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SHADOWS IN SPANDEX: A LOOK INTO ANTI-BLACK RACISM AND THE
POSITIONALITY OF SIDEKICKS WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC
UNIVERSE AND COMICS

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ABSTRACT

SHADOWS IN SPANDEX: A LOOK INTO ANTI-BLACK RACISM AND THE POSITIONALITY OF SIDEKICKS WITHIN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE AND COMICS

Kayla Wilson

The Marvel Cinematic Universe and its collection of films have represented a large number of superheroes and sidekicks. Taking a closer look into the character dynamics reveals that the majority of the Black characters have been forced into the restrictive ‘sidekick’ trope that stunts all development and keeps them positioned below their white hero counterparts. Sidekick characters James Rhodes, Sam Wilson and Maria Rambeau all work in the same function as side players who ensure their starring role heroes can save the day, even if it costs them their bodies, ideals and backstories. This repeated violence helps perpetuate the anti-black structure of repression that promotes whiteness and does not acknowledge the role that the Black heroes have played. Marvel Comics, alternatively, has had a little more progress in promoting Black characters into titular roles but still struggles with repression due to the characters being unable to move outside of the shadow of the white heroes. Using the characters to show how whiteness is positioned above Black in terms of relevance allows the racist hierarchy of power to be continued on. Looking at how each of the Black characters function in relation to their corresponding hero and on their own also works to uncover trauma. Rambeau, Wilson and Rhodes are regulated to Military/Armed Forces members who have lost someone important to them and can save the day without getting any of the credit. Forcing them into two-dimensional shadow versions of their heroes – Captain Marvel, Captain America and Iron Man respectively – shows how diversity within the Marvel Cinematic Universe and comics is further back than films

like the Black led *Black Panther* would lead one to believe. In order to allow Black sidekicks to become heroes in his or her own rights the white hero would have to be reconsidered as screen time and development would have to be shared.

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INTRODUCTION

What is a hero? The faces that instantly come to mind for most people and the heroic acts that accompany them makes the question seem simple enough. Some would say that a hero could be anyone. If so, the question can then be redefined to look at not *what* a hero is but instead *who* is allowed to be one. Over the years the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Comics brand has made itself synonymous with heroes due to the high concentration of heroic characters they have created and produced. The industry behemoth lists 2,574 characters on their featured webpage that are present in their print publication.¹ Their major motion picture, 2019's *Avengers: Endgame*, saw thirty-six heroes in the climatic fight scene alone (Mithaiwala, 2019). This is in addition to other characters who appear in their twenty-two films and twenty live action shows that are either currently airing or soon to be on streaming services such as Netflix, Freeform, Hulu and Disney+.² Marvel saturates clothes, toys, games and other aspects of daily life, which allows it to then represent what a hero looks like based on the images that it chooses. Take, for example, 2014's *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie. Its original poster features an enlarged version of main protagonist Peter Quill, portrayed by Chris Pratt, with the other four members of the team around him. Quill is the only expressly human character that is shown. Groot and Rocket are a giant tree and talking raccoon, respectively.³ Dave Bautista's Drax the Destroyer is humanoid in form but is blue and covered in large tattoos. As the only female Zoë Saldana stands out not only for her gender but also because of her bright green skin. Because they are a rag-tag team of space

¹ See Marvel Cinematic Character Page

² New Disney+ shows include Falcon and the Winter Soldier (2020-), WandaVision (2020-), etc

³ See Figure 1

outlaws who have to begrudgingly put aside their own self-interests to save the world their odd appearances seem explainable. Pratt's whiteness is in full display on the cover while the green and blue of Gamora and Drax mask the fact that the actors are people of color. Because Saldana's heritage is both Puerto Rican and Dominican and Bautista is half-Filipino (Ching, 2014) their ethnicities make them the two most diverse cast members but their prosthetics and body paint masks the fact. Instead, images like Pratt's Star-Lord can be seen alongside others such as the blonde Brie Larson (*Captain Marvel*, 2019), the bright red hair of Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow (*Captain America: Winter Soldier*, 2014) and Tom Holland's brunette Peter Parker (*Spider-Man: Far from Home*, 2019). These featured characters are all European in appearance while characters of color like Don Cheadle's War Machine (*Iron Man 3*, 2013) are either situated behind the white characters and out of the main focus or otherworldly and alien in appearance like Saldana and Bautista. Although there are many posters they all manage to maintain a very similar tableau of the white hero featured prominently and the Black or ethnic characters either shoved to the side or physically masked.⁴ This discrepancy between white and non-white heroes exists outside of the posters and within the world of the films as well. Officially named the Marvel Cinematic Universe but more commonly known as the MCU, the film saga produced by the studio shows heroes and villains fighting on cosmic scales and smashing box office records with alarming intensity.⁵ It was the \$2.79 billion box office victory that put *Avengers: Endgame* as the highest grossing film in history as it dethroned the previous film, *Avatar*, who had held the title for the previous ten years (Goldberg, 2019). Marvel's ability to create a high rate of content, as mentioned above, and their

⁴ See Figures 2-5

⁵ See Marvel Studios at the Box Office

schedule that already reaches to 2024 and beyond, allows room for an impressive array of crossovers and team-ups that could feature both old and new heroes alike, similar to what they accomplished in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019).⁶

Conversations about representation in film have existed since its conception with modern day film theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Dr. Linda Williams being able to add to the conversation through their writings about gender and the body.⁷ Part of the conversation also revolves around race with scholars such as Dr. Stephen Best of UC Berkeley contributing, but it is not only centered in academia. The way casual audience members watch the films and respond has begun to evolve as shown by an increase of articles surrounding diversity by mainstream publications such as the Huffington Post.⁸ Fan reactions to the films speaks also of the diversity that is desired in the future.⁹ An increase in demand for diversity and equality in both race and gender as well as an overall diversification of the worlds most popular franchise seems natural, especially since recent studies show that diversity in film actually boosts profit. Updating the industry to match the wants of audience members in subjects like character and culture reads as the obvious answer but is not an accurate reflection of what is occurring. The MCU has doled out small doses of representation and heavily promoted its breakout film *Black Panther* (2018) all the while failing to fix the root of the issue: systematic racism that has structurally become an almost unnoticed part of life for people who wish to turn a blind eye. This racism exists in the real world but also has transferred into that of the films to impact how characters treat one another. The high profile nature of *Black*

⁶ Coogler's *Black Panther 2* is slated for May 2022 and *Captain Marvel* July 2022

⁷ See *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess* (1991) as an example

⁸ See Fang, 2019

⁹ See Mackelden, 2018

Panther (2018) has not eliminated the issue but instead highlighted it by showing just how much has been missing. A Google search can show that the keywords ‘Marvel Cinematic Universe’ is home to 53,400,000 results (Google, 2020). Cross-referencing ‘black heroes’ with it brings up a still impressive 41,000,000 results and two unfortunate suggested asks: ‘Who is the black superhero in Avengers?’ and ‘Who is the black guy in Marvel?’ Both come up in the feature that shows what people have also asked as recommendations.¹⁰ Spoiler alert: the answer to both is Sam Wilson, the Falcon. Although Sam is not the only Black hero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and has arguably far less screen time than others such as Chadwick Boseman’s Black Panther and Cheadle’s War Machine he becomes here an answer to a racist question that takes all Black characters – both African-American and not – and lumps them into a singular and masculine identity. Eliminating who Black characters are outside of the sidekick template they are forced into tends to be more rule than exception in Marvel in cases other than just Sam. The MCU has made billions on the promotion of their white heroes and the underdevelopment of the Black. Like Sam Wilson, many of the Black characters that exist outside of the world of *Black Panther* are sidekicks. Living on the side, these characters are prohibited from becoming fully actualized and instead have to be two-dimensional reflections of their white ‘counterparts’. This anti-Black mindset then continues to persist when one turns to the printing origin in the Marvel Universe where the reimagining of popular roles as Black still sees the titular characters as shadowed reflections. These characters act like heroes but fail to measure up to the title in the eyes of the world around them, leaving them perpetually stuck as ‘less than’.

¹⁰ See Figures 7-8

A sidekick is easier to define than a superhero mostly due to what one would assume is a lack of complexity. It's Captain America who headlines the film that people pay to see and not the Falcon even if he's there as well. Regardless of what character the audience member looks forward to, it is the Captain America brand they are supporting. The sidekick, historically, is lesser to the hero and either supplements or compliments them during their journey. As Rob Buchanan points out, a sidekick can take on two forms over the course of the story. They can be "static, not changing in personality or function" or have the possibility to evolve "into an essential figure, assuming a higher degree of relevance but still maintaining a subordinate position of the hero(ine)" (15). Within the Marvel Cinematic Universe both forms of sidekick can be found. While the Black character represented in the sidekick archetype can grow they will always be limited by what their hero dictates both voluntarily and involuntarily. The sidekick can have lines and feature in the promotional material but marketing leaves no question as to the star of the show is. Left out of the limelight, these characters run the risk of becoming stagnant and idle. Due to their position in the margin of the story the Black sidekick becomes voiceless in a conversation that they should be able to participate in. Being unable to contribute to dialogue about issues that impact them and those like them means that the Black sidekick is left with no room to grow. True danger lies in the representation of a subservient Black face next to shining white privilege due to the historical context of the slave and the master. Not only is a sidekick less than their hero in the eyes of many, the likes of the blonde and light skinned Captain America plucked straight out of a country that had yet to have a Civil Rights movement standing next to his trusty Black sidekick Sam plays into the idea of slavery and ownership over the Black body. Having a Black sidekick

alongside a white character is then loaded with more implications in a way beyond that of an ordinary sidekick. Those who possess white privilege are able to say that the times have greatly changed because slavery was abolished and segregation ended, due to the fact that their privilege allows them to act as if their privilege is universal while denying that there are groups of people who are exploited.¹¹ This in itself is a sense of discrimination that shows racism has not yet been outgrown. Slavery may no longer be viewed as acceptable but in superhero culture the audience has been trained not to bat an eye at the eerily similar tableau due to how normalized it has become. Positioning them as a team without acknowledging the power dynamic that exists gives off the false appearance that racism is not present as it becomes more palatable for viewers.

Three specific Black sidekicks are turned into shadows to better compliment the white heroes of the MCU. Out of the roster of heroes Iron Man and Captain America took over as the two main faces from the start (Dalton, 2016). The old fashioned and justice oriented mindset of Captain America clashed with the more rebellious Iron Man who drank, partied and showed that he was more a piece of work than a boy scout in blue. Although the Norse god Thor was more powerful than both, Tony Stark and Steve Rogers have appeared in ten to twelve MCU films each with 2016's *Captain America: Civil War* (2015) forcing the heroes to become #TeamCap or #TeamIronMan. Promotional material featured Captain America and Iron Man facing off with their teams behind them and audience members were also encouraged to choose a side.¹² The dynamic between Rogers and Stark is centered on the masculine heroes with their

¹¹ See Kendall, 2012

¹² See Figure 6

warring ideals and the concept that everything else in the world revolves around their conflict. One character comes out of retirement and leaves his family while another is kidnapped and brought to another continent to join the fight, which he is shown to consider an honor. By positioning Steve and Tony as the two leads, the MCU forced all the other characters to fall somewhere on the scale between them. Even the freshly introduced Black Panther who debuted in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) had to play into the Captain America v Iron Man conflict due to his hatred of Cap's best friend, the Winter Soldier.

