

Fleischer Studio's Superman and a Darker Side of the "Good War"¹

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Harry Donenfeld must have felt like he was on the top of the world in 1941. After years of eking out a tenuous living on the margins of the pulp publishing industry, Donenfeld had stumbled across a gold mine in 1938 when he bought the rights to Superman for a paltry \$130. Not really understanding the Man of Steel's potential, Donenfeld worried right up to the publication of *Action Comics* that Superman would be a colossal flop, especially after seeing the cover—featuring the hero with a car raised over his head—and finding the presentation so “ridiculous” and “crazy” that “nobody would believe it” (Jones 123-4; Wright 9). The comic was a huge hit, nonetheless, and Donenfeld, swiftly alert to Superman's marketability, looked to exploit the Man of Steel's sudden popularity. The previously indifferent McClure Syndicate, for example, was now interested in a daily Superman newspaper comic strip, and Donenfeld also cut a deal with Fleischer Studios to make a serialized cartoon starring the superhero (Wright 12-4; Jones 142, 174).

Undoubtedly proud of his success and growing bank account, Donenfeld invited an old childhood friend, David Dubinsky, now a major player in the American Federation of Labor, to the first screening of the Superman cartoon series, which occurred not long before the United States joined World War II. The

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union man was unimpressed, bluntly remarking to a “glowing” Donenfeld, “It’s got no social significance” (Jones 158, 160-1). Here, however, Dubinsky missed the point. While the cartoons might have seemed childishly insignificant to him, they actually expose a more revealing view of the wartime United States than the labor leader either could acknowledge or perhaps understand.

Indeed, the war that would soon arrive at the United States’ doorstep raised hopes for some Americans but fears for others about the counterhegemonic possibilities of building a more egalitarian nation for women and people of color. Uncertain of what the future might be, Americans looked to any number of sources, including Superman, for guidance. As Marek Wasielewski has written, the Man of Steel is “intrinsically connected to the cultural and historical context in which he is imagined. Superman always embodies the specific moment of his (re)creation” (6). A rising symbol of “truth, justice, and the American Way” during the war, Superman’s cartoon adventures on the silver screen helped Americans cope with changes that seemed potentially far-reaching for women and nonwhites in American society. “It was,” as William Chafe has written, “a time of anxiety and fear. It was also a moment of possibility” (27, vii, 1-2).

In response to this crucial juncture in American history and the chance for meaningful reform it presented, Superman’s big-screen adventures reinforced a cultural hegemony based in white patriarchy, proposing traditional norms as the best solution. In this way, the Fleischer cartoons worked (like mass culture more generally does as well) to “mark the boundaries of permissible discourse” and thus shape “cultural definitions of race, ethnicity, and gender” in ways that justify “existing power relations” (Lears 569-70, 572). The cartoons, to put it more directly, wrapped themselves in an understanding of the “American Way” that looked backward instead of forward in urging that women remain subordinated to “real” men (if not Clark Kent) and that nonwhite Americans be associated with difference, inferiority, and threat, not inclusion.

A “Good” War?

Scholars have written a good deal about Superman, but the seventeen cartoons produced by Fleischer (released between September 1941 and July 1943) have received relatively scant attention. This despite the fact that critics have heaped praise upon them. Leonard Maltin, for instance, believes the series to have been “among the best fantasy cartoons ever produced” (Maltin 122, 120). Gerard Jones

describes, perhaps somewhat breathlessly, Superman's silver-screen adventures as "the most stunning cartoon action ever on screen" (158). Leslie Cabarga likewise celebrates the cartoon, marking the series as "a significant event in the history of animation" (180). Such aesthetic and technological consideration, however, has not been matched by historical examination and close textual analysis. This study begins to remedy this lack, especially in an effort to redress popular, celebratory, and oversimplified misunderstandings of World War II as the "Good War."

It is, of course, not hard to understand why Americans have decided to remember the fighting in this way. The war, after all, stands as a defining event of the twentieth century, helping Americans finally conquer the Great Depression, pushing their nation to unprecedented global hegemony, and shaping the ways in which Americans defined themselves as well as their country. Postwar celebrations have thus tended to paint the war as both successful and moral, a conflict that brought both unity and affluence (Jeffries ix, 8-10; Takaki 3-4; Wynn 463). As a result, Americans generally remember WWII as their nation's "finest hour" (Wynn 463).

