohesive.

The conflict of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* lay not just on the four-color pages of the series, but within the offices of DC Comics, where writers and editors struggled, both with and against each other, to create a single, unified, cohesive "DC Universe," while at the same time maintaining the artistic integrity of individual titles. What these combatants overlooked, or perhaps more accurately simply were not (and could not be) aware of, was that in this battle over the present state of the DC Universe they were shaping not only its future, but also its past.

Hayden White and Continuity In Crisis

Several years before Wolfman and Wein began forming the ideas about DC continuity that would ultimately lead to *Crisis*, literary theorist Hayden White posited a new form of historical analysis that has influenced the fields of history and literary criticism. White espoused the idea that objective history was ostensibly impossible to write, as every historian would constantly be imposing his or her own biases onto their work, whether consciously or unconsciously. The bare, dry facts of history – the "chronicle," as White calls them[13] – are taken by historians and turned into narratives that are implicitly subjective to whomever writes, and even reads, those narratives. Choosing what facts to take from the chronicle to put into the narrative (because the chronicle consists of every single detail of everything that ever happened, it would be impossible to reproduce it, even for a tiny sliver of history) requires subjective choices that ultimately cause the historian to become a shaper of history. As White points out, "Our explanations of historical structures and processes are thus determined more by what we leave out of our representations than by what we put in."[14]

However, in White's view, "history as a discipline is in bad shape today [1978] because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination."[15] White was not arguing *against* the literary nature of history, and the process of narrativization that he saw as inherent in the discipline, but rather *for* a recognition of that literariness within the work of his contemporaries

and colleagues. He felt that historians should put together their work in much the same way a fiction writer would.[16] White believed in the "emplotment," the narrativization, of history as a crucial aspect of historiography. Historians, like fiction writers, are telling a story, and they must be aware of that fact if they are to practice their craft while harnessing "its own greatest source of strength and renewal."[17]

The reason, White argues, that this is such a strength for the discourse of history is because, "the structure of any sophisticated, i.e., self-conscious and self-critical, discourse mirrors or replicates the phases which consciousness itself must pass in *its* progress from a naïve (metaphorical) to a self-critical (ironic) comprehension of itself."[18] For a historian to be properly self-critical, then, and achieve the final stage of his/her discipline's discourse, that historian must be willing to accept the process of emplotment, and be self-critical and self-aware of the process by which an objective chronicle becomes a subjective and personalized narrative.

Crisis was DC's attempt to bring this self-awareness and self-reflection to the realm of its cluttered continuity. As writer/editor Marv Wolfman saw it, by the mid-1980s the obsessive, fan-driven demand for cohesive continuity, combined with the creator-driven desire to constantly devise new scenarios and alternative narratives, had led to a cluttered, confusing mess in the DC Universe. Wolfman was at this point a Senior Editor at DC, where he not only wrote his own titles but also oversaw creators on other titles. He was thus not just an independent, freelance creator, but also an active part of DC's corporate structure. *Crisis* was Wolfman's brainchild, and he scripted the entire twelve-issue miniseries, which would be illustrated and partially co-plotted by detail-oriented penciller George Perez, with whom Wolfman had already established a fruitful (both creatively and commercially) partnership on the book *New Teen Titans*. In the text page at the back of the second issue of *Crisis*, Wolfman outlined what had become, to him, the problem with DC continuity:

> Writers like to complicate matters, and what began as a dream of a story – 'Flash of Two Worlds' – had turned into a nightmare. DC continuity was so confusing, no new reader could easily understand it, while older readers had to keep miles-long lists to set things

> straight. And the writers…well, we were always stumbling over each other trying to figure out simple answers to difficult questions.[19]

The story to which Wolfman refers, "Flash of Two Worlds," published in 1961, was in many ways the beginnings of DC's continuity problems. The story featured the first appearance of DC's "Earth Two" concept, a theory of parallel universes whereby, because "two objects can occupy the same space and time—if they vibrate at different speeds," it is possible for two earths to be "created at the same time in two quite similar universes! They vibrate differently - - which keeps them apart!"[20] Through the existence of these different earths – "Earth-One," Earth-Two," "Earth-Prime," etc. – DC was able to create a "multiverse" containing a literally infinite amount of alternate realities, each of which (usually) contained some variation on DC's pantheon of superheroes and villains. Over time, however, as Wolfman indicates, the number of Earths creators, editors, and fans needed to keep track of became so large as to be intimidating to new readers and confusing even to longtime DC followers. As Wolfman explained:

> For the past several years many people have suggested "fixing up" the DC Universe. Simplifying it. Making it consistent yet in a way which would not prevent experiments that varied with an "established" future . . . Well, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* will attempt such a repair job. By series' end DC will have a consistent and more easily understandable universe to play with. We're pulling out all stops to make *Crisis on Infinite Earths* an epic you will never forget![21]

In addition to explaining the continuity purposes for *Crisis*, Wolfman also provides a mission statement for the series itself – to relate an unforgettable epic that would create a consistent DC Universe. Along the way, this epic would come to redefine how superhero comic creators wrestled with issues of continuity.

WORLDS LIVING AND WORLDS DYING: THE TEXT & METATEXT OF *CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS*

The plot of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is meandering, complicated, and not particularly easy to recount. It begins with a glimpse at the birth of the DC multiverse, slightly reminiscent (at first) of scientific descriptions of the Big Bang:

> In the beginning there was only one. A single black infinitude…so cold and dark for so very long…that even the burning light was imperceptible. But the light grew, and the

> infinitude shuddered…and the darkness finally…screamed, as much in pain as in relief. For in that instant, a multiverse was born. A multiverse of worlds vibrating and replicating…and a multiverse that should have been one, became many.[22]

During the course of *Crisis*, the DC superheroes and readers alike learn that the multiverse, indeed, "should have been one" – it was ruptured and fractured into a multiverse, instead of a single universe, due to the scientific inquiry of an alien named Krona who wanted to look back to the dawn of time and learn its secrets.

Crisis opens with an explosive moment of rupture, one that points to the destructive potential of continuity upon creative cohesiveness. This would become embodied in the rest of the story through the roles of two new characters created specifically for the series. In the birth of multiverse a being known as The Monitor was also born. It was his job to learn everything about that multiverse, as well as to protect and maintain it. In addition to birthing the multiverse, however, Krona's actions also created an antimatter universe, an evil universe that contained The Monitor's polar opposite, The Anti-Monitor. In *Crisis*, the Anti-Monitor makes his move against the multiverse, attempting to engulf its infinite worlds in an equally infinite wave of antimatter (represented on the comics page by blank whiteness) that literally erases everything in every positive-matter universe that it touches.

The central threat of *Crisis* is actual erasure, from both the page and from existence. The confusing continuity of a multiverse, we are shown, leads to the potential eradication of all storytelling possibilities. As such, *Crisis* opens with the Anti-Monitor's plan already in progress – the antimatter wave is destroying world after world and universe after universe. Despite the best efforts of the Monitor and the various superheroes and villains (working together) whom he assembles, a roster which eventually includes *all* of the heroes and villains from throughout the past, present, and future of the DC Multiverse, the Anti-Monitor manages to destroy all but five of the positive matter universes. After his plans are halted by the noble sacrifices of Supergirl and the "Earth One" incarnation of the Flash, the Anti-Monitor travels back to the dawn of time, where, following an epic battle with the DC superheroes, the universe is restarted anew, albeit with a significant difference this time:

> In the beginning there were many. A multiversal infinitude … so cold and dark for so very long … that even the burning light was imperceptible. But the light grew, and the multiverse shuddered … and the darkness screamed as much in pain as in relief. For in that instant a universe was born. A universe with mighty worlds orbiting burning suns. A universe reborn at the dawn of time. What had been many became one.[23]

This moment is the central plot/continuity point of *Crisis* - the death of the multiverse, and its rebirth as a single universe, symbolizing the death of cluttered continuity in favor of streamlined storytelling. It takes up the opening page of the eleventh issue and directly resonates with the original birth of the multiverse from the very beginning of the first issue. As a result, certain characters who survived this death/rebirth because they were present at the beginning of time, and yet who contradicted the continuity of the reborn universe – characters such as the Earth-Two versions of Superman, Robin, and Huntress (Batman's daughter) – were erased from the memories of everyone in this reborn universe, such that they, like the multiverse itself, had no longer ever historically existed. Not coincidentally, the most problematic of these characters all died in the final battle of the reborn Earth against the Anti-Monitor, a battle that dominated the final issue of *Crisis*.

The rebirth of the multiverse as a universe, and the attendant rebooting of the major characters in that universe, was originally supposed to provide a springboard for an all-new continuity that did not rely on any prior DC history. Wolfman wanted *none* of the characters to remember what had happened during *Crisis*, and for the entire DC Universe to start from a fresh slate, with new first issues for every ongoing series. According to a DC-published *Crisis* companion volume, though,

> The other editors felt differently. One of them said, "If the heroes don't remember the Crisis it invalidates the book." Exasperated, Marv replied, "The heroes don't buy our comics. It doesn't matter if they remember the stories. The readers do and they'll remember them. Let's not complicate things." But Marv was outvoted.[24]

Furthermore, Wolfman's plan for all of DC's superhero comics to reboot with new first issues was similarly shot down.

As a result, the superheroes *did* remember *Crisis*, at least to an extent, and their books did not all restart. The outcome, according to DC researcher John Wells, was that, "For the most

part, it was as if Earth-One still existed, albeit now peppered with immigrants from Earth-Two. . . . And even this wasn't clear-cut."[25] Within a few years, however, Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, among other heroes, would all be "rebooted," and given new contexts, origins, and back stories that were consistent with this one, new universe.

This universe was more in keeping with the "mature" readership that came to dominate the comic book industry in the 1980s, with more complex and morally ambiguous stories and characters. The older readership came to dominance owing to a general shift in the comic book industry from newsstand distribution networks to what was known as the direct market, which revolved around specialty comics stores. Publishers like DC and Marvel soon came to realize that the major source of their revenue at such stores was the dedicated comic fans, rather than casual buyers.[26] As a result, Paul Levitz, Vice President and Publisher of DC, stated in a fanzine article that publishers were, "Consciously aiming their efforts directly at the fan market as their chief area of growth."[27] In addition, this system of direct-market distribution allowed publishers to create books with greater sophistication and more violent and/or adult content, because comic book specialty shops, unlike newsstands, drug stores, and supermarkets, were by and large not patronized by children. Even more importantly, they were not covered by the strictures of the Comics Code Authority. Comic book stores were destinations that adult fans specifically journeyed to, and were far less local and ubiquitous than the corner drug stores that children purchased their comics from.

Crisis, with its complex, solipsistic plot, its apocalyptic tone, and its unprecedented body count, was itself only possible thanks to the direct market. Such a new type of market allowed publishers to utilize a new kind of storytelling: the "event" or "crossover" series, that, shades of *Crisis*, asked readers to pick up multiple tie-ins to a central mini-series that promised lasting, permanent change to the fictional universe.[28] *Crisis*, like these future stories, was geared towards a specifically fannish, collector's mentality, one that was far more prevalent amongst adult readers than children. Similarly, once the narrative line was drawn between the "pre-

Crisis" DC Multiverse and the "post-Crisis" DC Universe, those "post-Crisis" stories were aimed squarely at this adult readership. Not only were DC's stories more mature in and of themselves – such as Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's dark Batman origin, *Batman: Year One* – but they also reflected, from their outset, the kind of shared continuity that Wolfman and Wein had argued for. Comics writer Paul Cornell notes that such continuity is, "one big and very complex story, that rewrites and contradicts itself. That was always the case. Only now it does it with purpose, rather than by accident."[29]

As was seen in the build-up to *Crisis*, this kind of a shared universe is only possible under the hand of firm editorial control across the entire publishing line. The post-*Crisis* DC Universe, and the superhero comics being produced at DC and Marvel from the mid-1980s up to the present, is a landscape where editors hold supreme power. *Crisis* changed not just the narrative DC Universe, but also the way of doing business for publishers of comic book "universes." Narratively, though, for the next two decades DC continuity would be a continual reflection of the changes wrought by *Crisis*.[30] The creators of DC's superhero tales, working under strict editorial demands, would constantly be negotiating with the fact that fifty years worth of storytelling was now pre-Crisis and had to be rewoven into the ongoing post-Crisis tapestry through the process of retroactive continuity.

By creating a new, cohesive universe that combined characteristics of the various worlds of the multiverse, *Crisis* was the ultimate retcon. It completely rewrote the entire history of the DC Universe, making it so that those stories that occurred pre-Crisis had, for the characters, never actually happened. Although, as Wolfman rightly pointed out, the readers and creators still remembered those stories, the characters within the fictional realm did not. The massive retcon of *Crisis* erased their original history and replaced it, rewrote it, with a new one.

Crisis was a project that deliberately set out to draw together the ragged strands of various continuities into one larger meta-narrative. As such, it was an example of superhero comics achieving Hayden White's "final stage" of historical self-criticism and self-awareness.[31]

White, in trying to unite, "scientific *and* artistic insights in history without leading to radical relativism and the assimilation of history to propaganda, or to that fatal monism which has always heretofore resulted from attempts to wed history and science,"[32] posits that a historian, "like the modern artist and scientist,"[33] should, "exploit a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all the data in the entire phenomenal field bur rather offers itself as *one way among many* of disclosing certain aspects of the field."[34] Thus, "we should recognize that *what constitutes the facts themselves* is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor by which he orders his world."[35] Furthermore, the organization of whatever facts a historian chooses to put in his/her record must conform to a certain mode of story telling – a particular genre. White explains, "What the historian must bring to his consideration of the record are general notions of the *kinds of stories* that might be found there, just as he must bring to consideration of the problem of narrative representation some notion of the 'pre-generic plot-structure' by which the story *he* tells is endowed with formal coherency."[36]

He goes on to summarize this entire process of historical discourse: "The historical discourse should be viewed as a sign system which points in two directions simultaneously: first, toward the set of events it purports to describe, and, second, toward the generic story form to which it tacitly likens the set in order to disclose its formal coherence considered as either a structure or a *process*."[37] What White is pointing towards here is, again, a larger self-awareness on the part of a historian, recognizing that every organization of facts, and every choice made in what facts to present and what to leave out, creates a subjective history, "one way among many" to make meaning out of a series of events.

With *Crisis*, DC Comics reached this stage of self-awareness in regards to its own history and continuity. Thus, it was an intentional narrative that attempted to wrestle with the problematic, confusing "chronicle" of continuity that preceded it. According to Wolfman:

> *Crisis* was created to solve a specific problem: to make the confusing DC universe accessible to new readers. I had thought it would do its job and the focus of attention

> would then be on the new books and not the title that changed them. . . . But its sales is what made everyone suddenly decide to copy the concept. Unfortunately, from what I know, most of the mega-crossovers that followed didn't have a core reason for their existence as *Crisis* did. . . . In a way, *Crisis* spawned an industry of mega-events when it should have only given birth to those kinds of events where something vitally important had to be achieved.[38]

It is important to note, here, that Wolfman's focus in regards to *Crisis* was placed firmly on what it was trying to specifically "achieve." Thanks to its commercial and critical acceptance (though it certainly had its share of criticism, explored below), along with achieving that goal of forming a massively important continuity node, it became a central text of the DC Universe "canon," one that has been widely copied, particularly in format, in the years since.

What was unique about *Crisis*, though, and certainly part of what spurred on the interest in it, was the fact that it was deliberately created for the purpose of altering and rebooting an entire comic book universe's continuity – as critic Harry Siegel calls it, "the comic book equivalent of Noah's flood."[39] *Crisis* was the first superhero comic to make continuity the central concern of the text. As such it altered the way that continuity could and would be used by superhero creators. Retconning became much more commonplace, allowing stories to visit the past more freely. The idea that a superhero's origin could be directly revisited, an even rebuilt from the ground up, inspired a multitude of texts that delved into the past.

