MERVI MIETTINEN

Truth, Justice, and the American Way?

The Popular Geopolitics of American Identity in Contemporary Superhero Comics

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
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November, 2012.

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MIETTINEN, MERVI: *Truth, Justice, and the American Way? The Popular Geopolitics of American Identity in Contemporary Superhero Comics*

Väitöskirjassani tutkin supersankarisarjakuvan suhdetta Yhdysvaltojen populaariin geopoliittiseen identiteettiin. Tutkimuksen kohteena ovat erityisesti viimeisen kolmenkymmenen vuoden aikana julkaistut supersankarisarjakuvat, joiden kautta tutkin ja analysoin niiden luomaa kuvaa supersankarista fiktiivisenä ”amerikkalaisuuden” ruumiillistumana. Työni lähtökohtana toimii populaari geopolitiikka, kansakunnan ja kansallisuuden ”kertominen” populaarikulttuuristen tekstien kautta. Supersankari toimii yhtenä lukemattomista populaarin geopolitiikan välittäjistä, ja sankarin kautta on mahdollista tuottaa erilaisia geopoliittisesti latautuneita kertomuksia, jotka osaltaan vaikuttavat Yhdysvaltojen jaetun kansallisen minuuden rakentumiseen.

Keskityn tutkimuksessani erityisesti supersankarisarjakuvan luomaan äärimaskuliiniseen identiteettiin, joka tuotetaan sekä suhteessa toisiin, ei-toivottuihin maskuliinisuuksiin että alisteisiin naishahmoihin. Tuon myös esille sen, miten supersankarin edustama maskuliinisuus on vahvasti sidoksissa väkivallan käyttöön. Supersankarisarjakuvien väkivalta on monin tavoin ongelmallista, sillä se esitetään usein paitsi voimaannuttavana, myös luonnollisena miehisyyden ilmaisuna.

Väkivallan ja maskuliinisuuden esiin nostamat kysymykset liittyvät myös keskeisesti vallankäytön kysymyksiin, joihin keskityn erityisesti poikkeustilan käsitteen kautta. Poikkeustilan käsite mahdollistaa supersankarisarjakuvan poliittisemman luennan nostamalla esiin hahmon ristiriitaisen suhteen sekä demokratiaan että valtioon ja vallan kysymyksiin. Keskeiseksi kysymykseksi tutkimuksessani nousee supersankarin ristiriitainen suhde juuri demokratiaan, jonka periaatteet ovat voimakkaasti ristiriidassa supersankarin todellisen toiminnan kanssa.

Viimeisessä luvussa keskityn tutkimaan näiden elementtien muutosta supersankarisarjakuvassa ja sen geopoliittisessa merkityksessä amerikkalaiselle identiteettikäsitykselle 11.9.2001 tapahtuneiden WTC -iskujen jälkeen. Tapahtumalla oli valtava geopoliittinen vaikutus, ja supersankarisarjakuvat pyrkivät välittömästi tapahtuman jälkeen tarjoamaan lukijoilleen uusia geopoliittisia malleja, jotka korostivat kansallista yhtenäisyyttä sekä ylistivät pelastustyöntekijöitä päivän ”todellisina” sankareina. Tämä yhteisöllinen vastareaktio oli kuitenkin lyhytaikainen, ja tutkimukseni tuokin esille tämänhetkisen supersankarisarjakuvan sankaruutta kyseenalaistavan luonteen.

Tutkimukseni muodostaa kattavan kokonaiskuvan supersankarisarjakuvan kulttuurisesta merkityksestä ja sen mahdollisista ongelmakohdista Yhdysvaltojen populaarin kansallisen identiteetin muokkaajana ja ylläpitäjänä. Tutkimukseni

esittelee uuden tavan tarkastella kansallisen identiteetin rakentumista populaarikulttuurin kautta ja samalla tuo esille erityisesti Yhdysvaltojen populaarin geopolitiikan lausuttujen ihanteiden ja todellisuuden välisiä ristiriitoja supersankarisarjakuvien kautta. Etenkin WTC -iskujen jälkeen supersankarin merkitys joutui laajan uudelleenarvioinnin kohteeksi, ja tämä kansallinen trauma pakotti Yhdysvallat pohtimaan uudelleen kansallista minuuttaan—myös sarjakuvalehtien sivuilla.

Analysointimenetelmäni korostaa käsitteiden, ei teorian varaan pohjaavaa tutkimussuuntausta, joka mahdollistaa aidosti poikkitieteellisen lähestymistavan, jota sarjakuva tekstuaalisena ja visuaalisena hybridisenä muotona edellyttää. Keskeisiä, tieteenaloja ylittäviä käsitteitä tutkimuksessani ovat *maskuliinisuus*, *väkivalta* ja *poikkeustila*, joiden kautta lähestyn ja puran kohdetekstieni suhdetta Yhdysvaltojen populaariin *geopolitiikkaan*. Maskuliinisuuden ja väkivallan kautta on mahdollista tarkastella kriittisesti niin sankari-identiteettiä kuin sen kautta ihannoitua kansallista minuutta. Samoin näiden käsitteiden kautta voidaan analysoida laajemmin supersankarisarjakuvien politiikkaa ja niiden edustamaa paradoksaalista poikkeustilan pysyvyyttä.

Asiasanat: supersankari, sarjakuva, Yhdysvallat, geopolitiikka, identiteetti, maskuliinisuus, väkivalta, sukupuoli, poikkeustila, valta, 9/11.

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1. Introduction

> SUPERMAN! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need! (*Action Comics* #1, Jun 1938, 3)
>
> ***
>
> The better American is the man who does what his heart tells him is right -- for the betterment of **all** mankind -- not **just** for other Americans.
> (*Captain America* #8, Mar 2003, 6)[1]

1.1 “Is it a bird? Is it a plane? It’s…”

Depending on who you ask (and what your definition is), *comics* as a distinct medium has its roots either in Egyptian hieroglyphics (circa 1300 BC) and Mexican codices (circa 1500 AD) (McCloud, 1993), in 18th-century British gag cartoons by William Hogarth and James Gillray (Harvey, 2009), or in Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer’s satirical picture stories from the mid-1800s (Kunzle, 2009). All these pictorial precursors culminated in America in 1894 with the emergence of the newspaper comic strip and the first appearance of *The Yellow Kid* (Duncan and Smith, 2009) and the subsequent formation of the comic book as a distinct entertainment medium in the 1930s America (Wright, 2001). While the definition, history, and developments of the medium have been extensively studied elsewhere[2] and comics themselves have explored virtually every genre from crime and horror to autobiography and journalism, comics—and especially American comics—are still most often associated with superhero comics (Wright, 2001, xiv; Murray, 2011, 243). First arriving in the form of Superman in 1938, the superhero, with his

[1] All direct quotes from comics follow the comic’s visual way of emphasis: bolded words signal those bolded in the original comic, and instead of dashes, comics’ tradition of two hyphens (--) is reproduced. Omission of words within direct quotations will always be indicated with the use of three periods with a space before each and a space after last (. . .).

[2] See for example: McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (1993); Sabin, *Adult Comics* (1993); Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (1996); Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (2007); Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* (2009); or Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty–First–Century Storytelling* (2012).

brightly-colored long underwear, amazing powers, and the dedication to "helping those in need" (Siegel and Shuster, 1938, 2) has, for many, become the distinct emblem of the medium, assuring that "the comic book medium would be forever . . . associated with adolescent power fantasies of muscular men in tights" (Duncan and Smith, 2009, 32).

This associative connection between comics and superheroes can be approached both in terms of medium and in terms of genre, and both have been claimed as distinctively American. Comics themselves have been viewed by several critics as one of the few indigenous art forms of America (cf. Inge, 1990; Heer and Worcester, 2004), and it is the American superhero that first emerged as a character that fully embraced the medium and its potentials (cf. Coogan, 2006; Duncan and Smith, 2009). Indeed, the combination of the medium of comics and the genre of superheroes became a recipe for success:

> In symbiotic reciprocity, they [superheroes and comics] contributed to each other's success. Superheroes in comics sparked a demand for comics—and that demand created the need for original superhero material, written and drawn expressly for the medium. (Harvey, 1996, 35)

Indeed, comics were the only medium in the early 20th century capable of literally depicting the fantastical adventures of the superheroes, as neither books, movies, nor radio shows could deliver these superhuman feats with the same amount of conviction, authority, and impact (ibid.). Following the first appearance of Superman, in *Action Comics* #1 (Jun 1938), the superhero has become a cultural phenomenon reaching far beyond comics into TV, radio, movies, games, and countless other forms of merchandise, from collectable cards and action figures to T-shirts and lunchboxes. Today, the superhero is a highly recognizable cultural icon of America with a vast array of meanings that also echo several decades' worth of interaction between politics and popular culture.

The superhero's relevance precisely as a cultural icon of America cannot be overstated: as I will demonstrate in this dissertation, the superhero is a distinctively American hero-character that is the result of a vast array of cultural, social, and historical influences that can be labeled as particularly "American." The most obvious example of a distinctively American superhero, Captain America, has been seen by Jason Dittmer as a "blatant" example of the way superheroes represent the United States, his symbolism underlined with a red, white, and blue uniform as his first comic book cover saw him punching Hitler himself in the face (2010, 80–81).

As I will demonstrate through the course of this dissertation, Captain America still continues to spark debate today, especially in the U.S. media, as his actions and views are often held to be those of "America."

A recent demonstration of Captain America's political relevance can be found in the so-called "The Tea Party Incident" from February 2012. The incident was sparked by issue 602 of *Captain America* (Feb 2010), which depicted what was clearly identifiable as a Republican Tea Party rally (the sign "Tea Bag the Libs before They Tea Bag YOU!" underlined it [#602, 16])[3] in a negative light. The protesters were portrayed as a group of racist and violent political extremists, and Marvel was promptly accused of "making patriotic Americans into [their] newest super villains" (Huston, 2010) as the issue was picked up by everyone from the *New York Times* to bloggers and columnists nationwide. However, the political relevance of the superhero is not in any way restricted to the United States. Instead, the superhero holds a potent symbolic and ideological power even outside America, evident in the way an anonymous artist transformed a monument of Russian Red Army soldiers in Sofia, Bulgaria, into various popular superheroes and supervillains and other American icons (apart from Superman, Captain America, and the Joker, both Ronald McDonald and Santa Claus can be seen) in 2011 (Allen, 2011). This imposition of the American superhero onto the Soviet statue is a clear example of the way superheroes are still seen and recognized as "a particularly American creation and . . . as an embodiment of American ideology" (Duncan and Smith, 2009, 243), both inside and outside the United States.

It is precisely this persistent idea of American superheroes[4] as embodying a particularly "American" ideology that will be the primary focus of this dissertation. The superhero, called a kind of "modern mythology" by Richard Reynolds in his *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992), is an amalgamation of a vast number of influences from ancient mythology to pulp and science fiction stories, and superhero comics can be studied as "an insightful yet underutilized window into the study of cultural change," and, more precisely, as an exploration of national identity (Costello, 2009, 14). Though scholars do regularly remark on the way superheroes

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[3] The sign was rewritten in the subsequent reprints of the issue, including the trade paperbacks, after Marvel's Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada publicly apologized for the content of the issue.

[4] Naturally, superheroes do exist outside the United States: both Canada and the United Kingdom have their respective "Captains": Captain Canuck and Captain Britain (cf. Edwardson, 2003, and Dittmer, 2009). Additionally, 2007 saw the publication of *The 99*, a team of superheroes based on Islamic culture and religion.

like Captain America literally embody a particular vision of American nationality in terms similar to the late 19th-century newspaper caricatures, which often were in the tradition of casting nations as personified characters from Miss Britannia to Uncle Sam (cf. Edwardson, 2003, 186), they rarely embark further into the comics themselves to analyze the way superheroes actually engage with the nation-building process. Thus, the in-depth scholarly approach to superheroes as embodiments of a national identity is still a rather new phenomenon in comics scholarship, the few examples of existing research being Matthew Costello's *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (2009), Christopher Murray's *Champions of the Oppressed? Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda During World War II* (2011), and Jason Dittmer's upcoming *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* (2012).[5]

This approach to the superhero as a national icon has been largely based on two major beliefs: the belief that superhero comics are quick to reflect changes in America's national identity and ideology due to their status as a "disposable commodity" with a very slim profit margin that allows them to be "highly responsive to cultural trends" (Costello, 2009, 4) and the over-arching belief that American popular culture as a whole somehow mirrors from year to year the "deep social responses and evolution of the American people in relation to the fate which has overtaken the original concepts of freedom, free individuality, free association etc." (James, 1950/1993, 119). According to James, it is through popular culture that one can find the explicit ideological expression of the "sentiments and deepest feelings of the American people and a great window into the future of America and the modern world" (1950/1993, 118–119). Though James's analysis dates back several decades, this notion of popular culture as a "mirror" to national culture and national sentiments is regularly repeated especially in the context of superheroes, who are often (and usually without any evidence) deemed as "seemingly innocent"

[5] As a rule, the Works Cited section at the end of this dissertation will only include those texts, comics, and other materials that are cited within the text. This means that any books, comics, or films merely mentioned as further sources of information or referenced as merely contextually relevant will not be in the Works Cited.

while actually engaging in a "battle over American identity" (Dittmer, 2005, 628).[6] These beliefs can also be addressed through Benedict Anderson's (1991) "imagined communities" as well as through Homi Bhabha's (1990) claims that nations are narrated—in other words, that national identities are created and sustained (and challenged) in the imaginations of people through narratives which propose and validate particular national myths and symbols, resulting in a shared popular culture memory that designates "who we are."

These narrated national identities are "consumed" through popular culture items which in some way embody national ideals, symbols, and myths, marking nationality itself a particular "cultural artifact" (Anderson, 1991, 4). Crucial in this approach, in my view, is Anderson's way of defining nationality itself as an artifact, which clearly implies its nature as something at least partially deliberately produced and constructed instead of something innate and natural (though it may be perceived as such; see Barthes, 1957/1972). In this sense, the idea of a "nation" and "national identity" exists in our minds, and it is created through what we are told of it, how we imagine it, and how we speak of it; in other words, "nation" exists in our minds, in our texts and interpretations — in *discourses* (of course it exists as a piece of land with borders, but those, too, are a part of this discourse) (Luoma-aho, 2003, 58). In other words, the "American identity" that superheroes are seen as reflecting and projecting is a part of a complex discourse of nationality and identities, and, accordingly, superhero comics represent only one aspect of this complex discourse.

1.2 Setting the Study Question

Starting from the basic premise, outlined above, that American superhero comics engage the complex discourses of American ideology and national identity, the goal of this dissertation is to analyze superhero comics published within the last three decades and to study their relationship to what I will refer to as the *popular geopolitics of American identity*. These "popular geopolitics," the everyday

[6] This perceived "innocence" stems largely from the (misguided) notion that superhero comics are only read by children and adolescents. Yet, the view persists that it is precisely in the field of popular culture and entertainment where a nation's unconscious attempts to resolve tensions and problems manifest themselves, often without detection due to their fantastical and popular guises (Wood, 1986, 77).

geopolitical discourses mediated through popular media (Dittmer, 2010, 14–15), will refer especially to the various narratives, scripts, and characters that superhero comics deploy in order to "narrate" a popular national identity that can be labeled "American," both in terms of cultural memory and shared national space (closely resembling Anderson's imagined communities as societies brought into existence through literature and media representations [1991]). In order to reach a comprehensive approach on the geopolitical dimensions of the superhero, the thesis will be divided into five chapters, each of them dealing with a particular theme: popular geopolitics, masculinity, violence, the state of exception, and 9/11. Together, these chapters form a coherent study of superhero comics and their relationship to American popular geopolitics.

My focus will be on superhero comics published in the United States within the last three decades, beginning with Alan Moore's *Miracleman* (1985) and ending with Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s *Kick-Ass* (2008). These comics have been chosen as the primary material because they tend to feature an ambivalent stance towards the superhero and therefore offer a more fruitful entry point into the analysis on the popular geopolitics of America. The choice of materials in itself poses an interesting (though surprisingly rarely addressed) challenge in terms of popular geopolitics: though the texts have been published in America for an American audience, several of the authors are not American. Of the writers, Alan Moore and Grant Morrison are British while Mark Millar is Scottish, and of the artists, at least David Gibbons, Dave McKean, and Bryan Hitch are British. As the main premise of this dissertation is based on the idea that superhero comics contribute to the popular geopolitics of American identity, how does the fact that several of these creators are not American affect this initial premise?

Often referred to as the "British Invasion" of American superhero comics, several of these creators rose to fame in the 1980s through their edgier and more cynical view of the American superhero mythology, paving way for other British comics creators to the "previously impenetrable American comics industry" (Murray, 2010, 41–43). However, as Murray points out, though these creators came from outside the United States, they had "more than a passing familiarity" with the American comic book tradition, having learned the language of superhero comics as fans and avid readers of the genre (ibid., 35). Alan Moore, for example, has on several occasions mentioned that growing up in the United Kingdom he was

thoroughly immersed in American popular culture from a very young age, learning his "morals more from Superman" than his peers (Pappu, 2000).[7] In this sense, these creators do not enter completely from the "outside," but instead possess an intimate knowledge of the genre that should not be ignored.

While Murray very clearly argues that these British writers aimed at explicitly deconstructing the superhero genre and strongly criticized the cultural, political, and military power that America represented (2010, 44), this perceived counter-hegemonic reading deliberately ignores the way texts like *Watchmen* still contain the very same mythological essences as their original American "ancestors." In other words, though these non-American writers often do display a clearly more critical view of the superhero mythology, we should not underestimate the power of discourse that the notion of "Americanness" entails: as Campbell and Kean note, these kinds of discourses that narrate nationality possess a great power through their dominant position, and they can be difficult to resist because "they anchor the image's meanings in very specific ways of seeing" (2006, 15). In other words, despite their desire to produce counter-hegemonic texts, these British creators may still produce narratives that upon closer analysis function to further support the values the wish to challenge. In addition, as Williams and Lyons (2010, xiii) point out, there are ample reasons to study and analyze American comics in a "transnational context" as a multilayered transaction of creators, texts, and capital that flows across various national borders and contributes directly to the shaping of American popular geopolitics. It is through this transnational context that the inclusion of these non-American authors can be justified, as it also acts to challenge the cultural essentialism and mythic unity by approaching nationality as formed through dialogues between and across cultures instead of being defined by the nation-state alone (Campbell and Kean, 2006, 17).

[7] In a similar vein, de la Iglesia claims that "the influence of U.S. comics has become a fundamental component of the British as well as Canadian culture of comics," claiming to find no traces of Millar's Scottish descent in works such as Civil War (2010, 10).

Beginning with the comics of the so-called “revisionary” superhero trend that began in the early 1980s,[8] I will end with the later post-9/11 superhero comics and their increasingly ambiguous orientation towards American geopolitical ideals. Accordingly, I have selected a limited corpus of superhero comics published in the United States within the last three decades. This means that the so-called Golden and Silver Age[9] superhero comics will not be a part of the corpus, but their significance in defining the genre means that their impact will not be overlooked. As superhero comics comprise a vast array of very different comics, the choice of texts has not been easy, and many superhero narratives that would have been suitable for this dissertation have been left out simply due to restrictions of space and time.

Therefore, while my list of key texts is representative, it is far from exhaustive, and it includes the following works (listed here in chronological order): *Miracleman* (1985–1989) by Alan Moore (writer) and several artists, *Watchmen* (1987) by Alan Moore (writer) and Dave Gibbons (artist), *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) by Grant Morrison (writer) and Dave McKean (artist), *Kingdome Come* (1996) by Mark Waid (writer) and Alex Ross (artist), *The Ultimates* (2002–2004) by Mark Millar (writer) and Bryan Hitch (artist), *Superman: Red Son* (2003) by Mark Millar (writer), Dave Johnson, and Kilian Plunkett (artists), *Truth: Red, White and Black* (2003) by Robert Morales (writer) and Kyle Baker (artist), *Identity Crisis* (2004) by Brad Meltzer (writer), Rags Morales, and Michael Blair (artists), *Civil War* (2007) by Mark Millar (writer) and Steve McNiven (artist), *Captain America: The Death of Captain America* (2007–2008) by Ed Brubaker (writer) and Steve Epting (artist), and *Kick-Ass* (2008) by Mark Millar (writer) and John Romita Jr.

[8] This trend is present in works such as *Watchmen* (1987) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), which have been cited as revolutionary in the way they went “behind the scenes” and showed us what we should have guessed all along: that all those patriotic, costume-clad crime-fighters were really violent and fascist sociopaths with “a kinky underwear fetish” (Shaviro, 1997, 63–64). In these works, the premise of the classic superhero was extrapolated to the point where their secrecy and paranoia about secret identities was ridiculed, and more importantly, and the paradox of “destroying the world in order to save it, or stepping outside the law in order to enforce the law” was brought forth (ibid.). However, as for example Gardner points out, the seeds for these “alternative” comics were already present in the “vulnerable and masochistic” superhero comic of the 1960s (2012, 109).

[9] These “ages” are the subject of continuous debate and revision, but most scholars tend to agree that the Golden Age spans from 1938 to 1954, while the Silver Age is located between 1956 and 1977. However, more recent comics scholarship has argued for the complete dismissal of the “Ages,” seeing them more as a distortive rather than a constructive critical tool created by the comics’ fans. For more on the discussion on the superhero “Ages,” see for example: Lewis, “One for the Ages: Barbara Gordon and the (Il-)Logic of Comic Book Age-Dating” (2003) and Woo, “An Age-Old Problem: Problematics of Comic-Book Historiography” (2008), both published in *The International Journal of Comic Art*.

(artist).[10] The corpus contains an equal amount of materials from both Marvel and DC, the two major publishing houses of superhero comics in America. In addition to these key texts, I will also reference other essential comics when necessary to further illustrate my argument.