Such uncritical memories have considerable power in shaping how Americans understand the social consequences of World War II, allowing them to imagine it as a conflict that generated substantial and positive change for groups long marginalized in American history. For instance, many Americans choose to remember an unchallenged wartime liberation of women, embodied by the popularized notion of "Rosie the Riveter" and the various kinds of empowerment that seemingly came along with it. Similarly, Americans can look back on the war, via popular culture produced both during and after it, and remember integrated "All-American platoons," comparably fictionalized images that misleadingly suggest that people of color (and especially African Americans) achieved transformative changes—in the military, and also the work force and society—during WWII. If such misguided conceptions are taken too far, the war can be seen as establishing American predominance on the global stage and simultaneously crafting a broadly egalitarian society across lines of gender and race.

These positive memories obscure the significant resistance to such democratic reform on the part of many Americans. (Jeffries 4, 8-9, 11-2; Wynn 463, 470-8). The substantial changes encouraged by the war, in fact, inevitably raised questions about a nation (as well as a world) that seemed almost totally transformed. In this way, American entry into the worldwide conflict certainly opened opportunities for women and people of color to question and even challenge traditional hierarchies

that had long undergirded American society; however, such openings hardly meant broad public support for far-reaching social change. Instead, faced with growing domestic uncertainties generated by the world-wide conflagration, Americans struggled to ascertain just what their nation should (or would) look like in the war's aftermath. As they did so, they cast about for reassurance in response to growing anxieties that were disguised—both then and later—by golden visions of an “American Century.”

Superman and American Women at War

Wartime pressures to elevate the status of women presented one such source of anxiety. Indeed, the war opened the possibility of challenging what R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt have described as a “hegemonic masculinity” that allows “men’s dominance over women to continue.” Such dominance, they contend, did not require force (although force could be marshalled to support it, to be sure); male superiority could also be achieved via “culture, institutions, and persuasion” (832-3). Masculine hegemony had been constantly enforced (and reinforced) across the scope of American history in the face of new challenges before WWII, a historical reality revealing that gender hierarchies could in fact evolve, potentially in significant and even radical ways (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). The possibility of real change must have excited some and terrified other Americans, and the cartoon version of Superman, sympathizing with those who resisted such changes, did his best—in concert with a host of cultural and official entities—to hold the line during the war.

The developments of the early years of WWII, indeed, brought significant changes for women that divided Americans. Going to college and to work in larger numbers, women asserted an emerging agency as they took advantage of new opportunities “with skill and ingenuity” (Chafe 9; Dorn 534-6). Their educational assertiveness carried over from the Great Depression, when “college enrollment for women soared,” jumping by about 120,000 between 1930 and 1940. This translated into significantly more women receiving bachelor’s degrees, the number growing from almost 49,000 in 1930 to about 77,000 in 1940 (Nash and Romero, 2, 6, 20-3; Solomon, 142). During the war, college women entered traditionally male programs of study in larger numbers, and some assumed positions of leadership and political activism on and off campus. (Dorn 534-6, 541-52; Solomon 167-9) No longer actively discouraged or barred from employment, women also went to work

in unprecedented numbers. Some six million or more took jobs during the war, increasing the percentage of women in the workforce from 25% in 1940 to 36% by 1945 and making “Rosie the Riveter” an iconic wartime figure. Many of the new laborers initially imagined working only “for the duration,” as the government bluntly suggested to them; however, by war’s end many had begun to think differently (Blum 94-5; Chafe 8-11; Jeffries 5, 93-7, 102; Ware, 23).

But if some Americans, looking at such changes, believed that a “revolution” in gender norms had occurred, others were skeptical of such a drastic transformation. The latter, of course, could point to continuing gender discrimination in employment and the military as well as the persistence of gender segregated jobs. In addition, historians have noted, women had virtually no voice in the most important policy-making bodies, suffered a double standard in wages, and struggled to find adequate childcare facilities. Furthermore, women were themselves divided about what the future ought to look like; while a new-found agency and sense of opportunities outside the home inspired some, to be certain, others remained loyal to more traditional understandings of gender norms (Blum 94-5; Chafe 11-4, 25-6; Jeffries 101). It seems fair to say that the balance sheet was at best profoundly mixed for women, raising questions about just what the postwar world would look like.