For *Crisis*, this obsession with the past as a necessity for shaping the publishing line's future. Wolfman freely admitted that *Crisis* only incidentally became "quite good beyond serving its purpose," but, more importantly that it, "had a reason to be done; it solved a major problem DC was facing."[40] This problem, he notes, was not only one of continuity, but also that, "certain characters no longer work because they've gone as far as they can in terms of sales, and of writers who can work up stories with them. . . . So you can either let the character just fade away into oblivion, or you can do something special with him."[41] On top of this, he explains, "The reason for doing it? We thought the DC Universe was cluttered, it made no sense. There were so many stories that set up so much, it was too much for anybody to understand."[42] For Wolfman *Crisis* was initially intended to "fix" continuity and recreate characters for a new

audience and for fresher stories, part of the outgrowth of his personal belief, formed from a life in fandom and in professional comics,

> that every generation needs the comics recreated for them. This happened by accident in the past: Comics were created in 1938 with Superman. About 25 years later, between 1956-1961, the Silver age was created with no direct regard for what happened before. About 25 years after that, I did Crisis with George Perez and that once again updated the DCU.[43]

What had been done accidentally with Julius Schwartz' reinvigoration of older character concepts was now being done purposely by Wolfman, Perez, and Len Wean. Years later, DC's editor-in-chief Dan DiDio would note the importance of this purposeful rebooting:

> Over the years, individual characters have changed directions, and origins have been rebooted to keep more in line with the times, but up until 1985, stories like that never occurred on a universal scale. [*Crisis*] changed that . . . The original Crisis became a seminal event for all comics fans, one cosmic series that touched upon every book and showed the DC universe to be one shared universe.[44]

Going forward from *Crisis*, DC's editors and writers did not forget this lesson.

CRISIS' CRITICAL RECEPTION

Crisis intentionally serves as a crucial moment of continuity change, a continuity node rewriting the fictional history of the universe, one created by fans-turned-pros who felt that this reinvigoration was necessary to attract a new generation of comics readers. The key members of the *Crisis* creative team (writer Wolfman, editor Wein, and artist Perez) had all arisen out of fandom, and possessed a fascination with older stories and continuity that fed their desire to create this massive "house-cleaning" story. They were creating a story for readers like themselves, who were enchanted not just with individual characters, but with entire fictional universes, and, at least according to Wolfman in the letter column of the fourth issue, they successfully reached that audience:

> The CRISIS was created solely to make the DC Universe more accessible to the largest number of readers, which means our concerns are towards story, plot, and characterization . . . To date we've received no—repeat NO—negative mail on issue #1, and although I'm sure somebody out there didn't like it, we're incredibly gratified to all those who wrote to say they cared.[45]

Even if taken at face value, Wolfman's statement that "we've received no negative mail on issue #1," should by no means imply that *Crisis* was universally praised at its time of publication. Indeed, his need to claim such praise may have been a defense against the controversy that the series generated amongst DC's fans. Longtime fan and fanzine writer Mark Waid, in an issue of the professional fanzine *Amazing Heroes* dedicated solely to *Crisis*, noted, "In *Crisis*, readers were witness to the deaths of major characters (like Supergirl and Flash), as well as a few 'trivia deaths' . . . If you're a long-time fan, that may have bent you out of shape somewhat—but it's a sad Rule of Collecting that nothing attracts the diehard fans of today like the smell of carrion, pal."[46] It was, however, not just the deaths that proved controversial, but also the rewrite/retcon process itself, which made some readers feel that the comics they had grown up enjoying no longer "counted" or even "existed." This was noted in an editorial cartoon, in the issue's letter columns, with the caption, "Across the country, readers are seeing the effects of the conclusion of *Crisis*!" Beneath that caption is a startled reader who, holding a copy of *Batman* that is fading from view, is screaming, "My 1950's *Batman* comic…It's fading like it never existed!"[47]

The letters column of *Amazing Heroes* itself showed a variety of responses to *Crisis*. Reader Christopher Day compared the series favorably to Marvel Comics' *Secret Wars*, stating that, "*Crisis* was everything that *Secret Wars* should have been. ... I am sorry that *Crisis* is over while I am relieved that *Secret Wars* is over."[48] However, Robert Plunkett, Jr., in the very next letter, states that, "*Crisis on Infinite Earths* was the most wrongheaded work DC has produced in memory. The balance sheet on the series probably looks very good right now, but these short-term profits will be purchased dearly, at the cost of alienating the long-term readers and potential readers, and of inflicting havoc on a once strong comic mythos."[49] Meeting these two opinions in the middle was *Amazing Heroes* critic R.A. Jones, who reviewed all twelve individual issues of *Crisis* and found that "a major flaw in the series" was that, "It is such a confusing amalgam of contrivances, back-peddling, miss-communications and general disorder that it is nearly

impossible to make any point with complete certainty."[50] Because of this, he ultimately feels that, "the scope of this particular story simply proved to be too much for Wolfman. And he did truly *have* a story—something which cannot be said for either edition of *Secret Wars*. It was indeed more story than he was capable of telling. His literary reach exceeded his grasp."[51]

Jones came to the conclusion that *Crisis*' impact on DC, and on the entire comics industry, was perhaps more important than its literary merits: "In terms of story alone, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* melts beneath the glare of critical scrutiny, but that does not diminish its importance in my eyes. In this instance, the fact that DC dared attempt to scale the heights far and away overshadows the fact that it stumbled and fell halfway up the slope."[52] This is, in fact, how *Crisis* has been remembered in the decades since its publication. As Hilary Goldstein, a reviewer for the pop culture web site IGN, noted in 2006,

> *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is a crucial turning point for DC Comics. Originally a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the company, it became a savior. . . . Marv Wolfman had the bold idea to cleanse the burdens of 50 years of continuity, with an event unlike any seen before . . . And once the *Crisis* ended, DC spent the next several years slowly reintroducing and revamping its characters. It was a long, arduous process that . . . helped put DC back on the map.[53]

By using this information in the introduction to a review of the collected edition of *Crisis*, Goldstein shows how, with the passage of time, the series is frequently framed by its historical value rather than as a discrete literary entity unto itself. Today, *Crisis* serves not only as a historical text, but also as a text that, quite literally, created DC's contemporary history.

THE CHRONICLE AND THE NARRATIVE

In *Crisis*, the process of creating a meaningful narrative out of a chronicle of previous events in the DC Universe came more fully to the forefront of fans' minds than it ever had before. The review of this chronicle was so important, in fact, that in the pre-planning stages of the story DC hired a specific researcher to review the entire history of its comic book universe. History was a crucial component of the *Crisis* project, and the hiring of such a researcher shows that the creators themselves were deeply invested in the history of their own cultural product, as

an integral part of *Crisis*' literary content. Though they were almost certainly not thinking about the kind of historical framework provided by theorists like White, the creators of *Crisis* were clearly engaged in what they saw as a process of historical storytelling.

DC's researcher, Peter Sanderson, spent three years reading all the comics that DC had published since 1935, taking extensive notes along the way.[54] Wolfman then took the reins from Sanderson, and instead of research-historian, worked as storyteller-historian. He grabbed the various narrative threads of DC history and tied them together into a larger narrative tapestry, one that took a group of disparate concepts created by multiple writers over half a century and turned them into a single, cohesive universe. Wolfman displayed a self-consciousness about this aspect of *Crisis* in a memo co-written with Giordano and Wein where he told all DC staffers that *Crisis*, "will establish which characters exist in the [new DC] universe, and therefore, by inference, which don't . . . [Those that don't] do not exist in the one cohesive timeline the 'DC Universe' represents . . . The series will correct 'mistakes' made in the past, eliminate repetitious concepts and generally make the DC Universe easier to understand for both us and our readers."[55]

Crisis was not just about telling an epic story and simplifying DC continuity, but was also, in part, a project geared towards taking control of the DC Universe with a firmer hand, deciding which stories and characters did or did not exist within that universe, and creating a single "cohesive timeline" out of the characters who did. Wolfman and his co-conspirators were, in a sense, narrativizing comic book history, a process he likens to, "a giant, 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle, with 1000 characters running around, and my job is to take those pieces, along with George Perez, and make the complete picture with no seams. If George and I are successful, you won't know there was ever a puzzle."[56] This kind of project, in one sense, was nothing new, since readers had been nitpicking continuity for years, finding a certain pleasure in doing so. In terms of one of the comic book *publishers* engaging in the continuity game on such a massive

scale, though, *Crisis* was revolutionary, and heralded a new era in which comic book creators were forced to adhere to the demands of readers and create a cohesive sense of continuity.

With *Crisis*, DC's panoply of multiple earths, instead of an editorial jumble of continuity, were retroactively made into a single story of how, "a multiverse that should have been one, became many,"[57] and then how, through the events and plot/continuity twists of *Crisis*, "What had been many became one."[58] The narrativizing of the multiple earths' history was in effect a retconning of reality. Wolfman took what had been creative and editorial inconsistency and turned it into a story that led up to a specific end point (or rather, given how the DC Universe continued forward after *Crisis*, to a specific mid-point). At the moment in *Crisis* where the Anti-Monitor has caused the restart of reality that will turn the multiverse into a single universe, a caption box notes, "It is the end of all that was."[59] *Crisis* was, in the context of its time, literally an end to the story of the DC Multiverse – a *narrative* that Wolfman had created out of a *chronicle* of previous parallel earth tales – and a beginning of the narrative of the DC Universe, or, as Adam C. Murdaugh phrases it, "a dynamic, albeit tragic, 'character arc' for the DC Universe, from old continuity to new."[60]

From its very beginnings, though, the new DC Universe *would* have a strong sense of its own history. During the course of *Crisis*, the Monitor's assistant, Harbinger, taking note of all of the events of the story through the Monitor's hi-tech machines, states that, "the HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE – from the dawn of fiery creation to its last smoking ember – will be recorded here for all posterity."[61] While *History of the DC Universe* (hereafter referred to as *History*) was the original title for *Crisis*, it ultimately became its own entity, a two-volume illustrated prose story, written by Wolfman and illustrated by Perez, that told the history of the new, solitary universe. In the process, *History* also served as a re-narrativization of pre-Crisis (multiversal) stories into a post-Crisis (universal) milieu. Whereas part of the goal of *Crisis* had been to create a big, sprawling, superhero crossover epic, *History* did not have the same drive behind it, and was intended instead, according to Wolfman, to, "be an epilogue to the Crisis," and thus, "to tell

readers which heroes and worlds still lived and which were consigned to the double-bagged depths of their collection."[62] He elaborates, "It's a history, it's not a story. It's a chronological retelling of DC's history in order. I think it's very exciting, because we can finally put all our characters in order for all the readers. *Crisis* is not a history, because we're changing history. A lot of readers will not be sure where everything fits now. The history will let them know."[63]

History was an attempt to provide a direct, clear-cut narrative of the new, unified DC Universe, one that would be accessible both to long-time fans and to new readers attracted by the streamlined post-*Crisis* DC. This is reflected not only in Wolfman's introduction to and quotes about the book, but also within the text itself. *History* is narrated by Harbinger, at some undefined time after *Crisis* has ended. Her in-story purpose for crafting such a text is, "because I must, because change must be recorded."[64] Like Sanderson and Wolfman, Harbinger is taking on the guise of historian in order to craft a narrative of the DC Universe and, specifically, its superheroes. This is a narrative of, "the History of the Universe as seen through my eyes. Its concerns are with those men and women who fought and sacrificed their own lives to save the universe, whose courage and determination altered the past and future."[65] She further refines her purpose in writing such a history (while at the same time making a nod towards real-world heroes, not just super-powered ones), explaining that:

> Throughout the history of the World there were freedom fighters, and this is their history, whether uniformed or not, whether powered or ordinary . . . I have been able to place them chronologically and thus show a continuity of events. . . . What began many years in the past will be remembered and acted upon many centuries from now. What *was* affects what *is* and what *will be*. This, more than any other reason, is why this history of the universe is needed. To look at the heroic age without perspective, to understand one element without seeing the whole, is to do it a vast injustice.[66]

In this speech, Wolfman seems to be speaking, through Harbinger, about the nature of continuity itself (note the use of the phrase "continuity of events"). The purpose of *History* is to give an understanding of DC's continuity to readers, creators, and editors alike, so that they can "see the whole" instead of just "one element," and thus avoid recreating the confusing morass of contradictions that led to the need for *Crisis* in the first place.

In order to make such a text palatable, though, the chronicle (in White's usage of the term) of events that made up DC continuity had to be turned into an entertaining story, a narrative. Wolfman, via Harbinger, states this directly: "This is not a chronological retelling of historical events which can be read in any text—this is the history of heroism."[67] This statement serves several purposes. On a surface level, it provides Wolfman with a narrative excuse for Harbinger to only relate the events that separate the DC Universe from the real world, rather than providing a full textbook of world history. It also, however, structures the entire fictional universe around the concept of "heroism," making it clear that the DC Universe revolves around heroes and heroines as the pivot-points of its history. It places the *characters*, rather than specific *events*, at the center of the universe, something that was crucial to a text that was erasing many of those events from its own history in order to focus on presenting streamlined characters and stories to a discerning, older fan.

Both *Crisis* and *History* were direct attempts by DC to expand their market share in a culturally marginalized industry. Since the rise of Marvel's popularity in the 1960s, DC had been seen both by both fans and cultural critics as a secondary company. The company's focus on mythic god-like heroes, multiple universes, and clear-cut tropes of good versus evil had made it lag behind Marvel in terms of both sales and critical success. Because Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and others created Marvel's heroes to be better-rounded characters with more relatable problems, the older audience that made up the readership of the 1980s gravitated much more strongly to Marvel's line than to DC's. The post-*Crisis* DC Universe, the one solidified by *History*, was a direct response to this, providing a mission statement for the publisher to focus on more mature stories with richer characters.

In order to create a universe that appealed to older readers, though, creators had to pick and choose from prior continuity. As Wolfman explained in an interview given at the time that *Crisis* was still being released, "anything we do not state happened, did not happen, unless it's

brought back. So all the stupid stuff has to be brought back again."[68] He went on to state exactly how this process worked, editorially:

> What we're trying to do: If it's not restated, it did not happen. . . . All of the dumb stuff is gone, and somebody's really going to have to go out of his way to bring it back . . . *It's corrective history*. There's a big eraser that's gone over all of it. If an editor deems a character or storyline worthy enough to bring back, okay – but I don't think we should be held responsible for past mistakes. Starting in January [of 1986], we only use the past that was good.[69]

This is not only a corrective history, but also a selective history, one specifically constructed by Wolfman, Wein, Perez, and DC's other editorial and corporate staff. It reflects what *they* saw as not falling into the realm of "dumb stuff," and thus worth keeping in a post-*Crisis* DC Universe.

This sort of cherry-picking of past events is remarkably similar to what White describes as the process of historians: "there are always more facts in the record than the historian can possibly include in his narrative representation of a given segment of the historical process. And so the historian must 'interpret' his data excluding certain facts from his account as irrelevant to his narrative purpose."[70] Once more we can see how *Crisis*, and its follow-up *History*, was a project of literally rewriting the narrative history of the DC Universe, one which utilized the decades of stories that made up a large part of the body of comics' cultural memory in order to create a new future. As Perez stated, "We're focusing on change . . . *Crisis* is establishing [continuity]."[71] The establishment and maintenance of clarity and consistency in the continuity of the DC Universe firmly relies upon a narrativization of its history and events, as created in *Crisis* and elucidated in *History*.

By turning disparate stories about various characters and settings from DC's past (the chronicle) into one ongoing universal narrative, Wolfman and his compatriots forever changed the way superhero comics worked. Every single story from now on would be seen as a building block towards the publisher's larger universe, allowing editors to steer the entire line towards predetermined "events" and crossovers, the literary descendants of *Crisis*. What's more, creators were suddenly far less free in the way they could treat iconic characters, or even second-tier

characters. Whereas prior to *Crisis* a writer of Superman could have the hero partake in whatever adventure that could be imagined, no matter how outlandish (so long as it did nothing to tarnish the character's brand and stayed within the basic confines of his established personality), now the stories involving Superman had to cohere to the universal continuity established and overseen by DC's editorial team.

