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# Secret Origins of the American Superhero! Comic Books as Performance

By Danny Devlin

## Abstract

*Secret Origins of the American Superhero* applies the vocabulary of performance studies to one of America's great pop culture exports: superhero comic books. The paper intersects the run-up to World War II, when the American government had adopted a stance of non-interventionism, despite the atrocities being committed on the European war front by the Nazis, with the sudden explosion in popularity of superhero comic books. These pop culture icons were created by young Jewish artists, and were an important method for disseminating the creators' frustrations, angers, and fears to scores of Americans – how comic book super heroes were fighting the good fight on the home front. I then consider the “moral outrage” stemming from post-World War II youngsters reading comic books – in particular the popular performances of comic book burnings at many American schools – as championed by Dr. Frederic Wertham, and how this moral outrage sounded the death knell for superhero comic books, until new anxieties began to creep up among members of the American public at the dawn of the era of the atom...necessitating a new generation of superheroes.

# Secret Origins of the American Superhero! Comic Books as Performance

By Danny Devlin

## Face Front, True Believer!

The purpose of this paper is to provide a methodology for reading comic books, specifically superhero narratives, as sites of identity performance, through interpretive lenses provided by performance studies. I argue that creators in the Golden Age of Comic Books — the time period spanning from roughly the 1938 debut of Superman in *Action Comics #1* until the post-World War II introduction of Barry Allen, the new Flash, in 1956's *Showcase #4* — used the comic book page as a stage upon which they participated in negotiations and performances of self through the self-conscious structuring of plot, character, and action in a form almost identical to the process of theatrical creation and reception. This similarity provides an opportunity to read comic books as performance, and, I hope, will demonstrate the potential value of understanding popular cultural material like comic books as vital primary source historical documents which may be read as revelatory sites of significant cultural negotiations of personal and social identities.

Not coincidentally, the Golden Age of Comic Books lines up neatly with the fears, anxieties, and tensions relevant to the lead up to, subsequent fighting of, and fallout from, the Second World War. The creators of comic books during this epoch were primarily Jewish men, and their super-powered creations became a super-powered medium through which they engaged in vibrant performances about what it meant to be Jewish in America during a turbulent and anxious time. The American comic book gave them the opportunity to fantasize and fictionalize their interior worlds through the fantastical expression of their fears, anxieties,

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and desires, all of which were produced and distributed for mass audiences. Golden Age Comic Books are a rich resource for considering how the material of popular culture transmits performances of self.

While much has been made of the Jewish influence in American popular culture, very little of this scholarship has been specifically focused on the role of identity performed through the comic book page. In *Jews and the American Comic*, Paul Buhle collects works from a variety of Jewish creators to argue that Jewish success in America “through at least the 1960s and sometimes far beyond, lay in assimilation.”<sup>1</sup> He argues that part of the early Jewish success in the field of comics is partially owed to the “decisive connection between Yiddish and the comic strip...[going] straight to humor, whether as social commentary or unadulterated fun.”<sup>2</sup> This, he continues, is because “Jewish humor...reflected something not so common to all cultures, the articulation of resentment by the dispossessed against the elite.”<sup>3</sup> American Jews, in the lead-up to World War II, felt dispossessed by the government, and by the larger (white) American society. Understood through Buhle’s point, Jewish cultural production — in this case, the superhero comic book — can be read as “articulation[s] of resentment” against dispossessive American sociocultural institutions, which preached non-interventionism in the rapidly escalating war in Europe, as when President Franklin D. Roosevelt explained during his fireside chat in September of 1939 that while it was clear that “when peace has been broken anywhere, the peace of all countries everywhere is in danger,” his administration was nonetheless preparing “a proclamation of American neutrality...in accordance with international law and in

