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Captain America: Disassembling Traditional Narratives

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Abstract

Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's *Captain America* first released in 1941 amid controversy prior to United States engagement in World War II. Since this release, the figure of Captain America has become widely recognized and regarded as an American patriot that symbolizes the moral compass of the United States. However, as American history progressed beyond the clearly defined binaries of World War II between friend and foe, Captain America's struggle turned inward as the varying authors and artists of the comics addressed domestic problems. As the figure traverses different eras of American history, the symbol adapts and faces different issues, but Captain America's evolution reveals the challenge of defining what "America" is and the limits of symbolizing the United States within a singular character. Eventually the pressuring questions of domestic terrorism, racial tensions, and corruption of the American government turns Captain America into an analogy and critique of the state of the nation. Observing the shifts from patriotism to counter-nationalism that occur within Steve Rogers as a character encapsulates American anxieties and anticipates upcoming challenges while recognizing the ambiguity of Captain America and the country he represents. By analyzing a variety of Captain America comics from different eras of American history, I disassemble binaries of the American narrative to reframe how American perspectives are vocalized in a popular medium. This

deconstruction of the character reveals contradictions in American values that disrupts the traditional narrative and looks towards future problems with fascism within the United States.

Keywords: Nationalism, American Dream, American Freedom, Patriotism, Domestic Terrorist



Figure 1. *Captain America Vol. 1* by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon

Introduction

The figure of Captain America has greatly evolved over the eighty years of his existence. Captain America's variety of roles reflect the attitudes, concerns, and conflicts occurring at the time of his published storylines. Author and Captain America scholar Jason Dittmer writes that "Since Captain America is so clearly a symbol of America, he provides an opportunity to analyze the changing meaning and symbolic shape of America as the region is continually (re) constructed" (629). At his core, Captain America remains a tool of nationalism that demonstrates the domestic struggles Americans experience. In different eras, varying versions

of the Captain have come to rescue Americans from threats to their liberties, but as he faces increasingly complex situations, Cap also grows in complexity as every binary established in the original character is broken down to reveal the non-existent idealistic United States 1940's Cap initially fights for, creating an ambiguous, jaded hero. Because of his complicated history, Captain America adapts as a symbol that explores patriotism in ways that reveal contradictions in American values.

Captain America is originally a propagandistic campy figure that acts as a moral compass during World War II. After Rogers is revived from being frozen in ice in Vol. #4 of *The Avengers* in 1964, he discovers that he has left behind the era characterized by the clear distinctions between allies and enemies established during the 1940's, forcing Cap to learn to adapt to the modern world. However, this adaptation becomes complicated as United States politics experiences increasingly revolutionary events including the Civil Rights Movement, the Watergate Scandal, and the aftermath of 9/11.

Rogers' time as the frozen man keeps him out of touch with reality as he learns to grapple with change and ever-increasing complexities in his morality. Forcing Captain America to accept the absence of a binary between good and evil disassembles his identity as he struggles throughout American history to accept the transgressions of the American government and structures how this symbol expresses, anticipates, or encourages a specific American reaction. Over time, Captain America has transformed from a one-dimensional representation of the United States into a figure aligned with an individual morality separate from the nation as an institution. Only loyalty to the ill-defined American dream remains, but during the current moment of American history, the nationalist symbol attempts to address the

problems that we face to process conflicts and their implications. Therefore, as Captain America constantly reinvents himself to adjust, the comics encapsulate change through the eras that reflect increasing ambiguity as we face conflict within the nation.

By analyzing the comics in response to specific historical events, I intend on addressing Captain America's importance in the interpretation on American history as his character becomes more convoluted thus becoming a challenge to the nationalism¹ he represents. There are four main events and corresponding comic storylines that I address:

1. World War II - Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's original *Captain America Volume #1*
2. Watergate and the Post-Nixon Era - Steve Englehart's *Captain America and The Falcon: The Secret Empire Volumes #169-176*
3. 9/11 and its Aftermath - Ed Brubaker and Mark Millar's *Civil War and Epilogue*
4. Present Conflict - Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Captain America (Volumes #1-19)*

While I challenge the binaries presented in *Captain America*, attitudes within the comics do parallel historical events. World War II and 9/11 produce storylines that promote senses of unity against the foreign enemy and accept personal sacrifice for the sake of protecting American ideologies of freedom, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press. In contrast, the Watergate scandal and current events including the 2016 Presidential election or the rallying of the Black Lives Matter movement breeds uncertainty, paranoia, and doubt in the national psyche that is reflected in Rogers' insecurities. The push

¹ "Nationalism is a politically influenced word used to describe the zealous attitude and staunch support of a nation by its citizens. In this context, nationalism refers to the cultural attitude that projects a particular image of a nation and how this perception is used to define the culture associated with the nation." Definition from my previous work, "Manga and *Les Misérables*: How Symbols of Nationalism Evolve to Join the Cosmopolitan".

and pull between the hero complex of the United States comes at odds as Captain America's morality falls under scrutiny because of his ambiguity which results from consistently practicing his heroics outside the law and acting within a moral gray area. Therefore, while the original *Captain America* and *Civil War* demonstrate the effects of nationalism, *Secret Empire* and Coates' *Captain America* question government motives to critique the turbulent history of the United States.