When the Marvel Cinematic Universe created a female led blockbuster they chose Carol Danvers, the woman behind the Captain Marvel alias. At this point Marvel had female characters in their films that were known for being powerful and capable, but they promoted Carol differently than they did existing female Avengers like the Scarlet Witch and Black Widow. Marvel Studio's longtime president, Kevin Feige, stated in 2019 before the films release that "it was the right time to finally introduce Captain Marvel to the world. She's one of the most powerful – and one of the most popular – characters in our comics, and will be the most powerful character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe." (Captain Marvel: The Official Movie Special, 2019).¹³ Although Feige later reversed this statement (Trent, 2020) and said that the Scarlet Witch was the most powerful – a statement made conveniently at the same time as her show production starting – at the time Carol was marketed as not only being able to stand up next to the boys but actually surpass them. The same formula that made Captain America and Iron Man was deployed for Captain Marvel. As the face of the upcoming phases of Marvel films, her unique

¹³ For more on this see Outlaw, 2019

origin mirrored the others. All three had a terrible tragedy or accident that they had to find a way to overcome. In the case of Captain America he had been ripped from his World War II timeline after a heroic sacrifice and had no choice but to learn to live in the modern world that changed without him while retaining his patriotic values and old-fashioned views of justice and what America should be. Iron Man lived large as a rich billionaire playboy with an alcohol problem, PTSD and a near death experience that made him realize he should better utilize his assets to become a hero. Even through his change of heart, an ability to live through the tragedies that come with being a hero and sarcastic quips endeared Tony Stark to viewers as a relatable face. Later, the MCU set him up as the modern but equally damaged foil to Rogers when conflict called. In multiple instances the two are set up as opposing forces that represent different ideas of good. Danvers, an amnesiac for a large part of her film, was exploited as a living weapon by the Kree alien race that wanted to harness her Infinity Stone-based power. Carol's strength is seen through overcoming the challenge of constantly being forced to prove she could succeed at whatever she wanted to despite being told her she couldn't. While Rogers and Stark each had three films respectively by the time Captain Marvel was introduced, she was touted as an essential player in the fifty-nine-character crowd in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) alongside assurance that she would be seen again in a sequel feature film that only has a tentatively scheduled release date.¹⁴

Danvers, Rogers and Stark cut dramatic and beautiful figures on billboards that promise epic battles and confrontations. The only thing that a passerby cannot see from their elevated pedestal is the Black shoulders of their sidekicks that they are standing on

¹⁴ See Hood, 2019

due to their exclusion and lack of acknowledgement. Choosing to give a woman her own film after repeatedly ignoring the MCU's founding Avenger Black Widow outwardly appears to be an act of progressive representation that shows how willing the Marvel Cinematic Universe is to increase diversity, similar to how they skipped over existing Black characters and went straight to the African-led *Black Panther* (2018). If anything, these attempts act as mere band-aids that attempt to cover up other issues that have long been swept under the rug in their studios. Black sidekicks act as the foundation for the diversity-as-token-representation trend and Marvel Cinema started with it in the first of their ongoing film series, *Iron Man* (201-2013). Through this they are able to show Black faces without having to truly allow them to articulate their own thoughts and desires or be treated equally. 2014's *Captain America: the Winter Soldier* continued the trend with the titular hero gaining a Black sidekick and best friend stand-in through the Falcon who can act as a support system and combat partner while his former best-friend serves as a murderous brainwashed amnesiac assassin. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe specifically, Sam's comic origin is not followed. Instead he does seem to be a replacement for Barnes while Rogers works to save the day. Abandoning Wilson's 1969 origins for one more updated and similar to Steve's through shared history of serving the United States allows Marvel to use their films to show a new Sam even if they fail to hit the mark when it came to representation. As stated, *Black Panther* (2018) seemed like an opportunity to show a new kind of dynamic where a Black character is able to function in a role other than sounding board to bounce back what white characters want to hear, but *Captain Marvel* (2019) proved that wrong when her best friend was introduced as a single Black mother who was set up to be nothing more than a morally supportive sidekick in a

way similar to Sam. While Marvel has championed diversity in their television streaming shows such as *Luke Cage* (2016-2017) and *Runaways* (2017-2019) through showing a higher concentration of Black life and Black faces, the failure to be able to prominently represent a Black character next to a white hero in their major motion pictures has led to anti-Black issues in the blockbuster film series. As Ezra Claverie commented, Marvel's Black heroes "likenesses appear prominently in Marvel's advertising, yet here they play secondary, flat roles: sidekicks, allies, or enablers to white protagonists within seemingly 'colorblind' narratives" (162). The three sidekicks from the respective Iron Man, Captain America and Captain Marvel films – James Rupert Rhodes, Samuel Wilson and Maria Rambeau – maintain commonalities through their origin, interactions and importance that show how the representation of Black characters is formulaic and stops them from being their own well-developed individuals as they are instead shown to act as shadows to the leads. This in turn leads to a misrepresentation of people of color as well as instances where white heroes can take the credit all while failing to acknowledge the help that they have had. A restrictive trope, this flaw shows how the Marvel Cinematic Universe is not as inclusive as it may seem due to its inability to move away from racist and limiting stereotypes that act as if Black characters have no purpose to serve because they fight not only for the cause also their 'superior' white heroes. The repression of Black heroes to further the success of white heroes is more than just a micro aggression. It is making a statement that Black characters are not able to complex and compelling on their own unless they have another hero to dominate them. The perpetuation of Black characters as limited sidekicks has limited the opportunities to show representation.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe only represents a fraction of the Marvel brand. With a publication history dating back to October of 1939 with the release of their first comic book *Marvel No.1*, Marvel has had decades to broaden their palette of heroes to match the times. New generations calling for new stories has led to the creation of new original heroes to go alongside original white characters such as the Fantastic Four, Thor and Spider-man. New titles like *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* (2015-Present) made room for new voices through depicting characters such as Lunella Lafayette, the smartest character in Marvel comics who was also a nine-year-old Black girl. Unfortunately, there have also been many instances in the comics where a character of color has been created to fill the shoes of a formerly popular white character. Instead of taking a chance to see if characters of color could be successful on their own with unique origin stories they become updated versions of others. White characters are not treated the same way. All eponymously titled, the formerly deceased *Gwen Stacy* (2020), the mercenary *Gwenpool* (2016) and completely original villain *Star* (2020) debuted and were given solo titles quickly after. In addition to being popular, all are young, white females between the ages of 16-26. Meanwhile, Marvel Comics chose to create new characters of color Sam Alexander/Nova (Latino) and Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel (Pakistani) and base them on pre-existing white heroes legacies. They continued this trend with Riri Williams, the teenaged prodigy of Tony Stark who got into MIT at age 15 and built her own Iron Man suit in her garage (*Invincible Iron Man* Vol. 2 #9). Riri was 2016's take on what a Black female hero would look like, and her origin includes a gang shooting that killed both her best friend and step-father. Instead of creating a new Captain America sidekick in 2014 Marvel made Sam Wilson, the former Falcon, the new Captain America in an attempt to

diversify the brand. Carol's status as Captain Marvel was never diminished by woman of color Kamala Khan's assumption of the Ms. Marvel title because Carol had already moved on from the moniker and was not threatened in her new one. Kamala's existence did not threaten Carol's and the two were able to co-exist. There was no need for Marvel to make Captain Marvel a Black woman because she already was. Monica Rambeau held the alias long before Carol did but gradually faded off the pages. Forced diversification occurs in the cases of Sam Wilson and Riri Williams because instead of new roles being created old and new faces were pigeonholed into already existing titles that readers would feel comfortable with due to their familiarity. In the past this may have worked but as comics have become more and more diverse through other publishers such as Image, Valiant and Dark Horse the inability of Marvel to commit to doing the same has become more obvious. This move by Marvel shows that while some side titles with non-white faces could exist they were unable to create new headlining Black heroes who could have their own independent identities that were not formerly tied to white heroes. This white to Black transition exists as a form of exploitation. Professor of African-American studies Dr. Adilfu Nama pointed out that in certain situations Black superheroes next to white heroes "symbolize struggles over racial integration and the cultural toll that shifting racial dynamics have on accepted notions of America's racial order" (2011). While that is true the symbolism in question will seem idealistic due to how overshadowed the Black sidekick becomes and how that cannot be fully true even when the Black character is the 'hero' themselves until change is made. White to Black titles such as *Captain America* (2016-2017) and *Ironheart* (2018-2019) ensure that the ghosts of white heroes still loom over their Black successors and therefore regulate them to the sidekick role by always

keeping their names present as a marker of comparison. The name Captain America will bring to mind Steve Rogers due to his decades in print, not Sam Wilson. People know and love Tony Stark as their Iron Man, which sets Riri Williams back before she even has a chance to start out on her own journey. The regression of Monica Rambeau from being the original female Captain Marvel before she was sidelined and eventually turned into Spectrum represents the idea that even an original hero can be turned into a sidekick.

These racist aggressions should not be the norm. Marvel found huge success in Miles Morales, the Spider-man of Earth-1610 who was published as the Ultimate Spider-man as a headlining hero. Black and Puerto Rican, Miles was inspired by actor Donald Glover after fans petitioned to have him become the next Peter Parker (Polo, 2018) and events such as the United States electing President Barack Obama. A kid from Brooklyn who was bitten by a radioactive spider and given powers, Miles took over the Spider-man mantle following the death of his reality's Peter Parker and is now a major player in comics, games and film. Sony's Oscar winning animated film *Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) put Miles on the big screen as the main character but the film was not released in association with the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) success highlighted hip-hop, rap, Latinx culture and what it would look like if the characters were of different realities and ethnicities. More diverse characters like those of *Into the Spider-Verse* were seen in the Marvel Comic crossovers *Spider-Verse* (2014-2015) and *Spider-Geddon* (2019) respectively. Having popular shows like the ongoing children's franchise *Marvel Rising* (2018-Present) that center on diversity as well as other programs that highlight lesser-known characters, Marvel Animation has seen more diversity than the film counterparts. Due to the smashing success of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) the MCU

films are gathering more revenue than their animated counterparts. Economic basic racism is part of a system that capitalizes on Black labor without distributing the wealth. Black characters can toil endlessly in the films but will never reach the same level of attention or respect. Marvel's animated shows are popular enough to keep producing them but they do not make the same kind of statements that the major films or comics do. Sandwiched between two racist modes of production, Marvel leaves its animated features without the widespread success that their other industries benefit from.

With the Marvel Cinematic Universe fully functioning in the world of sidekicks and the comics creating the façade of new independent heroes they both are limited in representation due to anti-black racism that will forever be bred from relegating the marginalized to sidekicks. Dynamics surrounding central characters Captain America, Iron Man and Captain Marvel best represent how their interactions with Blackness in the films and comics shape a space that does not allow Blackness to flourish or succeed. A diverse cast of characters that only hold surface-level representations is one that is easily riddled with anti-Black racism that turns the Black characters into living shadows who are forever static and marginalized. Standing on the sidelines prohibits these characters from becoming fully actualized. Instead, they have to be two-dimensional reflections of their white counterparts. Anti-Black mindsets persist in the printing origin where the reimagining of the starring trio as Black still sees them as comparisons or reflections. This look at the sidekicks of the Marvel comics and movies highlights how anti-Black racism continues to maintain prominence under the hierarchal structure that prohibits Black from being able to take center stage and hold attention without having any kind of white influence. Choosing to take characters that have histories with racial implications

and the possibility for deeper conversations about race and culture but frame them within a white setting creates a lack within the Marvel Universe. This absence limits the potential for diversity as well as an honest look at the real world social issues that comics discuss within their tales of gods, monsters and men.

CHAPTER ONE: MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Attempting to define a superhero is not new. Books like the aptly titled *What is a Superhero?* by Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter M. Coogan have been written on the matter without any real consensus being made. Mythological stories of heroes and monsters act as the roots of superhero stories and the folklore and history that they become. Definitions place superheroes as a central component to the understanding of culture and the future, a “useful way of discussing [...] American identity, changing conceptions of race and gender, individualism [...] and so many other central cultural concerns” (Rosenberg and Coogan). That says what a superhero is supposed to do but says very little about what a superhero should look like. A comic book panel of white faces will only ever be able to tell a story from a place of white privilege. Privilege is difficult for people who are born into it to see and/or acknowledge due to the fact that it can be described as a right and people sometimes assume that rights are universal.¹⁵ Those who are born white and privileged lack the experience and understanding needed to encapsulate the nuances of being Black or disadvantaged. The stories they would tell would not be authentic, as they would be limited by their specific worldview. Therefore, if a superhero is meant to help the reader understand their place in society they will only ever be able to reach a very exclusive group that has the privilege of being acknowledged. A variety of archetypes and tropes exist that can encompass the superhero. These compel the audience because they represent suffering, loss, grief and anger. Through taking emotion and turning it into power the superhero harnesses an ability that the average human cannot. Although the audience member may not

¹⁵ Kendall, 2012

experience the anguish that Spider-man does when his uncle is mugged and murdered as a result of the hero's inaction, loss and the overwhelming burden of responsibility is a more universal feeling. A superhero lives out the dreams that the audience cannot actualize for their self and that connecting rollercoaster of emotions plays out in fantastical conversations with one another that help to open the door for self-understanding. The unconscious positioning that one may take alongside their self-understanding opens the door to discussions of the real world. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, however, is unfortunately home to a very white version of that understanding that is wrapped in privilege and racist aggressions. Black characters feel loss. They feel pain. They are capable of expressing the same and more as white heroes do, but often times they are unable to express themselves through limited screen time and development. It is because of this that Marvel ascribes a very specific name for the majority of Black heroes who try to exist in white spheres: sidekick.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe, (MCU), has positioned itself as a white dominated one where heroes of color are allowed to exist pending their agreeance to behave within certain limits and statutes. Black is not truly allowed to be Black if one wants to succeed. Instead, one must find 'less Black' ways of existence to pass in white society, such as code switching. This idea is supported by the fact that all representations of Blackness follow the unspoken agreement that a Black hero cannot take any attention away from their white hero and their origin story must also be less intriguing and compelling. The MCU is deftly able to maintain this norm by erasing most traces of an origin story for the sidekicks in the first place. Although it can be said that the same may happen to a white sidekick like Bucky Barnes, the white sidekick is given more agency

and development to help counteract that fact. Despite the Black characters having lives outside of being the back up for their white counterparts, they are denied the opportunity to be seen fully as heroes due to how untethered they are in the way that they are presented. The Black sidekick in the MCU lacks a solid foundation that they could be developed off of. Instead of being grounded with a backstory they float in the peripheral. A hero who undergoes a cycle of loss and gain has the ability to pull an audience in and give them something to root for. Without having access to that spectrum the Black sidekick is reduced to a hero archetype of a hero. Kenneth Ghee lays out four themes for how this can be represented: the reluctant or “circumstantial” hero, the action hero, the superhero and the dutiful ‘role hero’ (Ghee, 2013).¹⁶ Sidekicks James Rhodes, Sam Wilson and Maria Rambeau fall into all three categories in one way or another. Their similarities outweigh their differences and their individuality is low. The extent of what is told about each sidekick is as limited as they are.