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<sup>1</sup> Buhle, Paul. *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of An American Art Form*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

accordance with American policy.”<sup>4</sup> If America wouldn’t go to war to protect the innocent, then Jewish comic book writers and artists like Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, and Alex Schomburg would wage their own theatricalized war through the fists of characters like Captain America and Namor, the Sub-Mariner. These performative articulations — resentment at being dispossessed, understood to mean “Othered” for their religious and cultural beliefs, while their families were facing the horrors of the Nazi war machine — played out upon comic books, a creative industry largely populated by Jewish creators. These creators worked through the primary-colored pages to include a generation of Americans in a pop cultural conversation about the Jewish experience in America, while simultaneously offering a glimpse at a Utopian future, achievable only by the willing assimilation of the identity of “Other” into the identity of “American,” better articulated perhaps nowhere than in the pages of Jerry Siegel and Jose Shuster’s series *Action Comics*. The performativity of the comic book page served as an important landscape upon which Jews were engaged in, and simultaneously critiquing, issues of American identity. It is my goal to offer a way to make these performances visible, and, in so doing, to position the American comic book in the Golden Age as a vital location for further scholarly consideration into issues of the negotiation of performance and identity of “acting Jewish” for mass audiences.

### **Meanwhile, in the Methodology Cave...**

To read comic books as a medium of identity performance is to place the act of creation into conversation with Richard Schechner’s model of performance as a series of “concentric, overlapping circles,” wherein the

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<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin D. "Fireside Chat.," September 3, 1939. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project.. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15801>

umbrella term “performance” subsumes specific underlying ideas like script and drama into a broader definition: performance is,

The broadest, most ill-defined disc. The whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that take place in/among both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance — the precinct where the theater takes place — to the time the last spectator leaves.<sup>5</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, the comic book is understood as the “field of performance,” the performers are the creators and the spectator serves as the end user — the youthful American consumer. Schechner’s later definition of performance as “restored,” or “twice behaved behavior” points to the possibility of performance functioning on a sub/unconscious level: “[twice behaved] behaviors are independent,” Schechner writes, “of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence...behavior is separate from those who are behaving.”<sup>6</sup> Danny Fingerioth’s 2007 book, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, quotes Captain America creator Joe Simon saying, “Jewish matters ‘had absolutely nothing to do with comics. [Jack Kirby] and I never sat around and discussed Jewishness in comics. [Marvel publisher] Martin Goodman never mentioned it. We all knew who we were. We were proud of our heritage,’”<sup>7</sup> By placing Simon’s work into conversation with Schechner’s theory of performance as restored behavior — a series of “strips” transplanted across generations, until the “originating” strip is so embodied as to disappear — the insight emerges that Jewish identity, unconsciously embodied by early American comic book writers, may be understood as “independent of the causal systems that brought them into existence,” and this identity was

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<sup>5</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies*.

<sup>6</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater & Anthropology*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Fingerioth, Danny. *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*, 24.

impossible *not* to perform on the comic book page, and so must be read into the work produced by Simon and other members of the community of early comic book creators.

Henry Bial's *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen* provides a resource for reading the ways in which this kind of coded performance can be read for its contribution to the negotiation of Jewish identity in a larger pop cultural context. Bial writes, "performances created by Jews for consumption by a mass audience are prime sites for analyzing what I call *acting Jewish*, a critical formulation of Jewish American identity in the latter half of the twentieth century."<sup>8</sup> Bial offers a possible explanation for the prevalence of Jewish comic book creators, via Brooks McNamara:

Popular entertainment, [McNamara] argues, has always been looked down on by so-called respectable people...with the vast immigration of eastern European Jews to the United States around the turn of the century, the Jews became the new under-class and moved into the performing arts largely because no other group was willing to humiliate itself.<sup>9</sup>

The application of the idea of this sort of willing embarrassment of working in such derided forms as the performing arts can also be read into the early comic book industry. Comic books have long been regarded as disposable culture, no thanks to their origins in the pulp industry, so dubbed, according to Bradford Wright, "because of the cheap paper on which they were printed...pulp often catered to...offbeat tastes."<sup>10</sup> The comic book as a cultural object recognizable to us today stems from the 1933 discovery, by Harry Wildenberg and Max Gaines, of a market for the