Whereas some of these works, especially the older texts such as *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, have been studied rather extensively,[11] some of the more recent comics such as *Identity Crisis*, *Superman: Red Son* or *Kick-Ass* have so far received very little (if any) scholarly attention. Depending on the exact definition, approximately half of the texts chosen for this corpus represent the "revisionary" superhero narrative, identified by Sabin in 1993 (and later redefined by Klock as "revisionist" in 2002) as such due to their desire to deconstruct the genre and its conventions (the ones that most clearly fall into this category are *Miracleman*, *Watchmen*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Arkham Asylum*). It should also be noted that of the corpus, only *Captain America* and *Kick-Ass* are currently marked as still ongoing series. This means that all the other key texts have either ceased publication (*Miracleman* most notoriously) or they have been published as either self-contained works separate from the characters' official continuity (*Watchmen*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Arkham Asylum*, *Kingdom Come*, *Red Son*) or as limited "event comics" that do have serious ramifications in the shared superhero universe (*Truth*, *Identity Crisis*).

The comics above have been listed in a chronological order, yet they will be studied thematically, as case studies to be analyzed throughout the dissertation and with the aim of setting the critical focus on the particular issues within each chapter. To illustrate the dynamic dimensions of this research, it must be stated that though all the key texts have been chosen because they explicitly address one or more of the major themes of this dissertation (popular geopolitics, masculinity, violence, the

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[10] As I use both trade paperbacks (TPBs) and single issues as my source materials, the primary material will be cited in more than one way. The trade paperbacks usually follow a single pagination throughout the story arc and will be cited (publication year, page number), while single issues follow a separate pagination in each issue, and will be cited (#issue number, page number). Additionally, single issues outside the primary material may also be cited by (*issue name* # issue number [month year]). If the text has not been paginated by the publisher, the pages have been counted manually by the author of this dissertation, which may cause some variation to other editions of the same texts. In counting the pages in single issues, the advertisement pages have not been included in the page count.

[11] See, for example, White et al, *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test* (2009); Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (2009); Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2002). In addition, my own previous academic work has dealt with *Watchmen* (see Miettinen, 2011).

state of exception, and 9/11), these themes themselves have partially arisen precisely from a close reading of these comics. In other words, these themes have not been chosen randomly, but they have been formulated through a close reading of the texts. In this sense, stating them at the very beginning is a somewhat artificial, yet necessary step in drawing out the premises of this dissertation.

Though some of the texts very explicitly address these themes and even deliberately aim at deconstructing some of the myths embedded in the superhero and offer clear counter-hegemonic readings of the superhero (*Watchmen*, *Truth: Red, White and Black*, *Kick-Ass*), some of the other texts (*The Ultimates*, *Identity Crisis*, *The Death of Captain America*) present a more traditional vision of the superhero as a national icon. Yet, even these seemingly hegemonic texts can be rendered "visible" (Dawson, 2007, 250) in terms of popular geopolitics through a close reading that shows how these texts construct a particular vision of an idealized national identity through their depiction of superheroic masculinity, vigilante violence, and politics. By drawing attention to how these comics narrate the popular geopolitical narratives and identity of America, it is possible to examine their inherent contradictions and the often problematic nature of "America" these comics portray as the implicit national ideal.

As stated above, in terms of structure this dissertation will be divided into five chapters, each dealing with a particular facet of the superhero. Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the superhero comic in terms of genre and history, and locate and define the superhero narrative in the wider historical and cultural contexts of America, discussing such distinct concepts as the American monomyth, American exceptionalism, and American utopianism. Acting as an introduction to the following chapters, this section will also expand the concept of popular geopolitics and how superhero comics can be analyzed as both creating and contesting the nation and its identity.

Both masculinity and violence become central in analyzing the superhero's popular geopolitics, as masculinity itself arises as a determining factor in defining nationhood and nationality. Chapter 3 will focus on the representation of masculinity in superhero comics, and the first part of this chapter will delve into the much-cited "crisis" in white masculinity in the 20th century (cf. Dyer, 1997; Faludi, 1999), and analyze the way the masculine superhero ideal is deconstructed in *Watchmen* through its neurotic and violent male "heroes." As a counterpart to this

deconstruction, *The Ultimates*, Marvel's *Watchmen* inspired "realist" reimagining of their famous Avengers team-up, will be read as an attempt to "rephallusize" the hegemonic masculinity of the United States destabilized by the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 487–488) through the introduction of a more gritty and violent Captain America. The rest of chapter 3 will center on the various "others" in superhero comics that act to define the white male hero so predominant in mainstream superhero comics: non-white heroes, villains, and women. The relevance of race in superhero comics is seen through the 7-issue series *Truth: Red, White and Black*, a comic that rewrites the origins of Captain America by revealing that the first Captain America was black, inserting a sharp critique that reassesses the superhero trope in terms of race as the comic draws attention to the nation's silenced black history.

Thus, in terms of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), chapter 3 will analyze the way the superhero's masculinity has been defined by the exclusion of other, unwanted masculinities. These questions arise especially in the relationship between Batman and the Joker, as the Joker is often deemed (both within superhero comics and other formats) with qualities that could be labeled "queer," thus implying a rather negative binary division between heterosexual and homosexual characters. The chapter will access this theme through *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, two revisionist superhero texts from the 1980s that actively problematize this dichotomy by rendering visible the sexual motives that characterize the hero–villain relationship. *The Dark Knight Returns* depicts a retired Bruce Wayne once more taking on the role of Batman and reuniting with the Joker as with an old lover, while *Arkham Asylum* explores the psychological relationship between Batman and his rogue gallery of villains in a perverse hide-and-seek through Gotham City's asylum for the criminally insane, suggesting that Batman may in fact be just as insane as those he sees as villains.

Finally, the last part of chapter 3 will examine the role of female characters in superhero comics, mainly characterized through their marginalization, demonization, and victimization, stressing the male superheroes' privileged role in defining the popular geopolitical narratives and scripts of America. The binary opposition which casts men as active and women as passive is still frequently present in superhero comics, and it becomes problematic due to its ability to further

enhance gendered geopolitics used to justify the very binary it stems from (Jukarainen, 2003, 89). I will also address the issue of "Women in Refrigerators," a popular expression that describes the frequent way women in superhero comics tend to become victims of extreme violence for the sake of the plot or the male character's development. This issue will be analyzed in DC's *Identity Crisis*, where once more the death of a female character acts as a catalyst for the male heroes' tragedy as the wife of the Elongated Man is brutally murdered.

From the super-men and their privileged masculinity, chapter 4 will continue by analyzing the representation of vigilante violence in superhero comics.[12] A controversial issue that has followed the genre since the 1950s' implementation of the Comics Code (see ch. 2.1), the superhero's use of extralegal violence is a remains an issue within superhero comics despite its often fantastical guises. Returning to *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the analysis will concentrate on the ways the comic—both acclaimed and reproached for its introduction of a more "realist" violence into the genre—depicts superheroic violence as a form of masculine empowerment while simultaneously presenting vigilante violence as natural and therefore justified.[13] Batman's return to the streets of Gotham becomes a justified purge, and the violence he inflicts is viewed as empowering and purifying, which creates a highly problematic narrative of the justifications of violence. In contrast to Batman, the recent superhero comic *Kick-Ass* offers a satirical rewriting of the superhero genre in its representation of "real-life" teenage superheroes, most notably deconstructing the trope of female superheroes and violence through the extremely violent depiction of the 10-year-old superhero Hit-Girl. The final section of chapter 4 will begin the gradual move towards actual superhero politics by

[12] Through masculinity and violence, especially in the context of national identities, the superhero will be linked to the notion of fascism. While the superhero has often been described as "fascist" with little evidence or definition of the concept, this claim of fascism can be made more valid through a close analysis of masculinity, violence, and national ideals that surface in the superhero comic. Fascism, when understood as a political aesthetic (rather than a political ideology) that stresses nationalism, masculinity, and violence, can become a useful concept in the discussion on superhero comics and their popular geopolitics. The superhero will be frequently linked to fascism throughout this dissertation, particularly through the strong connections fascism has to such central aspects of this dissertation as idealized masculinity, national ideals, and the violence that follows as society is controlled through a partial suspension of civil rights.

[13] According to Luoma-aho, one of the reasons to the popularity of the political body metaphor is the way any threat to the nation is presented as a threat to the nation's health (2003, 71). This way, any foreign or threatening aspects can be labeled as social "illnesses" (ibid.). Examples of this include President George W. Bush referring to Iraq and other terrorist nations as "cancers" of the world that send their corrupted "cells" all over the world. This line of thinking comes close to the rhetoric of organic metaphors, which are used to justify and explain political actions, including vigilante violence (see chapter 4.).

discussing the elements of superheroic violence, authority, and power in the "imaginary tale" *Superman: Red Son*, which relocates Superman's classic origin tale to the Soviet Union and depicts the consequences of this change as the traditional hero of American democracy becomes instead a communist hero dedicated to creating a world-wide utopia. The comic offers a challenging discussion on superheroic power and authority, and acts as a transition towards the next chapter on the state of exception.

Focusing on the superhero's central paradox of legality and power, chapter 5 will examine and analyze the superhero's characteristic contradiction of breaking the law in order to uphold it by introducing *the state of exception* (Agamben, 2005) as a new way of conceptualizing the superhero's paradoxical relationship to the state. Both *Miracleman* and *Kingdom Come* actively engage this issue, *Miracleman* through its titular character who decides to turn Earth into a utopia through his superpowers, *Kingdom Come* through a similar assertion as Superman, Wonder Woman, and the rest of DC's heroic oeuvre decide to take the rule into their own hands. Both do so only after a clear geopolitical crisis which they use to justify their actions as the only solution. In becoming the highest authority, these heroes effectively call into question the relationships between the superhero, law, and state authority, and demonstrate how the superhero, though aiming to restore the law, through his actions continuously undermines it. This contradiction, this "geopolitical taboo" of realizing the unlimited power of the superhero (Paik, 2010, 12) will also be addressed through a discussion on what Jewett and Lawrence (2003) have called the "Captain America complex," the defense of democracy through undemocratic means, which the authors view as emblematic of both the superhero narrative as well as American civil religion and popular geopolitics. The first section of this chapter will discuss these issues of power and authority, whereas the latter part will again examine them through a closer reading of a superhero text. *Civil War*, depicting a conflict between Marvel superheroes over a Superhero Registration Act that demands all superheroes to become government agents, explores the themes of freedom and security through the role of the superhero, explicitly addressing the superhero's geopolitical role as the comic creates a clear allegory to the post-9/11 Unites States and the War on Terror.

The sixth and final chapter will approach the present by analyzing how the events of September 11, 2001 were depicted in superhero comics. The attacks

created a clear geopolitical violation that had to be addressed in the world of the superhero comic as its fictions became reality. Though superhero comics initially attempted to offer their readers a way to respond to the events on 9/11 by promoting narratives of national unity and real-life heroism, this response soon gave way to a more complex geopolitical reading that began to question the nation's position as a victim. The first part of this chapter will concentrate on the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in superhero comics from a variety of comics published soon after the event, and the latter section will explore the later effects of 9/11 in the superhero comic. The chapter will analyze these comics through trauma studies, analyzing both the origin trauma of the hero as well as 9/11 as a cultural trauma of national proportions. Instead of a nation unified against a common enemy, later superhero comics after 9/11—especially *Captain America*—began to show increased moral ambiguities and distrust towards governmental authorities. The death of the national icon in *The Death of Captain America* becomes a marker of a geopolitical crisis within superhero comics, suggesting an era without superheroes.

Even though the analysis is divided into separate sections for the sake of readability, all these issues outlined above (popular geopolitics, masculinity, violence, the state of exception, and 9/11) are closely interconnected, and the argumentation and connections between these issues will be built throughout the dissertation. To summarize, some of the basic questions this dissertation aims to answer are:

- How do superhero comics take part in narrating the popular geopolitical identity of America? In what ways does the superhero embody the American national identity, and how can superhero comics also contest and criticize this national identity?
- How do superhero comics address questions of masculinity in terms of race and gender, and how does the idealized masculinity of superhero comics affect the popular geopolitics of America?
- How is violence justified in superhero comics, and what does it signify in the wider geopolitical context?
- What is the superhero's relationship with the state?
- What is the geopolitical relevance of the superhero in a post-9/11 United States?

These questions addressing the superhero in terms of masculinity, violence, the state of exception, and 9/11 will be approached in the wider context of popular geopolitics, allowing for a multifaceted and comprehensive analysis of the superhero comic from the last three decades. The overall aim is to provide new and current cultural analysis of the way superhero comics not only reflect but in fact actively take part in the ongoing formation and development of popular geopolitics and national identity construction within the United States of America.

1.3 Defining Boundaries

In order to answer the key questions and to analyze the complex discourses at work between superhero comics and the popular geopolitics of America, a few things must be taken into consideration: firstly, the question of intended audiences in regard to comics (or other popular culture narratives) must be noted:

> Although the narration of much American popular culture is undoubtedly centered on an understanding of national identity, it is written in such a way as to reproduce a more generic sense of identity for consumption within the globalized media. (Sharp, 1998, 154)

As Sharp writes, American popular culture narratives are usually produced with a deliberately "generic sense of identity" in order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. The superhero narrative, therefore, can be assumed to produce a wider, "more generic" construction of the American self, and the popular geopolitical scripts embedded in the comic books acquire a sort of universal nature through this generalization.[14]

However (and this is the second point of consideration), the worldview of superhero comics is not to be uncritically equated with the actual, real-world America. Neither should one assume that superhero comics could somehow offer a complete or "truthful" view of the American nation, or that there exists some kind of unified and monolithic "American national identity" that can somehow be pinned down and defined through superhero comics. Aiming at discovering a single

[14] Dittmer, for one, argues that nations are the creation of "geographical imaginations," and that they are the largest of collective identities to which people attach themselves. Accordingly, he cites how Americans tend to identify themselves as "American citizens" but only weakly as "North American" (2010, 74). Overall, this dissertation uses the qualifier "American" in this general sense as referring particularly to North American identities rather than an identity that would encompass such separate geopolitical entities as Latin or South America.

meaning is, as Campbell and Kean point out, "to misrepresent the complexity of the text (or nation) itself" (2006, 12). Instead, this dissertation aims to analyze the particular visions of America and American identity conveyed through superhero comics, which are seen as producing a particular discourse that, in turn, produces a particular reality, a specific form of American identity which despite its restricted nature yet seems to claim itself as universal. Indeed, superhero comics often appear to carry with them the authority of a dominant discourse through their stress on patriotism and American values. In other words, these deliberate "discursive formations" are often presented as "logical, acceptable and 'natural'"—as if they were somehow timeless and universally descriptive of all "normal, good Americans" (Campbell and Kean, 2006, 14).

Even though the superhero comics address the "gap between the *is* and the *ought*, between the way things are and the way we'd like them to be" and thus clearly engage with some of the most fundamental questions of Western philosophy (Saunders, 2011, 4–5), these questions are usually answered from the point of view of the dominant, hegemonic culture (however, the popular can also be counter-hegemonic). Concurrently, the villains usually tend to possess those qualities which the hegemonic culture views as unwanted and "other" to itself. To illustrate the point, all the key texts chosen for this dissertation from the last three decades have been produced by male writers and artists,[15] of which more than 90% are also white. Whereas other popular genres previously much dominated by men, such as the detective genre, have evolved into accounting for both women and non-white authors and audiences, it is interesting to note the dominance of the white male in the case of the superhero comic. So while Iain Thomson, for example, reminds us that it is through villains and enemies that people and nations define who they are not and that it is through the choice of its heroes that the nation usually defines its ideals (2005, 100),[16] it should be remembered that in superhero comics, these ideals largely come from a rather homogenous group of creators in terms of race and gender.

[15] For example, the 2011 DC re-launch saw the amount of female creators drop from 12,5% to only 1,9%. Source: http://www.comicbookgrrrl.com/2011/07/24/women-in-comics-the-new-52-and-the-batgirl-of-san-diego/. [Accessed May 8, 2012].

[16] This is a common narrative solution in popular fiction, discussed for example by Umberto Eco in relation to Ian Fleming's James Bond novels, which in Eco's reading are revealed to have been developed on a series of binaries where the hero is given all the nation's virtues while the villain becomes the racial and sexual deviant, the nation's Other (1966/1982, 245–246).

Furthermore, when discussing comic book creators, the question of authorship raises a host of problems by itself: as Will Eisner notes in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*: “Who is the ‘creator’ of a comic page which was written by one person, penciled by another and inked, lettered (and perhaps colored or backgrounded) by still others??” (1985, 123). The production of superhero comics may vary from a “shop” method, where the comic would pass from hand to hand through various levels from pencils to inks and color, all the while under the watching eye of the editor, to the creator by himself writing and drawing the entire comic (Harvey, 1996, 23). In other words, the production of a superhero comic is a complex process that involves several “creators,” consequently challenging the simple label of “author.” For example, the role of the editor is often forgotten when discussing comic book authors: yet, the editor of a superhero comic is often intimately involved with the various stages of production and with the power to suggest certain plot events and to forbid others. In some cases, as with Stan Lee’s era as Marvel’s main editor, his strategies in the 1960s and 1970s created a distinctive “Marvel style” that marked it as unique from DC as well as other publishers and had a significant impact in the way Marvel’s superheroes were developed (Wright, 2001, 217–218). To partially bypass this complex issue of authorship, this dissertation will mainly refer to the superheroes as characters rather than to the creators responsible for them. This solution can be further justified by the fact that, as modern icons and myths, these characters already operate slightly beyond the control of their creators, and though the creators may aim at writing the characters towards a particular aim, they are always restricted by both editorial control and by the character itself.

In terms of statistics, the male predominance of the authors of superhero comics has a sharp corollary in terms of superhero audiences, as this statistic in the production of superhero comics is strongly mirrored in their consumption. For example, DC’s own statistics in February 2012 revealed that 93% of the readers of their “New 52” superhero comics were male, and a staggering 98% were over 18 (Hudson, 2011). While for decades the genre’s readership consisted mostly of children and adolescents (Bongco, 2000, 1), the audiences of superhero comics have become increasingly mature in the last three decades, as evidenced in both the more “mature” themes (often translated into increased sexuality and violence) of the comics as well as in concretely financial terms (I will return to this issue again in

2.1). If DC's demographics are to be believed, they severely undermine the persisting myth of the "adolescent male" reader (Reynolds, 1992; Wolf-Meyer, 2003) that still haunts superhero scholarship.

Overall, both the production and the inevitable consumption of popular culture create a "cultural economy" where both the production and the audience consumption are essential factors (Dittmer, 2011, 115). The role of comics production (much like actual audience consumption) has received fairly little scholarly attention, but one can safely assume that the ultimate goal for comics publishers is financial profit, which makes serialization a key issue in the production of superhero comics. As for audiences, it is precisely this serialized nature of popular fiction (whether superhero comics or soap operas) that has been seen as a central factor that produces pleasure in the reader as the familiar characters and narratives are consumed repeatedly each week (Ang, 1982, 41), creating what Umberto Eco refers to as a "hunger for redundance" where serialized formula fiction with predictable outcomes offers the reader relaxation and escape (1972/1986, 341).

Even though these issues concerning the authors and audiences of superhero comics need to be stated here, neither the production of superhero comics nor the actual reading responses of these comics are parts of this dissertation. America as a nation was, after all, "invented rather than discovered," as Geoff Ward (2002, 9) points out, through a continuous redefinition via literary representation. Accordingly, the focal point of this dissertation is the *representation* of America in superhero comics and the ways the superhero comic actively engages in the processes of American popular geopolitics through fiction. While in terms of geopolitics the actual real-world politics and policies of America will be present in this dissertation, they will be approached through the superhero narratives in question. For example, the 2007 Marvel *Civil War* storyline will be read in connection to post-9/11 American geopolitics, including the USA PATRIOT Act (2001) and the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. The goal is to analyze the ideological and political dimensions of the texts themselves, located, as film critic Graeme Turner reminds us, within the discourses of the text itself, in the myths, images and conventions employed in them (1999, 173).

These discourses, myths, images, and conventions are central to the superhero's geopolitical relevance, and cannot be approached without addressing ideology. "Ideology" itself, as Slavoj Žižek points out, can be used to refer to

anything from “a contemplative attitude” to a set of beliefs, from the ”indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power” (1994, 3–4). For the purposes of this dissertation, ideology is primarily viewed as a structure of ideas and beliefs that are linked to hegemonic political powers, and which is analyzed as existing in a dynamic relationship with popular culture narratives produced within that hegemony and which is central in defining the cultural and national memory of a society. Deriving from Antonio Gramsci’s writings, the concept of “hegemony” is understood as “organization of consent” in which the values of the dominant class become society’s values without the use of force (Barrett, 1994, 238).

Studying comics is an ideological choice in itself. Long shunned because of its “low” cultural status as mere children’s entertainment, comics today occupy a distinct niche within the humanities in terms of scholarship.[17] Yet, there exists no single theory or method that could be labeled “comics studies,” and the scholarly research on comics tends to emerge from a vast number of different disciplines ranging from Art History and Literature to Philosophy and Cultural Geography—and beyond. Indeed, comics studies can be characterized precisely through its multidisciplinary nature, in this sense sharing a defining characteristic with the tradition of American Studies, where scholarship from a variety of disciplines has sought to “enlarge our understanding of the American population” (Radway et al, 2009, 3). If this dissertation were to be positioned in any particular field or discipline, it would be done on the basis of its interdisciplinary character as both comics studies and American Studies, examining both American culture through comics and comics as a part of American culture.

In his introduction to *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (2012), media scholar Henry Jenkins discusses the importance of a discipline in academic research as a definer of boundaries, yet he immediately criticizes these boundaries which can exclude and hinder research rather than encourage it; instead, Jenkins advocates an approach to comics studies that is “radically undisciplined, taking its tools and vocabulary where it can find them, expansive in its borders to allow the broadest possible range of objects of study” instead of remaining

[17] There are several peer-reviewed academic journals dedicated to comics scholarship, such as the online open access journal *ImageTexT* by the University of Florida, Routledge’s *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, Intellect’s *Studies in Comics,* Berghahn’s *European Comic Art*, and the recently founded *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art*.

"captive" to disciplinary limitations (2012, 6). In a similar vein, Charles Hatfield claims that comics studies cannot have a disciplinary status in the traditional academic sense because "the heterogeneous nature of comics means that, in practice, comics study has to be at the intersection of various disciplines" (2010, unpaginated).

