3

"Captain America Is Black and Thor Is a Woman": Gender- and Race-Bent Mantle Passing in Marvel's All-New, All-Different Campaign

Marvel followed the success of Miles and Kamala with 2015's All-New, All-Different Marvel campaign, to which we now turn. As the title suggests, this campaign entailed a massive shake-up in nearly all titles and team-ups, with such foundational characters as Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Wolverine, and the Hulk all replaced by non-White and/or non-male characters, and with major transformations in teams such as the Avengers and the X-Men. As we discussed in the previous chapter, Kamala Khan and Miles Morales had been mostly welcomed by fans when they took on existing hero titles, but they were new characters and, most importantly, the "real" Ms./Captain Marvel and Spider-Man continued to exist in Marvel canon.[1] Miles Morales and Kamala Khan also benefited from what Wilson, speaking of her own creation, identifies as the "paradox of low expectations.

[1]It is true that Ultimate Peter Parker and Mar-Vell had to die for the mantles to be available, but both die as heroes. Furthermore, Ultimate Peter Parker was always an alternate-universe Peter, who never reached the popularity of the 616 Peter, and he does return from the dead to endorse Miles as his replacement; likewise Mar-Vell's death, which allowed Carol Danvers to assume the Captain Marvel mantle and leave Ms. Marvel for Kamala to pick up, is not only an extra step away from the young hero, but also occurred in 1982, so audiences had had a chance to get used to it (even if he does come back occasionally).

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The bar was set pretty low for *Ms. Marvel*, but because of *Ms. Marvel*'s success, that bar got set much higher for similar books that came later" ("So About"). That other changes to the superhero complement might not face such a generous reception from fans proved to be true. If Miles and Kamala represented a necessary freshening up of the superhero roster for a new, more diverse generation, then ANADM sent the message that the Marvel Universe as a whole required a complete overhaul, a decision with which many fans disagreed.

The Gabriel diversity controversy, which we discussed in the introduction, came eighteen months into this transformation and, while there is not sufficient evidence to blame ANADM for Comicsgate as a whole, the coverage of Gabriel's comments online, in both journalism and the blogosphere, featured extensive commentary from fans who declared that the wholesale mantle passing to new, "diverse" characters made them feel angry, disappointed, and even betrayed. Numerous fans described the move as "very heavy-handed pandering" ("smokinclone" on Kanayama). Specific complaints included the idea that while "Ms. Marvel and Miles Morales are examples of new and important unique characters," the changes in ANADM were counterproductive because they came at the expense of fan favorites: "Pushing classic characters aside [and replacing them with] a 'diversity' character doesn't serve anyone. In fact it alienates a large portion of their base and devalues the point of diversity" ("skateboardgreen" on Kanayama). Some even argued that the replacements insulted the very idea of diversity by implying that new characters could not stand on their own, but must instead usurp the mantle and thus the popularity of existing White, male characters: "having a Korean hero is great, but you're not going to make him popular by having him take Bruce Banner's place and then hav[ing] the latter killed off; you're not going to make the Falcon a more popular character by hav[ing] him become Captain America … while Steve becomes a fucking Nazi, etc" ("Just Die Already" on Hughes). Such fan complaints were aimed directly at Marvel and argued to the corporate powers-that-be that, if they were attempting good progressive politics, they were going about it the wrong way.

These responses to the changes stem not only from genuine fan disappointment, but also from the ways that Marvel used, and even manufactured, controversy as a marketing tool for the campaign. In this chapter, we will analyze how Marvel employed the idea of ANADM to overtly re-brand itself as politically progressive, both in its storylines and in its letter columns and creator/editor interviews with the press. This period of explicitly political story-telling gives us a window into how Marvel's handling—and mishandling—of diversity at times betrays a lack of awareness of just how volatile this topic would come to be. In a *Time* article praising the passing of Mjolnir to Jane, Eliana Dockterman notes the danger of "Disrupting the fictional universes for longtime fans who can cite dialogue just from the mention of an issue number" ("Everyone" 79). And

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Zak Roman and Ryan Lizardi argue in "'If She Be Worthy': The Illusion of Change in American Superhero Comics" that "temporary diversity, no matter how progressive, becomes destructive when its logic is based more in marketing than in permanent representational changes" (20). To this, we add that the broad weaponization of fandom that has taken place since Gamergate in 2014 has allowed restorative fan nostalgia to serve some very ugly politics in terms of gender, race, and sexuality, and Marvel's ANADM campaign arguably served to fuel anti-diversity sentiment more than it welcomed a new age of progressive story-telling.

But we also assert that the transformations that took place in ANADM are not simply market-driven pandering that failed to add anything fresh to the superhero genre. While we will address the proliferation of mantle passing throughout the campaign, our close reading will focus on the challenges posed to gender and racial norms through two specific changes: the passing of Mjolnir, the hammer of Thor, to Jane Foster, created by Stan Lee, Larry Lieber and Jack Kirby in 1962 to be the nurse and love interest of Thor Odinson when he was Dr. Don Blake, and the passing of Captain America's shield to Sam Wilson, aka the Falcon, Marvel's first African-American superhero, created by Stan Lee and Gene Colan in 1969, who was Steve Roger's partner throughout the 1970s. The politics of the changes are best depicted in Nick Spencer and Daniel Acuña's *Captain America: Sam Wilson* (2015–2017) and Jason Aaron and Russell Dauterman's *The Mighty Thor* (2015–2018), but Rick Remender and Stuart Immonen's *All-New Captain America* (2014–2015) and Aaron and Dauterman's *Thor* (2014–2015) introduced the new mantle holders and inform the ANADM titles. Sam and Jane differ from Miles and Kamala in that, instead of being new creations, they are long-established characters who have been "promoted" from supporting character to central hero. They also differ from newer characters in ANADM, such as Riri Williams and Amadeus Cho, in that they have long histories of their own, ones that link them to the characters whose mantles they take on.

While promoting established characters could be read as a safe way to increase diversity, we argue that the story-telling in these comics exceeds the boundaries of character familiarity, and of fan comfort with it. These comics deliberately critique the story-telling of the past, engage in complex political exploration, and draw attention to the ways that women and minority characters have been, and continue to be, sidelined in the genre. In so doing, their stories reveal the absences, gaps, and silences in the original comics in ways that have significant and ongoing implications for the politics of these iconic mantles. Fans might complain that diversity stories "reduce" characters to tokens of their particular identity categories, but Jane Foster/Thor and Sam Wilson/Captain America reveal just how much the unspoken politics of identity were at work in these mantles all along, and the kinds of rich characterization that can be produced when race and gender are carefully attended to. The creators used mantle passing, even if it was only

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temporary, to challenge tired tropes within the superhero genre; and it was their very success in doing so, we argue, that fueled much of the backlash they faced.

Marketing All-New, All-Different Marvel: Putting Mantle Passing in Context

While mantle passing, temporary or permanent, is a widely accepted part of superhero story-telling, the second decade of the twenty-first century witnessed what Marvel Comics touted as a bold experiment in renewal and change. When Axel Alonso first took the reins as editor-in-chief in 2011, many of the line's diverse characters were secondary characters or parts of team titles, and one of his first acts was cancelling Marvel's only female-lead comic, *X-23*, which was not selling well. Alonso knew first-hand the importance of having a diverse roster, telling *Time* magazine: "It was always in the back of my mind that I'd like to see superheroes look like me or look like my son. So I'm always striving to make the next great Mexican superhero … When we decided to cancel *X-23*, it just hit us that this was really bad" (Dockterman, "Everyone" 78). Alonso's mandate to increase diversity culminated in the ANADM campaign, which officially began in October 2015 after *Secret Wars* and finished with *Secret Empire* in 2017.[2] *Secret Wars* depicted the collapse of the Marvel multiverse into a patchwork of worlds held together by the supervillain Doctor Doom, and concluded with the reforming of the main Marvel 616 universe, now called Marvel Prime. As ANADM rolled out, the idea that the universe had been restarted was echoed in the comics numbering. Every title started with a new #1 issue, whether it was a completely new title (such as *The Totally Awesome Hulk*), a relaunch with a new creative team and story (such as *Captain America: Sam Wilson*), or a continuation with the same team and ongoing story (such as *Mighty Thor*).

Significantly, Marvel's marketing for ANADM focused less on the idea that the multiverse had collapsed and been reformed into something new than it did on diversity, highlighting the importance of that aspect of the universe's transformation to Marvel's new future. Alonso made up for cancelling *X-23* by explicitly looking to "develop a female superhero who would also be a hit in the marketplace," asking editors to "Keep [diversity]

[2]While the two events make clear starting and end points for the campaign, the reality is fuzzier. Several All-New titles, including those for Jane Foster as Thor and Sam Wilson as Captain America, began before *Secret Wars* in the fourth, All-New Avengers phase of Marvel NOW! (2014); as well, ANADM overlapped with the Marvel NOW! 2.0 (2016–2017) and several of the All-New titles continue into the Marvel Legacy (2017–2018) branding, with the final ANADM title, *All-New Wolverine*, finishing in 2018 at the beginning of Fresh Start branding (2018–).

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in mind," but also to "Write something we can sell" (qtd. in Dockterman, "Everyone" 78). This explicit connection between the two separate needs—representation and profitability—shows how "Marvel creates and/or revivifies capitalistic pathways reaching and expanding new demographics. All of these commercially driven creative tactics attempt to raise revenue, foment excitement amongst a more diverse readership/viewership, create more brand equity for the character, and appear to give the company a progressive aura of inclusion" (Roman and Lizardi 24). But the overlap between diversity and marketing is also at the heart of the Comicsgate backlash and, as a result, many of the arguments about the changes, on both sides, focus on the salability of diverse characters. Pro-diversity fans point to sales bumps from new characters to make their case; Jane Foster's *Thor* (2014) outsold the title it replaced and *Mighty Thor* was Marvel's second-highest seller (Kanayama). Anti-diversity fans counter these statistics by arguing that new, widely publicized "diversity" characters—like new number one issues—are a gimmick that might work to increase sales for an issue or two, but that the new fans will not support Marvel in the way the "traditional" fans have done. One fan, "Re-Man," wrote to Marvel to complain about the changes, making his argument for the return of his heroes in financial terms: "I don't know how many longtime fans you've lost, because I can tell you in my little circle of friends, you guys lost close to over $2000 a month" (*All-New, All-Different Avengers* #8, 14). Whether fans are fighting for or against diversity, it seems that sales are always the measure of whether or not one has scored a win.

