

Review of the Captain America Graphic Novel 'TRUTH: Red, White and Black' Focusing on Parallels with the Infamous USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee

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Abstract: This review presents the first detailed presentation of the parallelism between the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the Captain America graphic novel 'TRUTH: Red, White and Black', published as a graphic novel by Marvel Comics in 2004 as a paperback, and then in 2009 as a hardcover. First written, published and distributed monthly in 2003 as pre-sequel seven comic book series to tell the story of the origins of the WWII superhero Captain America. In 2003, Marvel Comics chose to tell a 'very dark story' to explain the origins of Captain America, a half century after the initial introduction of Captain America as a WWII action hero in 1940. By detailing—for the first time—nine parallel aspects between these two storylines, this review demonstrates how Marvel Comics brought the tragic Tuskegee Syphilis Study story into the popular press, thus reaching an audience far beyond traditional bioethics academicians. This review is intended to stimulate and guide classroom discussions on the ethical issues at the core of the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study allowing bioethical issues to be made more accessible to the general public, via school curriculums, by the use of graphic novels.

Keywords: Bioethics ■ Curriculum development ■ Human research subject protection ■ Literature review ■ Folk media

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BACKGROUND

As stated so insightfully and prophetically by woman-and-nursing historian Susan Reverby—in describing how the public at-large (the proverbial 'common man') 'remembers' and understands the infamous USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee which had Nurse Rivers as its central figure over the 40 year period that it was conducted—in her essay 'The "Tuskegee Study as a "Site of Memory":¹

"The legacy of the "Tuskegee" Syphilis Study is entwined in beliefs about racism and scientific/clinical hubris that are often deficient in factual understandings of the Study itself ...

The increasingly iconic status of the Study makes it what French historian Pierre Nora calls a "lieu de memoire," a site of memory that is not merely a physical place, monument or celebration, but rather an interaction between history and memory, an event or experience, imagined and factual at the same time. The creation of a site of memory becomes the way in which individuals and groups in societies make meanings of their experiences and histories

Rather it has become a symbolic and memorialized site that is available to give meaning to the reality of scientific endeavors, ever present racism, state power, and the experiences of those who face illness and reach for help the words "Tuskegee syphilis study" now have cultural validity and are part of the American vernacular ... The Study, as a site or story, thus overwhelms any of the historical details ... Its power comes precisely because the details are confused. Stories always seem to win over historical narratives because they appeal."

And so it would be expected that the popular press's memory and presentation of this infamous bioethics study, as presented in the graphic novel 'TRUTH: Red, White and Black' in this dark Captain America seven comic book pre-sequel series,² would be no less "a lieu de memoire", i.e., an "... interaction between history and memory."

While the seven comic book series in the retrospective pre-sequel series by Marvel Comics entitled *Truth: Red, White and Black* initially came out—at one per month from January to July—in 2003,² all seven comic books was also subsequently packaged by them into one graphic novel under the same name, first as a softcover version in 2004³ and then in 2009, these same seven pre-sequel comic books were finally published as a hardcover version still entitled *Truth: Red, White and Black*.⁴ Both versions of this graphic novel had an added Appendix which explained the 'in-house' discussions at Marvel

Comics that led them in 2009 to intentionally—and purposefully—root and entwine the ‘origins of Captain America’ with the broader issue of racism in America and with the specific events of the infamous USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee.

And intentional this was ... for no less an insider-authority on the origins of this dark 2003 Captain America pre-sequel than its author, Robert Morales, clearly states in his Appendix as found in both the softcover³ and hardcover⁴ versions of his graphic novel:

“In 1997, President Clinton apologized on behalf of the nation for the very Tuskegee experiments (sic) that inspired Marvel editor Axel Alonso’s premise for ‘Truth’: During the Depression, 300 black Alabamans signed up with the U.S. Public Health Service for free medical care, only to be used as unwitting guinea pigs in a study of untreated syphilis that went on for decades—a tenth died directly from their lack of treatment, a third died of related complications. A solid reference is James H. Jones’ *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (1993).”