Lois Lane, the female protagonist in Superman’s adventures, found herself caught in the crosshairs of this cultural confusion. Lois arrived in the newsroom, indeed, not all that long after women had begun studying journalism in increasing numbers at college. (Nash and Romero, 20-3) Much like her real-world professional contemporaries who had to fight to move to jobs beyond the society pages or the rewrite desks, Lois also found limited opportunities in her new profession, confined in her earliest comic book appearances to the role of “‘sob sister’—a dismissive term given to female reporters who wrote human interest stories, often with heart-tugging, sentimental hooks” (Nash and Romero, 25-6; Ware, 75-6; Weldon 22). The war seemingly brought new opportunities for Lois, especially on the silver screen. Here, Glen Weldon has noted that the cartoon version of the reporter was “considerably more tenacious and resourceful” than her comic-book counterpart; the cartoon version of Lois still needed rescuing, to be sure, but she was “her own woman—and one hell of a reporter” (47). Examinations of the Superman cartoons in terms of gender have, surprisingly, not gone much further than this broad generalization, in particular in failing to explore just how the cartoon treated this new-found assertiveness and independence.

Superman's cartoon adventures ultimately confronted the gendered complexities of wartime by depicting a limited sort of female empowerment; however, the cartoons ultimately came down firmly on the side of tradition as a bulwark against the anxieties engendered by such changes. The series' first episode, titled "Superman," captured the fundamentals of what would define Lois Lane's character in all the stories that followed: an ambitious and independent career woman, who from time to time gets to play the action hero, but always finds herself in peril and need of rescue, a reality undercutting any seeming celebration of her new-found agency. Lois establishes her independence at the start, protesting when the chief assigns Clark to work with her that she wants "the chance to crack the story on my own." Before her boss can respond to her demand, Lois sets off to investigate alone. She briefly assumes the role of action hero, dressing in a pilot's uniform and taking off in her one-seat propeller plane. Her heroism is short-lived, however, as she somewhat naively lands her plane next to a laboratory and then knocks on the front door, where the mad scientist easily captures her; she can now only await Superman's rescue. Thus, and ever, the story of Lois.

Scenes of Lois as the seemingly independent career woman follow throughout the rest of the series as she asserts herself against men. When Clark volunteers to join her in covering the story of a (temporarily) frozen giant creature being brought to Metropolis, she demurs, worrying that he might very likely faint in the face of such danger. "You scare so easily," she acidly observes to her unwanted colleague ("The Arctic Giant"). In "Volcano," Lois again sets out to work alone, grabbing their press passes away from Clark and later depriving her co-worker of access to the story. As they leave, the chief urges the pair to "work together for a change," but his plea falls on deaf ears. Clark readily agrees, but Lois refuses to acknowledge his order. Lois also contests a Native American villain who demands that Manhattan be returned to his people, dismissing his claim as simply too "fantastic" to take seriously ("Electric Earthquake"). In all such interactions, Lois asserts her status as—in her own words—an "ace" reporter who remains staunchly independent in her relationships with men ("Terror on the Midway").

Such assertiveness leads Lois, repeatedly, to pursue big scoops on her own, another way in which her character gestured toward what seemed an independence from men. She might pretend to play a submissive role as a woman—as, for example, when she tells Clark in one instance that she is just "getting the woman's angle on [a] story"—but she is actually pursuing something more ambitious: the story that, by implication, had previously belonged to men ("The Mechanical

Monsters"). When things go bad in "The Arctic Giant" and the slumbering monster is awakened, Lois is thrilled—"Boy, what a story," she exclaims—and refuses to evacuate. Similarly, "The Mechanical Monsters" and "Japoteurs" both see Lois stowing away (in a flying robot and a super-bomber, respectively) in her pursuit of a big scoop. Finally, Lois's nose for news is impressive; even though her boss quickly dismisses the Native American's threat of retribution if Manhattan is not returned, Lois knows better, sneaking off to follow the villain and even hiding aboard his boat to get the story that her boss cannot yet see ("Electric Earthquake"). Similarly, her instincts prove true in sniffing out a story of industrial sabotage in "Destruction, Inc.," the reporter piecing together the evidence of a plot that threatens the industrial basis of her country's ability to fight. No story, clearly, is too big for Lois.