Allotments of ‘inclusion’ allow the Black sidekicks to enter white-centric spaces while they are simultaneously subjected to anti-Black racism and Anti-Blackness. Anti-Blackness, as defined in afropessimism theory, is the afterlife of chattel slavery. Although slavery itself was abolished in its most gross form, the construct still lives on in a multitude of forms such as aggressive policing and the pathologizing of both culture and black decisions. In essence, it can be said that:

Slavery is one of the most extreme forms of relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total

¹⁶ See *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (2013)

powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave... slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons (Patterson, 1982).

Slavery worked to shape relations between people of color and those who have an automatic dominance by being white. This structure created a power hierarchy that put those who were Black on the bottom of the social status structure. While some mobility is possible part of the foundation of slavery and its social death is total powerlessness that impedes progress. Bound up in slavery is the idea of social death, or the condition in which a group of people is no longer considered human (Brown, 2009). This can also pertain to how others retell and explain narratives that they may identify with all the while negating the voice the experience belongs to (Hartman, 1997) and all the Marvel Universe really is composed of is the retelling of stories from the same white-centric voice. In the case of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the sidekicks also are blocked from being considered heroes. It is the afterlife of slavery that requires theorization to bring it into modern times. The Black sidekicks find themselves not shackled by chains but instead by the responsibility to fulfill their role as the dutiful hero who serves the greater good while being treated as less than. They are outwardly treated as if they are the same as the other with a fundamental component is missing. Without agency, authority and identity a piece of the sidekicks remain missing. Their Blackness and what that means for who they are, and their history is sacrificed so that their structural position as Black can be ignored and they can fill the gap that is left for them in the white world.

Give Me Back My Rhodey: James Rupert Rhodes

James Rupert Rhodes introduced in *Iron Man* (2008) as the first of the sidekicks. Better known as Rhodey, he went to M.I.T. with Tony Stark and was awarded the title of Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force. The only significant relationship of any depth that Rhodey is shown having is with Tony. He has no romantic relationships that are ever discussed and most of the people he interacts with he knows because of Tony or his work. Like the other Black sidekicks, Rhodes serves dutifully to his hero friend as well as his country. The only times that Rhodey is shown serving in action though is during his rescue of Tony in *Iron Man* (2008) and later when he is seen as the Air Force liaison to Stark Industries. All other services performed by Rhodey occur in a suit he partially stole from Tony. This first dilemma presented by Rhodes is expanded upon in *Iron Man 2* (2010) when Rhodey finally suits up to become first the Iron Patriot and then War Machine. The franchise's second film sees Tony as an alcoholic mess who is out of control and endangering people with his reckless and careless nature. Although the MCU rarely switches out actors to play the same role, one of the most publicized cases occurred between the first and second *Iron Man* films when Don Cheadle was called in to replace the lighter skinned Terrance Howard. This was reported not to be a racial move but because of rumors that Howard was being paid more than Iron Man's own actor Robert Downey Jr. and reports that he was difficult to work with. Black faces are not interchangeable, yet Marvel seamlessly switched one Black actor out with another.¹⁷ Films may choose to replace actors, but the Marvel Cinematic Universe has for the majority retained their initial castings. The role of Howard Stark, Tony's father, has

¹⁷ See Dumaraog, 2019

passed hands a few times but the casting has been reflecting of the characters age and when he was being depicted. Actors replacing actors to show time difference has been seen in the X-Men film franchise, but the majority of casting switches or duplicates for Marvel has been with actors of color in the same time period. Gemma Chan first placed Minn-erva in *Captain America* (2019) before being casting in *Eternals* (2021). Black actress Alfie Woodward had a small part in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) before playing a main antagonist on *Luke Cage* (2016-2018). Her co-star Mahershala Ali was cast as the titular character Blade in a film that is currently in pre-production. The trend to cast actors from their canon shows like *Luke Cage* (2016-2018) in other roles in the films was not as prominent as Cheadle's turn in the major motion picture franchise.

Cheadle was then the one who got to show what Rhodey was like in the War Machine armor after the character stole the suit from Tony in an attempt to stop him from hurting anyone during a self-destructive episode at a party. While Tony shoots glasses out of the air over the drunken crowd, Rhodes' face is filled with concern and anger before he slips away. "I'm only gonna say this once," his voice rings out over the crowd. "Get out" (*Iron Man 2*, 2010). As the camera cuts to his face the partygoers scramble away and the faceplate slides down to hide Rhodey's rage. "You don't deserve to wear the suit." Rhodey says with conviction. Stark's laugh and request to the DJ to play a 'phat beat' to beat his friend up to shows how differently they view the severity of the situation.

Dressed in his bright red and gold armor, Tony is far more eye-catching than the gray suit that Rhodey wears as 'Another One Bites the Dust' plays in the background. As the two smash through the walls of the house and disrupt the party Tony's frequent use of the armor gives him an advantage over Rhodey, who still manages to hold his own. Despite

Rhodey trying to deescalate the situation and tell his friend that they do not have to do this, Tony attempts to challenge him with statements like “Do you think you have what it takes to wear that suit?” and “If you want to be the War Machine take your shot!” (Iron Man 2, 2010). Although his intentions are to stop Tony from harming himself or others the fact that the suit was technically stole is mentioned and emphasized instead of the good he was trying to do. A lifetime serviceman with a strong sense of duty, Rhodey is clearly the better choice to wear the dangerous equipment but Tony’s role as the suits creator trumps that even if his behavior is destructive and unfitting of the suit. Professor of African-American Studies Dr. Jared Sexton positions the world as having “twin axioms of white superiority and Black inferiority, of white existence and Black non-existence” (Sexton, 2012). In many ways Rhodey acts as the backbone for Tony’s existence. Sure, Stark has his leading lady in Gwyneth Paltrow’s Pepper Potts, but while Pepper can threaten to leave Tony if he does not change his ways it will inevitably be Rhodey who has to clean up the mess when his friend fails to get his act together. Tony is able to exist on the level that he does because Rhodey is there to hold the slack or play damage control. After taking his suit back to the government Rhodey is able to become the government liaison to Stark Industries so that Tony can continue to be Iron Man independently while still communicating with the government for accountability. In *Iron Man 3* (2013) it is Rhodey who saves the president, but when he is seen again in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) his success is used as a throwaway joke that Stark and his teammate Thor do not find funny. The only laughs he got later were from a group of white civilian patrons who lacked the credibility of the heroes who lived in the battlefield. With his only other appearance in the film his attempts to try and fail to help

Tony lift Thor's hammer, Rhodey is ultimately left out of the rest of the film and the final battle. Despite the repeated aid he had given his friend and the times he had tried to save his life; Rhodey is repeatedly ignored while Tony is praised. Although Iron Man may have done more overall than War Machine he also has endangered far more lives due to the fact that most of his adversaries were people he or his family had wronged over the years. To acknowledge the fact that the capitalist system is built on the erasure of Black labor means to acknowledge that the same occurs in superhero films. The only repayment Rhodey will get for his work to support his friend is a silent acknowledgement despite the high price of his sacrifices. In addition to not being acknowledged James Rhodes is also not heard. In *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), Rhodey sides with Tony and agrees that heroes should be limited legally on an international level while Sam Wilson sides with Steve Rogers in opposition of the Accords. While Rhodey argues why he believes that the Accords are the right thing to do, he in some ways echoes the sentiments of Tony through different words that convey the same ideas. Rhodey uses his military background as reasoning for signing the Accords, relating his dangerous combat missions to the law because although hard making the right decision and doing the right thing is worth it. The films end sees Rhodey in the same physical space as Tony, which leads to his objectification as something that has sided with Tony and therefore belongs to him. Even though *Iron Man 2* (2010) and *Iron Man 3* (2013) also show Rhodey briefly butting heads with Tony the two always find their way back to one another and the same goal.

In some instances the losses that the sidekick face are tied into their close proximity to violence that each shares. All three at one point believe that they have lost their hero or best friend. James Rhodes is no exception to this and many other forms of

loss. In the first *Iron Man* (2008) he is led to believe that Tony Stark is dead after he is kidnapped and gets back a different version of his friend; a new man that it ultimately takes a few films to figure out. The emotional loss Rhodey experiences and the loss of agency that every Black sidekick experiences come with an additional physical one.

During the hero on hero Airport Battle in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) the synthezoid Vision decides to make a dangerous shot at Sam Wilson but is distracted by his white human love interest and misfires. The film never says how detrimental the blast would have been to Sam, whose only protection consists of metal wings and regular clothing. Instead it shows how severe the damage is for the attacks unwitting victim. If it broke through the War Machine armor and severely wounded the man inside then it would have killed Sam due to him being far more exposed. Caught in the crosshairs, the wrong Black man was hit and James Rhodes was set spiraling to the ground where Tony clutched his prone form. The situation itself is double sided. The Vision is apologetic for hitting Rhodey because they were on the same side but not for attempting to hit and possibly kill Sam. Despite not being the one who fired the shot Sam still tried to approach Tony and apologize for not getting hit instead of Rhodey but is blasted back by Iron Man's repulsor beam. Violence against one Black body was traded for another and the one who was the original target who could have been broken on the ground was blamed instead of the person at fault. It is later revealed that Rhodey has not died but instead has "shattered L4 through S1" with "extreme laceration to the spinal cord" that resulted in paralysis. Rhodey lays prone on the field while Tony clutches him in obvious anguish. His next shot is a white backdrop that makes the darkness of Rhodey's skin stand out even more. He is frightened and looking around as an MRI machine sucks him in. Unable

to move, Rhodey is the only spot of color and has to accept the whiteness if he wants answers and aid. (*Captain America: Civil War*, 2016). The stark contrast and Rhodey's unease play off of one another by showing the discomfort of Blackness being forced to enter a white sphere in order to find help they cannot on their own. With Sam blamed and forgotten attention could be turned not to Rhodey's injury but Tony's pain and guilt over it. Tony had been the one to start the war and even though Rhodey had agreed without coercion to fight with him Tony was the one who got to be upset over what happened. Rhodey was again forced to assuage his friends stress and be the collected straight man he had always been even though he was the one with his life literally shattered. Rhodey's lack of a response comes from the fact that within the films his body is not his own and he is in actuality a possession of Tony's. Earlier in the fight Tony quipped "give me back my Rhodey," positioning Rhodey as his object. Since he had possession the injury of the object worked to impact not the unfeeling object but the owner instead. Determined to fix his possession and ease his guilt Tony creates leg braces that allows Rhodey to walk again as long as he wears them. By the end of the film Rhodey is sweating and in mild physical discomfort but upright and training on his braces while making Stark smile with some jokes. In his next appearance in 2018's *Avengers: Infinity War* Rhodey is completely competent on his new legs after two years and the fact that he was injured is apparently forgotten. The ability to brush aside such a traumatic experience exists because the injury was not the focus. Tony's story uses Rhodey's injury as an opportunity for Stark to become a white savior who is able to provide literal necessities such as the ability to walk back to his Black disabled friend. Instead of being a turning point for Rhodey it is one for Tony as he is the one who is shown processing it. The only real

comment from Rhodes about his condition occurs in 2019's *Avengers: Endgame* when the blue alien Nebula is sadly reflective of the fact that her evil genocidal father has mutated and mutilated her into a being that is part machine. The atrocities committed against Nebula are discussed in other Marvel films, but after watching her arm burn down to only its metal structure Rhodey makes a solemn remark about how he also did not choose his condition but they both had to work with what they had. This touching moment of bonding shows how a Black man with a disability was on the same level as years of torture and disfiguration. Even if he wasn't discussing how he felt about his injury there was apparently something monstrous about him as a result. The paralyzing of James Rhodes was not so that he could have a redemptive arc that showed his struggle with his new disability and the struggle of still being a hero. Instead it provided more reason for Iron Man to fight Captain America before being pushed aside as a plot device that served to keep the Black character in their place while elevating the white character. His loss became the gain for the story. African-American literary and history theorist Saidiya Hartman has theorized that white people cannot imagine or handle the pain of an African-American so they have to come up with the false belief that Black people cannot feel pain. This pain can be physical or emotional and while the loss may be shown it is never explained or explored.¹⁸ The physical one that takes his legs and his personhood from him eclipses Rhodey's emotional losses. Even though his military life is the most prominent out of many other MCU characters due to the continuation of his service as the titled Lieutenant Colonel after being paralyzed his career disappears and is never

¹⁸ Hartman, 1997

revisited in any capacity. Rhodey is effectively cut off from his pain, as it is not his to feel and does not fit within the small box of story he is allotted.