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<sup>8</sup> Bial, Henry. *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity of the American Stage and Screen*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bial 7.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, 2.

sale of collected newspaper comic strips. Proving successful, Wildenberg and Gaines branched out, hiring collaborative studios to produce new content for these pulp comic reprints in the hopes of reaching even greater audiences. Artists worked for hire, on a per page basis, producing thick tomes packed with the adventures of multiple characters, and usually including a poorly written serialized novel (or several). If there were any concerns for artistic integrity, they were brushed aside: early comic books were explicitly mass-produced on low quality paper to be read and passed around by children for a reasonable price. Producing these pulps were a generation of almost exclusively Jewish youths,

All acquainted with each other...the sons of immigrants, many of them misfits in their own communities. They were all two or three steps removed from the American mainstream but were more poignantly in touch with the desires and agonies of that mainstream than those in the middle of it. In the pursuit of a quick buck, a splashy novelty, some relief from their own lonely anxiety, they invented a cultural form that came like a revelation to kids of every class and ethnicity, that would evolve to become part of adolescent and adult fantasy, and that would outlast its initial fad by sixty years and set an entertainment norm in an era vastly different from the one that spawned it.<sup>11</sup>

The production of comic books, then, was always already understood as disposable by nature, and already imbricated within a close relationship to the growing desire for intervention in World War II. In turn, it is likely that comic books – disposable, after all – have only rarely been read for their performative significance, as I intend to do herein. Bial further notes his study of Jewish performance is “significant precisely because,” such acts of Jewish performance identity are “so commonplace as to be nearly

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*, xvi – xv.

invisible.”<sup>12</sup> It’s difficult to overstate exactly how popular and widespread comic books were during the Golden Age. We can track the sales of certain series – *Action Comics*, featuring Superman, often sold in excess of one million copies per issue, while the best selling title of the time was probably Fawcett Comics’ *Whiz Comics*, which featured young Billy Batson and his startling transformation into Captain Marvel, selling close to 1.5 million issues per month — but we cannot track the proliferation of the trade market that developed when kids “of every class and ethnicity” traded and passed issues around to friends, neighbors, and schoolmates. Conservative estimates of such proliferation place the reading population near five to six million children and adults.

The marriage of illustration and writing at play in the comic books is a human tradition dating back thousands of years. Cave paintings, like the ones Schechner found in the cave at Tuc d’Audoubert, are proto-comic books: they depict a spatio-temporality separately recalling of the day’s events — “presenting time 1 at time 2” — and serve as a visual/textual historical record. Simultaneously, some interpretations of cave paintings position them as ritualistic prayer.<sup>13</sup> In *Prayer: A History*, Philip and Carol Zaleski take such a view: “many cave paintings depict beasts attacked by darts or spears; some appear to be at the brink of death...all this spoke of ‘hunting magic’ a form of proto-prayer in which the cave artists symbolically slaughtered animals in paint and charcoal to ensure to successful bagging of their flesh-and-blood counterparts.”<sup>14</sup> The cave painting, like the comic book, performs both the past and present simultaneously: a memory of the past and spiritual invocation of the future.

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<sup>12</sup> Bial 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Performance Theory* 66.

<sup>14</sup> Zaleski, Philip, and Carol Zaleski. *Prayer: A History*, 19.



Performances of Jewish identity embedded in the comic book can be read similarly: the artists and writers work from their pasts in an attempt to define the future by speaking about the present. In addition to their symbolic invocation of the past and the future, the reading of a comic book shares numerous similarities with theatrical reception. Neither entirely visual nor entirely aural, the comic book narrative is read, like the theatre event, through signification of both word and image.