Lois's ambitions also repeatedly lead her to run towards danger (in contrast to the men around her), further reinforcing a purported independence. Thus, as Clark retreats to a phone booth in "The Mechanical Monsters," Lois sneaks into a compartment on a flying robot's back, demonstrating her daring spirit. She does the same as a scientist causes mayhem in Metropolis when he tries to pull a comet from the heavens but things go badly; as men flee the scene, Lois runs in the opposite direction, choosing to confront danger instead of retreating to safety ("The Magnetic Telescope"). Finally, Lois confronts the ultimate enemy—the Nazis—in "Jungle Drums," flying into the face of danger and, after her capture, refusing to break during an intense interrogation, even under the threat of torture. Eventually freed in the episode, she works bravely to save American military lives, tussling with Nazis and ultimately playing a supporting heroic role by making a radio call that arrives just in the nick of time to save an important American convoy from predatory Nazi villains.

In asserting her independence in these various ways, Lois was, at least occasionally, given the opportunity to become an action hero in her own right, seizing control of her own destiny, if only for brief moments. In this way, "Billion Dollar Limited" sees Lois jump to the defense of a train under attack, picking up a machine gun and returning fire on the bad guys, even if to limited effect. More dramatically in another cartoon in the series, when a volcano erupts, Lois finds herself in immediate danger. Trapped, she jumps up to grab a trolley wire, acrobatically swinging hand over hand while traversing a threatening landscape ("Volcano"). Even more impressive is Lois's performance when discovered by the industrial saboteurs in "Destruction, Inc.;" here, Lois eludes her ill-intentioned

male pursuers, athletically gliding up the stairs, daringly leaping onto a ledge, smoothly shimmying down a post, and swinging gracefully on a fortuitously placed rope. While she is eventually captured (necessitating, of course, another heroic rescue), her athletic prowess is undeniable. Lois also occasionally will confront male antagonists directly, perhaps most dramatically in “Showdown” when she tussles with a fake Superman, managing to tear the “S” off his chest and thus prove that he is not the real deal. In such ways, Lois embodied the potential of liberated women to become active participants in their own stories.

Whatever such positive portrayals of women at work seemed to suggest, Lois’s independence was more often and repeatedly cut short and undermined as the cartoons ultimately enforced traditional gender norms; in almost every episode her inquisitive professionalism gets her into trouble that sees her needing rescue.² In this way, the series revealed a lack of faith in the independent woman that it might be mistaken for celebrating. Indeed, the anxiety about women’s new-found agency appeared in literally every episode and could not but call into question the legitimacy of independent women. Whatever her merits, Lois always ends up in peril, for example in “The Mechanical Monsters” when a villain ties her up and suspends her over a huge pot of molten lava; she is utterly helpless, her only hope being the dramatic and timely arrival of the Man of Steel. Throughout other episodes, Lois was, to provide but a small sample of the perils from which she was saved: stalked and attacked by an enraged gorilla (“Terror on the Midway”), dropped to her seeming doom by Japanese American saboteurs who have stolen a new American super-bomber (“Japoteurs”), threatened by a tribe of hawk people who want to sacrifice her (“The Underground World”), and bound and threatened by a Japanese firing squad (“Eleventh Hour”). In such and myriad other ways, the series repeatedly questioned the independence of women; whatever the short-term accomplishments of Lois, her actions ultimately bring her nothing but failure that necessitates a man’s intervention.

Such rescues in this way repeatedly implied that women’s new-found agency was suspect, and occasionally the series went further in driving this point home. For instance, “The Magnetic Telescope” reinforces the inferiority of Lois when she is rescued by Superman, who digs her out of debris. When Superman asks if she is unharmed, Lois replies that she is fine as she brushes her hair, reminding viewers

² This would prove true in all of them, but the final episode, “Secret Agent,” replaced Lois with a blonde protagonist, who, while professional and independent, also, unsurprisingly, needed rescue.

that she is more object than agent. When Lois stumbles into danger in “The Arctic Giant” and finds herself about to be eaten by the giant monster, Superman arrives to save her. He then verbally reinforces her proper “place,” sternly lecturing her, “Now this time stay put.” Lois dutifully obeys, saying, “Yes, m’lord.” While such visual and verbal lessons were not as common as the ubiquitous rescues, these scenes certainly reinforce the message—present throughout the entire series—that any growing assertiveness and independence on the part of women was suspect. In this way, women might make some short-term contributions, but these were no more permanent in the cartoons than they were in real life, where women were expected to contribute only “for the duration,” after which men would again assume control in the workplace and beyond. Here, the cartoon—reflecting and reinforcing hegemonic social messages—asserted traditional gender norms as best for women, even in the allegedly new world ushered in by the war. Superman remained clearly her superior and her savior, winking—sometimes literally—at viewers to let them in on the joke of her seeming emancipation. Whatever gains women might be making, Superman, like many Americans, seemed unwilling to abandon traditional norms, looking to past traditions, and not future innovation, to provide solutions to contemporary concerns.