I Do What He Does: Sam Wilson

Six years after Rhodey's first appearance Sam Wilson made his in 2014's *The Winter Soldier*. While Rhodey was not very involved in the action in his first appearance, Sam finds himself pulled in almost instantly. He is not Steve's friend at first but someone who can aid him. Not taking the time to thank the Black sidekicks for the work that they do diminishes their sacrifices through a lack of recognition. A white sidekick like Bucky Barnes will also have the opportunity to work on their own agenda, like how Barnes is on the run between *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Sidekicks like Sam, however, are not acting on their own accord. Barnes does not need to thank himself for this work but a Black sidekick who works for someone else has a clearer disparity between what they are doing, who they are doing it for and what acknowledgment they should receive in the completion of their objection. Without the aid and logistical resources and abilities of their sidekicks, saving the day would be a lot harder for the main characters. There is no gratuitous applause for the side characters though, no proud shots that show how successful they are. The sidekicks instead fade into the peripheral with no loose ends to continue on in the next story. While some minor plot point may still remain on the table these function more as filler to allow Black sidekicks to feature in the next film. Their existence seems to be limited to supporting the white characters, inadvertently leading to their own non-existence where their work is undervalued and underappreciated. This became the case when Sam Wilson became the

second of the MCU's Black sidekicks. A brief glance at a social life is given to Sam when he is first introduced in 2014's *Captain America: the Winter Soldier*. Running a veteran support group in Washington D.C., Sam invites Steve Rogers to attend after a chance meeting. It is not until later that the audience learns he left his best friend and partner while serving in the Air Force, which is the only living relation who is ever discussed. Because of that Sam is able to drop everything and follow Steve without question due to the fact that there is no one in his life holding him back or any responsibilities he has to adhere to that would outrank the call to run headlong into danger with Captain America. A mission gone wrong robs Sam of his white flight partner, Riley, and the audience has to assume that it is connected to why Sam has gone into retirement. The lack of depth that occurs in each origin allows the sidekick to have one fact known about them without them taking away from the tragedy of their partners. Sam never gets Riley back but finds a replacement in Steve instead. Sam and Steve's meeting shows that Steve exists on a physical and genetic level above Sam. Dark purples and pinks of the sunrise back drop the first shot shown of Sam Wilson. He is shadowed as he runs past the water, a faceless form that could have been an extra until Steve Rogers sprints past him with a quick "on your left" (*Captain America: the Winter Soldier*, 2014). It is not until the scene gets lighter that Sam speaks in response to Steve's comment. Finally, when the sun comes up and the scene fully lightens Sam is shown from the front and his face is revealed. Once he has officially left the shadows and dark and entered a whiter toned frame he is allowed to begin to start functioning. It is outwardly obvious that the superhuman-serum enhanced Steve would be faster than a civilian like Sam but the same type of comment is never made to the Russian spy-turned-good-guy-bombshell

Natasha Romanoff who also aids Steve in the film. Sam's inability to keep up instead becomes a repeated joke.

After the run that will change Sam's life he takes the time to cool off and invites Steve to the PTSD support group. Steve does end up attending but there is no discussion around Sam's loss or trauma. Brief hints are made that it is due to the loss of Riley that Sam quit serving and has now started the group but the thought never fully develops and instead something poignant is turned into a wasted opportunity to delve further into Sam's mind and flesh him out further. Although he has retired from his specialized program due to what one can assume is trauma and PTSD, Sam hops right back into the saddle at the request of Steve. Almost exclusively after that is he shown as the Falcon with his high-tech wings in what is a complete negation of what appeared to be Sam's healing. How far he was in the process of grieving is up for the audience to interpret on their own but it can be assumed it was decently far along due to his composure and its lack of discussion. If any of his PTSD was triggered after fighting in more battles with Captain America or getting caged later on in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) there is no mention or acknowledgement of it. Tony's struggle with the disease filled not only his solo movie but also part of the second *Avengers*, showing how serious it can be. Historically there has been a stigma around the mental health of a Black man (Baldwin, 1984) and their ability to expression emotion and what is perceived as "weakness". As a white man Tony is given a comfortable space where he can lash out and experience the full extent of his pain as he battles the illness. He may be looked down upon for being detrimental to his health but there is a general understanding that he is dealing with intense pain and a condition out of his control. Sam's mental illness exists on paper only

which leads to a loss created by the loss he originally experienced. The false assumption that a Black person cannot feel pain prohibits them from ever being able to grow from it. That privilege is exclusively indexed to their white counterparts. The hints at the trauma that Black sidekicks have been subjected to shows that there is clearly violence being enacted against them, but the refusal to explore or fully acknowledge it positions them as being unworthy of development or not worth the time in what is just another form of anti-Black racism. Sam should be equally entitled to the same space but it is not. Instead Sam repeatedly hangs to the side of Steve and waits for his command. Sam's existing trauma has to become nonexistent so that the trauma his new life creates can be shown but not overwhelm him. Both new and recently acquired trauma therefore has to be as non-existent as possible so that they do not become too big of a deal. His past trauma is as non-existent as the trauma that could be created by his life as a superhero. Sam Wilson coasts by without any acknowledgement of his loss; unable to express whatever he's feeling to the world around him.

Sam's shining moment is the side mission of fighting the modern-day Nazi Brock Rumlow while Captain America chases the Winter Soldier. He is absent in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and is the first to turn to ash in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) when the heroes fail to stop intergalactic threat Thanos. By relegating the Black heroes to the side, these characters are marginalized in a way that allows them to act in tandem with the hero while allowing their white counterpart to remain the center of attention. The Marvel movies need Black sidekicks because they are more disposable than white ones and can take more abuse with less screen time and repercussions. Their lack of backstory creates a less compelling investment than a white character would have and so they are able to do

the less desirable jobs and experience more bodily harm without upsetting the audience as much. Bucky Barnes with his tragic history remains a central plot point despite his partial role as Captain America's original sidekick. The closest Stark ever comes to a white sidekick is the wide eyed Peter Parker/Spider-man who is a hero in his own right and can stand on that fact even when he's the newbie protégé of Iron Man, later receiving two films in 2017 and 2019 respectively. Sam Wilson lacks the origin and emotional investment that Parker and Barnes get, even when they briefly play the sidekick role. They are given more room to grow while Sam remains stunted.

In the aforementioned *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) the two sides are that of Iron Man and Captain America. While War Machine has his legitimate reasons to side with his friend, Sam gets far less actual reasoning behind why he sides with Steve. In *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014) Sam jokingly states, "Don't look at me. I do what he does, just slower" in a direct reference to his first meeting with Steve when he was lapped repeatedly on a morning run. Although it is posed as a physical joke it also relates to their relationship. It becomes a way of explaining that Sam will go along with what Steve wants, whether it is return to a lifestyle he had given up or the decision to become an international war criminal. He joins Captain America without hesitation despite the high consequences. If one is to believe that whiteness is referential and bases itself on the refutation of Blackness (Sexton, 2012), then the white heroes are standing on the shoulders of their Black sidekicks without any acknowledgement to the significance of their efforts. This refutation is built on the idea that to be white is to not be Black, or that white would have no clout if it did not have a Black to compare itself to. While social status positions itself on a sliding scale, one who is white will always be able to

claim that they are, at the very least, not Black. This elevates being “white” to a status that can be desired and appreciated as it is a position that always will be at least one step up from the bottom no matter where a white person falls down the pyramid. At the end of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), Captain America’s “team” of heroes who have opposed a piece of government legislation that they don’t like are arrested while their leader and his war criminal best friend run away to Siberia for the final confrontation. Among those who are stuck with taking the fall is Sam, imprisoned in an underground facility. A Black man behind bars is not an uncommon image, nor is the one of him waiting for a white man to liberate him, just as Sam does as he coyly smiles at the approaching shadowed figure of Steve. Through his ability to escape at the expense of others like Sam, Captain America is able to avoid the strait jackets and collars of the prison. While Captain America is a war criminal, he is still not Sam. Steve may now be an international fugitive but he does not also have to sit behind bars and wait for his white savior to free him. The other detained members of Captain America’s team included a former convict and a refugee, but both Scott Lang and Wanda Maximoff are white. That being said they still find themselves at a place of privilege even if they are locked away. Although they also took the fall for Captain America they lack the relationship that Sam and Steve do. The two are posited as best friends in both *The Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The plot of the latter film revolves both not only the government creating a piece of legislation called the Sokovian Accords that would monitor hero activity but also Roger’s journey to reclaim his previous best friend, the brainwashed James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes. Sam fills the role that Bucky once had as the other half to the passionate and impulsive Steve who is

willing to die for what is right. Sam helps Steve and is dragged into action alongside him. When the rubber hits the road he is the one who searches for Bucky with Steve and instantly disagrees with the Accords while the others gradually join the team after internal deliberations. A loyal best friend who barely misses a nearly fatal hit during the hero versus hero fight scene, Sam's sacrifice for his friend could play out as a show of loyalty. In reality it shows how easily Sam is replaced by Bucky once he and Captain America reunite. Steve and Bucky's choice to run and try to clear Bucky's good name effectively tarnishes Sam's and leaves him trapped. Bucky was brainwashed and used by Nazi's but had a friend who would fight a war to save him. He wasn't Sam, left behind and put in second place.

This placement of a Black man behind bars for the betterment of a white one is one that should carry more weight but is instead glossed over. The scene has room for there to be discussion about private prisons and how they function as an indexing of social death but instead it is glossed over and not acknowledged as having racial implications. When the champion of the other side and Steve's one-time opponent Tony Stark enters the Raft to talk to the captured heroes, he is met with anger from both the imprisoned Hawkeye and Ant-Man. Clint Barton (Hawkeye) debates with Stark on if their actions were right even though Tony remains firm that they were adults and deserved to be punished for breaking the law. As Stark approaches Sam it becomes clear that the imprisoned hero appears to be in the worst physical shape with intense bruising on his face. When Tony asks where Steve is, Sam tells him he'll have to beat it out of him. This Black man in jail defending his white friend at the extent of his health shows how secondary Sam is viewed in comparison to Steve. If we are to believe that being

human in the Western world is to be white, male and masculine (Sexton, 2012) like Steve then Sam falls one short and is instead the fallback in every way. His own health was already jeopardized when he followed Steve into war, and now behind bars he again puts his body to defend Steve as if his captivity is not enough. Stark does not take the bait and instead reasons with Sam, getting him to reveal where Rogers has gone. Out of the three conversations that Tony has in the jail one defends their actions, one references advice from an old friend and Sam is forced to discuss not himself or how is coping with being incarcerated but his white friend. Sam's internment dehumanizes him first by locking him up and secondly by stripping away some of his identity through putting him in a jumpsuit in a cell and attributing who is he and how he is feeling into a way to turn the conversation back to Steve. Sam's inability to voice his own reasoning makes it seem as if he has no voice of his own and instead must go with Steve's. Losing his voice is a part of Sam losing his identity, something that works to turn him into the faceless masses you would find in a prison. To be imprisoned and to be Black is to not be able to speak your own narrative (Hartman, 1997) and Sam is far from the exception to that rule. All four of the prisoners sit behind bars. Sam Wilson waits with a smile because he knows his friend will come to redeem him. Over the two years between *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) it is shown that Sam has been busted out of prison and has been on the run with Steve and Black Widow. All this is shown without any insight into how he feels about this or why he has done it outside of the fact that it was what his friend was doing. He makes his appearance to help Steve and Natasha save Wanda Maximoff and the Vision. Dings and dents on his wings are the only indicators that things may have been rough. Again Sam is shown following Steve blindly without

any cues as to why he is doing so. This limitation on the sidekick's emotion and backstory forces them to reach the same conclusion as the white heroes and prevents them from expressing complex thoughts. When they do manage to move into that territory like Rhodey does on occasion it comes off as forced as their interests are ultimately aligned to their counterparts before they open their mouth. The act of white characters speaking over the non-white characters is a form of silencing and the automatic and formulated responses that are often heard represents loss of agency. The white hero taking the voice of the Black sidekick subjects them to a voice and passive agent in a space where anti-blackness is able to speak louder than they can.

Come Here Girl, I Got You: Maria Rambeau

Carol Danvers, Marvel's first titular female superhero film, debuted not only the white powerhouse Captain Marvel but also her black sidekick, Maria Rambeau. Carol arguably had two sidekicks – both of color – but Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury had first appeared in the post-credit scene of *Iron Man* (2008) and had always existed in the role of supporting character.¹⁹ Because Fury had a multi-film history it is Maria who became positioned as the true sidekick with no outside history to fall back on. Racial inequality within film is something that has, according to Matthew W. Hughey (2014), been minimized due to the idea that society is also moving away from racism as a whole. He claims that by doing this, the dominant majority is able to ignore racial inequality and downgrade the effects that it has because it is “no longer a central factor in social life” (169). This, of course, is not true. Racial inequality is still incredibly prevalent in film as

¹⁹ Note: Fury is, interestingly enough, race-bent from his white comic appearance. See Bryant (2019) for more on comic book movies and race bending.

it has been previously discussed and that inequality extends as far as to thoughts and free will. Though they may have moments of hesitation or differing opinions, the three sidekicks ultimately side with the hero on all big issues as mentioned before. *Captain Marvel* (2019) begins the film with Carol Danvers an amnesiac who has been living in space with the Kree alien race under the false assumption that she is one of them. Oblivious to the fact that she is human and left a life back on Earth, Carol has no idea who she has left behind. Having a structure that favors one group over the other creates an undeniable power dynamic. A hierarchy is put in place to ensure that dynamic and once it is cemented all justification for why it was established comes from a false place of privilege. Those at the top dictate how those who are under them can be used, stealing their agency and limiting their performance in a way that takes away from their freedom (Hartman, 1997). Maria is never really shown as having much of that power at all even though her friend is cosmically charged. The first time Maria is shown in the present she has a touching reunion with her long-thought dead other half, Carol. Everyone she interacts with, with the exception of her child, is white or an alien. All we know of Maria is what is tied up into Carol as a way of adding more tragedy to Danver's backstory as Carol lost a friend and pseudo-niece when she was in an accident that gave her powers. Maria's past is only hinted at when she and Carol Danvers discuss how the latter helped support her in her Air Force career. There is never any mention of who fathered her child, Monica, or what her life was like outside of Carol's positive influence. It is worth noting that both Rambeau and Danvers seemed to be more than competent flyers for the Air Force but it was Danvers who ran a dangerous experiment that led to her becoming Captain Marvel as Maria had her daughter to look out for. Had Maria been the one to fly

that day the possibility for her to become a hero would have existed, but that is never even discussed as an option. Instead it is made to seem obvious that Carol, who should be considered Maria's pilot equal, would be the one to make the sacrifice and ultimately prove herself a hero. Carol continually limits Maria's performance. Her friend is her champion, the one who takes the dangerous missions and her support system. Maria functions only in the role of best friend and tragic backstory component without any real ability to take on a role of her own. When Carol goes back into space Maria joins her after Monica gives her a pep talk. The eleven-year old chides her mother's decision to stay home and away from Carol's dangerous mission, telling her:

You have a chance to fly the coolest mission in the history of missions. And you're going to give it up to sit on the couch and watch *Fresh Prince* with me? I just think you should consider what kind of example you're setting for your daughter (*Captain Marvel*, 2019).

