Chapter 11: This World Which Is Not One
Superhero Comics and Other Dimensions of Reference

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In 1961, the Flash discovered the secret history of comic books—a history of alternate histories, multiple worlds, and retroactive continuities. The original Flash, a young scientist named Jay Garrick, first appeared in 1940 in the anthology series *Flash Comics*, published by All-American Publications. Created by Gardner Fox and Harry Lampert, the Flash was one of many comic-book superheroes invented after the breakout success of Superman in 1938. The Flash eventually got his own series, *All-Flash*, but as sales of superhero comics dwindled following the end of World War II, the adventures of the Flash—along with many other heroes from the so-called Golden Age of comics—were cancelled, consigned to the rubbish bin of history. By 1951, the Flash had disappeared from this world.

But in 1956, a completely new Flash character appeared in the DC comics anthology *Showcase* #4. Created by Robert Kanigher and Carmine Infantino, the new Flash—now a police scientist named Barry Allen—had similar attributes to the old Flash, including superfast speed and lightning-bolt motifs on his costume. But otherwise he was a totally distinct character, living in a world in which the old Flash, Jay Garrick, had never existed. The popular success of the new Flash led to the rebooting of many other superhero characters in the 1950s and 1960s, ushering in what has come to be known as the Silver Age of comics. Then something remarkable happened. In the 1961 story "Flash of Two Worlds" (*The Flash* #123), written by Gardner Fox and drawn by Carmine Infantino, Barry Allen discovered that he could alter the speed of his molecular vibrations in such a way that he could enter another dimension of spacetime, a parallel world: "The way I see it, I vibrated so fast—I tore a gap in the vibratory shields separating our worlds! As you know—two objects can occupy the same space and time—if they vibrate at different speeds!" (Fox/Infantino/Broome [1961] 2009: 15). As Barry explored this other universe, overlapping his own universe but separated by an impossible vibrational barrier, he suddenly came face to face with Jay Garrick. As it turns out, the old Flash did not cease to exist in 1951. On the contrary, he and his world had continued in their own fashion: an entirely separate timeline, a different Earth than the one inhabited by Barry Allen. This science-fiction conceit, allowing both

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the original Flash and the new Flash to have independent realities, each with its own historical events, characters, and thematic concerns, was to have a profound impact on the narrative logic of superhero comics.

It was not actually the first time that a superhero had met an alternate version of themselves in a different universe. Wonder Woman had already discovered a parallel Earth and a parallel Wonder Woman in the 1951 story "Wonder Woman's Invisible Twin," written by Robert Kanigher and drawn by H. G. Peter (*Wonder Woman* #59). But "The Flash of Two Worlds" definitively established that all previously published comics were equally canonical, and if there were any discontinuities—internal contradictions, discrepancies in characterization, or even entire franchises that seemed narratively incompatible with other franchises—there was now a rational explanation: these things happened in other worlds, parallel realities. For DC Comics, it inaugurated the concept of the "multiverse"—initially involving just two different storyworlds, Earth-1 and Earth-2, but eventually coming to involve a sprawling multitude of alternate dimensions and timelines. Over time, as more and more comics were published, the multiverse became an invaluable trope for managing the proliferating complexities of ongoing serial narratives, branching plots, intersecting titles, and the occasional franchise reboot. Marvel Comics, Milestone Comics, Image Comics, and other companies would likewise embrace some version of a multiverse as a core feature of the superhero genre.

But in thematizing the concept of alternate timelines, the "Flash of Two Worlds" story also made a bold claim for superhero comic books as speculative media, with unique capacities to reflect upon events past, present, and future, to examine the unactualized potentialities of history. Indeed, when Barry Allen meets Jay Garrick for the first time in the alternate universe, he realizes to his great surprise that he has actually met the old Flash before, in a fashion: "You were once well-known in my world—as a fictional character appearing in a magazine called Flash Comics! When I was a youngster—you were my favorite hero!" (Fox/Infantino/Broome [1961] 2009: 17). As it turns out, according to "Flash of Two Worlds," comic-book writers and artists in all worlds have a super power of their own: they are preternaturally sensitive to the "vibrations" of other universes, and they are able to render these divergent realities graphically visible, making them available for cultural delectation and deliberation in comic-book form. As Barry Allen tells Jay Garrick, "A writer named Gardner Fox wrote about your adventures—which he claimed came to him in dreams! Obviously when Fox was asleep, his mind was 'tuned in' to your vibratory Earth!" (17). In this metafictional twist, the comics writer Gardner Fox becomes a character in Barry Allen's world—an alternate Gardner Fox from the one in our world, apparently, where both Flashes are nothing more than fictional characters. But at the end of this story, Barry Allen decides that his discovery of a parallel world is such an outlandish notion that only comic-book fans would take

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it seriously: "The only ones who'd really believe it would be the readers of Flash Comics! That's why I'm going to look up Gardner Fox who wrote the original Flash stories and tell it to him! He can write the whole thing up—in a comic book!" (32). A recursive joke, a self-reflexive quip about the tendency of comics to present notions of radical difference both seriously and ironically at the same time, it nevertheless implies that superhero comic books even in our own mundane world may be peculiarly attuned to vibrations from a different history entirely—reworking the givens of the present by forging new, retroactive continuities.

In other words, "Flash of Two Worlds" represents the speculative affordances of the residual. According to the cultural theorist Raymond Williams, processes of cultural formation are characterized by dynamic interrelations of dominant, emergent, and residual elements. For Williams, "The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (Williams 1977: 122). In this regard, "Flash of Two Worlds" literalized the residual as an active and effective force in superhero comics. Furthermore, it suggested that the residual is not merely a lingering cultural memory—for example, Barry Allen's recollection of reading about Jay Garrick's allegedly fictive adventures in his childhood. For the residual also describes unactualized alternatives to the present, the residue of potential histories that did not take place or become culturally dominant but remain available for other reconstructable futures: they are reminders of what could have been and what might yet still come.

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall has likewise emphasized the importance of the residual: "An adequate account of the whole culture of the modern world cannot be given without reference to the traces of residual ideas and practices which are appropriated into an enormous variety of social struggles. […] The point is that these images from the past are recuperated into the present, where they work again. We work on and with them; we even build on bits of them in order to envisage what we cannot know, what we have no image for" (Hall 2016: 49–50; cf. Bardini 2011). To be sure, after the two Flashes meet one another, they initially decide to proceed independently, each fighting crime in their separate ways. But they soon realize that they are more effective when they team up: "Together, the new Flash and the old Flash streak out to take up the challenges of the super-criminals—uniting as a duo for the very first time" (Fox/Infantino/Broome [1961] 2009: 26). The present recuperates the past, and previously unimagined futures suddenly emerge: "Vibrating in unison, the scarlet speedsters catapult forward . . ." (28). Moreover, even after Barry Allen returns to his own Earth at the end of "Flash of Two Worlds," the knowledge that each Flash has of the other—that there is another Earth, another mode of existence—continues to inform their actions. They would go on to have many adventures together over the years, often intersecting at pivotal moments with dramatic implications for the fate of the multiverse.

