The Falcon and the Winter Soldier -- Representation

Okay, I was in the middle of writing the outline for my video on Gathering Blue by Lois Lowry when I got caught in a Marvel feedback loop in my head. Don’t worry, this happens all the time and I’m used to it. But I couldn’t let go of the loop until I made this video. So If you want to hear about Gathering Blue, check back in soon because I’ll upload it shortly.

I have to take minute to talk about The Falcon and the Winter Soldier. I know it came out years ago – I watched it back when it first came out. It’s become my comfort show. I’ve rewatched it so many times and live off of Falcon and the Winter Soldier fanfics and headcanons and all that. Here’s the thing – there are so many things this show did well. Sam Wilson got so much more depth out of this show. I know he got a little retconned because instead of being from Harlem like in the comics, he’s from Louisianna like the actor who plays him, Anthony Mackie, but I enjoyed the rewrite. I think it gives a different angle on Black culture in America. The Sam Wilson of the comics is kind of built on some inner-city New York-type stereotypes and Anthony Mackie’s Sam Wilson brings in a coastal, fishing culture side of the Black experience that tends to be underutilized in media representations. The TV show builds comparisons between Isaiah Bradley and Steve Rogers and the different ways they are treated for freeing prisoners of war. Steve Rogers is turned into a national hero, gets a promotion and becomes the glorified army captain he always wanted to be. Isaiah Bradley gets imprisoned, tortured, and experimented on by his own government. Both receive the super soldier serum, but Steve Rogers consents to a very well-controlled procedure with a high chance of success and Isaiah Bradley is one of many Black soldiers who are experimented on without their consent and lied to about the medicines and procedures they receive in a way that is deeply reminiscent of the Tuskeegee Syphilis Study. Sam Wilson gets profiled by police and his sister is denied a bank loan despite his government contracts, steady income, and history as an Avenger.

We see Sam Wilson step up to protect vulnerable people in the ongoing refugee crisis caused by the “Blip,” not because he has a strong sense of intellectual altruism, but because he understands what it means to be part of a vulnerable community and has deep compassion for anyone who is struggling. This sets him apart from Steve Rogers whose goal is to do the right thing by going to war. He knows how to stand and fight and there are times that this gives him a hint of white saviorism. In contrast, Sam has a history of counseling veterans and knows how to deescalate situations so that violence isn’t necessary. He’s not afraid to fight when he needs to, but he treats fighting as a last resort much more than the Steve Rogers of the MCU. And I’d argue that this makes him a better hero. The creator, showrunner, and head writer, Malcom Spellman is a Black writer and his influence on this series in regards to Black representation really shows. I really want to make sure that that’s clear before I move on because I don’t want you to think that I’m trashing this miniseries. It’s really clear that it’s purpose was to uplift Sam Wilson’s character, show his journey to becoming Captain America, and ground it in a very real America, particularly when it comes to the harm done to the Black community in the United States.

Now – Let’s get into all the problems I have with this show – none of which have to do with Sam Wilson and all of which have to do with Bucky Barnes. Okay? Okay. I’ll admit that I’m kind of an isolated comic book and MCU nerd. I’ve got just a couple friends with an interest in comic book culture and neither of them really care much for Bucky Barnes. But I do. And I do for some very specific reasons. They are also the reasons I get so worked up about the way this character is portrayed in the MCU. It’s really created this culture of ragging on Bucky but if ya’ll understood where I’m coming from, I feel like we could create a different level of appreciation for this character.

First of all, Bucky Barnes is disabled. Let’s all say it louder for the people in the back. Bucky Barnes is DISABLED! And it is not dealt with well. I’m going to try my best to stay within the confines of The Falcon and the Winter Soldier for this video because I think disability representation around this character as a whole deserves a video of its own – but I make no promises. This character is also Queer. Again, I say, this character is queer. It has never been confirmed, but Bucky has been queer coded since the very beginning of the character. The general consensus among LGBTQ+ fans is that he is bisexual, but I’ve seen arguments for gay, nonbinary, and trans which are all interesting. For the purposes of this video, I’m going to stick with the more accepted argument that he is bisexual because I think it fits better. Eventually, I’ll make a video about this as well, but again, I’m trying to stay on track here.