While it seems that Maria was once expected to stay home and watch her daughter it is now expected that she will do the opposite since it is Carol who needs aid. Maria's choice to join her friend may be a noble one but the fact that it was brought to her door and that she was pressured into it in the first place shows how she is objectified; while it may seem that it is of her own free will that she is undergoing the mission there is actually an intricate web of guilt and reasoning behind her decision that make it impossible to say no. Not only is Maria put on the spot but she is also in a position where her own child could be disappointed by her actions and is pressuring her into a decision that Monica may not fully be able to understand. Maria's usefulness only comes when she is called on by

Carol, which prevents the two from being seen as equal. Instead Carol flies high while Maria remains grounded.

The sidekicks find that hard work and agency are not the only things that they receive no recognition for. Maria is no exception in being a Black sidekick shaped by pain with no origin story. The only pain from her past that she is allowed to feel is the one that comes from losing Carol. Depicting Maria as a single mother for reasons that are not made clear allows her more room for Carol to take up in her life. Carol was the one who helped Maria raise Monica before the accident led those who loved her to believe she had died. After losing her best friend, Maria leaves the Air Force despite cinematic plot hints that she is good at her profession. Monica's argument against her mother in the debate over whether Maria should go to space is that she had done dangerous missions in the past. Clearly brave, Maria is depicted as someone who has no one to rely on other than herself. When Carol remarks that her circumstance is "hard" for Maria it leads to the sidekick to launch into a monologue explaining how hard it was to lose her best friend and the only person who not only believed in her but also supported her as a single mother. The second speech that Maria gives is also centered on Carol where she passionately reminds the semi-amnesiac of who she is, declaring that:

You are Carol Danvers. You were the woman on that Black box risking her life to do the right thing. My best friend. Who supported me as a mother and a pilot when no one else did. You were smart, and funny, and a huge pain in the ass. And you were the most powerful person I knew, way before you could shoot fire through your fists (*Captain Marvel*, 2019).

It is only minutes later, however, that Maria's parents are shown when they arrive to watch Monica while her mother goes to space. Maria having others to help with Monica and provide support implies that Carol was not the only person she had or needed. Her saying that she exists only to build up the virtue of Carol and reiterate how good of a person and friend she was in an attempt to develop her humanity further. Repeatedly through instances like this Maria is positioned below Carol in regards to authority and control. To be a single mother is one thing but to have Maria claim that she would not be able to do it without Carol directly after showing she had been raising her daughter alone in her absence highlights the loss of personhood that Maria represents. Maria should have no need to imply that her white friend is more useful for caring for her child than her own Black parents could be. As an independent woman who is intelligent enough to run classified missions for the Air Force and a single mother, it is a disservice to her agency to do so. The role of a Black woman as a mother is an often-analyzed topic by theorists like Black feminist literary scholar Hortense Spillers. A Black woman like Maria Rambeau disrupts gender standards due to the complicated relationship that they have with kinship. In slave situations the Black female body was rebranded as a ground zero matter called "flesh" due to the violence enacted against it. This led to the slave mother being unable to identify with the female gender or claim maternity. Paternity then would have been left to the white slave owner who could not claim the child himself and therefore left the baby unable to be a baby by typical standards (Spillers, 2003). In the case of Maria and Monica there was no white paternal figure to abandon Monica and so a stand-in role was created for Carol. The film codes the two as a queer family with Monica as their daughter, but that is not confirmed and instead left for audiences to fill in

the blanks. This implication is different than other family templates that Marvel sets up but is unfortunately wrapped up in racial implications. Because of that, Carol assumes the white slave owner paternal figure while Maria takes on the role of slave mother. While Maria did claim kinship over Monica, her reliance on Carol disrupts that maternity by fracturing the kinship ties through showing that a Black woman cannot be a mother without white aid. Aid cannot be given from Black relative either as shown by the dismissal of Monica's grandparents. It must come from a white source of strength and inspiration.

Monica is overjoyed at seeing Carol and has hung onto her jacket for years. She supports her mother journeying away with Carol even though it means they may never see each other again. In every scene that the two share together it is obvious that the eleven year old possesses a deep love for her adopted aunt and is willing to make a stand against her mom when she disagrees with what Carol wants. Carol joins Monica on the steps of the family's house before going off on the mission. In the darkness Carol stands out more than Monica and lovingly tells the girl that she needs her help to pick out a new costume. As Carol flips through a variety of suit aesthetics, one lights up in neon colors. For a moment Monica basks in the glow of Carol's light-up suit before they move on (*Captain Marvel*, 2019). Dressing Carol puts Monica in the brief position of servitude. She helps her idol in the film without doing anything to help herself. Alternatively, Carol's aid of Maria is a reason cited as to why Captain Marvel is powerful because no one else would champion a Black female pilot joining the Air Force. Although both were women it was Maria's position as a Black woman that ranked her below Carol. Time and time again Carol is forced by those around her to show that she is strong even though she

is a woman. The audience is able to look at her and that she is a white woman and that gives her grounds to act as a savior. The bloneness of her hair presents the opposite of Monica's dark curls, and Carol's privileged behavior over her sidekick show just as much of a contrast. Losing someone so instrumental would have huge effects on Maria in both her ability to be a mother and a professional, leaving her lost without the more powerful white savior who needed to act as a surrogate parental figure to Maria's Black child to make up for whatever lacks her biological mother would have.

As mentioned before, Carol's only other sidekick is a Black man, Nick Fury, who was transformed from a white male in the comics to a black male in the films. While both of Captain Marvel's sidekicks are Black, Nick is heavily featured in the film and is a relevant character. This plays into the concept that society is based on a scale that positions people on different levels depending on race, gender, sexuality and class. White is situated on top with cisgender males as the highest point. What then follows is various intersectional points of race, gender and sexuality as you move down the line and away from the supposed 'universal right' of privilege.²⁰ Due to his white cisgender male status, Steve Rogers is placed closer to the top than Sam Wilson. Just because Sam is Black, however, does not mean that he possesses an equal status with someone like Maria, who is Black and coded as queer. Black men, although disenfranchised, are able to have more privilege than a Black woman can. Because of this, he is given more to do than Maria as she is situated lower than he, Rhodey or Sam despite the fact that all three are Black. After years of wondering how the eye-patch wearing Fury had lost his eye, fans were finally able to see the mutilation in the prequel film. Although he reacted in pain initially, Fury

²⁰ See Steedman, 2011 for a look into the history of racial hierarchy

quickly blows it off after and moves on as if he did not just get severely maimed (*Captain Marvel*, 2019). Fury provides a familiar tie-in to the Avenger's saga and a cohesiveness between *Captain Marvel* (2019) and the established world, but Maria fades away from existence not to be mentioned in Carol's next big screen appearance. The characters that the audiences are more intimately familiar with work in the foreground while the Black sidekicks handle the dirty work in the background. The film producers do not need to show Carol fighting secondary villain Minn-Erva because they have Maria to do it for him. She's more interesting to watch than a random unnamed character but not enough interesting enough to fully hold the attention of the audience. Maria's participation makes it possible for the film to continuously cut from the main fight to the secondary fight to add to the intensity of the conflict due to its many moving parts. Carol spends a moment fighting the blue skinned alien with an inferiority complex before moving on to the larger conflict while Maria cleans up Carol's mess. Minn-Erva has a rivalry with Carol that is hinted at during *Captain Marvel* (2019) but it is never actualized into a full one-on-one standoff. Being able to act as Carol's stand-in and fight one of Captain Marvel's fight allows Maria to end her section of the battle as neatly and precisely as possible. Maria's past is hinted at when she and Carol Danvers discuss how the latter helped support her in her Air Force career. There is never any mention of who fathered her child, Monica, or what her life was like outside of Carol's positive influence.

Soldiers At War: Black Sidekicks as Soldiers

As it has been mentioned, each of the three sidekicks has a history of military service that makes up part of their personalities. One root of the shared proximity to

violence is the history that each has from serving. In superhero films there is a high concentration of death and destruction that is likely to be shown due to the nature of the films, but the Black heroes receive an extra dosage due to their veteran status. War itself is common in superhero films even outside of the scripted villain plot that rises and falls within the film. Film studies scholar Dr. Terence McSweeney notes that the superhero and their films are needed in a world living in the aftermath of 9/11.²¹ Similarly, other scholars such as American Studies scholar Dr. Ramzi Fawaz have written about how comics were also reflections of how the world was affected by the Cold War and World War II.²² Superhero plot lines are responses to terror and in the modern age that manifest as responses to terrorism specifically. According to an essay by Jason Bainbridge in the compilation *Assembling the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, the hero can represent the law or stand in opposition to it if that is actually the more just move, complicating the idea of the soldier and the hero as two entities that cannot merge due to the soldier being duty bound to protect the government (Bainbridge, 2018).²³ Connecting various characters to war then makes sense to the viewer, whether it is former arms dealer Tony Stark or one with actual military credentials. Both Carol and Steve have the rankings of Captain to add to their name to prove their service. Every time their name is called the fact that they served and are heroes is once again brought up. Rogers title of Captain is somewhat of a sham though as he never really served. He enlisted and was denied repeatedly until he went to a boot camp and was selected to become the first super soldier. Ranked as First Private, Rogers received a battlefield promotion but still had never actively served when

²¹ See McSweeney (2018)

²² See Fawaz (2016)

²³ Compiled in *Assembling the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (2018)

he was first called “Captain” during World War II. His title was given to him due to the odd circumstance of his participation in a superhuman experiment and the press tour he participated in afterwards as the handsome living propaganda Captain America, which is something that never occurs within the world of the sidekicks. Carol and Steve were able to take their Captain rankings and have control from the position as well as the ability to experience a full spectrum of emotional and psychological development. The Black characters that worked hard for their rankings are not given the same privilege. All three are listed as serving in the United States Air Force in what appears to be less of a coincidence and more of a rushed fill in the blank backstory. Serving two tours as a pararescue never gave Sam a title. Maria is listed as being a Captain in addition to being a pilot and mechanic but is never referred to as such in the film. Instead it is Carol who is the Captain that people acknowledge. Sam is inactive by the time he first is introduced and Maria has retired to raise her child. Rhodes is made the outlier due to the trajectory of his character going from actively serving to no longer being able to. Regardless of their status, all three sidekicks are more valuable to their heroes due to the skill sets that their Air Force background has given them. Maria is able to fly with Carol; Sam conveniently has prototype wings that he can steal that will allow him to fly for Captain America and Rhodes connections work for Stark’s betterment. Connections to violence appear to make the Black sidekicks be more of use due to their preexisting understanding of the subject. The importance of this defining trait then becomes a characteristic of the Black identity and makes it so that they cannot escape violence. African-American’s were forced into a violent struggle historically and that struggle is able to manifest itself in new forms that do not seem as outwardly harmful. With the genre intrinsically tied to war, it could be

argued that having Black sidekicks linked to this strain of violence is not anything harmful but instead a natural connection. This is not true as they are not as much active agents in the war as they are foot soldiers. Historically, Black soldiers within America were used to fight even when the battles were those of exploitation. Black soldiers acted as disposable foot soldiers who fought when the white numbers began to flag but were not regarded as equal and instead were mistreated as their accomplishments were ignored and opportunities limited (Nalty, 1989). In essence, the Black soldier existed to run the missions the white did not have the time or interest in. They were there in the background to do what was needed all the while considered less than their fellow soldiers. It is no different within the Marvel Cinematic Universe or superhero soldiers. McSweeney writes, “it is possible to discern a great deal about a society from its heroic mythology, those exemplary figures it selects to be a manifestation of its highest values” (7). Those figures are the white heroes who have their titles and work acknowledged and not their Black sidekicks. In this case, what is important to the society of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the reminder that conflict is present and always able to be escalated because some wars never truly end. The heroes that they choose to combat that conflict are able to reflect the high values due to the whiteness and hierarchal place above other heroes, like those who are Black. Again, this structural violence promotes whiteness as the values and morally upright standard that a Black hero cannot live up to as they are locked in not only the violent struggle of war but also anti-Blackness. It is worth noting that the Air Force affiliation of each sidekick means that they are employed by the United States government, a structure that is a part of a nation that claimed to move past Jim Crow and laws that were demeaning to Black people.