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Indeed, "Flash of Two Worlds" became a key reference point for subsequent developments in the vast narrative of DC Comics. In 1962, for example, when the Flashes reunited in "Double Danger on Earth" (*The Flash* #129), a discreet footnote reminded readers of previous events: "*Editor's note: See *The Flash* #123, 'Flash of Two Worlds'" (Fox/Infantino/Broome [1962] 2009: 37). Later multiverse stories, such as *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985–1986), *Final Crisis* (2008), *Flashpoint* (2011), *Convergence* (2015), and *DC Rebirth* (2016), likewise make references to "Flash of Two Worlds," whether in terms of specific plot callbacks, or visual allusions to the original artwork, or the characterization of Barry Allen as the only superhero capable of transporting himself between universes by controlling his molecular vibrations. Grant Morrison's *The Multiversity* (2014–2015) even returns to the metafictional conceit introduced in "Flash of Two Worlds" that superhero comic books are windows onto other actually existing worlds, running with the idea that comics writers possess a preternatural capacity to glimpse events from other timelines, other universes, and make them available for serious contemplation among comics readers.[1]

Yet even as references to the foundational meeting between the two Flashes have served to provide a sense of continuity over the decades, calling back and reanimating the residual across many radical changes to the internal narrative history of DC Comics, each point of retroactive continuity, each retcon, has actually drawn attention to the radical discontinuities, the dynamic multiplicities of the superhero multiverse.[2] To be sure, in *Convergence*, the entire multiverse turns out to have been merely one multiverse among other multiverses. Which is to say, the retroactive continuity references, situating each major event in the history of the multiverse by calling back to the 'origin' of the superhero multiverse concept, actually highlight how superhero comics embed references in ways that actively resist coherency or unification. Residual elements remain vibrant—vibrating with potential, available for reinterpretation—even after their assimilation by the conditions of the present. It is in this way that superhero comics reveal their secret capacity for transformative radical politics, despite the tendency of many superhero narratives to recapitulate conservative or reactionary themes (cf. Fawaz 2016).

1 On the conventions of worldbuilding in comics series, see Bukatman (2016); Bainbridge (2009); and Friedenthal (2019).

2 Kukkonen argues that comics require readers to hold onto a "multiworld model of reality" as an "ontological given" and contain a variety of visual and narrative strategies to help facilitate this (Kukkonen 2013: 156). For debates about whether superhero comics are organized around continuity or multiplicity or both and to what degree, see Klock (2002); Kaveney (2008); Ndalianis (2009); Jenkins (2009); Hyman (2017); and Singer (2018).

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In other discursive contexts—for example, historical narratives, scientific reports, or realist novels—references are stabilizing elements, explanations for causality, shared history, and the uniform worldness of the world. Literally, references are supposed to create the conditions for a frame of reference, a world in common. But in superhero comics, references are rather more speculative, linking the present to more worlds than one and opening altered perspectives on the continuity of lived history, which proves to have never been continuous or singular at all. The endless recombination of referential elements, drawing together characters and events from diverse and perhaps incommensurable narratives into the same representational space, is less about apprehending a world of differences than about affirming the difference of worlds, opening up the present to multiple other futures. It suggests that, even within the confines of one world, inside the "vibratory shields" of our consensus reality, we might yet glimpse a flash of the otherwise—and vibrate to the tune of another timeline.

What's in a Reference?

Superhero comics are littered with references.[3] Historical persons are drawn directly into comic book pages. Current events become incorporated into the month-by-month developing storylines. A real-world global conflict is mentioned as background for a comic plot. In their everyday speech, characters make analogies to contemporaneous and past moments and invoke cultural references. From the longstanding comparisons and debates about Charles Xavier and Martin Luther King, to the way in which the Marvel "Civil War" story arc mirrored the post-9/11 passage of the Patriot Act, to the writing of Barack Obama's historic presidential inauguration into *The Amazing Spider-Man* #583, superhero comics have incorporated, responded to, reflected, and refracted their extra-diegetic contexts.[4]

At the same time, though, superhero comics reference persons, events, or discourses from their own diegetic worlds, whether the Marvel Universe, the DC Multiverse, the Valiant Universe, the Milestone Dakataverse, or other comics franchises. Precisely because of the serialized production of comics and the ongoing

3 Gardner analogizes the form of comics to the archive because of its "excess data—the remains of the everyday" (Gardner 2012: 177).

4 Coogan locates this convention with what he calls the "reconstructive stage" of superhero comics (Coogan 2006: 221). For essays that foreground the relationship between comic books and cultural history, see Pustz (2012). Wright draws out sweeping sets of correspondences between superhero comics, their evolution, and U.S. social and cultural politics (Wright 2001: 226–253). A great deal of scholarship working on superheroes in relation to their historical contexts focus on U.S. militarism and geopolitics. See Hassler-Forest (2012); and Chute (2017). On Captain America and other nationalist superheroes, see Dittmer (2013).

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construction of continuities both within individual titles and across titles, references to previous issues, characters, and story arcs abound.[5] One of the earliest forms of this kind of reference-making is the footnote, usually marked by an asterisk. Such references help readers to configure a provisional continuity; gaps in the storyline, for example, can be patched up by footnotes advising readers to consult other issues in the series or other series. Footnotes can also explain narrative references to characters who are no longer part of the current action, as in this footnote for "The Viper" in *Captain America and the Falcon* #174: "That supervillain *sparked* all this in CA&F #163. —Roy" (Englehart/Friedrich/Buscema [1974] 2017: 115). In this case, the footnote produces a retroactive understanding of cause and continuity (indeed, some readers might not otherwise agree that the Viper "sparked all this"). Such references, then, may not simply allude to an already understood past. They may reconstruct, fill in the gaps, or draw out overlooked aspects in order to reframe the current action. While footnotes are the most explicit forms of intra-diegetic reference, other forms include how a character is drawn, the details of his or her costume, and references to characters' pasts.

The superhero comics page becomes a space of incongruous interaction among imaginary, intra-diegetic, and historical references (fig. 11.1). These references do not work harmoniously to stabilize the relation between fictional text and history. Rather, each reference—each cite—is a site of speculation where continuities across worlds are fashioned at the same instant they are proliferated, always opening up new and potentially other worlds that were, in effect, already there.

Because the reference does not belong to one world, it follows less a criterion of temporal progression than a process of articulation, what Hall describes as the "articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'" (Hall 2016: 142; cf. Hall 1986). What brings together elements that "have no necessary 'belongingness'" are the culturally defined ways in which we know and feel about these references. Discussing the communicative function of images in comic books, the cartoonist Will Eisner notes,

> Comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience. This demands of the sequential artist an understanding of the reader's life experience if his message is to be understood. An interaction has to develop because the artist is evoking images stored in the minds of both parties. (Eisner [1985] 2008: 7)

5 On the range of comic books' allusions, see Pustz (1999: 143–156). On the role of allusions and intertextuality for self-reflexivity in comics and the emergence of revisionary superhero narratives, see Klock (2002).

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Figure 11.1: Worlds collide in a blend of references: dinosaurs and pilgrims and spaceships, oh my! Crisis on Infinite Earths *#5, "Worlds in Limbo" (Wolfman/Pérez [1985] 2000: 127).*

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This "commonality of experience" is itself a contested domain of collective apperceptions or apprehensions of particular references—for example, how a reference is commented on, talked about, and understood. After all, in order for a reference to be a reference, it must be commented on and used in an allusive, metaphorical, allegorical, metonymic, or indexical fashion. It must 'stand for' something. The interaction between the reader's and the sequential artist's minds foregrounds the relationship between our cultural consciousness of these shared images and the manner in which they are narrated and thematized. The reference, a shared bit of cultural lore, does not have to be from the past: it could be from a not-yet present or even far future, so long as it is part of a shared cultural consciousness that invokes the referent in a particular way.