World War II: Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's Original *Captain America*

Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's original Captain America established the nationalist "good guy" figure. Captain America's alter ego Steve Rogers is small and average who achieves greatness because of his patriotism and good nature, inspiring many Americans during the global crisis. During his first adventures, Steve Rogers' newfound physical prowess and symbolism is utilized to promote patriotism as a duty to support American military goals and to distinguish between right and wrong in a us-versus-them binary sparked by World War II. Since 1941, Steve Rogers as Captain America has been an American symbol used to voice political opinions and tackle questions of Americanness. Nearly eighty years after Captain America's debut, the American hero continues to capture the interest of new generations and faces contemporary problems.

In World War II, Captain America is a champion for the United States who fights the Nazis and against the enemy "others". Kirby and Simon's debut issue of *Captain America* has a cover that displays Captain America punching Hitler, an image that sparked controversy in the United States, but later placed the Captain on the right side of history. Captain America's dedication to protect the civil liberties of American democracy from falling into totalitarianism

or authoritarianism becomes the motive for the initial comics as they deal with the war and utilize the sense of nationalism to unite the American people under one national hero.

Despite the controversy that first surrounded *Captain America*, the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 dictated the American attitude towards the world war. *Captain America* depicted anti-Axis sentiment, and specifically anti-Japanese sentiment as a result of the attack. Although Captain America clearly opposes the Nazis, villainizing the Japanese as the racial other introduced racial tensions that later versions condemn. While writers like Stan Lee and Steve Englehart later attempt to reconcile the original racial biases, Cap's conservative views from the 1940's causes conflict with his modern counterparts, including his partner the Falcon², Iron Man, and the Daughters of Liberty. Regardless of Roger's personal growth in later eras, his 1940s attitude sets the stage for the identity crises of *Secret Empire*, *Civil War*, and Coates' *Captain America* in addition to critiquing the cultural values of the 1960s and beyond.

Comic book scholar and Captain America expert J. Richard Stevens described World War II as a "safe space" for comic books and their audiences, especially in comparison to the following social climate during the Korean War. Because World War II had distinct enemies and a clear victory without ambiguity, the war became the era of nostalgia not only for Cap, but for the American psyche. The 1950's version of Captain America became violent and overtly aggressive as the "Commie Smasher". Writing Cap as such contradicted his 1940's persona as a do-gooder patriot. The immediate contrast within the character landed him frozen in ice to be

² The Falcon is a black social worker from Harlem named Sam Wilson introduced as Captain America's partner in the late 1960's.

resurrected in the 1960's rewritten with pacifist values to reconcile the aggression of the 1950's.

Watergate and the Post-Nixon Era - Steve Englehart's *Captain America and The Falcon: Secret Empire*

President Richard Nixon's Watergate Scandal in 1972 severely injured the American perception of the government that bred severe paranoia and distrust of the state. This historical moment becomes the initial national trauma that causes a development within Captain America to re-evaluate his morality and loyalties.

In his chapter "Art Imitates Life: Nixon as Villain in the Pages of Captain America " from the book *The Supervillain Reader*, Richard Hall reflects on the effects of the Watergate scandal in the *Captain America* storylines and its effects on the American psyche. Hall claims that "The distrust and even hatred that so many Americans feel toward the federal government in the 21st century could easily be argued to be a result of the real-life crimes of Richard Nixon; and the fictionalized of those crimes in the pages of Captain America at the time only goes to symbolize the deep ramifications of Nixon's actions had had" (Hall, 272). Hall also argues that Nixon's Watergate scandal led to a state of catharsis when the nation desperately needed a sense of clarity. While Steve Englehart's *Secret Empire* was not directly in response to the events of the Watergate scandal, Englehart incorporated the crime and abuse of power by the White House to process the implications of the actions in the popular medium of *Captain America* comics.

Englehart's *Secret Empire* consisted of seven volumes and was first published in 1968. The plot begins with the Falcon leaving for Wakanda to work with the Black Panther on

upgrades for his super suit. During Falcon's absence, Captain America becomes the subject of a smear campaign, as the media present the Captain as a dangerous vigilante who is unequipped to protect the nation and is a threat to the government. When the Falcon returns, he is informed by Iron Man that Cap is a fugitive and that he must find Cap to clear his name in the media. When the Falcon rejoins Cap, they fight the media-backed Moonstone together, lose, and go on the run to avoid becoming captured and imprisoned. With the help of Professor X's team of dwindling X-Men, Cap and the Falcon discover the existence of a 'Secret Empire' that seeks to infiltrate the United States government in order to control it as a totalitarian society. Also responsible for Moonstone, the Secret Empire attempts to kill Captain America and the Falcon, but after a successful escape the duo manages to reach the White House and defend the capitol, but not before discovering that "Number One" (the leader of the Secret Empire) is also the President.