Okay, backstory on queer, disabled Bucky another day. For now, I’m moving forward on the assumption that Bucky is queer and disabled before the start of Falcon and the Winter Soldier. Based on this assumption there are absurd levels of queer-baiting in this series. If you don’t know, queer-baiting is when a scene is played out in which, if the characters involved were of opposite sexes the scene would be read as romantic OR if a character that is coded as queer but not openly queer does something that in our society would be considered a particularly queer thing. Typically, when this is done in movies and TV shows, it’s either written off as a haha funny funny joke joke, or done to entice queer viewers without upsetting homophobic and transphobic audiences. What ends up happening as a result is the queer community becomes the butt of the joke or it gets strung along with hush hush promises of representation especially the hopes of positive representation that get dashed when the creators of the content come out and say, “Nah, it was all for fun. They’re not actually queer.”

So, instances of queer-baiting happen all the way through this series. Like it’s rampant. We have the moment in episode 1, when Bucky goes out to dinner with Leah, the nice bartender at his favorite sushi joint and she asks him about his dating life and he says, “I tried the whole online dating thing. It’s pretty crazy. A lot of weird pictures.” Leah asks. “What kind of weird?” He answers, “I mean, tiger photos? I mean, half the time, I don’t even know what I’m looking at. It’s a lot.”

This scene might come across as kind of innocuous to general audiences, but tiger photos were an odd trend on dating profiles particularly on male profiles. The trend got so out of hand that Tinder had to make a statement asking their users to stop using these photos because those photos can also be associated with animal cruelty.

When the director, Kari Skogland was asked about this scene, she wrote it off by saying, ““I think we just thought of it as an oddity of the times, because he’s so confused by it. Because don’t forget, he’s 106 years old. So, he’s just confused by the whole thing.” I think people who lean on this excuse view this character as an offshoot of Steve Rogers and his experiences. Steve Rogers goes down with his plane at the end of Captain America: The First Avenger and wakes up 66 years later. He undergoes a really rapid culture shift from going to sleep during World War II and waking up in the 21st century. He has to learn about all the changes in culture and technology. But Bucky Barnes has a very different experience. Yes, he’s kept in suspended animation between missions as the Winter Soldier, but he’s repeatedly woken up, trained as a Hydra operative, taught the technologies of the time he’s operating in, and taught how to blend in. Even though he deals with memory loss and a disconnection from culture on a personal level, he enters the 21st century with a better understanding of modern technology than Steve Rogers does. So, the idea that this guy who used to be known for his skills as a flirt who should have a grasp of the technology struggling with how to use a phone app in the way that Steve Rogers would kind of feels like a cop-out. I would say that it’s more reasonable to say that he struggles with dating for other reasons like that he’s probably a victim of sexual assault, that he has lacked ownership over his body for most of his life, that he’s not had the right or the ability to give consent for a really long time, and that if he is truly bisexual, he probably has to work through some internalized homophobia.

Then we have the scene where Bucky and Sam first encounter the Flag Smashers in episode 2 when Bucky falls off the 18-wheeler they’re fighting on and gets stuck hanging from the undercarriage of the vehicle. Sam saves him by flying under the truck and grabbing Bucky and they both tumble through the tall grass on the side of the highway. Rolling through the fields is a trop that’s been done so many times I don’t think I could count them and when it’s done between two people of opposing sexes, it is read as romantic. One of the most famous examples of this that I can think of is in Star Wars: Attack of the Clones when Anakin and Padme roll through the fields of Naboo. It’s become a super famous expression of their romantic entanglement. But when this scene is done between people of the same sex, we get queer-baiting for the LGBTQ+ audiences and jokes for everyone else. This scene in Falcon and the Winter Soldier hits hard as queer-baiting, but like most buddy-cop style shows, anything that could be seen as queer is designed as a joke. We get this again when Bucky’s rather terrible therapist pulls Sam into an emergency session with Bucky and forces them to participate in couples therapy. She makes them stare into each other’s eyes and they get so close that they’re leg-locked. The romantic tension is just wild, but it’s again all played off as a big joke.