As such, the strange phenomenon of the reference in superhero comics forces readers to question in what sense histories are 'shared' and in what sense worlds can be held in common. As sites of speculation, references draw worlds together—underscoring the processes through which continuities are forged. When superhero comics use references, then, they are simultaneously speculating on our cultural consciousness—how we as readers might feel or how we might understand any residual element—dramatizing the crisis of what world(s) we do or do not share. In this way, references in superhero comics always instantiate the logic of the multiverse, that is, the multiverse as an epistemic formation. For even when they serve to anchor the assumptions of a single world, forging continuities both prescriptively and retroactively, the referential operations of superhero comics require us to think multiple worlds simultaneously.

Reference and Retcon

Let us consider a salient example. Published from January 10, 1974 to June 10, 1975, Steve Englehart's "Secret Empire" and "Nomad" storylines of *Captain America and the Falcon* (issues #169–186) explicitly speculate on the cultural consciousness of particular events, symbols, and figures during the then-ongoing Watergate scandal in the United States and the resignation of President Nixon. These sequential storylines revolve around the question of reference, in the strict sense of what something 'stands for.' Englehart writes,

> [*Captain America*] was being considered for cancellation when I got it, because it had no reason for existence. […] The problem across the board at Marvel was that this was the 70s—prime anti-war years—and here was a guy with a flag on his chest who was supposed to represent what most people distrusted. No one knew what to do with him. (Englehart 2002a)

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Englehart further clarifies how the "Secret Empire" arc alludes to Watergate:

> I was writing a man [Captain America] who believed in America's highest ideals at a time when America's President was a crook. I could not ignore that. And so, in the Marvel Universe, which so closely resembled our own, Cap followed a criminal conspiracy into the White House and saw the President commit suicide. (Englehart 2002b)

The literary scholar Matthew Vernon summarizes Captain America's perpetual dilemma: "Captain America embodies the problem of being torn between two worlds while seeking a way to reconcile them" (Vernon 2016: 126). Vernon analyzes two worlds that are separated by time. In Englehart's stories, Captain America must navigate worlds separated by shared referents.

These storylines depict Steve Rogers's crisis of consciousness as he uncovers a "secret empire" conspiracy, which begins with a media campaign targeting Captain America as an enemy of the state. The conspiracy, as it turns out, goes all the way up to the president of the United States. Seeing that corruption and greed extend to the president, Steve Rogers retires as Captain America only to reemerge as a new superhero, Nomad. The inexplicable reappearance of his old nemesis, the Red Skull, and the killing of Roscoe (who had taken up Captain America's mantle in Rogers's stead) prompts Rogers to become Captain America once more, vowing: "I won't be blind again" (Englehart et al. [1975] 2006, #183: 135). This new Captain America will no longer have his nationalist blinkers on; instead, he will supposedly become deeply self-reflexive about what he stands for.

In issue #169, which begins the "Secret Empire" arc, Captain America is framed as a vigilante, an anti-American villain, by the Committee to Regain America's Principles. The accusation eventually leads Captain America and Falcon to defeat the secret empire plot, in which the leader (Number One) is a thinly disguised version of Richard Nixon. The Committee to Regain America's Principles (CRAP) references the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP), the group whose illegal activities led to Watergate. Of course, it is not a simple presentist reference. The name of the committee, emphasizing a desire to "Regain America's Principles," already anticipates the ignominious downfall of American consciousness *following* the Watergate affair and prospectively imagines linking the concerns of illegal vigilantism with a questioning of who is the proper referent for "America." The committee's ad attacking Captain America questions whether or not he stands for "Your America?" (Englehart/Friedrich/Buscema [1974] 2017, #169: 11) (fig. 11.2). In issue #176, Captain America's crisis of consciousness in both himself and the nation is figured through the incompatibility between different "versions" of what America is: "In the land of the free, each of us is able to do what he wants to do—think what he wants to think. That's as it should be—But it makes for a

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great many different versions of what America is." The dilemma becomes clear: "So when people the world over look at me—which America am I supposed to symbolize?" (Englehart/Friedrich/Buscema [1974] 2017, #176: 157) (fig. 11.3). Here, in the cartoon panel, racial difference is drawn as a conflict between different exercises of freedom and attached to the crisis of consciousness regarding one's faith in the nation. Moreover, it is internalized for Steve Rogers as a problem of reference: "when people the world over look at me."

Figure 11.2: CREEP reimagined as CRAP. Captain America and the Falcon *#169 (Englehart/Friedrich/Buscema [1974] 2017: 11).*

Figure 11.3: Which America? Whose America? Captain America and the Falcon *#176 (Englehart/Friedrich/Buscema [1974] 2017: 157).*

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These storylines do not resolve this question by reviving Captain America's old enemies from World War II. They do not restore to Captain America the symbol of America or reconcile a different version of America to Captain America in any nostalgic way. His renewed commitment that he "won't be blind again" is not a renewed attachment to an ideal, but rather a drive in the psychoanalytic sense of a "constant force" that will never be satisfied (Lacan [1973] 1998: 179). In other words, this question of reference is answered neither through shoring up national identity against oppositional, un-American threats, nor by identifying Rogers more firmly as a symbol of the American people.[6] Instead, it is answered through creating psychic and cultural drives for Captain America in and amongst alternative continuities. The reference, working on and through the residual, shapes these drives; it forges and reconfigures continuities on which the coherence of political imaginaries depends.

Rogers's crisis ("which America am I supposed to symbolize?") articulates a world in which crises of belief are brought to signification by invoking challenges to white nationalism. The historical Watergate scandal—a political blunder in which one political party did not play by the proper rules of politics—is inserted as the background assumption of a cultural consciousness having to do with the ongoing white resistance to black struggles for freedom. As we move from "Secret Empire" to "Nomad," the new antagonist becomes the Serpent Squad and its brand of anti-capitalist terrorism. The Serpent Squad is described as "crazy," "fanatic," and fighting for the "cause" of "nihilism" (Englehart et al. [1975] 2006, #183: 102). But the Serpent Squad's "cause" is quickly pictured through a mainstream popular consciousness of black street politics. The Serpent Squad's story finds a powerful site of dissemination in a crowd led by the stereotypical image of an 'angry black man' (fig. 11.4). Relying on the iconicity of the race riot and the consciousness that links it to the false understanding of black struggle as reactionary, the superhero comic produces a cultural background that becomes Nomad's understanding of historical forces. Seeing the crowd, Nomad (formerly Captain America) thinks to himself: "Good lord! It's already started—the very thing the Viper predicted—The building of a legend around her, to inspire others to the goals she pretended to espouse! And they're calling *me* a *vigilante*, just the way the *Committee to Regain America's Principles* did!" (Englehart et al. [1975] 2006, #183: 122). What bothers Nomad so much is the inversion of consequence and cause, where consequence becomes cause in the future. He draws a continuity between CRAP and the Serpent Squad, creating a peculiar consciousness of his own persecution.

6 Dittmer (2013) analyzes Captain America in relation to a U.S. nationalism that continually evolves and incorporates geopolitical questions of gender, race, body and territory. He briefly treats the "Secret Empire" run (Dittmer 2013: 119–121), using it as an example of the rigid nationalist politics of a process of renewal and regenerative identification of Captain America with the nation.

