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Comics in Action: A Reflection of the Dominant Narrative in World War II

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that the propagandized use of comic books during World War II promoted views among Americans which contributed to antipathy towards Americans of Japanese and German descent. More generally, the goal of the essay is to highlight the importance of comic books as a reflection of the times – they simultaneously influence and are influenced by society's dominant ideas – and promote the further study of such material. I examine the text and art from three comic book covers dated from 1942-1943. An analysis of these selections suggests that comic books depicted Axis soldiers as savage and animalistic, while Americans are portrayed as trustworthy heroes with whom the reader may easily identify. These conclusions are confirmed by various government sources, which claimed to have been teaching citizens about the war and the enemy, which in reality meant teaching citizens how to hate the enemy. Even more disturbing, comic books were read primarily by children, so these hateful ideas were spread to the most impressionable of all Americans. These very depictions, I argue, reflected and contributed to the general American sentiment towards the war, specifically in relation to the treatment of Japanese-Americans in internment camps and the use of atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Further, the proliferation of comic books and the sole fact that they were used as a propaganda arm by the U.S. Government demonstrates their importance during the period and suggests that they be studied more to further understand their importance to American society
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1.   INTRODUCTION

I have had an interest in comic books and their characters for about as long as I can remember. In fact, the very first toy I remember having as a child was a Superman toy from Jack in the Box that I got when I was two or three years old. I had just begun learning the letters of the alphabet, and I recognized the "S" on Superman's chest as the very same "S" that was part of my name. I was instantly hooked and tried to get my hands on anything else that was Superman- related for the remainder of my childhood, from books to movies, to T-shirts and toys. This interest has carried over to my early adulthood, and as I have grown older, my interest in comic books has shifted from what it used to be. I certainly still enjoy them for the entertainment, but I also see comic books as something more than just a throw-away read. Comic books, like other forms of literature, help to form the worldview of children, and so to study comic books is to understand the world through the eyes of the youth (Wright, 2001).

In this paper, I will explore the impact of comic books on public opinion during World War II. Specifically, I will argue that the anti-Japanese propaganda present in WWII comic books, both in text and imagery, reflected and reinforced the dominant American narrative that the

Japanese people were inherently evil, leading to a lack of opposition to the unjust treatment of Japanese Americans. In doing so, I will highlight in a more general manner the often-ignored and under-represented influence on culture and society that comic books have held in the past and show some of the ways in which they have been used to affect popular opinion and public policies, like the sentiment toward the harsh treatment of Japanese Americans through mass incarceration in the United States.

2.   BACKGROUND

In 1940, Superman was featured in a comic strip titled "How Superman Would End the War." The story was published before the United States entered World War II, hinting at a possible desire from the authors for the United States to engage. Superman makes short work of the Nazi forces in Germany and captures Hitler, grabs Stalin from Russia, and delivers the two to the League of Nations, where they are found guilty of "modern history's greatest crime – unprovoked aggression against defenseless countries" (Siegel & Shuster, 1940). In 15 panels spread out over a grand total of two pages, Superman managed to end World

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War II, five years before the Allies would reign victorious.

After the events at Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into the war, however, the comics changed. While there were messages encouraging readers to purchase war bonds and recycle scrap materials, comic authors made sure to keep their distance in discussing or portraying the ongoing war. In many cases, issues would feature a cover of a character participating in the war effort, but the stories themselves were completely different and unrelated to the covers. This strategy from comic book publishers was two-fold; not only would the stories confuse young readers, but having heroes fight in the war would also have been disrespectful.

According to Paul Levitz, former president of DC Comics, writing a story for children in which a hero like Superman solves the world's problems by ending the war would be troublesome because "the problem is still there in the morning," and comic book writer Mark Waid argued that having a "costumed character run in and just fix everything" would have been perceived as disrespectful to the actual war efforts being made by Allied soldiers and their families (Levitz & Waid, 2006).

At the time, Superman was far and away the most powerful (and most popular) comic book character, so writers had to invent a way to justify his absence from the war. The writers invented a creative workaround in the newspaper comic strips: Superman, as his alter ego Clark Kent, applied for the draft and was found unfit for service. He was so excited to enlist that he accidentally triggered his x-ray vision, making him see the eyechart in the next room over. After incorrectly reading every letter on his own chart, Kent is declared by the doctors to be blind, thus failing the physical and being rejected from joining the US military (Siegel & Shuster, 1942).