Superman, Race, and WWII

The war also threatened to unsettle American race relations, ultimately bringing “small progress in the midst of massive racism” (Chafe 16). In this way, the transformations wrought by war encouraged more than two million African Americans to move north and west for new jobs and convinced President Franklin Roosevelt to create the Fair Employment Practice Committee (after A. Philip Randolph threatened a massive protest, of course) to protect their right to have them. At the same time, however, African Americans found themselves excluded from more than a dozen national trade unions, received limited help from the FEPC, and confronted racial violence, most prominently in urban race riots, with little support from government leaders. Such mistreatment spurred black activism, with growing numbers joining the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, talking about fighting for equality at home as well as abroad, and initiating protests (Blum 11, 182-8, 199-207; Chafe 15-9; Jeffries 108). The story was no better, and sometimes worse, for other nonwhites. After Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans—citizens and aliens alike—found themselves facing the reality of exile

and mass incarceration, processes that deprived them of their basic rights. Even though others like Mexican Americans and Native Americans found some new opportunities in employment and military service opened by the war, wartime proved a mixed bag at best, as racism and discrimination continued to limit nonwhites. Anti-Semitism flourished, too (Chafe 19-22). Racism and prejudice had deep roots in American history; they were hardly going to disappear over the course of four short years (Blum 147).

Some scholars have nonetheless teased out more positive trends during the war. Ronald Takaki, looking back on the war as a moment of possibility, observes that some wartime intellectuals came to understand a fundamental incongruity: Americans fought for freedom but lived in a country in which all men and women were not created equal. He also notes that grass-roots activists demanded “inclusion in the democracy that they were defending.” In doing so, he avers, “they stirred a rising wind of diversity’s discontent, unfurling a hopeful vision of America as a multicultural democracy” that would provide an important foundation for the coming “Civil Rights Revolution” (Takaki 4-7). John W. Jeffries similarly, with the benefit of historical hindsight, argues that the war—despite racial tensions throughout—laid the groundwork for change and racial assertiveness (5, 144). Takaki and Jeffries can pull such optimistic threads together in looking back on the war and what followed; however, Chafe is right to note an even more important understanding: Americans at the time just didn’t know what was coming as a result of the war. “It was too soon,” he writes, “to say what it all meant” (19). The question of just what would come next generated anxieties, as Americans imagined different futures, some aspiring to a return to traditional norms, others envisioning a more innovative future.

Superman waded into these troubled waters with certain predispositions on race. The initial comic-book version of the character had embraced reform, albeit with limits made clear by the ways in which race was not addressed. In his earliest published adventures, Superman was a somewhat edgy, New Deal-style reformer who fought for the common man, but his reform agenda avoided issues of race (as the New Deal often did as well). The war then transformed the Man of Steel into a determined supporter of the very status quo that he had not that long ago questioned. Now wrapping himself in the American flag (especially on his covers), Superman’s wartime comic-book stories actually shied away from the war, adopting instead “an increasingly whimsical, juvenile tone” that continued to offer little in the way of

overt racial commentary (Wright, 22-9, 55; Gordon, "Nostalgia," 184; Weldon, 60).³

In addition to his own comic-book history, Superman's retrogressive relationship to race on the big screen was shaped by other historical forces. The racism endemic in early American animation, for one, compounded the problem, hardly predisposing the cartoon's creators to address race in progressive ways. Early American cartoons presented a wide range of racist images and understandings in the antics of characters including, among the better known, Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse, and Fleischer Studios had actually profited from signature characters like Betty Boop and Ko-Ko, who starred in some episodes grounded in racism. This era of cartoons, indeed, "produced the most racist and sexist depictions of people of color in cartoon history." (Behnken and Smithers 83, 84, 85-92; Sammond 130, 132, 140-2) "Whether any specific animator was or was not racist," Nicholas Sammond concludes, "the practices that animators by necessity entered into were" (146).