Now, I get it. Sam Wilson is not coded as queer, and in these queer-bait scenes he’s just used because he happens to be there and the actors that play Bucky and Sam have a really natural rapport so they’re able to pull off scenes that require physical and emotional closeness between these characters. But that doesn’t mean that the unrequited queer-baiting doesn’t do the character of Bucky and queer Marvel fans a disservice. Cause it does. I for one am tired of my identity as a queer person being a punchline of somebody else’s joke.

There’s a lot of platonic touch throughout the rest of the series. They give each other bro-hugs, walk with an arm around each other’s shoulders, and show a general closeness that we should see represented more on TV, particularly between men. This is something that the actor who plays Sam Wilson talked about when he was questioned about the queer-baiting. I want to break down his response.

"There’s so many things that people latch onto with their own devices to make themselves relevant and rational…the idea of two guys being friends and loving each other in 2021 is a problem because of the exploitation of homosexuality. It used to be guys could be friends, we could hang out, we could do this, and it was cool. You would always meet your friends at the bar, but you can’t do that anymore, because something as pure and beautiful as homosexuality has been exploited by people who are trying to rationalize themselves. There’s nothing more sensitive than having emotional conversations and a kindred-spirit friendship with someone that you care about and love," he said. "And you can call it a 'bromance' or whatever they call it, but it's literally just two guys who have each other's backs, and you don't have that now. You can't find that now."

I get what he’s trying to say. He’s trying to say that we need to represent positive and healthy platonic relationships between male friends because a culture of toxic masculinity has taken that away. Men are discouraged from showing affection, sensitivity, creativity and softness in men is insulted by associating it with femininity and queerness and this has hurt men. He’s absolutely right about that. And also this trope uses very specific tropes that hint and Bucky’s queerness and pull Sam along for the ride. If the writers did not make use of these tropes, you could argue that this show is representing heterosexual, platonic softness and sensitivity between two friends who have been through a lot together and have learned how to support one another through their trials. But because they used very specific romantic and cultural tropes in the context of a character that is already assumed to be queer, we can’t escape the queer-bait in this show and the responses that the creators of this show have for audience push back falls flat because of the history of queer-coding and queer-baiting in film and television and, in particular, in Marvel content.

Rowan Ellis made a really good video about the history of the Hays Code and the Comic Book Authority and the ways that the entertainment industry self-censored queer content over the years. So, if you want to hear more about this, you can use the link in the description to watch her video. I’ll get into this in more detail someday, but in the meantime, she is a really good resource.

But if you don’t think that queer-baiting is a problem, let’s just touch on a couple reasons why it is. First, like I said earlier, queer-baiting is usually played off as a joke which means that the queer community is the punchline of a joke that cisgender, heterosexual people are telling. Queer folks don’t have the power in queer-baiting. It’s a way to get more views without making the world a more accepting place. Queer-baiting is part of a history of closeting queerness and upholding laws and practices that hurt queer folks. Queer-baiting messes with the heads of queer viewers by telling them “Maybe this time, we’ll throw you a bone and let you have a taste of representation,” and them immediately taking the offer back and saying, “No, you don’t actually deserve this.” By preventing actual positive representation we’re telling queer folks that they don’t belong, their undeserving, or that they simply don’t exist and if they think they do, there must be something wrong with them. When we have characters like Bucky that have been queer-coded throughout their history, but we don’t follow through on telling that side of their story, we tell queer viewers that they belong in the closet. That’s why I get so fired up about bisexual Bucky Barnes and what his treatment in the Falcon and the Winter Soldier says about queerness.