Another early story featuring a comic book hero taking on the war was about a character by the name of The Shield. Published in early 1940, this book followed the trend of vaguely acknowledging the war. The Shield, alias Joe Higgins, become a superhuman as the result of chemical experimentation, and sought to avenge the death of his father, who had been killed by a saboteur in World War I (Scott, 2007). Rather than acknowledge the war and have the hero unable to intervene, this book put a thin veil over the Axis soldiers. Villains had exotic-sounding names and were disguised as soldiers of a place called "Mosconia," while their speech balloons included phrases and pronunciations clearly intended to be German references: "Den ve haff lost notting except de lives of some vorthless Americans" (Scott, 2007). The stories involving The Shield often combined real-world characters with fantasy, creating stories that readers could relate to, yet were kept distant enough so as to not step on the toes of those who were actually fighting in the war.

The rule for refraining from directly mentioning of the war was broken unceremoniously in *Captain America* #1, published in 1941, which featured a cover of the titular character landing a punch square on the jaw of Adolf Hitler. This issue did not follow in the tradition of the earlier comics, which would have featured an anti-Axis cover and a completely unrelated story. *Captain America* was the origin story of an American hero clad in the stars and stripes and invented for the sole purpose of fighting in the war and defeating the Axis powers. The story was chock-full of American propaganda and described a specific enemy: the "ruthless war-mongers of Europe," who had set their sights on the "peace-loving America[ns]," even though the United States had not yet entered the war (Kirby & Simon, 1941).

Captain America focused on the efforts of Steve Rogers, a weak kid from Brooklyn who sought to serve in the war but was found unfit for service. Rogers, desperate to serve his country, submits himself to a program intended to create a super-soldier and upon injection with the serum, becomes Captain America, a patriotic superhuman capable of incredible feats of strength. *Captain America* quickly became Timely Comics' (now known as Marvel Comics) best-selling book, perhaps in part due to its appeal to children who wished to assist in any way possible – much like Steve Rogers – and who too found themselves facing long odds (Murray, 2012).

Captain America's story told these children that, with enough spirit, they too could contribute to their country and be a hero, despite their own shortcomings.

After the United States entered World War II, the threat of Nazis loomed over the heads of many Americans. In his State of the Union address from 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt warned Americans of the threat from overseas:

> "We must guard against divisions among ourselves and among all the other United Nations. We must be particularly vigilant against racial discrimination in any of its ugly forms. Hitler will try again to breed mistrust and suspicion between one individual and another, one group and another, one race and another, one Government and another. He will try to use the same technique of falsehood and rumor-mongering with which he divided France from Britain. He is trying to do this with us even now. But he will find a unity of will and purpose against him, which will persevere until the destruction of all his black designs upon the freedom and safety of the people of the world" (Roosevelt, 1942).

The message was clear – Hitler and the Axis sought to divide and conquer, so unity needed to be promoted among Americans. The war became a clash of competing and incompatible ideologies: people could follow either the "Hitler Way" of slavery and fascism or the "American Way" of freedom and democracy (Wall, 2008). The government needed to get this message out without releasing pure propaganda and without a clear link to the government – it had to be done in the "American Way," and what was more American than the comic book? (Wright, 2001). Enter the Writer's War Board.

The Writer's War Board was a private American organization used to promote the war effort. Although officially private, the WWB worked closely with the Office of War Information, which was a government organization. The OWI was not allowed to distribute material within the U.S., so it became the WWB's agenda to do what the government could no longer openly do – shape public opinion (Howell, 1997). The U.S. government naturally did not want to be associated with propaganda, so it intentionally

tried to distance itself from the WWB.

The first method of dissociation was done through the WWB itself. The WWB essentially functioned as a proxy for the government. Although it was technically independent of the government, the organization itself estimated that 85 percent of its work was sanctioned by the government, and it received funding for such work to the extent that the WWB was considered to be "an arm of the government" (Howell, 1997). The second method was in the description of the material. Rather than distributing "propaganda," the OWI regarded the WWB's mission as providing an "education" to give Americans "the fullest possible understanding of what this war is about" (Davis, 1943).