We want to avoid such reductive arguments. While we focus here on two of the more successful titles in this phase, it is important to recognize that the large-scale nature of the campaign was always about seeing which new characters would find an audience, and which would not. As we discussed in Chapter 1, comics are mass culture products, and their profitability is the primary concern for those who produce them; however, they are also a form of corporate art, and so reflect Marvel's current branding. ANADM was not just about the immediate profitability of each new title or mantle passing, although Marvel certainly would have been looking to replicate the success they had found with the introduction of Miles and Kamala. ANADM was also about Marvel and their parent company Disney reading changing demographics and attitudes toward consumption and positioning themselves to take advantage of progressive branding. The sheer volume of new characters, roles, and titles that Marvel introduced in this period meant that there were always going to be successes and failures in ethical representation, in artistry, and in profitability, undermining any simplistic arguments both for and against the "get woke, go broke" mantra.

Furthermore, an examination of the changes made from 2013 to 2016 highlights the many factors that have to be considered when evaluating Marvel's success at diversifying its titles. First and foremost, the scope of the transformation was unprecedented: Marvel implemented massive and

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wide-reaching changes to the entire line, including both new characters and mantle passing on a scale that had not been seen before. They launched sixteen new titles with female leads between 2013 and 2015 (Dockterman, "Everyone" 79) and, of the titles that Marvel launched or relaunched as part of ANADM, roughly half featured leads who were not White males or their non-human stand-ins.[3] The campaign saw the first solo title for longstanding characters, such as Mockingbird, and revivals of characters who had been out of the limelight for decades, such as Red Wolf and Patsy Walker. And while changes in major teams such as the Avengers are common, by the end of 2016 the only one of the original six MCU Avengers who was active and not somehow disgraced in the comics was Black Widow; significantly, she is also the only woman on the team. Tony Stark/Iron Man was in a coma, Bruce Banner/Hulk was dead[4] and Clint Barton/Hawkeye was on trial for his murder, Steve Rogers/Captain America was a secret Hydra agent (which we will discuss in detail in the next chapter), and Thor Odinson had found himself unworthy and unable to wield Mjolnir. All five White male characters had been succeeded by a woman and/or by a person of color. In addition, Logan/Wolverine, the most popular White male on the X-Men team, had died and been replaced by Laura Kinney as the *All-New Wolverine* (2015–2018) in a title that was more successful and longer running than her *X-23* title that Alonso had cancelled in 2012. These characters differ from Miles Morales and Kamala Khan in that in each case Marvel's corporate strategy entailed that the original character be stripped of power specifically so that the mantle can be passed. G. Willow Wilson, weighing in on the Gabriel controversy, implicitly criticizes many of these mantle passings: "This is a personal opinion, but IMO launching a legacy character by killing off or humiliating the original character sets the legacy character up for failure. Who wants a legacy if the legacy is shitty?" ("So About"). As Wilson points out, linking the wholesale introduction of "diverse" legacy characters with the wrong-doing, flaws, or diminishment of the originals arguably invites fans, particularly those who closely identify with the original characters, to see themselves as flawed and replaceable, an outdated fanbase that Marvel is rejecting in favor of attracting a new one.

And, certainly, many of the younger diverse replacements were meant to attract a new generation of readers: the half-Latino Sam Alexander put on his father's Nova helmet in February 2013, filling a hole left by the death of Richard Ryder; Latino Robbie Reyes became the *All-New Ghost Rider* in March 2014, the same time as Kamala entered the scene; Korean-American

[3]It is difficult to come up with exact percentages as there are numerous one-shots, limited series, and team-up titles on both sides, because what counts as "diversity" in speculative story-telling includes many grey areas (is Vision a diverse character?), and because the end date for the campaign is not explicit.

[4]He gets better.

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Amadeus Cho became the *Totally Awesome Hulk* in 2015, taking over from Bruce Banner; nine-year-old African-American Lunella Lafayatte became Moon Girl in 2016, a replacement for Moon Boy; African-American Riri Williams/Ironheart filled in for Iron Man when Tony Stark was in a coma starting in 2016; Nadia Pym, a younger Wasp, was introduced in 2016; and Kate Bishop began her first solo *Hawkeye* series in 2016. These replacements all focus on younger, more diverse characters replacing older, less diverse ones. Furthermore, teenage versions of the original six X-Men were brought forward in time and became the focus of the *All-New X-Men* launched in 2013; in this series, Iceman is not only younger, but also gay, arguably reframing a character who had always been represented as straight. Together with new lines featuring other diverse teenagers, such as America Chavez and Gwenpool, these transformations and additions were all aimed at broadening Marvel's audience in the younger generation and pitched at a variety of identity categories so as to market the brand to new demographics going forward. Backlash against these characters is not, therefore, entirely subsumable to identity politics; as well, whether or not Marvel was successful in gaining a younger audience is complicated by younger people consuming comics more in trades than in the floppies that Marvel uses to gauge sales figures.

The many changes and replacements did gain Marvel a great deal of mainstream publicity, which was clearly the point, and produced a significant backlash, which may also have been the point. On Free Comic Book Day in 2015, five months before the official launch of ANADM, Marvel released an *All-New, All-Different Avengers* comic that operated as a preview of the rebranding. The ANADM Avengers included core Avengers heroes Tony Stark/Iron Man and the Vision; newcomers Miles Morales, Kamala Khan, and Sam Alexander/Nova; and new mantle holders Sam Wilson/Captain America and Jane Foster/Thor. The marketing for the comic highlighted the idea that such changes would be controversial and meet with some resistance. Tom Brevoort crowed to *Wired*: "It's an All-New, All-Different Avengers for an All-New, All-Different Marvel Universe! […] So throw out your preconceptions about Earth's Mightiest Heroes as we change the game, rewrite the rules and destroy childhoods with an Avengers team that more closely reflects the world outside your window!" (Kamen). Brevoort's claim that the corporation is deliberately attempting to "destroy childhoods" refers to a regular complaint across many fandoms that reboots and reinterpretations of a text constitute an attack on long-term fan's nostalgic memories,[5] but his brash assertion is also clearly a marketing ploy, one that ironically evokes a different form of nostalgia. He hearkens back here to the days of Stan Lee's Soapbox, positioning Marvel Comics as a progressive

[5]George Lucas's changes to the original *Star Wars* trilogy are an obvious example, as discussed in the 2010 documentary *The People vs. George Lucas*.

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voice that privileges diversity politics over fan pressure to maintain the status quo. While insulting one's own fan and consumer base might seem like bad business, we argue that Marvel employed this tactic to separate Marvel from soulless corporate culture at a time when media consolidation and its effect on culture are a significant public concern. Certainly, the marketing is aimed at gaining a new, more politically conscious audience, as well as rewarding those long-term fans who identify with Marvel's more progressive roots. However, it is also deliberately provocative, and frames Marvel as an ethical corporation, taking a side against their own financial interests by standing up to regressive fans who might reject the changes.

Finally, Marvel emphasized the diversity of some creators, both those who had been around for some time, such as Gregory Pak writing *Totally Awesome Hulk*, and some who were new to the genre, most prominently Ta-Nehisi Coates writing *Black Panther*. But the diversity of the creators took a back seat to the diversity of the characters, and much of the ANADM campaign was still helmed by White men. As we discussed in the introduction, the diversification of Marvel's creative and editorial team faced backlash from those who saw it as politics-based hiring that favored identity over knowledge and skill. But a lack of diversification in the creative pool also led to questioning from pro-diversity fans about just how different ANADM really was in terms of representation and progressive politics. In "The Return of the Author," Kristina Busse argues that "authors have returned to the forefront of interpreting texts not via interpretive privilege or singular access to the meaning of their writing but via their identity and how that identity affects reading and writing practices" (55). For many fans and critics, the identity of the creative bench was just as important as the identity of the character being depicted. Kelly Kanayama, in her response to the Gabriel controversy, highlights Marvel's own mishandling of diversity in the very stories touted as promoting progressive politics:

> When Brian Michael Bendis writes Miles Morales as being upset with a fan who mentions his black heritage, or when Nick Spencer has Sam Wilson apologize to Steve Rogers for any activism-fueled anger he may have displayed in the past, it comes off as tone-deaf and leaves readers understandably less than thrilled … Let's also remember SHIELD #8 (2015), written by Mark Waid, where a black woman viewing her young son's corpse remarks, "He was no angel"—the same phrase used to vindicate Michael Brown's murder.

Understanding the varied fan reactions to ANADM is therefore complicated by a variety of factors: the deliberate decision by Marvel to pitch the stories as controversial; a transformation in story-telling to attract a younger audience; a replacement of fan favorites that might invite fans to see themselves, by extension, as "unworthy"; and a mishandling of diversity that arguably betrays a shallow understanding of just what such diversification might entail on the level of creator, character, and story.

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But if Marvel's ANADM marketing sought a connection to the past in order to promote its future in ways that, arguably, inflamed its fanbase and served as evidence of the company's shallow pandering to new audiences, some of its creators nevertheless took this opportunity to engage in a form of nostalgia that opened up new and creative possibilities for superhero mantles. While both the stereotypical angry fan and arguably Brevoort himself rely too heavily on an idealized version of the silver age of Marvel Comics, and thus engage in "restorative nostalgia," or, a desire to return to "truth and tradition" (Boym xviii), we argue that *The Mighty Thor* and *Sam Wilson: Captain America* instead exemplify "reflective nostalgia," which allows for "a more conscious, complex attitude towards the past," and "a more successful interpretation of the past as a resource" (Horvath 151). Reflective nostalgia "can present an ethical and creative challenge" (Boym xviii) to the object of nostalgia, as it is "suspicious of the retrospective gaze" (Boym 29) even while it revisits and hearkens back to the past critically. Sam Wilson and Jane Foster offer a clear example of how mantle passing can simultaneously appeal to the past and to progress and transformation.

Jane and Sam's historical prominence in what Stan Lee called the "Marvel Age" of comics, during the 1960s and 1970s, certainly speaks to a return to roots.[6] The writers draw on fan knowledge of Sam Wilson and Jane Foster and use specific references to past comics to reward "hardcore fans who can be flatteringly positioned as connoisseurs or opinion leaders within organic fan communities" (Beaty 324), but they also ask these fans to reread those past comics critically and think through how the new mantle holders challenge the racial and gender politics of that past. Sam and Jane have been part of Marvel comics continuity for half a century, with Sam being a superhero for all that time, but in ANADM they occupy roles that are more central to Marvel Comics and to the Avengers—Thor was an original Avenger, and Captain America joined the team in the fourth issue. They both struggle to find their place with their new mantles and experience a tension with the "original" mantle holder, as Steve Rogers and Thor Odinson do not always agree with the actions of their successors. Significantly, Aaron and Spencer both explicitly link the conflicts between old and new mantle holders to the politics arising from their differing subject positions.