Furthermore, the political context hardly encouraged serious consideration of racial reform. As Wendy L. Wall has shown, conservative opposition to the Office of War Information's advocacy for "greater racial equality" had wide-ranging and stultifying results; in response, the government resorted to linking tolerance and unity as twinned wartime ideals that marginalized those pushing for equality as "troublemakers, traitors to an 'American Way' that often put civility and social harmony above all else." As a result, calls for tolerance could condemn individual bigots but not federal policies or systems of power (Wall 116, 132, 149-50). Such realities made it easier for Superman's cartoon creators to resist OWI requests (and, indeed, even DC Comics' occasional efforts) "to present American society as a great melting pot," instead showcasing racial diversity as only threat (Munson 6-7; Wright 44-5, 34, 53-5). Set in this milieu, the Fleischer series mirrored other less progressive aspects of superhero popular culture more directly, especially in terms of engaging in paternalistic and reductive understandings of non-whites, imagining an internal racial threat, and amplifying a hateful, racialized portrayal of Japanese

³ Superman confronted race more directly in the newspapers, on the radio, and on the silver screen, of course, especially in denigrating the Japanese and Japanese American enemy (Chang 37-60; Gordon *Superman*, 44; Munson 5-13; Weldon 57). Scholars, however, have done very little with issues of race beyond Japanese and Japanese Americans, leaving unexplored the broader racial politics at play in the cartoons and, as a result, the ways in which these shorts help us better understand the American home front.

and Japanese Americans (Austin and Hamilton 14-5, 25-49; Munson 5-15; Wright 36-7, 54-5, 39, 45-7).

The Fleischers' Superman series, indeed, adopted a hard line against racial reform, presenting any and all racial difference, both at home and abroad, as a threat to white institutions and white Americans. In doing so, the cartoons assumed the United States to be a white society and supported an implied white supremacy. When Lois interviews the mayor of Metropolis, the city's inhabitants (and power brokers) are presented as uniformly white, manifestly connected to the progress associated with the modern, sleek Metropolis that they have built ("Bulleaters"). In contrast, when Lois and Clark investigate Mt. Monokoa, located somewhere in the Pacific, the natives scurry about hopelessly as lava approaches, looking disorganized and helpless, their primitive nature emphasized by their horse- and person-drawn carriages ("Volcano"). Closer to home, "Terror on the Midway" metaphorically connected danger with challenges to the long-established racial hierarchy. In this episode, staged at a local circus, a brown-skinned fire-eater performs backgrounded by a series of posters that connote exotic danger, one depicting a black panther pouncing on a barely-clothed African and another showcasing a giant, menacing ape, big enough to hold a person in each hand. The gorilla that later stalks Lois in this episode offers but a thinly veiled sense of racialized threat. Clearly, racial difference represented substantial danger to white Americans.

As suggested by the circus scene, racial difference in the cartoons threatened American unity and security. Native Americans present just such an internal enemy in "Electric Earthquake." Here, the unnamed villain—standing in for Native Americans generally—arrives with his unsmiling, rocky visage and longer, black hair, all of which immediately type him as Native American. When he visits the newspaper offices to demand that Manhattan be returned to "my people," he speaks in a stereotypically stoic fashion, standing proudly, arms folded across his chest, the classic image of the Native American; his suit and tie hardly mask his inherent primitiveness. When the reporters challenge their visitor, he snarls and the whites of his eyes grow large before he stalks off to ominous music. While hypocritically polite to Lois—gallantly stepping aside to allow her to enter an elevator first, for instance—the threat of the "Other" reaches its climax when he shackles Lois and later leaves her for dead in his flooding underwater headquarters, revealing a racialized threat to white womanhood. Whites might be trusted to pull together to fight the war, but non-whites presented a threat lurking within society.

Japanese Americans joined Native Americans as another racialized threat in “Japoteurs,” which launched a harsh attack that implicitly made clear the need for the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans (Austin 51-6). Here, the Japanese American saboteur, like the Native American, is instantly identifiable as dangerous and “Other.” He speaks with a thick accent, and his buck teeth and thick glasses play to widely held wartime stereotypes associated with his assumed inferior racial ancestry. Even more insidiously, the villain pretends to be loyal to the United States, a poster of the Statue of Liberty seemingly signifying his love of country, but is of course disloyal, as revealed when the poster transforms into a symbol of the rising sun (when no one else is watching, of course). His efforts to steal a new American super-bomber fit him into another stereotypical expectation as he attacks from behind. Finally, Lois’s call of distress after the plane is hijacked lays bare the racial threat: “Japs,” she radios, using the universal wartime racial epithet that collapsed Japanese and Japanese Americans alike into one undifferentiated and threatening mass, are up to no good. That the “Japoteur” also threatens white womanhood in attempting to drop Lois to her death suggests that such racial threat was both broad and nefarious.