3.   METHODOLOGY

This attempt at "education" resulted in publishing images and stories of the United States' enemy which, I argue, promoted racist sentiments among Americans that decreased the likelihood of individuals opposing the unjust treatment of Japanese Americans. Frankly, there is too much material to cover at one time, so I will only assess the text and art of a few comic books. As mentioned earlier, many of these stories were unrelated to the covers, and while the stories may not provide a useful artifact for analysis, I believe that the covers are artifacts in themselves and qualify for assessment, so I will assess only the covers of the selected comic books. For the sake of time, I have chosen three comic books published by DC Comics in the 1940s for analysis: *Action Comics* #58, *Superman* #17, and *World's Finest Comics* #9[1]. I will look at the covers simultaneously, dividing the depictions by characters: Germans first, then Japanese, followed by a comparison to American characters.

Analysis of Action Comics, Superman, and World's Finest

Depictions of German in the comic books were particularly interesting. Some depictions reused stereotypes from World War I, in which Germans were portrayed as arrogant and aristocratic, with devices such as monocles used to convey these ideas to children (Scott, 2007). This was infrequent though, as most often the only way to distinguish a German soldier from an American was their uniforms, which featured Nazi symbols. Other times they were described as purely evil, like in *All-Star Comics* #24, in which a story was re-written from pinning the blame of the war on only Nazi leaders to claiming that the war was the result of the inherently violent German people (Hirsch, 2014). However, this particular issue was an aberration – it was one of the most aggressive books published during the war, and depictions like that were uncommon.

In *Superman* (Figure 2), Hitler is seen being held from his neck by Superman. He appears surprised and short, but nonetheless remains a relatively accurate depiction of himself. Similarly, in *World's Finest* (Figure 3), Hitler remains mostly true to his appearance. It was often the case that most comics preferred to simply display Hitler himself rather than German soldiers, since he was the figurehead for

the Nazis. This and other attempts were made at distinguishing the Nazis from ordinary Germans, with at least one instance of a character who proclaimed he was of German descent but remained a "good American citizen" (Wright, 2001). Although conflation of the people of Germany with the evil Nazis was possible, it did not occur often, and the covers observed here do not necessarily promote any particular stereotype toward Germans as a whole.

Depictions of the Japanese, however, were drastically different. In most comics, Japanese soldiers were displayed as being inhuman and animalistic. In fact, comic books seemed perfectly suited to portray the Japanese enemy as Americans saw them: purely evil (Wright, 2001).

Common traits included buck teeth, squinted eyes, rat-like features, yellow skin, and of course, a general appearance of deceit and treachery (Scott, 2007). Unlike the Germans who usually appeared to resemble normal humans, Japanese soldiers almost always were depicted so far disfigured that they appeared inhuman, regardless of the publisher or artist. While there was often the "good German" to distinguish from the evil Nazi characters, there was no Japanese counterpart – *all* people of Japanese descent appeared evil (Dower, 1993).

In *Action Comics* (Figure 1), Superman is shown printing posters which read: "SUPERMAN SAYS YOU CAN SLAP A JAP WITH WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!" The poster says it all - for readers to do their part in the war, they must go out and purchase war bonds or stamps. This is not controversial, really. In fact, it is not the message here, but the language that is used to convey the message that is troubling. "Jap," of course, is a derogatory term directed at individuals of Japanese descent, while the act of slapping seems to indicate that the Japanese were thought of as almost childlike. The comic book is most likely to be read by a child, who would certainly never slap an adult. A child would only ever slap another child, perhaps when play-fighting. It stands to reason then, I argue, that the message the poster conveys is that the Japanese were inferior and comparable to a child – all that is needed is to give them a good slap to make them behave.

From a visual standpoint, the depiction of Japanese soldiers' inferiority through infantility was quite common. They were often shown to be primitive, childish, and held both emotional and mental deficiencies (Hirsch, 2014). Not only were the Japanese depicted as inhuman in comic books – they were *sub*human, lesser even, than the very children who read about them. In *Action Comics*, the infantility of a Japanese soldier is depicted on the poster Superman is seen printing. The soldier's face appears to be young, like a child, and sees stars after being slapped, almost as if they were a children's cartoon character. Additionally, in *World's Finest*, a Japanese soldier, along with others, is seen taking baseballs to the face by Batman, Robin, and Superman. Although there are other soldiers present next to the Japanese soldier, it appears that he looks significantly more childish than the others. Hitler, of course, closely resembles himself, and the soldier in the middle appears gruff and grizzled. Unlike the others, the Japanese soldier is

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[1] Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3, respectively. Since there is only one issue of each book, the issues will hereafter be

referred to as Action Comics, Superman, and World's Finest.

not so much grimacing in pain as he is cowering in fear, indicating perhaps weakness or fearfulness.