Enough about that. Let’s talk about Bucky as a disabled person. I’m operating based on the understanding that he is, at least, an amputee and a trauma survivor with Complex PTSD. Honestly, I also imagine that he probably has some unaddressed neurological issues because of all the electrocution he suffers and I think that if that element was brought in, that would make things really interesting. Then again, I have a whole host of neurological issues, so I may just be projecting. I dunno. But if this show is supposed to show Bucky working through his ish, I feel like it falls a little short. First, he’s an amputee but because of the magic of Wakandan comic book science, we don’t see him dealing with the things that come with being an amputee. He doesn’t have phantom pain, nerve damage, or chronic pain. He doesn’t have to work through the trauma of losing a part of your body and having to adapt to new ways of doing things.

We’ll go into this in more detail another day, but this is important to bring up because in Episode 4, the Dora Milaje come to bring Zemo back to prison. Sam and Bucky broke him out of prison to use him as an informant in their investigation – it’s contrived and kinda ridiculous, but that’s what happens. Walker and Hoskins show up and Walker shows that he’s trash at deescalating situations, picks a fight with Ayo and, all of a sudden, everybody’s fighting. Sam and Bucky are supposed to be trying to end the altercation, but Bucky’s role in all of this has offended Ayo and she shows him what’s what by removing his prosthetic arm. It’s supposed to be this big moment where we see how wrong Bucky was to insult the Wakandans for gifting him with medical support by removing the Hydra programming and letting him use a Vibranium prosthetic. They’re trying to show this white boy who doesn’t think before he acts and keeps flubbing up, offending the Black people around him and taking advantage of their good graces. And sure, Bucky is a white man from 1940 and it takes him time to recognize the privilege he has. But if you watch this scene from the perspective of disability, it just hurts. Because we see this disabled man being told through Ayo’s actions that he has what he has out of the benevolence of other people and that having his medical and accessibility needs met are a privilege and not a right. Privilege is a really big conversation in the disability community with lots of different avenues for discussion. We could argue that Bucky is privileged because he has a really advanced prosthetic that gives him more dexterity than what most people who use prosthetic limbs have access to and because it’s made of Vibranium, he doesn’t have to worry about wear and tear or if his insurance will replace it if it breaks. Typically, insurance companies will only cover one new mobility aid every three years and if it breaks, good luck getting it fixed. Or if you need more than one aid, you’re stuck paying out of pocket for the additional aids. So, we can argue within the context of disability, that Bucky’s relationship with the Wakandans gives him a certain privilege because he has access to more durable and intuitive equipment than other people in his position might have access to. But that’s not how this scene reads.

This scene reads as ableist because it reaffirms the idea that people with disabilities should be grateful for what people without disabilities give them out of the kindness of their hearts. That people with disabilities are “charity cases.” But people with disabilities have had to fight for access and inclusion every step of the way. By taking away Bucky’s prosthetic arm, even temporarily, Ayo is saying that he still doesn’t deserve agency over his own body and that accessibility is a privilege that she can bestow or take away. But accessibility is a right. Lesson one of disability etiquette is to never – I mean never – confiscate someone’s mobility aid, communication device, or other assistive device. This is a character who has been without agency – unable to consent to anything that happens to his body or his mind, and unable to make his own choices for literal decades and by confiscating his prosthetic arm, Ayo is telling him that he still can’t have those things. This is a message that has been told to the disability community for generations and it’s a real problem. This kind of mentality is what excuses people for physically moving people in wheelchairs out of their way without consent. This kind of mentality is how we deny nonspeaking people assistive communication devices. This kind of mentality is how we get people denied the kinds of high quality mobility devices that will protect them from pressure sores or other potentially fatal complications. This is the kind of mentality that makes it okay for our sidewalks to be in shambles and for our bus stops not to be cleared of snow. When Bucky’s arm is taken away from him as punishment by someone he considers a friend, we send a message that people with disabilities deserve to have their own bodies used against them as punishment and that is not an okay message to send.

Okay, I’ma take breath because that whole bit really gets me fired up.