Like theatre, comic books feature characters moving through narrational time and space in a way that is made meaningful only by the reception of a spectator; the page, as Spaulding argues, functions as a stage, and can be read as a means through which the creative team metaphorically narrativizes their own experiences and hopes. As Paul Buhle argues in *Jews and the American Comic*, “comics largely reproduced the familiar Jewish story, including internal class conflict...identifiably Jewish superheroes would not have been an option for wartime comics, and neither artists, writers, nor publishers seemed even to contemplate them.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, comic books provide a ready stage upon which Jewish creators were forced to encode their “familiar stories.” Many early Jewish comic book creators mirrored their characters’ tendencies to develop and practice a performative self in the act of adopting a pen name. Just as the Batsuit, and the performative aspects of the character Batman provided Bruce Wayne with the ability to reclaim the night from the cowardly and superstitious lot of Gotham’s criminals, Jewish creators were similarly empowered to cross-over from a group dispossessed by elite institutions into popular mass reception of their cultural products, while performing without the potentially troublesome semiotics of ethnic identifiers present in their “identifiably Jewish” names and identities.

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<sup>15</sup> Buhle 56 - 57.

In order to provide a specific theoretical vocabulary to thinking through the issue of (secret) identity performance by Golden Age comic books creators, I pull from Vijay Prashad's theory of polyculturalism, explained in *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting*, in which he critiques the myth of cultural purity.<sup>16</sup> Multiculturalism, Prashad argues, suggests that "cultures are discrete and bounded..." and is a problematic theoretical view because it limits the possibilities of "liberation from cruel and uncomfortable practices....culture becomes the means for social and historical difference, how we differentiate ourselves, and adopt the habits of the past to create and delimit social groups."<sup>17</sup> A polycultural perspective, Prashad argues, provides for plurality of interpretive possibilities. In adopting pen names, Jewish creators like Joe Simon and Jack Kirby slipped into what Prashad's work terms a "new skin," an attempt to "rethink race, culture, and the organization of our society."<sup>18</sup>

The idea of a new skin promotes the concept of re-envisioning the cultural landscape, calling attention to the imaginary status of socially constructed borderlands between "discrete and bounded [cultures]."<sup>19</sup> Slipping into this "new skin," Prashad argues, allows for a crossing-over and dismantling of these imaginary divides, opening free exchange through and between the imaginarily constructed separations. This "new skin" has a neat analogue in superhero comic books: it is, in effect, a "super suit"; a costume, for instance, that Bruce Wayne dons when Commissioner Gordon shines the Bat-signal over Gotham, or that Superman reveals underneath his workaday attire in a phone booth outside of the Daily Planet. It is through semiotic acts of re-signification of the suit, the body inhabiting the suit, and the conscientious performance(s) of Batman and Superman, that

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<sup>16</sup> Prashad, Vijay. *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*.

<sup>17</sup> Prashad xi.

<sup>18</sup> Prashad x.

<sup>19</sup> Prashad xi.

Bruce Wayne can become the vengeance of the night, and Clark Kent can shed his performative human weaknesses and shortcomings and, in effect, become himself. In much the same way, the comic book page, and the characters thereupon, operate as a super-suit, a new skin, because they allowed Jewish comic book creators to discretely perform their identity on a previously unreachable level of popular reception, crossing over socially constructed borders they would otherwise be unable to navigate, liberating themselves from the confines of imaginary and socially constructed borders of “identifiably Jewish” significations in order to “rethink race, culture, and the organization of our society;” to reject “the habits of the past to create and delimit social groups,” in order to imagine the future of the country.

### **Truth, Justice, and the American Way!**

Perhaps no character is as markedly Jewish as the first superhero: the Kryptonian Kal-El, better known Earth-side as Superman, who went about, “disguised as Clark Kent.”<sup>20</sup> And perhaps no hero better exemplifies the superhero as a performance of a “new skin.” The creation of Jerome “Jerry” Siegel, son of Lithuanian immigrants, and Joseph Shuster, similarly the son of Jewish European immigrants, Superman is a character born of metatheatrical layers of tragedy: Jerome’s father Mitchell — born Mikhel Segalovich, was reportedly murdered in his clothing shop by armed assailants in Cleveland on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1939.<sup>21</sup> When Superman was introduced to American youth in *Action Comics #1* in April 1938, he was

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<sup>20</sup> The description comes from the introduction to the 1940’s Superman radio series.