Renowned bioethicist Arthur Caplan, in speaking of historian James Jones and his 1981 book *Bad Blood*, widely accepted as the definitive history book on this infamous study, has stated that *Bad Blood* “is the single most important book ever written in bioethics” adding that “Tuskegee gave birth to modern bioethics and James H. Jones was the midwife.”^{5,6} Decades after publishing *Bad Blood*, his definitive history of the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, James Jones clarified what he knew of that central role as played by Nurse Rivers in this tragic story when he revealed what he knew on the ‘holy grail’ question that had hovered over the Tuskegee syphilis study for decades: ‘What did Nurse Rivers know and when did she know it?’ In his reflective essay in 2011, Jones tells of Nurse Rivers’ lament to him after he had completed his interviews for his book with her back in 1977: “Oh Dr. Jones, we should have told those men that they had syphilis, and God knows we should have treated them.”⁷

Even 30 years after the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee story broke into headlines in leading U.S. newspapers in 1972,⁸—which led to the closing of that study within a few months—the early references linking this pre-sequel origins of Captain America series by Marvel Comics with the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee via its focus on the underlying and widespread racism in American life and culture were very brief references, limited in detail, and encountered by very few individuals via three limited-access public media pre-release sources back in 2002 (see [Table 1](#)).^{9–11} Even

advancing forward another near decade up to 2010, the references to this parallelism between the Tuskegee Syphilis Study story and racism in America appeared only as a limited acknowledgement of this parallelism (but lacked any detailed articulation of specific parallel features) in two published research papers—one in the *American Journal of Public Health* and one in the *Journal of the National Medical Association*.^{12,13}

Some detailed observations in the graphic novel on those existing parallels

In the graphic novel versions of ‘Truth: Red, White & Black’ there is clear evidence of an intentional connection between the storyline of the graphic novel itself and between the history of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. In both versions of the graphic novel, the author Robert Morales actually refers directly to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, describing it as, “During the depression, 300 black Alabamans signed up with the US Public Health Service for free medical care, only to be used as unwitting guinea pigs in a study of untreated syphilis that went on for decades.”^{3,4}

While this is the only direct mention of the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee within the graphic novel that is explicit, there are many connections and many parallels within the themes and the characters.

One critical way in which the graphic novel sets up the parallelism is by providing a time, place, and culture that leads readers into the historical parallels (see [Table 2](#)). The graphic novel gives us a temporal setting (i.e., the WWII era of the early 1940s) as well as a geographical setting in America. Because Captain America was envisioned as a very true American superhero during World War II, as somebody who was fighting against Nazi Germany and against the Axis Powers, this sets us into the era of the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, since this early 1940’s time period was within the first decade of the study’s running.

Within the first part of the graphic novel, we are introduced to three of the main characters of the graphic novel. First we meet Isaiah Bradley, a black soldier on leave in New York City. He is with his wife at the 1940 World Fair that took place in New York. In a scene from the graphic novel, he and his wife are very rudely barred from entry into a particular exhibit at the World Fair which shows a cultural environment that reflected the racial environment present during that time in America. Then we are introduced to Maurice, another black soldier in Philadelphia around the same time, and despite being from a more affluent and intellectual background, he is very much exposed to the racist environment of the time. The graphic novel shows him having just been beaten up by a bunch of

Table 1. Level of linkage details in a chronological list of published and online references to the link between the 2003 Captain America pre-sequel and the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee (TSS).

Reference	Reference Type	Year	Level of linkage
Entertainment Weekly article ⁹	magazine	2002	points out Marvel Comic editor's logic, given WWII era institutional racism, 1st guinea pig for super-soldier serum would be a black—not a white—soldier
NY Times Op-Ed by B. Staples ¹⁰	newspaper	2002	details the WW II racism underlying Marvel Comic editor's decision to make 1 st Captain America a black soldier
All Things Considered NPR archive ¹¹	radio show	2002	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Science & Education ¹⁴	academic journal	2008	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
American Journal of Public Health ¹²	academic journal	2008	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Journal of the National Med Assoc ¹³	academic journal	2009	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Bodies Out of Control: Rethinking Science Texts ¹⁵	textbook	2010	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
College Literature ¹⁶	academic journal	2011	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
VDARE ¹⁷	website	2011	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
People with voices ¹⁸	website	2011	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Comicvine ¹⁹	website	2014	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Theblerdgirl ²⁰	website	2015	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Gabbinggeek ²¹	website	2015	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Vixenvarsity ²²	website	2015	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Gizmoto ²³	website	2016	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
medium-cination ²⁴	website	2016	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
comiccocity ²⁵	website	2016	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
medium-cination ²⁶	website	2016	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
geek ²⁷	website	2017	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
e-Pedia under Isaiah Bradley ²⁸	website	2017	only cites TSS parallel in general terms
Wikipedia under TRUTH: Red White & Black ²⁹	website	2017	only cites TSS parallel in general terms