This would come to have a dual impact on those writers and artists interested in exploring historical narratives featuring corporately owned characters. On the one hand, creators now needed to adhere to the historical reality established by the editorial staff and by previously published stories. Any new stories set in World War II or during Vietnam, for example, needed to fit within the larger picture of how those wars functioned within the DC or Marvel Universes *plus* cohere with real-world history. Writers needed to juggle an increasing multitude of story elements if they wanted to write a series, or even a scene, with an historical setting, and everything in that series needed to make sense in the context of everything else that had been established about that time and place in the "universe." This is why stories like Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson's *Born* or Brian Azzarello and Joe Kubert's *Sgt. Rock* needed to take place outside of continuity, so that they weren't encumbered by the shackles of taking place in a world where a passing superhero could serve as a literal deus ex machina.

On the other hand, though, the new focus on a universal narrative brought with it an obsession with continuity not just in the present, but also the past. Fans wanted to know how all of the stories in the publishers' long histories fit together, and this demanded a repetitive return to the past in order to provide explanations. Roy Thomas' *Young All-Stars* story featuring internment camps, for example, was made possible by the universal *Crisis* retcon erasing the 1940s Aquaman from DC history, allowing Thomas to "replace" him in World War II with a young Nisei woman. Similarly, the tensions and conflicts between Captain America, as a World War II veteran, and Nick Fury and the Punisher, both of whom fought as part of the Cold War

and in Vietnam, are made all the more intense and meaningful as continuity changes such that Captain America never experienced the Cold War first-hand.

The relationship between continuity and historical narratives is a very fraught one. Continuity tears at historical stories because its demands dictate that the fictional universe's history must constantly be updated such that everything makes sense in the context of the other stories and real-world history, while historical stories can wreak havoc with that continuity through the addition of new events and characters. Ultimately, this back-and-forth leads to a situation where the universe's continuity is every bit as confused and confusing as it was at DC in the years leading up to *Crisis*.

Crises **of the 21st-Century**

Creating a solid, unchangeable continuity that doesn't accept any retcons or new historical narratives is functionally impossible for DC or Marvel. If, as established after *Crisis*, Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and the rest of the major superheroes were definitively said to have started their careers in the late 1980s, then in the present day they would all be pushing fifty (at least). Because the major publishers are unwilling to age the characters, most of the heroes are still said to be somewhere in their 20s or 30s, thus negating *Crisis*' continuity. As a result, a new story must arrive to explain these new continuity entanglements.

In short, once there is one *Crisis*, there must ultimately come another. This next *Crisis*, whatever narrative form it takes, needs to explain the nagging continuity issues created by the first story and by the many other comic books which followed it in the ensuing years. As a result, the process of meta-narrativization-via-universal-cataclysm initiated by *Crisis* and *History* has become a repetitive trope used many times by DC Comics in the years since their publication. The publisher is constantly working to fight back against the slow accretion of back story that might discourage new readers, while at the same time servicing fans who find that continuity to be part of the appeal of the books. DC and Marvel are both engaged in a struggle to maintain

their loyal readership at the same time as they attempt to expand their audience base, a tricky balancing act that is often achieved through line-wide revamps in the mode of *Crisis*.

The continual repetition of *Crisis*-styled plot points and themes has not been without its share of complaints, however. Comics critic Douglas Wolk, for example, argues that the continual use of the universal retcon by DC Comics as well as other publishers is merely an expression of the problematic fact that, "significant, lasting change is almost impossible to get past the marketing department, or past sentimentally attached readers. If the new way doesn't work out—and it almost never does—it's time for the 'cosmic reset button,' as fans call it; a contrivance that restores things to their original state."[72]

In 2007, in fact, DC Comics *did* hit the cosmic reset button once more, as we shall explore more fully in the next chapter. Two "event" stories in a row, *Infinite Crisis* and *52*, dealt with the rebirth the multiverse as a set of 52 alternate universes, many of which were updated versions of their old, pre-Crisis forerunners.[73] Writer Grant Morrison explored these new multiverses, in part, with his 2009 epic of ultimate evil versus ultimate good, *Final Crisis*.[74]

As the title suggests, *Final Crisis* was meant to be the culminating story in the "*Crisis* trilogy" that started with *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (although, of course, the original *Crisis* was not launched with the idea of two sequels in mind). However, Morrison has revealed that he is working on a new series, referred to as *Multiversity*, specifically meant to map out several of the worlds of the new multiverse. This project, long-rumored but with a release date that is constantly being pushed back, is whether explicitly stated or not a sequel to the now-misleadingly-named *Final Crisis*. Morrison himself has said, "I want this to be big. I kind of thought 'Final Crisis' would be the big one and then I realized I had to tell this Multiverse one. So this is the real big epic that comes up next."[75] His hope for the series is that he will explore these new Earths, one per issue for seven issues, and then, "in the eighth issue, I would tell a new big story to link things up in into one big epic."[76]

Additionally, DC had a different sort of "epic" *Crisis* follow-up in September 2011, one that once again utilized the "cosmic reset button." Following a crossover event entitled *Flashpoint*, DC Comics finally went through with Wolfman's original suggestion of restarting the entire line, with all-new first issues and a new, theoretically streamlined continuity. As experience has shown, however, continuity can only be streamlined for so long, and the cracks in history will need to be repaired to fans' satisfaction, both through future stories that look back on the past as well as likely through more large-scale, multidimensional metanarrativization.

All of this shows how the ongoing cycle of repetition regarding the DC multiversity, and the "big events" and "crises" that threaten it, continues more than a quarter of a century after *Crisis* was meant to clean up the continuity confusions that such stories have the strong potential to produce. However, the fact remains that crossover comics *do* sell, in large numbers, and thus something about them is appealing to readers. *Crisis* may have been the first big event comic of its kind, but it was certainly not the last, and several that were to come in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks dealt more directly than *Crisis* did with the national traumas and cultural memory of 20th and 21st Century America.

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[1] Though DC Comics was the first comic book publisher to reach this anniversary, technically the corporate entity itself was not quite that old. Rather, according to Shirrel Rhoads, "in 1935, Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's National Allied Publications came out with *New Fun: The Big Comic Magazine* #1—the first time original characters and stories had appeared in a comic book format." This is the anniversary that DC Comics celebrated in 1985, despite the fact that, "In 1937, Major Wheeler-Nicholson found himself financially overextended with his printer. In order to continue publishing, he had little choice to take Harry Donenfeld on as a partner. Detective Comics, Inc., was formed early that year, with Wheeler-Nicholson and Donenfeld's business manager, Jack S. Liebowitz, listed as owners. The new company's first production, Detective Comics #1 (March 1937) was the first true DC comic book." See Shirrel Rhoades, A Complete History of American Comic Books (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 12 & 15.

[2] Marv Wolfman, from the text page at the back of the first issue *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, as quoted in Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 4.

[3] Technically, Marvel Comics' twelve-issue *Secret Wars* story was published prior to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. However, as a potentially apocryphal story (perpetuated by DC Comics itself) has it, Marvel Comics' Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter caught wind of DC's plans and rushed production of *Secret Wars* in order to tie in with a toy line of Marvel characters. Whether or not this is true, *Secret Wars*, though a sales success, was a critical failure, and did not have the same long-reaching affects as *Crisis*, either industrially or narratively. Nevertheless, DC was aware of the sales impact that *Secret Wars* had, and planned *Crisis* accordingly. See, for example, a memo from Marv Wolfman to all DC editors: "One thing we've learned from SECRET WARS is that the main book feeds all the others. Sales went up on all the titles connected to that catastrophe and I'm sure they will with this one, too [that doesn't sound right, does it?]." Quoted in Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics,

2005), 19. For the purposes of this chapter, I will be taking this story at face value, and, given that the *planning* of *Crisis* preceded *Secret Wars* (public mentions of *Crisis*, in its early stages, date back to at least 1982), continue to refer to *Crisis* as the "first" major company-wide crossover, as that is largely the legacy it has achieved in hindsight.
[4] Adam C. Murdough, "Worlds Will Live, Worlds Will Die: Myth, Metatext, Continuity and Cataclysm in DC Comics' *Crisis On Infinite Earths*" (master's thesis, Bowling Green State University, August 2006), 13.
[5] Ibid, 66.
[6] Renate Lachmann, "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature" in A Companion To Cultural Memory Studies (Germany: De Gruyter, 2010), 301. For more on Lachmann's view of intertextuality as cultural memory, see this dissertation's introduction.
[7] See note 1.
[8] At this point, *Crisis* was known under its working title of *The History of the DC Universe*. See Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 4.
[9] Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 4.
[10] Reprinted in Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 7. Emphasis in original.
[11] Ibid, 8.
[12] Ibid, 9.
[13] White describes the chronicle as follows: "The chronicle . . . often seems to wish to tell a story, aspire to narrativity, but typically fails to ahcieve it. More specifically, the chronicle usually is marked by a failure to achieve narrative closure. It does not so much conclude as simply terminate. It starts out to tell a story but breaks off *in media res*, in the chronicler's own present; it leaves things unresolved, or rather, it leaves them unresolved in a storylike way." See Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), 5. On page 42 of the same text, he goes on to explain that, "A chronicle, however, is not a narrative, even if it contains the same set of facts as its informational content, because a narrative discourse performs differently from a chronicle. Chronology is no doubt a code shared by both chronicle and narrative, but narrative utilizes other codes as well and produces a meaning quite different from that of the chronicle."
[14] Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in The Writing of History, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 44.
[15] Ibid, 62.
[16] Ibid, 47.
[17] Ibid, 62.
[18] Hayden White, "Introduction: Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human Consciousness," in Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 23. Emphasis in original.
[19] Reprinted in Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 5.
[20] Gardner Fox, writer, Carmine Infantino, penciller, and Julius Schwartz, editor, "Flash of Two Worlds," in Crisis on Multiple Earths: The Team-Ups, ed. Robert Greenberger (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 13-14.
[21] Reprinted in Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 5.
[22] Marv Wolfman, writer/editor, and George Perez, penciller, Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Absolute Edition (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 11. Ellipses in original.
[23] Marv Wolfman, writer/editor, and George Perez, penciller, Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Absolute Edition (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 297. Ellipses in original.
[24] Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 34.
[25] John Wells, "Post Crisis Events," in Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 87.
[26] See Bradford Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 261.
[27] Quoted in Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Paul Cornell, "Canonicity in Doctor Who," PaulCornell.com, February 10, 2007, http://www.paulcornell.com/2007/02/canonicity-in-doctor-who.html (accessed February 1, 2012). Cornell is talking about the long-running *Doctor Who* franchise here, but he has also written for both Marvel and DC Comics, and his comments can easily apply to both of those fictional universes as well as the world of *Doctor Who*.
[30] Until *Crisis*' official sequel, *Infinite Crisis*, and its follow-up *52*, discussed in more detail below and in chapter 8.

[31] Other examples of such self-criticism of superhero comics from the same era include the "deconstructionist" texts *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*, both of which dealt with teasing apart the tropes of the superhero genre. *Crisis*, on the other hand, reveled in those tropes, taking them to absurdist heights, and thus reflected a different sort of criticism/awareness than these more pessimistic, if more critically acclaimed, deconstructionist works.
[32] Hayden White, "The Burden of History," in Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 47. Emphasis in original
[33] Ibid, 46.
[34] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[35] Ibid, 47. Emphasis in original.
[36] Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," in Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 60. Emphasis in original
[37] Hayden White, "Historicism, History, and the Imagination," in Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 106. Emphasis in original
[38] Quoted in Harry Siegel, "Marv Wolfman on What's Got to Die For a New DC World To Live," The Village Voice Blog, August 31, 2011, http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2011/08/marv_wolfman.php (accessed September 22, 2011).
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Quoted in Mark Waid, "Beginnings and Endings," Amazing Heroes 66, March 1, 1985, 30.
[42] Quoted in Patrick Daniel O'Neill, "*Spotlight*: Crisis on Infinite Earths," David Anthony Kraft's Comics Interview #26, 1985, 17.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Dan DiDio, "Introduction," in Infinite Crisis Omnibus, ed. Peter Hamboussi (New York: DC Comics, 2012), 5.
[45] Marv Wolfman, "Crisis Mail," Crisis on Infinite Earths 4, July 1985, 27.
[46] Mark Waid, "Editorial," Amazing Heroes 91, March 15, 1986, 4.
[47] Fred Grandinettie, editorial cartoon in "Amazing Readers," Amazing Heroes 91, March 15, 1986, 111.
[48] "Amazing Readers," Amazing Heroes 91, March 15, 1986, 110.
[49] Ibid.
[50] R.A. Jones, "Crisis in Review," Amazing Heroes 91, March 15, 1986, 108-109.
[51] Ibid, 109.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Hilary Goldstein, "Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Absolute Edition Review," IGN, January 6, 2006 http://comics.ign.com/articles/679/679514p1.html (accessed January 31, 2012).
[54] Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 6.
[55] Quoted in Ibid, 7.
[56] Quoted in Patrick Daniel O'Neill, "*Spotlight*: Crisis on Infinite Earths," David Anthony Kraft's Comics Interview #26, 1985, 15.
[57] Marv Wolfman, writer/editor, and George Perez, penciller, Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Absolute Edition (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 11.
[58] Ibid, 297.
[59] Ibid, 295.
[60] Adam C. Murdaough, "Worlds Will Live, Worlds Will Die: Myth, Metatext, Continuity and Cataclysm in DC Comics' *Crisis On Infinite Earths*" (master's thesis, Bowling Green State University, August 2006), 63.
[61] Ibid, 294.
[62] Marv Wolfman, writer, and George Perez, penciller, History of the DC Universe (New York: DC Comics, 2002), 1.
[63] Quoted in Patrick Daniel O'Neill, "*Spotlight*: Crisis on Infinite Earths," David Anthony Kraft's Comics Interview #26, 1985, 24.
[64] Ibid, 5.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid, 54.
[67] Ibid, 55.
[68] Quoted in Patrick Daniel O'Neill, "*Spotlight*: Crisis on Infinite Earths," David Anthony Kraft's Comics Interview #26, 1985, 24.

[69] Ibid, 25. My emphasis.
[70] Hayden White, "Interpretation In History," in Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 51.
[71] Quoted in Mark Waid, "Beginnings and Endings," Amazing Heroes 66, March 1, 1985, 27-28.
[72] Douglas Wolk, Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 102.
[73] See Geoff Johns, writer, Phil Jimenez, lead artist, et. al., Infinite Crisis, New York: DC Comics, 2005-2006; and Geoff Johns, Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, Mark Waid, writers, et. al., 52, DC Comics, 2006-2007.
[74] See Grant Morrison, writer, JG Jones, Carlos Pacheco, and Doug Mahnke, lead artists, et. al., Final Crisis, DC Comics 2008-2009.
[75] Quoted in Jeffrey Renaud, "Grant Morrison's Multiversity," Comic Book Resources, May 6, 2009, http://comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=21104 (accessed May 7, 2009).
[76] Ibid.