Another visual characteristic of Japanese soldiers was their size and tendency to appear inhuman. Often, Japanese soldiers appeared to be physically weak, small, and grotesque, and occasionally took on figures of rats or monkeys (Hirsch, 2014). In *Superman*, the Japanese soldier appears quite smaller than Superman, as does Hitler, however what is most obvious is the Japanese soldier's appearance. He is a dark orange color, with giant teeth and squinted eyes behind glasses, perfectly embodying the typical visuals of a Japanese villain. He appears to be throwing a fit much like a child would, and combined with his grotesque appearance, suggests that he is of some subhuman species.

Compared to the American characters in these selections, there are quite obvious differences. Most notable are the size, strength, and facial expressions of American characters, which starkly contrast with those of the enemy. In fact, this was the prototype of the American hero: they were supposed to feature all of the best and most American qualities, including knowledge, strength, and morality (Scott, 2007). The way of depicting that through comic art, of course, was to have athletic and muscle-bound heroes giving the Axis soldiers either a smile to show the enemy's insignificance and powerlessness or a scowl to indicate disapproval of their actions. Return to *Superman*, where Superman is illustrated as large, strong, and in charge of the situation. He features broad shoulders, well-defined muscles, and a stern look, while Hitler and the Japanese soldier appear to be short, weak, and surprised or angry. In *World's Finest*, all three heroes are clean-shaven, in-shape, and giving their enemies a smirk, while the Axis members are bruised, grimacing, drooling, and ugly. Moreover, the fact that the heroes are simply throwing baseballs signals once again that their enemy is foolish and insignificant. Only a dunce would allow themselves to be hit point-blank in the face by baseballs, right? The heroes take this act as child's play; hitting the Axis members is mere target practice for them, continuing the narrative of inferiority on behalf of the enemy. Finally, in *Action Comics*, the poster printed by Superman features a Japanese soldier with his tongue out in an overly cartoonish manner after being hit by a white, undoubtedly American hand. While this is a cartoon poster, again the Japanese soldier appears childish, with his eyes crossed out and tongue hanging from his mouth.

Perhaps most interesting and most telling about the comic imagery is the style in which the characters are drawn. Comic books, and cartoon illustrations as a whole, are particularly effective at drawing individuals in to their stories because of the style of art, through both the detail of the illustration and the way that the lines themselves are drawn.

The theory of abstraction states that the more abstract an image is, the deeper perception is required to understand the idea, while conversely, the more detailed an image is, the easier and more instantaneous the idea is to grasp (McCloud, 1993). Imagine a scale, the left side labeled simple or abstract, the right side labeled complex or detailed, and that an artist is trying to convey the idea of love through the image of a heart. According to Christoph Niemann, the most abstracted version of a heart might be a simple red

square, while the most complex version would be a detailed depiction of the human heart. Neither of these depictions is very useful at conveying the idea of love; the abstract red square is too vague to convey an idea, and the realistic depiction of an actual human heart is so detailed and grotesque that "the last thing anybody would ever think about is love," (Niemann, 2017). Rather, the most useful image lies somewhere in between these two extremes, with the typical heart shape we best recognize as the symbol for love. Abstraction involves simplifying an idea to easily convey it through an image. If that sounds familiar, it is because it is the exact way in which cartoons and comic books operate.

Cartoons function successfully when readers can effectively put themselves into the story. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud argues that the individual is depicted in their own mind in the simplest and most basic terms to create general placement of the self, while the face of another is seen in a more detailed manner, and in fact, this may explain why children are fascinated with cartoons – a cartoon is drawn simply, allowing readers to more easily place themselves in the story (McCloud, 1993). Imagine having a conversation with a friend in which you observe their features in full detail with hair, wrinkles, blemishes and all. Your awareness of your own features and movements, however, are far less detailed – the self-image in your mind is only for spatial awareness and placement so it remains quite hazy, and in a way, resembles the style of a cartoon. When we see realistic drawings then, we see them not as our own face, but as the face of another person. Therefore, depicting a character in a more detailed manner isolates and distances the reader from that character, while a more abstracted depiction increases the likelihood of the reader self-identifying with that character. Further, when the reader identifies with the character, the message is better received: when you easily identify with the character, *who* they are matters less than *what* they say (McCloud, 1993).