This multidisciplinarity becomes evident when looking at some of the recent academic work done on comics, such as Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester's collection of scholarly essays in *A Comics Studies Reader* (2009) or the above mentioned *Critical Approaches to Comics* (2012) by Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, which both feature scholarly work from a number of different disciplines with the focus on comics. Indeed, Hatfield argues that comics studies, in order to "make up" for its lack of disciplinary specialization, should intentionally embrace a "conceptual interdisciplinarity," where the research questions themselves go "beyond borrowing in a deliberate attempt to carve out a new intellectual 'space'" that is not restricted by disciplinary or affiliate boundaries (2010). By calling for comics studies to go "beyond borrowing," Hatfield's argument also offers a new way of understanding what Samuel R. Delany still perceived as a problem within comics scholarship a decade earlier: that comics studies had "gone on using borrowed vocabulary and talking about definitions for the last sixty years" (1999, 240). By suggesting that interdisciplinarity in itself could become a disciplinary characteristic to define comics studies, Hatfield effectively argues that comics studies is capable of defining its own disciplinary boundaries and carving its critical intellectual "space" beyond the traditional compartmentalization of academic knowledge.[18]

However, this demand for interdisciplinarity in comics research does have its risks, one of them being the danger of veering into theoretical eclecticism, which runs the risk of becoming nothing more than a courteous way of acknowledging the incompatibility of various approaches without actually considering why or how this incompatibility occurs (Hatfield, 2010). In foregrounding the theoretical and methodological positions of this dissertation, the approach adopted is an interdisciplinary one. Consequently, no separate chapter on the "theories and methods of comics studies" will be offered here, as the theories used in this study

[18] In addition to these new disciplinary boundaries, I agree that comics scholarship should focus on the "analytic *description* of what is vital, intriguing, newly noticed, and wondrous about comics" instead of the never-ending search of definitions and methodologies unique to comics that has characterized earlier comics scholarship (Delany, 1999, 245, emphasis original).

are not static but always intermingled with the analysis. The theoretical concepts taken from different disciplines will gain significance as they are presented with the objects of study, and the central arguments will be formulated through theoretically informed close readings of the key texts.

This kind of approach to studies in the humanities has been advocated, among others, by Mieke Bal in her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002), where Bal suggests that interdisciplinary research within the humanities should locate its "methodological basis in *concepts* rather than *methods*" (5). By laying the foundation on concepts, the role of the object and the dynamic interaction between the object and the concept allow for both key texts and concepts to receive new meanings and definitions. Bal criticizes theory for remaining often rigid and exclusionary, whereas concepts have the potential to act more fluidly and dynamically, enabling us to redefine and thus gain new insights and to analyze our object of study through the object's own terms rather than forcing it to comply with a particular theoretical framework (ibid. 7–11). In other words, rather than taking a text and subjecting it to a particular theoretical reading, the concept-based approach takes the object of study as its starting point.

In this way, the concepts themselves, not the different theoretical approaches from which they have been applied, become the counterpart to the object of study (Bal, 2002, 8), ideally excusing some of the inevitable conflicts that would arise from combining theoretical approaches from different schools of thought. Additionally, in this approach it is the object of the study that assumes the central role within the relationship between theory, reader, and object. This perspective, naturally, favors the text-oriented approach of close reading, of analyzing the text itself. Though close reading itself is a method (and thus something we should, according to Bal, approach with caution), it will be "applied" in a way that will closely resemble what cultural critic Slavoj Žižek refers to as a "symptomal reading": a reading that aims at detecting the hidden bias of the text through its ruptures and slips, through what is shown and what is not shown (1994, 10).[19] This method of reading allows for a more interactive reading of the texts, which will become necessary especially when analyzing those superhero comics that seemingly

[19] A similar approach is present in Pierre Macherey's work, where he advocates a literary analysis that takes into account the "determinate absences" of a text and studies what the text does not say, and through these fissures and absences it is possible to locate the conflicts and ruptures that exist at the borders of the text (1966/1978, 154–155).

support the hegemonic values of American society, yet allow for a reading that can be labeled as counterhegemonic.

When discussing a visual medium such as comics, Žižek's what is "*shown and not shown*" must be understood literally as well as metaphorically, going beyond the traditional mimesis of storytelling by literally showing as well as telling. This becomes increasingly relevant when discussing superhero comics, which can offer "an avenue through which one can access the core values of a society, the ideals that give that society an identity, and the 'other' that society fears," as Matthew Costello (2009, 15) phrases it, but those core values tend to come from within the dominant ideology and do not represent the multitude of views that exist within the nation. For example, the past visual exclusion of such groups as blacks, gays and even women[20] is as vital to the analysis of the superhero as the representation of the hero itself (Murray, 2000, 143). Within this context, the not-shown becomes an even more important aspect to be taken into consideration.

It must be acknowledged that interdisciplinarity has always been a central part of a number of disciplines, including cultural studies, American studies, and feminist studies, and that Bal is perhaps putting a name ("travelling concepts") to what has been taking place in academic scholarship for years. Furthermore, Bal's own text is clearly indebted to such work as Edward Said's "Traveling Theory" (1983), where Said discusses the way intellectuals navigate between different theoretical climates when "theory is a response to a specific social state and historical situation" (1983, 237). Indeed, Bal makes a point in noting that concepts are not labels nor in any way fixed or unambiguous; they are abstract notions and ideas that refer to a particular framework, "a set of distinctions" that function as tools for analysis, becoming a "third partner in the otherwise totally unverifiable and symbiotic interaction between critic and object" (2002, 22–23).[21] However, these concepts arise from a particular social and historical situation, which has to be

[20] The official DC Editorial Policy from the 1950s actually stated that the "inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance" (qtd. in Madrid, 2009, 77).

[21] A concept such as *power*, for example, can contain numerous meanings depending on the discipline: from physics and mathematics to social sciences, the concept of "power" carries with it multiple connotations. Logically, then, the superhero and his super*powers*, too, can possess several meanings, from the actual physical (super)power of the superhero to the sovereign power the hero possesses as someone existing above the power of the state. All these different aspects of power may be relevant to the analysis of the superhero, but no single method or approach will be able to cover them.

acknowledged before the concept can in any way be re-appropriated to other contexts.

Apart from arising from particular socio-historical contexts, concepts run the risk of becoming meaningless when used as nothing more than labels, and the "unreflective" deployment of concepts will ultimately result in poor use of the concept as little more than jargon (Bal, 2002, 23). The concept and the object of study must have an interactive relationship, and this is why I propose to modify Bal's initial approach for this dissertation by a way of moving from *concepts* to *conceptualization* and *contextualization*. Through conceptualization and contextualization, the analysis takes into further consideration the interaction between the concept and the object of study, as the object is analyzed as a way of conceptualizing and contextualizing particular ideas or themes—in other words, concepts. Within this study, some of the key concepts are *geopolitics* (and its derivatives, such as geopolitical identity and popular geopolitics), *masculinity*, *violence*, *power*, and *the state of exception*. Each of these concepts will be conceptualized in this dissertation within the context they appear, taking into account their flexible and dynamic nature.

The aim is not to use these concepts as mere labels, but to analyze the object of this study (superhero comics) through them, using them in the most meaningful way possible. The concept of popular *geopolitics* within the sphere of superhero comics will require a re-contextualization of geopolitics in the visual form of comics, which actively create national icons through their visual representation of national heroes, most markedly in the form of Captain America, whose red, white, and blue outfit literally figures the American flag. *Masculinity* will be contextualized through the gendered identity politics of superhero comics, and analyzed through some of the representations of central binary oppositions they hold. The concept of *violence* must be contextualized closely in connection to superheroic masculinity and the identity politics of superhero comics, and by association, American geopolitical identity. The *state of exception*, borrowed from political philosophy, will enable the new analysis of the complex equation of superhero politics and ideology.

Finally, I will briefly address the issue of visual analysis. As a medium consisting of both textual and visual information, comics possess a unique intermedial quality, and the intermedial relationship between the two levels is still a

topic of active debate within comics scholarship. For example, Marie-Laure Ryan writes in the introduction to *Narrative Across Media. The Languages of Storytelling* (2004, 10–15) how written or spoken language has traditionally been seen as the primary language of storytelling, whereas visual images have been credited with very little narrative capacity—yet, in the context of comics studies, this claim becomes highly debatable. According to Ryan, though language is usually claimed (with some reserve) as the "privileged medium" of storytelling due to its ability to narrate logical structures, it cannot be claimed that media based on other sensations, such as visual narratives, cannot contribute significantly to narrative meaning (2004, 11–12). Indeed, as Ryan writes, visual narratives are literally mimetic narratives in the way they actively "show" the narrative as opposed to diegetic "telling" of a story (although a visual narrative can always contain a diegetic level through a narrator) (Ryan, 2004, 13).

The role and relevance of the visuality of superhero comics cannot be overlooked, yet it must be stated that the study of the visual elements of comics, such as panel division or other strictly visual elements, will not be an integral part of this dissertation. This is largely due to the fact that instead of an aesthetic history, this study is primarily interested in comics as cultural representation rather than an art form. In this regard, this study will stress the visual aspects of the superhero comic only in reference to the iconic relevance of the superhero in terms of popular geopolitics. The iconic potency[22] of the superhero is stressed in terms of geopolitics as superheroes can embody the national ideal in concrete, visual terms as comics as a visual medium "engage this act of [imagining nations], in turn facilitating the mental construction of the nation and national identity" (Edwardson, 2003, 185). In the next chapter, I will discuss the superhero comic, its history and definitions, and contextualize it in terms of American cultural history and popular geopolitics.

[22] Icons, in Peircean semiotics, are usually formed not just via external similarities and relationships, but also through metaphorical connections that are based on conventions (Mikkonen, 2005, 30). Accordingly, "icon" can be "any image used to represent a person, thing or idea" which always demands the reader's "participation to make them work" (McCloud, 1993, 27, 59). Importantly, this reader participation is what separates "iconic" from "visual": as Bal (2002, 47-49) notes, these two terms are often presented as equals and the Peircean concept of "icon" is often misunderstood as synonymous to "visual". Instead, "icon" has to be conceived by the reader, who then "produces *fiction*" by subjectivizing and culturally framing the object as iconically signified (ibid.).

2. Superhero Comics and Popular Geopolitics: Defining Nations, Defining Identities

> [I]f interpretation in terms of expressive causality of allegorical master narratives remains a constant temptation, this is because such master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them; such allegorical narrative signifieds are a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality.
> (Jameson: *The Political Unconscious*, 1981/2002, 19)

Captain America #1, of Marvel's fourth volume of the title, appeared in June, 2002, a little less than a year after September 11, 2001. The first issue of Captain America comics to appear after the event, it very pronouncedly took a stand against the attacks, depicting Steve Rogers volunteering at Ground Zero and later, dressed up as Captain America, hunting down the terrorist leader "Al-Tariq" in a very clear attempt at a "reterritorialization of American identity" (Dittmer, 2005, 637). Promoting a message of national unity through a strong rhetoric both textually and visually (captions "We share -- We are -- The American dream" juxtaposed with Captain America standing tall surrounded by American flags leaves very little room for other interpretations [*Captain America* #1, 24]), the issue clearly promoted a vision of a nation united under threat. Though the issue was just one of many within the field of comics to address the trauma of 9/11, it also testifies clearly to the way superhero comic books are still deployed to influence popular geopolitical imaginations in the 21st century.

However, superhero comics' relevance is not restricted to the 21st century, despite the example given above. The character of the superhero has been present in the popular geopolitical discourses of America since his inception, addressing the nation's hopes and fears as a "kind of iconic shorthand"—a primary example of the way the "zealous mainstream of political sentiment" is carried out in popular culture (Jewett and Lawrence, 2003, 6). In this way, superhero comics become an important

part in the culture’s “master narratives,” as Jameson above calls them. Echoing a very similar idea, Kaja Silverman refers to these master narratives as the “dominant fiction” of a nation:

> [Dominant fiction is] the images and stories through which a society figures consensus; images and stories which cinema, fiction, popular culture, and other forms of mass representation presumably both draw upon and help to shape. (Silverman, 1992, 30)

Dominant fiction is thus traditionally seen as creating and sustaining national identities, yet it may also contain contesting views which cannot always be assimilated into the hegemonic view of heroism and masculinity. Whether called “dominant fiction” or “master narratives,” both terms clearly fall under the category popular geopolitical narratives.

In the following subchapters, I will discuss both superhero comics and the phenomenon of popular geopolitics and analyze the historical and cultural context of American geopolitics and the rise of the American hero, especially the superhero. First, I will briefly trace the history of the superhero comic in 2.1, defining the superhero and the genre’s central conventions. In 2.2, I will approach the contextual framework of popular geopolitics, tying it together with the superhero’s mythical origins in America’s social and cultural history by analyzing the superhero’s connections to the tradition of the American monomyth and the idea of American utopianism.

2.1 Origin of a Species: A Short History of Superhero Comics

> *Superhero*. A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. (Coogan, 2009, 77)

The comic book superhero was born with the publication of *Action Comics* #1, which introduced Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman to the American public in June, 1938. The arrival of the comic book superhero coincided with the end of the

Great Depression in the United States, at a time, as Richard Reynolds notes, when millions of Americans had had "their faith in the notion of uninterrupted economic progress seriously undermined" (1992, 18). America was in an economic turmoil in the 1930s, and to escape this, comics had begun to offer readers transport elsewhere through the adventures of such heroes as Tarzan, The Phantom, and Buck Rogers (Savage, 1990, 4). Both Peter Coogan (2006) and Danny Fingeroth (2007) have analyzed the many influences that led to the creation of the Man of Steel: Fingeroth has called it a "cultural stew" of biblical tales, myths, pulp magazines, science fiction comics, adventure novels, and radio dramas (2007, 41), whereas Coogan traces the roots of the genre even further back, to epic heroes like Hercules and Gilgamesh, arguing that the origins and prototypes of the superhero as well as their inspiration can be located in ancient epics and myths, partially as a part of a collective cultural unconsciousness (2006, 116–125). In this chapter, I will briefly outline the central definition for the superhero and will then trace the genre's development from the late 1930s to the 1990s.[23] As the later chapters will deal with some of the basic premises of the superhero, this chapter provides an overall description of the genre that will then be examined further in the subsequent chapters.

Peter Coogan (2009, 77) defines the superhero as having the following attributes: a mission, powers, an identity, and a costume. Not all the attributes have to be present for a character to be a superhero: Batman is a superhero without any actual superpowers, the Fantastic Four do not have secret identities (their civilian names are public knowledge), and the Hulk can hardly be characterized as a hero with a mission, but all of these characters are still categorized as superheroes. Accordingly, Coogan adds to his list of attributes a category he calls "generic distinction": if one or more of the central attributes are missing, the generic conventions, such as the emergence of a supervillain, can be used to deduce the genre.[24] Of the central defining attributes, Coogan identifies the mission as the most

[23] For more extensive accounts on the birth and later development of the superhero genre, see for example: Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992); Wright, *Comic Book Nation* (2001); Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch* (2004); Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006); Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed? Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda During World War II* (2011).

[24] A similar "save" has been offered by Jason Dittmer, who argues that genres tend to "blur into one another more than they stand in opposition," and that the superhero genre, for example, is primarily characterized "by the type of *narrative* in which [the superheroes] exist" rather than by costumes and superpowers (2011, 118, italics in original).

crucial aspect, deeming it as essential for any hero in any genre, not just the superhero (2009, 77). Famously, the superhero's mission, cited by Coogan as "pro-social and selfless" (ibid.), has focused on upholding the status quo, not changing it, which has meant that the narrative formula of the genre tends to follow an action/reaction-pattern: the villain attempts to overthrow the current state of affairs only to have the hero intervene and restore order. This pattern has been satirized especially during the last three decades, but it remains a standard within superhero stories.

Superpowers, another central attribute, are one of the most identifiable elements of the genre, separating the superhero from the pulp detectives and science fiction heroes that preceded him[25] (Coogan, 2009, 78). Though not mandatory (as Batman demonstrates), superpowers are the most common element in superhero comics. These superpowers are often read as a sign of moral superiority that conflicts with state authority, and this conflict has allowed for an endless flood of stories featuring the hero "wrestling with his conscience over which order should be followed"—the law or his own morals (Reynolds, 1992, 15). When early superhero stories still saw Batman as Commissioner Gordon's number one ally in the fight against crime, the late 20th-century superhero comic re-envisioned him as a vigilante condemned by the state, as, for example, Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* demonstrates. Around the same time, Captain America had to face government officials and was ordered to work only for the government. Faced with the conflicting ideas of government control and heroic ideals, Steve Rogers realizes he cannot compromise his values and resigns rather than becomes a government-dictated hero.[26]

Apart from the mission and powers, the two remaining elements, the secret identity and the costume, combine in forming the third essential element of the genre. Both were borrowed partially from the 1930s' popular pulp characters, like the Shadow and Doc Savage, who had clearly separate hero and civilian identities. However, as Coogan notes, what separates the superhero and the pulp hero is the

[25] For example, as Curtis C. Smith notes, a clear predecessor of the superhero can be found in the work of science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon, whose book *Odd John* (1935) precedes Superman by a few years and is, according to Smith, "a standard for superman stories" in its utopian and markedly Nietzschean explorations into superhumanity (1976, 54). Murray, on the other hand, cites Philip Wylie's *The Gladiator* (1933) as the inspiration for Superman, whose early versions still pitted him as a villain rather than a hero (2011, 4).

[26] See *Captain America* #332 (Aug 1987).

iconic quality of the costume that in superhero comics came to “emblematize the character’s identity” (2009, 79). The costume of the superhero functioned not just to hide the hero’s civilian persona, but it also literally created the hero’s identity: the colors of the costume gained iconic resonance and their chest emblems (or “chevrons,” as Coogan calls them) became symbols that were instantly recognizable as “the stuff of which gods are made” (McCloud, 1993, 188), ready for lunchboxes and t-shirts. Batman’s bat-inspired costume, with its dark grays and blues, embodied his character biography, whereas Superman’s very codename referred to a “super man who represents the best humanity can hope to achieve” (Coogan, 2009, 79). The tradition of depicting superheroes in what looked like underwear over tights has made the genre the butt of innumerable jokes for 70 years, yet the visual trope actually has a completely logical origin in the circus strongmen of the 1930s. These men wore capes, boots and skintight spandex to signify “extra-masculine strength and endurance” in an emphasis of their performative and freak-show-esque “carnival flair,” a visual style recognizable in its era (Morrison, 2011, 14). This visual tradition was carried over into early superhero comics, signaling the strongman-like quality of the emerging Superman, who was not as omnipotent then as he is today (for example, he could not fly, but merely “leap 1/8th of a mile” (*Action Comics* #1, 3).

The costume is essential to the dual identity of the superhero. As the superhero has to disguise his everyday persona in order to protect his identity as a masked avenger, the costume and the dual identity have become almost inseparable. The secret identity, as Robert Inchausti has argued, makes the hero a liminal being who is unable to resolve his identity, forced to live “in transit” between the two worlds he inhabits (1983, 69–71). Interestingly, Philip Sandifer argues that of the dual identity of the superhero, it is the superhero identity, not the civilian one, that should be viewed as the “real” identity (2008, 182). Basing his arguments on trauma studies, he claims that the hero identity ultimately prevails over the civilian one: “Because the organizing pathology of the superhero comic is that of a post-traumatic identity, we are obliged to read any claim to a ‘prior’ identity as a construct of that post-traumatic identity” (Sandifer, 2008, 182). Accordingly, the civilian identity of the superhero should be viewed as a construct created to hide the superhero identity, as an extension to the main identity of the superhero. The superhero mask and costume are the “true” face of the hero; as Lizabeth Mason

argues, the superhero's mask "does not *hide* his identity; instead it *reveals* who [he] *really* is" (2010, 49, emphasis original). Accordingly, the superhero's adventures begin after his "origin," which motivates his mission and gives him his sense of identity. This reading is further supported by the numerous examples where the hero identity is depicted as empowering and "real" set in opposition to the emasculated and numb life of the everyday. (For more, see Ch. 3.).

This dual nature is one of the central reasons behind the superhero's inability to integrate into the community, and always deems him as some kind of an outsider. In order to integrate into society, the superhero must renounce his hero persona—a story that always ends with the hero forced out of his "retirement" by a threat no-one else can manage. Additionally, as Jules Feiffer mused as early as 1965, one of the key elements in the success of the superhero comic itself has been attributed to the issue of identity, as the hero's secret identity as a "loser" allowed the reader to identify with the hero (1965/2003, 12–13). "Clark Kent" was the perfect device for enabling reader identification, an insecure, shy man pining away for Lois Lane, while at the same time allowing for a power fantasy in which one could possess immense superpowers. Whereas Feiffer speaks of identity and identification on a more personal level, Costello has expanded this argument by claiming that the "mechanism of the dual identity" is itself one of core elements that make superhero comics a highly suitable vehicle for the analysis of national identity: dual identity is central in the "development of the characters, rendering the secret identity an element articulating changing visions of political identity" (2009, 15–20). For example, the way the heroes' origin stories are handled by different writers, and especially any "retcons," retroactive continuities where writers make changes within the characters history in order to accommodate the present, often reflect a cultural or social change (ibid.).[27] This suggests that the origin story and its adaptation (like the relocation of Iron Man's 1960s' Vietnam War origins to the ongoing war in Afghanistan in the 2008 blockbuster movie *Iron Man*) into new contexts could be seen as a discursive "tool" to geopolitical analysis, as the rewriting of the origin in a

[27] A good example is the controversial 2003 storyline *Truth: Red, White and Black*, which retold the origins of Captain America by revealing that the first Captain America had been a black man, adding a new emphasis to the iconic character that questioned the portrayal of America as virtuous and acknowledged the nation's past crimes against the black population. For a detailed reading of *Truth*, see ch. 3.2.

different geopolitical context can be read as a "symptom" of a similar desire within the nation.