Chapter 7 – War & Crisis: DC & Marvel Comics' Crossover Responses to September 11th

In the final months of 2001, DC Comics and Marvel Comics tried to approach 9/11 seriously and soberly through several "tribute" books whose goal was to showcase America's firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, military forces, and other first responders as the "real" heroes (compared to the fictional superheroes), as well as to raise money for 9/11-related charities. This chapter will examine the ways in which DC Comics and Marvel Comics have utilized "universe-wide" crossovers as part of a process of reflecting upon the events and aftermath of September 11th, 2001; nonetheless, the industry's immediate reaction to the terrorist attacks was not to profit directly from the tragedy. As Marvel's editor-in-chief, Joe Quesada noted in a *Today* show interview at the time, "I was getting e-mails from fans almost instantly saying, you know, Marvel needs to step up."[1] His counterpart at DC, Vice President Paul Levitz, similarly exclaimed that, "We needed to lift our pens, measure them against the swords of vengeance and the crumpled steel of anger."[2]

These books came in a variety of forms: Marvel's *Heroes* poster book, consisting mainly of images and brief snippets of text; a team-up between DC and publishers Chaos!, Dark Horse, and Image Comics to produce two volumes of short stories, both real and fictional; a similar collection from independent cartoonists titled *9-11 Emergency Relief*; and various other efforts from smaller publishers and individual creators. As journalist and media critic Susan Faludi notes, though, these tribute stories failed to break free from the simplistic morality stories at the core of superhero comics:

> Comic book writers stretched the limits of [the heroic] ideal, expanding the definition of hero to fit any and all acts . . . At the same time, the actual superheroes . . . were universally depicted as powerless. In the 9/11 comics, the superheroes stand in front of the smoldering mound with their arms dangling at their sides, a pose that inadvertently echoed the posture of the ground-zero searchers. In the 1940s Superman whacked Nazi spies, while Captain America downed a 'Super Soldier' serum to boost his killing powers and went to war on the front lines. Now, Spider-Man wandered ineffectually through the ruins.[3]

Instead of questioning the heroic ideal, Faludi argues, these comics pointed out how such an over-the-top view of the world had actually permeated reality itself: "The reversal of hero worship in the comic books underscored a troubling question in real life: why were our serious media insisting on portraying us and our leaders with such comic hyperbole?"[4]

The apotheosis of these 9/11 stories came in a special tribute issue of *Amazing Spider-Man* (featuring a somber all-black cover) written by J. Michael Straczynski (known to fans as "JMS") and illustrated by John Romita, Jr., with the proceeds given to 9/11-related tragedies. This issue firmly set the terrorist attacks in Marvel continuity, which led comics scribe Grant Morrison to call it, "a genuinely heartfelt tale in which the superheroes aimlessly assembled at Ground Zero. They were compelled to acknowledge the event as if it had occurred in their own simulated universe, but they hadn't been there to prevent it, which negated their entire raison d'être."[5] However, the issue also included a now-infamous image of arch-villain Dr. Doom crying, something that was criticized by many fans writing on the Internet. One particularly ardent fan who admits to being an outspoken critic of JMS ("Few things in the world anger me more than JMS and his so-called comic book work"[6]) exemplified just how extreme the reactions to this issue could become, given its touchy subject matter. The fan, going by the name "The Fanboy," wrote a retrospective review in 2007 wherein he claimed that the issue,

> is offensive, poorly written, preposterous and it destroys the entire continuity of the Marvel Universe by being canon. . . . JMS, in one page, manages to ruin the character of Doom forever. . . . Because JMS. MADE. DOCTOR. VICTOR. VON. DOOM. CRY. *CRY*. ***CRY***. DOCTOR DOOM WOULD NEVER, EVER, EVER, EVER CRY IN REACTION TO A TERRORIST ATTACK ON THE UNITED STATES! . . . DOOM DOES NOT CRY! . . . I HATE YOU SO MUCH, JMS! YOU NEVER PAY ATTENTION TO ANY OF THE FINER POINTS OF CONTINUITY AND AS A RESULT OF IT CLASSIC CHARACTERS HAVE BEEN SULLIED PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE![7]

Though this is intentionally a humorous overreaction, it does nicely summarize the problems that many fans, obsessed with continuity details, had with the issue: Dr. Doom is a villain who has perpetrated mass slaughter himself, and thus would have no cause to weep at the events of 9/11.

Other fans, though, were able to take the issue in the spirit in which it was intended, and thus find it moving in its own right while coming up with a way to excuse the continuity contradictions. As reviewer Skott Jiminez argued in another retrospective review, from 2011,

> It makes sense to me. While these are villains and, yes, they have taken the lives of innocent people, they have always done so for a solid reason. . . . Doom . . . has always wanted to rule the world but for no other reason than the prosperity and safety of his beloved [homeland] Latveria, it makes sense that he would be effected for if something like this could happen in the World's City, what of his people and homeland?[8]

Whether or not Doom was acting believably in character, this debate serves to highlight, once again, the importance that continuity holds to comic book fans. As such, a regular issue of *Amazing Spider-Man* may not have been the best place for a 9/11 memorial, serving as it did to highlight the ridiculous nature of such debates in relation to the real-world mourning after the terrorist attacks.

Marvel would go on to launch a new *Captain America* series that dealt directly with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the new "War on Terror," but soon after moved all of its books away from such political stories and back into the realm of superheroic adventure fiction[9] (a path that DC had never quite strayed from, even in the immediate aftermath of September 11th). The publishers found that 9/11 was not like Pearl Harbor, and readers did not want to see any kind of jingoistic heroism or period of extended darkness and mourning. Rather, audiences wanted superhero comics to do what they did best, and provide an escape from the horrors of the world outside. As a result, the mainstream superhero stories – with the exception of the above-mentioned short run of *Captain America* – shied away from dealing with September 11th or the War On Terror for several years.

In this respect, the comics companies were taking part in a larger culture of consumption and comfort that arose following 9/11, as epitomized by President George W. Bush's exhortation for Americans to maintain confidence in the economy. American citizens were being told by their government and by big businesses to return to normality by seeking out (and paying for) comfort in the face of a mentally disturbing national trauma. As Marita Sturken argues, this

comfort culture was serving a larger national purpose: "The selling of comfort is a primary aspect of the affirmation of innocence in American culture."[10]

Following 9/11, this belief in American innocence became the dominant way of expressing centuries-old feelings of American exceptionalism. Many citizens wanted to feel like the 9/11 attacks were completely unprovoked, and bore no relation to decades of American geopolitics, so they worked hard to create a culture of innocence through what Sturken calls, "comfort consumerism . . . which can be seen in the context of the long history of the marketing of domestic comfort as a means of reassuring the national public of the cohesion of the nation."[11] Examples of this culture of comfort after 9/11 include the proliferation of merchandise reaffirming citizenship via the iconography of the American flag, the increasing popularity of the Hummer, a gigantic car utilizing military technology to make drivers feel extra-protected, and a flurry of patriotic music from both the right-wing (such as the sudden leap in popularity of Lee Greenwood's 1984 patriotic country song "God Bless The USA") and the left-wing (preeminently, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's album *The Rising*, and its titular first single, which explored the effects of the attacks on the American psyche while at the same time providing an uplifting beat). In the case of comic books, the publishers were selling comfort by keeping calm and carrying on, as it were, and not allowing the events of 9/11 to alter significantly the kind of superheroic escapist narratives that were their stock in trade.

After a few years passed, however, and America returned to a sense of something resembling normality, readers felt less of a need for comfort and were once again willing to accept more than just escapist narratives in their superhero comic books. Both DC and Marvel Comics began to tap into the cultural zeitgeist of a post-9/11 America. Rather than crafting stories that put the superheroes into conversation with the actual real-world events and effects of 9/11, though, both publishers used the anxiety and tension in the American mindset and mediascape in order to create massive crossover events in the vein of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. DC's approach to this would be to draw upon the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that

permeated the country by creating a series of cosmic, metaphysical events that, like *Crisis*, obsessively referenced and reworked the company's almost seventy years worth of stories, with one apocalyptic event following closely upon the heels of each previous one. Marvel, on the other hand, reflecting the way in which it had differed from DC since the 1960s by being more "grounded" and "realistic," chose to deal with several of the issues raised by 9/11 more directly, and produced a lengthy series of crossovers that reflected upon such topics as the Patriot Act, disguised terrorists, and the Bush administration. After a brief look at how the medium of film has represented the memory of September 11th, this chapter will examine the various crossover series published by DC and Marvel in the years since 9/11 in order to show how, in a media-saturated world, superhero comics as much as any other medium are used to reflect upon and remember events of the recent past.

9/11 ON FILM

As in the world of comics, the film industry was relatively slow to respond to 9/11, unsure of just when, how, and if it would ever be tasteful to take up the issues and imagery surrounding the attacks and their political and psychological aftermath. The first film to do so was a documentary, entitled simply *9/11*, that told about the day from the point of view of the New York City fire department. Co-directed by French brothers Jules and Gedeon Naudet and FDNY firefighter James Hanlon, it was originally meant to follow the experiences of a probationary firefighter, but instead happened to catch some harrowing footage of the events of 9/11 (including one of only three known recordings of first plane hitting the North Tower of the World Trade Center). A sober, sad, and respectful look at the "heroes" of September 11th, *9/11* aired commercial-free on CBS in March of 2001, only six months after the attack.

The two most prominent narrative films to attempt to take on the subject of 9/11 would both come five years later, in 2006 – Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* and Paul Greengrass' *United 93*. Like *9/11*, both of these films were unconcerned with the political motivations behind the terrorist attacks, and were equally disinterested in the exploring how

American society reacted to them. Instead, they were focused on human stories of survival and heroism, true-life stories that had become almost mythical in the years since.

World Trade Center is a smooth, slick, Hollywood film relating the story of two Port Authority Police Officers caught in the rubble of the collapsed Twin Towers, who were rescued after about ten hours of being trapped. Though a tribute to the fallen first responders of 9/11, it is also an attempt to find, as the poster for the film asserts, "A true story of courage and survival" amidst a day known mostly for the fear and death it was filled with. Its big budget and movie star cast, led off by Nicholas Cage as Jon McLoughlin, one of the trapped officers, ultimately makes the movie too narratively smooth to capture the disjointed feeling of 9/11. This was picked up on by many of the film's critics, who saw it as dramatic and touching, but a failure at evoking any lasting emotions about the tragedy. As Roger Ebert noted in his review, citing another potent film immersed in a project of cultural memory,

> I was reminded of what Stanley Kubrick said about "Schindler's List": "Think that was about the Holocaust? That was about success, wasn't it? The Holocaust is about six million people who get killed. 'Schindler's List' was about six hundred people who don't." *That's* perspective.[12]

Focusing on those who *were* killed in 9/11, Greengrass' *United 93* features a cast of then-unknown actors as the passengers and crew of the United Airlines flight that crashed into a field in Pennsylvania on 9/11, instead of reaching its intended target (suspected to be either the White House or the Capitol Building). While it also features a portrayal of the FAA's reaction to the hijackings (including FAA National Operations manager, Ben Sliney, playing himself), the heart and soul of the film is its almost documentary-like focus on the passengers on the plane, from the routine of their morning, through the horror of being hijacked, and ultimately to their resolve to storm the plane's cockpit in an attempt to wrest control from the terrorists who were at the helm. It is a painful look at what it takes to be brave in the face of overwhelming fear, and despite the tragic ending it in many ways is more evocative of "courage and survival" than *World Trade Center*. As Ebert notes, "The entire story, every detail, is told in the present tense. We know

what they know when they know it, and nothing else . . .. This is a masterful and heartbreaking film, and it does honor to the memory of the victims."[13] The final moments of the film attempt to capture the final moments of the doomed plane, as the passengers fight against the terrorists while the airplane (and the camera) careens toward the ground in ever tightening, dizzying circles. It ends with a literal impact, cutting to black just at the moment of the plane crashing, sparing the viewer from any grotesque viscera. The psychological impact, however, is deep and immense.

While *World Trade Center* and *United 93* attempted to take on 9/11 as their full subject, other films would use the destruction of the Twin Towers as mere window dressing. Mike Binder's *Reign Over Me* (2007) and Stephen Daldry's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011) both tell the stories of individuals dealing with grief after losing family members on 9/11, while Allen Coulter's *Remember Me* (2010) rather tastelessly ends with a scene set inside the North Tower moments prior to the first plane's impact. Some films – such as the 2008 J.J. Abrams-produced science fiction "found footage" monster movie *Cloverfield* and the 2012 Zach Snyder Superman film *Man of Steel* – have even evoked the news footage of 9/11 as a way to add "realism" to blockbuster entertainment, portraying city streets filling with rolling clouds of dust from collapsed buildings.

Far more common than the films soberly examining 9/11 or the ones exploiting its imagery have been those films dealing with the geopolitical events that followed, focusing particularly on the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (most notable among these being Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2008, and Michael Moore's 2004 excoriating documentary attack on the Bush administration, *Fahrenheit 9/11*). These latter types of narratives are far easier to capture in a film than the evocation of a day already noted for its immense amount of media coverage, both amateur and professional. The American film industry, as we have seen in regards to World War II and the Vietnam War,

is well prepared to talk about the subjects of war, politics, and the meeting point of the two, often using an action film aesthetic in order to deliver a filmmaker's message.

Superhero comics function in largely the same way. As a genre, they are based on "good guys" fighting "bad guys," a simplistic narrative that many critics accused the Bush administration of reducing the national political discourse to in the wake of 9/11. DC Comics' multiple post-9/11 "Crisis" events fell into this model. The heroes might be slightly tarnished, but they are ultimately able to pull together in the face of true evil. Marvel Comics' post-9/11 crossover events, on the other hand, would be used to critique that model, calling into question what "good" and "evil" might mean in an increasingly morally complicated world. Like the films that responded to 9/11, however, both publishers' comics would show just how much trickier it is to use popular media in order to remember and discuss the recent past, rather than more distant events that have become the realm of "history."

CRISES INFINITE AND FINAL

In the fifteen years following *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, DC Comics published a stream of semi-annual crossovers, some of which were creatively and commercially successful and some of which appeared to be no more than uninspired, diluted versions of those that had come before. In the aftermath of 9/11, DC focused instead on more character-based storytelling that didn't involve much cross-title continuity. This began to change, however, with the increasing influence of editor Dan DiDio, who had a background writing and editing for both soap operas and children's cartoon programming. When DiDio took the reigns of DC editorial, he brought back the primacy of the crossover event as a storytelling vehicle. From 2004 through 2011, DC's entire line would be defined by a series of one crossover "event" after another, which all attempted, on an ongoing basis, to tie together universal continuity as *Crisis on Infinite Earths* had done in the 1980s.

The opening salvo of this long list of events was, initially, one of the most independent of them – the seven-issue miniseries *Identity Crisis*, released between June and

December of 2004, by best-selling prose novelist Brad Meltzer (who had previously written a *Green Arrow* arc for DC) and artist Rags Morales. The series was touted as a Justice League murder-mystery that would reveal deep-seated secrets of the team, but as it went along its ramifications were felt wider and wider across DC's publishing line. The story does, in fact, begin as a murder-mystery, with the brutal death of Sue Dibny, wife to light-hearted hero Ralph Dibny, the Elongated Man, whom together had formed a sort of superhero version of *The Thin Man*'s Nick and Nora Charles. That Sue Dibny was the first death in *Identity Crisis* was not incidental. It was an indication that darker times were coming for the DC Universe, where even genial, innocent creations from a time when the comics were more geared towards children (Ralph and Sue were meant to be likable parent figures) were subject to violent, adult forces.

As *Identity Crisis* continued, its body count rose, and its grim nature became more and more apparent. The deaths would come to include the superhero Firestorm, the supervillain Captain Boomerang, and Jack Drake, the father of Batman's young sidekick, Robin. The darkness of the story, however, did not just extend to these deaths. Although Sue Dibny's murderer is revealed to be Jean Loring, the ex-wife of superhero the Atom, during the investigation several younger heroes discover a long-hidden secret kept from them by their mentors and predecessors – years earlier, in the wake of Sue's rape at the hands of supervillain Dr. Light, several Justice League members began a campaign to alter the minds of some of their worst villains.

This piece of retroactive continuity is used by Meltzer as a way of "explaining" the somewhat goofy tone of the superhero stories of the 1950s and 1960s, stories meant for children and produced under strict Comics Code guidelines that limited the amount of violence or action that could appear in a story. Meltzer argues that,

> You look back on those stories now and they're wonderful – nothing tops them – but I think a lot of people chuck them to the side and say, *That's fun, that's cute, but they're a coloring book and we don't need them anymore*. I love those stories. I grew up on those stories, and those stories changed my life. They taught me my values. They engaged me when no one else did. And in my own selfish way, I wanted them back.[14]

Meltzer does not appear to realize the paradox he is creating here – in order to "get back" the simple, moralistic stories of his childhood by bringing them into contemporary DC continuity, he needed to add a dark and horrific back-story of sexualized violence and morally compromised heroes. From the outset, the project initiated by DC with *Identity Crisis* was mired in this obsession with justifying continuity at the expense of the values and intentions of the older stories that were being revisited.

Identity Crisis was ultimately a story about the darkness at the core of even the greatest of heroes. The most significant secret that gets unearthed in the mini-series is the fact that several Justice League members erased Batman's memory when he discovered them altering Dr. Light's mind, an event that the finale of the story hints he is starting to remember. In a special commentary included with the collected edition of *Identity Crisis*, Meltzer notes that the series was intended to show the clay feet of DC's superheroes, revealing their dark history as well as ramping up the focus on constant threat of death faced by both them and their loved ones: "In this story we look at death in all its manifestations – not just the death of a person, but the death of an ideal, the death of a dream, and . . . the death of self . . . So many super-hero comics look at things through a telescope trying to find giant monsters and whole worlds to punch. *Identity Crisis* is designed to look at these characters through a microscope, pulling in so tight, we can see all their flaws and imperfections."[15] The series proved so successful at revealing the cracks in the foundation of the DC Universe – or, rather, at *creating* those cracks, retroactively – that it led to multiple years' worth of stories about what it would take to heal those wounds and get the heroes working together again, acting heroically rather than selfishly in new storylines that pitted them against more extreme villains. Meltzer explains that, "DC told me they were going to build a year of stories on this moment [of Batman remembering the Justice League's betrayal]," an indication of how *Identity Crisis* was going to be used by DC as a launching point for a much darker continuity.