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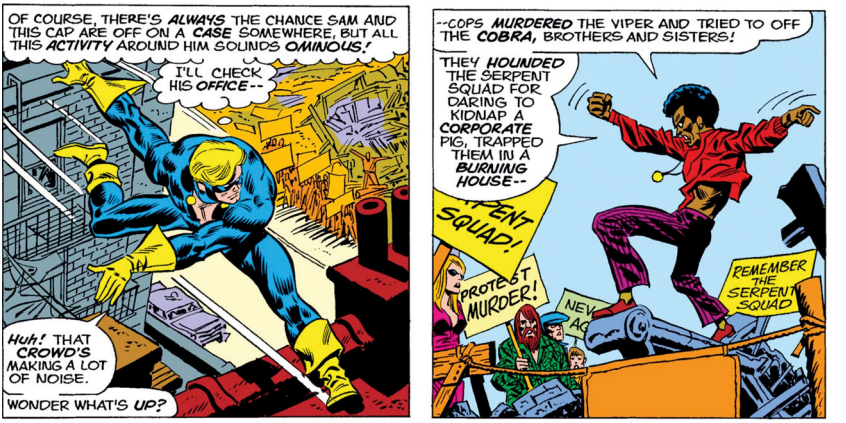

Figure 11.4: Serpent Squad drawn as racial unrest. Captain America and the Falcon *#183 (Englehart et al. [1975] 2006: 122).*

This technique of using residual elements of race riot images in order to forge white political consciousness mirrors the strategies used by Richard Nixon and Alabama Governor George Wallace before him. As Carol Anderson writes: "H. R. Haldeman, one of the Republican candidate's most trusted aides, later recalled, 'He [Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to'" (Anderson 2016: 104). This recognition "while not appearing to" relies on race-neutral language and the strategic use of images to *picture* African Americans without referring to them. What distinguishes superhero comics' use of an otherwise familiar technique is that it creates continuities such that events are cognized in terms of historical drives.

Enter the retcon—that is, the technique of creating retroactive continuity in serial narratives and media franchises. The retcon, as Joshua Clover eloquently describes, "involves a kind of rearrangement of the already given facts into a new logically consistent constellation that can account for later, initially inconsistent developments" (Clover 2014: 15). Here, the retcon smooths over Nomad's drives by drawing from histories of racial affect. The retcon is used not so much to reproduce political identities as it is to form new drives.

Across a series in which the relationship between Captain America's identity as symbol of the United States and his drive to struggle for liberty are being questioned, it is the remaking of consciousness around juxtaposed residual elements of racial signification that creates a new continuity for this relationship. For example, after Rogers "abandon[s] the role of Captain America" because he is "deeply troubled by current political events," he remarks on the kind of freedom that he feels:

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> You know, Sharon, I don't think I've ever felt as free as I have these past weeks. I've had no master but myself, and no cause but my own. I don't mean that selfishly, now—Just that I've been able to live entirely as myself and not at all as a piece of public property! (Englehart et al. [1974] 2006, #179: 44–45)

It is a freedom, made clear by the comic itself through Rogers's rhetoric of "master," "cause," and "property," that is dependent on slavery and dependent on creating a distance between Steve Rogers and Falcon. It furthers the interests of capitalism because it creates a conceptual division that enables the creation of new understandings of what capitalist freedom looks like, one that is dependent on marking a distance from the appropriation of gendered labor, racialized labor, and other forms of devalued social standing (Singh 2017; Roediger 1999). Indeed, before becoming Nomad, Steve Rogers's freedom allows him to partake of the pleasures of heterosexual, romantic coupling with Sharon Carter. Previously, in issue #166, Rogers had been evicted and dispossessed from his apartment room, and Sam Wilson (Falcon) let him sleep in his social welfare office. After hearing Rogers complain about his dispossession, Wilson commented, "Easy, Steve! In Harlem, we been puttin' up with landlords like Trimble since forever" (Englehart/Buscema [1973] 2013: 16), bringing Rogers's relationship with labor and property close to his own. But in the passage from issue #179 above, Rogers is not worried about 'work' at all. Instead, this newfound freedom "banishes the specter of wageless life" (Singh 2017: 94). That this freedom is felt in relation to racial formations of territory and property is made clear in Rogers's offhand remark after an explosion that disturbs his taking a walk with Sharon: "Unless the American Indian Movement wants Manhattan back, somebody just tried to kill one of us!" (Englehart et al. [1974] 2006, #179: 46).

The reference as concretization of the residual takes center stage at a pivotal moment when Rogers tries to link his new superhero identity of Nomad to some new drive untainted by America's failures of democracy and the sign of Watergate. Early in the "Nomad" run, Nomad stands in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Rather than being a site for the unification of worlds of reference and thereby clarifying the single political horizon in which Captain America/Nomad will find meaning, the reference to the Lincoln Memorial becomes a site for speculation that refuses those totalizing logics. Words flood the page: first, a quotation from a speech that Lincoln gave at Independence Hall on February 22, 1861; and then, a second, longer quote from a speech given at Edwardsville, Illinois on September 11, 1858 (fig. 11.5). These quotations do not mirror the ones actually present on the Lincoln Memorial, which are instead drawn from the Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863) and Lincoln's second inauguration speech (March 4, 1865). The panel emphasizes a non-correspondence with monumental history, a disjunction between possible worlds.

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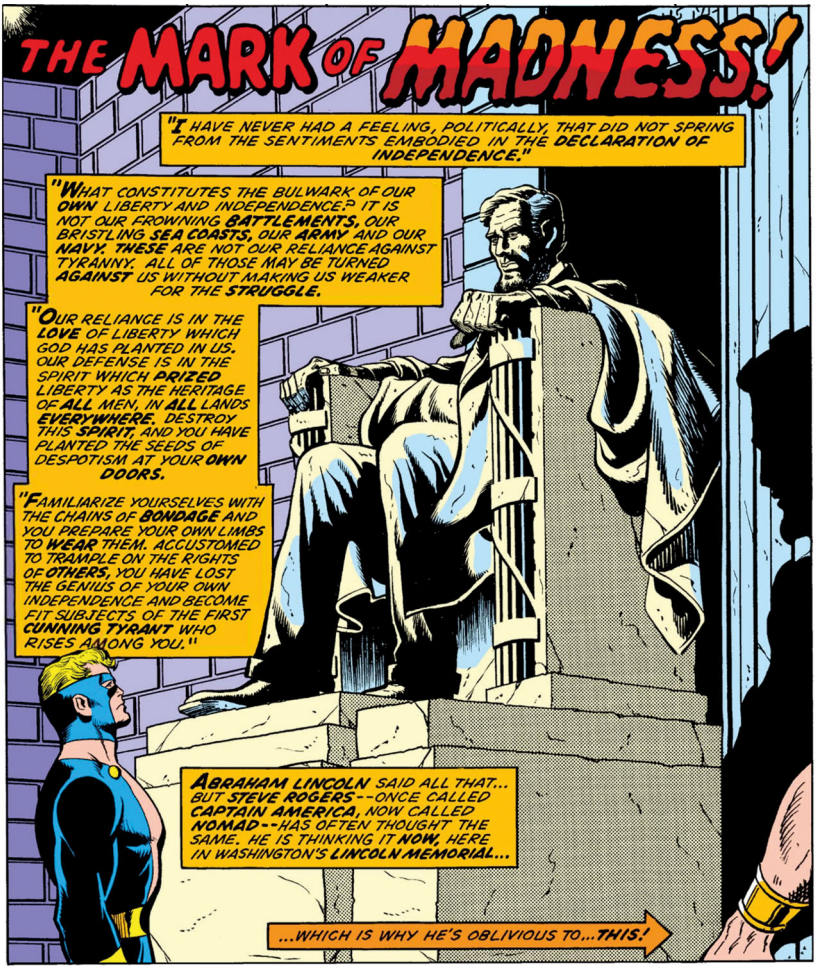