This is quite significant when analyzing the comics' portrayal of Axis soldiers. Look particularly at *World's Finest*: the superheroes' faces are all drawn in their typical cartoon style, with vague facial features and a sort of flatness (in terms of how they "pop" off the page), which contrast sharply with those of the Axis soldiers. In each of the villains' faces, wrinkles, facial hair, and more intricate shading create a detailed and lifelike face. According to the theory of identification, the increased realism of the villains discourages reader identification and empathy, so when a Japanese character is punched in the face, the reader feels no empathy and assumes that the hero is doing the right thing. The hero has the reader's trust through identification, so the action or message is what truly matters.

Since the reader is more likely to trust the hero due to identification, the message is now of the utmost importance. What messages are the comic covers trying to send? Specifically, *Action Comics* tells us that we should purchase war bonds and stamps to help the war efforts and "slap the Japs". *Superman* is more difficult to decode, but the possible message could be that the Axis powers are tiny, insignificant, and childish in comparison to the might of Superman (where Superman serves as a stand-in for the United States). *World's Finest* tells us again that if we buy war bonds and stamps, we will help to defeat the Axis

powers, much like our heroes. More generally, and much more importantly, the comics send one simple, collective message: the Japanese are the evil enemy who must be defeated. The message is easily decoded by children: we know that Superman, Batman, and Robin are heroes and always do the right thing, so anyone who opposes them *must* be evil.

The faces of the Japanese are drawn to extreme proportions – one might note that I have classified them as inhuman and object that this disqualifies the face as being "realistic," and thus does not establish the character as that of another. However, I ague that it is not the degree of realism insofar as how much the face resembles a face that one might see every day that matters, but it is the *degree of detail* that prevents association with the character. If a reader cannot associate with a wrinkled and disfigured Japanese soldier, then the likelihood of the reader to feel empathy for the character is greatly decreased. And by extension, the likelihood of the reader to feel empathy for a *real-life* person of Japanese descent is decreased by virtue of having the idea that the individual is inhuman already in their mind. The detailed and inhuman depictions of such characters, therefore, decreases the ability for readers to identify, causing a general sense of indifference toward the people which the character is intended to represent.

Besides the self-identification through lack of detail in faces, the artistic style presented in these comic books must also be considered. This works hand-in-hand with the level of detail in faces, but what I am specifically referring to is the style in which the lines are drawn. In *World's Finest*, the heroes are drawn in bold and dynamic lines, which have long been used to indicate strength and heroism, while the villains are presented in a slightly different style, with lines that are more neurotic and detailed, indicating a lack of innocence and general sense of betrayal and treachery (McCloud, 1993). The style in which lines are drawn may seem relatively inconsequential, but they contribute to the level of detail which can promote or discourage the reader's association with the characters, as mentioned earlier.

Effects of the Comics

The influence and reach that these images had should not be understated; in the early 1940s, comic books had readerships that rivaled those of major newspapers, and in fact, their readership may have even surpassed the newspapers. In total, comic publishers reported an astounding 25 million issues were sold per month, and most publishers conservatively estimated that each comic book would be passed along to readers' friends about five times, meaning that over 100 million comic books were read per month in the United States (Wright, 2001). The images that were circulated in these comics, therefore, should not be taken lightly – they were everywhere and viewed by everyone, including those who were "poor and rich, those who never got beyond the sixth grade and Ph.D.'s," but most importantly, by one demographic in particular: children (Zorbaugh, 1944).

Surveys conducted by two independent pollsters in the early 1940s questioned children on their consumption of comic books. For a child to be considered a "regular" reader, they needed to read 12 to 13 comic books a month. The Market Research Company indicated that 95 percent of boys and 91 percent of girls aged 6 to 11 were regular readers, while Paul W. Stewart and Associates, Inc. discovered that 93 percent of children aged 8 to 15 read comic books (Zorbaugh, 1944). Comics were heavily criticized for lacking literary significance and being composed of crude art, but that is perhaps what made them so influential and popular, and the comic book's ubiquity alone signified its influence (Gruenberg, 1944). For children in the United States, the comic book *was* popular culture; comics pervaded every aspect of youth culture and had far-reaching influence, so it comes as no surprise that they were used to circulate propaganda.