Prior to Englehart's *Secret Empire* plotline, Rogers begins to brood and contemplate his place in the modern society that he feels regards him as a relic. As Rogers begins to worry if he will be known solely as the captain and not as himself, he simultaneously fights his enemies while handling his own identity crisis and internal struggles. The premeditated psychological battle Rogers underwent in the mid-1960's becomes amplified in *Secret Empire*. Rogers' feelings of betrayal by the state and the media then force him from the external action of battling secret agents to the internal dilemma of processing the reality that the state he defends does not align with his ideologies or moral compass. The movement from external fighting to Rogers' internal conflict in the finale of *Secret Empire* indicates a shift to psychological action that leads to the questioning of Captain America's identity. Rogers' breaks

in identity begin with the shattering truth that the leader of the *Secret Empire* is presumed to be the President of the United States, an apparent dig at Nixon, who had recently resigned around the final release of *Secret Empire*.

Since the plot of *Secret Empire* pre-existed the scandal, Englehart incorporated Watergate in the story because the ramifications of exposing American corruption were already evident. Hall discusses how Englehart noted the fracturing in Rogers' identity caused by the deception of the government. Englehart states, "So I asked myself, "Who is Captain America?" and had found an answer for the man... I was writing a man who believed in America's highest ideals at a time when America's President was a crook. I could not ignore that" (Hall, 272). Englehart uses Captain America as a tool for addressing the conspiracies and crimes of the Nixon administration that challenged the American self-perception of a government separate from corruption. In the finale of the *Secret Empire*, Rogers decides to abandon his costumed identity as Captain America and later becomes Nomad, a "man without a country" who also embodies liberal values. This dismissal of the state manifests the sense of betrayal through a literal redefining of who Captain America is and demonstrates the trauma that permanently altered the perception of the American government as a result of the Watergate scandal. Eventually, Steve Rogers revives his alter ego Captain America, but his dedication to his ideologies remains stronger than his dedication to the White House itself. Therefore, Cap's evolution is more than an emergence from naiveté but a recognition of the need to fight domestic enemies within his own society, thus breaking the established binary binaries from the World War II era.



Figure 2. *Captain America: The Secret Empire* by Steve Englehart. Collects *Captain America* (1968) #169-176. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZB6tnaiKcPIMwfZs_iCl6ZkTRx4qvKwz2797UCBZ6jY/edit?usp=sharing

9/11 and its Aftermath - Ed Brubaker and Mark Millar's *Civil War* and *Epilogue*

Ed Brubaker and Mark Millar's *Civil War* and the original *Captain America* comics share many similarities in the conception of the storylines. Both respond to international conflict that present the American reaction as a righteous response to a national tragedy. The events of Pearl Harbor and 9/11 identified a racial other to define as the enemy, leading to an increase in hate crimes against American Muslims and Sikhs. In addition to hate crimes, questions of the invasion of privacy produces a domestic conflict within the American public and questions the monopolization of violence by the state.

Jason Dittmer, author of *Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics*, claims that "The events of 9/11 provided an opportunity for *Captain America* provided an opportunity to return to its origins, with a clear geopolitical script free of the ambiguity and complexity introduced in the 1960's" (637). The conflict in the *Civil*

War storyline evaluates how tragedy impacts the American psyche, presents the conflicting ideologies of the old and the new, incorporates sentiments regarding the Patriot Act and the war in Iraq.

Brubaker and Millar took advantage of this “clear geopolitical script” when attempting to re-establish the definite binary of us-versus-them. While the thematic of *Secret Empire* aimed to blur the distinct lines between good and evil within the singular government by exposing the corruption of officials and placing Captain America outside the law, the *Civil War* plotline results from a conflict that led to a surge of nationalism within the United States, thus re-establishing the United States’ sense of self-righteousness similarly to the events of Pearl Harbor.

The action-packed *Civil War* causes many superheroes to join Cap’s rebellious ranks after an accident with some lesser-known irresponsible troupe of vigilantes accidentally causes the death of 300 people. While Cap feels for the loss, he believes the incident fails to justify limiting the freedoms of himself and his colleagues. However, conflict emerges when Iron Man passionately supports the Registration Act, a law demanding super-people to register with the government and work as government agents. Cap’s opposition to the Registration Act leads them to battle for their personal liberties.