<sup>21</sup> There’s some historical controversy here as to the actual cause of death: the police record says Mitchell was shot during a robbery in his shop. Sarah Siegel told her children the same. Other members of the Siegel family argued Mitchell’s death was the result of a heart attack, brought on by the stress of defending his store from three armed assailants. Murdered or dead from natural causes, the loss of Mitchell Siegel was a brutal experience for young Jerome.

described as being able to “leap 1/8<sup>th</sup> of a mile, hurdle a twenty-story building...raise tremendous weights...run faster than an express train...” and, perhaps most importantly, the muscle-bound man in tights discovered “that nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!”<sup>22</sup> Superman was born on the doomed planet Krypton, escaping death via the sacrifice of his father; Superman was also born in the Siegel family haberdashery, escaping death via the sacrifice of Jerry Siegel’s father.

The description noted above — “disguised as Clark Kent” — neatly subverts the trope of the superhero being a performance undertaken by the man underneath the mask.<sup>23</sup> That is, it is Bruce Wayne disguised as Batman, and not the other way around; the vengeful Dark Knight is the performance, while Bruce Wayne is the basis for that performance. In the subversion of that trope — it is the human Clark Kent that is the disguise, and the superhero Superman that is the basis thereof — Siegel and Shuster cleverly reinforce a Mosaic context for understanding the character as a performative artifact. While most contemporary depictions of Superman are undertaken within the context of understanding him as a Christ-figure — one need look no further than the heavy-handed imagery in Bryan Singer’s 2006 film *Superman Returns* — it is clear that Siegel and Shuster originally intended for Superman to be a super powered approximation of Moses, sent to Earth in a rocket ship just as Moses was floated down the Nile in a basket, meant to free his enslaved people and lead them to the promised land. There is much evidence to reinforce this reading. Like Moses (and, of course, like the families of Siegel and Shuster), Superman is an immigrant, adopting Earth (and America) as his home, swearing to protect the innocent. He simultaneously performs as a citizen

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<sup>22</sup> Shuster, Joe, and Jerry Siegel. *Action Comics #1*, cover. Note that this is technically the second incarnation of Superman from Shuster and Siegel. The first was a forgettable psychic super villain named Bill Dunn who featured in one issue of a sci-fi ‘zine the duo published.

<sup>23</sup> Or cape, as it were.

of Earth, and of America, and above and beyond both of these stations. He embodies the immigrant narrative: a “son” of both his home planet and his new one, he assimilates, takes the “new skin” of humanity, and sets about creating a better life than the one he left behind. Superman is the ultimate American, because he is an immigrant.

Indeed, his earliest adventures revolve very little — if at all — around the kind of cosmic-level threats he would later take on. Instead, he spends his time running around, beating up slumlords, wife beaters, and corrupt politicians; Superman was truly a “mighty champion of justice and the oppressed!”<sup>24</sup> Understood this way, Siegel and Shuster’s Superman character performs the dual-life of the American Jew as immigrant: the nebbish performance of Clark Kent perhaps reflects the immigrant’s plight of passing in a dispossessive America, while the Kryptonian Superman performs the role of savior of his people by working to wipe out oppression and corruption, ensuring the integrity of equality promised by America. Of course, embedded within the power fantasy of the alien immigrant wiping out oppression and corruption is a critique of the elite institution as inherently corrupt, and while Siegel and Shuster, during the initial wartime years when America was practicing non-intervention policies, were less enthusiastic about using Hitler as a villain than their colleagues Simon and Kirby, they nevertheless created stories that featured Superman fighting against nameless, but obvious, despotic, tyrannical analogues against a European backdrop. As the war effort ramped up, Superman’s credo to fight “the never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way,” took on overtly nationalist, and often racist tones — the cover of *Action Comics #58*, cover dated March 1943, features Superman using his super-strength and super-speed to print posters bearing the notice “Superman says: YOU can slap a Jap with war bonds and

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<sup>24</sup> Siegel, Jerry and Joe Shuster. *Superman # 6*, 2.

stamps!” alongside an image of a hand striking a yellowface cartoon of a Japanese soldier.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps in the act of villainizing another race, Jerry Siegel saw the opportunity to assimilate into the very elite institutions he had previously critiqued as corrupt.