Children are the most impressionable demographic, and it appears that the Writer's War Board and the Office of War Information intentionally circulated comics as an attempt to persuade children into supporting the war and wartime policies. The WWB specifically intended that its material for the "less literate," including children, be released through comic books (Howell, 1997). Robert Maxwell, director of *The Adventures of Superman*, a radio show based on the character of the same name, said the following of his program:

> "I control the destinies of three juvenile radio programs with audiences running into the millions. I can, in some way, formulate ideologies for these youngsters…. *I am, at the moment, teaching this vast audience to hate*…. And, unfortunately, *there is no cleavage between the individual and the state* whose ideology he defends. A German is a Nazi and *a Jap is the little yellow man* who "knifed us in the back at Pearl Harbor" (Wall, 2008)[2].

All of this evidence suggests that the Writer's War Board, the Office of War Information, and of course, the government knew exactly what the consequences were of its suggestions for comic books to be published that featured and encouraged its racist depictions of the Japanese as grotesque and inhuman. In fact, the consequences were intended: children were being taught, as Maxwell stated, to hate and feel indifference toward the enemy through racist depictions in comic books that painted the Japanese as childish, weak, angry, subhuman, and discouraged any association with the characters.

4. CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

The comic books that I have selected, I argue, serve as an artifact of the overall American narrative that the Japanese were inferior to Americans, which discouraged Americans from empathizing and opposing the racist policies that justified the internment of millions of Japanese Americans. It was this same tactic of psychological

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[2] Emphasis added.

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distancing, in fact, that led to the merciless killing of the Japanese and even the use of nuclear weapons on a civilian population (Dower, 1993). Even if the racism was not explicit, just by depicting the Japanese as disfigured or childish, the comic books tacitly encouraged the narrative that allowed Americans to simply look away while millions of Japanese Americans were locked away in internment camps and millions more of Japanese civilians lost their lives via nuclear warfare. The imagery and language presented in the comic books, among other media, invited millions of readers to partake in the cultural view that the Japanese were evil simply by virtue of being Japanese.

One might object that comic books, per the genre, necessarily require a villain and since the villain is evil, there is no responsibility to portray the villains in a respective or sensitive manner. By extension then, there should be no problem with comic books portraying the Japanese as evil and disfigured villains. If the Joker, a popular comic book villain, can be portrayed as discolored and disfigured with green hair, yellowed teeth, and bright red lips, why then can the Japanese not be portrayed with yellowed skin, buck teeth, and angry expressions? Both characters are disfigured in an inhuman manner and both are villains, so the same rules should logically apply. And even if there is some difference, do comic books have the responsibility to portray people of varying ethnicities correctly?

I do not believe that this objection can be used to excuse the racist and subhuman depictions of Japanese characters. The exaggerated portrayal of the Joker, for example, is acceptable because it is not based on race – his appearance is the result of falling into a vat of chemicals that dyes his skin, hair, and lips. The Japanese soldiers, however, were not the result of a chemical accident. We are led to assume that these characters are *born* the way that they appear, and that all Japanese people are the same in appearance and personality. This is obviously false and their appearances are based on untrue racial stereotypes, for which there is no excuse. And with a circulation of over 100 million readers per month, many of whom were children, I maintain that comic books should have been held to the same standard as any other popular medium. Racism is racism, and it is no less offensive, inappropriate, or damaging when it is in the form of a comic book, no matter the circumstances of the present day. War is not an excuse.

In fact, I agree that comic books require villains, because I believe this furthers my more general claim that comics serve as a reflection of the dominant narrative, in this case, the Japanese were commonly depicted as villains because that is what reflected the popular opinion of the time. In the 1930s, Superman fought greedy businessmen, wife-beaters, and supported the everyday American in response to the Great Depression (Wright, 2001). Comics in the 1970s and 1980s featured corruption as a recurring theme in response to the Nixon administration (Wright, 2001). Post-September 11th comics featured heroes like Spider-Man seek and provide comfort in the aftermath of one of the United States' greatest tragedies, while contemplating the very racism that World War II brought upon us:

> "What do we tell the children? Do we tell them evil is a foreign face? No. The evil is the thought behind the face, and it can look just like yours"

(Straczynski, Romita, & Hanna, 2001).

Modern comics continue to tackle the most pertinent issues of the day, with heroes like Simon Baz, the newest Green Lantern – a Muslim – who fights against discrimination and alien invasions alike (Johns, Mahnke, Alamy, Irwin, & Champagne, 2012). Even the rise of Donald Trump was responded to in comic books, with an anti-immigrant, America-first villain created in his likeness called M.O.D.A.A.K. – Mental Organism Designed As America's King (Latour, Visions, & Campbell, 2016).