Spinning out of *Identity Crisis*, DC's editors, headed by DiDio, took a more prominent role in the creative process, tightening the continuity of the entire publishing line so that all of the titles worked together to build towards a series of continuity nodes which would impact the entire DC Universe. As a result of this, the entire DC line – which typically was upbeat and filled with the fantastic as opposed to Marvels more grounded, and often grimmer, superhero stories – took a darker turn. This was a way of both reflecting national anxieties and appealing to a more mature readership than had been the original audience for superhero stories. Though the storylines involved bore no resemblance to the events of 9/11, the tonal shift can certainly be linked to the uncertainty permeating the American consciousness in the years following the attacks, years filled with unwinnable wars, an increasingly polarized political divide, and the ever-present fear of future attacks.

As a reaction to 9/11, DC's tightened continuity seemed to serve two purposes. First, it created a sense of certainty and control in the fictional universe, something that could be comforting to readers in comparison to the seemingly chaotic, out-of-control real world. Second, the crossover stories that punctuate this tighter continuity required a greater-than-usual threat to the superheroes and their universe, which reflected the greater sense of threat permeating the American psyche after the 9/11 attacks. This, at least, was what DiDio believed, arguing that the comics provided a therapeutic and cathartic force for readers. In his words, these stories were,

> crafted in a post-9/11 world at a time when most Americans were feeling vulnerable and in need of heroes. We saw a world where the human spirit was pushed to the limit and against overwhelming odds, people persevered and heroes emerged – sadly, at the cost of their own lives. And although we work in fantasy, the questions became, 'Should we expect less from comics' greatest heroes?' The answer, of course, is 'No.' So, while the [stories have] all the requisite death and destruction, the true story is the measure of determination and self-sacrifice necessary to be a hero in the DC Universe.[16]

DiDio indicates that bigger threats ultimately provide a larger cathartic release by showing how the heroes overcome those threats in order to save the day and save lives. Scholars Phillip Smith and Michael Goodrum go even further in talking about superhero comics' responses to 9/11 and their role in creating a sense of control:

> The insertion of superheroes into the story of the September 11 terrorist attacks allows an element of control to be integrated into the narrative. In terms of clinical psychology, a sense of control is key in preventing trauma . . . The superhero genre allows . . . attacks to be contained within the familiar and its outcomes are evoked but resolved without any adverse effects.[17]

The large-scale, cosmic, epic stakes of DC's crossovers are a way of reliving the trauma of attack and destruction, but with the creators (and to a lesser extent the readers/fans) in control and able to create a positive outcome.

DC's continuity-driven storytelling of this era can be seen as a response to the events of 9/11 and its aftereffects. The stories provided readers with an increased sense of narrative tension while at the same time releasing their real-life tensions through the cathartic experience of a genre where, eventually, the good guys always win. As a result, the increased level of continuity that began with *Identity Crisis* brought with it a dark and dour tone that would spread throughout in the DC Universe in the years to come. This darkness first presented itself in stories throughout 2004 and 2005 that addressed the dangling plot lines of *Identity Crisis*, such as Batman's reaction to finally recalling his memory-wipe. Though initially appearing in various storylines of ongoing series, these plot points came to a head in March 2005 with a special one-shot issue, *DC Countdown*, crafted by prolific DC writers Judd Winick, Greg Rucka, and Geoff Johns, along with a series of popular artists. The issue tells the story of a widespread conspiracy to take advantage of the ways in which the various corners of the DC Universe were in disarray following *Identity Crisis*. This conspiracy is uncovered by B-level superhero the Blue Beetle, who pays the prices with his life. It is important to note that Blue Beetle had his highest level of success in the 1980s as a member of a humorous take on the Justice League; thus, as with *Identity Crisis*, *Countdown* implements contemporary continuity by actively destroying the lighter moments in DC's history.

Equally as crucial to DC as the plotlines that spun out of *Countdown* was the role Geoff Johns played in creating the book. Johns was a young writer with a rising profile both within DC and within the larger comic book industry. In a generation of comic book writers who had

started out as fans, Johns stands out as a different sort of figure, one who had not created fanzines but who nonetheless was a voracious comic book reader with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the DC Universe. His fandom "credentials," so to speak, can be seen in several letters columns from the early 1990s, which the young Johns wrote to before getting his first professional break (even suggesting plot points to editors and writers that he would follow up on himself once he broke into the field.)[18] It was while working as an assistant to film director Richard Donner (who had directed *Superman: The Movie*) that he began a career in comics, creating the series *Stars and S.T.R.I.P.E.* for DC before moving on to successful and well-received runs on titles such as *The Flash, JSA*, and *Teen Titans*, for which he received multiple fan awards.[19] His popularity with the fans, which was thanks in part to his immense knowledge of DC's characters and continuity, led to a higher and higher profile within the company, which culminated in being handed the opportunity to helm 2005's seven-issue crossover "event" *Infinite Crisis*, the official 20-year anniversary/sequel to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. Tellingly, this was a project initiated by Dido and DC editorial, rather than by the book's creative team, which Johns would later admit: "Dan always had the plan to do a sequel to the original *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and then he just got the rest of us involved."[20]

Four mini-series had spun out of *Countdown* – *The OMAC Project*, *Day of Vengeance*, *Villains United*, and *Rann/Thanager War* – that were each disparate in tone and created by different teams of writers and artists. However, thanks to DC's tight editorial control, each series was designed to reach a common endpoint – the beginning of *Infinite Crisis*. Johns describes how at the outset of *Infinite Crisis*, "the universe was going to hell in a handbasket, all of the DC mini-series . . . had pushed our world into such chaos."[21] The books' primary artist, penciller Phil Jimenez, explains how this dark opening, one which all of DC continuity had been pushing towards, was intended to be the starting point of a redemption arc for DC's heroes: "It set up our heroes in this dark place . . . and it gave us a great starting place to take our heroes back to their iconographic status."[22] The pre-sale hype for *Infinite Crisis* was of such a great extent that the

comics-centric *Wizard* magazine followed Johns and Jimenez to various comic book stores in Los Angeles and New York on the day the series was released, gouging fan reactions about everything from confusion over continuity issues, to fear about what characters might die, and even to recognizing the presumably "undercover" creators.[23]

Much of the advertising and advance hype for *Infinite Crisis* focused on the story's darkness, explaining the series as portraying "the worst day in the history of the DC Universe."[24] However, *Infinite Crisis* was also advertised as being the culmination of very careful planning on the part of DC editorial, along with top creators like Johns and Jimenez. Johns explained in an interview that, "There's a reason everything's happening the way it is now. It's not arbitrary. Everything's been planned really carefully."[25] The same interview noted how the planning and the increased darkness went hand in hand, as Johns, "prefers to think of each ripple in the DCU—be it *Identity Crisis* or the original *Crisis*—as part of one enormous story, rather than self-contained events. In a way, this allows him to justify the unspeakable pain about to befall the bravest and boldest of the DCU."[26]

The writer who was quickly becoming the main architect of the DC universe wholeheartedly subscribed to the concept of a universal narrative, a way of viewing DC's publishing line that had been initiated with the original *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. The planning that went into this endeavor was on such a scale that, according to another interview, the chief DC editors and creators laid out, "the tricky and intricate story pacing . . . via giant blueprints, charts, and Post-It notes DiDio . . . keeps locked in his office, to keep tabs on the story as it progresses."[27] These story beats were then farmed out to various DC books and creators: "The core Crisis architects strived to provide enough story and character options for the rest of the DC talent, so that tie-ins weren't forced and previously planned storylines weren't undermined or tossed. The character and story links would ultimately result in a more cohesive universe and add to the already epic quality of the event – stretching across all books in the DCU."[28]

The darkness that all of this universal planning sets up for the first issue of *Infinite Crisis* is meant to impact not only the audience, but also a set of characters within the story itself – the Superman, Lois Lane, Superboy, and heroic Lex Luthor of several alternate dimensions, all of whom had gone into a limbo-like zone at the end of the original *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. In *Infinite Crisis*, this Superman – the original Superman of Earth-2, the one who had initiated the DC Universe as well as the very concept of the superhero in *Action Comics* #1 – has finally seen enough darkness overtake the world, and he breaks free of limbo to return to the DC Universe, bringing with him the memories of the pre-*Crisis* multiverse.

After twenty years of a single DC Universe with an entirely rewritten and retconned history, the DC Multiverse returned, providing a fresh link between current stories and those going back to the 1930s, a link which had been severed by the original *Crisis* in the mid-1980s. This reemergence of the multiverse was perhaps a reflection of the post-9/11 desire to return to "simpler" times of the past, in this case via a multitude of fanciful worlds and stories that need not be slaves to reality or continuity. By this point, too, creators like Johns who had grown up reading DC's comics but never had a chance to utilize the idea of the multiverse in their work wanted to bring that story possibility back into the publisher's fold. Thanks to *Infinite Crisis*, after twenty years these fans-turned-creators were, like Roy Thomas in the 1980s, able to write back to the stories they had grown up with set in a DC Multiverse.

Infinite Crisis becomes a fictional embodiment of the battle over that multiverse – the alternate Lex Luthor and Superboy have gone mad during their time in limbo, and want to destroy the current DC universe in order to create a more perfect one. These two characters' manipulations behind the scenes turn out to have caused much of the terrible circumstances that the series opened on, and the world's heroes – especially the "trinity" of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, who begin the series barely on speaking terms – must come together to defeat them. In the process, the Earth-Two Superman and Lois Lane both die, and the DC Universe's continuity is given something of a "soft" reboot, where certain aspects of its history are tweaked

or recreated (such as whether or not there was ever a Superboy, or whether Wonder Woman was a founding member of the Justice League) while leaving much of the overriding structure of the universe intact (which differentiates it from to the "hard" reboot of the original *Crisis* that altered the very core and history of the DC Universe, rewriting its basic format, setup, and structure).

While *Identity Crisis* established a darker, more serious tone for DC, one created through editorial oversight of the entire line, *Infinite Crisis* started a second thread of control – that of obsession with DC's history and continuity. The follow-up "event" series to *Infinite Crisis* was *52*, a year-long weekly series set in "real time" (beginning in May 2006) telling the story of what happened to the DC Universe in the year following *Infinite Crisis*, a year in which Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman were all inactive. *52* was a critically acclaimed series, due both to its unique narrative structure as well as the four "all-star" writers helming it, which included Geoff Johns and Grant Morrison. Though composed of a variety of character-focused narrative threads, the "big reveal" of the series in the fifty-second issue is that the events of *Infinite Crisis* resulted in not just the return of memories of the DC Multiverse, but the full-on recreation of that multiverse as fifty-two alternate worlds and dimensions. Many of these were reminiscent of worlds from the original multiverse, while others were home to popular out-of-continuity stories (called "Elseworlds") from the previous few decades that imagined scenarios such as Batman becoming a vampire or Superman landing in Soviet Russia instead of Kansas. This recreation of the multiverse further shows DC's continuing obsession with its own history and continuity, in essence rewriting the rewrite of the original *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. One of the characters in the series sums up the feeling of the creators and editors behind *52* when he exclaims, "Look around you . . . There's so much more happening out there than we could ever have imagined . . . That's the way things should be. Welcome to a multiverse of possibility . . . Welcome home."[29]

DC followed up the well-received *52* with another weekly series, *Countdown,* which began in May 2007 and was poorly received by critics and fans alike. What DC's editors failed to realize was that *52* had been a success not because of its attention to continuity, but because of

its attention to character and story. *52* was crafted by four of the finest writers working in superhero comics, veritable experts in bringing together action, characterization, and continuity tidbits within a meaningful overarching story structure. *Countdown*, on the other hand, was driven by editors rather than writers, and was concerned with tying all of DC's books into one massive continuity rather than exploring nuances of character. Its focus on continuity as the star of the title led to flat, undifferentiated character arcs that provided little emotional depth for readers to latch on to. Eventually it was revealed that *Countdown* was only ever "counting down" to yet another major "event," *Final Crisis*, a book helmed by Grant Morrison in what was intended to be the finale of the "crisis trilogy."

The goal of *Countdown,* narratively, was to get the DC Universe into position for the beginning of *Final Crisis*, and yet in the end it failed at this because neither Morrison nor the writers of *Countdown* were even aware that this was DC's goal. Morrison would later explain that *Countdown* had little to do with what he was crafting for *Final Crisis*:

> *Final Crisis* was partly written and broken down into rough issue-by-issue plots before *Countdown* was even conceived, let alone written. . . . The *Countdown* writers were later asked to "seed" material from *Final Crisis* and in some cases, probably due to the pressure of filling the pages of a weekly book, that seeding amounted to entire plotlines veering off in directions I had never envisaged, anticipated, or planned for in *Final Crisis*.[30]

This certainly seems to support the idea that *Countdown* was, rather than a creator-driven book, one that was driven by DC editorial as a way to keep up the feeling of an ongoing "event" in the DC Universe as Morrison prepared *Final Crisis* for the following year. Indeed, DiDio himself would admit that, "I'd say about 75% of the concepts that are being created [at DC Comics] are editorially driven."[31] However, he clarifies that, "The role of the editor is to assemble and be responsible for whatever project they are in charge of . . . please understand that whatever book you hold in your hand, at the end of the day, is there because of an editorial mandate to create that book."[32] Nevertheless, even DiDio would come to admit that many fans and reviewers felt that *Countdown* suffered from too much editorial interference, forcing it to reflect too much of

what was happening in other DC books: "If you're creating stories just for the sake of having events to tie things together with no real meat on the bones, then you're going to have event fatigue because you have all this promotion and drive and anticipation, but you've under-delivered on what the expectations are."[33] *Countdown* served as a lesson to DiDio and the rest of DC editorial that even they could only control the DC Universe so much before the stories and characters, not to mention the creators, suffered from being stifled.

In Morrison's *Final Crisis*, those characters suffered in a different sense – they were subjected to "the day evil won," when the superheroes failed to stop the physical, psychological, and emotional invasion of earth by the dark "New God" Darkseid. Morrison had a long history working for DC Comics, beginning in the 1980s when he was part of the "British invasion" of creators brought to DC from the world of British comics (which had also included Garth Ennis). Over the two decades since then, Morrison had become a critical darling as well as a blockbuster sales force, whose postmodern, intellectual take on superheroes reflected an outsider, counter-culture ethos that he brought to such seemingly staid characters as Superman, Batman, and the Justice League. He was also known for his creator-owned properties, such as *The Invisibles*, which brought him an audience that wasn't much interested in superheroes, generally, but did avidly follow his work on any project. With *Final Crisis*, Morrison, along with artistic collaborators J. G. Jones, Carlos Pacheco, and Doug Mahnke, amongst others, finally brought to a head plot threads that he had been seeding into his DC work since the 1990s, in order to tell his version of the ultimate story of good versus evil in the DC Universe. Perhaps having learned something from *Countdown*, DC did not force *Final Crisis* tie-ins upon every one of its books and creators, but rather let it stand alone with a few related mini-series and crossovers.