The superhero defined, we can now move on to the genre's development in the United States. Though comic books had been sold for years in America (in the form of reprinted newspaper strips collected in comic book formats [Gardner, 2012, 64]), the arrival of the first superhero comic marked a noticeable shift in the medium. Superheroes and comic books turned out to be a perfect match: the symbiosis of the medium and the character created a unique form of popular entertainment that accessed America's cultural and national myths and transformed them into easily accessible stories that functioned to reinforce these myths. This reinforcement is visible in the way the character of the superhero offered the audience a way to identify with the hero through a secret identity, as mentioned above. To mark this identity as clearly American, the heroes' civilian names are poignantly common: from Steve Rogers (Captain America) and Bruce Wayne (Batman) to Superman's invented persona of Clark Kent, the everyday names of these heroes stressed their geopolitical relevance as distinctively (yet very generally) American. Especially in the character of Steve Rogers, who was neither a billionaire nor an alien from a distant planet, the superhero as the identifiable everyman is clearly present. In the aftermath of an economic crisis, Steve Rogers with his secret—yet clearly American—identity gave hope that through dedication and hard work, anyone could still succeed and be a hero, even though others failed to notice it.

Another significant factor in the success of the superhero comic in the late 1930s and early 1940s was the advent of the Second World War, which sealed the superhero's role as the quintessential American patriot. The superhero, Captain America more than others, was strongly associated with the virtue of U.S. patriotism, and many superheroes fought for America, whether in the front lines like Captain America or at the home front like Superman.[28] From his looks to his actions, Captain America literally *was* America in many ways, offering an excellent example of the way the popular geopolitical narratives and scripts of America have

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[28] Clark Kent, in his enthusiasm, accidentally read the eye charts of the room next door with his x-ray-vision, and received an 4-F classification—an ingenious plot twist to prevent Superman from fighting the war which he could end on his own, simultaneously diminishing the actual task faced by the nation's fighting forces. (Wright, 2001, 43)

been produced in order to reach a particular effect that, during WWII, was clearly propagandist in nature (cf. Murray, 2011).

Of course, Captain America was not the only patriotic superhero to dress up in the flag. As Bradford W. Wright lists, characters like "Uncle Sam," "The Star-Spangled Kid," and even "Miss America" could be found in the newsstands in the 1940s, championing "loosely defined Americanism synonymous with lofty ideals like democracy, liberty, and freedom from oppression" (2001, 42). However, none of the other patriotic heroes had an introduction like Captain America's: the cover of the first issue of *Captain America* (Mar 1941)[29] showed Captain America punching Hitler in the jaw while being shot at by Nazis (See fig. 1.).[30] The background featured images of U.S. munitions factories as targets, which made the move to attack Hitler a defensive one. As Nicholas Yanes writes, this cover is not simply filled with patriotic imagery, but also clearly identifies the Nazis as the enemy and the United States as a target that could not afford to wait to be attacked (2009, 57). This type of visual rhetoric is crucial in analyzing the way geopolitical scripts are created and maintained not just through the narratives, but also through the visual representation of the heroes.

As the superhero's early development with real-world politics from New Deal politics to WWII propaganda demonstrates, the superhero has always had a significant function in actively producing and/or reinforcing certain geopolitical narratives and scripts that are particularly American or relate to a particular political situation. As Wright notes, the demands of WWII actually caused a substantial shift in American geopolitics (2001, 35). Until then, the nation was still strongly influenced by the Monroe Doctrine of the 19th century, which promoted U.S. isolationism. Now, WWII required "a dramatic reorientation in American culture" as the United States became a "repository of virtue and morality charged with extending justice and freedom to the oppressed in Europe and Asia," and this message was adopted particularly in superhero comics advocating American unity and the joint war effort (Wright, 2001, 35).

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[29] Though the issue is cover-dated March 1941, it was already sold in newsstands in December, 1940—a full year before Pearl Harbor.

[30] In fact, some critics argue that Captain America was strongly influenced by the patriotic superhero the Shield, who first appeared in the newsstands in January, 1940 (over a year before Captain America) with a star-spangled outfit and a shield, battling robots. The difference in the characters' success has been attributed to their introductions to the public, as Captain America's introductory cover resonated much more strongly with the nation than the Shield's (Yanes, 2009, 57).

Fig. 1. *Captain America* #1 (Mar 1941). © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

Captain America's origin story stressed this national unity, as it revealed how the sickly and frail yet brave draft reject, Steve Rogers, was injected with a Super-Soldier serum that transformed him into "one of America's saviors" (*Captain America* #1, 4). However, a Nazi spy assassinated the scientist and destroyed the serum, leaving Rogers the only super-soldier in the United States. However, even though Steve Rogers, as Captain America, stressed the patriotic virtue of America, the views of these patriotic heroes were far from unanimously held in the United States. For example, Captain America's adventures battling the Nazis elicited angry reactions from "isolationists and Nazi sympathizers," and resulted in actual death threats aimed at the comic's creators (Wright, 2001, 36). The fact that the majority of the writers and artists were of Jewish descent functions in part to explain the strong support expressed by the superheroes for entering the war against Nazi Germany, and comics creators like Joe Simon and Jack Kirby may have quite consciously created characters like Captain America in order to "do their bit for their country" (Murray, 2011, 37) and to express their "solidarity with an idealized America, pluralistic and undivided" (Devarenne, 2008, 48).

These early superhero comics, from 1938 to the early 1950s, represent what has been generally identified as the "Golden Age" of superhero comics, which ultimately ended with the 1954 Congressional Hearings on Juvenile Delinquency and Comics (Reynolds, 1992, 8). What many comics critics view as the "crucial blow" to Golden Age superhero comics was delivered by Dr. Fredric Wertham, whose book *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) explicitly blamed increased juvenile delinquency on comic books, famously interpreting the relationship between Batman and Robin as a gay fantasy and Wonder Woman as a deviant, bondage-loving lesbian. This rise of the anti-comics movement can be read as a side effect of the arrival of McCarthyism and the increased desire for censorship that penetrated American culture at the time (Arffman, 2004, 50–52). It can also be linked, as Amy Kiste Nyberg suggests, to the considerable rise of teenagers and teen culture in postwar America, which distressed the country's older generations (1998, 19).[31]

[31] For a more detailed analysis of the 1950s and the cultural position of comics, see for example: Nyberg, *The Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (1998); Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (2004); Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America* (2008).

The pressure from the authorities after these hearings led to the creation of the Comics Magazine Association of America Inc. This association soon produced its own internal censorship tool, The Comics Code Authority, in October, 1954. The Code immediately proceeded to control the entire industry, insisting, among other things, on good always triumphing over evil, on the realistic portrayal of female bodies, and on never portraying crime in a positive manner.[32] No comic book without the Code's stamp of approval made its way to the newsstands, which refused to put unapproved comics on sale. The effects of the Code have been viewed by many critics, such as Mila Bongco, as "fatal to the medium's growth and development" and causing a generic and thematic stagnation of the superhero genre (2000, 4).

However, the Code's effects on the genre may not have been as drastic as Bongco claims them to have been: for example, Joseph Witek argues that the Code's actual effects on the comics were "business as usual" for the majority of comic book producers:

> The Code officially ruled out overtly mature treatments of adult themes in American comic books, but few such books existed anyway, and to blame only the Comics Code Authority for the lack of serious literature in comics form is to badly underestimate the puerility of the comic book publishers and of the mainstream comic audience. (Witek, 1989, 54)

According to Witek, then, we should not overestimate the literary value of the comic book of the 1950s, but remember the intended audience of the comic books, which still was, at the time, largely formed of children and adolescents. Furthermore, as Duncan and Smith remind us, this development in comic book history coincided with the rise of television as the dominant medium in the United States, which further serves to explain the dwindling sales of comics in the 1950s (2009, 40). Italian comics critic Marco Pellitteri also calls for the critical consideration of both content and audience in the criticism of comic books: in the 1950s, the expected audience of superhero comics was still very much adolescent and male, and the narratives by and large were produced with this particular audience in mind (2010). As the audiences grew more diverse in the following decades, so did the themes and topics of the comics and their visual representation. This development began in the 1960s and 1970s both within the rising U.S. underground comics movement and in some of Marvel's Silver Age comics, which began to tackle domestic political

[32] The complete list of the 1954 Code can be found at: www.comicartville.com/comicscode.htm.

issues such as college protests, discrimination, and drug abuse as the code's power gradually began to fade.[33]

The arrival of the so-called "Silver Age" of superhero comics coincides with the aftermath of the 1954 hearings and DC's revival of the Golden Age character Flash in the form of Barry Allen in 1956 (Reynolds, 1992, 9). The era came into full bloom in the 1960s with the new heroes of Marvel Comics under the editorial leadership of Stan Lee, who would collaborate with a number of artists, particularly Jack Kirby, to produce such iconic heroes as the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, and Spider-Man. More realistic than their Golden Age predecessors, these characters no longer showed the absolute moral certainties, characteristic of the war-era Superman and Batman, but instead had "believable human qualities and failings" (Wright, 2001, 207). Consider Spider-Man, Peter Parker: a nerdy teenager struggling to pay his rent, unpopular, and shunned by his peers—a vast shift from the playboy lifestyle of Bruce Wayne or the clearly adult world of Clark Kent. Spider-Man was not unanimously applauded as a hero, and he was accused by some (most notably his boss, the Daily Bugle editor Jonah Jameson) of being a villain. Spider-Man himself often doubted his hero status and contemplated resigning. "With great power there must also come -- great responsibility!" (*Amazing Fantasy* #15, 11) exclaimed the last panel of the first Spider-Man adventure, underlining the burden of heroism that previously had been mostly absent from the pages of superhero comics. Captain America, too, was revived in 1964—for a third time[34]—when he was discovered frozen in an iceberg in the North Atlantic after having crash landed there during the war. After spending decades in suspended animation, he joined the Marvel superhero team the Avengers; it is this incarnation of Captain America that is ongoing today. After almost twenty years on ice, Steve Rogers becomes a man out of time, dislocated and unable to quite fit in the American 1960s. As Steve

[33] The Comics Code, though diminishing in power throughout the later part of the 20th century, was not officially discarded by either Marvel or DC until the 21st century: Marvel publicly renounced the Code in 2001 and DC as recently as January, 2011. (*The Beat. The News Blog for Comics Culture*). See: http://www.comicsbeat.com/2011/01/20/dc-ditches-comics-code-for-video-game-like-rating-system/. [Accessed 5 Feb, 2012].

[34] The series was shortly revived in the mid-1950s under the moniker *Captain America ... Commie Smasher!* with a clear aim of feeding on the rising Cold War attitudes. However, the series failed to attract an audience, probably due to the fact that, as Wright notes, the "series offered no further discussion of Cold War issues beyond the message that communists were evil, overweight, and poor dressers" (2001, 123), and the title was cancelled after only three issues. The third revival ultimately revealed that after Steve Rogers's disappearance during WWII, several other people took on the title for a while; one of them was the 1950s' racist and commie-hating Captain America, clearing the "real" Captain America of all accusations of commie-bashing (DuBose, 2007, 926).

himself notes in *Captain America* #109 (Jan 1969): “I have to live in a world that should have **passed** me by! Too **young** for the generation which should have been **mine** -- and yet too **old** for the role in which **fate** has cast me!” (1969, 7). His perceived uneasiness arises from the inability to fit into the new society of the 1960s’ America and the gradual dismantling of the “consensus identity” of the previous decades (see below).

Captain America’s gradual unease with the world he is living is matched with a similar trend in other Silver Age superhero comics. Whereas in the Golden Age the moral certainties of superheroes tended to be absolute, the Silver Age is characterized by a more conflicted moral view: for example, the divide between the hero and villain began to show its first cracks as what Costello (2009, 2) refers to as American “consensus identity” began to slowly dissolve, and this manifested itself early on in characters like Fantastic Four’s the Thing or Bruce Banner’s transformation into the green and menacing Hulk. These characters were, despite their grotesque looks, marketed as superheroes, challenging the established notion of physical beauty and moral virtue as inseparable.[35] This development has been primarily attributed to Marvel editor Stan Lee, who blended the superhero comic with the serial nature of the soap opera while simultaneously drawing on the themes of crime, romance, and horror (Wright, 2001, 212-213; Murray, 2011, 244).

Previously, the division between heroes and villains had been expressed primarily in the visual representations where the evil’s ugliness was displayed in stark contrast to the physical attractiveness of the superheroes, implying that the villain’s values and worldview are “not only ideologically repulsive but morally bankrupt” (Costello 2009, 63–5).[36] The WWII era’s xenophobic representations of monocle-wearing gestapo agents or fanged and long-nailed Asians are perhaps the most obvious examples of this type of equalization of physical features and moral corruption, but the trope can still be found, albeit less pronounced, in a variety of popular culture texts today. In the 1960s, as Marvel created its new, physically grotesque heroes, this division of good and evil in purely physical representations gradually began to shatter. The crumbling of this division between ugly villains and

[35] The origins of this logic can be traced to Johann Kaspar Lavater’s *Essai sur la Physiognomy* (Essays on Physiognomy, 1781), which claimed that people’s character can be deduced form their appearance; hence beauty equals virtue, whilst ugliness denotes the lack of it (Mosse, 1996, 25).
[36] Of course, this equation did not include evil women (such as Batman’s seducing arch-villainess, Catwoman), whose evil nature stemmed primarily from their corrupted femininity and threatening sexuality.

handsome heroes in the early 1960s' Marvel comics has been seen as critiquing the previously mentioned consensus identity, the "unquestioning portrayal of American virtue" that had been present even within superhero comics (Costello, 2009, 63).

The 1960s witnessed the beginning of a slow deterioration of the American consensus identity conceived after the war: the rise of the Hippie movement and "flower power," the anti-war protests, the feminist movement, and the Civil Rights movement (to name just a few) all played a significant role in the changing attitudes of 1960s' America. Though some of these events and actual movements seeped into mainstream superhero comics as for example Spider-Man Peter Parker was thrown into the middle of student protests (*The Amazing Spider-Man* #68, Jan 1969), it should be remembered that what is *not* depicted is often as crucial as that which is, as the denials and silences within the text can sometimes reveal more than the stated (Macherey, 1966/1978, 150).[37] A good example of this is the way the Vietnam War was almost completely omitted from the pages of *Captain America*.[38] Captain America made only a few appearances in Vietnam, and none of them were presented in a particularly positive light.[39]

As Coogan has noted, it is almost surprising how the genre that had previously participated in actively creating consensus and morality in WWII (as the cover of *Captain America* #1 shows) was now made to question America's role as a superpower in the context of Vietnam (2006, 208), if it was portrayed at all. Indeed, whereas WWII was a touchstone of Captain America stories, Vietnam is markedly absent throughout, despite readers' letters pleading both for the Cap to take a more active stand in the war and for him to stay out of it (Wright, 2001, 244). As Dijkink notes, the Vietnam War was in many ways the most significant of America's wars (instead of the Civil War, which still had over ten times as many casualties) because it "provoked an internal struggle about American identity and purpose" (1996, 61–62).

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[37] These silences could also be read through what semiotician Jurij Lotman referred to as the "minus device," the deliberate omission of an element the reader expects which bestows significance upon this absence (1971/1977, 51). While for Lotman this absence was mainly detectable through an omission of a rhyme or a change in rhythm, it is possible to apply this logic on a wider level on narrative themes and tropes.

[38] Other Marvel comics did engage more with Vietnam: Iron Man's origins were literally located into the war, making the character much more political in this respect. However, it is the role of Captain America, as the avatar of America, and his absence from Vietnam, that marks him different from the other comics of the era.

[39] Interestingly, the Korean War in the 1950s was also completely bypassed by superhero comics at the time, but this fact has received very little attention from scholars.

According to Shawn Gillen, Captain America would have been “exactly the type of hero [U.S.] national leaders called for and needed to get America behind Vietnam” (2009, 105). Despite his fictional status, Captain America was a character who had been depicted fighting an actual war in the 1940s, and many readers and creators recognized the implicit expectations in the character’s nature (Wright, 2001, 244). However, instead of inserting Vietnam into Captain America’s storylines, the character was depicted battling old WWII foes, such as the Red Skull, with no mention of the ongoing war in Vietnam. In fact, Dijkink (1996, 67) notes how after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam in 1973, the entire war was almost completely excluded, not just from the pages of superhero comics, but also from public discussions as well as TV documentaries. In order to cope with the national trauma, the nation turned to fiction with various novels and films dealing with the traumatic experiences of the veterans. Importantly, the war was not represented as a national project, but instead, the focal point in these fictions was on the individual level, stressing the special powers of survival acquired through the experiences in Vietnam[40] (Dijkink, 1996, 67). In these Vietnam fictions Dijkink identifies the witnessing of the American myth as it shatters, but simultaneously they contain its “reconstitution”: America’s confrontation with itself, facing its mistakes—and, according to Dijkink, ending up in distant worlds and fantasy (as exemplified by the popularity of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* trilogy) (ibid.). Captain America’s relevance as a symbol of national identity ultimately meant that the creators could not express any polarized views on the issue of the Vietnam War—instead, he battled the internal problems of the nation, waging war against racism, poverty, pollution, and corruption within the United States. As Costello claims:

> As the avatar of an American creed, Captain America’s dilemma implies that emphasizing the public side of the creed undermines the private, [or that] focusing on external affairs leads to the neglect of the internal affairs that are necessary to sustain national identity. (2009, 98)

In the wake of the internal problems of the United States in the 1970s, Captain America was forced to face the fact that the principles of freedom and democracy he claimed to protect now entailed the arrival of “multiple interpretations of what America really means” (Hayton and Albright, 2009, 21). Captain America could no

[40] In movies, see: Cimino, *The Deer Hunter* (1978); Kotcheff, *First Blood* (1982); or Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In literature, see: O’Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973); Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976).

longer claim to represent “all” of America, despite his iconic nature which clearly implied it.

By the 1970s, the consensus identity of America was no longer aided by an “unending progress toward an affluent, equalitarian society,” but instead was slowly replaced by an uneasiness brought on by slow inflation, the fear of exhausting fuel supplies, and visions of overgrowing the Earth’s carrying capacity (Costello, 2009, 86). This gradual crumbling of the national consensus identified by Costello became increasingly visible in the superhero comics of the 1970s, which now had several storylines that dealt with identities in crisis, multiple identities, and the ambiguity of identity. Already in the late 1960s Captain America felt the need to stage the death of his civilian alter ego, Steve Rogers, in order to restore the mystery of Captain America’s secret identity.[41] However, his identity crisis would only intensify as the nation’s internal problems escalated. As a marker of the severity of this crisis, Steve Rogers momentarily abandoned the Captain America mask in 1974, becoming truly disappointed with the nation’s government (a plot line involving the President himself as the villain was published shortly after Nixon’s resignation). Taking on the role of “Nomad, the Man without a Country,” Steve Rogers became a hero without a nation, if only to resume the Captain America identity later in the hope that he could still steer the country towards the right path.

The issues of identity would become even more pronounced in the 1980s with the arrival of such revisionist superhero texts as *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* with their reworking of the traditional superhero conventions. These works, among others, problematized the superhero identity by creating ambiguous superheroes whose status as heroes was increasingly under question. Frank Miller’s “dark knight,” Batman, was a psychotically violent and fascist “hero” of whom the citizens of Gotham City showed very little acceptance or understanding, and the heroes of *Watchmen* were forced to retire in 1977 after massive police strikes and protests against them. Following the trend, Captain America, too, became what Mike S. DuBose refers to as “fully aware of the postmodern nature” of both morality and heroism, admitting to the problems within the United States in the 1980s (which, as DuBose points out, was no easy feat for a markedly patriotic superhero) (2007, 928). DuBose also notes that though Captain America’s “sense of

[41] See *Captain America* #111–113 (Mar 1969–May 1969).

right and wrong" did not disappear in the 1980s, he now "recognize[d] his opinions as opinions," seeing morality as relative and that, crucially, criticizing America did not in itself make anyone anti-American (ibid.). The 1980s pitted Captain America against villains like "the Super Patriot" and "the Flag-Smasher!"—heroes with a strong nationalistic (or anti-nationalistic) stripe that functioned as a distinct contrast to Captain America's own ideals. The rift between Captain America and the U.S. government was shown to go deep as Steve Rogers once more resigned the title, becoming "the Captain" instead of subjecting himself to governmental control, following the American myth as an anti-establishment individualist.[42] As DuBose notes, though Captain America initially began his career as a government agent, he ultimately transcended both politics and authority, which "truly made him a hero" in the 1980s (2007, 931). Though he did eventually return to being Captain America, his relationship with the government was never easy, finally devolving into violent conflict in *Civil War* (2006–2007).

Concurrently, the late 1970s and early 1980s saw a change not just within the superhero comic, but also in prospective audiences. Whereas the readers of superhero comics had mostly consisted of adolescents (and during wartime, U.S. soldiers) in the 1940s and 1950s, the 1960s witnessed a shift towards college students with the new, more mature, and "real" Marvel heroes such as Spider-Man, complete with the more adult themes, increasingly dealing with such issues as student protests, drugs, and alcoholism. Both Marvel and DC began to publish comics without the CCA approval, which had begun to lose its power as the topics grew more versatile and mature. At the same time, the rising U.S. underground comics movement of the 1960s, which launched artists like Robert Crumb, Jay Lynch, and Gilbert Shelton, attacked the very basic conventions of American society with their iconoclastic works aimed at "an audience of their peers—at adults" instead of the traditional adolescent market (Harvey, 1996, 140–141). Comics, due to their previous role as a condemned and thus controlled "juvenile" medium, was now repossessed by the underground "comix" movement and consequently used as a tool to openly criticize and ridicule the conservative values of America through exaggerated representations of sex and drug abuse. The underground comics movement also challenged the comic book economy by

[42] *Captain America* #332 (Oct 1987).

allowing authors to retain the ownership of their art and by selling the works outside the established syndicates, proving that nationwide newsstand distribution was not a prerequisite for financial success within comics (Harvey, 1996, 143–144). The significance of the underground comics movement is central to later developments within superhero comics, as several of the comics artists and writers discussed within this dissertation came either from within this movement or had grown up reading these countercultural works.