white working-class men who were angered by his political activism. Finally the graphic novel introduces Sergeant Luke Evans, a black soldier from Cleveland, who has been a career military man for 17 years, but has recently actually just been demoted from Captain to Sergeant due to a minor altercation that he had with one of his white commanding officers. Thus the readers of the graphic novel meet the three main characters with each being introduced in a context of racism.

Throughout the graphic novel, there are additional experiences that these three men go through that continue

to reinforce the realities associated with pre-civil rights America, and that their experiences are very much colored by their status as African Americans. For example, the graphic novel shows Maurice actually being cornered and beaten up at the latrines by a bunch of white soldiers after they've been recruited into the Army.

A key theme within the graphic novel that is also clearly common to the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee is the valuation of scientific discovery over black lives. And clearly, for this study to have occurred in our country spanning from the 1930s until the 1970s, a total of 40

Table 2. Nine identified parallels between the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee (TSS) and the Captain America pre-sequel comic book series storyline.

	USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee	Captain America pre-sequel storyline
1. Time and place setting	U.S. 1932 –1972	U.S. 1940
2. Cultural environment	racism in U.S., both in rural Alabama and in Washington, D.C.	racism in U.S. at 1940 World's Fair as middle-class black couple barred from entering 'girlie show' at the Fair
3. Central role of U.S. government	U.S. Public Health Service	U.S. Army
4. Institutional racism	low regard for and disrespect of black men and families by observing disease over 40 year period without treatment (to protect whites from spread of syphilis from blacks)	forcible use of black soldiers in Army's dangerous and deadly study to invent a super-serum to create white super-hero (goal: "... turn straw into gold ...")
5. Medical/scientific discovery theme	study of pathology of untreated syphilis in black men	develop of super-serum to create a super-soldier within black soldiers for eventual use to create a white super-soldier hero
6. Devastating nature of 'condition' under study after decades	fatal disease, with secondary and tertiary stages of syphilis manifest	injected serum results in death and grotesque deformities in soldiers
7. Role of forcible 'injection'	a long-rumored—and widely believed—rumor of TSS story but without any supporting evidence	injection of experimental serum is central to this story, echoing what was 'rumored' in TSS story
8. Key Player #1: the 'Judas goat' African-American exposure as:	Nurse Eunice Rivers, a 'lifer' in the TSS who served the USPHS for 40 years as the site coordinator for the TSS	Sergeant Luke Evans a military 'lifer' who believed in a trusted and accepted/acquiesced to the who lead men into – ways of military authority
9. Key Player #2: the top authoritative player who apologizes	President Bill Clinton who apologized to the U.S. African-American community	the 'White' Captain America (Steven Rogers) who apologized to the original 'Black' Captain America (Isaiah Bradley)

years, speaks to an ever-present culture of racism in the country in general, but also a great degree of institutional racism, considering that the study was organized by the US Public Health Service itself. In the graphic novel 'TRUTH: Red, White, and Black' this institutional racism is presented within a military context, also clearly a branch of the government, just the military rather than the biomedical research.