These tensions are exacerbated by the diminishment of the original mantle holders, and by the ascension of the new mantle bearers, from love interest and side-kick/partner to central protagonist of their own stories. As Albert S. Fu points out, characters of color are generally either side-kicks "such as Tonto for the Lone Ranger or Kato for the Green Hornet," or "they were 'regional' heroes such as Zorro in the Hispanic American South-west, or Asian action heroes from Asia (not Asian-American). Like

[6]Jason Aaron and Chris Robison both further this connection by responding to positive letters in support of Jane Foster/Thor with Stan Lee's trademark "Nuff Said!" (*Thor* (2014) #1, 24 and *Mighty Thor* #3. 23).

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other heroes of color, black superheroes are marked by their 'blackness' both visually and in name" (276). Women in the superhero genre have also often been sidelined; while "female superheroes in the 1940s were generally clever, strong, and independent" (Cocca 7), "Female superheroes of the early 1960s suffered both quantitatively and qualitatively. They were not at all diverse, and they were markedly less threatening in their names and powers" (9). If this period saw female superheroes confined to romantic plots that hindered their development as characters, non-superheroic love interests like Jane Foster were offered even less depth of character and field of action. And while it is not surprising that a secondary character such as a side-kick or love interest should experience a life that is, well, secondary to the heroic exploits of the main character, it means that "Marginalized groups have been forced to 'cross-identify' with those different from them while dominant groups have not … white males have not had to identify with the small number of women and people of colour protagonists" (Cocca 3). Gender- and race-bending in contemporary popular culture can redress this imbalance and, in so doing, provide complex, positive representation for those who have not seen themselves reflected in the culture they consume; it encourages empathy and identification with, rather than objectification of, women and people of color by those who are used to seeing themselves reflected in the heroes.[7] And when that representation is combined with mantle passing, particularly mantles central to the Marvel universe, creators have the opportunity to challenge their readers' fundamental understandings of what it means to be a hero.

From Love Interest to (In)Vulnerable Superhero: Jane Foster/Thor and Why Gender Matters

As discussed in Chapter 1, creators can use a variety of story-telling methods to take risks with valuable and beloved properties, and certainly the idea of Jane Foster as a superhero required just such a risk to come to fruition. As the love interest from the early days of *Thor*, Jane Foster was a lovelorn damsel in distress, low in complex characterization. However, a 1978 issue of *What If … ?* (#10), written by Don Glut and drawn by Rick Hoberg, dared to imagine who and what Jane Foster might have been had the Marvel universe offered her a greater scope of action. Aptly titled "What If Jane Foster Had Found the Hammer of Thor?" this retelling has Jane taking on the awkward name of "Thordis" and living out many of Thor's early

[7]And while responses to race- and gender-bending are often vitriolic, we should remember that White washing has been a problem for far longer.

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adventures, with her gender seldom changing the outcome of the battles. Thus, the comic suggests that gender is not significant when it comes to the mantle of Thor, and that differences in power and leadership are based on social perception, rather than ability. But it also stands as an oblique criticism of Jane's shallow characterization in the main timeline, implying that, somewhere in the multi-verse, Jane Foster has far more depth of character and far more to do than her role as love interest allows. Thordis co-founds the Avengers, and her declaration, "I like these Avengers! They don't get intimidated by my powers … **especially** considering I'm a **woman,**" emphasizes the Avengers' acceptance of a woman as the physically strongest member of the team, while the qualifier acknowledges that much of society is not so liberal-minded (21). With this comment, Glut directly critiques the audience and society of the age when Thor was first created.

Glut's ending, unfortunately, undoes much of this interesting work, instead reiterating the limitations placed on female superheroes at the time of the comic's publication. Odin reveals Don Blake's true identity as Thor Odinson and returns Mjolnir to its "rightful" owner. He then transforms Jane into a goddess—an act he always resisted in the main timeline because he did not approve of a relationship between Thor and Jane, and because he repeatedly found Jane "unworthy"—and marries her. While Glut presents this marriage and elevation in status as a victory, the combination of marriage to the father of her true love, itself a literal reification of patriarchy, with the knowledge of how Odin repeatedly belittles Jane in canon, rings hollow. *What If … ?* #10 opens up the possibility of Jane Foster being Thor, but its conclusion marks a return to the status quo, and it ultimately suggests that a woman temporarily wielding the hammer would only change things for that individual, and even then, not necessarily for the better.

While the *What If … ?* Jane Foster/Thordis comic served as a diverting thought experiment at the time of its publication, it highlights the far more complex way in which Jason Aaron approached the idea in 2014; he negotiates Jane Foster's assumption of the mantle of Thor as both a continuation and transformation of that mantle. In a letter in the final issue of *Thor: God of Thunder* Aaron emphasizes continuity:

> It's the same story. The same direction in which I have always been moving. The same characters and settings. The same stakes and tone. The same heavy metal soundtrack. The same "dark Kirby" vibe. The same all-encompassing love of beards and mead.
>
> Though there will be just one notable difference.
>
> There's about to be a brand new Thor in town.
>
> And she can sling a hammer with the best of 'em.
>
> That's right. SHE. (#25, 31)

Jane might be an "All-New" Thor, but Aaron assures audiences that her gender does not supersede the nine points that are "the same." Jane's ability

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to become Thor, in a transformation that—because it is triggered by an enchanted hammer—goes beyond a costume change, suggests that mantle passing paradoxically provides stability, allowing a role to continue even when occupied by a new person.

Therefore, when a shadowy figure whispers "there must always be a Thor" (*Thor* (2014–2015) #1, 22) as she picks up Mjolnir, she sets up one of the major themes of the run. Jane Foster's whisper echoes Nick Fury's whisper of truth to Odinson in the *Original Sin* event—also penned by Aaron—a whisper that made him drop the hammer (*Original Sin* #7, 15–16), and so creates a symmetry linking the making unworthy with the making worthy. These whispered truths are in tension with each other. We eventually learn the content of Nick Fury's whisper: that "Gorr was right" (*The Unworthy Thor* #5, 16). Gorr the God Butcher is the villain of the first two arcs of Aaron's run; he was driven mad by his gods' refusal to answer prayers, and so goes on a quest to kill all gods on the grounds that they, and the religions they inspire, have devastating effects on the people they claim to help. While Aaron is highly critical of religion and of gods who demand fealty throughout his run on *Thor*, from the first Gorr arc (2012) to *War of the Realms* (2019), Jane's whisper implies that—while Gorr is right about gods and religion—the role of Thor transcends that of one specific Norse god. James Whitbrook argues that what makes *Mighty Thor* one of the best Marvel comics in recent years is the way Aaron uses Jane to negotiate the tensions between Asgard and Midgard (Earth) that are a mainstay of Thor comics:

> In almost every version of Thor, the point of being placed between these two realms, between gods and humankind, is to show the need for both, for a faith in the *good* of both, despite vast differences between them. Jane encapsulates that on a literal and spiritual level throughout *Mighty Thor*, not just because of the dichotomy between her failing human body and her all-powerful goddess form, but because of the crises of faith that have tested her throughout her long relationship with the Odinson and into her time as Thor herself. (Whitbrook "Faith")

The reveal of Jane's identity to the readers, which happens at the end of the first series, is accompanied by an inner monologue in which she clarifies the meaning of her initial assertion: "The world **needs** a Thor. That's all that really matters. We need a god who understands what it means to be humbled. To be **mortal**. A god who knows how precious life is. How delicate. A god who struggles every day to lead a worthy life. Who suffers so that no one else will have to" (*Thor* (2014–2015) #8, 20–1). While the rhetoric of this statement echoes Christian mythology more than Norse, a connection reinforced by Jane's eventual sacrificial death and resurrection, Aaron depicts Jane's strength as coming from her humanity rather than her divinity. Jane Foster as Thor reflectively brings back the duality of Thor

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as Don Blake, a form Odin chose as a punishment so his son would learn humility, and so returns the mantle to its earliest Marvel roots.

However, Aaron's run also explicitly highlights the specific challenge that a female Thor represents to the status quo. Thor Odinson makes a spectacle of himself in front of all of Asgard upon the loss of his hammer. He kneels shirtless and defeated, refusing to eat, to sleep, or to speak to anyone "except the **hammer**" (*Thor* (2014–2015) #1, 7) that had dropped from his hand at the end of *Original Sin*. Dauterman's art in the opening pages renders Odinson as an abject, crouched figure, ending with him pathetically wiping his nose as his father berates him and the shadowy image of Nick Fury whispering hovers above him in the stars (9). Aaron uses the conflict between Odin the All-Father, who has recently returned to Asgard, and Freyja the All-Mother, who had been ruling in his stead, to suggest two different ways of reading Thor's fall. His Father angrily asks: "What **absurdity** have thou allowed to befall thee here, boy? How is it possible that the prince of Asgard, the one true God of Thunder, **the Odinson** … has become unworthy?" (7–8). The focus on masculine bloodline and loss of power demonstrates Odin's own fear of replacement, and—even before Jane picks up the hammer—he blames women: "This is what happens when an All-Mother is left in charge of Asgard" (10). Freyja, however, suggests that her son should not read the loss of Mjolnir as a loss of his identity: "Worthiness should not be defined by the whims of magic weapons. Rise my son, and let the hammer be damned. Rise and remember the hero that you are" (11).[8] The suggestion that worthiness is internal rather than external undercuts the hierarchical reasoning of Odin, and shows Jane's godhood as part of a larger social change. Where Marvel's past "attempts to appeal to female readers through female superheroes" have been marked—at best—"by complex negotiations between female (and/or feminist) needs and male (and/or patriarchal) expectations" (Peppard 109), Aaron writes a female-centered text that criticizes patriarchy as harmful to both men and women, and Dauterman's art appeals to a female gaze as much as a male one. Jane Foster's story therefore openly acknowledges the challenge her assumption of the mantle offers to the one who held it before her, and through it, to the ruling power structures of the Marvel Universe as a whole.

Furthermore, because Marvel only announced that "a woman" would become Thor, with the mystery of her identity continued through her first series, the new Thor's gender is inevitably more important to her role in this first series than is her own history as Jane Foster. When Jane picks up the hammer, the focus is on Mjolnir, rather than her. The panels slowly move in from a wide shot of the abandoned icon to a close-up as the hammer begins to lift from the ground; its inscription, which has been the same since

[8]This sentiment is picked up, but placed in the mouth of Odin, in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017).

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Don Blake first picked it up, changes in a crackle of blue lightning, adding an "s" so that it reads, "Whosoever holds this hammer, if she be worthy, shall possess the power of … **Thor**" (*Thor* (2014–2015) #1, 22). While in the 1960s, the pronoun "he" was used both for men and as the universal default, that grammatical construction of gender suggests that the default position is male, and that a female is somehow a special case. The change from "he" to "she" does not solve the larger pronoun problem, but it does emphasize that the holder of the hammer does not need to be male to be worthy.