The events of 9/11 paralleled the bombing of Pearl Harbor in many ways, including garnering nationalist responses against the offenders, triggering a uniting sense of patriotism and dedication to the country, the comics look for a clear definition between friend and foe in the *Civil War* storyline. However, because of the history that occurred between the 1940s and 2001, escaping ambiguity is nearly impossible since Rogers’ psychological, moral, and political

complexity experienced exponential growth. Yet, *Civil War* establishes two opposing sides, one team led by Stark and the rebels led by Rogers. Throughout the conflict, it becomes evident that no side is more morally correct than the other, thus failing to reproduce the clean-cut binary that emerged during World War II and shares similarities with the critiquing *Secret Empire*.

Cap's opposition to the fictional Registration Act becomes representative of those against the Patriot Act because it threatens their right to privacy and is an arguable overreach of the government. Living outside the law (and to some, above the law) causes the Captain and his cohorts to be considered domestic terrorists against the government. This shift in identity from American hero to domestic terrorist adds a layer of complexity to Cap's moral uprightness. Despite directly challenging the law and undermining its authority, Cap maintains his actions as inherently American because his dissent intends to defend an interpretation of American liberties. Although *Civil War* draws more similarities to the propagandic Captain America of the 1940's, it also echoes the Liberal Crusader persona of the 1970's that valued individual rights, diversity, and peace.

Cap's time as a domestic terrorist complicates the perceptions of the body politic, so while *Civil War* produces connotations of one side versus the other, placing Captain America outside the law creates an ambiguity that undermines the supposed binary of right and wrong. Although Captain America becomes a rebel to the American public like he was in *Secret Empire*, he eventually gives into the pleas of Iron Man's conditions because Cap's noble desire for peace wins out over his personal beliefs. Despite the ending to *Civil War*, the writers' attempt to work through the classifications of terrorism through the figure of Captain America as an outlaw

challenges the correctness of government sanctioned actions. This binary also returns to the conflict in *Civil War* and questions how sanctioned violence is socially acceptable in certain contexts, a theme that also carries over into Coates' rendition of Captain America.

To reach Coates' jaded and cynical version of Cap, Brubaker's *Epilogue: The Death of A Dream*, the conclusion to the *Civil War* series, must first reveal an astonishing event: the death of Captain America. Immediately after Cap's surrender to Iron Man and accepts the consequences of his actions resulting in Cap being forced to stand trial. However, while walking into the courthouse, Cap is fatally shot by his love interest Agent Sharon Carter, who was manipulated and controlled by Hydra. This conclusion to the *Civil War* story is extremely dismal. *Epilogue* suggests that the surrender of civil liberties is the "death of a dream" itself and accepting governmental policy literally kills Captain America. Slaying Captain America is an attempt to kill the physical representation of an ideology. Based on the dedication to remain unregistered and free to act, *Civil War's* Captain America's death demonstrates how American values and American patriotism is used to push for policy, not necessarily the well-being of the people, as shown by Cap's demise. Captain America's death, although formidable, is not permanent, since he is revived after being temporarily replaced by Bucky Barnes, but his death in itself signals a mourning of a specific type of justice and honor that Cap represented. After this plot-twist event, Captain America must once again re-adjust to the new era and shoulder the distrust of the government in addition to the guilt of his personal ideological sacrifices. *Civil War* presents Captain America's sense of hopelessness caused by his struggle to accept the changes in American society and his death at the end of the series signals how this inability to

adapt or accept these changes may be the death of the traditional American Dream of “freedom, justice, dignity, and opportunity for all” (Stevens, 163).

Present Conflict - Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Captain America and Legend of Steve*



Figure 3. From *Captain America: The Legend of Steve* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Collects *Captain America* (2018) #1-12. Page 76.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZB6tnaiKcPIMwfZs_iCl6ZkTRx4qvKwz2797UCBZ6jY/edit?usp=sharing

Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Captain America* echoes the prioritization of dedication to ideologies over the American government that originated in Englehart’s *Secret Empire*, reiterating the separation between nationalism and heroics. The *Washington Post* claims that Coates’ rendition of *Captain America* anticipates a post-Trump era by exploring the effects of dividing the nation. While Coates depicts Rogers as a relic of a simpler time, his *Captain America* is also less idealist and recognizes the golden era’s flaws and that the issues he currently faces have always been present in American society. In the above panel, Rogers claims that what was “real” America was the unification under democracy. As he reminisces, Rogers has his back turned

against the present threat and the darkness, while his recognition of a “simpler time” is placed in the lightest panel. Captain America’s conservatism seeps into how he addresses the threat his reality faces, which is an exploration of how this conservatism contrasts with the needs to remedy the situation and grapples with the arising power struggle that appears later in *The Legend of Steve*.