Returning to Hartman's *Scenes of Subjugation*, Blackness is a structural position where being Black was inferior to white, and those narratives were not eliminated but "updated" to fit modern settings. One way this was achieved was through the structure of the current government that limited people of color through mass incarcerations and laws slanted against them. Despite the government being a form of anti-Black racism it is also a structure that the Black sidekicks are aligned with as their positionality is ignored while also reinforced. Having the Black sidekicks serve the institutions that hold them down and fight alongside heroes that forsake and overshadow them keeps them at the same level of "grunt" soldier that they would have been historically. Major H.G. Duncan cited a grunt soldier as "a term of affection used to denote that filthy, sweaty, dirt-encrusted, footsore, camouflage-painted, tired, sleepy, beautiful little son of a b*tch who has kept the wolf away from the door for over two hundred years" (Grove, 2018). A grunt soldier is one who is fighting on the battlefield with everything that they have, not the leaders who sit in tents and strategize. Grunts are the ones who, historically, put in the work even if its hard. That is in essence the Black sidekick. They sweat, bleed and labor to save the day time and time again even if they don't get the same level of acknowledgement as those who fight alongside them.

Extended Marvel Cinematic Universe: Black Panthers and Bulletproof Men

It is impossible to have the conversation of race in the MCU now without bringing 2018's *Black Panther* into the discussion. The Black-led film not only became a cultural phenomenon but also won Marvel their first Oscar nomination for best picture. Because *Black Panther* (2018) features a predominately Black cast with the exception of

two characters there is no Black sidekick. Instead, characters like the duty-driven captain of the Dora Milaje royal guard Okoye and the teen genius Princess Shuri all work together without negating the efforts of one another. During the 2018 *Avengers: Infinity War* press tour directors Joe and Anthony Russo ranked Shuri as the smartest MCU character, a statement that is indicative of the world building and influence that *Black Panther* (2018) established even though white scientists like Dr. Bruce Banner ultimately receives more attention in the film series overall.²⁴ While *Black Panther* (2018) did provide a refreshing taste of something new in regards to diversity and culture on screen through its depiction of a wider variety of culture, it also showed that the only time a Black hero can have full representation and agency is when there is no white hero to focus on. Within *Black Panther* (2018) there are complex love interests, supporting roles and antagonists who are able to engage in conversations about the African diaspora, nationalism and culture openly and without restrictions. The characters are able to be both Black and scientific with Wakanda not represented as the muddled generic “African” origin but instead a specific place with governing laws and customs. Despite how impressive the film is it does not transfer into any of the other ones. Instead of being complex and multifaceted the characters of Wakanda receive the same treatment that the Black sidekicks do. The scope of Wakanda and the complexity of its people never manage to cross over into the world at large. King T’Challa is first introduced in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and within his first scene has his father murdered in a violent attack. After that T’Challa takes on a singular side mission of revenge that aligns eventually with Tony Stark’s group. Later he is featured in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018)

²⁴ Lezmi (2019)

and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) respectively but without much dialogue or development. While having a large ensemble cast can do this to characters of all backgrounds, white characters Wanda Maximoff, Natasha Romanoff, Bruce Banner, Thor and Scott Lang all had more development and dialogue in their scenes in the two films. Even with limited time they were able to act as integral components in the overarching story. Wakanda instead becomes a setting in these films and T'Challa is a prop that allows the white Avengers access to resources. Headlines about the *Black Panther* (2018) lauded it as a groundbreaking success and celebration of culture but that celebration is instantly negated when whiteness enters the sphere.²⁵ Only in isolated areas can Blackness be celebrated, which cements Blackness as a position and space. *Black Panther* (2018) isn't the only example of how Marvel is unable to show Blackness in different spheres.²⁶ Black characters Heimdall, Karl Mordo and Valkyrie exist in the MCU as sidekicks and supporting characters. Netflix produced five television shows that were held in the Marvel Cinematic Universe canon. In the critically acclaimed *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), the African-American physical powerhouse Luke Cage acts as a supporting character and love interest to the fair-complexioned Jessica. A part of his plot revolves around how Jessica's actions hurt him and take advantage of him in moves that effectively victimize the "bulletproof" man. Within Netflix's following show, *Luke Cage* (2016-2018), however things are different when Luke is seen as the hero and receives a love interest of his own. Characters like Misty Knight can also be developed within this world. As soon as they leave Luke Cage's Harlem this is all eliminated as Luke and Jessica express pleasure at seeing each other with little regard to their toxic relationship and Misty loses

²⁵ It must be noted that there were also point made against its representation.

²⁶ See Johnson (2018), Wallace (2018), and Williams (2018)

an arm in a violent act in the crossover show *The Defenders* (2017). Hulu's MCU canon streaming *The Runaways* (2017-2019) features the African-American family the Wilders. Unfortunately, the Wilder's are criminals and subvert stereotypes by being presented in a way that implies if a Black character is going to be powerful in a white sphere they have to be seen as evil or wrong.

The closest that Marvel comes to positively representing what it means to be Black and a hero is in the TV show *Cloak and Dagger* (2017-2018) where one of the titular characters is a young Black male who attends an upper-crust prep school. Unfortunately, his older brother had murdered by cops years before despite not being armed. This is an updated take from the Cloak and Dagger comic storyline where Tyrone Johnson is a poor Black kid who gets hooked on drugs.²⁷ The inability to transfer Black characters into white stories puts barriers on where they can appear and to what extent. It stops them from being seen as equal and instead forces them to either exist in isolation or not exist at all. Their marginalization effectively turns them into shadows when the spotlight has the opportunity to shine on a white hero and the only way that they are able to rectify that is by creating their own space. Outside of the formerly isolated Wakanda with their tribal clothing and Afro-centric mind the Black characters seem lost and unsure of their place. The problem is that there *isn't* a place for them. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has created a world where aliens have a home but Black sidekicks can't say the same.

²⁷ Tyrone Johnson's first appearance was in *Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-man* #64 in 1982

CHAPTER TWO: MARVEL COMICS

The Black Panther introduction in a 1966 issue of the *Fantastic Four* made him Marvel's first black superhero and one of the first overall.²⁸ Following after him in 1969 was Sam Wilson as the Falcon, the quintessential Black sidekick created to compliment the poster boy of whiteness, Captain Steven Rogers. Although he was meant to stand up against the Nazi party and fight the villainous Red Skull, Steve's blonde hair and blue eyed appearance looked physically like that which he was fighting. His role of being the counter to Nazi propaganda meant that he was instilled with every idealized American trait, such as bravery, loyalty, courage and a clean cut and vice free style that was reflective of America at the time. Over time other Black characters that starred in their own titles would emerge but the role of the sidekick remained the most steadfast place for them. Even though the trope of the Black sidekick conflicts with spotlighted characters such as Luke Cage or Blade, the Black man and woman in Marvel comics became marginalized time and time again. Their origin stories were changed or forgotten and in some cases they were written out of relevance entirely. Just like in the film world Captain America and Iron Man are regarded from a place of reverence in the comics and Captain Marvel recently joined them. Their presences loom as large as in the films but their relationships with the Black sidekick manifests differently.

After forty-six years of being the sidekick Sam found himself in a new role in 2015's *Captain America* when Steve was aged into an old man. No longer able to hold the shield, Steve christened Sam the all-new Captain America. Although Rhodey

²⁸ Cooper (2018)

remained around Tony as his friend and occasional substitute he was never properly recognized. After Rhodey died tragically in a fight Sam gives his eulogy and reveals that Rhodey had once stepped in and worn Tony's armor without revealing his identity when his friend could not because he was both a good friend and a good soldier.²⁹ A sidekick to his eventual death, Rhodey never managed to move outside of his role. Instead of acknowledging the years of labor he had put in since his first appearance in 1979, Marvel decided to go a more outwardly progressive route and created the original character of Riri Williams. A fifteen-year-old Black girl genius from Chicago with a tragic history, Riri set out to become the new Iron Man by making her own homemade armor. With two incredibly popular characters reestablished with Black faces Marvel seemed to be on track to show that they can promote diversity and inclusivity by removing the Black sidekick from their secondary position and create someone new who could burst onto the scene. Black heroes who are not introduced in tandem with a white hero are also not safe from being treated like a sidekick or second class hero. Known now for her role as Maria Rambeau's daughter in the *Captain Marvel* film, Monica Rambeau actually had a comic origin that began in the *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #16 in 1982. Taking over the mantle of Captain Marvel from the deceased alien Mar-Vell, Monica was Captain Marvel long before Carol Danvers ever was. Over time she was slowly phased away though, turned first into Photon before finally settling under the new alias Spectrum. Monica's fall from one that bore the iconic title of Captain Marvel to a renamed afterthought so that a white woman could replace her proves that no Black hero is safe. Instead they forever run the risk of being replaced and sidelined back into the sidekick-like identity. New roles are the created then for the Black sidekick: one that is able to transition into being a

²⁹ Spencer (2016-2017)

hero and one that sees a hero turn into a sidekick. Through these the Marvel Comic Universe works to counteract the conception that they are being truly progressive and creating a space for Black heroes to have their moment. The diversification in the comics of the white trinity of the Captain Marvel, Iron Man and Captain America films provides room for a side-by-side comparison of the limits of the Black sidekicks in different mediums. The Marvel Comic Universe winding history has given them far more opportunities than the films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe due to the higher amount of content produced on a consistent basis, but the perpetuation of anti-black racism that still remains prevalent permits new conversations centered on race and representation from occurring.

Call Me Captain: Monica Rambeau

Although she is not the first of the three sidekicks to be created, Monica Rambeau's tenure as a hero predates the other two. *Captain Marvel* (2019) made the choice to focus on Maria Rambeau despite the fact that in the comics she only makes ten appearances and functioned only as the worried mother of Monica who was unsure of her daughter's superhero antics.³⁰ Outside of being a wife and mother Maria lacked any substance and was created only to be a supporting piece of filler. The real star of the Rambeau family was Monica, who would eventually find almost every part of her repurposed for others. One of her codenames, Photon, was subtly mentioned in *Captain Marvel* as Maria's Air Force call sign while Carol received parts of her origin story. Pieces of Monica were copied onto her mother, a sign that neither of them can maintain

³⁰ Avengers (1984)

originality. Monica Rambeau in the comics is first introduced as a beautiful woman who catches Peter Parker's eye. When he tries to follow her he finds that she is actually superhuman in nature and her origins are then divulged. A young, passionate and hotheaded member of the New Orleans Harbor Patrol who could not receive acknowledgement for her work and the title of Captain, Monica agrees to help a scientist on a dangerous mission that led to her absorbing a mass amount of light and becoming a superhero (*Amazing Spider-Man Annual #16*).³¹ This origin bares a similarity that cannot be a coincidence to Carol Danver's in her film as she also receives pushback for being female in her career, takes on a dangerous mission and is given powers in what is meant to be a heroic sacrifice.

Monica's life as a young woman of color who has to endure racial pushback gives her story a layer of depth that Carol's lacks. Monica's first outing in New York ends up with her nearly destroying the Avengers due to her out of control powers but instead she is taken in by them and joins their ranks.³² A character that we do not see interact with any other people of color, Monica's acceptance into the Avenger's by the white and literally waspy Janet Van Dyne (aka the Wasp) shows that she is a "good" Black person who is allowed to participate within the white sphere. Monica is intelligent and accomplished. At that point the only thing Black about Monica in her first appearance is her skin. Her ethnicity could easily be swapped out due to the little attention that is paid to her double struggle as both a woman of color or what being a hero would mean for her. Adilfu Nama references an article by Christian Davenport, stating that "if a Black

³¹ See Figure 9

³² *Amazing Spider-man Annual #16* (1982)

superhero is too Black, it makes the character irrelevant to whites, and if the character is not Black enough, it appears to invalidate the rationale for a 'Black' superhero in the first place. In other words, Black superheroes have a very limited audience" (132). Monica at her inception provided a racial representation that people would have wanted to see but her mostly white uniform and team of white heroes that instantly surrounded her kept her safe in the interest of whites. The first shot of her also occurs when a civilian garbed Peter Parker notes her beauty and decides to "Check out this lovely lady! From a discreet distance, of course! Don't want her to think I'm some kind of pervert!" (*The Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #16). Right away her body is made out to be something viewed by the white man and deemed desirable. She is beautiful and exotic and deemed appropriate for the Avengers, but as a non-white hero Monica found herself unable to retain interest despite leading the Avengers and her slide into the role of the marginalized sidekick began. The title of Captain Marvel was first given then to the son of the deceased original Captain Marvel and later to Carol Danvers in 2012 when the hero was finally changed from her Ms. Marvel persona.³³ Even though decades had passed between when Monica gave up the title and Carol took it the latter was far more popular by the time she was upgraded. Monica at that point was Spectrum and bouncing from series to series without one of her own. In *Captain Marvel* #7 Monica confronted Carol about the latter's use of the Captain Marvel title without reaching out to Monica first as it took away some of her authority and agency through forcibly taking a part of her identity.³⁴ The 2014 run of *Mighty Avengers* and 2015's *Ultimate's* once again saw Monica on a team and even leading in a brief capacity but she failed to fully cross back over into the main plot points.