Despite the gradual dismissal of the CCA stamp of approval, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that the arrival of the more expensive "graphic novel"[43] visibly marked the division of the audience into children and adults in concretely economic terms: "At £10 a copy, comics can't be just for kids," as Reynolds humorously pointed out (1992, 96–97). This also suggested that questions of audience and readership were not ignored by the production and marketing division of comic book publishers, who became aware of a more mature audience with significantly higher buying power, and this was at least partially responsible for the vast reports of "comics growing up" that dominated in the papers in the 1980s (Sabin, 1993, 87–95):

> Published almost simultaneously, they [*Watchmen*, *Maus*, *DKR*] were perceived by a naïve press not familiar with comics fandom . . . as constituting a new and historically unique trend. . . . Whatever the angle, inevitably the coverage tended to concentrate on the novelty aspect—analyzing the comics for how they were different rather than for what they were. (Sabin, 1993, 91)

However, this vastly publicized "maturation" of comics that overtook the press in the 1980s was more likely a marketing move by the publishers than any real change within the genre or medium. As Wright, for example, has pointed out, the *New York Times Magazine* published a favorable article on the maturation of comic books already in May 1971, distinguishing the "more sophisticated themes" of the texts (2001, 233). Another factor in the changes that took place within the genre in the late 1970s and early 1980s may have been the maturation of a new generation of comics writers and illustrators who had grown up reading the Silver Age superhero comics from the late 1950s onwards, and had accumulated an intricate knowledge of

[43] The term "graphic novel" has been a subject of much debate, and opinions on its origins and meaning differ between scholars. Many quote the term to Will Eisner (*A Contract with God*, 1978), whereas others have been keen to point out that the term has been in existence before that. Generally, "graphic novel" refers to a thematically unified, completed and well-organized narrative where word and image are inseparable. For a more detailed discussion on the term, see for example Sabin, 1993; Harvey, 1996; DiLiddo, 2009.

the workings of the superhero genre and the complex continuities of both DC and Marvel universes (Wright, 2001, 234). They also began to question the binary values embedded within the superhero universes, and through the vast knowledge of the genre's themes and unwritten rules, began to carefully rewrite some of the central tropes, "hoping to kick some life into the old clunker by breaking nearly every one of the tried and true 'rules'" (McCloud, 2000, 117).

The desire to rewrite established superheroes was largely sparked by *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Instead of producing the "last key superhero text," as Reynolds predicted of *Watchmen* in 1992, these works sparked numerous offspring that focused on the violent and nihilistic themes without any serious content or deliberation. As author Alan Moore himself noted on the influence of his and Frank Miller's work:

> [O]bviously, we've to some degree doomed the mainstream comics medium to a parade of violent, depressing postmodern superheroes, a lot of whom, in addition to those other faults, are incredibly pretentious. I stand accused. (*The Comics Journal*, 138, 1990, 75; qtd. in Reynolds, 1992, 117)

Despite the fact that Moore now dismisses his past superhero work, his influence on the genre has been well-established by critics. Iain Thomson, for one, reads *Watchmen* not as annihilating, but ultimately reinvigorating the genre: the "apparent suicide" of the superhero comic through *Watchmen* possesses the nature of "a redemptive intent, a would-be rebirth" (2005, 117) that benefits the entire genre.

One of the most prominent rewritings of the superhero tropes is apparent in the theme of betrayal and deconstruction of the hero/villain binary in the darker superhero comics of the 1980s. In *Watchmen*, for example, the old binary of physical perfection and virtue vs. grotesque looks and villainy is inverted, as the villain of the story turns out to be the physically flawless and self-titled "smartest man on Earth," the superhero Ozymandias. It is a story of betrayal, one that Costello claims is very typical for the superhero narratives of the 1980s, the age when the Americans looked at their institutions of authority and saw only betrayal looking back at them (2009, 166).

All these ambiguities concerning the state and authority as well as the decreasing difference between the hero and the villain are present in the visual narratives, too. As "the boundaries between events in the comics begin to break down," the growing concern with the certainties of the early 1960s became increasingly pronounced (Costello, 2009, 79). The superhero comics of the late

1970s and early 1980s underlined these changes through their visual style: gutters practically disappeared as panels were drawn over each other and often ordered nonlinearly with varied shapes and multiple splash panels; lines became blurry and images often bled into each other, creating a disorder that mirrored the similar blurring and chaos within the identity of the superhero and the American citizen (Costello 2009, 168). As the hero's identity turned increasingly unclear, a similar development could be seen in the illusion of a unified American identity: the disillusionment with authorities and the consequent feeling of betrayal led to a loss of national identity, a fractured and pluralized existence (Costello, 2009, 195).

This pluralized existence continued to influence superhero comics in the 1990s, which Costello sees as being somehow "amiss," as the rhetoric of American identity itself—virtue, progress and freedom—seemed to have lost its power as a victim of the Cold War, and it could not be appropriated again except ironically (2009, 199). Famously, DC killed Superman in 1992 in the much-publicized *The Death of Superman*, only to revive him a year later in a confusing storyline involving no less than four Supermen, which demonstrates what Coogan deems as "the essential failure of the reinvigoration approach" (2006, 217). Captain America, too, was facing a crisis in the 1990s: the Super-Soldier serum that made his body superhuman was drained from him, putting his body (and allegorically, America) in crisis. With the Cold War over and the sales of comics on the downfall, Steve Rogers, too, was facing extinction. David Walton goes as far as interpreting this storyline as a "commentary on the market forces that had overfed and starved a medium" as the comics "speculator market" crashed after its brief materialistic spin (2009, 170). The speculator market Walton refers to was a brief 1990s' trend in comics collecting: publishers produced alternate covers, 3D covers, and other "special" issues to be bought and collected by investors with the hopes that these "rare" issues would dramatically increase in value as time passed. However, this excess was soon met with a fan backlash that significantly cut the profits of comics publishers (cf. Wright, 2001, 282–285).

As a way to boost the slumping comics sales, Marvel, too, tried to "reboot" its series in the 1990s by going back to the successful days of the past. They especially tried to revert to older artistic style: "bright colors, clear lines, and firm contrasts . . . a more contained look, with gutters separating panels, characters firmly distinguished from backgrounds, and a color scheme that accentuates bright

backgrounds and primary colors" (Costello, 2009, 201–2). A good example of this approach can be found in Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross's *Marvels* (1994), which on the surface seemed to aim at a restoration of the fantastic and the wondrous of the genre by depicting classical Marvel heroes through the eyes of the common bystanders, yet ultimately revealed the impossibility of this nostalgic vision by revealing the frustration and impotence created by the existence of super-powered beings. This inability to restore the vision of the past supports Costello's claim that the rhetoric of American identity had indeed lost its power, showcased in the failed attempts to re-establish classic American superheroes through various reboots and re-evaluations. A part of the reason for this, as Mila Bongco points out, may have been that the 1990s also saw the rise of the so-called "West Coast Style" in Marvel superhero comics, based on the art of Todd McFarlane and Jim Lee. This style stressed glorified violent fight sequences between heroes with bodies that were beyond absurd in their dimensions, leading to "overblown fighting orgies without rhyme or reason" (2000, 191–193).

Although the desire to reboot older series within superhero comics can be attributed to the nostalgia that arose in the 1990s, this this move towards an innocent past of the superheroes was a dead end, consisting of "selective remembering" of a past that really was far from "innocent" (Bongco, 2000, 195). It was not until the terrorist attacks on 9/11, 2001, that superheroes once again seemed to regain some of their power in the consciousness of the American nation, as once more, the chance of defining a unified nation against a shared enemy presented itself.

Even though the effects of 9/11 on superhero comics will be dealt with separately in chapter 6, the 21st-century superhero comic merits a few general comments here. Initially reacting to the terrorist attacks by stressing national unity and the strength of an America under attack, superhero comics have taken up a conflicted position during the last decade. The surprising popularity of superhero blockbuster movies from *Spider-Man* to *Iron Man* and the overall success of *The Avengers* movie franchise speaks not only of the way film technology today is capable of creating the illusion of superhuman feats, but also of the relevance and resonance of the superhero in the 21st century. Yet, this fame has not really translated into the comics themselves, which struggle to grow, and sometimes even to maintain, sales. In 2011, DC announced its total "reboot" of all its titles in the "New 52" initiative, scheduling the release of 52 number 1 issues from *Aquaman* to

Wonder Woman. Though initially gaining sales of over 5 million comics in no more than six weeks in October 2011 (Khouri, 2011), DC has since then been forced to cancel several titles due to poor sales, while simultaneously facing sharp criticism on the increasingly sexualized and fetishized representation of female characters.

This section has already made references to the superhero's geopolitical relevance and resonance as it has provided discussion on the superhero's origins and developments within America from a broadly geopolitical perspective. In the next section, I will move further into the historical and cultural roots of the superhero as a distinctively American hero, and tie these roots even more firmly into the discussions on American popular geopolitics.

2.2 Embodying the Nation: Defining America through Popular Geopolitics

Popular geopolitics surrounds us wherever we go. Our lives are thoroughly embedded in popular culture, which is filled with various stories and images that create and sustain (and challenge) the geopolitical spaces we live in. Indeed, popular geopolitics strongly relies on images and emotions which are deeply rooted in the everyday life of a particular group and its localized spaces: different symbols and archetypes of a nation are regularly evoked not only by popular culture, but by its politicians and media, and these symbols have become "naturalized" as a part of a shared national subconscious through repetition and tradition (Dijkink, 1996, 1–2). Being part of the "cultural economy" characterized by Dittmer (2011, 115), popular culture is also closely linked to what Kukkonen (2010, 111) refers to as cultural memory. Cultural memory (kulturelle Gedächtnis) is a shared cultural "public domain," an unlimited reservoir of texts and their "mental representations which can be related to a particular community and their attitudes and ideologies" (2010, 123). Superhero comics, as popular culture, rely on this "popular cultural memory" that functions as a formative text and helps to create and maintain the identities and scripts of a particular community (ibid. 127–128). By studying the way national identity is created and maintained in popular culture narratives, it is possible to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of a nation's collective identity (Dittmer, 2005, 626).

Though today's era of global media means that popular culture texts travel with ease all over the world, they can still hold a special power on a local or national level. This means that, for example, a superhero comic book (like any popular culture text) has a number of different interpretations and meanings depending on who reads it—a U.S. citizen raised on superhero comics will experience the comic differently from a European reader familiar with a different tradition of, for example, Franco–Belgian albums such as Hergé's *Tintin* or Franquin's *Spirou*. This difference in cultural knowledge is worth bearing in mind, as recent globalization may raise the question of "cultural invasion" of the United States that permeates all strands of Western culture. However, as Dijkink reminds us, living within a culture produces a member of that culture in a way that cannot be simulated by globalization, as "no amount of information can overcome the particular structure of information-processing pertaining to each place" (1996, 2–3). And yet, this does not mean that a nation's defining popular geopolitical texts only come from within the nation; indeed, as Shelley Fishkin points out, the transnational nature of culture today means that one cannot approach a nation as narrated only from within its borders, but that other, transnational perspectives have to be take into consideration as well (2005, 20). This is relevant especially in discussing superhero comics and their significance as popular geopolitical texts, for they are texts that engage in issues particular to American geopolitics, and are produced primarily for American audiences, yet their authors, like Mark Millar, Grant Morrison, and Alan Moore, often hail from outside the United States. Instead of focusing only on the closed, essentialist notion that only the representations coming from within the United States can narrate the nation, the transnational approach includes other perspectives that re-examine the very idea of nation and national identity (a view currently promoted in American Studies; cf. Rowe et al, 2010).

Dalby and Tuathail divide the critical study of geopolitics into three categories: *practical geopolitics* of foreign policies and state leadership, *formal geopolitics* within states and strategic communities, and finally *popular geopolitics* which focuses on popular cultural artifacts and their relationship to geopolitical scripts and identities (1998, 4).[44] Originating from the study of the interaction

[44] Harle and Moisio distinguish five key concepts within geopolitics: area, environment, border, identity, and the politics attached to each of these concepts, where the first four comprise the "geo" to which the "politics" then attaches itself (2003, 9).

between geography and politics (often tied to actual military strategies), the field of geopolitics has since then evolved to encompass much more than its initial trajectory. Indeed, one of the reasons for the rising interest in geopolitics is the way that it lends itself to interdisciplinary research both through its principles and through its goals, thus enabling creative tensions required for the inner development of the field (Harle and Moisio, 2003, 8). In this dissertation, the concept of identity within "geopolitics" gains most weight from the particular framework of *popular geopolitics*, distinguished from other forms of geopolitics by its emphasis on the unique way popular cultural texts contribute to national identity construction and through it, to the geopolitics of a nation, as can be seen for example in the work of Jason Dittmer, whose work on Captain America guides this dissertation as well.

Geopolitics in itself is comprised of the "spatial practices, both material and representational, of statecraft itself," and the critical analysis of geopolitical identities is closely tied to the popular cultural myths of a particular nation (Dalby and Tuathail, 1998, 3). Dealing with the issues of power, knowledge, space and identity, popular geopolitics actively produces national identities and borders through textual practices and languages (Dodds, 2000, 73; Moisio, 2003, 31) as well as through the use of images and icons as representations of a nation. Within popular geopolitical analysis, the emphasis is less on geopolitical facts and the actual socio-historical context (although this aspect cannot be completely ignored), but more on what the texts actually *say* and how the texts *construct* a particular worldview (Harle and Moisio, 2003, 10). In other words, the focus is clearly more on *representations* than on reality. In this dissertation, popular geopolitics becomes one of the connecting elements between different scholarly approaches, establishing a common ground between textual analysis and political analysis. By using popular geopolitics as a wider framework for my research questions, I will not deploy it as a clinical theory to explain phenomena, but rather as a point of view, as a way of posing questions and interpreting the texts—a perspective rather than a discipline (Luoma-aho, 2003, 69).

The popular geopolitics of American identity can be accessed through superhero comics, but, as already stated, what is at the core of the study is not to discover any actual "real" American identity or to define what "Americanness" is, but to discover what kind of popular geopolitical identities superhero comics offer to their readers, and what implications these geopolitical constructs may have.

"Nation" and "nationality," after all, can become powerful rhetorical tools, as they are based on a shared sense of belonging created through various ethnic and cultural levels as opposed to the more politically oriented "state." Though the concepts of nation and state both amount to more than just rhetoric, the focus within this dissertation will be on the particular cultural discourse produced by superhero comics. More specifically, I will analyze how these texts either naturalize, or, as is more often the case with some of my key texts, de-naturalize the geopolitical processes that for their part affect the construction of the American nation and national identity.

In order to discuss the popular geopolitics of superhero comics as defining "America," I will first examine the superhero as a variation of the American monomyth, tracing the superhero's roots in the monomythic tradition of America, and particularly the concept of the frontier, which still holds a major position in the popular geopolitical imaginations of America. After that, I will introduce the notion of American utopianism and American exceptionalism and discuss their role in the birth of the American (super)hero. I will also discuss the relationship between popular geopolitics and popular culture within the framework of comics.

The Superhero and the American Monomyth

Superheroes have been cited by Richard Reynolds as "modern mythology," and not completely without reason. As Lawrence and Jewett argue in their study *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002) (following their earlier work on the topic from the 1970s), the superhero is a key figure in American mythology. The American monomyth that they put forth is clearly separate from Joseph Campbell's well-known universal monomyth, introduced in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949): as Lawrence and Jewett argue, the American monomythical superhero is marked by a fascination with redemption, which they deem typical for a "culture preoccupied for centuries with the questions of salvation in the appearance of redemption" (2002, 44). This definition differs crucially from the classic monomyth as originally described by Campbell:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell, 1949, 30)

The emphasis within the traditional monomyth is, as Campbell identifies it, “the call to adventure,” which ultimately leads to the hero’s return and reintegration into society as its central member (ibid., 38). The classic monomyth, whether the story of Odysseys, Moses, or Luke Skywalker, is about the initiation of the hero into the world, where the hero travels, gaining (or regaining) his powers so that he may return to his community as a revitalizing force.

In contrast to this view of the universal monomyth, the American monomyth begins to find more distinction from its distinctive cultural space. Consider the basic formula of the American monomyth:

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by his fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 6)

The American monomythic superhero is not concentrated on initiation the way Campbell’s heroes tend to be, but instead he is an outsider to the community obsessed with the task of redemption. The hero is motivated by redemption and the desire to reclaim his place within the society he protects, which is the one thing he cannot achieve due to his extralegal nature, because he is the one who defends the community. In a way, the American monomythic hero embodies the tragedy of the American dream, which Geoff Ward has identified as deprivation: the American dream is the dream that can never be realized, and it is the never-ending pursuit, not the achievement and happiness, which is at its core (2002, 14). Similarly, it is the superhero’s never-ending quest to become a member of the society, not the integration into society that characterizes the superhero narrative.[45]

Whereas the classic monomyth reintegrates the hero back into the society, the American monomyth ultimately separates the hero from the society he fights for. As Lang and Trimble see it, the American monomyth “secularizes the Judeo-Christian ideals” of the classic monomyth with the American “supersavior” who sacrifices himself for the community on his zealous crusade against evil (1988,

[45] It must be recognized, of course, that Lawrence and Jewett do not arrive at their much-quoted definition from nothing, but base their argument on the tradition established by the so-called “myth and symbol school” of American Studies, which includes such names as R.W.B. Lewis and Leo Marx. Indeed, the American monomyth is clearly derived from Lewis’s famous “American Adam,” a distinctively American hero who was not at the center of the world like the traditional hero of classical drama, but instead was located within distance, outside seeking a way home (1955, 128).

158). Indeed, what characterizes the American monomyth is precisely this peculiar sacrifice, as the hero has to sacrifice his place as a member of the community in order to protect it, and in those few instances that he is accepted within that community, he is cast into the role of the "idealistic loner" (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 48).

To further stress his separation from society, the American superhero must renounce "sexual union as primary value" (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 237). In other words, as Mark Best notes in his reading of superhero comics from the1950s, in the "hyperbolic male fantasy" of the superhero, women were usually depicted as a threat to male power (2005). Seen as a corrupting force to the superheroic mission, women were bent on nothing more than exposing the hero's civilian identity, which would then enable them to force marriage and domesticity onto the poor male hero. Thus, it became vital that the superhero reject his desires in order to protect the community and fully engage in his mission, and this dilemma allowed endless variations to the superhero narrative. The most common example of such rejection is the Clark Kent/Superman/Lois Lane love triangle, which took nearly sixty years to reach its conclusion in the marriage of Lois and Clark in October, 1996 (although this, too, has been erased by the recent DC re-launch in 2011). And though even Peter Parker, the Amazing Spider-Man, finally married his long-time girlfriend Mary Jane in 1987, this marriage, too, was ultimately erased in a storyline that concluded by removing the marriage from the comic's continuity, effectively restoring the earlier status quo.

Although Lawrence and Jewett claim to analyze the American "superhero," their analysis includes a vast number of American "heroes" who actually are not *super*heroes as defined in the previous section (and their view of female heroes is constricted to the clichéd notion of the "angel in the house" seen in characters like Little Heidi and Mary Poppins with no mention of such female action heroes as *Alien*'s Ellen Ripley or *The Terminator*'s Sarah Connor). What Lawrence and Jewett fail to acknowledge is that though it can be argued that all superheroes tend to represent the American monomyth, not all monomythic heroes fit the superhero definition. Neither can it be claimed that the American monomyth would somehow flawlessly "explain" the superhero. Rather, the American monomyth serves to further the discussion on how the superhero is in fact a significant part of a larger

cultural phenomenon that emerges from a distinct cultural and social context that is specifically American.

Apart from their dismissive stand on the female hero, Lawrence and Jewett quite uncritically equate the American monomythic hero with the privileged, white, masculine, and heterosexual hero, failing to address such aspects as ethnic or sexual minorities within the monomythic construction. Black superheroes, such as the Falcon and Luke Cage/Powerman, have been in existence within superhero comics since the late 1960s, fuelled by political movements like the Civil Rights movement and the Black Panthers, yet the inability to explain these heroes with the American monomyth ignores an essential element within American popular culture.[46] Perhaps most crucially, the American monomyth fails to encompass the more ambiguous and morally conflicted superheroes that signal a change in the concept of the national hero (Lang and Trimble, 1988, 172). The American monomyth thus enables an initial assessment of the superhero as embodying national mythology within popular geopolitics, but its limitedness signals a necessary transition beyond it—a critical move made necessary by the increasingly ambiguous superheroes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

According to Peter Coogan, the superhero genre can rightfully be claimed as "a site to examine American culture, and the changing meanings of the figure give us access to some part of the ongoing construction of the American self" (2002, 8). However, Coogan himself explicitly refuses to go deeper into this "broad contemporary cultural analysis" he briefly sketches out (2002, 9). It is precisely this wider cultural analysis Coogan shuns that this dissertation embraces as its primary goal. After all, America as a nation was (and still is) constructed from a multitude of different nationalities and ethnicities, a process that requires "intense symbolism and the invocation of geopolitical visions to shape and reinforce American identity" (Dijkink, 1996, 51). One of these geopolitical visions was the mythical frontier, a "moving zone" that became a near-abstract space separating darkness and light, wilderness and civilization (ibid., 52). This view echoes Frederick Jackson Turner's famous thesis on the significance of the frontier from 1893, in which the frontier becomes a defining factor in what Turner himself described as a growing nationalism and "the evolution of American political institutions" (1893/1963, 46).

[46] For more on black superheroes, see chapter 3.2.

Despite the fact that Turner's claims on the impact of the frontier as the chief promoter of American democracy have received a fair deal of criticism, it could also be argued that these claims themselves have become a part of the American mythology: the view of the frontier as "creating Americans" has in itself turned into a national myth, a part of the dominant geopolitical view of America and firmly removed from any factual reference or evidence. A similar claim can be found in Richard Slotkin's classic text *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (1973, 4–5), in which Slotkin argues that American writers very deliberately attempted to create a new, uniquely American mythology through literature on the American frontier, and that even critics who discuss this phenomenon may, for their part, further this "national phenomenon of myth-consciousness."