When Cap collaborates with a team of strong female heroes called “The Daughters of Liberty”, Rogers grapples with his loss of leadership and entrusts the women to save the day. Coates explicitly depicts the young female characters as the “future they never saw coming”, ‘they’ presumably being the conservative Hydra sympathizers who represent radical conservative Americans. The Hydra sympathizers represent people who often try to present themselves as the most patriotic Americans, however, their lack of respect for other Americans undermines their supposed patriotism. By illustrating them as passively un-American, Coates processes their position in the current American public. In doing so, Coates introduces a lack of compassion and abundance of frustration for Cap which carries throughout the series as he attempts to reconcile his outdated views while embarking on solving a series of cop murders.

While Coates’ Cap fights fascism in the United States, he grapples with the fact that some citizens embrace it as a comfort. This conflict circles back to the controversy of Captain America Vol.1. As the American government currently teeters on the brink of fascist government, the controversy of Captain America punching Hitler parallels how the parts of the country remain split and unsure of Trump’s administration. Now, Captain America’s desire to fight Hitler and the Nazis places him on the right side of history, Coates’ rendition excellently encapsulates the complexity of recent American conflict, we find the nation to be confused in

the face of fascism. Coates' Cap does not know who he is but only maintains what he fights for. When the people he aims to protect tear their own ideals apart, it also tears apart his identity and makes him a reflection of our situation and an analogy for current conflicts. Captain America once guided American morality but with the crumbling binary that began with the Watergate Scandal, the ambiguity of who he is and constitutes Americanness becomes too great and we see Cap's world try to emerge from fascism as we slowly fall into fascism in reality.

In Chapter Four of his book, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, Stevens expresses that "Outwardly, Cap challenges his teammates to fight the good fight, exposing his 1940s values freely. But inwardly he wrestles with his lot in life. Feeling isolated from the alien culture, Cap longs to find a sense of belonging." (Stevens, 86). This inward struggle forces Cap once again to reflect on his purpose, morality, and character beyond his identity as Captain America to fight on behalf of "the dream", a concept not well defined by Cap or Coates but presumed to be a dream of freedom and civil liberties since Rogers is strongly against totalitarian and authoritarian governments.

Coates uses his version of Steve Rogers to process the calamitous effects of passive acceptance and alter the character from the 1940's to fully defend the "dream" of possessing American civil liberties. Coates writes Captain America to critique the wrongdoings of the government while attempting to maintain American "values", but with Cap's continuous change and evolution, these values become increasingly vague while the comics wrestle with their own standpoint.

The Parallel Between Englehart and Coates

“The Nixon Campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White house after that, had two enemies: the anti war left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin. And then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.” John Erlichman, Former Domestic Policy Chief for the Nixon White House.

This quotation taken from a former administrator of the White House connects how the Watergate scandal shattered the American psyche and how its effects bleed into our current conflicts. The testimonial not only exposes some motives of the Nixon Administration, but also brings to light that there were no “glory days” that constitute nostalgia for the time before the administration. Perhaps there seemed to be an era of class and peace for white Americans like Steve Rogers, but for the minorities of the United States, there is arguably no pleasant time to exist. Anti-Black racism pre-existed Nixon’s villainy, as did the Japanese concentration camps that took place during Cap’s heighday, the Chinese Immigration Ban of the 1920’s, the Trail of Tears, amongst many other prejudices harbored and encouraged by the United States government. While Watergate may have altered the perceptions of the government for many Americans, the prejudice in the White House is no shock to many minorities. Therefore, the 1970’s awakening is particular to Cap because of his status as a cis-gendered white male.

Unlike Cap, his partner the Falcon lives fully aware of the ramifications of race and often has to highlight racial disparities and injustices. At the beginning of the *Secret Empire*, Wilson

discloses to Cap his desire for upgrades on his suit. Cap is supportive and suggests that Falcon go see Tony Stark or the Avengers. The Falcon respectfully declines, saying that “The guy I had in **mind**, actually, was the **Black Panther**. From what you’ve told me about the **scientific wonders** he’s helped create in his hidden land, I’d say he’s as hot as the **others**...And he’s **Black**... which would make me feel **easier**” (Englehart, 10). This small moment reveals a perspective that never occurs to Cap. Falcon’s comment reveals anxieties unique to him as a black man that has roots in a disturbing history. Other Captain America storylines like *Truth*, written by Robert Morales, explicitly handle the history of experimentation on Black people in the United States. Currently, disparities in the American healthcare system are more apparent than ever, with the COVID-19 pandemic unproportionally affecting Black and Latino communities³.



³ According to the APM Research Lab, “**Black Americans** continue to experience the highest actual COVID-19 mortality rates nationwide—more than twice as high as the rate for Whites and Asians, who have the lowest actual rates” (APM.org).