Final Crisis is a solipsistic, metafictional, and surprisingly philosophical superhero magnum opus for Morrison. It suffers, however, from its own cleverness – to truly understand the series requires not only a knowledge of DC's extensive continuity (though the series does not tie into any ongoing series, it draws upon decades of previous stories), but also an ability to parse

out the metatextual message Morrison implants into the series about the force of creation versus the blank page, and the hope inspired in readers by the inevitable fact that DC's superhero stories never end, are always "to be continued." By the end of the series, Morrison experiments with storytelling techniques, distilling entire story beats down into single iconic panels, and telling the story from multiple points of view in both time and space. As Morrison, himself, describes the series,

> The "final crisis," as I saw it for a paper universe like DC's, would be the terminal war between is and isn't, between the story and the blank page. What would happen if the void of the page took issue with the quality of material imposed upon it and decided to fight back by spontaneously generating a living concept capable of devouring narrative itself. . . . I tried to show the DC universe breaking down into signature gestures, last-gasp strategies that were tried and tested but would this time fail, until finally even the characterizations would fade and the plot become rambling, meaningless, disconnected. Although I lost my nerve a little, I must confess, and it never became disconnected enough. This, I was trying to say, is what happens when you let bad stories eat good ones.[34]

Though an interesting postmodern exercise in creating a comic, this stylistic flourish did not sit well with many readers. Some felt that Morrison was making a simple superhero story too complex and difficult to read, while others felt that such complexity was wasted on the subject matter of superheroes. The reviews of the series were, at best, mixed. Critic Graeme McMillan, writing for the web site io9, noted that,

> Like the majority of Morrison's superhero work, this isn't a story that will satisfy fans of the literal; it's very much an allegorical, lyrical story . . . with narrative clarity sacrificed on occasion for artistic effect - It's very much a story you feel as much as anything, and because of that, re-reading it becomes a strange celebration of the successful moments with an increasing awareness of its faults.[35]

The blog Collected Edition similarly described *Final Crisis* as a story that had both flaws and moments that soared, summarizing that, "Though the storytelling within *Final Crisis* is perhaps at times unnecessarily complex, it is at its heart an ode to comic books."[36] In essence, Morrison was trying to please both superheroes and "alternative" comics readers, and was unable to find a happy middle. The metanarrative of creation/destruction, good story/bad story, comic book/blank page ultimately *becomes* the narrative of *Final Crisis*, a concept that was not as

pleasing to fans as either the "universe/multiverse"-based storytelling of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis* or the character-driven story of *52*. As Morrison himself notes: "*Final Crisis* was a bestseller, but it divided the Internet crowd like Alexander's sword."[37]

Superhero comics, as we have seen, walk a tightrope between the pleasures of escapism and the strictures of continuity and historical reality. *Final Crisis*, in a sense, eschewed *both* of these poles, by being both densely philosophical and yet also unconnected to real politics or history. Fans and critics were only somewhat willing to follow Morrison in this strange direction, and thus it received neither the sales success of *Infinite Crisis* nor the critical acclaim of *52*. Though Morrison showed that comics can utilize their form and structure to create new ways of understanding story and new modes of looking at reality, he also learned that these concepts do not sit well with average superhero fans.

However it was received, with *Final Crisi*s DC reached the apex of its post-9/11 continuity obsessions. Morrison created a story of the DC Multiverse that is ultimately about not the individual heroes or their struggles, but rather about the living multiverse itself, and the power of superhero comics as a vehicle for instilling hope and awe in readers. The end of the series reflects this, explaining that Superman, at a point in the story where he was given an all-powerful "God machine" with which he could do anything, "wished for a happy ending." However, the very next page explores, via the voice of a newscaster, how that very ending is merely a beginning for new stories: "You've just joined WGBS on a beautiful day in Metropolis! With more on those newly discovered parallel worlds and how they could change our lives forever! This is one story that's only just beginning."[38] Thus, even when evil wins, in the DC Universe the figure of the superhero – represented by the iconic Superman – can "wish" it back to a happy ending, as a place for new narratives and new comic books to emerge from.

Final Crisis shows just how different the DC Universe is from the real world. After September 11th, 2001, there was no way of magically wishing things back to the way they were before. On America's own "day evil won," tragedy and trauma prevailed, despite the narratives

of superheroic emergency workers. *Final Crisis* is, fittingly, the final reaction by DC (whether consciously or not) to the events of 9/11, a statement of the power of heroic fiction to always lead to another adventure and never give in to defeat or surrender. Just as ancient societies created pantheons of gods in order to explain the natural workings of the world, including horrific tragedies, Morrison is saying that modern writers of superhero comics can craft mythologies which can be every bit as inspiring to readers as the older myths were to their inventors, enabling their respective societies and cultures to get over great tragedy.

In the DC Universe, unlike in the Marvel Universe, there has never been any overt mention of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Though the mood of 9/11 permeated the books, the actual events were never portrayed or intimated, as DC's editors and creators recognized the fact that such a disaster would not be possible in a world full of such powerful superheroes, at least without adversely effecting the continuity. DC's New York skyline simply stopped showing the Twin Towers, without any direct narrative explanation as to why.[39] This is representative of the mythological character of DC's heroes, and of its ongoing universal narrative. *Final Crisis*, with its clash of gods, showcases how the heroes of the DC Universe *are* gods, whose adventures take place in a world that is a little brighter and kinder than our own.

DC's reaction to and reflection upon 9/11 is, in essence, pure escapism, a retreat from the geo-politics of the real world into a fantasy realm of fiction that, leading to *Final Crisis*, becomes ever more navel-gazing. This solipsism culminates in a story that reaffirms the value of such self-obsession by showcasing how it enables a certain style of hopeful storytelling that isn't possible when reflecting the conditions of a real world dealing with the fallout of war and tragedy. It is no accident that the final issue of *Final Crisis*, released early in Barack Obama's presidency and in the aftermath of his successful campaign focusing on the idea of "restoring hope," features an other-dimensional African American Superman who is, in his secret identity, the president of the United States. DC Comics' way of dealing with the decade following 9/11

was, like Obama's 2008 campaign, to focus on hope and on the future, rather than dwelling on the tragedies and mistakes of the past.

With *Final Crisis*, Morrison and DC affirm the value of escapism and hope in superhero stories as a valid way of responding to tragedy, showcasing how such escapism can be tied into the ongoing narrative of a comic book universe with a tightly controlled continuity. Marvel Comics, on the other hand, reacted differently to 9/11; it featured continuity that was just as tightly monitored by its editors, but which more directly reflected events happening in the real world during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

WARS CIVIL AND SECRET

While DC Comics used the anxiety and desire for control/catharsis of a post-9/11 America to retreat further and further into the metatextuality of its own fictional realm, Marvel Comics took the opposite path. Though also engaging in a series of crossovers that built upon each other, beginning in 2004 and continuing almost a decade later, Marvel chose to tell stories that, rather than dealing with epic cosmic forces, brought its heroes down to earth. If DC had purposely avoided any overt references to recent and current events, Marvel decided to take those events, give them a bit of a metaphysical/fictional twist, and use them as the basis for line-wide crossovers. Philip Smith and Michael Goodrum argue about this era at Marvel that, "By telling a story with a different location, happening to different people and with different outcomes (essentially, by telling a different story) an event can be stripped of its immediacy and horror whilst maintaining a certain kernel of truth which could not otherwise be told."[40] This was the path that Marvel took in the wake of 9/11, retelling and reliving the traumatic events of the terrorist attacks and their political fallout, but clothed in the realm of a science fiction universe where the good guys win out against the "evil-doers" (to borrow a phrase utilized by President Bush in the years following of 9/11). The stories maintain an element of realistic "truth" while being distanced enough from the real-world events so as to not be tasteless or inappropriate. Rather than directly engaging in real-world events such as the Patriot Act or the

War on Terror, Marvel's stories represented these ideas via thinly veiled metaphors that addressed contemporary issues through the lens of Marvel continuity.

The first of these "event" stories was a 2004 crossover that ended the classic *Avengers* team and series, fittingly entitled *Avengers Disassembled*, helmed by writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist David Finch. Bendis was, by this point, one of Marvel's most popular and acclaimed writers. He began his career as independent cartoonist, specializing in noir-ish stories of small-time criminals and bounty hunters, but by this time he had become famous at Marvel for a lengthy, revitalizing run on the *Daredevil* title; for the creation of Jessica Jones (a private eye whose "woman-on-the-street" experiences in the Marvel Universe were initially told in an adults-only title, *Alias*); and for revamping Spider-Man for a younger, 21st-century audience in the out-of-mainstream-continuity *Ultimate Spider-Man*.

In 2004, Bendis was handed one of Marvel's flagship properties, the *Avengers*, which he quickly put his mark on by violently "disassembling" the team and then putting together the *New Avengers*, which included long-time members such as Captain America and Iron Man, but also new-comers (yet popular Marvel franchise characters) like Spider-Man and the X-Men's Wolverine. *Avengers Disassembled* thus needed to be a story featuring enough devastation to cause the Avengers to disband, and it did this by crossing over into various titles and invoking images of 9/11, in the form of buildings being destroyed, crashing planes, and seemingly endless amounts of rubble. Most memorably, a small aircraft crashes into the Avengers' mansion headquarters, destroying it. Any contemporary image of a plane destroying a building in New York City cannot help but remind readers of 9/11, and Bendis does this intentionally. He wants to forge a connection between *Avengers Disassembled* and 9/11, in order to show how horrifying this attack is to the superheroes, as well as to create a platform that reminds his audience of 9/11 so that he (and the rest of Marvel's stable of writers and artists) can then discuss how America reacts to wide-scale trauma and devastation. This was the first step in a longer process of destabilizing the Marvel universe so that it could follow a path similar to post-9/11 America's.

With his takeover of the Avengers franchise, Brian Michael Bendis became one of the architects[41] behind the evolving Marvel Universe's continuity, a position which he took to with gusto, often using the line-wide crossover stories he was responsible for in order to speak to recent and current political issues. His next "event" was a mini-series entitled *Secret War*, with fully painted interiors by Italian artist Gabrielle Dell'Otto. *Secret War* focuses on a small group of superheroes recruited by Nick Fury to go on a secret mission to the tiny European nation of Latveria, in order to infiltrate the country and put a stop to the export of technology to American criminals. The mission must be kept under wraps because Fury has already been forbidden by the American president from interfering in Latveria, as they are a fledgling democracy supported by the United States. However, during the battle, Fury convinces a new SHIELD agent with the power to create earthquakes to destroy the Latverian castle, causing multiple deaths and bringing attention to the "secret" mission. In order to, as he explains it, "spare [them] the brunt of the aftermath,"[42] Fury brainwashes the heroes into forgetting about the entire situation. A year later, Latveria's prime minister, Lucia Von Bardas[43], orchestrates a devastating revenge attack on New York, bringing Fury's secret machinations to light.

Given his background as a soldier in World War II and a long-time Cold Warrior, it is unsurprising that Fury frames the entire affair as a war (hence the series' title):

> I'm a wartime general. I have weapons and I have soldiers and I have a job to do. Some of you understand this and some of you don't . . . I didn't start this war, but damn it to hell, I'm not going to lose it . . . And I'm sorry I had to unplug you a little, but I just don't have the time or inclination to debate the finer points of wartime morality, with a bunch of people who wear masks.[44]

As a result of his actions, defensible or not, Fury is kicked out of SHIELD and branded a war criminal, an aging superspy cast out in the cold. With this plot point, Bendis and Marvel are symbolically bidding farewell to the Cold War, which, confusing and painful as it was for many Americans, was nevertheless a modernist conflict of two gigantic international systems. In the postmodern world of terrorist cells and dispersed enemies, Fury is no longer the man who can lead America's covert forces into battle against a clearly-defined enemy. *Secret War* thus

continues what *Avenger: Disassembled* began, further destabilizing the Marvel Universe and turning it into a world of moral inscrutability where the heroic ideal is questioned and the stakes are raised ever higher. This, in and of itself, reflects America's post-9/11 tensions and fears, and Marvel would address the Bush administration's post-9/11 politics head-on in its next major event, the 2006-2007 crossover series *Civil War*.

In *Civil War* (with a main seven-issue miniseries created by writer Mark Millar and artist Steve McNiven, along with multiple tie-in miniseries and crossovers into the majority of Marvel's titles), a battle between superheroes and supervillains in Stamford, Connecticut leads to the deaths of a playground full of children, sparking off protests against unregulated heroes and the implementation by the president and Congress of the Superhuman Registration Act. This act is never explicitly printed in any Marvel comic, and its various aspects are differently represented in a variety of conflicting comics, but the general gist of it is that all superhumans must register their name and powers with the government, and then must undergo training and become licensed to act as superheroes under governmental control. Captain America, however, feels that, "this plan will split us down the middle. I think you're going to have us at *war* with one another . . . super heroes need to stay above that sort of stuff or Washington starts telling us who the super-villains are."[45] His words prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, as he turns against the government and forms an underground rebellion of superheroes against both the Registration Act and the "pro-registration" superheroes led by Iron Man.

Despite its vague, confusing, and conflicting nature over the course of the *Civil War* crossover event, the Superhero Registration Act is clearly meant to stand in for the controversial Patriot Act enacted by Congress in 2001. Pushed quickly through legislation in the wake of 9/11 as a perceived safety precaution against future terrorist attacks, and playing off the fears of a traumatized nation, the Patriot Act immediately brought forth a plethora of detractors, who saw it as fascist government surveillance of private citizens. Filmmaker Michael Moore, for example, noted in his controversial 2004 documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* that Congress had given President

Bush carte blanch to push through a bill that massively extended government (and particularly executive) powers, with most Representatives and Senators not even reading the massive Act.

Civil War is a metaphor for the battle between detractors of the Patriot Act and those who felt that it was a legitimately benign way to protect America from further terrorism. The Superhero Registration Act would force all heroes to give their personal information to the government, which would keep a database of their names, addresses, powers, and so forth, plus make them undergo military-style training before allowing them to patrol the streets. Captain America, once more calling upon his connection to World War II and its evocation of individualistic morality, believes that placing this information and power in the hands of the government is inherently dangerous; even if a good man such as Tony Stark, Iron Man (ever the representative of the military-industrial complex), is the only person who can access the information at present, there is no guarantee that it won't be turned over to someone untrustworthy in the future. This is a reflection of real-world arguments regarding information gathered by the Patriot Act, and whether it would actually be used to ensnare terrorists or if it might also provide a way for unscrupulous members of the government to enact revenge upon their political enemies.

Civil War, far from escaping these complicated issues, grapples directly with them; however, in order to do this it must simplify them so greatly that the metaphor stretches to the point of breaking. Whereas *Avengers Disassembled* and *Secret War* had utilized imagery and the atmosphere of fear, trauma, and grief created by 9/11, *Civil War* confronts this major aftereffect of the terrorist attacks head-on, and finds that metaphorical appropriation is harder to maintain than atmospheric appropriation.

At the core of *Civil War*, beyond even its metaphor for the Patriot Act, is a recognition of the split in American politics precipitated both by 9/11 and by the contentious presidential elections of 2000. There is no ability for either side of the issue to compromise, and so they come to blows – the rhetorical blow of the partisan US media in real life, and the physical blows

of superheroes battling each other in the Marvel Universe. This differed from Marvel's past, when heroes of various backgrounds could find common ground in a certain set of moral values based on America's post-World War II Cold War consensus.[46] By metaphorically invoking the Patriot Act and the debates surrounding it, *Civil War* functions as commentary on the very recent past, and a way of remembering both that past and the history that preceded it. This commentary proved successful for readers, as *Civil War* was both a sales juggernaut and generally well reviewed, with critics particularly commenting on the core conflict between Captain American and Iron Man as the driving force of the story. As a reviewer for the web-site IGN argued, "While the event had an incredible beginning . . . it seemed to shift away from the center of the series: Captain America and Iron Man. As the principal icons representing the different sides of the debate, these two men were critical for *Civil War* while everything else was just a distraction (for better or for worse)."[47]

At the end of the miniseries, the story once again comes down to the two men. Captain America is on the verge of winning the physical battle against Iron Man when he is tackled by a group of citizens who, in a moment of over-the-top symbolism, are all firefighters, police officers, and EMS workers, the groups heralded as the heroes of 9/11. When this happens, Captain America notices the devastation that the superheroes' battle has caused and he surrenders to the government authorities, realizing that, "They're right. We're not fighting for the people anymore . . . Look at us. We're just fighting. . . . [We were winning] everything except the argument. And they're not arresting Captain America . . . they're arresting Steve Rogers. That's a very different thing. . . . Stand down, troops…that's an order."[48] He is then taken into custody, in exchange for a general amnesty for all the heroes who sided with him, and shortly thereafter he is "killed" in his own series, a storyline already discussed in chapter 4.