³³ See DeConnick's 2012 *Captain Marvel* run

³⁴ See Figure 10

Now on a team there were moments that hinted at the power Monica originally had that almost bested the Avengers but her contribution to the Captain Marvel legacy were ultimately ignored. Carol's ability to slide into the role and immediately eclipse all that Monica did proved that her work was both unrecognized and unappreciated as she was relegated to a side series that combined popular characters with obscure ones. The act of turning Monica into a child who loved Carol and looked up to her is loaded with anti-Black racism. A proud and impassioned woman who knew what she wanted Monica was effectively changed into a cute child sidekick in the movies. Instead of the trailblazing woman of color that was progressive in the 1980's Monica Rambeau now has her image attached to the child version of her seen on screen. Her upcoming appearance in 2020's *WandaVision* show on Disney+ has Teyonah Parris cast as an adult Monica, but the damage to her image has already been done. Monica's position as a hero did not save her from being marginalized or having her actions capitalized upon. Her regression took her from a place that a sidekick would hope to reach and turned her into a shadow of herself in two different mediums. For Monica Rambeau being a Black hero meant being more than just undervalued and exploited. It meant being forgotten entirely.

Not *My* Captain America: Sam Wilson

One pre-established trait that the Black sidekicks share with one another in the films is their lack of origin. Despite what the MCU films present in their stories, Sam Wilson actually did have a backstory in the comics no matter how muddled it was. Originally a do-gooder who helped care for his siblings in Harlem after their parents were murdered in two separate occasions, Sam met Steve on an island where he was trying to

help the locals and the two joined forces to become the iconic Captain America and the Falcon. Later it would come out that Sam's memories had been altered and he was actually the criminal Sam "Snap" Wilson whose proximity to Captain America was supposed to tarnish his good name. Steve, being the white savior that he was, forgave Sam and the two continued on. Over the years that origin became outdated due to its racist overtones of a Black man having to be a criminal and was changed to match the time. The reveal that Sam was a criminal was actually a trick to test his character and make him doubt himself and if he was a good or bad Black person. The reconstruction of a Black identity into a "good Negro" who behaves more like a refined white person than a Black one over the years has always resided around the desire to be seen as equal and human within white society. Even historically famous African-Americans like Frederick Douglass had "reconstructed" identities that made them easier for the white man to swallow (Gates Jr, 1988). Sam's gift of the shield and the title of Captain America presented an opportunity to create a new conversation about race, and while it did it also allowed room for anti-Black racism to creep into the background. Sam's course as Captain America plays out in three series consisting of four, six and twenty-one issues respectively.³⁵ From the beginning one of the main phrases that pop out is the continued use of "not *my* Captain America" from disgruntled civilians who do not approve of Sam. Some cry that Steve is the one true Captain America; others wish to see other white replacements that had previously held the shield such as James Barnes or John Walker take over.³⁶ The threat of racism and inequality line Sam's storylines to the point that they become the main focus. While Steve Rogers was infamous for standing against the

³⁵ See Hopeless (2015) and Spencer (2016-2017)

³⁶ This is shown throughout Spencer's 2016-2017 *Captain America: Sam Wilson* run

government Sam's speaking out on "partisan" issues make him less likable. In his first volume the white adopted son of Steve yells at him "Dammit, Sam! You're Captain #S!& America!" (*Captain America: Fear Him*, 2016) all the while ignoring his orders and going against his plans. Within the same story arc Sam is imprisoned in a cage where he is put into a tight confinement on display. The Black body under the white gaze has been subjected to a plethora of discrimination over the years stemming from the times of slavery when slaves were placed in front of slavers and sold like commodities. Their bodies were items to be looked at, but they were not bodies in a way that relates to a person. They instead were 'things' on display. The objectification has continued on as the view of Black bodies as criminal, invisible or sexualized has persisted.³⁷ The most common thing to put in a cage is an animal. A prison is a modern day one where many Black men find themselves, but in the case of Sam he is literally being presented as a beast not a man. In the times of chattel slavery Blacks would be chained and degraded, more flesh than human. Michelle Alexander comments that "[h]undreds of years ago, our nation put those considered less than human in shackles; . . . today we put them in cages," (Alexander, 2012). Putting Sam Wilson in a cage shows that it does not matter if he wears the Captain America uniform. He is still Black and subjected to the same racism that confined slaves. The cage is a physical representation of a far older system of oppression that still exists in Sam's world.

Some of the worst of the anti-black racism comes from *Captain America: Sam Wilson* (2016) where Sam is the unwilling victim of an experiment that turns him into a

³⁷ Yancy, 2008

hulking beast.³⁸ His condition as a wolf-man hybrid is the brunt of several jokes but never really discussed. It's a condition that the characters believe will go away so it is never fully taken seriously. The implications behind Black as an animal have always linked back to the devaluing of the Black body and the idea that they are bestial or less than human. Paul Hoch explains that "The archetypal figure of the threatening super-sensual dark villain or Black beast, though less clear cut, is also as old as the class societies of Western civilisation" and cites Robert Graves that this beast is the heroes "twin, his second self, his weird" (97). Sam is both the hero and the twin. He is filling a white role but also Black and the beast that no one bats an eye at. Sam's physical transformation into being a monster-like animal is a sharp reminder that even though Steve Rogers has given him the shield and says he is worthy Sam is still different in a way that will forever impede him from reaching the same popularity and acceptance. Sam's tenure as Captain America is riddled with white influences from literally having the elderly Steve boss him around to the public demanding the end of his reign. Having the Captain America title does not change Sam from being a sidekick because although he has more power in name it is still limited. His ability to make decisions and be respected remains trapped within white public opinion of what kind of hero he can be.³⁹ Forced to hide behind the shield and what it represent, Sam Wilson goes from being a good man to one who has to live in the shadow of his predecessor. The intensity of the racism around him both opened up a door for conversation and closed another when Sam was shoved to the side and made to be reactive instead of proactive as every move he made was watched and judged. Every statement that Sam makes is scrutinized, even if he is doing the right thing. In one issue

³⁸ See issues 1-6 for the storyline

³⁹ See Figure 11

of *Captain America: Sam Wilson* (2016) Sam is forced to endure question after question and comment after comment of fellow travelers while stuck on a plane. He is forced repeatedly to answer to everyone from government officials to civilians since he has no authority on his own. During his run as Captain America Sam did have some good moments and made some good speeches but the weight of the people believing he was not good enough cast a shadow over his accomplishments. In his resignation Sam made the concluding remarks “If Steve’s Captain America is a symbol of a great country pushing forward – then let Sam Wilson’s Captain America have been a reminder of the one people are leaving behind” (*Captain America: Sam Wilson* #21). He is in many ways both right and wrong. The idealistic America of Steve Rogers will always have a tether to the past and how things were. Sam’s on the other hand was a reminder of where people should be going, as they clearly had not left the racism behind. Filling in for Steve for a few years put Sam in the spotlight but racism and the ghost of Steve shared it. Even when he was the Captain Sam Wilson was unable to move past the margins of the sidekick because the world was not ready to let Blackness enter their sphere on an equal level.

I am Ironheart: Riri Williams

Riri William’s debut in 2015 makes her the most recently created hero of the discussed Black sidekicks. Younger than the others, Riri was described as a teenage prodigy and protégée of Iron Man. With James Rhodes deceased at that point in time, Riri checked the box for diversity in the Iron Man franchise by adding another Black face to the mix. When first introduced Riri is described as a young girl who is so intelligent her parents fear she’ll lack social skills and be unable to connect with others. She receives

a scholarship to MIT before the age of thirteen and creates a lab in her garage. Like every superhero there had to be tragedy added into Riri's life, and at a picnic her step-father and her best and only friend Natasha were gunned down in an attack that could have killed Riri as well. Building an Iron Man suit in her garage, Riri later received aid from Tony Stark and began her path to become a superhero in her own right. "I'm totally going to be Tony Stark. Except for that weird facial hair," Riri quips in *Invincible Iron Man* #8. After eleven issues of *Invincible Iron Man: Iron Heart* in 2016 Riri was given her own title without Tony Stark's Iron Man featured in the name. Drawing from her codename, the 2019 *Ironheart* series finally saw Riri billed independently. Seeing someone young, Black and gifted in a leading role both as an individual hero and team player as a member of the Champions boded well for Marvel's diversity. Unfortunately, Riri's connection to Stark put her in a similar place as Sam was with Steve Rogers. Sam Wilson's transition into Captain America happened after decades of the two being linked. He was an existing character who could easily slide into the role in the minds of viewers. Riri was more deliberate as her entire creation was based on Tony and her purpose to play the next part in the Iron Man dynasty. While there was a chance to make a new hero who was completely independent, one was instead made who was a Black girl idolizing a white man.⁴⁰ When Riri first began to be recognized as an Iron Man themed hero Tony Stark was believed to be dead. Despite his absence he had sent equipment over to Riri that not only help her with her technology but also work as an artificial intelligence. This hologram of Stark not only lived inside of Riri's suit but also followed her around her lab giving her advice and mentoring her. Through doing so Stark ensured that he is present

⁴⁰ Figure 12

even when is not physically able to be. With her father out of the picture Riri does not seek to replace him but was unwillingly forced to have a pseudo figure in Tony Stark. While she repeatedly commented that she wants to turn him off Riri ultimately couldn't because she needed his aid in figuring out how to use the armor and be a hero. Riri's familial situation also leaves her vulnerable to racial violence. Demetrius Williams, Riri's father, is believed to be dead and her stepfather is murdered in front of her. In the fractured family state of the Black slaves, the male was often not present and the children were left at the mercy of the white slave owner to claim paternity. In her fractured home, Tony could give Riri more opportunities than her loving mother so she had to turn to him. Her reliance on him interferes with her ability to be an independent hero and instead stations her below him even though he isn't actually there.

The problem with creating a new hero to take over the place of the old is that the hero of color cannot measure up to their white predecessor due to a perceived lack.⁴¹ Riri's admission to MIT – the same school that Tony attended – at such a young age showed great promise for her aptitude and intelligence. Given time she likely would have been able to figure out her own armor even without Tony stepping in and domineering part of her learning curve. Just like intelligence became a personality trait so did her lack of social skills. In order for this Black woman to speak the language of science she first had to lose the ability to communicate with others around her. “I am working on my social skills,” Riri tells Black-Puerto Rican Champion's teammate Miles Morales, “but being trapped in a cabin with you until the end of time is a trial by fire I did not ask for” (*Ironheart* #6). The two are surrounded by white snow and isolated from anyone else due

⁴¹ See: Kant's idea of 'Negro' as an empty concept in *Observations*

to their being trapped in a time loop. Riri has made it clear that she does not like Miles – even though he is the only other Black Champion – and it takes them sitting alone away from anyone else that the two are finally able to connect in any real sense. Riri’s ability to talk to Miles is an isolated incident. In *Infinity Countdown: Champions #2* (2018) Riri is nearly killed by Thanos. She exhibits PTSD symptoms after when she wakes in a cold sweat, but struggles to explain her feelings to teammate Vivian Vision. What Riri *is* able to convey is the fact that she feels like a failure as she was unable to do anything.⁴² Although her performance is reflective of her other teammates Riri shows she believes that she has something to prove and is basing her worth on that idea. Her lack of communication limits her friend pool. Her best friend, Natalie Washington, was murdered alongside Riri’s step-father (*Invincible Iron Man: Riri Williams*) and appears only as a programmed A.I. (*Iron Heart*, 2019) or in flashbacks. Princess Shuri and a local boy named Xavier make up the rest of Riri’s close friends and are both Black. The only romance she gets is when synthezoid Vivian tries to kiss her (*Champions*, 2018-2019) without her consent.⁴³ The incident eventually escalates to an evil spirit feeding on Riri due to her anger at the situation and the violation. Unable to have any romantic consensual relationship keeps Riri in the mold of a Black woman who has no agency over her own love life or body.

In essence, the role of Ironheart is one that makes sense to try to introduce. “The racially remixed superheroes offer audiences familiar points of reference that, as Black superheroes, suggest a range of ideas, cultural points of interests, compelling themes, and

⁴² Figure 13

⁴³ Figure 14

multiple meanings that were not previously present” (Nama, 2012). Riri’s positionality as Black, female and a teenager gives her an identity that allows her to operate in different spheres than Tony ever could and open up room for more conversations. In order for her to be a hero and do so, however, Tony’s voice would have to be literally removed from her ear. The revival of Tony later on diminished the individuality that Riri had, and even when she moved to Ironheart her origin as the replacement Tony Stark and token diverse character remained. Zachary Crockett commented that “the creation of the comic book sidekick -- a weak jester foil with limited redeeming qualities -- left an opening for racial minorities to be included, but in a way that indulged the worst racial stereotypes of the time” (Crockett, 2014). Main heroes should be less limited than the sidekick, but Riri Williams and Sam Wilson find the opposite to be true. They have redeeming qualities but can only show them in certain times and never for long. Riri deciding to be the next Tony Stark makes her a copy of him. His A.I. that lives in her suit should take on the sidekick role, but instead it bosses her around. The white and blue of Sam’s Captain America uniform fails to hide his skin and therefore leaves him vulnerable to additional scrutiny and the loss of authority. Dressing Black sidekicks up as heroes but limiting them still makes a new form of repression and Anti-Black racism that just builds on the structure the sidekick trope created.