Figure 4. From *Captain America: Secret Empire* by Steve Englehart. Collects Captain America (1968) #169-176. Page 10. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZB6tnaiKcPIIMwfZs_iCl6ZkTRx4qvKwz2797UCBZ6jY/edit?usp=sharing

The *Secret Empire* parallels Coates' *Captain America* because it returns to the concept of a deeply corrupt government that manipulates the people. However, while in Englehart's *Secret Empire*, Captain America prevents totalitarianism, Coates' Cap has to deal with the aftermath of a fascist society. While commenting on the effects of comics on the national attitude, Hall clearly nods to current American politics, saying that "If we allow ourselves to bleed into the realm of fiction, what would stop our fictional villains from bleeding into the real world? It might then become possible for an egomaniacal billionaire villain like Lex Luthor to become president of the United States", suggesting that fears manifest themselves from the page into reality (Hall, 271). With a real egomaniacal billionaire in office who lacks leadership and dismisses many serious issues, anxiety is building over the 2020 election. Thus, while *The Secret Empire* speculates, anticipates, and processes, Coates' *Captain America* addresses the reality of institutional racism and encroaching totalitarianism.

Captain America and the Other / Captain America and Racial Tensions

The term "American Dream" has a variety of interpretations ranging from owning property, possessing civil liberties, starting a family, or participating in democracy. Regardless of the definition, the ideal that all men are created equal is essential to the American Dream, but this supposed equality is vastly underachieved and scrutinized in the pages of *Captain America*. The multiculturalism of the United States presents a major issue within the comic books and the nation. Racial tensions complicate readings of Captain America since he supposedly symbolizes the nation in its entirety but his appearance as the 'ideal' white man is in itself

problematic. As America's super-soldier, Rogers is the ultimate man of the 1940's, embodying the white patriot.

Steve Rogers' identity as a white cis-gendered male with blonde hair and blue eyes is used as a tool in the seventies to navigate the problem of race in the United States and is also a point of conflict with his partner the Falcon. While the Falcon's presence was groundbreaking because it expanded the superhero canon beyond the white body politic, Roger's experience defines limits in understanding American minorities. The Falcon eventually becomes a deduced superficial hero who is marginalized even within the Avengers, demonstrating the limit projected onto Black characters within the comics by the writers.

In "Embodying Multiculturalism" from *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*, Dittmer argues that "A common storyline for Captain America is of villains attempting to exploit racial divides in the United States to bring ruin to Captain America, the U.S. government, or the country as a whole" (52). This occurs in Ta-Nehisi Coates' rendition of Captain America and the displacement of the terrorist further complicates identifying who is the "other". As racial differences continue to be an ever-present issue in our society, modern-day Captain America has no room for fighting the "other" who is defined by different appearances or cultures, only those others presented as a threat to governmental democracy (a mission in itself problematic).

Dittmer argues that "Captain America and his whiteness positions him as the ethnic particular rather than the American universal" (52). While this is plausible, characters like the Falcon suggest otherwise since Cap's whiteness prevents him from seeing other perspectives. Although Cap defends citizens of any ethnic background, we observe his oversight with Falcon in *Secret Empire* and also Cap's resistance to assist the undocumented immigrants in Coates'

Captain America. Through his comment, Dittmer establishes a connection between superheroic bodies and the national narrative. This connection is why Cap's position as a rebel and fugitive is important because it parallels the founding history of the United States and tells the story of what he is, which is a white man.

Despite his identity as a white man, Rogers' "man out of time" status (as referred to by Stevens) makes him inherently an "other" since he comes from a different era and attempts to use his background to reconcile the problems he faces. But Stevens also comments that "the actions of a previous generation seem less relevant than the actions of the generation active in the modern world" (96). Stevens' comment is unfounded because past actions set up systems of the future. While current generations disregard certain attitudes from the past, they face resistance instilled by past values of the previous generations, thus keeping the past relevant. Also, to assume the past has no repercussions on current events is narrow minded because it presumes that the past is isolated and distinct, when reality proves this is not the case.

Captain America's constant displacement as an American hero also comes under fire whenever he takes a controversial position outside the law he feels dedicated to protect. In Coates' *Captain America*, Rogers is constantly plagued by his conscience over his fugitive status and questions, "How can I claim to serve my country when I constantly oppose it?" (Coates, 169). This questioning leads to his establishment that he is the protector of the abstract American dream, not the structure of the government itself. Cap remains dedicated to ideologies of democracy and freedom, not to the figures of authority. However noble this message is, Coates includes a scene in which this passionate defense of the American dream faces scrutiny.

Along with the recognition of the corrupt American government, Captain America also gains an increased awareness of the ambiguity of what actually defines an American. In the panel above, he has a monologue with his former love interest Peggy Carter, explaining that “America is **not** the **single** entity that you’re **talking** about. It’s **changed** since I took the 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**....But it makes for a great many different **versions** of what **America** is” (Englehart, 155). This declaration confirms that the definition of an American has evolved with the increasing diversity that contradicts idealized World War II representations while also recognizing that this change has also made defining the enemy difficult with the rise of domestic villains. And while the panel intends to display a diverse United States, the artists employed a variety of stereotypes in the bottom box that attempts to demonstrate diversity. Ultimately, this confusion regarding Americanness explored in the colorful 1970’s version persists up until Coates’ rendition, who continues to ask “Which America am I supposed to **symbolize**?” (Englehart, 155).