Slotkin's definition of a myth as "a narrative which concentrates in a single, dramatized experience the whole history of a people in their land" where the mythical hero becomes the embodiment and defender of his culture's values (1973, 269) also clearly addresses the American hero as a geopolitical influence where the hero comes to embody the nation's values. To Slotkin, John Filson's Daniel Boone narrative from 1784 (only a year after the Revolution) is the first mythical hero narrative of America, constructing a tale that grows from the culture it espouses as well as adjusts and changes according to it, drawing from all the "significant strands of thought and belief" that had developed in the history of America and creating a hero the audience could believe and identify with (ibid.). Furthermore, the mythical Boone narrative "establishes its meaning through a rhythmic repetition of a single pattern of experience" which is further reinforced by emphasizing a connection between Boone's state of mind and the real landscape (1973, 293). Contrasting this analysis with traditional superhero narratives, the parallels are easy to point out: a product of his era, the superhero, too, establishes his meaning through a repeated narrative pattern.

The superhero embodies the nation's virtues (Superman's classic "Truth, Justice, and the American Way" being a clear example), and with his extraordinary powers, he is determined to protect and uphold the society that produces these virtues. As Slotkin notes, "if Boone sees Kentucky as a paradise . . . then it really is (or may really become) a paradise" (1973, 293). Similarly, I shall argue, the superhero's decision to uphold the status quo signals that what he deems as worthy

of protection is, at least in Superman's case, the classic "American way." What Slotkin sees as especially noteworthy is how the "literary logic" of Filson's Boone narrative sees Boone's "arcadian vision" of the West as paradise as emerging from his experiences of extreme hardships and evil in the wilderness; in other words, the "highest good for Boone's character" (and America) arises from (or is even dependent upon) these evils (1973, 293). This view of evil as giving birth to goodness is an essential aspect in several superhero origin stories, where traumatic events (such as Bruce Wayne witnessing his parents' murder or Spider-Man's loss of his Uncle Ben) are almost a prerequisite for a heroic persona to be born. Furthermore, it stresses the narrative structure where success is only achieved through enduring hardships, that greatness can only be achieved through suffering.

Related to this notion of greatness through suffering, the American love for the "underdog" should not be ignored as an essential (though ignored by Lawrence and Jewett) part of the American monomyth. A central facet of American individualism, the appeal of the underdog is an element often found in children's literature and American cinema, becoming a popular metaphor of childhood itself as children themselves exist in a world dominated by powerful adults (Parsons, 2005, 357). It is therefore not surprising that the idea of the underdog emerges in the superhero comic, despite the contradiction in combining the oppressed and weak underdog with the powerful and unique superhero. However, when examining the central characteristics of the underdog, the connection to the superhero becomes clear, as the notion of the underdog relies on the acceptance of three main ideas:

> (1) that in every situation there always has to be a winner and a loser, so that a happy ending requires not just someone's triumph but also someone's defeat; (2) that the best way to win is to have the individual power to take control and win by one's own actions; and (3) that a truly happy ending occurs only when a person who was oppressed achieves a position in which it's possible to oppress others. (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, 156)

This characterization can be applied to the superhero comic with ease, as the basic superhero narrative usually fulfills all these ideas (for the superhero to win, the villain must lose; the hero wins by the virtue of his individual power; often the hero is momentarily defeated before he ultimately triumphs, as exemplified with Superman and his weakness to Kryptonite; the superhero's brand of democracy is often based on undemocratic actions).

Often facing threats of intergalactic proportions, the superhero takes on the position of the underdog who triumphs even when the odds are against him (as they often appear to be). It is precisely this moment of "extra effort," as Reynolds calls it, "the moral determination to go on fighting" when all hope appears to be lost that becomes the key element in most superhero comics, and partially explains the popularity and endurance of such immensely popular non-powered superheroes as Batman, Daredevil, and Captain America (1992, 40–41). Testifying to the persistence of this trope, the *Civil War* special issue *Casualties of War* (Feb 2007) has Iron Man address Captain America with the following description:

> You're the perfect man. You live by ideals and standards that are . . . more than outdated. They're **impossible** for anyone but you. And when you're confronted by the shades of gray, when people inevitably disappoint you because people are **flawed**, you do what you've **always** done when the going got tough. You dig in your heels and fight even **harder**. Never mind whether you can win. Sometimes I think you'd **rather** go out in a blaze of glory than face reality. (*Casualties of War* #1, 24).

Even though Iron Man's words are meant to accuse Steve Rogers/Captain America for holding on to archaic notions of heroism, what they simultaneously reveal is the idealized hero still present in Captain America who, in a key moment of "extra effort," only digs in his heels and fights even harder when faced with insurmountable odds. Though perhaps not a common part of the discussion, the relevance of the underdog in the popular geopolitics of America is not to be ignored, and to locate it in the superhero narrative enables an even more nuanced reading of the national icon, and through him, American popular geopolitics.

Hero-narratives began to occur frequently in 18th-century United States, which Slotkin sees as a sign of the growing need for an image, a "symbolic heroic figure" of the American hero who would be markedly different from the cultural heroes of Europe and who would "express their own sense of history" as Americans (1973, 189). Yet, the hero that emerged from this need described by Slotkin was still far from the comic book superhero of the early 20th century, despite the notion presented by Coogan (2006) that these characters can already be seen as early "superheroes." Slotkin stresses the mediating role of the early American hero as the one who acts in the intersection between "the American wilderness and the civilized world" (1973, 213). The American hero of the frontier era existed on a threshold between the savage and the civilized, functioning as the mediator between two worlds. This may be his link to the superhero, who, too, exists on a frontier, a

threshold between two worlds as he is expelled from the society he protects. The liminal space of the frontier has been central in the creation of the American hero myth, and its variation can be located in the superhero through the modern frontier of urban space, the city.

Through the concept of the frontier, the superhero genre is closely tied to the popular genre of the Western, which clearly precedes the superhero: as John Cawelti argues, the Western embodies a central American myth in which the mythical West and the untouched frontier are American in a "very special sense," as men can leave their past behind and start anew on a "virgin continent" (2004, 143). Works such as *The Virginian* (1902) by Owen Wister or *The Lone Ranger* (1933) by George Trendle and Fran Striker featured the prototypical individualistic American hero of the Western, acting out the traditional American monomyth as outsiders to the community and protecting the civilizations of the frontier as needed, yet unable to settle down and integrate into the community. However, as Cawelti notes, this myth is a paradox from the start, composed of two contradictory visions: the West as a site for a new and better society and the West as escape from the constraints of civilization (ibid.). This contradiction that characterizes the Western myth could be divided as a conflict between the community and the individual and the way the needs of these two sides are combined within the narrative through various confrontations, culminating in the way the hero purges the community through his violence, which is in itself an act of "individualistic aggression" (Cawelti, 2004, 147). The hero of the Western has an ambiguous relationship to the law, as the law usually was unable to execute true justice:

> Society and law exist not as a fountainhead of what is just, but as a set of rules controlling the action of individuals who are the true source of morality and justice as well as of injustice. Because the law is only a set of shifting rules it can readily be bent by those who are strong or unscrupulous enough to do so. Thus, for Americans, the individual who can mold society and the law to his own ends is as much admired as condemned. (Cawelti, 2004, 175)

As Cawelti's argument shows, the hero of the Western shares a definitive quality with the superhero when it comes to the question of society and law: both individuals are willing and often required to break the law. What differentiates the Western hero from his urban counterpart (which can be said at this level to encompass both pulp detectives and superheroes) is that while the Western hero was a solution to the frontier era problems, the urban (super)hero aims to resolve the

issues of the postindustrial American society, facing a markedly urban, consumer-driven mass society since the 1930s (Wright, 2001, 10).[47]

The Western, the detective story, and the superhero all share a common cultural heritage that touches upon some of the key issues within this dissertation, such as masculinity, violence, and the state of exception: all are characterized as masculine genres that feature highly individualistic heroes and all are built on the use of what Lawrence and Jewett refer to as "regenerative violence." Extracting the idea from Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence*, the two authors see Slotkin's "myth of regeneration through violence," the cleansing and regenerating power of Puritan violence, re-emerging as celebrated in 20th-century American popular culture from Westerns to vigilante fiction, where both the hero and the community profit from the hero's violent action, executed without official sanction (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 111–112; 161). Besides violence, both Westerns and superhero stories share a problematic relationship with authority and display a need for redemption in the vein of the American monomyth. (Where they differ is in the super-heroic mission, powers, and identity that mark the superhero genre as separate and distinct from any other genre.)

But there are other, subtler similarities: for example, whereas the Western, as Jane Tompkins notes, relies on the landscape shot for its beginning and end (1992, 69), the superhero comic can rely on the view-shot of the city. The Western frontier can be seen re-emerging in the modern "urban frontier" where literally anything is possible. Both the frontier and the city represent a wilderness and require that the hero be in possession of some special skills, knowledge of the survival tactics that allow him to master that wilderness, whether natural or urban. But whereas the Western landscape is described by absence, as Tompkins notes (1992, 71), the urban landscape of the superhero is filled with multitudes. The hero of the Western bears his solitude and isolation in a deserted environment that underlines it, whereas the superhero must endure his inevitable isolation among a densely populated and vibrating cityscape. Still, the Western desert and the urban jungle require a very similar hero, they both expect very similar qualities needed for survival: to be a

[47] This is not to claim that the Western had somehow lost its relevance as a result: as the popularity of the Western in the 20th century shows, the genre still engages in issues that resonate with the American public. According to Tompkins, the Western offers a counter-space to the pressures created by modern industrial society, an escape into something "purer and more authentic, more intense, more real" (1992, 4).

Man, the hero needs to be hard, tough, unforgiving, and the setting itself seems to claim this strong masculinity with a certain build, complexion, facial type, dress, and skills (or powers) of the white, Anglo-Saxon tradition, subsequently naturalizing "a certain racial, gender, and ethnic type as hero" (Tompkins, 1992, 73). This particular type of masculine hero emerged gradually in the American West during the 19th century, asserting itself more fully at the turn of the 20th century as a part of a wider crisis in masculinity and a desire for a remasculinization, exemplified by the surge of white male action heroes in the late 20th century. (For more on the crisis in masculinity, see ch. 3.1).

The frontier, whether the Western desert or the urban jungle, is a distinct geopolitical space, which in its turn functions to create geopolitical identities based on those particular locations. More precisely, geopolitical identities are created through different categories of space, through divisions between different kinds of national spaces that follow the traditional inside/outside dichotomy that separates nations from each other: literally in the form of national borders, and mentally through the construction of geopolitical identities that construct "us" as separate from "them" (such as the propagandist superhero comic of WWII that portrayed the enemies of America in very xenophobic terms).

Furthermore, a nation can contain within itself multiple geopolitical spaces that all function to categorize and define national identity. In superhero comics, this division within the nation is often made through the juxtaposition of the violent, urban "hell" of the city and the Edenic, peaceful small town. Superman's hectic life in Metropolis is contrasted with his origins in Smallville, and both of these spaces function to categorize American geopolitical identity. The idyllic Midwestern small town, in the middle of Kansas corn fields where Ma and Pa Kent raise young Clark to live according to American virtues, is as crucial to the superhero myth as the wilderness of Gotham City, where Bruce Wayne's parents are murdered. The battles in the urban city, against terrifying foes, are fought to protect the Edenic idyll of the American heartlands that cater to the national myths of the American consciousness in a formula already presented in the American monomyth.

However, the motivations and justifications for this have become increasingly complex and ambiguous, going far beyond the initial trajectory of the American monomyth: for example, William Uricchio (2010, 120–125) remarks upon the way superhero comics tend to display an ideological refusal in

acknowledging that the city itself is "a generator of social inequities such as poverty, poor living conditions, inadequate education, corruption, and the absence of opportunity":

> By day, the wealthy Bruce Wayne seems unable to change these conditions despite the Wayne Foundation's charities and his own civic engagement (indeed, his disproportionate wealth might be seen as symptomatic of the problem of inequitable wealth distribution, a point underscored by his day job as a playboy); by night, the Batman obsessively enforces the laws of the propertied classes against those who would illegally share the profits. (Uricchio, 2010, 120)

Though not always true in superhero comics (Spider-Man, Daredevil, and even early Superman testify otherwise), the frequent refusal to engage and address these issues of social inequity, class, and the distribution of wealth within superhero comics emerges as another substantial "absence" in the genre, another "symptom" marked by its absence on the pages of comics. Instead, superhero comics tend to promote their own brand of individualistic vigilante justice and responsibility rather than advocate for a systematic social change. Though the issues of wealth and class are not extensively studied within this dissertation, their relevance in discussing the city as a geopolitical space defining America must be recognized.

Overall, the urbanization of America has witnessed the migration of the frontier myth from the prairie into the urban setting of the city, which becomes an urban frontier that defines its inhabitants much in the way the frontier defined early Americans.[48] As Markku Salmela writes, the frontier rhetoric, when understood as a cultural function, can be applied beyond the actual geographical frontier, creating the idea of an urban frontier which is often used in a metaphorical sense between the actual wilderness of the frontier and the modern cityscape (2006, 157–158):

> If the frontier myth is analysed as a facet of urban literature (rather than a motif belonging to the remaining rural narratives), it becomes apparent that the presence of the myth fortifies the specifically urban elements of the text instead of undermining them. In other words, the frontier, understood as an impulse that occurs in urban narratives, is included in the mental space of the city. (2006, 158)

The frontier myth therefore does not signal a move away from the urban space, but instead leads us into the very heart of the city, and within superhero narratives, this appropriation of the frontier myth has included the notion of violence as both "celebrated" and regenerative.

[48] Dijkink names the ghetto as a modern day equivalent to the mythical frontier as a "challenge or test proving one's citizenship" by escaping it into a career (or, I would claim, by surviving it) (1996, 53).

The urban setting is a definitive characteristic of the superhero comic, a quality it shares with some subgenres of detective fiction, as the city becomes a "narrative generator" in itself, becoming almost as crucial to the narrative as the superhero himself (Ahrens and Meteling, 2010, 10). The superhero's city delves into "aesthetic, atmospheric, and scenaristic possibilities" as it becomes the foremost setting for the adventures of the superhero (ibid., 5). The city can be fictional, as DC's Metropolis or Gotham City, although both are clearly fictional representations of New York, the quintessential urban jungle. In a decided shift towards "realism," Marvel's Silver Age heroes like the Fantastic Four or Spider-Man were purposefully located in the actual New York City instead of the fictionalized cities of previous superhero comics. The literary (and visual) trope of the superhero's city closely resembles an almost dystopian vision of a violent and dark urban jungle where the city's inhabitants battle for survival on a daily basis; it is a living organism, a thing with a pulse, a heartbeat, and vibration that requires the hero to control it, to tame and maintain it. By depicting the city as an organic and natural entity, this rhetoric partially functions to justify the hero's actions and the inevitable use of extralegal violence (an issue I will return to in chapter 4). Much like the mythical frontiersman who dominates "by individual skills acquired in the wilderness" (Dijkink, 1996, 52), the superhero and his use of violence become a crucial factor in surviving and controlling the urban jungle, in turn partially defining the urban space through the use of violence.

As mentioned above, geopolitical spaces create geopolitical identities. The frontier remains a potent myth in American history, and therefore still carries a strong resonance in America's popular geopolitical visions, yet another myth can be seen just as, if not more relevant than the frontier: the myth of American utopianism. In the next section, I will examine American utopianism in the context of American history, and tie it to the development of the superhero as a construction of American popular geopolitics. In this way, I will also aim at expanding on the original construction of the American monomyth in order to better tie it into the analysis on superhero comics.

Popular Cultural Myths: American Utopianism

American utopianism has been identified by Richard Reynolds as "a highly potent cultural myth" that acts as a premise for the entire superhero myth (1992, 83). Indeed, American utopianism can even answer the persistent question of why superheroes rarely try to force utopia despite their superhuman powers, and are instead content to merely stabilize the status quo: American utopianism implicitly contains the idea that America is a utopia in practice. If, as American utopianism would have us believe, America is in fact a utopia in practice, then the superhero preserving the status quo only acts to *preserve* utopia, while the villain is branded evil for his desire to alter this utopian present.

As for example Umberto Eco's classic study "The Myth of Superman" (1972/1986) argued, the traditional superhero of the Golden Age never actively pursues utopia (which the superhero could presumably do, as he is a superhuman with superpowers), and ultimately always restores the symbolic order of the nation. Superman does not end wars or admonish poverty and hunger, although he undoubtedly could, and instead only battles local bullies and comparatively small-time crooks.[49] Indeed, the superhero's mission has always been to "preserve society, not to re-invent it" (Reynolds, 1992, 77), whether fighting local crime or intergalactic alien threats. Both Eco and Reynolds clearly convey the idea that even though the superhero *could* impose utopia, he explicitly chooses not to do so, which would imply that the present society is not utopian in nature. What Reynolds fails to note, however, is that a closer inspection of American utopianism suggests that America is already a utopia in practice, thus signaling the superhero's justified choice in upholding the status quo, now revealed as utopian in nature. Though the idea of the United States as a utopia today can be easily disproved, the power of this national myth can still be found in the superhero comic, closely interwoven into American popular geopolitics. Therefore, I will devote the next few pages to briefly mapping out the concept of American utopianism and especially its connections to the superhero comic.

American utopianism originates from the 17th and 18th centuries, when the basic premise was about the potentiality of utopia rather than reality. America, as the new world, was seen by the settlers as a potential utopia because of its status as a

[49] This is true only of the Golden Age Superman, whose powers were still limited. Later, as his powers increased, the powers he began to battle also increased to more astronomical proportions.

blank slate on which a new and better society could be created, distinctively separate from Europe. As cultural critic and theorist Sacvan Bercovitch writes:

> "America" entitled a carnival of European fantasies. It meant the fabled land of gold, the enchanted Isles of the West, springs of eternal youth, and "lubberlands" of ease and plenty . . . It promised opportunities for realizing utopia, for unlimited riches and mass conversions, for the return of the pastoral arcadia, for implementing schemes of moral and social perfection. Columbus thought that it had been the actual site of Eden. Later explorers and settlers, translating the myths of biblical geography into the landmarks of Renaissance geo-mythology—spoke of America as a second Eden, inhabited by pagan primitives . . . awaiting the advent of Civilization and the Gospel Truth. (1993, 71)

Projecting their own hopes and dreams onto the new continent, the Puritans verified their vision of this would-be-Eden through the deployment of "myth, rhetoric, fact and metaphor" that could counteract such "inconvenient obstructions" to the mission as the weather, plague, and the Native Americans (Ward, 2002, 18). The most famous early example of this can be found in the famous sermon by John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), which envisioned America as a "city upon a hill" that should act as an example to the rest of the world, and envisioned "a covenant" that the new settlers of America would take with God, literally seeing them as the new Adams and Eves in the new Eden that was America.

Initially, America was the object of utopian hopes for European settlers; later, as the colonies gradually began settle, those hopes became America's own (Segal, 2000, 5–6). The premise of this view relied heavily on religious and mercantilist ideas: everyone had to work hard, and this hard work "might eventually bring modest rewards to all" (ibid., 7–8). As Winthrop noted in his sermon, the community's interests had to be put before the individual's, as the settlers had to be "knitt together in this worke as one man" for their Eden to come true. This view was gradually redefined in the late 18th century as a more technological view on utopia emphasizing not change, but endless progress, development, and growth emerged, thanks to rapid technological developments. The increasing economic and technological growth gradually led to comparisons with the Old Country, and now the view was that America was not only a potential, but also a probable utopia: a utopia "in practice" (Segal, 2000, 9–10).

This vision of American as a utopia in practice can also be seen in the 19th-century belief in the so-called "Manifest Destiny," a concept popularized by John O'Sullivan in 1845: the belief in endless progress that dictated the need for America to expand over the entire continent "for the free development of our yearly

multiplying millions" (O'Sullivan, 1845). This myth was embraced, among others, by Theodore Roosevelt, who transformed it into reality in the late 19th century during the Spanish–American War, as he "developed visions of controlling territories in Latin America and the Pacific" that echoed not only the myth of Manifest Destiny, but joined it with a popular rhetoric he borrowed from Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 58–59). Seen as an unavoidable destiny, the effects of this concept are still traceable in America today in the highly controversial notion of the United States as a global "superhero" since WWII.

The notion of America as a realized utopia that began to emerge in the 18th and 19th centuries slowly became a part of what Segal refers to as "America's so-called civil religion": a secular nation invoking God in public ceremonies and in public policy, declaring the United States a de facto utopia, "unique among the world's nations yet a model for them all" (2000, 11) in a clear reference to Winthrop. The potential utopia of the early settlers had been replaced by the probable utopia, the view that America was in fact a utopia in practice where anyone could succeed. Success in this potential utopia was dependent upon individual determination and will, and accordingly, America's popular literature began to emphasize the self-reliant individual as "the emblem of American enterprise," creating a cultural pattern of a rising nation (Bercovitch, 1993, 47)—a popular myth of the American dream still alive and well in American popular culture, as the popularity of various rags-to-riches reality shows and talent competitions today show.

Similarly, the view of America as Eden and the new Americans as self-reliant Adams and Eves began to emerge in writing, testifying to the oft heard claim that America was not discovered, but invented through literature. In *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis argued that "America" was a distinctively "collective affair" born out of texts produced in and of America in the 19th century by such writers as Emerson, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville (1955, 4). As Lewis claimed, America "had no past, but only a present and a future" (ibid., 7); for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson's opening lines in *Nature* (1836) called for a rejection of the "sepulchers of the fathers" and of the tradition that ties one to the past, and instead suggested the creation of new works, laws, and ideas that clearly look to the (American) future

(1836, 5).[50] The new American hero was to be "emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry," an innocent individual ready for anything (Lewis, 1955, 5). In this way, American identity, too, became something "flexible that can be chosen regardless of where (or what) you were born" (Dittmer, 2011, 123), not tied to ethnicity but to a choice. Dittmer sees this notion as particularly expressed in the superhero genre, most notably in alien heroes like Superman or Hellboy,[51] who despite their alien nature can choose to be American heroes. The underlying geopolitical "master narrative" here is the way each individual is governed only by his or her own choice, dedication, and willpower, which simultaneously narrates the superhero as exceptional while granting everyone the potential to become so.