Additionally, we are reminded of the institutional nature of this racism when—in the graphic novel—a conversation held between the camp's commander and the scientists who are coming in to recruit the soldiers for their military study parallels the deceit and deception in the recruitment techniques infamously used in the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee. In the graphic novel, the military doctor explains that they want to run a study to enhance the

combat performance of U.S. troops, i.e., to experiment on these black soldiers to find serum to create a 'super-soldier'. Although the commander is very confused as to why they want African American soldiers in particular, the scientists reply that it is important to use these particular soldiers, as they are "... trying to turn straw into gold". Then, once the 'super-serum' is perfected via the deaths and disfigurements of these black soldiers, the officers—of course—inject the now-perfected serum into a White soldier to create the white super hero, Captain America. This reveals an explicit racial prejudice about the inherent worth of blacks, just as was exhibited by the US Public Health Service researchers who could only see the very rate of syphilis in Tuskegee as a massive opportunity to study a scientific issue, with little—if any—regard for the black men themselves.

Just as there were massive health consequences for the subjects in the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee study, there were also disastrous health consequences for the subjects of the fictional ‘search for the super-soldier serum study in ‘TRUTH: Red, White and Black’. When the black soldiers were first injected with the super-serum in early testing, many of them had very, very intense reactions, usually leading to disfigurement and/or death, including those that grew and grew and grew and gain great muscle mass until they literally exploded. Others just become incredibly grotesquely deformed with head deformations and massive muscles. The parallels with the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee are clear given the secondary and the tertiary phases of syphilis, where a great deal of suffering occurred due to the high levels of neurological and cardiovascular damage suffered by the black men in that 40-year study.

Two specific characters within the graphic novel seem to very strongly represent two specific and complex—and very central—personalities—who were involved in the actual history of the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Study. Sergeant Luke Evans was clearly created as quite a strong representation of Nurse Eunice Rivers. As we know, Nurse Rivers was deeply, deeply committed to her work as a nurse, and worked within healthcare for many years, and had those a dedicated commitment to the local healthcare system and of her role as a nurse deeply embedded within her personality, and she stuck to these roles very strictly over the entire 40 year period of that study. While Sergeant Luke Evans had previously been unjustly demoted from his role as a captain, and retained some residual anger from this, outwardly, he remained very resigned towards his fate, as he understands that this was the way that the racist system works. And so it was also for Nurse Rivers in the USHPS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, as she realized fully, back then, that it was not really the place of a nurse, much less a black nurse, to speak out against what the doctors or the scientists were doing. Inevitably, given how ambiguous her role was, and how complex—and competing—her motivations likely were within this role, deep reflection is required to make judgements on the morality of her decisions and her actions over the 40 year period.

And another parallel between Nurse Rivers and Sergeant Evans is that they both had a very particular role with and relationship to the subject population. Nurse Rivers became quite close to the subjects in the study as she was responsible for recruiting and retaining these subjects within the study. Just as the participants in the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee became very close to Nurse Rivers and became very trusting of her, the same happened regarding Sergeant Evans among the African American soldiers that were recruited into the ‘super-

serum’ study in ‘TRUTH: Red, White and Black’. This was illustrated in scenes showing the African American soldiers sharing photos of their families with Sergeant Evans in the barracks, and clearly bonding over this event, developing a sort of fraternity. This strong degree of trust that each build with their men, served to obscure the men’s understanding of the risks that they were running in being involved with the respective studies. And so, Sergeant Evans, in allaying the men’s fears when they were asked to go into an unusual, special night training exercise, which was actually the moment in which they were forcibly recruited into the ‘super-serum’ experiments, actually was serving—as did Nurse Rivers in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study—as a ‘Judas goat’ in which the men’s trust that they had placed into this person, viewed as a member of their own community, actually led them into a dangerous situation.

Finally, there is a clear parallel to be drawn between the actions of ‘the eventual’ white Captain America, who emerges as a representation of President Bill Clinton and his actions related to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Bill Clinton was the one in 1997 to emerge—as President, as representative of the United States, and as a symbol of the entire nation and its population, —and to formally apologize for the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee. Marked similarities exist with Captain America in ‘TRUTH: Red, White and Black’ who—even in his name and in the way that he is dressed with his message-laden American flag inspired costume—is undeniably a strong symbol of the United States itself. So as an individual who represents the United States, each rises to the occasion to apologize once he’s learned what has happened.