CONCLUSION

The sidekick has unfortunately become the role most often played by the Black character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The portrayal of Black heroes in the MCU promotes anti-Black racism in a way that is different than the way the Marvel Comic Universe does when it keeps Black characters as sidekicks even when they are the starring heroes. The Captain America, Iron Man and Captain Marvel templates in both the films and comics show Black faces but prevent them from actually speaking or being heard. Of course, anti-Blackness in film and other aspects of life and the media are not new or exclusive to the Marvel universe. Repeated violence and reinforcements of racial inequality and anti-Black structures mean that these aggressions have to become a prominent conversation. The industry continues to churn out more films and children look for more characters to look up and relate to which makes the conversation even more needed. The suppression of Maria Rambeau, James Rhodes and Sam Wilson in the films begs the question *why is it assumed that the reverence of the white hero would be decreased if the Black sidekick were able to take more of an active and prominent role?* The repression of Monica Rambeau, Riri Williams and Sam Wilson in the comics acts as a guide to show what does not work for representation. Having Black faces presented on a screen does not satisfy the needs of the people who are being repressed.

“Representation itself cannot be seen as enough,” Samira Shirish Nadkarni writes, “if this representation is in service of reinforcing systems of white hegemonic power that privilege American imperialism without engaging with or critiquing the larger issues of

global identity politics at stake” (234).⁴⁴ Having the Black sidekicks present without delving into what makes them Black is a token representation that keeps their bodies on displays and their minds ignored. Within the films the lack of origin stories, close proximity to violence and defining loss show a lack of originality between the Black sidekicks and how that leaves more room for their white counterpart to fill. That whiteness, as it has been mentioned, is built on the act of not being Black and positioning it below itself. It can be said that without Blackness there could be no whiteness and the privilege that a white hero has is derived from the lack of privilege that a Black hero receives. Though the systems are in place and routinely reinforced, Marvel as a creative force will have the chance to feature Black heroes in different capacities as they see fit. In the final act of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) there is a scene where an elderly Captain America passes his iconic shield over to Sam Wilson instead of his white best friend, James Buchanan Barnes, in a moment reminiscent of Sam’s story arc in the comics.⁴⁵ Like it has been shown, Sam is only capable of running here because Steve is no longer walking. The MCU then has the option to show another example of a Black hero succeeding when a white character isn’t around and gives them their blessing like Steve and Sam in the comics and Riri and Tony. This granting of permission to become a hero reminds the audience that the Black hero is not equal to the white one whose name they share. In the case of Monica there is no permission at all but instead something taken. Even though Sam’s run as Captain America was far from ideal in the comics, the MCU has presented a hopeful act that may be symbolic of a more inclusive time to come. Until they air the show *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* in 2020 it’ll be impossible to say, but a

⁴⁴ See *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (2013)

⁴⁵ See Spencer’s run of *Captain America: Sam Wilson* (2016-2017)

conversation must start somewhere before anti-Black racism can be purged from the two Marvel universes. An acknowledgement of the anti-Black tendencies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films would not change the racist structures and hierarchies but would on some level illuminate that there is, in fact, more than one Black guy in Marvel and that guy or girl does not have to be a sidekick. It's not about what a hero is or is not because on paper the Black sidekicks hit every requirement. Instead it is about social components and hierarchal structures that are built on one succeeding and another failing. What does it mean to be a hero? It means to keep trying when the world holds you down. It means being Black and existing because you are more than just a sidekick or a shadow.

Appendix I



Figure 1: Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) Promotional Poster
(See page 1)



Figure 2: Captain Marvel (2019) Promotional Poster
(See page 2)



Figure 3: Captain America: Winter Soldier (2014) Promotional Poster
(See page 2)



Figure 4: Spider-Man: Far From Home (2019) Promotional Poster

(See page 2)



Figure 5: Iron Man 3 (2013) Promotional Poster

(See page 2)



Figure 6: Captain America: Civil War (2016) Promotional Poster

(See page 6)

People also ask

Who is the black guy in Marvel? ▼

What superheroes are in the MCU? ▼

Who is the most popular character in the MCU? ▼

How many Marvel characters are there in the MCU? ▼

Figure 7: Example Google Search

(See page 4)

People also ask

What superheroes are in the MCU? ▼

Who is the black superhero in Avengers? ▼

How many Marvel characters are there in the MCU? ▼

Is the MCU Earth 616? ▼

Who was the 1st black superhero? ▼

How did Nick Fury lose his eye? ▼

Figure 8: Example Google Search

(See page 4)



Figure 9: Cover and Panel from Amazing Spider-man Annual #16 (1982)

(See page 53)

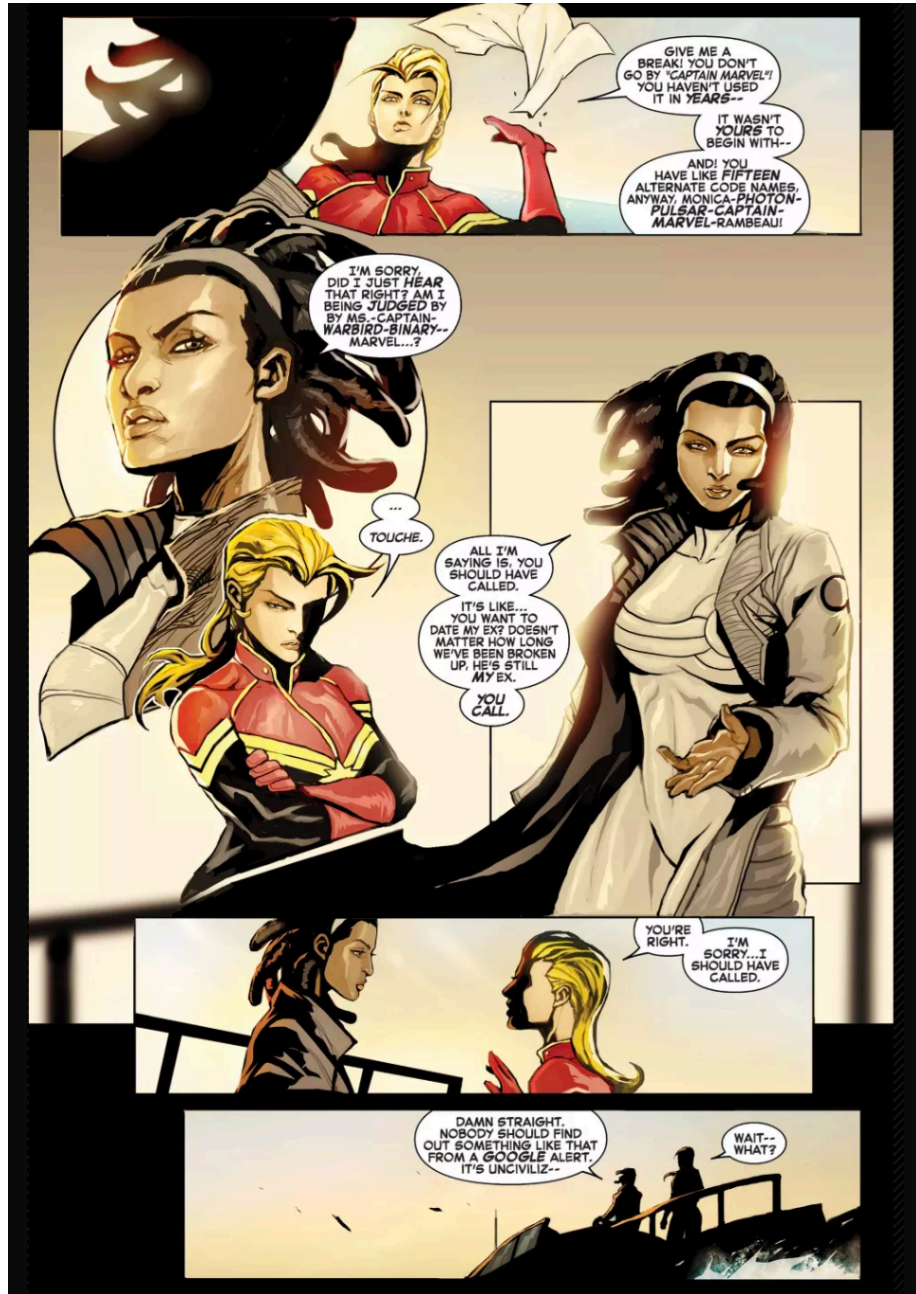


Figure 10: Panel from Captain Marvel #7 (2012)

(See page 54)

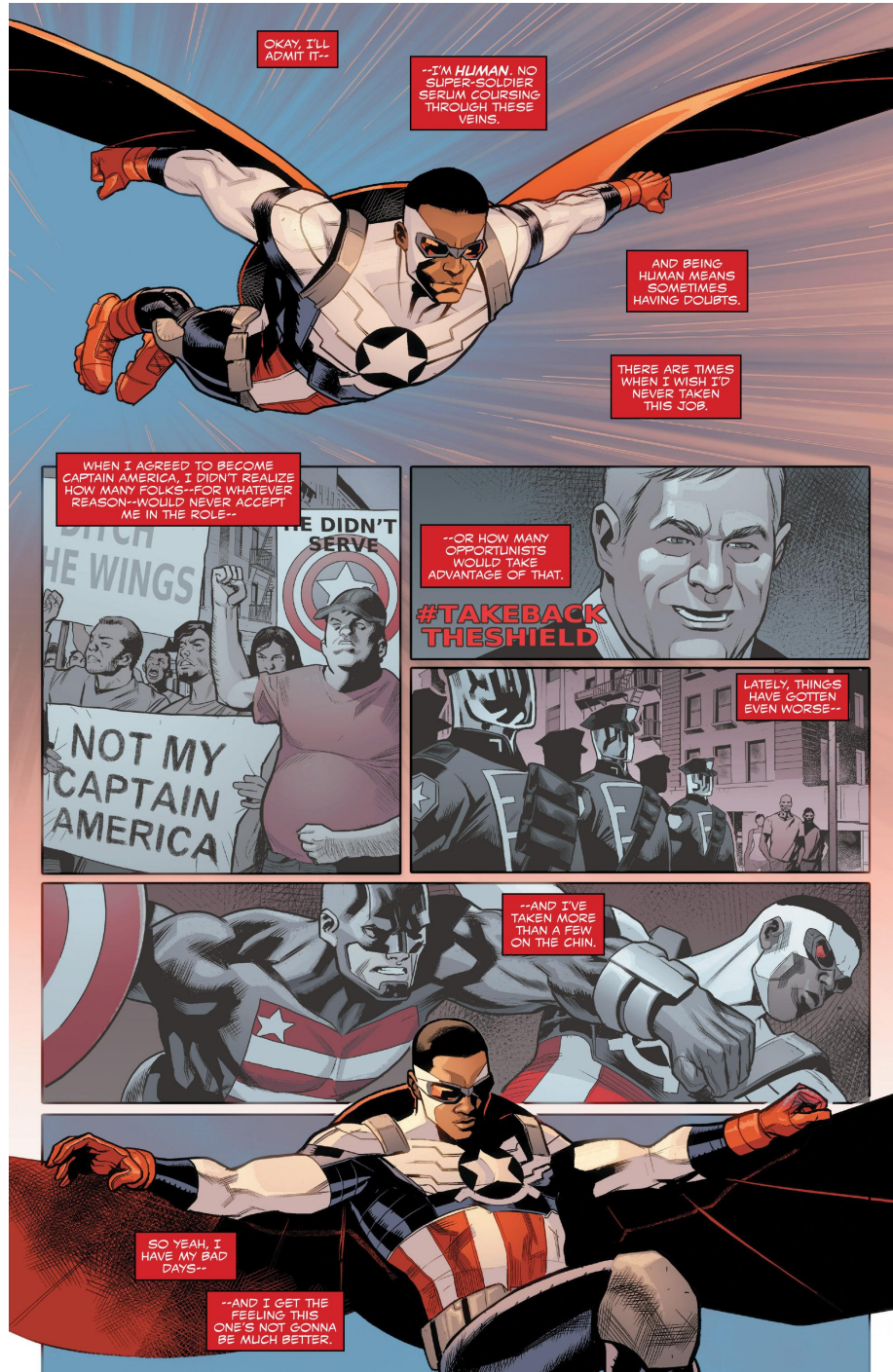


Figure 11: Panel from Captain America: Sam Wilson, vol. 4 (2016)

(See page 58)



Figure 12: Panel from *Invincible Iron Man: Ironheart #8* (2016)

(See page 60)



Figure 13: Panels from Infinity Countdown: Champions #2 (2018)

(See page 62)



Figure 14: Panel from Champions #1 (2019)

(See page 62)

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