Additional racial threats existed inside the U.S. “The Mummy Strikes,” for instance, highlighted the threat of brown-skinned Egyptians. Opening to roaring flames, an Egyptian tomb, and foreign-sounding music, this episode centers on the legend of an Egyptian boy king whose protectors—apparently ensconced in a barbaric culture—drank poison to join their leader in the afterlife after he died. Years later, in a local museum, the guardsmen’s blank, white eyes glow to ominous life. The menacing, brown-skinned guards attack, grabbing Lois, who is dwarfed by their fantastic size. Even though Superman eventually achieves victory over these menacing monsters, their lurking presence, hidden in an unassuming Metropolis museum, warned of a pervasive non-white threat to white women and wartime American society.

A racialized threat abroad included the Japanese enemy. In “Eleventh Hour,” Lois and Clark venture to Japan to report on the war. Clark, however, also sneaks off every night at 11 o’clock as Superman to commit sabotage. His actions enrage the Japanese militarists, who decide to make an example of Lois, kidnapping her and sentencing her to death before a firing squad. Throughout the film, the Japanese appear more like animals than humans, their appearance suggesting a kinship to rodents and their actions driven by unthinking anger. The showdown with the firing squad again plays to the idea of a racialized threat to white womanhood, although

the scene also critiques Japanese manhood when, in silhouette, a Japanese soldier approaches Lois; his sword hangs down, suggesting a limp phallus. He may have evil intentions towards Lois, but he will be impotent in acting on them. And, indeed, Superman arrives at the last moment to save Lois, doling out a well-deserved beating to her captors, suggesting hope in the battle versus the racialized “Other.”

Africa presented a racial threat, too, as the cartoon suggested that Africans’ ignorance made them susceptible to control by outsiders like the Nazis, a reality necessitating American intervention in the world. In doing so, the cartoons mimicked a prominent theme in comics of the day in which Nazis “exploited [non-white, colonized peoples] to suit their own hostile interests” (Wright 37) “Jungle Drums” opens to an exotic and darkly-lit scene, intending to portray a most primitive Africa. Here, in a society dominated by the Nazis, a priest in a horned helmet, arms outspread, appears as red lighting bathes the scene, all suggesting an ominous and threatening locale. Africans often appear in silhouette, their top knots seemingly elongating their skulls into more simian shapes. When shot from above in groups, the Africans appear disorganized, scurrying back and forth almost like ants and implying a chaotic society. Under Nazi control, the natives prepare to burn Lois at the stake (as white womanhood never escapes a racialized threat in Superman cartoons featuring non-white characters), an ominous drumming building tension for the viewers. Here again, the Africans have ape-like features, their arms too long for their bodies, as they dance and walk in primitive fashion, almost like monkeys. As the flames grow, the drummers come into better focus, their war-painted cheeks and simian features all grotesquely highlighted by the red/orange light thrown by the growing fire. As the scene continues, Africans wear strange garb—loin cloths, bones through their noses, bracelets on their wrists, ankles, and biceps—and are hidden in the shadows, further dehumanizing them. As Superman restores order, “Jungle Drums” served as a call to intervention for Americans grounded in blunt racism: if Americans did not take control of what the cartoon presented as inferior peoples, their enemies would.

Conclusion: Superman as Savior?

WWII thus simultaneously opened new opportunities for women and people of color while reinforcing traditional roles and hierarchies. This paradoxical process led inexorably to increasing tensions, no matter how much myths of the “Good War” have obscured such realities. In the face of pressing concerns about gender

and race, Fleischer Studios offered Superman as a solution (Jeffries 93). In doing so, the studio presented a hero who both reflected and helped to constitute American norms (Gordon, *Superman* 52). The hero, to be certain, had his charms for Americans living in a world at war. At the start of each episode, Superman arrives to upbeat music, suggesting optimism and energy. In "Superman," his origin story presents the hero as something of an angel come to earth, arriving from Krypton backgrounded by heavenly harps. As he (at least indirectly) addressed assertions of gender and racial equality, the Man of Steel assumed the moral high ground; it should be pointed out that Superman, as Americans liked to believe about themselves, never starts a fight—he only finishes them, using a combination of resilience, strength, and intelligence to overcome whatever threats may come his (and Americans') way. In case viewers missed the larger symbolic point, later episodes emphasized Superman as embodying the United States. In "Terror on the Midway," for instance, as Clark changes into Superman, his shadow is cast against a circus tent's broad red and white strips, almost as if he is transforming in front of an American flag. Even more directly, the final episode, "Secret Agent," sees the hero, his mission completed, salute a massive American flag.⁴