Unfortunately, although *Civil War* raised the promise of dealing with heavy political issues, what it carries through on is more of a seven-issue slugfest with a ham-fisted ending. The emergency workers who tackle Captain America indicate how the ordinary citizens of the

Marvel Universe are swamped with fear, even of their iconic superheroes, and thus want the reassurance of the Registration Act. However, by ending the conflict because he sees how it is harming these people, but not conceding his point of view, Captain America wins something of a moral victory over that of the "establishment" heroes fronted by Iron Man. Marc DiPaulo notes how this ending shows that *Civil War* sides morally with the dissenters, in both the fictional world and the real world:

> Despite the presence of some occasionally well-expressed conservative sentiments . . . the *Civil War* story as a whole . . . [is] essentially an indictment of President George W. Bush's policies. . . . *Civil War* asks us . . . to remember that dissenters are often the bravest, and most patriotic, among us, despite the fact that they are derided and vilified by the establishment and by television pundits.[49]

Literary scholars Jake Jakaitis and James F. Wurtz, however, read a slightly more nuanced political allegory at work in the *Civil War* event, seeing it as working out a series of engaged tensions between secrecy and security that open a space for political critique.[50] Despite the diversity of the many *Civil War* crossover stories – over a hundred in total – it is surprising just how much of the narrative tends to side with the anti-registration forces. Much of this may be due to the traditional liberal bias of comic book writers, but it also attests to the fact that the central story hinges on a superhero genre trope – that of the "underdog" versus the entrenched, institutional forces of the government and the rest of society. Captain America and his team are, in essence, fighting against the cultural hegemony being enforced by Iron Man and the government, and in a superhero story the protagonist is always the one who must overcome the odds that are stacked against him or her.

In the fallout of *Civil War*, with a series of stories loosely tied together under the banner of "The Initiative," Marvel explored what the world was like in the aftermath of the Registration Act. Some heroes remained outside the law, some joined the government-sponsored super-teams, and some waffled back and forth. Captain America was assassinated, while Iron Man became the head of SHIELD and the chief security agent of the United States. These stories largely continued the general political rhetoric of *Civil War*, but they also slowly began to reveal

the fact that much of this post-Registration Act political structure had been infiltrated by a race of shape-changing aliens known as the Skrulls. Using advanced science and magic to render themselves undetectable in any way – to the point of copying the memories and thought patterns of the people they have replaced, sometimes even serving as unaware sleeper agents – the Skrulls prove to be a massive threat to the heroes operating both inside and outside of the law. The discovery of their presence by both sides leads to an increase in suspicion beyond the already-immense levels that had been created by *Civil War*, and all of that tension would eventually boil over into Marvel's next crossover, 2008's *Secret Invasion*, by Bendis and artist Lienil Yu.

With its villains who are able to blend into the American populace, *Secret Invasion* clearly contains echoes of America's "War On Terror." The mini-series' imagery, as Smith and Goodrum note, continually returns to that of 9/11, as it is, "repeatedly drawn back to images of attacks on towers . . . With the ability to disguise themselves seamlessly the Skrulls, like the terrorists described in President Bush's State of the Union Address, 'spread throughout the world like ticking time bombs, set to go off without warning.'"[51] When this time bomb does eventually go off, and the Skrulls reveal themselves, they are able to topple the entire power structure that Iron Man had erected through a computer virus that infects all of the software designed by his company, software that he had seeded throughout both SHIELD and the American government. The heroes are only able to overcome the Skrulls by joining together both pro- and anti-registration forces in a last, desperate battle in Central Park. This, however, does not heal all of the wounds created by the *Civil War*. Thor, the Norse God of Thunder and Marvel's strongest hero, returns to the world of superheroes (he had been "dead" since *Avengers: Disassembled*) for *Secret Invasion*, but afterwards tells Iron Man, "Don't misunderstand my intentions, Stark. I came here because I was needed. . . . I *abhor* what thou hast become and I'm sure I will not be the only one who finds the blame in all this to fall square on thy shoulders."[52]

The lesson of *Secret Invasion* seems to be lost on some of Marvel's most important heroes, however. It was their very divisiveness, their internal squabbles both during and

following *Civil War*, that caused the heroes to be so unprepared for the Skrull invasion, allowing it to escalate into a full-scale global attack in the way that it did. In contrast, the X-Men, a Marvel team consisting of genetic mutants who had mostly sat out *Civil War*, were at this point in their own narrative more united than they had ever been. As a result, they manage to successfully defend their own city, San Francisco, from the Skrull attacks. The more large-scale lack of preparedness on the part of the Avengers, however, leads to tragedy, and New York, their home turf, is devastated in a way that San Francisco is not. In the wake of this, the heroes continue to bear grudges against one another, while in the meantime a different force rises to power, initiating a dark reign.

"Dark Reign" was the overarching title for the series of crossovers and mini-series that followed up on *Secret Invasion* in 2008 and 2009 by showcasing the political career of Norman Osborn. Osborn was a wealthy industrialist and a Spider-Man villain named the Green Goblin who, in the wake of *Civil War*, had risen to the head of a program called the Thunderbolts, which utilized supervillains to perform missions mandated by the government. During *Secret Invasion*, Osborn takes the kill shot against the Skrull queen, making him a national hero, which leads to him replacing Iron Man as the head of national security. He quickly disbands SHIELD and forms his own, far more militant and corrupt organization, HAMMER, as its successor. The martial word "HAMMER," compared to the defensive "SHIELD," is clearly meant to indicate the fact that Osborn sees national security as an interventionist process, one that involves not responding to threats, but rather seeking them out before they even begin. Unfortunately for the rest of the Marvel Universe, Osborn is both quite evil and quite insane, haunted by his Green Goblin alternate personality and making plans to amass more and more power in a tyrannical fashion. A year's worth of stories followed that featured *all* of Marvel's heroes as outcasts and underdogs, thanks to a government security agency headed by a supervillain with a vendetta against them.

With "Dark Reign," Marvel once again invoked the same rhetoric as they did during *Civil War* – that of individual freedom versus governmental interference in daily life, with the latter severely threatened by untrustworthy (and archly conservative) politicians. Though none of the creators or editors at Marvel directly stated as much, Osborn's reign can easily be equated to the Bush administration, which was criticized for infringement upon personal liberty through such measures as the Patriot Act. The difference here from *Civil War* is that the earlier series, whether successful or not, had been an attempt to explore both liberal and conservative reactions to the Patriot Act, with both sides doing what they thought was best for the American people. "Dark Reign," on the other hand, showcases government intervention to its fullest extent of corruption, where an evil madman obtains power and abuses it in order to pursue his own sinister agenda. It is a warning against the consolidation of power into one person's hands, since that one person may switch from a noble individual like Iron Man to a corrupt one like Osborn.

In essence, "Dark Reign" retroactively wins for Captain America the debate enacted in *Civil War*. With the powers created by the Superhuman Registration Act placed into Osborn's hands, he becomes an almost unstoppable force of evil, able to impose whatever martial law he likes wherever and whenever he so desires. The argument for individual freedom and liberty, and the fear of the government deciding just whom superheroes should go after, is proven correct. As with *Final Crisis*, in the time during which *Secret Invasion* and the beginning of "Dark Reign" were being published Barrack Obama was elected and inaugurated as president of the United States. Despite its dark tone, the storyline, like *Final Crisis*, validates Obama's rhetoric of "hope" over "fear," as it shows how the fear-based Registration Act was, in the long run, a dangerous and destructive piece of legislation. It is no coincidence that Marvel's next crossover would end with Obama repealing the act.

In this final "event" in Marvel's post-9/11 sequence, the 2010 Bendis-written crossover miniseries *Siege*, Osborn oversteps his bounds, attempting to incite a war between the United States and Thor's Asgard, a city full of devastatingly powerful Norse gods. He does this despite

a direct order from President Obama to stand down. Iron Man, Thor, and a recently resurrected Captain America, along with an emerging-from-the-shadows Nick Fury, all join forces to lead the Avengers against Osborn and HAMMER. To rally the superheroes, many of whom have not spoken to one another since the events of *Civil War*, Captain America gives a speech that helps them to find the common ground that they had lost:

> I know I've been away for a while. But now I'm back, and I look around, and I cant stand what I see…All I see now is a madman leading a march of troops into battle and for the life of me I can't see why. To me it looks and feels a lot like the events that made me want to be Captain America in the first place. I know not everyone here sees eye-to-eye…And I know we've had to go so far as to defend ourselves against each other…But if you came here tonight, if you chose to stand up and be counted…Then I think you agree with me. It's time to take back this country. Our friends and allies are being attacked, maybe killed. And we're going to do something about it. All of us.[53]

Captain America's reference to World War II and Hitler is not incidental – it is yet another example of the character's iconic connection to the "good war," a time which cultural memory has retroactively deemed to have been less divisive than the present, when Americans were able to unite against a great evil instead of arguing over partisan issues. It is by calling upon this memory that Captain America is able to pull together the heroes for the first time in years.

When the assembled heroes finally defeat Osborn and restore order to the Marvel Universe, it follows as a matter of course that the Registration Act is repealed. In its stead, Obama appoints Captain America as the head of a revived SHIELD. The Captain insists on protecting world security while *also* maintaining individual privacy and liberty, something that many supporters of Obama hoped that the new president would be able to achieve, as well. Symbolic of this moment providing closure to a long, dark, post-9/11 storyline that had begun with *Avengers: Disassembled*, in the wake of *Siege* Marvel began publishing a new *Avengers* title, under the line-wide banner of "The Heroic Age." As with all comics at Marvel and DC in the twenty-first century, though, this new story simply led into the next. In the first arc of *Avengers*, Brian Michael Bendis once again began planting seeds for another long-simmering crossover event to take place in the future, several years ahead.

CONCLUSION

In the pop culture realm of comic books, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have proven to be fodder for a multitude of large-scale storylines. At Marvel Comics, 9/11 was reimagined several times, as a series of devastating worldwide attacks, invasions, and wars were waged year after year, each one reflecting some aspect of either the 9/11 attacks themselves or the divisive rhetoric of the years following it. At DC Comics, the increased darkness and uncertainty permeating the national psyche in the wake of 9/11 became a center point of a series of crossover stories that retreated into the sense of control inherent in obsessively and metatextually reinventing DC's own history and continuity.

Both approaches – the direct allegory, and the atmospheric retreat – took several years to implement. In 2001, all they were able to do in response was to mourn. With the passage of time, though, creators and editors at the two major comics publishers were able to look back upon the events of 9/11, and the political events which followed in its wake, and draw upon them in order to create superhero narratives that reflected the heightened tension, and the heightened realization of what true devastation meant, created by the terrorist attacks. As with World War II and Vietnam before them, post-9/11 superhero stories combined looking back at the real past (though in this case a more recent past) with looking back upon their fictional past. At Marvel, this continuity was present-minded, with the examination of the allegories for the real world taking precedent; at DC, the trauma inflicted upon the national psyche was used to influence the examination of the meta-history of its universe. Both tactics united the ongoing narratives of the superhero universes with their past, as well as tying together the history of the real world with the history of the fictional world.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, continuity has inextricably tied superhero comics to the events and history of the previous seventy-five years. At the dawn of the new century's second decade, though, it was with an eye towards the future, rather than the past, that DC Comics decided to reboot its entire continuity in an initiative called "The New 52." By examining this project, as well as Marvel's response to it, we will, ourselves, be able to look

back at the various and contentious ways in which superhero comics have both reflected and created an ongoing process of American cultural memory.

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[1] Quoted in Susan Faludi, The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 50.
[2] Quoted in Ibid, 50.
[3] Ibid, 51.
[4] Ibid, 51-52.
[5] Grant Morrison, Supergods (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 346.
[6] The Fanboy, "*Amazing Spider-Man* #36 Review," The Daily Raider, September 12, 2007, http://www.dailyraider.com/index.php?id=4174 (accessed January 9, 2013).
[7] Ibid. Overemphasis in original.
[8] Skott Jiminez, "Remembering 9/11: Amazing Spider-Man #36," Comic Booked.com, September 11, 2011, http://www.comicbooked.com/remembering-911-amazing-spider-man-36/ (accessed January 9, 2013).
[9] Even a short-lived series called *The Call of Duty*, focusing specifically on "real-world heroes" in the form of police, firefighters and EMS workers, was little more than a vehicle for supernatural adventure fiction.
[10] Marita Sturken, Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 37-38.
[11] Ibid, 38.
[12] Roger Ebert, "World Trade Center," RogerEbert.com, August 8, 2006, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/world-trade-center-2006 (accessed December 4, 2013).
[13] Roger Ebert, "United 93," RogerEbert.com, April 27, 2006, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/united-93-2006 (accessed December 4, 2013).
[14] Brad Meltzer, "Brad Meltzer and Rags Morales Dissect *Identity Crisis*," in Identity Crisis, ed. Robert Greenberger (New York: DC Comics, 2005).
[15] Ibid.
[16] Dan DiDio, "Introduction," in Infinite Crisis Omnibus, ed. Peter Hamboussi (New York: DC Comics, 2012), 5-6.
[17] Philip Smith and Michael Goodrum, "'We have experienced a tragedy which words cannot properly describe': Representations of Trauma in Post-9/11 Superhero Comics," Literature Compass 8/8 (2011): 490.
[18] See Brian Cronin, "Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #272," Comic Book Resources, August 5, 2010, http://www.americanquarterly.org/submit/guidelines.html (accessed July 1, 2012).
[19] "Biographies: Geoff Johns," in Blackest Night, ed. Sean Mackiewicz (New York: DC Comics, 2010).
[20] "Infinite Discussions," in Infinite Crisis, ed. Anton Kawasaki (New York: DC Comics, 2006).
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Todd Casey and Mike Cotton, "Coast to Coast," Wizard, January 2006, 42-44. In the interest of full disclosure, the fan mentioned in the article who recognized Jimenez ("Hey, are you Phil Jimenez? *Infinite Crisis* looks amazing.") was actually me.
[24] Chris Ward, "Crisis Confidential," Wizard, May 2005, 51.
[25] Quoted in Ibid, 52.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Chris Ward, "Crisis Almighty," Wizard, November 2005, 81.
[28] Ibid, 83.
[29] Geoff Johns, Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, and Mark Waid, writers, Keith Geffen, art breakdowns, et. al., "A Year In The Life," 52 52, June, 2008, 25-26.
[30] Quoted in Chris Eckert, "Five Years Later: The Oral History of Countdown to Final Crisis," Funnybook Babylon, May 10, 2012, http://funnybookbabylon.com/2012/05/10/five-years-later-the-oral-history-of-countdown-to-final-crisis/ (accessed July 2, 2012).
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

[34] Grant Morrison, Supergods (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 368.
[35] Graeme McMillan, "*Final Crisis* Is Frustrating, Flawed And Arguably Worth It All," io9, June 10, 2009, http://io9.com/5284580/final-crisis-is-frustrating-flawed-and-arguably-worth-it-all (accessed January 9, 2013).
[36] "Review: Final Crisis collected hardcover/paperback (DC Comics)," Collected Edition, August 3, 2009, http://collectededitions.blogspot.com/2009/08/review-final-crisis-collected.html (accessed January 9, 2013).
[37] Ibid.
[38] Grant Morrison, writer, Doug Mahnke, artist, et. al., "New Heaven, New Earth," Final Crisis 7, March 2009, 34-35.
[39] With DC's reboot of its entire continuity in 2011, the appearance of Superman, the first superhero, has been retconned to have only occurred "five years ago," in 2005, thus putting to rest the question of whether or not the DC Universe had a 9/11 – it did, but that was because the superheroes had yet to emerge as a protective force
[40] Philip Smith and Michael Goodrum, "'We have experienced a tragedy which words cannot properly describe': Representations of Trauma in Post-9/11 Superhero Comics," Literature Compass 8/8 (2011): 488.
[41] In fact, Bendis would later be specifically named a "Marvel Architect" in a marketing push by the publisher to indicate which writers were most responsible for shaping the ongoing Marvel Universe.
[42] Brian Michael Bendis, writer, Gabrielle Dell'Otto, artist, et. al., Secret War 5, December 2005, 24.
[43] Latveria is the fictional Marvel country ruled by the supervillain Dr. Doom. However, during the time at which *Secret Wars* was published, Dr. Doom was "temporarily dead" (a state of affairs that, counterintuitive and oxymoronic as it may be, is relatively common in the world of superhero comics).
[44] Brian Michael Bendis, writer, Gabrielle Dell'Otto, artist, et. al., Secret War 5, December 2005, 24-25. Emphasis in original.
[45] Mark Millar, writer, Steve McNiven, artist, et. al., Civil War 1, July 2006, 24-25. Emphasis in original.
[46] See Matthew Costello, Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America (New York: Continuum, 2009), 235-236.
[47] Richard George, "Civil War #7 Advance Review," IGN, February 20, 2007, http://www.ign.com/articles/2007/02/20/civil-war-7-advance-review (accessed January 9, 2013).
[48] Mark Millar, writer, Steve McNiven, artist, et. al., Civil War 7, February 2007, 18-21.
[49] Marc DiPaolo, War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 99-100.
[50] Jake Jakaitis and James F. Wurtz, "Introduction: Reading Crossover," in Crossing Boundaries in Graphic Narrative: Essays on Forms, Series and Genres, ed. Jake Jakaitis and James F. Wurtz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2012), 13.
[51] Philip Smith and Michael Goodrum, "'We have experienced a tragedy which words cannot properly describe': Representations of Trauma in Post-9/11 Superhero Comics," Literature Compass 8/8 (2011): 489.
[52] Brian Michael Bendis, writer, Leinil Yu, artist, et. al., Secret Invasion 8, December 2008, 21. Emphasis in original.
[53] Brian Michael Bendis, writer, Olivier Coipel, artist, et. al., Siege 2, February 2010, 9-10.