By their nature, superhero stories should always already be understood to operate within a metatheatrical context. That the characters’ Jewish creators self-consciously adopted new identities or skins reveals the same performance of identity adoption occurring in the act of creation: it is not just Steve Rogers, Bruce Wayne, or Clark Kent who adopt new skins and identities, but that those characters metatheatrically mirror the performance of identity their creators undertake. Golden Age comic book creators were a clever, street-wise group. They “navigated their ethnicity” on the streets where they grew up every day as a functional necessity. Jacob Kurtzberg, for example, was something of a street tough: “[Kurtzberg’s] growing up period is not entirely atypical,” write Mark Evanier and Steve Sherman. “... Street-fighting, the usual childhood activities, and the burgeoning instinct of self-preservation were all a part of it.”<sup>26</sup> The pre-World War II years were not, by any definition, easy on Jewish-American immigrants. Worried about their families overseas, and facing derision and prejudice at “home,” American Jews engaged in conscientious efforts to appear “less Jewish”; that is, to fit into the dominant (white) cultural apparatus by passing for white, a self-conscious adoption of a “new skin.”<sup>27</sup> Pen names aided in this process. Many early comic book writers wrote under a variety of pseudonyms, sometimes in order to give the publisher the illusion that the produced pulp volumes

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<sup>25</sup> Siegel, Jerry, and Jack Burnley. *Action Comics #58*, cover.

<sup>26</sup> Evanier, Mark, and Steve Sherman. "Jack Kirby Biography." *Jack Kirby Museum & Research Center*. Web. 12 Dec. 2011. <<http://kirbymuseum.org/biography>>.

<sup>27</sup> Bial offers a compelling definition for these acts, framed as an ontological anxiety for appearing “too Jewish.”

offered readers a variety of authorial voices, but just as frequently to hide their ethnicity. Kurtzberg settled on the *nom de plum* Jack Kirby because it “was a simplification of his real name with an Irish twist that reminded him of Jimmy Cagney,” according to Jones.<sup>28</sup> A 1990 interview from *The Comic Journal* offers a different reasoning:

KIRBY: ...On each comic strip I put a different name: I was Jack Curtis, Jack Cortez... I didn't want to be in any particular environment, I wanted to be an all-around American. I kept Kirby. My mother gave me hell. My father gave me hell. My family disowned me.

GROTH: You actually changed your name to Kirby?

KIRBY: When I began doing the strips.

GROTH: Why did you change your name exactly?

KIRBY: I wanted to be an American. My name is Kurtzberg.

GROTH: Why didn't you think Kurtzberg was an acceptable American name?

KIRBY: I felt if you wanted to have a great name it would be Farnsworth, right? Or Stillweather. I felt Jack Kirby was close to my real name.

GROTH: You're Jewish. Was there anti-Semitism back then?

KIRBY: Yes. A lot of it. They were confrontational days when people of different backgrounds had to live together. And it hasn't changed. There's anti-Semitism today.<sup>29</sup>

Kirby, eager to “be an American,” changed his name from the ethnic Kurtzberg to escape the “confrontational days” he experienced growing up in the streets of Brooklyn, adopting a “new skin” to pass as “an all-around

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<sup>28</sup> Jones 195.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Jack Kirby. *The Comics Journal* Feb. 1990. *The Comics Journal Archive*. Web. 12 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.tcj.com/jack-kirby-interview/>>.

American.” Kirby’s most famous works are rife with the kind of duality that reflects his existence as a Jewish-American “hyphenation.” Perhaps the character richest in this description, created by Kirby with Joe Simon, is none other than that Sentinel of Liberty himself, Steve Rogers, aka Captain America. First published by Timely Comics in March 1941, Captain America made an incredible and lasting impression on an American public anxious about the war overseas, and who were focused on the national policies of isolationism and non-interventionism.