Americans might have liked to have imagined that they could transform into Superman as easily as Clark, allowing some escape from the worries that beset them. Such security was, of course, deceptive. That Superman offered something different—and better—was made clear by the fact that the Man of Steel had his own set of model charts, different from Clark Kent's, at the studio. Further setting Superman off from his more mild-mannered alter ego, Clark's voice was given "a quavering tenor" while Superman, the new American, spoke in a "powerful baritone" (Cabarga 177). If Clark was not up to the challenges of the new world, Superman clearly was, or at least was intended to be. The purportedly "new" solutions offered by Superman, however, ironically looked only backward, and not forward.

Superman's adventures, indeed, suggested a retreat to tradition as the best solution to the possible changes raised by the war. When J.P. Telotte argues that

⁴ Superman's inherent goodness is cemented, of course, by the inherent evil of those he faces down. For instance, "Superman" introduced a recurring theme in the series by showcasing a villain who has no discernible motive; he acts in evil ways, as best the viewer can tell, only because he is an evil guy. At other times, the bad guys act irrationally; "Billion Dollar Limited," for example, presents criminals who target a train not to steal all the money onboard but simply to destroy it.

some of Superman's cartoon villains presented "a threat to normalcy," he gestures toward a larger point regarding the Man of Steel's big-screen WWII adventures: the episodes were suffused with a quiet, if rising and anxious acknowledgment that things might never be the same (293). Thus, as Superman went to battle, his cartoons attempted to ease American anxieties about the potential changes that were arising from the war. As a result, Marc DiPaolo correctly points out that the Superman cartoons were "more politically conservative than the comic book" and might even be considered "reactionary" (156; Dial 328).

This reality, however, seems to have been largely forgotten by most Americans today, who prefer to ignore the ways in which past versions of Superman have embodied unsavory qualities. Such romantic memories, Weldon argues, were later laid bare when DC "killed" Superman in 1992, provoking outrage at what many—and often casual—fans saw as "a curiously personal attack on something good, innocent, and fondly (if dimly) remembered." This was true, Weldon argues, because Superman "is not the hero with whom we identify [as Americans]; he is the hero in whom we believe. He is the first, the purest, the ideal" (Munson 5; Weldon 3, 4). As a result, for example, Americans tend to remember the wartime Superman doing his patriotic part to sell war bonds, but forget the ways in which he belittled and dehumanized the Japanese enemy to do so. As Ian Gordon has pointed out, race hatred helped to build national unity in early 1940s America (Gordon, *Superman* 44). An examination of the wartime cartoons in any detail serves to remind us, in this way, that there was a much less seemly side to the Man of Steel during the war, one that presented sexist and racist understandings of the "American Way" that Americans would continue to grapple with long after war's end, spurring civil rights and feminist movements demanding equality that clearly had not been achieved during the war. The much-neglected Superman cartoons thus provide essential, if previously unrealized, insights into some darker realities of what so many remember as just the "Good War."

Recognizing this more complex silver-screen Superman who emerged amidst the profound social challenges ignited by the war helps us better understand one prominent regressive solution favored by anxious Americans as they faced the threat of potentially far-reaching changes. Such attitudes had long-term consequences. Americans would win the war, but even then substantial work remained to be done in sorting out issues revolving around gender and race that had been made increasingly clear by that very conflict. In this way, winning WWII—no matter how much Americans then or since have wanted to believe otherwise—

was not the conclusion of a story of greatness; it is instead better understood as the opening chapter of a story that is still unfolding around them, even in the early years of the twenty-first century. In this way, the war evoked confidence and bravado, to be certain. But it also generated worries—even if they lurked beneath the triumphal spirit of the early postwar years—that encouraged Americans not to build a new, more equitable future but instead to fight a rear-guard action against nascent changes geared towards greater equality, pushing back against the claims to equality made by women and people of color. In this darker side of the so-called “Good War,” Superman encouraged viewers to understand the world in simplistic terms of good versus evil, promoting ways of thinking that didn't bode well for solving problems of race and gender, either at home or abroad. As a result, wartime society, whatever the American myths of unity and confidence, struggled to work through such issues, leaving Americans today to turn to superheroes to rescue them from wartime problems that they never really escaped.

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