The transformation in Mjolnir's inscription, together with Freyja's earlier personification of the "magic hammer," suggests a change not only in the wielder, but also in the mantle itself. Jane has a more collaborative relationship with Mjolnir than Odinson ever did. While Aaron's run has a recurring character of a young Thor, *c*. 900 CE, who cannot yet lift Mjolnir and struggles to become worthy, Jane and Mjolnir's relationship is reciprocal, and modeled on cross-species relationships, rather than on the use of a tool as a sign of dominance. She kisses Mjolnir and tells it that it is a "Good hammer" (*Thor* (2014–2015) #7, 19). It speaks to her. It even takes her form to save her from S.H.I.E.L.D agents (*Mighty Thor* #11, 3). In Jane's form, Mjolnir tells her, "Your heart is stronger than even your thunder, my lady. That's what makes you worthy. That's why I chose you" (17). The close identification between the two suggests that Jane Foster is more truly Thor than was the original holder of the mantle. Their relationship also spits in the face of Odin, who put the initial enchantment on Mjolnir because the hammer was "too wild and untamed for even the god, and if it would not be wielded by him, then it could rot for all he cared" (*Mighty Thor* #12, 18). In emphasizing these changes to Mjolnir, Aaron's story depicts gender as something that actually matters when it comes to power relations, that might challenge what superheroism should look and be like.

Because the focus of the first series is so much upon the change in gender of the mantle holder, Aaron's story also delves into the challenges faced by a female superhero operating in a sexist society. For example, in the second issue of her run, the new Thor faces off against both Frost Giants and Dario Agger, head of the Roxxon corporation. The villains belittle Thor, and question her legitimacy. The Frost Giants suggest that Jane is a "scrawny little girl" who makes a "**mockery**" of the role, or that she is not real but a trick pulled by Loki. Either way, they see battling her as "so humiliating, seems almost a shame to have to kill her" (*Thor* (2014–2015) #2, 17). Dario Agger's quip, "I've met Thor. I've punched Thor. **You're** no Thor" (17), echoes Lloyd Benson's belittling of Dan Quale in the 1988 vice-presidential debates—"I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy"—which has become political shorthand to rebuke anyone who is trying to elevate themselves by association with a beloved icon. The perspective of Dauterman's accompanying image adds to

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the intimidation, with the viewer placed, like Jane, looking up at the Giants, emphasizing her physical smallness.

The fact that the story openly addresses the sexism Jane Foster/Thor might face as a female superhero is not necessarily a weakness, but there are times when Aaron's first Jane Foster series is too self-congratulatory in its treatment of gender, reflecting some of the creative dangers of overtly political writing. In one particularly pointed episode, Aaron takes both positive and negative reactions to the mantle passing that could have come from internet comments or letters pages, and places them in the mouths of villains. First Crusher Creel/Absorbing Man dismisses Jane, complaining: "**Thor?** Are you kidding me? I'm supposed to call **you** Thor? Damn **feminists** are ruining everything. You wanna be a chick super hero? Fine. Who the Hell cares? But get your own identity" (*Thor* (2014–2015) #5, 5). The target of the parody here is low-hanging fruit, and while it might be cathartic when Jane breaks his jaw, the defeat comes not from the hero but from another woman who respects what she is doing. Crusher's partner Titania is so impressed that Thor is a woman and not "called She-Thor, or Lady Thunderstrike or nothing like that" (7) that, in a "one time girl-power pass," she gives herself up to the hero "out of respect for what you're doing. Can't have been easy for you. Hasn't been for me either" (8).

Titania's affirmations here echo many of the letters to the comic, each of which emphasizes what the positive female representation means to the writer, and Aaron thus suggests that those staunch defenders of Thor help her win battles; however, the moment is heavy handed, and was commented on by numerous fans as a particularly on-the-nose bit of writing. Fans commenting on the Gabriel controversy on the r/books sub-reddit[9] singled out this "girl-power pass" incident as particularly worthy of scorn, and emblematic of the worst of Marvel's diversity writing: "sonofableebblob" exclaims, "holy god damn. even as a girl, that is FUCKING annoying. ESPECIALLY as a girl" and grafton29 complains about "fem Thor stop[ping] the fight to talk about feminism." Clearly, neither fan saw this as a seamless incorporation of feminist themes into the story arc, but rather, registered it as a moment of preachiness and "moral superiority" ("I_am_the_ginger") on the part of the creators. Similarly, Odinson's list of women he suspects of being Thor—a list that points to the many worthy women in the Marvel universe—triggers another "girl power" moment when he uses it to find an army to back up his usurper. In a splash page, the reader is positioned looking over Jane's shoulder to see Odinson and his mother leading an army of women arriving to aid Jane in battle. Freyja's call "**Am I right, ladies?**" (*Thor* (2014–2015) #7, 21) emphasizes the power of women working together as a community, but again, the artificiality of the moment, in which superhero women all simultaneously gather together to answer

[9]Discussing Sian Cain's article for the *Guardian* ("Marvel Executive").

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the call of another woman, arguably undermines the scene in its obvious, pandering address to its audience.[10]

It should be noted, however, that most such incidents happen in the first run where Thor's human identity is a mystery, making her gender her defining feature. Once it is revealed that Thor is Jane Foster, she becomes more than simply a representative of her gender; rather, her gender is only one part of her transformation of the mantle. Aaron draws on her long history with Odinson and with his family and people, her movement from nurse to doctor, her work as the Senator from Earth in the Congress of Worlds, and her battle with cancer to give Jane depth and nuance that make her much more interesting than "Thor, but a woman." For example, one of the strongest ways the Jane Foster/Thor run critiques gender is through hearkening back to the character's long history in ways that critically examine her role as a love interest in the early days of *Thor*. Her first appearance was in Thor's second appearance (*Journey Into Mystery* #84), where Lee and Kirby introduced her as Don Blake's nurse, who, despite their mutual attraction, he would not pursue because he saw his own disability as making him unworthy of her affections (#84, 4). Throughout the early years of *Thor* comics, Jane is depicted as standing loyally by Don Blake, running the office and making excuses to patients for his unexplained absences, and putting up with his reticence to develop their relationship despite his eventual protestations of love. She later accepts his inability to stand up to his father, who she identifies as the main reason their relationship failed: "I was never good enough for the All-Father. Never worthy" (*Mighty Thor* #5, 3). In some of the early issues, Jane also has a crush on Thor, whose dashing and romantic heroism she sees in opposition to the stuffy reticence of Dr. Blake. Kirby depicts Jane's daydream in which she polishes Thor's hammer[11] and irons his cloak; she imagines that "he'd complain about my fussing, but I know he'd secretly enjoy it" (*Journey into Mystery* #89, 5). Lee, Lieber, and Kirby use Jane's fantasy of doing domestic chores for Thor to parody idealized American domesticity at the time, since Thor so obviously does not fit the narrative; but Jane, rather than Thor, is the object of their satire.

By contrast, Aaron critically re-examines Jane's role as love interest in ways that are both about gender and about the character herself. Jane's position as nurse, assistant, and love interest in the earlier comics places her outside the world of action that is Thor's domain, and suggests, perhaps, that Odin is right and that she is too far beneath him for their relationship to work. But in Aaron's run she rejects that secondary role, not to rekindle her relationship with Thor, but to *be* Thor. She throws an asteroid at the

[10]It also prefigures the moment in the final battle of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) when all the female heroes join together to help Captain Marvel, a scene that similarly elicited mixed reviews (Kane).

[11]Not an explicit euphemism, although it does link domesticity and sexuality.

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All-Father in battle, asking "Am I Worthy enough for you now?" (*Mighty Thor* #5, 4). Jane also notes Thor's own role in the failure of their relationship, telling Rosalind Solomon: "I loved Donald Blake like no man I'd ever known. And I knew that he loved me. But for far too long what I didn't know was that he had a secret. Donald Blake was the Mighty Thor. When I found out, I felt like such a fool" (*Mighty Thor* #11, 19). Rather than protecting her with his secrecy, Jane's "one true love" let her down. By explicitly and critically referring back to earlier comics, Aaron not only suggests Jane's growth as a character, but also rejects the ways in which female characters in those comics were passively affected by male characters' actions, or even inactions.

Aaron most explicitly criticizes this passivity in Jane's rejection of her early role as the stereotypical damsel in distress. It was common in the Lee and Kirby comics for Jane to be kidnapped or otherwise endangered as a way for the villain to manipulate Thor. For example, when Loki discovers Thor's human identity, he visits Don Blake in his office, and puts Jane under a spell so that she will obey his commands (*Journey into Mystery* #88, 5); he then makes Thor choose between picking up his hammer and maintaining his identity, or saving Jane from a tiger he has conjured (7). When Jane first encounters Loki in her new role as Thor, she cuts off his pleas that he has changed and wants to create new stories, as she is doing, because she cannot completely escape those old stories. She knocks off the head of his avatar with a hammer, thinking:

> The first time I ever crossed paths with Loki, he brainwashed me and tried to feed me to a tiger in central park. In those days he was always kidnapping me to use as a prop in his schemes against Thor. He treated me as a plaything. Never cared if I lived or died. If he knew it was **Jane Foster** who now commands the thunder, he'd know not to waste his breath. This is one Thor who will **never** trust a Loki. (*Mighty Thor* #3, 5–6)

While Jane's suspicions are reasonable, the narrative itself suggests that Loki *is* trying to change, and Jane's inability to work with him because of past conflict points both to the limitations of those narratives and to the difficulty of changing them. In trying to escape the narrative of damsel in distress—a role she obviously no longer plays—Jane ends up re-inscribing the story of Thor and Loki that has been told since that time. With this ironic conflict, Aaron demonstrates how gendered narratives have repercussions that cannot be erased simply by rejecting one past narrative.