This parallelism between the white Captain America and President Clinton even extended into their precise words of apology. President Clinton in his 1997 apology said, “What was done cannot be undone, but we can end the silence. We can stop turning our heads away. We can look you in the eye and finally say, on behalf of the American people, what the United States government did was shameful and I am sorry.” So he uses the first person and takes that responsibility upon himself. He goes on, “The American people are sorry for the loss, for the years of hurt. You did nothing wrong, but you were grievously wronged. I apologize, and I am sorry that this apology has been so long in coming.”

Similarly, Captain America in his apology decides to take the responsibility of the apology, and a lot of the guilt upon himself, and also using the first person says “I can’t say enough how sorry I am for what happened to you and your family. I wish that I could undo all the suffering you’ve gone through. If I could have taken your place ... ”.

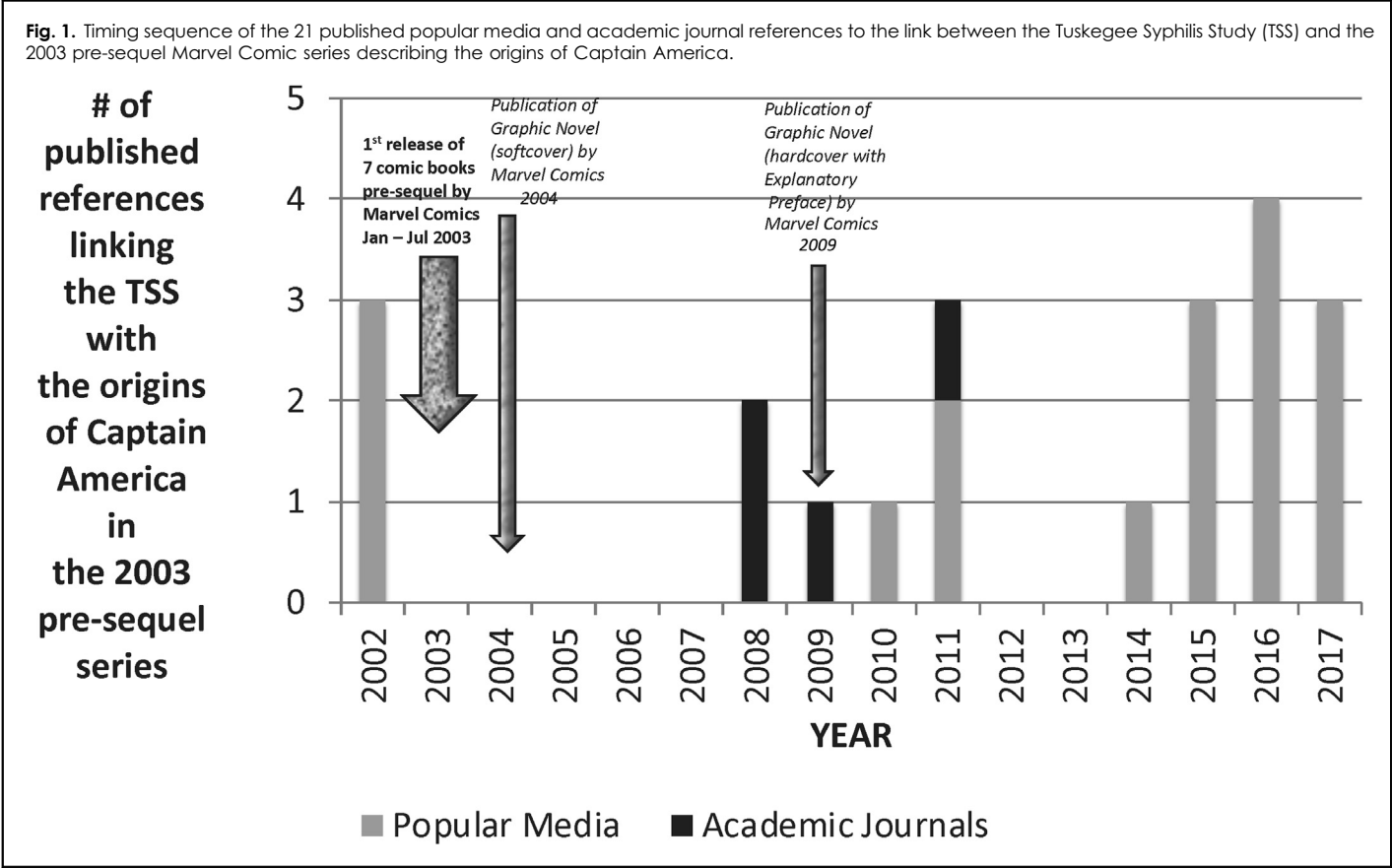
Finally, as sort of as another parallel event to President Clinton’s including a gift to build the National Center for Bioethics at Tuskegee, white Captain America—in his apology—returns the suit to Isaiah Bradley (the black, and initial, Captain America) that Isaiah Bradley had wore in his role as Captain America.