All of these examples serve to suggest that comic books are just as responsive and reflective as any other form of media, and perhaps even more so, considering the weekly, biweekly, or monthly release schedules of varying issues. When comic books feature an idea or theme, it is often because the theme already fits with the dominant narrative, and I believe that this was especially the case with anti-Japanese propaganda present in comic books from World War II. Japanese soldiers were depicted as evil and subhuman because that is what reflected the majority public opinion and dominant narrative. The depictions allowed readers to psychologically distance themselves from the Japanese, causing a lack of empathy and tacit – if not explicit – support of the racist and unjust policies directed toward the Japanese and Japanese Americans. As such, these comic books serve as tiny artifacts of the much larger dominant American narrative of their time.
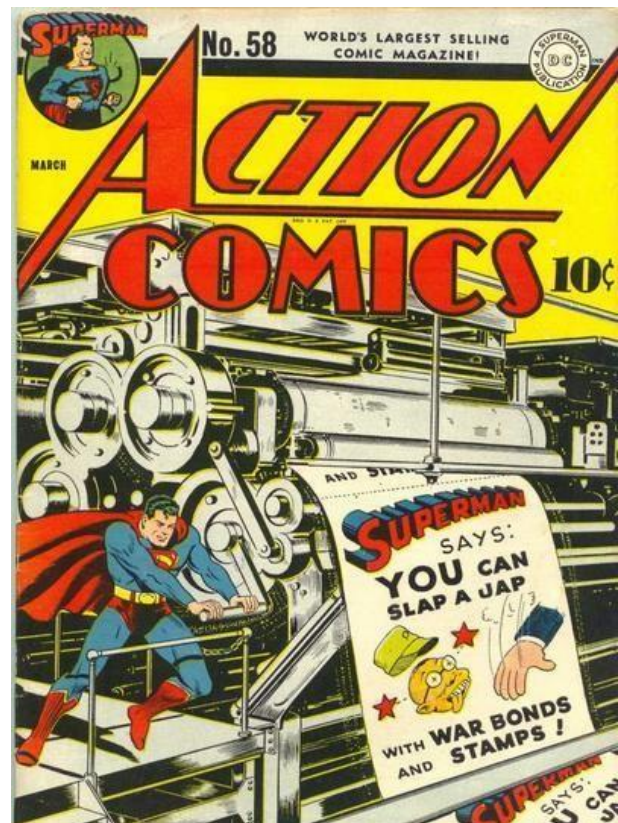
5.   FIGURES

Figure 1: Siegel, S., Citron, S., Sikela, J., & Schiff, J. (1943, March). Action Comics(58).
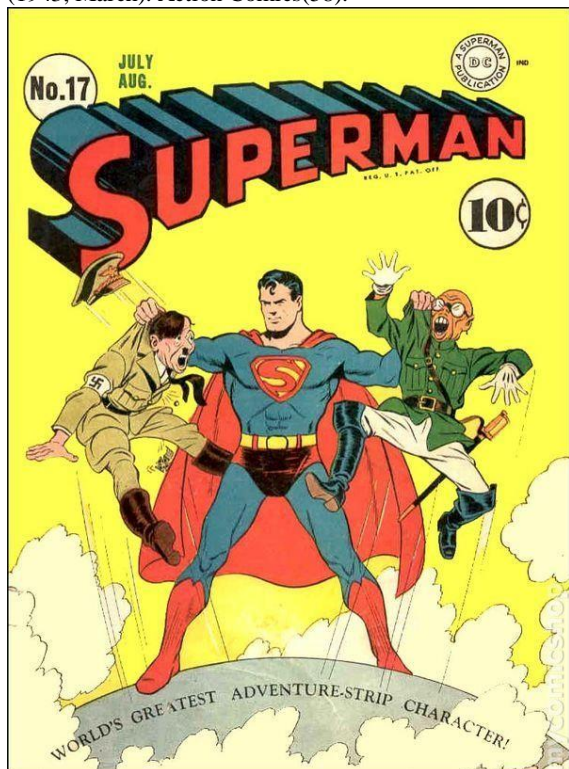

Figure 2: Siegel, J., Shuster, J., & Sikela, J. (1942, July). Superman(17).

Figure 3: Finger, B. & Sikila, J. (1943, March). World's Finest(9).

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