Figure 5. *Captain America: The Secret Empire* by Steve Englehart. Collects *Captain America* (1968) #169-176. Page 155. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZB6tnaiKcPIMwfZs_iCIGZkTRx4qvKwz2797UCBZ6jY/edit?usp=sharing

In Coates' *Captain America*, after the Daughters of Liberty free Cap from jail, they start preparing for their first mission together saving undocumented immigrants from exploitation and harassment of a local militia. Rogers first protests their mission because it goes against the law. After the White Tiger (also known as Ava Avila) points out Rogers is a fugitive wanted for murder, he relents but establishes his discontent. Within the images above, we observe the debate, but the characters' body language implies isolation from each other. Captain America expresses hesitation, frustration, and a single declarative, which contrasts with the White Tiger who is more assertive and uses strong hand gestures. The differences in expression symbolizes the shift in power and demonstrates how Cap now remains distanced from his new team.

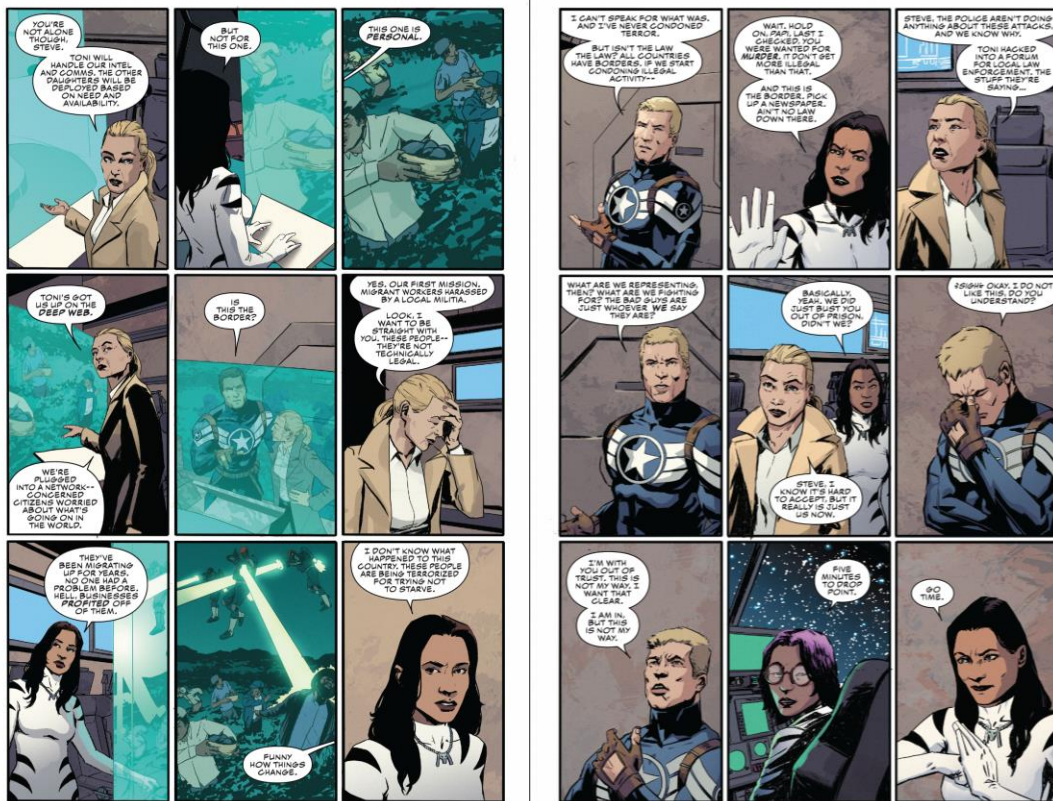


Figure 6.a. & 6.b. from *Captain America: The Legend of Steve* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Collects *Captain America* (2018) #13-19. Page 9.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZB6tnaiKcPIMwfZs_iCl6ZkTrx4qvKwz2797UCBZ6jY/edit?usp=sharing

This resistance exposes a discrepancy within Captain America, who has a history of violence and rebellion, suddenly against helping innocent immigrants who are presumably chasing the American Dream he claims to support and defend. This discrepancy creates more ambiguity to his character that echoes the conservatism of the 1940's and present disputes over immigration. Despite Cap's stint as the Liberal Crusader in the 1970's and his adaptation to protect people of all races, he still preserves some values and beliefs that only maintain the current social order instead of protecting vulnerable people.