Nine identified points of parallelism between the two storylines

As can be clearly seen in Table 1, all 21 of the published and online references to the link between the 2003 Captain America comic book pre-sequel series and the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee—with only two exceptions—only describe this level of linkage at a very superficial and generalized level by only citing the parallelism in general terms, i.e., that parallels exists and are noted. Interestingly, both exceptions occurred early on—in fact, in 2002—the year before the release of the pre-sequel to the public. The first exception occurred in the Entertainment Weekly article by Tom Sinclair in which “... the high-concept question [of the editor at Marvel Comics, Alex Alonso] was: Would it stand to reason that the supersoldier program would have made its prime guinea pigs guys of Steve Rogers’ demographic?” (i.e., White).⁹ The

other exception was the 2002 Op-Ed piece in the NYTimes by Brent Staples which had several paragraphs dedicated to detailing the WWII institutional racism in the U.S. Army against black soldiers (and against black citizens attempting to enlist as soldiers) that was “tip-toed around” in the White press but widely protested against by “what was called the Negro press.”¹⁰ This led the editor at Marvel Comics, Axel Alonso, to “deal head-on with the hard-core segregation that dominated WWII ... [in] ... TRUTH: Red, White and Black”.¹⁰ Alonso had been “dismayed by the depth of ignorance surrounding”⁶ that institutional racism in the WWII U.S. Army and so he instructed the writer of that pre-sequel series, Robert Morales, to focus on that aspect.^{4,6}

Fig. 1 shows a graph of the timing sequence between the 21 published references (both in the popular media and in academic publications) from 2002 through 2017 and the publishing release of the Marvel Comics books (the seven comic book series in 2003 as well as two versions of the graphic novels (the softcover version in 2004 and the hardcover version in 2009) as marked by the down-facing shaded arrows in Fig. 1. First two popular press releases occurred online in 2002 accompanied that same year by a short four-minute National Pubic Radio (NPR) interview



show segment announcing the plans of Marvel Comics to soon release (in 2003) the pre-sequel story of Captain America who was originally introduced to the American public in 1941. Then, there are 4 very general references in academic journals to this parallelism, this overall link between Captain America between 2008 and 2011, followed by 14 online blogs which also made only very general references to this link between Captain America and the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee between 2010 and 2017.

Table 2 then, for the first time, shows the nine detailed parallels between the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee (TSS) and the Captain America pre-sequel comic book series storyline. The parallels detailed describe: 1) the time and place setting of the stories; 2) the cultural environment; 3) the central role of the U.S. government; 4) America's institutional racism; 5) the medical/scientific discovery themes; 6) the devastating nature of the 'condition' under study; and 7) the role of forcible 'injection', as well the parallelism of two key players across the two stories: 8) Sergeant Evans with Nurse Rivers, and 9) Steve Rogers, the 'White' Captain America with President Bill Clinton.

CONCLUSIONS

So via the publishing of this 2003 pre-sequel series explaining the origins of Captain America, Marvel Comics demonstrated the depth of penetration of this most poignant of American bioethics tragedies, the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, into the fabric of American folklore. By Marvel Comic's presenting this story in a comic book format—often viewed as one of the 'lower' and/or 'edgier' forms of public media—then as a graphic novel book, the story of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study was richly brought into the popular media—brought to 'everyman'—no longer the privileged knowledge of an elite subset of bioethicists and health care researchers in America.

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