Finally, Aaron critically re-examines the Thor mantle through exploring Jane's illness. She is the only woman who Odinson crosses off his list of possible Thors, not because she is unworthy, but because of her cancer—a fact that suggests that he has forgotten the duality of being both the God of Thunder and "lame Dr. Blake." Aaron's run began with three Thors from different eras, and he also writes three Janes, who exist simultaneously: Thor,

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the cancer patient, and the woman who mediates between the other two identities. Jane hides in her Thor identity as a way to escape "thinking about cancer or chemo or the problems of poor, frail Jane Foster" (*Mighty Thor* #3, 19). Transforming into Thor gives Jane strength and power, but it also "neutralizes the effects of the chemotherapy" making her weaker every time she returns to human form. It does not purge her body of the cancer cells that are consuming it "because cancer is just another part of me now" (#1, 18). In this way, Jane Foster differs greatly from the Donald Blake/Thor Odinson dichotomy, in which Thor's power represents what José Alaniz, in *Death Disability and the Superhero*, calls an "overcompensation" for disability: "Almost universally, the superpower will *erase* the disability, banishing it to the realm of the unseen, replacing it with raw power and heroic acts of derring-do in a hyper-masculine frame" (36). Jane's transformation into Thor grants her immense physical strength and beauty, but because her illness *is* her, there is no escaping from or erasing it through her superheroic transformation. Instead, her story focuses intimately on the relationship between the body and the self, and in so doing challenges the "structuring principle of the super-body," namely, "that it comes about … through an always-erased though always-implied disabled/dying/dead body" (25). In *Mighty Thor*, that dying body is not erased; rather, it is central to the story and to Jane's sense of self.

Tellingly, Dauterman's art directly links Jane's super-body to her cancer-ridden body in that neither the blonde goddess nor the frail, bald patient looks like the brown-haired Jane Foster of the past fifty years of comics continuity; Jane is afraid of losing herself in either alternate identity. They are both her, and yet, neither is fully her, so her fear is that of losing her "self," either through death from cancer, or by forgetting Jane Foster and "staying the Goddess of Thunder forever" (*Mighty Thor* #20, 14). While Don Blake sees his disability as emasculating in the early comics, Jane's cancer suggests that recognizing and accepting vulnerability is its own form of strength, and that one does not need to be an invulnerable god to be a hero. *Mighty Thor* includes many letters from people with and survivors of cancer and their families who praise the comic for speaking to their experiences.[12] For example, Marla writes that her "Mum was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer around the same time that it was revealed that the new Thor was Jane Foster—who also happened to have cancer." While her initial impulse was to quit reading because the storyline hit too close to home, she found the parallels filled her with inspiration and hope: "My Mum's bravery and strength matches that of Jane Foster. No matter how much life keeps trying to drag her down, she fights and fights and fights" (#21, 22). Aaron presents Jane's fight against cancer as equivalent to her cosmic battles, and

[12]See also letters from Charles Hilton (#4, 23); separate letters from Justin and F.J. (#5, 23); from Wadzi (#15, 21); from Bellan (#17, 21); and from Jamie Grace-Duff (#704, 23).

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her assertion that "When you are a ninety-pound woman dying of cancer … it **does** feel good to punch god in the face" (#5, 13) emphasizes her strength in the battle. The god she punches might literally be Odin, who has been a blocking figure to her for half a century, but the reference to her illness suggests that she is also fighting back at the fates who have dealt her this affliction. Jane's illness is, after all, a gendered one; she is battling breast cancer, which is coded as female, both by its attack on a female secondary sexual characteristic and also by awareness campaigns using stereotypically feminine imagery such as pink ribbons. Jane eschews such explicit gendering of the disease, usually referring to it simply as cancer,[13] but Aaron's explicit choice links her struggles with her body to the many ways in which women negatively experience their own embodiment within sexist and patriarchal societies.

Furthermore, Jane's repeated transformation into Thor is killing her, which brings up questions of who has the right to tell someone how or when to die. In a page that visually parallels Jane first picking up the hammer, a visibly frail, almost ghostlike, Jane contemplates Mjolnir as the people around her tell her that she can never do so again. Here, rather than each panel moving closer to Mjolnir, Mjolnir stays the same size, and each panel shows Jane getting closer. Color artist Matthew Wilson presents Jane and the hammer in the same pale, stony color scheme, emphasizing their connection and Jane's continued identification as Thor, even in her weakened state. While she is not literally isolated as she was on the moon, the people around her, talking to her, and telling her what to do are not connected to her. Dauterman pencils them all out of focus, and only Rosalind Solomon's assertion that "She's gotta make this decision herself" (*Mighty Thor* #703, 17) actually gets through to Jane. Even surrounded by loved ones and caregivers, professional and personal, she is alone and the decision of whether to pursue treatment is hers to make. The final panel of the hand and hammer almost touching echoes the suspense of the first lifting of Mjolnir, but also emphasizes the cost of doing that work. Her choice to embrace the physical might of godhood is not an escape from death or vulnerability, but instead a reckoning with the personal consequences of wielding great power.

The ending of *Mighty Thor* continues the theme of transformation, but focuses as well on the idea of return. Aaron emphasizes the permanent transformation of the Thor mantle by not having Odinson regain Mjolnir when he retakes the Thor name. Importantly, Odinson values Jane over Mjolnir, telling his once beloved tool: "You are the cause of this suffering! You are the reason she is dying! Go to Hel and leave her be, you blasted mallet!" (*Mighty Thor* #21, 20). Jane dies after saving Asgard from Mangog, and earns the respect of Odin (without any creepy offers of marriage this

[13]In so doing, Jane's illness also refers back to one of the most famous superhero deaths, Jim Starlin's *The Death of Captain Marvel* (1982).

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time), and a place in Valhalla. However, she hesitates at the gates, bathed in warm sunshine, and in her ideal form as a healthy human woman with brown hair, explaining that, though she chose to sacrifice herself for Asgard, she wasn't "ready to die" (#706, 7). Odin and Thor work together to channel the God Tempest, the force that gave the hammer its power and was released when Jane destroyed Mjolnir in order to hurl Mangog into the sun; they use that power to bring Jane back from the Gates of Valhalla. The storm burns itself out bringing Jane back and becomes a "soothing breeze" (16). Mjolnir and Jane have fused into one, but Jane's heroism is now the human kind and the hammer is gone. Thor says that "'twas easier to get used to losing an arm than it will be the hammer" (18), emphasizing how much it was and is a part of both of them. Jane hands Odinson back the last remaining speck of Mjolnir, but tells him that his identity was his own: "The hammer made me the thunderer. But not you. You did that yourself" (19). Jane repeats, "There must always be a Thor. And now … once again … it must be you" (20). Aaron and Dauterman's story ends with Jane Foster looking out from Asgard and seeing the spectral image of her other identity (20).

This conclusion could be viewed as a disappointment on a number of levels. First, by passing back the mantle, Jane could certainly be seen as reaffirming that Thor Odinson is the "rightful" owner; Aaron gestures toward this reading when Loki tells Jane: "We all know how your story ends, Lady Thor. You're just keeping that Mjolnir **warm** for a bit, aren't you? Sooner or later, the Odinson will come back to reclaim his hammer" (*Mighty Thor* #3, 14). Her inevitable passing back of the mantle to the original mantle-bearer could thus be read as a sign that her bearing of it was always just a marketing ploy that would be abandoned if it proved unpopular. As well, by having Jane escape death, the story could be read as a "bad-faith 'resolution'" (Alaniz 282) to the death/disability narrative at its heart. Certainly, while Jane may no longer be a Thor, she has challenged what the mantle means, disrupting the patriarchal power structures that mantle has represented through her collaborative relationship with Mjolnir (as opposed to Thor and Odin's attempts to command it). Nevertheless, the fact that it is Odin and Thor who, through their power over nature, erase her choice to sacrifice herself, also undermines this narrative; her bodily autonomy and her choice to accept the consequences of her power are denied by their authority.

Jane's survival might, however, be necessary for her time as Thor to have lasting repercussions on the Marvel universe, rather than being only a one-off experiment in diversity. Her survival offers opportunities for other creators to build on Aaron's foundation. As well, while her death can be seen as a cop-out, a magical erasure of her illness that feeds into the very tropes of the super-body that Alaniz rightly identifies as central to the superhero genre, it is just as true that death as permanent only for side characters and girlfriends is every bit as problematic. We read the ending, then, as a

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compromise: given the nature of Thor Odinson as a valuable property, it was inevitable that the mantle would be returned to him. However, by having Jane survive and her Thor form remain as a spectral entity who might, as most superheroes do, someday return, Aaron and Dauterman negotiate the end of this Thor in ways that suggest that the mantle is as transformed by her wielding of it as she is by bearing it.

What It Means to Be a Good Man: Race and the Captain America Mantle

Like Jane Foster, Sam Wilson has a long history in the Marvel universe, although he has occupied a far more prominent position. He was created by Stan Lee and Gene Colan in 1969 and, though his very first appearance has him swinging shirtless through a tropical jungle (*Captain America* (1968–1996) #117, 16), he introduces himself to Steve Rogers as "a big city brother" (17). While this conjunction does combine two stereotypes, it also served to remind late 1960s readers not to judge by appearances. Working as Captain America's partner throughout the 1970s, the Falcon's almost-equal status is captured in the title *Captain America and the Falcon*, which appeared on the covers of #134–222 (1971–1978), although the official title remained *Captain America*. He made sporadic appearances in various titles after that time, only again co-headlining a comic in Christopher Priest's 2004–2005 *Captain America and the Falcon*. The partnership between Sam Wilson and Steve Rogers is "contentious, but brotherly … measured by the superhero's commitment to interracial male bonding based on an assumed social equality between partners" (Fawaz 189). Nevertheless, Marvel creators often depict Sam chafing at Steve Rogers's greater physical and social power, and Mark Gruenwald underlines his less-than-equal status through the words of a government committee tasked with replacing Steve as Captain America: they briefly consider Sam Wilson, but "doubt the country is ready for a black Captain America" (*Captain America* (1968–1996) #333, 5). In the Marvel universe, Sam Wilson is continually defined by his race in ways that, while they often critique racial politics in America, are also limiting; as Fawaz observes, "The Falcon's wish to be seen as Cap's heroic equal is presented as stemming from his personal insecurities as a black man in a racist society, while Cap's struggle to escape the institutional structures of government power is framed as the universal struggle to be a free man in any context regardless of race" (190). Such a universalist construction of Captain America, which, as we will discuss in Chapter 4, sees him as an apolitical, idealized representation of the American Dream, positions Sam, by contrast, as unable to fulfill that role because he has so constantly been represented as a minority.

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Nevertheless, Sam's name being put before the Committee for consideration and his role as Cap's partner both suggest a desire for a time when Sam Wilson could occupy the position, one that would signal that America was indeed, finally, "ready" for racial equality. Indeed, Sam Wilson's first turn as Captain America is, unlike that of Jane Foster as Thordis, part of canon, as Sam temporarily assumes the shield in 1999 in *Captain America: Sentinel of Liberty*, written by Mark Waid and penciled by Dougie Brathwaite. The two-issue arc in which the mantle is passed emphasizes racial divisions in America, ones that have not been solved in the ensuing twenty years, and the series remains topical today, with its depiction of White supremacist groups inciting hatred and Black people distrusting the police, including Steve Rogers who works as a beat cop. Waid attempts to avoid the stereotype of Black men as "ultracool sidemen or wise-cracking partners to various white protagonists" (Nama 67), and has Sam take "**extra** care to be perceived as Cap's **partner**, not his **sidekick**" (#8, 4). But the relationship still puts him in an uncomfortable position with the people of Harlem, especially since the White supremacist group, the Sons of the Serpent, has renamed itself the Sons of the Shield, and is claiming that Captain America supports their goals (#8, 5).[14] When the group makes it appear that protesters incited by the bombing of a Black church have killed Steve Rogers, Sam puts on a Captain America costume to preserve both the legacy of his friend and everything that the costume itself represents. The title page of issue 9, "Back in Black," depicts Sam, positioned in front of flames, saying "I'm **Captain America**. **Deal** with it" (3).