The cover to *Captain America #1* features the red, white, and blue star-spangled Avenger punching Hitler in the jaw.<sup>30</sup> The art is classic Kirby: a sort of manic athleticism propels Cap forward, through the steel-barred windows, the blow already having rendered Hitler unconscious. Around the two, Nazis are firing guns ineffectually at Captain America: three soldiers’ bullets whiz by his body, while a fourth bounces off of his kite shield. On the ground next to Hitler are a map of the United States and a booklet labeled “sabotage plans for U.S.A.” In the background, a Nazi communications officer watches the destruction of a building labeled “U.S. Munitions Works.” The narrative is clear: the Nazis had *already* launched their evil plan. If Cap hadn’t shown up to stop them just in the nick of time, who knows how badly they would have crippled the (eventual) American war effort?

Captain America hardly seems like an appropriate “Jewish” superhero: lantern-jawed, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, the masculine Steve Rogers reflects the ideals of the Nazi party better, perhaps, than he does his role as American “super-agent” who, like the country he represents, “shall gain the strength and the will to safeguard our shores!”<sup>31</sup> Steve’s origin story is prototypically Marvel. Faced with the encroaching

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<sup>30</sup> Simon, Joe and Jack Kirby. *Captain America #1*, cover.

<sup>31</sup> Simon and Kirby 8.



threat of the Fifth Column, Army generals turn to President Roosevelt, who asks “What would you suggest, gentlemen? A character out of the comic books?” providing a self-conscious reference to the metatheatricity inherent in Simon and Kirby’s creation.<sup>32</sup> Young, weak, orphaned artist Steve Rogers is unable to enter the draft to serve his country due to this physical frailty. When Army officers see him refused enlistment, they note he must have the sort of courage necessary to serve as a participant in a top-secret government experiment to create the “Super-Soldier” and take on the “dreaded Fifth Column!”<sup>33</sup> While the experiment is a success, a Nazi saboteur destroys the lab, killing the scientific lead of the experiment, Professor Reinstein – marked by his name as Jewish – in the process, and rendering Steve Rogers the only American Super-Soldier to ever be created.<sup>34</sup> It is no mistake that Simon and Kirby self-consciously note the metatheatricity of the comic book creation of Captain America as a uniquely Jewish and American creation.

As a site of performance, Captain America performs a fantastical revision of Kirby and Simon’s feelings of helplessness and dispossession, transforming them into an ironic signifier of the nightmarish Nazi eugenics policy: the steroidally-enhanced Rogers is nothing so much as a performative reclamation of the social construction of Nazi Aryan superiority, inverted and thrust back at Hitler in the form of a sock to the jaw. With family members still overseas under the power of Nazi occupation, Kirby and Simon created the Captain in the image of the Nazi prototype to help work out their aggression: if even this man, the visual approximation of the Nazi poster boy, would stand up for the rights of the down-trodden, why wouldn’t the government similarly respond? “Captain

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<sup>32</sup> Simon and Kirby 6.

<sup>33</sup> Simon and Kirby 1.

<sup>34</sup> Simon and Kirby 9. This would be retconned later on to be the Nazi defector Abraham Erskine.

America's dramatic debut was a call to arms, urging the nation to unite against foreign aggression," Bradford Wright notes.<sup>35</sup> The Jewish creators of the comic book industry critiqued America's interventionist policies, whilst simultaneously predicting the country's inevitable involvement in the war; comic book creators performed their anger at America's apathy and their frustration at the lack of news from family overseas. This anger would continue for Simon and Kirby throughout Captain America, with future covers depicting Cap boldly going after Hitler face-to-face. Joe Simon said of his creation, "the opponents to the war were all quite well organized. We wanted to have our say, too."<sup>36</sup> In order to reinforce the dangers of non-involvement, Simon and Kirby, among others, began to have their stories occur more and more often on the home front, with Nazi spies and aggressors waging war on the soil of the United States.