Conclusion – More of the Same, But Different: History and Continuity At Odds in the 21st Century

On the tenth anniversary of 9/11, DC Comics finally shed its focus on the past. Following a crossover event entitled *Flashpoint*, written by Geoff Johns (who by this point had gone from simply an influential writer at DC to an executive in the company, serving as its "Chief Creative Officer"), the entire DC publishing line was cancelled, with 52 titles – some classic, some brand new – receiving first issues as part of an entirely rebooted DC Universe. As a *New York Times* article published just prior to the release of the first of these new issues explained, "The success or failure of this plan will have far-reaching implications: it could alienate longtime fans at the cost of new readers."[1] As the *Times* article rightly points out, this reboot – which DC named "The New 52" – was a bold move. Though the publisher had previously restarted its continuity in the mid-1980s in the wake of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, that was a gradual process in which individual characters' back-stories were retconned and retold over a period of months and even years. DC editorial had in fact rejected Marv Wolman's idea to start all of the publisher's books anew with first issues. Twenty-five years later, though, faced with ever-shrinking sales and an increasingly vocal group of hardcore fans who were resistant to change, DC decided it was time for just such a risky move.

Although officially DC would note that not *all* of the prior continuity was thrown out, the company went to great effort to streamline its books. All of its iconic characters were much younger than they had previously been portrayed, with the modern DC Universe having started with Superman's first appearance about five years in the past. Dan DiDio, who by this point was DC's co-publisher alongside artist-turned-businessman Jim Lee, explained in a *USA Today* article officially announcing the relaunch that, "We really want to inject new life in our characters and line. This was a chance to start, not at

the beginning, but at a point where our characters are younger and the stories are being told for today's audience."[2] In this way, DC hoped to retain fans who would see links to the previous continuity, while at the same time gaining new readers who may have been interested in DC's books but were looking for a jumping-on point: "Not only will this initiative be compelling for existing readers, it will give new readers a precise entry point into our universe."[3]

The New 52 was at first a smash success for DC, in large because it served as a very public jumping-on point to an otherwise increasingly impenetrable fictional universe. Not only did the company market their new books to comic book readers at conventions and on popular industry web sites, but they also made an attempt to capture a broader audience through mainstream media coverage in such outlets as the *New York Times* and *Entertainment Weekly*. At first, this move seemed to work. The initiative increased their sales by a significant amount and gave them a majority of the market sale for Diamond Comic Distributors (the nation-wide comic book distribution network) for the first few months of the new line, a position that Marvel had traditionally held for years.[4] As would be expected from fifty-two discreet books, critical reaction was mixed, with some series receiving rave reviews while others failed to find critical and/or sales footing. Comics journalist Rich Johnston, for example, provided brief reviews for all of the first issues, ranging from a pan of the series *Stormwatch* ("A bunch of characters, some known, some new, that stand around saying that they are not superheroes, but not acting . . . any differently. It's not just been neutered, it's been castrated") to a glowing review of the book *Animal Man* ("If *Stormwatch* seems to abandon what made it special, *Animal Man* has preserved it . . . concentrated it and portrayed it with a writer and artist working like one").[5]

By eight months in, however, analysts began to question just how successful the initiative really was. Comics translator and critic Marc-Oliver Frisch, in crunching the numbers of the first eight months of sales, concluded that the New 52 stopped DC's drop-off in sales from 2011, but in the end only by returning to sales amounts from 2010:

> All told, the "New 52" seems to have stabilized DC's sales right in the middle of the spectrum. Whether or not that's good or bad, given the massive logistical and promotional efforts and incentives that went into the "New 52" relaunch . . . is a matter of interpretation. The good news is that DC managed to boost and stabilize its line after a very tough couple of years. The bad news is that DC took its best shot and it bought them a reset to 2010, basically.[6]

At the time of this writing, this is about the most up-to-date assessment of DC's New 52 – a moderate success, but not exactly a game-changer in sales.

Marvel Comics, however, appears to have viewed DC's initial success with some jealousy, and began their own publishing initiative called "Marvel NOW!" In the wake of a massive crossover series called *Avengers vs. X-Men* (which, as the title suggests, pits the two biggest franchise teams of the Marvel Universe against each other in a giant slugfest designed to tap into new readers who are more familiar with Marvel's movies than their comics), Marvel relaunched most of its major titles with a first issue, as well as creating some entirely new titles, all helmed by their best-selling creators shuffled around from the books and characters they had previously been working on. As *Entertainment Weekly* explained the process, these books, "will roll out gradually over a few months, with creators finishing off their runs and then starting new ones."[7] This is in stark contrast to DC's relaunch of all titles in the same month, a differentiation that Marvel Editor-in-Chief Axel Alonso seizes upon: "This ain't a reboot. It's a new beginning. I feel that it's a much more human approach for retailers and fans to tell them: 'Look. In the months of October through February, every week you can go into a comic book store

and find a few new jumping-on points for the Marvel Universe, a place you're going to like visiting. Or revisiting.'"[8]

Unlike DC's approach, as Alonso very bluntly notes, Marvel NOW! is not a reboot of the company's continuity, but rather a relaunch of some of its biggest characters and titles. Whereas a reboot begins the publishing line's continuity anew, discarding what has come before, a relaunch is more directly a marketing ploy, producing new titles with new creators but anchored in the same continuity. In fact, the book *Uncanny Avengers*, the "the flagship title of the new era,"[9] combines Marvel's household name Avengers and X-Men franchises, historical continuity ties play a crucial role, as writer Rick Remender explains in describing the series' first central villain: "In 1943, Arnim Zola, who was this bio-fanatic engineer, recorded the Red Skull's consciousness, and set it to wake up 70 years later. So the Red Skull is right out of 1943-44. Prime Nazi scumbag."[10] In order to herald a new Marvel era which sees its heroes cooperating after the internecine, villainless battles of such events as *Civil War* and *Avengers vs. X-Men*, Remender is resorting to one of the company's oldest methods of creating a clear moral divide – Nazi supervillains.

With their respective reboots/relaunches, DC and Marvel display two contrary responses to a flagging comic book industry, which ironically comes when big-budget blockbuster movies, such as *The Dark Knight* and *The Avengers,* have given the superhero genre more cultural cache than ever before. DC's reaction was to jettison the past, and focus exclusively on the future, in direct opposite to their previous decade's worth of internal history-focused projects. They created a blank slate of their continuity, picking and choosing which stories were to have vaguely occurred sometime in the five years prior to the starting point of the New 52 Universe while casting the rest aside. As much as is possible for a genre that is tied irrevocably to its own history, DC is now

trying to ignore that history, looking towards tomorrow rather than yesterday. Marvel, on the other hand, is taking the opposite path. After almost a decade of breaking apart its heroes with in-fighting and seemingly endless wide-scale devastation, with each "event" leading inevitably to the next, the publisher is finally bringing those heroes back together, reminiscent of Marvel's earliest years.

Both tactics – denying the past and embracing it – demonstrate the deep connections between history and narrative continuity in superhero comics. By restarting its continuity, DC is tacitly noting how its entire publishing model, the very way it views the superhero genre, is based on this notion of a shared universe. Yet this kind of obsessive continuity was only the result of the growth of fandom in the 1960s and the rise of those fans to positions of power by the time of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in the 1980s. These fans, a vocal audience of greater sophistication than the children who had previously been the main reading audience of superhero comics, asked for some measure of realism in their fantasy escapist literature, and wanted the comics they read to exist within a world that followed a certain set of rules, however much suspension of disbelief it took to accept those rules. With its New 52, DC is making less of a sweeping change than they seem to think – they are still accepting the same concept of a rulebook, but just rewriting part of their own solipsistic set of rules. Marvel NOW! exemplifies the same process, only more so, by not even ridding the publisher of any cluttered continuity and instead just returning their publishing universe to an ideological ground it had occupied decades earlier.

These publishing initiatives do not stand outside of the larger culture in which the comic book industry is enmeshed. From ancient mythologies to national narratives, cultures thrive on recreating archetypal stories again and again. Henry Jenkins explains that, "Part of the nature of culture is that we retell stories that are meaningful to us, again

and again, in different ways . . . We can see revamps that have no clear purpose, endless numbers of '80s TV shows being brought to the screen with no innovation to speak of. Or we can talk about revamps that actually go someplace."[11] At the time of this writing, it is still unknown just where the New 52 and Marvel NOW! will go, whether they will ultimately prove to be innovative or not. Similarly, it has yet to be seen if these attempts to make the books friendlier to new readers will actually lead to a long-term increase in sales in an industry that is never quite bolstered by the success of translating its characters into other media. At their outset, though, both publishing lines seem to be hedging their bets. They are focused on creating, as best as possible, engaging stories that nevertheless retain the well-worn familiarity that continuity engenders – more of the same, but different.

If history is any guide, though, both DC and Marvel will find themselves continuing to return to their *own* history. Because of the flexible way that superhero comic book continuity functions, creators are constantly returning to historical events (in the sense of both the history of the fictional universe and the history of the real world) in order to "fix" and update that continuity. Additionally, given that most contemporary comics creators started as fans, they are particularly interested in writing about the characters, situations, and stories that they grew up with. For these reasons, superhero comics are extremely cyclical, constantly vacillating between various status quos. As a part of this cycle, they continually return to the past, providing fans-turned-creators with the opportunity to look back upon, and "write back" to, those earlier stories, which also means reevaluating the time and place in which those stories took place.

This constant look to the past can be more than purely nostalgic. Roy Thomas' *All-Star Squadron*, the various Sgt. Rock and Sgt. Fury war-time stories, and the entire histories of both Captain America and the Punisher all use historical settings in order to

talk about the past, and through that past to talk about the present and the future. Roy Thomas' "new historical" examination of the Japanese internment camps, for example, spoke to the racial strife of his own 1980s culture which was struggling with the issue of crime waves in America's inner cities, "internment camps" of a different kind. Similarly, his exaltation of Franklin Roosevelt was meant to contrast with the desire on the part of Reaganite conservatives to erase FDR's progressive legacy. This sense of looking backwards, of using superhero continuity to explore the cultural memory and present-day reverberations of historical events such as World War II, the Vietnam War, and 9/11, is evident in a multitude of comics beyond the few I have explored in this dissertation.

Scholars and media critics have examined the ways in which official public culture, such as monuments, memorials, museums, and textbooks, have commemorated the past. More recently, they have turned to such popular culture sources as novels, movies, television shows, and even non-fiction graphic novels – such as Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* – as another way to examine how the past is remembered and used in the present. As I have shown, there also is fertile territory to be unearthed in examining how history becomes embodied and implemented in superhero comic books. Consequently, this dissertation is an opening salvo in a long and fruitful conversation between scholars of cultural memory and the creators, readers, and fans of superhero comics.

These superhero stories are particularly important for understanding the ongoing mutation of how we remember a culture's past. While books like *MAUS* and *Persepolis* may have greater aesthetic value than any given Superman adventure, and provide a more nuanced look at history, the entire body of Superman stories covers a span of seventy-five years. Superman's story *is* history, reflecting the changing social mores of the time periods through which the character has survived. The continuity of Superman and the

heroes who followed in his wake is not just part of a narrative, but also part of a national culture. Embedded within each superhero comic book are traces of the time and place in which that book was created, and studying these comics allows us to learn more about those traces. Superhero comics that speak back to the past are thus *doubly* enmeshed in the matrix of cultural memory; they serve as primary sources about the time in which they were published, but they also tell us about how members of the creative class in that era viewed their own history.

Superhero comic creators are in a unique cultural position. They are contributing to an ever-lengthening ongoing narrative that has lasted the better part of a century. The process of retroactive continuity allows them to delve into and alter the history of that narrative in a way that creators in other media simply cannot. Retconning provides a literary embodiment of the desire to interact with and change the past. Superhero comic book continuity thus provides a unique opportunity for engaging with cultural memory, and we must pay attention to this process if we want to fully understand America's changing views of the past.

Forged in the years before World War II, superhero comics have weathered decades of American history, from the World War II consensus era to the moral uncertainty of Vietnam, and the shock of 9/11. As the nation continues to face its shares of tragedies and triumphs, somewhere out there sits a young reader with designs on becoming a professional writer, just waiting for his chance to get his hands on one the storied DC or Marvel heroes whose adventures he follows with his dad. In the link between the primal visual grammar of the images and the more codified linguistics of the word balloons, father will help son to learn how to read, thus cementing in his mind a powerful loyalty to this medium and these characters. Once he begins to chronicle those characters' adventures, it is likely that he will want to revisit the stories he is reading

right now, and the political and social climate that engendered those stories, in his own explorations of fictional mythology set against real-world historical backdrops. Today's lived experience becomes tomorrow's cultural memory, in a sort of generational continuity, just as today's comic book fan becomes tomorrow's professional comic book writer, the arbiter of what memories from the real world and the fictional realm will become part of the reading experience for future fans. In this way does yesterday connect with tomorrow, through the crucible of today.

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[1] Dave Itzkoff, "Heroes Take Flight, Again," New York Times, August 30, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/31/books/dc-comics-reboots-justice-league-and-other-series.html?pagewanted=all (accessed July 3, 2012).
[2] Brian Truitt, "DC Comics unleashes a new universe of superhero titles," USA Today, May 31, 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/life/comics/2011-05-31-dc-comics-reinvents_n.htm (accessed July 3, 2012).
[3] Dan Didio and Jim Lee, "Welcome To The New 52!," in DC Comics: The New 52 1, July 2011, inside cover.
[4] Kevin Melrose, "DC Comics Dominates October Sales," Comic Book Resources, November 4, 2011, http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=35298 (accessed July 3, 2012).
[5] Rich Johnston, "Tuesday Comics Reviews: Stormwatch, Batgirl, Batwing, Animal Man, Detective Comics, Action Comics, Men of War, Swamp Thing, JLI, Green Arrow, OMAC, Hawk & Dove, Static Shock," Bleeding Cool, September 6, 2011, http://www.bleedingcool.com/2011/09/06/tuesday-comics-reviews-stormwatch-batgirl-batwing-animal-man-detective-comics-action-comics-men-of-war-swamp-thing-jli-green-arrow-omac-hawk-dove-static-shock/ (accessed January 9, 2013).
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[7] Darren Franich, "Comic-Con Exclusive: Witness the future of the Marvel Universe with Marvel NOW!," Entertainment Weekly, July 3, 2012, http://popwatch.ew.com/2012/07/03/marvel-now-jean-grey-exclusive/ (accessed July 3, 2012).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Dave Itzkoff, "Heroes Take Flight, Again," New York Times, August 30, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/31/books/dc-comics-reboots-justice-league-and-other-series.html?pagewanted=all (accessed July 3, 2012).

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