However, Waid and Brathwaite present the image of a Black Captain America as a source of dis-ease, both for those he is fighting and for those on whose behalf he fights. White supremacists might be addressed as the ones who need to "deal with" a Black Captain America, but the people of Harlem also react negatively, seeing in the uniform a symbol of inequality and oppression, and distrusting Sam when he wears it, calling him "a traitor to [his] race" (#9, 12). He responds to this distrust with a stirring speech, ending "America belongs to **all** people—not just the **white supremacists**! This is **my** home—This is **your** home—This is **our** home! You **with** me?" (13). While the crowd that turns to support Sam is specifically made up of people of color, the speech is also being delivered to the comics audience, and the emphatic use of first person, second person, and first person plural draws a connection between Sam, the people of Harlem, and the readers. The rhetoric encourages all readers to include themselves in the "our" and to make a mental allegiance with the oppressed people of Harlem fighting

[14]The Sons of the Serpent have adopted this strategy before; in their first appearance (*Avengers* (1963–96) #32–33) they captured Captain America in an attempt to force the rest of the Avengers to help them divide America through racial conflict, and had an imposter act as a pro-Serpent Cap.

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back against injustice, and not with the bigots and White supremacists who are oppressing them. The issue ends with Sam explaining that his heroism was not in aid of his friendship with one individual, but rather for the symbolism of the nation: "Not **just** for you, Steve, for the **suit**. I've learned a lot **from** you, man … and maybe the most **important** thing is about the power of the **colors**. Not the black and the white … but the red, white and blue" (#9, 23). Sam here makes a claim for himself as worthy of the mantle, as racial conflict is subsumed in the universality of the American dream, which is only powerful if it is open to all. However, Sam sees himself as "back where I **belong**" (23) in the final frame; while cynical readers might read this as an indication that Sam knows his place, the comic itself suggests that Steve cannot be Captain America without the balance provided by his partner. This early mantle passing therefore straddles a line between arguing that the mantle does represent all Americans and recognizing that different groups within society need different heroes representing them and their interests, cementing Sam's, and the African-American community's, minority status.

Nevertheless, this temporary mantle passing storyline demonstrates again how one-off creative risks can pave the way for larger changes within continuity, as Sam Wilson officially took on the mantle as the new Captain America on October 1, 2014, in the final issue of Rick Remender, Carlos Pacheco, and Stuart Immonen's *Captain America* (2012–2014). In the preceding storyline, Iron Nail had removed the Super-Soldier Serum from Steve Rogers, triggering a reversion to his true age and rendering him no longer capable of performing the physical heroics of Captain America. The cover art by Immonen, Wade von Grawbadger, and Marte Garcia has a background of many Marvel characters, old and new, but the focus is on an empty white space, in the shape of Steve Rogers holding the shield in a heroic pose, with the question "Who is the NEW Captain America?" in the middle (#25, 1). The negative space emphasizes the hole left by Steve Rogers, but the words also suggest that the hole can be filled. The mystery implied by the cover is undercut when Sam Wilson appears in his new colors at a huge party held by Steve Rogers at Avengers Mansion, and attended by all the big names and many deep cuts from Avengers history. Sam immediately acknowledges his appearance as an anticlimax, both to the assembled heroes and to readers: "You guys **all knew** it was me, didn't you? There's literally **no drama** left in this reveal" (20). The fourth-wall-breaking comment does ask readers to think about why this reveal is happening with all this fanfare, especially since Sam Wilson's new role had been widely publicized by Marvel in July.

But the reveal is necessary in order to emphasize that, while Sam will become Captain America, he will not become Steve Rogers. The silhouette of Sam in the splash page does not fit neatly into the hole left by Steve Rogers in the cover art. Furthermore, as Sam enters his new role, the shadow of Steve Rogers still looms large; Steve is not retiring, but instead operating

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as "tactical support" from Avengers Mansion (19). He is the only person who could inspire so many heroes to attend such an event; as Rogue notes, "Steve says jump, everyone asks how high" (16). While she identifies this authority as "one of the advantages of being Captain America" (16), it is clear from the context that advantage does not come with the shield, but rests in the elder statesman who is bestowing it on his protégé, a feeling that is borne out in Remender's two brief runs with Sam Wilson, and becomes a recurring theme of Spencer's series. The comic begins with Steve Rogers authorizing Sam's position:

> I remember the first time I met Sam Wilson as clearly as if it was yesterday. He was helping a band of subjugated villagers fight for their freedom against the Red Skull. Even after I arrived he insisted on helping fight. He was used to fighting. Sam had been through terrible adversity. Lost both parents to violence at a young age. He raised his brother and sister. Supported them. But he never succumbed to bitterness. He used the teachings of his parents, a minister and community organizer, as the standard by which to live. In a world that had shown him prejudice and heartbreak … Sam Wilson continuously stood up. Giving everything he had to try and shape the world into the one that his father dreamed of. (#25, 2–3)

Remender has Steve's words place Sam's backstory firmly in a civil rights narrative that is widely accepted and celebrated within liberal American culture. His father was a minister who had a dream, linking him to Martin Luther King Jr. His mother is a "community organizer," a term closely linked to then President Barack Obama. Most importantly, while Sam has fought, both literally against supervillains and more metaphorically against "adversity," "prejudice and heartbreak," he has done so without "bitterness," and so is very much the model of the acceptable Black activist, who doesn't make White allies feel uncomfortable with his anger. Steve's story here is directed at the reader, affirming that Sam is a hero, even if he has "No magic hammer. No Super-Soldier Serum," even if he is "Just a man" (p. 3). The words are superimposed over visuals of Sam apparently sacrificing himself to save New York from an Omega bomb. His falling from the sky evokes images of Icarus, but his ability to rise from the ashes suggests that he can reach higher, that he can be superhuman.

However, Steve Rogers' (and Remender's) version of Sam's history already hints at the complexity of Sam's position in superhero mythology. His story as told by the former Captain America is not entirely accurate. In their fraught partnership in the 1970s, Steve and Sam *often* fought, and Sam frequently evinced significant and righteous bitterness about his second-class citizenship in American society; for example, in issue #137 of *Captain America* (1968–1996), Stan Lee depicts Sam reflecting on his partnership with Steve Rogers: "I never signed no contract to be his **whipping boy**.

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Any time he wants'a trade **gripes**, I'll match 'im **two** for one. I figure **any** black man can" (6). Sam's words here signal his importance in terms of representation; in a world of superheroes set apart by their unique powers, Sam invokes the power of communal experiences, in which "any black man" could set Steve Rogers straight. Sam also has to continually remind Steve of his White privilege, puncturing the idea of Captain America as a "universal" icon; for example, writer Gary Friedrich has Steve see Sam's more politically radical girlfriend, Leila, as a threat to their partnership; Steve tries to win the Falcon back by claiming to know what it's like to be torn between conflicting communities, which Sam angrily rejects: "That's the **trouble** with you whites! You think you've got all the **answers** … when you don't even ask the right **questions**! On the day you **realize** that … then maybe you'll have the **right** to say you know how it is!" (#144, 15). Sam's words express rightful bitterness about his second-class status, and Steve's inability to fully comprehend this fact. Therefore, when Falcon proclaims in issue 146, also written by Friedrich, that "My **people** need me a lot more than SHIELD or Cap, and I plan to see that they **get** at least **one** superhero to call their own" (14), he is making a claim for why he needs to be not just a Black man who is a superhero, but specifically a *Black superhero*, one who might very well be at odds with a White establishment that is both complicit in and ignorant of the problems facing the Black community in a profoundly unequal America. By having Steve Rogers White-wash this history in his introduction of Sam as the new Captain America, and place his troubles in the past *as* history, Remender makes him a palatable option for the supposedly apolitical mantle. This reveals the unspoken assumption underlying the choice of Sam as Captain America: only a good man who has suffered, but remains above anger for that suffering, can represent America as a whole.

If Remender's introduction of Sam relies on somewhat revisionist history to make Sam suitable to bear the mantle of Captain America to the assembled Avengers and (presumably) the reading audience,[15] Nick Spencer's ANADM take on Sam Wilson instead focuses on the cost to the hero of picking up a beloved mantle, and the role that race plays in a hero's ability to represent the larger public. Rather than adopting the version of Sam presented by Steve when he passed the mantle, Spencer instead invokes the friction in the relationship between Sam and Steve that stems from their different positions in an America where the liberal ideas of equality and justice are not available equally to all. Spencer's story is often angry in tone, and therefore "off brand" both for the stereotype of Captain America as a nationalist icon and

[15]Sam Wilson is no stranger to revisionist history, the most infamous being the earlier "Snap Wilson" retcon, in which Sam's heroic origin story, as related by Steve Rogers here, was revealed to be a hoax perpetrated by Red Skull with the aid of a cosmic cube, a story designed to appeal to Steve (and liberal readers') ideals and ethics.

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for the more centrist aspects of Marvel's liberal philosophy. At the beginning of Spencer's run, Sam has been ousted from S.H.I.E.L.D, lost all funding, and gained the ire of a good portion of America, because he has chosen not to be a replica of Steve Rogers, with his ability to "inspire Americans, show them what they could be, if they worked together" (*Captain America: Sam Wilson* #1, 10). Remender might present Sam Wilson as the obvious choice to replace Steve Rogers as Captain America, but Spencer's first issue highlights just how much Sam will have to work to be accepted in that role by the general public, with newspaper headlines blaring "Captain Anti-America" and "Sam Wilson: Hand in your Shield" (12). Therefore, while Spencer initially depicts Sam as attempting to "follow in [Steve's] footsteps, honor his legacy" by fighting villains, joining the Avengers, and appearing in a Pride parade to support marriage equality—in other words, as a superhero who embodies the Marvel philosophy—he also depicts Sam as "feeling a little off" (10), showing that he cannot simply step into the role as it was defined, and occupied, by Steve Rogers.