Figure 11.5: The Lincoln Memorial and its multiple continuities. Captain America and the Falcon *#181 (Englehart et al. [1975] 2006: 82).*

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Lincoln's line begins the issue: "I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." The narration for the comic continues: "Abraham Lincoln said all that … but Steve Rogers—once called Captain America, now called Nomad—has often thought the same. He is thinking it now, here in Washington's Lincoln Memorial" (Englehart et al. [1975] 2006, #181: 82). Extracted from the rest of the speech, the quoted lines make an argument about resisting despotism and tyranny, not through strength of arms, but through inner spirit and inner love of liberty. The circuit defining Rogers's new drive forges a continuity with the Declaration of Independence.

In what sense is this a speculative retcon and not just a historical reference or revisionist history? It is not actually interested in revising our understanding of the past (revisionist history). Nor is it a historical reference that takes some event as given. Rather, it is a moment that rearranges the given facts in order to form a new continuity, a new way of orienting to the antagonisms of the contemporary era. This new continuity makes little mention of slavery, excising the original historical context. In the full speech from which these quotations are drawn, Lincoln directly addressed the Dred Scott decision. In U.S. Chief Justice Roger Taney's final majority opinion on the Dred Scott case, Taney admitted that it was difficult to reimagine public sentiment, whether at the time of the Declaration of Independence or at the time when the Constitution was adopted; but he nevertheless professed to do exactly that in bringing forward the hardened thought of "more than a century" in which "[the negro] had no rights which the white man was bound to respect" (Taney 1857: 407). Taney's speculations on historical consciousness became the basis for professing historical 'fact.' In *Captain America and the Falcon*, the blind spots in Taney's historical imagination of sentiment are reproduced through the comic's selective quotations from Lincoln that emphasize the transhistorical conduit of sentiment over other lines of thought.

Lincoln's argument in his 1858 speech was actually that the Dred Scott decision spuriously founded the "right of self-government" on the right to brutalize the "negro" (Lincoln [1858] 1953: 95). He stated that what Judge Stephen A. Douglas insisted on calling "popular sovereignty" really meant installing in the notion of "peoplehood" itself the right to treat black men and women with impunity (Lincoln [1858] 1953: 95). But Lincoln's rhetoric also aimed to rouse white sentiment and fear, compelling his audience to safeguard black interests with the idea that "you're next." Indeed, the lines immediately before the portion of Lincoln's speech quoted in the comic are:

> Now, when by all these means you have succeeded in dehumanizing the negro; when you have put him down, and made it forever impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field; when you have extinguished his soul, and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out in darkness like that which broods over the spirits of

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> the damned; are you quite sure the demon which you have roused *will not turn and rend you?* (Lincoln [1858] 1953: 95)

The continuity that Steve Rogers derives from this partial reference involves both a severing of the concept of freedom from the history of slavery and a carrying forward of the sentiments of fear that white men, too, could become targets. Lincoln's own limited way of imagining U.S. anti-blackness only in terms of its potential threat to white men is carried forward into Rogers's cultural consciousness. The retroactive continuity making sense of Captain America's transformation into Nomad runs through the residual meanings actively formed in the sentiments of slavery and freedom.

But at the same time, this form of speculative history through which Captain America crafts his own consciousness is willfully blind. The sequence of panels displays this blindness. As Rogers stands in front of the Lincoln Memorial, lost in thought, an arrow points to a partially exposed arm with the line, "Which is why he's oblivious to … this!" The next panel repeats the blindness. Rogers thinks to himself, "Lincoln: Why did he sound so eloquent when everyone today sounds so forced? Why did our forefathers seem to understand America more clearly than we do now? We've been through so much, and yet—Eh? Someone behind me—!" (Englehart et al. [1974] 2006, #181: 83). He is suddenly interrupted by the Sub-Mariner, a figure whose fictional continuity with Captain America is crucial (after all, he is the character who discovered Captain America encased in ice). At this moment, Nomad is attempting to create a continuity with a retconned version of the historical past, one that brings forward the eloquence of Lincoln in order to align voice and body into a sentiment of freedom that has nothing to do with slavery and everything to do with the fear of tyranny. But the Sub-Mariner reintroduces another continuity: the problematic identity of Captain America.

This reintroduction unearths the multiple worlds drawn together in this scene. Here, the collisions of intra-diegetic references and extra-diegetic references open up multiple racialized histories that cannot be subsumed into a single line extending from the U.S. Civil War to the Civil Rights movement. While the story arc focuses on Captain America's crisis of consciousness linked to Watergate, the issue that introduces the entire "Secret Empire" arc actually begins with another ongoing storyline—one that centers on the Falcon's desire to get new powers so that he no longer feels inferior to Captain America. The Falcon storyline interpolates the Secret Empire plot into the longer-running narrative of Falcon's powers and his 'place' in relation to Captain America.[7] In the issue that begins the "Secret Empire" plot, Captain America saves the Falcon, again leading Falcon to ask for extra pow-

7 As a sidekick character whose position appears to mirror structural inequalities, Falcon has garnered less attention from scholars writing on the politics of race and comics. See Brown (2001);

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ers. Captain America responds, "He has a right to better himself, of course. I only wish I believed that what he wants is *for* the better" (Englehart/Friedrich/Buscema [1974] 2017, #169: 10). Captain America here references longstanding discourses of black freedom struggle and white resistance to that freedom. It also references the deep hypocrisy of white superiority in the language of rights discourse. But more importantly, it situates the whole CRAP advertising campaign in relation to the spacetime of the Falcon's long discontent and his critique of Captain America: Falcon's history as a history of white retrenchment.

For the critical theorist and poet Fred Moten, interpolation can interrupt interpellation, the way in which we are recruited by ideologies and constituted as subjects. The insertion of new matter simultaneously disrupts continuities and creates new continuities (Moten 2017: 28–33). In issue #174 of "Secret Empire," Falcon learns from Professor Charles Xavier of the X-Men that he may be a mutant and have a "paranormal mind" (Englehart/Friedrich/Buscema [1974] 2017, #174: 114). This speculative retcon of Falcon's origins would explain his uncannily telepathic relationship with the falcon, Redwing. In this sense, the Falcon as superhero carries forward the residual—untapped potentialities, discarded alternatives. Captain America refuses to follow this alternate continuity. Early in the Nomad storyline when Falcon tries to get Steve Rogers to investigate with him whether he might in fact be a mutant, Rogers responds: "No, Sam—You have to find out! Captain America doesn't exist anymore! He's a legend of World War II—no longer living! And since he doesn't exist, he doesn't go on patrol!" (Englehart et al. [1974] 2006, #177: 10). Rogers registers his complete indifference to this possible retconned storyline. In fact, he disavows this possible continuity, diminishing Falcon's desired mission as simply going "on patrol." But Falcon's mission potentially revises his origin story by articulating a different set of reference points—namely, the X-Men—with the long struggle of black resistance to conceptions of freedom centered on white affect. Falcon is a fragment from another world, but one that anticipates the conditions of possibility by which he is made into a problem.