Indeed, what ties the superhero to the notion of American utopianism is the way American utopianism is connected to the concept of American exceptionalism, the idea that America is distinctively different from other countries because of its birth as a "new" nation. This idea of America as exceptional was first introduced in 1831 by the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, where he cites the "position of the Americans" as "quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one" (1831/1840, 36–37). American exceptionalism expresses the idea that the United States is fundamentally different from other nations in its birth as a God-appointed Eden, proved so by its financial success. Furthermore, its sense of mission (present since the idea of Manifest Destiny), quoted by Jewett and Lawrence as both a "crusade against evil" and a "world-redemptive view of America's destiny," is highly visible in superhero comic books where the American superhero saves not only the United States, but the world from various external attacks (2003, 5–6). Indeed, as Dawson and Schueller claim, without understanding American exceptionalism as a complex construction of a variety of cultural, historical, and political elements, it is impossible to understand the conviction held by many Americans that the United States "has been and will always remain the provider and protector of world freedom" (2007, 15).

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[50] A year later, in the speech "The American Scholar" (1837) Emerson further addressed this issue by demanding that America should separate itself from Europe's intellectual heritage and begin building its own, distinct scholarly identity.

[51] "Hellboy" is a character by writer-artist Mike Mignola in 1993: a demon summoned to Earth by the Nazis but captured and raised by the Allied Forces in America. Hellboy is an ambiguous hero who has to reconcile his demonic nature with his (super)heroic mission.

This belief in America's exceptional nature as a unique nation among all others (the city upon a hill), when translated into popular cultural narratives, is transformed into narratives about exceptional heroes accountable to no-one, fulfilling their destiny by acting according to an intrinsically superior moral code. It is fairly easy to spot the parallels to superhero comics, filled with exceptional heroes who still arise from the essentially democratic premise that superpowers are usually granted to ordinary citizens. In a broadly allegorical and simplified analysis of post-WWII U.S. history and superheroes, the superhero acts to enforce the ideology behind America's role as a global "superhero" on a mission against evil through his/the nation's exceptional nature that began during WWII. This can be seen, as Dittmer notes, in America's indifference to the restrictions of international law and institutions such as the UN, which further emphasizes America's mythical vision of itself as "avoiding the shackles of governmental authority," much in the vein of superhero narratives (2011, 117):

> [B]oth superhero narratives and US government narrations of the international realm emphasize the need for freedom of (cathartic, redemptive) action when confronted by corrupt bureaucracies, at least by a select few morally exceptional "superpowers." (Dittmer, 2011, 117)

The need for redemptive action, as already stated, is an essential characteristic of the American monomyth. Yet, though the American superhero's actions always contain a desire to reintegrate into the community by defending it, their redemption is denied precisely due to their hero status.

The superhero as the exceptional individual above all governmental shackles was challenged in Marvel's 2006–2007 storyline *Civil War*, as superheroes were required to reveal their civilian identities and register as government agents or face indefinite time in an alternate reality super-prison. This sparked a war between the heroes, with Captain America in the front lines opposing the registration and refusing to arrest other rebel heroes:

> *Captain America*: "You're asking me to arrest people who risk their lives for this country every day of the week."
> *Commander Hill*: "No, I am asking you to obey the will of the American people, Captain."
> *Captain America*: "Don't play **politics** with **me**, Hill. Super heroes need to stay **above** that stuff or Washington starts telling us who the **super-villains** are."

> *Commander Hill*: "I thought super-villains were guys in masks who refused to obey **the law**." (2007, 23)[52]

The superhero's status as above the law is questioned through Commander Hill's sarcastic comment, which simultaneously casts doubts over the nature of American exceptionalism and the vigilante politics promoted by the popular geopolitical narratives of superhero comics. The superhero's (and, allegorically, America's) actual nature as a masked vigilante who does not obey the law is openly questioned through the demand that superheroes, like everyone else, must be held accountable for their actions. Instead of flaunting the superhero's ability to take action when the law's hands are tied (as was evident in #5 [Oct 1992] of *Spawn* where the titular hero brutally murdered a serial killer released by the courts as "rehabilitated"), the superhero's illegal premise and paradoxical relationship to the legislative powers are questioned. The superhero's legal status, as exemplified by the brief dialogue above, is exceedingly problematic, and I will return to this issue and its role in *Civil War* with more detail in chapter 5.

* * *

In this chapter on superhero comics and popular geopolitics I have discussed the origins and development of the superhero comic as a distinct genre emerging from the particular historical and cultural context of America. By asserting the superhero as a distinctively American character, his relevance to American popular geopolitics and its so-called master narratives becomes more evident. Superheroes were established as a "modern mythology" that appropriates myths and ideologies that are particularly American, in turn accumulating the cultural memory and the geopolitical scripts and identities of America. The following chapters will delve more deeply into how superhero comics create and maintain America's geopolitical ideals through such aspects as masculinity and the use of violence.

[52] As a Scottish writer with a particular view of imperialism and power, Mark Millar clearly comments on the specific cultural and political aspects of the superhero in *Civil War* that take part in a transnational dialogue that shapes the popular geopolitical narratives of America across cultures.

3. Imagining Super-Men: Masculinity in the Superhero Comic

> But you have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.
> (D.H. Lawrence, 1924, 68)

Masculinity holds a key position within this dissertation for a number of reasons. Firstly, as George L. Mosse notes in his book *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996, 4–5), masculinity holds a "determining role" in defining nationhood and nationality, and can therefore be claimed to be an essential element in studying the geopolitical fictions of a nation. According to Mosse, it is the male body, not the female one, which comes to symbolize society's need for such virtues as order, progress, self-control, and moderation. The female body *can* be used as a public symbol, "a reminder of the past, of innocence and chastity" of a nation, yet it is the male body that has the real power to evoke those virtues alongside countless others, becoming a significantly more potent symbol for the nation (1996, 9). The role of the masculine hero in the popular geopolitical narratives of America is stressed in the superhero's hypermasculine body, which becomes the national ideal onto which the nation's (masculine) virtues are projected.

The projection of these national virtues ties the superhero firmly into the discourse of "hegemonic masculinity," a form of masculinity that is culturally exalted over other forms of masculinity, "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell, 1995, 76–77). Overall, "masculinity" can be defined in a variety of ways, ranging from essentialist definitions of what a "man" is to a semiotic distinction that contrasts the symbolic difference of masculine and feminine (ibid., 68–70). In the semiotic approach, masculinity is defined through binary oppositions, difference becoming the primary way of definition. This definition appears frequently in superhero scholarship, where the hero's idealized

masculinity achieves its status precisely through various dichotomies in terms of the other. As for example Jeffrey Brown puts it:

> The status and the power of the hard male body is only achieved in contrast to those cultural identities represented as soft and vulnerable. This myth of idealized masculinity which is still incredibly pervasive remains dependent upon the symbolic split between masculinity and femininity, between the *hard* male and the *soft* Other. (1999, 27)

The definition of masculinity, according to Brown, is inexplicably tied to its "others," the division between hard and soft, masculine and feminine, yet these divisions are always derived from a particular historical and cultural era. The comic book superhero comes to represent the idealized "hard male body," impenetrable and explosive yet ultimately defined and constructed through extremely visible binaries, and though it may appear as though he gains an air of timelessness, he is in fact very much a representation of the era's ideals.

To be more precise, masculinity itself is a "construction and a myth," a product of the hegemonic culture which marks the masculinity in question as hegemonic masculinity; as Philippa Gates defines it, "masculinity is not a collection of attributes possessed by a male subject from birth but a set of expectations that society deems appropriate for a male subject to exhibit" (2006, 28). Indeed, the notions of hegemonic masculinity are firmly institutionalized, not just through social and cultural histories, but also through schools and the military, which both take time to include education of "proper masculine behavior" of the hegemonic ideals, usually characterized by proper morality, a trained body, and self-discipline (Mosse, 1996, 134–5). This "education" into masculine ideals emerges, in part, through the dominant fiction present in superhero comics, which espouse and promote a particular type of idealized masculinity through the heroes' action and ideological stand.

The superhero is as a representative of a particular brand of 20th century American hegemonic masculinity, as he comes to embody the tough, uncompromising masculine virtues of the nation, virtues that originate from the frontier myth and which can be located in other popular fictions of America, such as Westerns and detective fiction. Indeed, the demands of hegemonic masculinity are often so great that they can only be achieved through fiction, creating cultural icons (such as the superhero) of clear hypermasculinity (Jokinen, 2000, 215–217). Connell stresses the mobile and dynamic nature of hegemony, which means that old

hegemonies can be challenged and new hegemonic constructions may arise as the "dominance of *any* group of men can be challenged" (1995, 77). In this way, studying popular culture representations of masculine heroes allows one to trace the ways hegemonic masculinity has changed during the 20th century, and how white hegemonic masculinity has been defined and represented through various positions of subordination and dominance, not only in relation to women, but also in relation to black men (Connell, 1995, 75). The superhero comic, by definition (see chapter 2.1), is a genre that is pronouncedly white as well as masculine, as the superhero has been read as an emblem of the cultural and national myths of America and American popular geopolitics. The hero's masculinity is central to his geopolitical relevance, for as Gates notes, just as the American male hero represents the myths of the nation's masculinity, the villainy that characterizes his "others" (which Gates translates as "un-Americanness") becomes pronouncedly foreign against the Americanness made heroic (2006, 254).

According to Aaron Taylor, comic book superheroes are usually "constructed along very gendered lines" and through a very visible set of binaries despite their potential to defy and ultimately transgress all traditional limits of the body (2007, 345). Testifying to this, the white, muscular, and heterosexual male has quite clearly dominated the superhero comic, still evoking the image of a masculine and idealized male whose outer good looks match his superior moral stand, and the visual images in the panels tend to further this image by portraying the hero in graceful actions shots, often with an angle that posits the hero slightly above the reader, signaling a further emphasis on the hero's power. As noted in the previous chapter, it was not until the 1960s that superhero comics first began to question the equation between good looks and moral virtue through such misunderstood monsters as the Hulk or the Thing. Though this equation is no longer taken at face value in superhero comics, the visual aspect remains central. After all, due to their unique ability to portray anything (within the limits of its authors), comics are not limited in any ways by the actual laws of physics, but instead are able to portray bodies perfected beyond human ability as well as physical (and violent) feats unforeseen in any other medium.

In his analysis on superheroic bodies, Taylor demonstrates the significance of the form of comics to the visual representation of superhero bodies: due to the static and sequential nature of comics, the bodies of the heroes are "always-already

literally objectified" by the conditions of the sequential panels, "sculpted figures frozen in impossible time" (2007, 348). Furthermore, Taylor notes the panels' effect of creating "splintered physicality" where the bodies of the heroes are "chopped up by the borders of the panels" so that total, complete body shots become rare instances of glorifying images of the "reassembled body" (2007, 348). The effect of the full splash page containing the hero's complete, glorious body thus heightens its impact even further, making it a powerful visual tool to further the image of idealized masculinity.

The superhero's masculine body, usually clad in skin-tight spandex, clearly functions as a visual marker, an image of perfected masculine virtue which is further reproduced by the hero's unquestionable ethical and moral stand. Though the image is important, especially when discussing a visual medium, I also wish to address the wider construction of idealized masculinity in the superhero comic and its representation of masculinity. Without disclaiming the importance of the images of masculinity in discussing its representations in superhero comics, how those ideals of masculinity are performed and evaluated in the comics is also crucial, as "men must perform masculinity through activities in order to confirm virility, power, and toughness" (Gates, 2006, 36). In other words, it is not only through their looks but also through their actions that superheroes define their idealized form of masculinity. Furthermore, in order to understand this idealized masculinity it is important to examine those groups that by necessity are excluded from the hegemonic masculinity, such as black heroes and women. By studying these "others," it is possible to render visible the ways superhero comics and the popular geopolitical narratives they promote actually construct and depict idealized masculinity through exclusion.

When discussing the ideological connotations of masculinity, a few words need to be said about fascism and superheroes. The superhero has often been connected to fascism in one way or another. One of the reasons behind this is the way the superhero can be categorized as what Coogan has referred to as the "pulp ubermensch," a distinctively separate notion from the actual *superman* by Nietzsche

(2002, 312).[53] Superhero comics themselves have also engaged in a discourse that draws on the idea of the superman, most notably in present in *The X-Men*, which centers many of its conflicts on the idea of the mutants as a superior race:

> *Xavier*: "All we want is equal rights for --"
> *Bucky*: "**Equal rights**? How can we be equal to someone who can **blow up a city with their mind**?"
> *Xavier*: "So your fear justifies the slaughter of innocents?"
> *Bucky*: "Innocents? **Hah**! I've read Magneto's speeches. Mutants are 'homo superior.' 'The next step in evolution.' You want to wipe us out! Replace us with your super-race!" (*Civil War: House of M*, 2009, #3, 22)

A recurrent theme especially in the X-Men universe, the superhero comic is not associated with the übermensch completely without reason.

However, instead of linking the superhero to the Nietzschean discourse, I wish to address fascism through masculinity, which in the superhero comic interconnects with a nationalist sentiment that carries with it a very particular form of fascism (Devarenne, 2008, 49). Drawing on Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1978/1989) and his explorations on the "turbulent emotional world of the fascist man" (Benjamin and Rabinbach, ix) in the German *Freikorps* novels and memoirs of the 1920s, Theweleit's analysis on the connections between masculinity, nationalism, and violence in post-WWI Germany offers a way to problematize superheroic masculinity, as his deconstruction of the "male warrior" shares a number of similarities with the superhero despite the differences in their contexts. The connecting factor arises in the armored "man of steel" (1978/1989, 160), the male body and its connections to violence and nationalism, defined through the rejection of the Other. A further connection can be found, incidentally, in the way Theweleit chooses to illustrate his own argument with images of both Captain America and the Mighty Thor, deliberately underlining the similarities between the superhero and the subject of his study. The explosive dynamics of superheroic battle with its sound effects and lines denoting speed and power create massive, explosive confrontations, as Theweleit visually cites the superhero as the masculine ideal of

[53] This separation of the two notions is useful, for comic book superheroes, though often referred to as supermen in the Nietzschean sense, actually rarely exhibit any of the traits Nietzsche himself stressed in his original writings. As Coogan argues, the association to the ideals of "superman" in the public mind was the main intent of the pulp ubermensch, not the active engagement of any philosophical debates (2002, 312). According to Wolf-Meyer, the true Nietzschean übermensch is one whose purpose is to "go under" in order to teach humanity "in an attempt to affect utopia" (2003, 501). As superheroes are by and large focused on upholding, not overthrowing the status quo, very few of the superheroes have ever truly fit the *superman* role as defined by Nietzsche.

his "man-machine" with a hard "steel body" and armor that contains his "over-wrought body" that yearns to explode and erupt like a bullet in battle (1978/1989, 160–179).

In this chapter, I will examine and analyze the representation of masculinity in superhero comics, both through its presences and absences. First, I will take into account the embedded identity politics within the masculine superhero and analyze the crisis in white masculinity that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s (cf. Faludi, 1999; Shyminsky, 2006). This crisis can be traced in its different forms in the pages of superhero comics, from the deliberate deconstructions of the masculine ideals in *Watchmen* to the übermasculine and newly patriotic Captain America of Marvel's new *Ultimates* franchise, which responds to a different crisis of the immediate post-9/11 era. By analyzing these two distinctively different representations of superhero masculinity, my aim is to discuss the way superhero comics represent masculinity, and what these representations reveal in terms of popular geopolitics. Whereas *Watchmen* is an obvious critique of the standard superhero and his brand of hegemonic masculinity, *The Ultimates* presents a slightly more challenging reading, for it is a clear example of a post-9/11 re-masculinization that seems to abide with the hegemonic standard. However, a closer reading reveals that this seemingly ideal masculine hero is far from unproblematic, as Captain America's desire for total (and violent) solutions suggests a disturbing model of masculinity that comes to resemble Theweleit's proto-fascists.

After examining these representations of masculinity, section 3.2 will focus on the Others of American hegemonic masculinity in superhero comics. As the superhero tends to represent the white, heterosexual, and masculine hegemonic ideal, it is only logical to turn our attention to the non-white, the homosexual, and the feminine as the others of masculinity. I will first discuss the emergence of black superheroes and their representation in superhero comics as the racial other, and then move on to discuss the sexual politics of superhero comics and especially the Joker/Batman relationship as an example of the villain as sexually "deviant." Finally, I will devote section 3.3 to the problematic position often held by women in superhero comics as either objectified or victimized, but rarely empowered.

3.1 Calling for (Super)Heroes: White Masculinity in Crisis

While the entire 20th century has been claimed by some critics as an era of "crisis" in masculinity,[54] it is safe to say that specific eras nevertheless tend to produce more particular crises. For example, in the late 1980s and the 1990s America was facing what Susan Faludi calls a "domestic apocalypse" (1999, 6): as Faludi recounts, the era saw everyone from newspaper editors to preachers publicly bemoaning the crisis in American masculinity that manifested in the much-publicized "angry white male" demographic, which was linked to the rising number of unemployment, depression, and suicides found among the average male population in America (ibid.). Linked to this, the nation saw the emergence of a new men's movement that suggested that men needed to distance themselves from the domesticating effect of women and the Women's Rights movement and reconnect with other men, thus becoming "warriors" of a near-mythical proportion (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 152–153).[55] The effects of this crisis are visible in the era's popular fiction, as for example the increased amount of muscular action heroes in the 1980s' American cinema shows. Articulating the anxieties about masculinity and nationalism, as Gates notes, these movies presented the heroic male body as "stripped and on display, offering a spectacle of hypermasculinity through which masculine crisis could be performed and resolved" (2006, 133).[56]

This "crisis in white masculinity" in the late 1980s' and early 1990s' America has also been read as a reaction to the threat posed to male white privilege by the progressive and anti-oppressive politics of the latter part of the 20th century (Shyminsky, 2006, 392). In even broader terms, the entire 20th-century masculinity has been seen as going through a "historical upheaval," its effects most visible in

[54] The "crisis of masculinity" of the 20th century is neatly summed up by Connell as largely resulting from a shift in power relations: "a historical collapse of the legitimacy of patriarchal power, and a global movement for the emancipation of women" (1995, 84). He cites changes in production relations and the stabilization of gay and lesbian sexuality as other contributing factors in this "crisis" (ibid., 85).

[55] This trend did not remain in the realm of popular fiction, but was experienced first-hand by Americans through such real-life terrorists as the Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh and the Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 153). Demonstrating the horrifying effects of the American "belief in individual freedom, in the right to use violence against any person or force threatening that freedom," these "homegrown terrorists" brought to life the popular geopolitical fiction of the solitary (super)hero (Dijkink, 1996, 49).

[56] This rise of the hypermasculine action hero also contained a backlash against women, responding to the empowerment of women by either demonizing or excluding them (Gates, 2006, 101).

popular fiction, which began to feature male heroes increasingly characterized by a loss of faith in the familiar: heroes who no longer felt “at home” in the house/town they grew up in, who resisted cultural (re)assimilation, and were ultimately dislocated from the main narratives and subject positions of the nation’s dominant fiction (Silverman, 1992, 52–53). This historical upheaval identified by Silverman can in a broad sense mean “any historical event” which severs a large group of men from their belief in the dominant fiction (1992, 55). Such could be seen, for example, in WWII, the Vietnam War, or in the events of 9/11—all events which seriously affected America’s beliefs in certain dominant geopolitical narratives. Essentially providing a psychoanalytic framework, Silverman suggests that the concept of “historical trauma” can be used as a way to “conceptualize how history sometimes manages to *interrupt* or even *deconstitute* what a society assumes to be its master narratives” (1992, 55). These “master narratives,” or geopolitical narratives, exist in popular fiction, which “projects a masculinized vision of individualism” that can be read as a “symbolic representation of anxieties of gender” arising from a particular historical and cultural context (Nyman, 1997, 3).

Indeed, Jopi Nyman argues that a “historical crisis of masculinity” can already be found in the hard-boiled fiction novels of the early 20th century, which spawned as a reaction to the 1930s’ depression and the feeling of diminished autonomy it caused as the general success ideology of America was put to doubt (1997, 4; 192–193). Though distinctively separate from the hard-boiled narratives studied by Nyman, the superhero genre, also born in the United States in the late 1930s, displays something similar: indeed, the superhero shares many similarities with the hard-boiled heroes, such as the desire to define individualist masculinity. Nyman cites hard-boiled fiction as “a representation of the world of masculine fantasy and . . . a fictional location for resolving anxieties dealing with the loss of masculine privileges” (1997, 81), and the superhero comic, too, fulfills a great deal of this distinction. However, the way superhero comics present their solution differs crucially from hard-boiled fiction, as the superhero realizes his masculine omnipotence in a way the hard-boiled male can only hope for.

Though Nyman, Silverman, and others have convincingly argued for a general crisis in 20th century masculinity, others have been more skeptical. Gates (2006), for example, has questioned this claim of a masculine crisis at the end of the 20th century, claiming that though popular opinion may speak of a crisis, that in

itself is not sufficient proof of a crisis. As she points out, just because male protagonists of popular fiction are in crisis, it does not automatically mean the society at the moment is (Gates, 2006, 47–49). Similarly, Connell points out that as a term, "crisis" requires some kind of system that the crisis will either destroy or restore:

> Masculinity . . . is not a system in that sense. It is, rather, a configuration of practice *within* a system of gender relations. We cannot logically speak of the crisis of configuration; rather we might speak of its disruption or transformation. We can, however, logically speak of the crisis of gender as a whole, and of its tendencies towards crisis. (Connell, 1995, 84)

As Connell continues, these crisis tendencies may "provoke attempts to restore a dominant masculinity," citing such examples as the Women's Liberation and the Vietnam War as instigators of "new cults of masculinity" in the United States (ibid.). Similarly, even though Gates questions the claim of a "crisis in masculinity," she does admit that as the topic is popular, it signals a desire in society to address the issue in some form or another (2006, 49). Instead of a crisis, she offers a view of masculinity as being in a "state of fluctuation" as it attempts to renegotiate gender roles (ibid.).