These performances were extremely effective as articulations of resentment towards American non-intervention policies. The not-so-subtle depiction of Hitler as cartoonishly weak and inept reinforced Jewish comic book creators' attempts to perform their culture through the medium of the three-colored page, an example of the relationship between Yiddish and the comic strip as "[going] straight to humor, whether as social commentary or unadulterated fun."<sup>37</sup> Hate mail and death threats were not uncommon occurrences for the creators at Timely and DC. Joe Simon, in his memoir *The Comic Book Makers*, writes,

Hitler was a marvelous foil; a ranting maniac. It was difficult to place him in the standard story line of the cunning, reasoning villains who invariably outfoxed the heroes throughout the entire story before being ultimately defeated at the very end. No matter how hard we

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<sup>35</sup> Wright 31.

<sup>36</sup> Wright 36.

<sup>37</sup> Buhle 6.

tried to make him a threatening force, Adolph invariably wound up as a buffoon — a clown. Evidently, this infuriated a lot of Nazi sympathizers.<sup>38</sup>

So worrisome were dramatic retaliations from the “substantial population of anti-war activists,” so powerful were “American Firsters’ and other non-interventionist groups” and so dangerous was “the German American Bund...heavily financed and effective in spewing their propaganda of hate; a fifth column of Americans following the Third Reich party line,” that no less than Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia himself offered protection to Simon and Kirby:

I was incredulous as I picked up the phone, but there was no mistaking the shrill voice. “You boys over there are doing a good job,” the voice squeaked, “I will see that no harm will come to you.” I thanked him. Fiorello LaGuardia, “The Little Flower,” was known as an avid reader of comics who dramatized the comic strips on radio during the newspaper strikes so that kids could keep up-to-date on their favorite characters.<sup>39</sup>

### **To the Silver Age...and Beyond!**

The American comic book provided one of the first and most broadly popular stages for young Jewish creators to perform their identities and struggles for a broad popular audience. These metatheatrical performances were sometimes subtle — the Aryan ideal Captain America, for instance, intrinsically mocking the Nazi policy of eugenics, or Superman’s Mosaic performance of immigration, assimilation, and the promise of leading his chosen people to the Promised Land of

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<sup>38</sup> Simon, Joe, and Jim Simon. *The Comic Book Makers*, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Simon and Simon 45. LaGuardia took to the airwaves during the 1945 newspaper boys strike in New York City, unwilling to allow kids to miss their Sunday Funnies.

equality and freedom — and sometimes obvious, as with Captain America socking Hitler square in the jaw, and Superman exhorting American youths to “slap a Jap.” Comic books provided an opportunity for the Jewish immigrant creators to performatively try on a “new skin” of Americanism in much the same way as their creations went to work fighting for “truth, justice and the American way” in primary-colored tights.

My goal has been to argue for a methodology of reading comic books as a locus of performance. Doing so allows the comic book to take on potentially exciting new value as a resource for reading acts of Jewish identity formation and negotiation in twentieth century popular culture through Bial’s concept of “acting Jewish.”<sup>40</sup> The medium provides a rich but underutilized opportunity for performance theorists to examine a new source of “critical formulation[s] of Jewish American identity in the latter half of the twentieth century.”<sup>41</sup>

Future work in this field may choose to focus on the contemporary zeitgeist of superhero media. If, as I argued, superheroes in general and comic books in particular may be read as a rich site of identity performance and negotiation, what might be revealed through considering the performative implications of superheroes, and their creators, in the post 9/11 era? Do these heroes still fight for “truth, justice, and the American way”? What socio-personal and cultural tensions do superheroes find themselves navigating today? What “new skins” are creators performatively slipping into, and how are comic books coded for consumers? How are contemporary comic books predicting the future?

I look forward to seeing where these inquiries might lead, and can assure, True Believer, that I will tune in next time...same Bat-time, same Bat-channel.

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<sup>40</sup> Bial 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

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