Captain America as the (Domestic) Terrorist

Since the *Secret Empire* storyline, forcing Captain America on the peripheral as an outlaw has become a common trope. Because he regularly defies the law despite identifying as a law enforcer, Captain America's decisions and actions suggest that legality does not necessarily align with morality. Since the events in *Secret Empire* led to Rogers' first status as a vigilante and his consequent evolution into Nomad, other storylines including Brubaker's *Civil War* and Coates' *Captain America* placed Cap outside the law to evaluate the correlation between morality and patriotism.

The original Captain America participated in a representation of a binary between good versus evil. However, after Nixon's Watergate scandal in 1972, Captain America's character and self-perception suffer alterations as it becomes clear that the American government and the White House are also corrupt, challenging Steve Rogers' identity as a patriot. With the added racial tensions of the 70's (which introduces us to Sam Wilson and later to Steve Rogers as Nomad or the Liberal Crusader), new opponents are introduced in the form of racist figures and domestic villains.

Author Talal Asad's essay *Terrorism* introduces questions regarding who can be identified as a terrorist. Asad defines the perception of terrorism within the U.S. as heinous acts committed by the "other" by referencing the concept of jihad but also looks at western events like the crusades or domestic terrorism to demonstrate that the "other" is not criteria for terrorism. In the 1990's and early 2000's, Captain America is seen fighting foreign militants, but Coates shifts to display internal conflicts as the terminal problem he needs to fight. Therefore, by making Captain America an anti-establishment figure in the plot of *Civil War* erases some

racial tension because of his Caucasian identity to highlight the complicated ideologies of what constitutes “terrorism” and how terrorist actions are not necessarily detached from us. Additionally, because Cap is white, audiences experience difficulties labeling him as a terrorist since he does not fit the concept of the racial other despite the fact that in the *Civil War* storyline and in *Secret Empire*, Captain America is clearly depicted negatively as a rebel by the media. This loose identity as a domestic terrorist creates internal conflict within Captain America as he struggles with his morality, motives, and concerns of how the people perceive him.

9/11 triggered the next identity crisis for Rogers because he now has to battle the intentions of his own people and becomes dethroned from his status as *the* American hero since he opposes the law Iron Man endorses for the sake of protecting the civil liberties of superpeople. As the events of 9/11 find its implications on the page, Captain America is forced to deal with all the complications from his previous storylines simultaneously, which forces Cap to see the issues converge and can no longer be perceived as isolated, which leads to his losing sight of what America is supposed to stand for. The internal conflicts and domestic terrorism is then taken advantage of by Hydra, the ever-looming foreign threat kills Steve in Brubaker’s *Epilogue*, takes control of the country, and gathers support from rural America. Coates’ adaptation then explores the aftermath of losing the clear definition of the American Dream. While Captain America remains a defender of the “dream”, the ambiguity of his loyalty in addition to the vagueness of the dream itself depicts the world as divided, complex, and fascist.

Conclusion

Captain America addresses how conflicts cause shifts in an identity that once represented an idealized nationalist narrative but has disintegrated as Cap's internal struggles grow in complexity and parallel events in American history. The nationalist Captain America can no longer embody the nation or its people but only hope to attempt to maintain a national vision.

Ultimately, Captain America's defining feature is his undying dedication to upholding freedom and the American Dream, but as his identity shifts in reaction to discovering the corruption of the government and its ramifications on society, his solid identity dissolves. Cap's sole identifier is to be a protector of the "dream" but in Coates' most recent adaptation, the dream unravels and Steve Rogers, now labelled as "the Captain of Nothing" has to reconcile his diminishing role in the modern society and allow the Daughters of Liberty to act. Therefore, the constant theme of ambiguity that underlies the entirety of *Captain America* uses the guise of super-patriotism to express anti-nationalism. The plot of *Secret Empire* establishes that having a tool of nationalism can easily be used against the people that look to it for guidance and that symbols can be manipulated until they are outmoded and promote harmful prejudiced messages to the public. *Secret Empire* demonstrates that while nationalism is essential to create a national psyche and national attitudes like the comics of the 1940s aimed to do, the nation eventually outgrows its need for a symbolic unifier like Captain America and adapts the symbol to reflect the times. Instead, maintaining old ideas and reminiscing on the "gold old days" amplifies facets of oppression and creates a pattern of acceptance followed by resisting nationalism. This pattern is analyzed by Cap's transformation through history. Rogers remains cemented in a past era and undergoes a multitude of internal changes as a representation of

processing change in the United States. Cap's continuous gripes with the government reflect a lost sense of naiveté and embodies the liberty to dissent against the government. Through his shifting personalities, moral ambiguities, and contradictions with the law, *Captain America* comics have captured a struggle with change in recent American history while anticipating future challenges.



Figure 7. From *Captain America: Secret Empire* by Steve Englehart. Collects *Captain America* (1968) #169-176. Page 154.

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