As a further manifestation of Falcon's interruptions, he continually points to Captain America's affective drives: "Cap was so intent on gettin' this trip started, he didn't even take time to switch to civvies! This thing is really eatin' at 'im!" And then, "Partner, you have got to lighten up! You nearly drove that dude into screamin' paranoia!" (Englehart/Friedrich/Buscema [1974] 2017, #172: 72). Falcon repeatedly notes how crazy and forgetful Captain America has become, making clear the reactionary nature of Captain America's actions. In the example above of Falcon's response to Rogers's eviction ("we been puttin' up with landlords like Trimble since forever"), Falcon's "since forever" inserts a different temporality, which

Howard/Jackson (2013); Gateward/Jennings (2015); carrington (2016); and Wanzo (2009) for analyses of black superheroes, masculinities, stereotypes, and genres.

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interrupts Rogers's indignant focus on the immediate past and immediate future. Falcon puts the brakes on the reactionary emotions that drive Captain America forward and that structure his cultural and historical consciousness.

The manner in which the crossing of intra-diegetic and extra-diegetic references opens up sociopolitical horizons is further articulated through the referent of whiteness. When Steve Rogers as Captain America announces his retirement, various characters insert themselves into the vacated position. First, the famous baseball player Bob Russo takes his shot at being Captain America. Seven panels is all it takes to dispose this wannabe Captain America: Russo swings into a wall and breaks his arm. Second, a biker gang member, Scar Turpin, makes his move to take on the mantle: "I been kinda leary about trottin' my costumed bod down to the cops, to show 'em who they got workin' with 'em now—They might just put me away for disrespectin' the flag" (Englehart et al. [1974] 2006, #179: 56). These interpolations from different sectors of society (baseball and biker culture in San Rafael, California) display both the popular accessibility of the icon (people believe they can become Captain America) and the exceptional quality of the icon (they inevitably fail to do so). The third and most significant interpolation is Roscoe Simons, who trains with Falcon to be the new Captain America and whose death at the hands of the Red Skull actually propels Steve Rogers to resume his role as Captain America.

These failures are signaled precisely in their deviation from a specific alignment of whiteness in relation to labor and language. Scar Turpin imagines Captain America as someone who "works" and who affiliates with the "cops," neither of which apply to him. Roscoe's defining characteristic is his speech written in dialect: "Ain't dis a kick inna teet'? I bend da rules ta scam Mr. Rogers' address in da gym registry—and den he ain't home! But heck, if I lived inna welfare office, I'd travel a lot, too! I didn't know tings was so bad for 'im" (Englehart et al. [1974] 2006, #180: 74). This dialect places Roscoe Simons within a range of possible ethnic identities—Irish, Jewish—and the uses of 'dis' and 'dat' recall Bre'r Rabbit caricatures of blackness. The failures of these men to become Captain America—failures of interpolation—serve the construction of Steve Rogers as *generically* white, that is to say, both *general* and *genre-specific* within the discourse of superhero comics.

These multiple, alternative continuities appear as paradoxes on the cover of *Captain America and the Falcon* #181 (fig. 11.6). This cover image does not reproduce a scene from the narrative. Instead, it imagines an encounter between Nomad, Falcon, and the new Captain America (Roscoe Simon) that never actually happens. Falcon says, "Stay back, Nomad! You had your chance to be Captain America! Now it's his turn!" Nomad does not speak. This fictional non-encounter shows the alliance between Falcon and Roscoe as something that never fully matured, but whose

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Figure 11.6: Drawing out the refused continuity. Captain America and the Falcon *#181 (Englehart et al. [1975] 2006: 81).*

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residual possibility remains available for representation as an alternate history, a counterfactual world. A glimpse of their possible alliance does occur earlier in the narrative proper when Falcon overcomes Roscoe's racist language and Roscoe overcomes his own embarrassments and humiliations in being trained by Falcon.[8] Indeed, to understand this scene as something that actually happens is to interpolate a past in which Falcon's multiple interruptions—here manifested through his command to Rogers ("Stay back")—are given standing and in which Roscoe is Falcon's partner and not the other way around. It is also to form a linkage across blackness and a non-generic, non-generalizable whiteness that has historically been foreclosed by specific political formations that have traded on black images of inferiority and what W. E. B. Du Bois has called the "public and psychological wage" of whiteness, a construction of public space, institutions, and the economic value of white freedom as a public good (Du Bois [1935] 1998: 700).

The cover depicts an encounter that does not happen within the story's diegesis—and, in fact, it *could not happen*. For it is Roscoe's death that causes Steve Rogers's guilt. (He feels that he should have been the one to confront the Red Skull.) This guilt and mourning drive Steve Rogers to become Captain America once again. The pictured encounter on the cover thus replaces one set of affective potentialities (mourning, guilt) with another (astonishment, surprise, feelings of betrayal from Steve Rogers and refusal from Falcon). The cover image's non-event is necessary for the dominant storyline, insofar as it enables Steve Rogers's affective drive through the comic. In imaging what *could not happen*, the cover points to the reorganization of affective elements that would be necessary to form a continuity and thereby an alternative cultural consciousness.

Captain America's drive to resolve his crisis of consciousness requires revising the problem of being in the wrong history, the wrong timeline—or, as he puts it in issue #168, "the feeling that I'm a walking anachronism—a guy who looks like he's twenty … even though he was fighting Hitler's hordes some thirty years ago!" (Thomas/Isabella/Buscema [1973] 2013: 3). He expresses this crisis in terms of linking the idea and material reality of what he 'stands for.' This drive runs circles around and repeatedly avoids an alternative consciousness. It is a drive predicated on the refusal of Falcon's claims and activated through speculating on residual meanings of race and history, as in the Lincoln Memorial reference. The return of Rogers as Captain America with his statement "I won't be blind again" epitomizes the cultural consciousness and temporal continuity that the series repeats: a looking ahead that disavows alternate continuities in order to secure a drive for liberty. As we have seen, however, Captain America is often caught not looking behind him. Always looking in front of him instead of behind him, Captain Amer-

8 In *Captain America and the Falcon* #182, Falcon forgives Roscoe for calling him a "joik" and refashions the relationship as one where he watches out for Captain America, not the other way around.

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ica's continuity relies on the retcon to smooth out inconsistencies at the same time that the proliferation of continuities body forth alternate modes of consciousness and reference-making. Falcon becomes important as a figure for and interruption of the intra-diegetic and historical continuities that weave Captain America and Falcon together. Falcon indicates the referential consciousness built around blackness that drives Captain America's blindness and also interrupts this drive with other affective possibilities—specifically, a refusal of given social relations.[9]

Beyond the One-World World

By drawing attention to contradictions, residual histories, and alternate timelines even while retconning them, superhero comics expose the coercive force of continuity as the condition of a unified world—the violence and repressions inherent to one-world ideologies and the desire for a "one-world world" (Law 2015; cf. de la Cadena 2015; de la Cadena/Blaser 2018; Escobar 2018; Reiter 2018). Superheroes themselves have often represented such one-world ideologies: forces of vigilante justice or homeland security determined to bring order, unity, and liberty to an unruly universe. Captain America looks ahead to universal freedom, even while overlooking the structural occlusions and injustices on which his own sense of freedom relies. But the system of references in superhero comics likewise indicates how the speculative drives that characterize one-world ideologies, aspiring to produce the conditions for one world to persist at the expense of another, ultimately threaten the continuity of any world whatsoever. This is, of course, the whole point of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986–1987).