But we can’t forget that Bucky also has Complex PTSD. He has a crappy, government-appointed therapist who focuses on getting him to apologize to people that he hurt when he was the Winter Soldier and uses the threat of writing in her notebook whenever he doesn’t respond to her during therapy. The implication is that his freedom is conditional on the success of his therapy sessions. It’s probably a logical way to go and I’m sure it’s representative of how people who have a record of violence are monitored. So, in that sense, it’s probably realistic. My problem is how much they focus on his contrition. Now, some of that comes from Bucky himself and that makes sense. Hydra made him hurt a lot of people and it’s totally natural for him to feel remorse for the things that he did as the Winter Soldier. But the series doesn’t make any attempt to broach the ways that he was also a victim. Right? Before he could hurt anyone on behalf of Hydra, they had to first, torture, condition, and brainwash this man. They experimented on him without his consent. In episode 3 we get a tiny moment when Zemo is pretending to sell the Winter Soldier’s services where sexual assault is implied. So he’s this big ball of trauma who needs specialized care from a trauma specialist, but instead he gets a therapist who doesn’t specialize in his acute needs, threatens him, provokes him, and brings other people like Sam into his sessions without his consent. Are you catching the trend here? Bucky Barnes and agency just don’t seem to mix in this show. He’s got this long history of things being done to his body as a prisoner of war without his consent and then his friends and his therapist continue to limit his agency and his capacity for consent. This is something that comes up so frequently with this character and I will definitely go into it in more detail in another video, but these are the moments in Falcon and the Winter Soldier that stand out to me as far as bodily autonomy and consent go.

Like I said, this show is my comfort show. I love the connection between Sam and Bucky and all the queer-baiting means that I enjoy shipping them in my own little headcanons, so don’t take this rant to mean that I don’t like this show. The Falcon and the Winter Soldier does a lot of things right, especially when it comes to Sam Wilson and what it means for him to take up the mantel of Captain America as a Black man. And it shows the ways that he’s a better Cap. But even shows that we enjoy can do things that are harmful. And I think a lot of that harm comes from how Bucky’s story progresses in this series. I’m glad he owns up to his privilege as a White man and apologizes to Sam for throwing a fit over Sam giving up the shield at the beginning of the show. I think it’s important to see the ways that race impacts their relationship with each other. And at the same time, this series ableism is showing and the MCU’s longstanding issues about queerness also rears its ugly head. It makes me anxious about how they’re going to approach these issues around Bucky’s character in his upcoming appearances in The Thunderbolts and the next Captain America movie. But I can’t control those things. I can just hope that they do better.

If you’ve made it to this point in the video, thanks for sticking with me. I know I went on a pretty long rant here. I’m working on a deep dive into Daredevil at the moment, so that’s probably the next Marvel video you’ll see from me. I’m also uploading a video about Gathering Blue which is a continuation of The Giver by Lois Lowry over on the Representation in Literature playlist. And our Book Club book for September is Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo A. Anaya. All my sources, socials, and links are in the descriptions. As always, I’m accepting submissions for Underground Bookshelf where you can find resources, short stories, poetry and more that centers diverse artists, characters, and plots. As you’ve probably noticed, I get a bit defensive of Bucky in light of all the tropes he’s subject to, so my question for the comments is, “Is there a Marvel character you are particularly defensive of?” Thanks again, and remember, when you’re here in the Underground Bookshelf space, you belong.

Question for the comments: Is there a Marvel character you are particularly defensive of?

Rowan Ellis’s video on the Evolution of Queerbaiting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riKVQjZK1z8>

Links:

This video’s script: <https://www.underground-bookshelf.com/platforms>

Underground Bookshelf: <https://www.underground-bookshelf.com/>

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Laura M. Browne-Lambert Author Page: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/Laura-M.-Browne-Lambert/author/B0C66VNTJ6?ref=ap_rdr&store_ref=ap_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true>

The Wood by Laura M. Browne-Lambert: <https://www.amazon.com/Wood-Laura-M-Browne-Lambert/dp/B0C6BSPR2N/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3QNQLI2W5X0RX&keywords=laura+browne-lambert&qid=1687530044&sprefix=%2Caps%2C216&sr=8-1>

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