Spencer instead chooses to emphasize Sam's different approach to the mantle of Captain America, focusing not on hope and idealism, but on the political divisions that are tearing apart the country, both in the comics and, implicitly, in the world outside our windows. Sam complains that "We don't **trust** each other. We no longer see ourselves in our neighbour. And this is not some intellectual debate—people are **dying**. Our streets are burning. Inequality is soaring." He notes that he differs from Steve Rogers, who "always tried to stay **above** the fray" in that Sam has "opinions. Strongly held beliefs." He reflects, "the more I saw the people I believed I was standing up for being **walked** on—the more I heard a noise machine spouting **intolerance** and **fear**, drowning common sense out—the more I wondered—shouldn't Captain America be **more** than just a symbol?" (#1, 10–11). Sam therefore holds a press conference that sets the stage for the conflicts Spencer highlights throughout the run, in which Sam's ideals come into conflict with those of the nation state. Sam goes from being a governmentally sponsored superhero back to a street-level hero, crowdfunding to finance his operations (#1, 20), borrowing money from his brother's congregation, and flying coach on missions (#1, 7). His lack of funds to do the good work he envisions alludes to the work done by many underfunded agencies and by those without privilege. While Waid's Sam Wilson who temporarily held the shield in *Captain America: Sentinel of Liberty* worked to bridge racial divides and placed the "red white and blue" over "black and white," Spencer's Sam Wilson is rightly cautious, hearkening back to his early days in the 1970s. His self-reflexivity in his relationship with Steve recalls his history of refusing the typical sidekick role, which "gave their personal relationship a social resonance with broader racial tensions, and symbolized a social debate about if aggressive or incremental steps were more effective in achieving racial equality" (Nama 70). That these same concerns are still central to a Sam Wilson storyline decades down the road demonstrates that

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the incremental steps of the powers that be (both within and outside the comics) who worry about an America that is "not ready for a black Captain America" are not working.

Spencer grounds Sam's internal conflict in political debates that are easily recognizable to a contemporary American audience, and in so doing, argues for the impossibility of an apolitical Captain America in the current political climate. The recap and credits pages of each issue show a television set to a news channel, a tablet open to a Twitter-style newsfeed, and a smartphone with the creators. The different screens and the opinions that appear on them emphasize how the media are exacerbating the divisions that Sam is trying to overcome. Recurring commenters appear on these screens throughout the series, spreading the news of Sam's previous and ongoing exploits, always with their own slant or a sensationalist agenda designed to change the narrative or to get attention. For example, the title page of the second issue shows "Wing Watch" arguing with "GALACTUS WAS RIGHT" over whether Sam's hotline is a useful way for ordinary people to "take a stand" or "part of the socialist agenda" (#2, 2). Even the television news, which is supposed to give the facts, asks rhetorical questions designed to sway opinion or uses adjectives to suggest particular readings of events: "*Partisan* Captain America ruffles feathers with *controversial* press conference" (#2, 2 emphasis added). Nuanced debate over issues becomes reduced to hashtags, with #IStandWithSam and #NotMyCaptainAmerica denoting how characters position themselves in relation to what they see as Sam's politics and embodiment of the role. Spencer, in an interview, notes that "what drives partisanship, even in an era of deep disillusionment with political parties" is "not belief in one's own ideas, it's fear of the other side. That's really what motivates people to vote, it seems—not 'We're going to fix this' but rather, 'We can't let the other team win'" and he therefore has Sam battle "an entire political structure that really has no interest in coming together" (Leon, "Slams Fox"). Such binary division, Spencer suggests, does not allow for cooperation, negotiation, or even nuanced debate. Sam and Steve's ideological positions are not too far apart, but each is coopted by an opposing side as an emblem of all that side represents.

Furthermore, Spencer's depiction of Sam attempting to adopt a centrist political position reveals the moral hazards that belief entails. A recurring theme is that of Sam going against his own beliefs and preferences in order to maintain social stability, such as when he allows the corporations who employed Serpent Solutions to escape prosecution, even though they were benefiting from human trafficking and torture, because taking them down will cause economic hardship for the entire country (#6, 17), or when he does not publicize the facts of Maria Hill's illegal prison at Pleasant Hill, because it would make Americans lose faith in S.H.I.E.L.D. and the government (#9, 7). But Sam's compromises put him at odds with others. For example, two younger heroes, Joaquín and Rage, both believe he should be doing more and fighting harder against obvious injustices in the system,

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even if doing so might break the system altogether. When Joaquín and Rage attempt to protest Ariella Connor—an anti-immigrant pundit and obvious stand-in for Ann Coulter—who is speaking at a local campus, they come up against the Bombshells, campus radicals who make the two younger heroes better understand Sam's position. Rage notes that he is confused by fighting people "who seem to hate the same person we hate" and Joaquín agrees that Conner's "very presence is damaging to those who have suffered" but can't agree that "for that she's gotta **die**" (#17, 14). One of the group's complaints that Joaquín—who is an undocumented immigrant himself—should be "an **ally**" to their cause points to the hierarchical divisions in the left, and to the dangers of well-meaning outsiders taking over radical movements (#17, 15). Spencer's attempt to get his readers to think outside binary "team" terms, however, also leads some reviewers to critique the message. Kelly Kanayama complains on *The Nerdist* that the Bombshells are "parodies of the 'Social Justice Warrior' stereotype" (Kanayama), and YouTuber "Graphic Policy" describes the storyline as "very anti-left" and the political rhetoric of the campus protesters as "a comic book version of what someone thinks the left sounds like." He sees this episode—and another where Flag Smasher attacks a US Senator—as going against the politics of the rest of the title ("Graphic Policy"). Certainly, the issue does offer some heavy-handed representation of a particular type of social discourse, such as when one protester yells at Sam: "Oh, look, it's Captain **Patriarchy** here to **mansplain** why our principled stand against hatred isn't '**appropriate**'" (#17, 19). In representing leftist discourse in ways that play into "fault on both sides" reductionism on issues of racism and oppression, Spencer could be accused of playing it safe.

However, this episode can only be understood for what it is when read within the larger arc of the series: Sam's last attempt at working within a system that is becoming increasingly oppressive. Although the campus confrontation ends on an optimistic note for Sam and his team, who have found common ground, the issue itself does not. There is a coda in which Rage tries to prevent a robbery and is beaten and arrested by the Americops, a privatized police force who have been violating civil liberties. This incident is bookended by Sam's narration, musing "that things are a long, long way from perfect, but they have gotten better. And so long as we all keep pushing—the world will change" as the team heads home from the campus confrontation (#17, 22). The final page of the issue crushes that optimistic vision. Artist Paul Renaud's splash page shows the Americops surrounding and standing over Rage's beaten body, with Sam's words "Then again, maybe things **never** change … and maybe all that hope was just an **illusion**" positioned in a text box right beside his comatose friend (#17, 25–6). The Captain America shield in the bottom right corner of the page is situated to balance a speech bubble at the top left, announcing Rage's arrest "by the authority of the Americops," and the star on the shield and on the Americops badges links both to the nation. This incident puts the lie not

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only to Sam's repeated attempts to work within a system that consistently attempts to discredit him, but also to the idealism represented by the mantle of Captain America. Rather than simply critiquing the left, the rhetoric of the comic suggests that it is impossible to work with an opposition that refuses to compromise, as the reactionary right does, and that—rather than fighting each other over methodology—those on the center need to move further left in order to fight against injustice. This storyline both echoes, and diverges from, the *Captain America* comics of the 1970s, which included stories that tackled White supremacy, but also contained "thinly veiled attacks on Black Power nationalism" (Nama 72).

Sam cannot embody the supposedly apolitical qualities of "Captain America" (which we will further challenge in the following chapter) because he is repeatedly asked to protect the powerful in ways that lead to continued systemic oppression. In Spencer's storyline, Sam's attempt at a moderate position is not a strict endorsement of centrism so much as it is complex continuation of Sam's characterization throughout Marvel history: one that shows him constantly having to negotiate between his work as a superhero and his role in his community in ways that superheroes from the dominant group often do not. The Americops and their handlers are the defining villains of Sam Wilson's time as Captain America, and his struggle with them is both an obvious allegory for the Black Lives Matter movement and a demonstration of the futility of trying to find common ground within an inherently unjust system. Sam at first attempts to de-escalate conflict, preventing Rage from engaging the Americops (#13, 14) and trying to talk reasonably with the officers (#12, 7). Still trying to work within the system, he sets up an avian surveillance network to attempt to document instances of the Americops overstepping their authority (#13, 18). When his network captures Rage being brutally beaten, Sam at first hesitates to make the footage public because a representative of the Mayor's office uses the same rhetoric that has been used to convince Sam before: "This footage could tear the entire city—hell, the entire **country**—apart. Do you really wanna **do** that?" (#18, 17). This time, Sam decides that if the country needs to accept this level of injustice in order to stay together, then dividing the country might be the only way to effect change. As with people's use of camera phones to document police brutality, Sam's network raises awareness and creates public outrage, but it is not enough to change the system, as demonstrated when the video is ruled inadmissible in court (#19, 13). Working both with and against ruling structures, Sam is continually undermined in his fight for justice.

Spencer contrasts Sam's attempts to compromise with the challenges and actions of the appropriately named Rage, who becomes a martyr to the cause and, in the process, makes Sam recognize the futility of centrist politics. Recognizing the importance of his high-profile case, Rage deliberately refuses the kinds of financial and legal advantages available to

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most superheroes, thereby drawing attention to how African-American—and other disenfranchised—defendants are railroaded by the justice system (#18, 11–12). Rather than being represented by Matt Murdoch or Jennifer Walters, he has an overworked public defender who he first meets two hours before the trial and whose first order of business is to encourage his innocent client to take a plea deal (#19, 6). Sam describes the trial itself as not "too far off from what you'd expect to see most days—a nearly all-white jury in the majority-minority city … and an overly aggressive prosecutor eager to get his name in the papers" (#19, 9). The riots that first protest Rage's unjust conviction, and then his suspicious death in a privatized prison, reinforce the divisions within an America that is moving ever-closer to a Hydra state, as we will discuss in the next chapter.