A singular reference establishes *Watchmen* as an alternate history of our own world, marking the inflection point when it changed: the publication of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, representing the first appearance of Superman. In *Watchmen*, the advent of superhero comic books inspired groups of people to become heroes themselves. The generation of the Minutemen (allegorizing the Golden Age of comics) was followed by the generation of the Crimebusters (allegorizing the Silver Age of comics). In these eras, the worlds of fiction and reality collided: "[T]he super-heroes had escaped from their four-color world and invaded the plain, factual black and white of the headlines" (Moore/Gibbons 1987, I: 32). Because these real costumed heroes dominated the news media, the comic book industry in *Watchmen* instead went in a different direction, prioritizing stories of pirates and swashbucklers. In *Watchmen*, the presidency of Richard Nixon in the U.S. never

9 Drawing on the work of the black studies scholars Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, Tiffany Lethabo King writes, "Blackness is a form of malleable potential and a state of change in the 'socio-political order' of the New World" (King 2019: 103).

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ended because the Watergate scandal never came to light. (Indeed, it is implied that a superhero working on behalf of the U.S. government—perhaps the Comedian—murdered the reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein before they could expose the dirty tricks carried out by the Committee to Re-Elect the President.) In the context of this political history, costumed heroes have come to stand for a one-world world, stamping out petty crime as well as mobilizing against other forms of social deviance, including "promiscuity," "drugs," "campus subversion," "anti-war demos," and "black unrest" (II: 10–11). While some heroes such as the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan have aligned with the U.S. military to contain the spread of communism, others, such as Ozymandias, aim for a unification of the world's people into a common frame of reference, namely, globalized consumer capitalism. Ozymandias plots to achieve this goal—the end of global conflict and the overcoming of ideological differences, the creation of a neoliberal planet as the end of history as such (Hoberek [2014] 2017)—through an elaborate scheme, staging a fake alien invasion of New York. Ozymandias believes that only by providing the global superpowers—the U.S. and the Soviet Union, as well as the individual heroes that represent them—with a common enemy will a worldwide peace be achieved: "Unable to unite the world by conquest . . . I would trick it; frighten it towards salvation with history's greatest practical joke" (XI: 24).

The story of *Watchmen* is explicitly about the practice of interpreting references and the production of retroactive continuity. On the one hand, the main storyline follows the efforts of the masked heroes Rorschach and Night Owl to solve a series of murders and other mysterious events that suggest an extraordinary conspiracy to eradicate superheroes. Rorschach's own name, of course, references the famous psychological test that involves interpreting arbitrary inkblots as meaningful references. While putting together the pieces of the mystery, Night Owl remembers that "Ozymandias" was the ancient Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II, which turns out to be the secret password on Ozymandias's office computer. Night Owl thus discovers Ozymandias's role as the mastermind behind the conspiracy.

On the other hand, Ozymandias himself is figured as an expert interpreter of references (fig. 11.7). As the "smartest man in the world" (XI: 32), he has built his personal fortune by observing patterns in popular media and television advertising that guide his strategic business investments. Watching multiple television broadcasts simultaneously, reading across images and forging continuities among a multitude of references and allusions—analogous to the practice of reading across comic book panels, suturing words and images (see McLuhan [1964] 1994: 166–168; Milburn 2015: 135–172)—Ozymandias discerns patterns of cultural consciousness, the lineaments of a world: "These reference points established, an emergent *worldview* becomes gradually *discernible* amidst the media's white noise" (XI: 1). For Ozymandias, comprehending the ensemble of reference

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points is an exact practice of speculation, providing "subliminal hints of the future" and a model of things to come: "This jigsaw-fragment model of tomorrow aligns itself piece by piece" (XI: 1). His speculative synthesis of reference points from global media streams likewise convinces him that the incommensurable one-world ideologies of the twentieth century will never be reconciled:

> I saw *East* and *West*, locked into an escalating *arms spiral*, their mutual terror and suspicion mounting with the *missiles* […] Both sides *realized* the suicidal *implications* of nuclear conflict, yet couldn't stop racing *towards* it lest their *opponents* should *overtake* them. […] Simply given the *mathematics* of the situation, sooner or later *conflict would be inevitable*. (XI: 21)

Ozymandias determines that only a wild science-fiction scheme—revealing to the people of Earth that a multidimensional multiverse does exist—will make the Earth whole: "To frighten governments into *co-operation*, I would convince them that Earth faced imminent *attack* by beings from another *world*" (XI: 25).

Ozymandias commissions a team of scientists, artists, and science fiction writers to help him create the hoax (though Ozymandias has them all killed before they learn the full truth of his plan). Significantly, Ozymandias recruits Max Shea, the famous comics writer and novelist whose work on *Tales of the Black Freighter* expanded the artistic horizons of pirate comic books, tasking him to create horrifying scenes from the alien world.

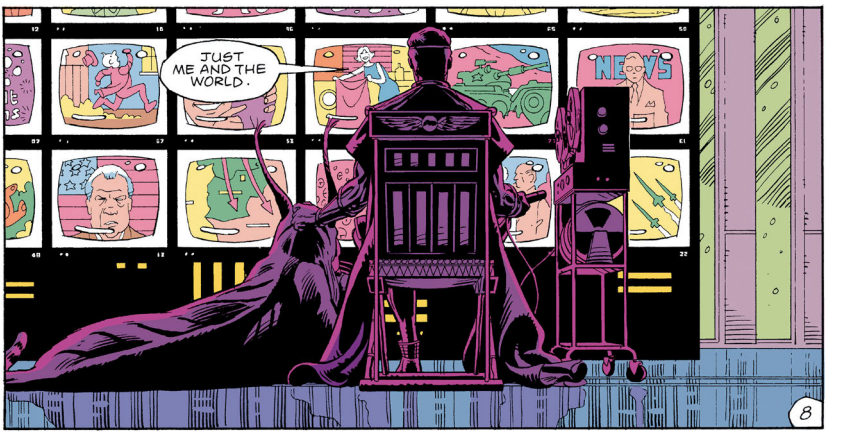

Figure 11.7: Ozymandias reads across images, connecting points of reference. Watchmen *(Moore/Gibbons 1987, X: 8).*

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Of course, Ozymandias was not the only one to have envisaged such a scenario. Around the same time as Moore and Gibbons were creating *Watchmen*, the former Hollywood actor and president of the United States Ronald Reagan was indulging similar speculative fantasies. During the 1985 Geneva Summit, Reagan and the Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev took a private walk to a cabin in the vicinity. Years later, Gorbachev revealed what they had discussed on this walk:

> President Reagan suddenly said to me, "What would you do if the United States were suddenly attacked by someone from outer space? Would you help us?" I said, "No doubt about it." He said, "We too." So that's interesting. (Gorbachev 2009)

The idea of a world united by war against an extraterrestrial threat was often on Reagan's mind. For example, in his address to the 42nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 1987, Reagan once again waxed in a subjunctive mood, implicitly referencing any number of science fiction stories:

> In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world. And yet, I ask you, is not an alien force already among us? What could be more alien to the universal aspirations of our peoples than war and the threat of war? (Reagan 1987)

Like Ozymandias's scheme, Reagan's wish for an alien invasion to end divisiveness on Earth only reveals the violence inherent to the one-world ideal: eradicating the "alien force already among us" requires a displacement of internal hostilities elsewhere, a unification made possible only through the expulsion of the alien in whatever form it may take. Tellingly, Ozymandias's plan to achieve peace actually demands the sacrifice of many thousands of innocent people: dropping a gigantic, bioengineered "alien" creature in the middle of Manhattan results in massive destruction, which Ozymandias believes is necessary to convince the people of Earth about the scale of risks still to come (cf. Cortiel/Oehme 2015). But more generally, Ozymandias's plan highlights the speculative orientation of a one-world vision, where the resolution of the various conflicts referenced in *Watchmen*—between the capitalist world and the communist world, the white nationalist world and the black unrest world, the straight world and the queer world, the world of ordinary people and the world of superheroes—becomes imaginable only through the projection of a new, alternative world to hate.

Watchmen ends with professions of peace between the Americans and Soviets, now committed to weaponizing the Earth together in preparation for transdimen-

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sional warfare. Enter the retcon, once more: like Captain America looking ahead, vowing never to be blind again, the people of Earth now look ahead to conflict with all the denizens of a vast multiverse, discovering retrospectively the continuities of their common humanity, as if the Earth had always been a world—"one world, one accord" (XII: 31)—all along. But the narrative of *Watchmen* has already indicated that this situation is doomed to failure, precisely because this new cohesion demands a condition of perpetual, forever war—and, of course, there really is no alien enemy to play the antagonist in perpetuity. Moreover, a globally unified, ever vigilant military-industrial complex, now looking ahead to an endless arms race with a phantom enemy of incalculable strength, still presents a significant threat to the planet Earth itself. Ozymandias had already noted that, during the Cold War, the anticipation of conflict alone had damaged the natural world thanks to nuclear waste and reactor leaks, deforestation, and other ecological problems: "War aside, atomic deadlock guided us downhill towards environmental ruin" (XI: 22). Ozymandias's drive to create a unified world thus leaves him willfully blind to the limitations of any détente achieved through the displacement of internal conflicts elsewhere (Paik 2010). Indeed, his entire plan has been based on a thoroughly fatal process of *misreading*.

Despite Ozymandias's self-fashioning as an expert reader of references, he has apparently overlooked a set of references highlighted in the narrative of *Watchmen* itself. For one thing, while Ozymandias intends his own superhero name to reference the figure of Rameses II/Ozymandias and his historical meaning in antiquity, the text makes several allusions to Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" (1818)—"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" (XI: 28)—to suggest that Ozymandias has, curiously enough, misread the significance of his own name in the context of a post-Romantic world. The whole point of Shelley's poem is that, given world enough and time, even the mightiest empires will eventually crumble, becoming residues of other histories, remembered only by ruins. Dr. Manhattan, near the very end of *Watchmen*, does try to remind Ozymandias of the fact that there is no end of history: "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing *ever* ends" (XII: 27). But Ozymandias does not catch the reference: "Jon? *What*! What do you mean by . . ." (XII: 27).

Likewise, throughout the narrative of *Watchmen*, various films are playing at the Utopia cinema in New York: *This Island Earth* (1955), *Things to Come* (1936), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The Sacrifice* (1986), and *Nostalghia* (1983). These films each consider the hazards and pitfalls of the one-world ideal, whether explicitly depicting how the drive to secure a singular, homogenous world threatens to displace violence onto other worlds, or critiquing the delusions and obsessions of those who believe they might avert catastrophe by committing sacrificial violence. After Ozymandias's giant creature has exploded in Manhattan, the Utopia cinema is covered with alien gore, its entryway is littered with dead human bod-

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ies, and the marquee has fallen apart (fig. 11.8). While *The Day the Earth Stood Still* implies that a utopian future might be achieved by recognizing the existence of other worlds and relinquishing the internal conditions for conflict, Ozymandias's scheme has instead rendered any such "utopia" illegible.

In the denouement shortly after this climactic event, a television rebroadcast of "The Architects of Fear," a 1963 episode of *The Outer Limits* (1963–1965), makes the point even more starkly. "The Architects of Fear" is about a team of scientists who create a hoax alien invasion in order to produce global peace, precisely by offering the alien as a new enemy to fear. But the plan goes completely wrong and has no effect on geopolitical conditions at all. The narrator sums things up:

> Scarecrows and magic and other fatal fears do not bring people closer together. There is no magic substitute for soft caring and hard work, for self-respect and mutual love. If we can learn this from the mistake these frightened men made, then their mistake will not have been merely grotesque, it would at least have been a lesson. A lesson, at last, to be learned. ("Architects of Fear" [1963] 2008)

Ozymandias has misread the lesson, apparently, but *Watchmen* invites readers to connect the residual media and residual meanings excluded from Ozymandias's speculative scheme. Together, these references animate a set of other fictive worlds that critically reflect upon the drive for retroactive continuity—in comics or otherwise.

To be sure, in his sorting through the media streams of popular culture, it seems that Ozymandias has utterly overlooked the referential affordances of comic books themselves. Throughout the chapters of *Watchmen*, Bernie, a young man of color, is reading a story in *The Tales of the Black Freighter* comic: the notorious "Marooned" storyline written by Max Shea. The significance of this comic is signaled by its formal prominence in *Watchmen*. The main storyline is intersected repeatedly by resonant images, parallel phrases, and mirrored events from *Tales of the Black Freighter*. By the end, it becomes clear that the "Marooned" narrative is an allegory for Ozymandias's plan to save the world from itself. Awash in references to other works of literature, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) and William Blake's "The Tyger" (1794), "Marooned" depicts the formidable drive of a man who fights against overwhelming odds but ends up destroying the very things he loves in pursuit of phantasmatic enemies: the mariner protagonist accidentally murders his neighbors and his family while under the delusion of trying to save them from evil pirates. "Marooned" concludes with the mariner swimming toward the haunted Black Freighter, now fated to join its damned crew. Late—too late—in the story of *Watchmen*, Ozymandias has

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Figure 11.8: Due to Ozymandias's shortsighted scheme, alternative references remain unseen and utopia becomes illegible (u-opia). Watchmen *(Moore/Gibbons 1987, XII: 3).*

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a brief flash of insight, almost making a connection between his own actions and the plight of the mariner in the "Marooned" comic: "I dreamt about swimming toward . . . No, never mind" (XII: 27). The continuity fails to stick. For Ozymandias, these worlds remain isolated. For the reader, however, the reference is unmistakable. With *Tales of the Black Freighter*—a comic within a comic—*Watchmen* recapitulates the famous trope from "Flash of Two Worlds," showing how comic books present imaginative echoes or speculative diagrams that trace the alternate histories obscured by consensus reality.

As an indictment of one-world ideologies, then, *Watchmen* also affirms the capacities of comic books to help us see otherwise, to see multiple. Yes, comic-book superheroes have often contributed to power fantasies, military propaganda, and fascist notions of ethnic superiority—these aspects of cartoon history are objects of *Watchmen*'s self-referential critique of superpowers and the super as such (Wright 2001; Hughes 2006). But more importantly, it shows that comics can be read and misread in more than one way, precisely because every comic tells more than one story at the same time. Manifested in its system of references—both internal and external, intradiegetic and extradiegetic—the presumption of multiple universes is now intrinsic to the form of superhero comics. Superhero comics afford ways of engaging with residual pasts and potential futures through narratives of unactualized realities—and thus they present ways of living in this world which is not one.

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