Sam Wilson's turn as Captain America therefore highlights the tensions that remain for racialized superheroes in a culture that is far from post-racial. Numerous fans complained that Spencer's storyline, as with others in Marvel's ANADM, focused too much on stereotypical storylines for the "diversity" characters. In a Reddit debate on the Gabriel controversy, several fans pointed out that characters such as Sam continue to be defined by their race in ways that White characters are not: "Zilde" says Marvel is "putting up more walls and making characters with the sole motivation being, 'He's a black guy, he does black stuff and represents black people'" and that this "is a terrible way to make characters and exactly the wrong way to diversify your work. The struggles a character faces as a result of their race should be natural, they shouldn't be the only thing that defines them as a person" (on "Marvel Executive"). "LiathePenguinologist" adds, "Sam Wilson as Captain America's biggest stories so far have all been about police brutality and racism in the media … why can't minority characters have similar stories to 'traditional' super heroes?" (on "Marvel Executive"). However, other fans asserted that the reality of America means that minority characters must have different stories: "ModsAreShillsForXenu" argues, "If you're a black guy, in a city like New York, in the Stop and Frisk era, that shit is going to affect you every day" and "itchni" agrees, saying "I think it is extremely important to address a lot of the issues that minorities face" (on "Marvel Executive"). The very acknowledgment of the obstacles Sam faces, which make it impossible for him to have "similar stories to 'traditional' super heroes," arguably makes the text more anti-racist than ones that emphasize the "everyman" status of their heroes.

However, "itchni" goes on to argue, "One of the best ways of doing this is by hiring writers or consultants of that minority to help guide the character into place. This will both kill the chances of it being racist while also incidentally integrating a lot of the challenges minorities face" (on "Marvel Executive"). While this point is vigorously debated by others in the discussion, the fact that the Sam Wilson/Captain America storyline was written by a White writer, and particularly one with politics as slippery as

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Spencer's,[16] is one more factor making some fans, even those who embrace diversity, unconvinced that Marvel's promotion of diversity goes beyond a marketing ploy. While we believe that Nick Spencer's attention to race was necessary for Sam Wilson's turn as Captain America, primarily because the mantle itself—as we will discuss in the next chapter—was never apolitical or universal, we also recognize those beats in the story that lend themselves to a far more conservative meaning than the surface would suggest. For example, Spencer complicates Sam's decision to release the footage in the first place by having HydraCap[17] be the one who convinces Sam to release the tape (#18, 19). Arguably, this aspect of the storyline is inherently moderate and centrist, echoing as it does the argument that civil unrest and protest play right into the hands of democracy's enemies, as is the case here.[18] At its best, however, Spencer's storyline embraces the messiness of contemporary politics, and the difficulty of upholding ideals when those very ideals might be at the heart of political and racial conflict.

Like Jane Foster, Sam gives up the mantle of Captain America at the end of this series, but Spencer frames this return as a rejection rather than a loss. Right-wing pundits, politicians, and people might have told Sam throughout the series to #GiveBackTheShield, but he returns it not because he feels unworthy, but because he finds the country unworthy, highlighting just how much both the mantle and the nation it represents need to be challenged. In his farewell video, he explains that he is giving up the shield, just as Steve Rogers has done in the past (#21, 17), as a protest against "a system that never practices the fairness it claims." He tells the next generation not to lose hope (18), but acknowledges the fundamental difference between the mantle holders: "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 people it's leaving behind" (21). Sam's critique of the shield as a force for White supremacy, lifting up some while pushing others down, comes to fruition in *Secret Empire*, which is the focus for our next chapter.

But it is important to end our discussion of Sam Wilson as Captain America with the final issue of his run, in which he again dons the suit, in a wardrobe change that takes up most of the issue. Misty Knight, his love interest and sometime partner, first pressures him to do so, but he claims that the country does not deserve him after "what they've allowed [Steve] to do" (#24, 12). However, Patriot, a young African-American hero who

[16]We will discuss Spencer's politics in the next chapter.

[17]Steve Rogers transformed into Marvel's version of a Nazi—see Chapter 4.

[18]The ambiguity of the politics in the comic is meant to stir up debate, rather than present a thesis on how to fix America. Spencer claims to "write a lot of characters, all with different views on the world and different politics. It's not hard for me to make that distinction. Sam and I do not have identical politics. I am not Sam. I have absolutely no desire to simply confirm my own beliefs and write a book that only appeals to people who agree with me" (Leon "Spencer Slams Fox").

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was inspired by Rage, convinces him that the resistance, the people who have "lost **everything**," do "deserve a Captain America" (17). As Sam puts on the uniform, he thinks "I spent so long wearing this suit, but never really believed it was a part of me. It was always in the back of my head that the job was temporary" (8). But this time is different. Joe Bennett's visual storytelling on the final two pages of the final issue first shows Sam suiting up, each component part making him more Captain America with every panel, culminating in a splash page, reminiscent of his initial reveal, but this time Sam looks not overwhelmed, but proud and confident. The final words of the issue "I might even enjoy it" (21) suggest a beginning rather than an end. While Sam eventually returns the shield to a resurrected Steve Rogers at the end of *Generations: Sam Wilson Captain America and Steve Rogers Captain America* (31–2), Spencer's choice to end the series with Sam re-assuming the mantle suggests that he might occupy it again, or at least that the next Captain America who is not a White man will have Sam as a model, and might not have to face the same struggles.

Conclusion: Passing the Mantle Back

The passing back of the mantles to the original mantle-bearers in these series could be read as either a sign of failure or an inevitability built into the genre. For example, Roman and Lizardi see a reversion to the status quo as inevitable, since "the American superhero comic publishers have deeply embedded a narrative universe based on consistency, replicated for decades, above all other concerns." They quote Stan Lee as claiming that "the secret to the company's successful storytelling has always been cultivating 'the "illusion" of change.' The comic book industry employs these narrative deviations to control their intellectual property, while simultaneously using temporary changes to drive economic growth" (19). On the other end of the spectrum, Terrence Wandtke argues that "revisionism is widely accepted as part of and integrally related to our experience of superheroes" and that this constant questioning of narrative "must also be recognized as critical to our identity" (6). We would place ourselves between these two positions, arguing that comics can—but do not always—reflect changes in society, and that individual creators move the story and the characters forward in meaningful ways. The mantles were passed back and everything was restored to normal, but that does not mean that these two particular wearers of the mantle failed to challenge the status quo.

First and foremost, both series draw attention to the ubiquity and transitory nature of mantle passing. While the continuing presence of Steve Rogers and of Odinson acts as a reminder that the original mantle holders are waiting in the wings, and will likely retake the mantles (which they do), the presence of other mantle holders emphasizes that the mantles can be occupied by a wide variety of people (including horse-faced aliens

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and frogs), and that each individual mantle-holder brings something new to the role. Sam discusses the implications of holding the mantle not only with Steve, but also with two previous replacements to Captain America: Bucky Barnes, who encourages and supports him (#7, 8–9); and U.S. Agent, who attacks him verbally and physically, and tells him to give back the shield (#13, 6–7). Misty Knight also picks up the shield for one issue (#16). Jason Aaron suggests a multiplicity of Thors by adding Volstagg as the War Thor; likewise his *Thors* series in the *Secret Wars* event multiplies Thors exponentially. In Battleworld, all of Doctor Doom's security force are Thors with many new heroes, such as Storm and Groot, joining the ranks. Most of the expected Thors also make an appearance, although Beta Ray Bill, Ultimate Thor, and Odinson are the focus. Roman and Lizardi argue that Misty sending Sam on vacation and coopting the shield cast his ability to wield it into doubt (32) and that both *Thors* and *The Unworthy Thor*, which is focused on Odinson, dilute the importance of Jane Foster (26). We would argue instead that the plurality of mantle holders does not make Sam and Jane unworthy, but rather suggests that the mantles are not, and should not, be linked only to one individual and one identity category.

Furthermore, these stories both delve into what it means when characters from different identity categories take on mantles in ways that challenge the "universal" hero. While Miles and Kamala respectfully occupy their positions in relation to Peter Parker and Carol Danvers, both Jane Foster and Sam Wilson challenge and critique those who have come before them and the way they chose to occupy their roles. Jane is at odds with the gods throughout her series, challenging the high-handed way they wield their power, a position that is directly linked to Thor's own pained recognition that Gorr the God-Killer was right. And when Sam picks up the shield and is challenged and rejected by the American public, he reveals the lie at the heart of Steve Roger's own occupation of the mantle: that the American dream, even as an ideal, is not accessible to all Americans. Fans may have hated that the original mantle-holders had to be weakened or diminished for Jane and Sam to take their place, but that was precisely the point: these stories demonstrate that mantles are not universal ideals, and therefore have to be transformed if they are to acknowledge the real differences—in experience, in access to power, and in viewpoint—that identity categories represent.

Finally, while we acknowledge the danger of diversity as an empty marketing tool, we would argue that these changes, temporary though they were, have implications for the ongoing story-telling in Marvel comics, for the characters that the company promotes, for the stories that they tell, and increasingly, for the diversity of those that get to tell them. Temporary mantle passing, like team titles, provides a space for less central characters to find prominence. For example, the mantle passing in the comics is already being taken up in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. At the end of *Avengers: Endgame*, Steve Rogers passes his shield on to Sam Wilson, in a move that has not provoked anywhere near the internet outrage that the comics

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announcement did five years earlier. Although Chris Hemsworth's Thor appears to be continuing on into phase four, he too is sharing the mantle. He passes the leadership of Asgard to Valkyrie, recognizing the different nature of his own heroism, and Natalie Portman will be picking up the hammer as Jane Foster/Thor in *Thor: Love and Thunder*. These changes suggest that, while the ANADM branding might be history, it has in fact changed the stories that can be told about these particular superheroes. Furthermore, the particular brand of story-telling in the MCU suggests that these changes can be more permanent than in the comics as iconic actors retire from the roles and leave them open for legacy characters. Just as one-off stories of Jane and Sam taking on the mantles in the past perhaps led the way for these two storylines to be made, so too do these storylines open up space for new possibilities to be imagined. While the "big names" have reverted to original mantle-holders, the universe around them is more diverse. The fact that most of the successful and ongoing "diverse" titles are aimed at younger audiences suggests that change is coming with new generations, and the repeated introduction of new characters, and "promotion" of old ones is allowing new stories to be told.

While the temporary mantle-passing storylines discussed here represented creative risks that might, the MCU's 2019 announcements suggest, herald lasting change, they also lead into one of the most controversial changes of the Alonso years: 2017's *Secret Empire* was reviled by critics and fans alike. Replacing White, male characters with diverse ones was seen as an outrage by some, but as a progressive creative choice by others; however, people on both sides of the culture wars read the transformation of Captain America into an agent of fascism as a market-driven gimmick that served no one. While we agree that this choice existentially threatened the Marvel universe and the iconic hero at the center of it, we see that threat as its primary strength. *Secret Empire* represents the culmination of ANADM, because it directly inserts itself into contemporary politics in ways that hearken back to the very first days of Captain America; in this case, however, Spencer aligns the American icon with fascism and asks the audience to fight back. Unfortunately, the widespread rejection of the event and Marvel's attempts to back-pedal from it speak forcefully to a public that was not ready for that story to be told, and a company that was not ready to tell it.

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