The crisis in white masculinity, though clearly a problematic concept, will nevertheless function as a starting point for the analysis on the representation of masculinity in late 20th-century and early 21st-century superhero comics. In the next sections, I will conduct a close reading of two distinctively different superhero texts, namely *Watchmen* (1987) and *The Ultimates* (2002). *Watchmen* will be analyzed as an attempt to deconstruct some of the masculine superheroic ideals of the 1980s, whereas *The Ultimates*, and particularly the character of Captain America, will be analyzed as an example of the new, 21st-century lethal patriot and the dangerous masculine ideals he comes to represent. *Watchmen* is a clear deconstruction of the superheroic ideal and the geopolitics it stands for, whereas the "ultimate" Captain America presents a more complex reading due to its more privileged position within the geopolitical narratives of America, yet even this seemingly simple hegemonic masculinity can be problematized through a symptomal close reading that exposes some of underlying assumptions behind the construction of this masculine ideal.

Lethal Patriots: Masculine Ideals Deconstructed in *Watchmen*

Masculinity, defined as a dynamic concept, is "a set of expectations that society deems appropriate for a male subject to exhibit" (Gates, 2006, 28). Following this, the masculine ideal consists of the expectations the society sets for masculinity. Looking at the superhero, the masculine attributes attached to him stress the ideal as white, heterosexual, muscular, and violent.[57] The American superhero is often a patriot (no matter what his actual origin), and his ethical and moral virtues match his visual good looks. I would also argue that the modern myth of masculinity that the superhero represents is heavily influenced by a "messianic element" that was added to the idealized vision of masculinity already during the 19th century, the idea that a "true man" should always serve some higher ideal (Mosse, 1996, 44). Thus, such virtues as heroism and sacrifice for a higher purpose became "set attributes of manliness," and as Mosse points out, these became a frequent subject of visual representations, too (1996, 51). Furthermore, these ideas are usually joined with the notion of freedom and national unity, for which the ideal man would dedicate himself; in this way, the birth of what we see as the modern masculine ideal is tied very much to the rise of national consciousness (ibid., 51–52).

This dedication roots the masculine ideal firmly into the geopolitical narratives, as the hero's physical and mental virtues become inseparable from his national consciousness. After briefly characterizing the masculine ideal that American geopolitical narratives often celebrate, this section will concentrate more on the dismantling of this perceived ideal with the aim of highlighting some of the attributes of idealized masculinity in superhero comics. Tropes such as vigilantism, patriotism, or virility that are usually perceived as virtues in the masculine superhero can also be read as debatable and destructive, revealing similar problematics within the popular geopolitical narratives of America. I will analyze these issues through a close reading of some of the central masculine superheroes in *Watchmen*.

[57] It is important to note that though classic superheroes like Superman or Captain America clearly succumb to the standards of heteronormative white masculinity, they both do broaden its definition in their own ways: Superman's distinct alien origins as the last son of Krypton make him a "foreign-born immigrant," and it is through his desire to assimilate into the American culture that he achieves acceptance (Regalado, 2005, 92). Similarly, by creating Captain America in the generically white Steve Rogers, Kirby and Simon "broaden the concept of what it means to be an American superhero by suggesting that allegiance to nation, not ethnic origins, is the source of masculine empowerment" (ibid., 94). Both characters thus widen the possibilities idealized masculine identity to some extent by stressing dedication to the nation over ethnicity—as long as that ethnicity overtly conforms to the white stereotype.

Watchmen, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, is a 12–part graphic novel that portrays real-life superheroes in a fictional United States of the 1980s. It is explained that superheroes became real in this version of the United States, and that ordinary people without superpowers were inspired by superhero comics and took on the crime-fighting in tights in the 1940s, which quickly led to the extinction of the superhero comic book itself. Outlawed in 1977 by the "Keene Act," the heroes of *Watchmen* are either retired (Nite Owl/Dan Dreiberg, Silk Spectre/Laurie Juspeczyk) or choose to live as outlaws (Rorschach), not revealing their true identities. Only Dr. Manhattan/Jon Osterman with his superpowers (gained through the classic trope of superhero comics, a radiation accident) and the Comedian/Edward Blake remain active under strict governmental supervision. With the assistance of the latter two heroes, the United States has won the Vietnam War and gained substantial technological progress thanks to the contributions of Dr. Manhattan.

Through these "heroes," *Watchmen* quite consciously deconstructs some of the myths of the superhero, producing what Iain Thomson has labeled a form of "hypertrophic deconstruction":

> [Hypertrophic deconstruction] deconstructs the hero by developing its heroes—extending traditional hero fantasies beyond their limits—to the point where the reader comes to understand that these fantasies, realized, become nightmares. (2005, 106)

This deconstruction takes place on multiple levels, addressing a variety of issues within the superhero narrative from vigilantism to the very narrative structure of superhero comics. However, masculinity rises as one of the key themes in *Watchmen*, as it is developed to its limits through the cast of male characters from the nihilistic vigilante Rorschach to the emasculated ex-hero Nite Owl. *Watchmen* deconstructs the masculine hero ideal that characterizes the superhero genre through its revision of such masculine tropes as vigilantism and patriotism, but instead of producing a redefined masculinity that supports a newly-found masculine identity during an era of crisis, the comic functions to expose the inherent contradictions within them from the fascist undercurrents of violent patriotism to the often-hinted sexual dysfunction of the costume-fetish variety. I will address these themes through three central male characters: Rorschach, the Comedian, and Nite Owl. Distinctively separate from the seemingly "perfect" masculine heroes of Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan (whom I will not discuss), these three male characters offer a way to

analyze the masculine ideal of the superhero deconstructed. Rorschach comes to represent the violent masculine vigilante ideal in its most extremes, whereas the Comedian is deployed to demonstrate the problematic notion of masculinity as a patriotic virtue. Finally, Nite Owl allows a discussion of the fetishizing and sexual aspect of the superhero costume and its effect on masculinity. Through these characters, some of the essential complexities of the seemingly simple masculine ideal of the superhero are exposed, and through them, the narratives and ideals that motivate them.

Watchmen extrapolates the hypertrophic premises of superheroic masculinity most brutally in two of its main characters, Rorschach and the Comedian. Rorschach's diary monologue begins and ends the narrative, which casts him in the role of a main narrator. This in itself is a clear nod to the tradition of hard-boiled detectives, signaled by the frequent use of the first-person narration through the captions from Rorschach's journal, which emphasizes particular "linguistic strategies" that create a detached masculinity similar to the voice-overs often heard in film noir (Nyman, 1997, 36). The Comedian, a patriotic superhero employed by the government, dies in the comic's opening pages, leaving the reader to discover the character only through flashbacks. Though different, the characters share a distinction through their streak of "lethal patriotism," a violent and often uncompromising attitude that claims to see the world for what it is, and to do what must be done in order to save the nation. Both Rorschach and the Comedian are characterized through their use of violence, which becomes a central definer of their masculinity as they exercise their "right" to use violence granted to them by their mythical "hero" status. (For more on the uses and justifications of violence, see chapter 4.).

It is society's lack and inefficiency in fighting crime that motivates *Watchmen*'s most extreme vigilante, Rorschach. Wearing a mask that reacts to heat and creates the shapes similar to his namesake test, Rorschach begins his vigilante career after the (reality-based) murder of Kitty Genovese, a woman who was raped and murdered in New York in 1964 as several of her neighbors looked on. It is in the face of inadequate action from both society and state officials that he realizes that in order for justice to take place, he himself has to execute it. His actions themselves act as critique towards the inefficient and useless government, casting him in the role of the "true" patriot in a corrupt nation. This theme of discovering

the government as evil and corrupt was in itself a prominent theme in the popular entertainment of the 1970s' and 1980s' United States, demonstrated by such movies as Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* (1971), Charles Bronson's popular vigilante movie series *Death Wish* (1974–1994), and Sylvester Stallone's *First Blood* (1982). The popularity of these films, along countless others, testifies to a "deep schizophrenia" within America as the nation continues to praise democratic ideals while celebrating fictional visions which in reality would horrify it (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 152–153).

As Reynolds describes him, Rorschach is the archetypal vigilante superhero, but "with every semblance of glamour apparently taken away" (1992, 107). In fact, it is interesting to note that writer Alan Moore himself was reportedly dissatisfied with the way the majority of readers positively identified with Rorschach as the comic's hero despite the fact that Moore aimed to portray the "worthlessness of the vigilante ideal" through him (*Comics Journal* 138, 1990, 73; qtd in Reynolds, 1992, 117–118). Pondering upon the popularity of this clearly paranoid, violent, and right-wing "hero" who "represents the most unsavory part of American culture," Michael J. Prince comes to the conclusion that it is Rorschach's "resilience in the face of everything that would undermine his identity" that is the cause of his popularity among readers, because he will not compromise "even in the face of a collective problem" (such as a potential Armageddon) (2011, 823). Rorschach's display of the superheroic "extra effort," together with his uncompromising rhetoric of good and evil, though meant to be hypertrophic and thus undesirable, ultimately display an essential component of the popular rhetoric of American identity, which defines America as a "virtuous nation," constantly engaged in a mission to quench a mythical (and quite often biblical) "evil" (Costello, 2009, 3). As the American monomyth is strongly tied to an uncompromising ethic, Moore's extreme take on the American superhero in the form of Rorschach failed to challenge the cultural myth of the American hero. Despite the character's schizophrenic and unsupportable nature, he was still seen as the "hero" by the audience, which testifies to the persuasive power of the national myth even in its most extreme variations.

This resilience against insurmountable odds and the perceived moral "clarity" of good and evil are very apparent in Rorschach, whose world is one of black-and-white morals without a shade of gray (much like his Rorschach inkblot mask where the colors never mix):

> Never despair. Never surrender. (I; 16)
>
> Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this. (I; 24)
>
> We do not do this thing because it is permitted. We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled. (VI; 15)

"Never surrender" clearly states the ultimate dedication of the masculine hero to his principles and signals his faith in the higher ideal he serves because he is "compelled" to do so. Ultimately, he will rather die than agree to a compromise to protect Ozymandias's newly-found "utopia." Though this unwillingness to compromise is undoubtedly what gained him the status of "hero" among some of the readers, the comic clearly aims at dismantling this reading by presenting Rorschach as a violent, paranoid, and misogynist schizophrenic.

Indeed, a particular source of potential emasculation for Rorschach is derived from the corrupting female sex, the woman who threatens his sense of identity. This links back to the idea of the hero renouncing a stable sexual union, which has been a classic trope of the American monomyth as the hero must resist (feminine) temptation in order to keep his motivations pure (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 47). The superhero genre has partially adopted this aspect, often depicting heroes who shun all close female companionship, either for their own good or simply because they prefer the company of other men over women. But while Superman may play tricks on Lois Lane to keep her from finding out his civilian identity (and thus be forced to marriage), Rorschach takes this aspect to its misogynistic extremes. A quote from Rorschach's monologue from the beginning of *Watchmen* serves well to testify the sentiments of the lethal patriot of the 1980s:

> The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout "Save us!" ...and I'll look down and whisper "No." (I; 1)

The "vermin" drowning in its own filth is identified as either prostitutes or politicians. In other words, both women and the government are seen as responsible for the corrupted state of the nation, and only the true patriot can see the world for what it is. Rorschach also refers to the first Silk Spectre, Sally Jupiter, as "a bloated, aging whore" (I; 19), and criticizes the way "women's breasts [are] draped across every billboard, every display, littering the sidewalk" (II; 25). He cites his work in the garment industry as "unpleasant" due to the requirement to handle women's

clothing (VI; 10), and his dislike with the feminine is apparent in the way he cuts up a dress until "it didn't look like a woman anymore" (VI; 10) and how he states his disapproval of the Silk Spectre's (very figure-revealing) costume (VIII; 21).

Through his obvious misogyny and rejection of women, Rorschach comes to resemble Theweleit's fascist males, who experienced women as "all that might threaten or deluge or to flood the boundaries of the male ego" (Benjamin and Rabinbach, 1989, xvii). Because Rorschach becomes the hypertrophic extension of the popular vigilante myth of American popular geopolitics, his violent rejection of the female can be interpreted as exposing the inherent misogyny within the popular heroes of America. Rorschach reveals a strong tension in the masculine ideal represented by superhero comics, as love and family must often be rejected in order to maintain the autonomy of masculine authority (Mosse, 1996, 166–167; Nyman, 1997, 7). In Rorschach, this part of the popular hero myth is taken to its most extreme and highly misogynist (and also homophobic)[58] version of the sexual renunciation of the superhero: he becomes the "lethal patriot" who must resist and reject women in order to survive the "crisis of masculinity" that Lawrence and Jewett (2002, 151–155) identify as rising already in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Whereas Rorschach clearly functions as the hypertrophic extreme of the masculine vigilante ideal of the American monomyth, Moore and Gibbons use the character of the Comedian to problematize the patriotic virtue associated with the superhero since Captain America. It is revealing that Rorschach (whose uncompromising morality leads him to kill rapists and despise whores) actually idolizes the Comedian, whose attempt to rape the original Silk Spectre is viewed by Rorschach as a "moral lapse" (I; 21) of a great man, a justification of "a hypermasculine display of power and violence" (Loftis, 2009, 72). The Comedian represents a "real" man to Rorschach, whereas all the other heroes of his cohort are seen as either failures or otherwise corrupt; he fights U.S. wars in both the South Pacific and in Vietnam, and handles the Iranian hostage situation in 1980 (IV; 23). As Rorschach describes him, it is clear that he views the Comedian as standing for

[58] Homosexuality also clearly rises as the negative form of masculinity in Rorschach's worldview, revealed in his evaluation on the hero Ozymandias: "He is pampered and decadent, betraying even his own shallow, liberal affectations. Possibly homosexual? Must remember to investigate further." (I; 19). In Rorschach's world, homosexuality implies moral corruption and the inability to control one's sexual urges, the very opposite of the masculine ideal. As Nyman notes, homosexual desire destabilizes the dominant binary categories of gender (1997, 135), and accordingly, Rorschach, too, expresses distrust towards anyone he sees as challenging this binary.

the same uncompromising attitude he holds for himself: "He [the Comedian] stood up for his country […] He never let anybody retire him." (I; 17). Yet, the Comedian seems far from an "ideal" masculine hero of the traditional superhero comic: he unhesitatingly shoots and kills his pregnant Vietnamese girlfriend, tries to violently rape Silk Spectre, and is generally depicted as enjoying the violence he inflicts as a "hero." As the Comedian fires at the rioting crowds in *Watchmen* (the very crowd who is protesting against his actions as a "hero" without state sanction), the dumbfounded Nite Owl asks who they are protecting the people from, and the Comedian answers: "From **themselves**" (II, 18). On the same page, the Comedian even goes as far as to identify himself as the embodiment of the new and irrevocably twisted "American dream" as Nite Owl despairingly asks him: "But the country's **disintegrating**. What's **happened** to America? What's happened to the American **Dream**?" (II; 18).

The Comedian is deliberately portrayed (much like Captain America) as embodying the mythical "American Dream," his outfit a more realist and militarized version of the star'n'stripes motif. However, the Comedian's attire also addresses sexual subtexts of the superhero costume and its flair to fetishistic clothing through the use of leather and the bondage–themed gimp mask. While Captain America was created to stand for the idealistic masculine hero of American popular geopolitics and especially the virtue of patriotism before WWII, the Comedian is an obvious mockery of this ideal made "real." The connection is primarily stressed through the Comedian's suit, which visually borrows the American flag thematic from Captain America, but with a clear military practicality (and the fetishistic overtone). Yet, the Comedian shares none of Captain America's patriotic idealism, displaying instead a cynicism that ridicules the very basis of the superhero idea. As he addresses his fellow crime-fighters in 1966:

> You people are a **joke**. You hear **Moloch**'s back in town, you think "Oh **boy**! Let's **gang up** and **bust** him!" You think that **matters**? You think that **solves** anything? It don't matter **squat**. **Here** -- lemme show ya **why** it don't matter… It don't matter squat because inside **thirty years** the **nukes** are gonna be flyin' like **maybugs**… and then **Ozzy** here is gonna be the smartest man on the **cinder**. Now, pardon **me**, but I got an **appointment**. See you in the **funny papers**. (II; 11).

Through the metatextual reference to the "funny papers" (the origins of comic book superheroes themselves), the Comedian condemns his idealistic colleagues as obsolete things of the past. Instead of clinging on to the past, the Comedian becomes

the state-sponsored hero Captain America has repeatedly refused to become. A willing agent for the government, the Comedian could be read as the "what if?" of Captain America's dark side: the national hero who compromises his principles in working for the government and in the process becomes cynical and disillusioned, losing his faith in the American Dream.

The Comedian is also used to address a particular geopolitical trauma of the United States: the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War in itself reads as Silverman's "historical trauma" that severed men from the dominant fiction of masculinity in the United States. As already mentioned in 2.1, the Vietnam War has been seen by many as the most significant American war, one that produced a painful geopolitical struggle over American identity. Within this context, *Watchmen* posits an interesting commentary on the Vietnam War as its alternate United States wins the war with relative ease. The Comedian, however, manages to see the risk involved: "I mean, if we'd **lost** this war... I dunno. I think it might have driven us a little **crazy**, y'know? As a **country**." (II; 13). The effect of a possible loss in Vietnam, while fiction in the world of *Watchmen*, is recognized by the Comedian as a risk to the country and everything it represents. The Vietnam War is a national trauma that affected the American geopolitical identity, perhaps driving it "a little crazy," as the Comedian prophesizes, and erasing it will undoubtedly have consequences.

In Jamie A. Hughes's analysis, the Comedian's character in *Watchmen* is "able to see more deeply into the truth of American ideology" due to his experiences in war, yet he, like the other heroes, is unable to do anything about it (2006, 551). The Comedian becomes a "satirical reworking of the state-sponsored, nationalistic breed of superhero most notably exemplified by Captain America" (Reynolds, 1992, 107), doing what Captain America never did by actively engaging in the Vietnam War.[59] The Comedian (aka Edward Blake) comes to represent the ultimate outcome of the patriotic virtue in the extreme condition in Vietnam. As Dr. Manhattan describes him:

> Blake is interesting. I have never met anyone so deliberately amoral. He suits the climate [in Vietnam]: the madness, the pointless butchery... As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I also realize

[59] Captain America did briefly enter Vietnam to rescue a helicopter pilot in 1965 and again five years later in a storyline "Captured in Vietnam." However, both times he did so with a distinctively neutral attitude (Hayton and Albright, 2009, 18). Overall, the small amount of Vietnam-related storylines is telling of the reluctance to take a stand on the issue.

> that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding. Blake's different. He understands perfectly... and he doesn't care. (IV; 19)

The Comedian's morality (or the lack of it) is interpreted by Dr. Manhattan, who sees his actions as insane, yet at the same time mirroring the twisted values of the society in which he exists, realizing that insanity may be the only way to cope with the world. Even though his brand of masculinity may be idolized by Rorschach, the final image painted by the graphic novel quite clearly denies this, as it exposes the violent and misogynist elements at work in the lethal patriot and his understanding of "the human condition" of mindless butchering that took place in Vietnam.

Finally, the character of Nite Owl will be used to address the fetishizing aspect of superheroism, the "ornamental masculinity" which refers to "a model of manhood overly dependent on symbols and appearance" (DuBose, 2009, 207). This ornamental masculinity addresses the issue of the superhero costume and its significance; it becomes, according to Faludi, "something to drape over the body, not draw from inner resources" (1999, 35). This ornamental masculinity leads, as DuBose points out, to a nigh-fetishistic amount of attention given to the iconic elements of the superhero costume (2009, 208). The costume becomes so overpowering in this notion of masculinity that it can override the private persona of the hero—and this can become problematic, as the hero persona is seen as more "real" than the civilian one. Though this trope is in fact often presented as such (the superheroic persona as the "true" persona while the civilian is a mask), its implications, when transferred into a more realist text like *Watchmen*, reveals the problems it clearly entails. Nite Owl, retired since 1977, is aged, out of shape, and impotent at the loss of his heroic identity and costume. Self-reflexive, he is vaguely aware of the costume's perverse power. Showing Laurie a prototype of an "exo-skeleton" costume in his secret base, she comments: "Jesus. That sounds like the sort of costume that could really mess you **up**." His laconic reply, "Is there any **other** sort?" (VII; 8), hints at an awareness of the fetishizing nature of the costume and its (ornamental) power. To further stress Dan's passion for the superhero costume, it is revealed that he also has several separate costumes for different circumstances, including costumes for underwater work and low temperatures (VII; 6 and X; 27).

Nite Owl has succumbed to the authorities and resigned after legislation forbade vigilantism in 1977, and in Rorschach's uncompromising eyes, he has

become a quitter and thus a less of a man, "a flabby failure who sits whimpering in his basement" (I; 19). In a dream sequence (VII; 16), Nite Owl peels off the naked skins from Laurie and himself, revealing their "true" identities in costume beneath. After waking, he walks down to his basement naked. Without his heroic persona, the "ornamental masculinity" of the superhero costume, he feels emasculated and (literally) impotent: "It's this **war**, the feeling that it's **unavoidable**. It makes me feel so **powerless**. So impotent. -- I can just feel this **anxiety**, this **terror** bearing down… I came down here for, for my **costume**…" (VII; 19–20). Nite Owl perhaps most clearly expresses the other spectrum of masculinity in crisis presented in *Watchmen*; instead of holding on to an uncompromising moral palette and the use of violence as a definer of masculinity like Rorschach and the Comedian, he has become soft, effeminate, and impotent as his role as the masculine superhero has been denied. Furthermore, he has projected far too much power into the superhero costume, relying on a brand of ornamental masculinity that fails to come from within. Succumbing to control by the authorities, he has lost his autonomy and, consequently, his masculinity as a result.

It is not until Nite Owl and Silk Spectre go out in their costumes and save several people from a burning building that he finally manages to perform sexually. Afterwards, Laurie asks him: "Did the costumes make it good? Dan...?" (VII; 28) and he confesses to the excitement of the costumes as something he has been ashamed to admit, his monologue testifying to the remasculating and empowering potential of the superhero costume: "I feel so **confident** it's like I'm on **fire**. And all the **mask killers**, all the **wars** in the **world**, they're just **cases** -- just **problems** to solve." (VII, 28). Laurie sees this newly-found passion as something that has "awoken" within Dan, further stressing the "natural" view of masculinity as something active, powerful, and instinctual which cannot be subdued or denied without subsequent emasculation. Dan's inner sense of masculinity is restored through the combination of his superhero costume and superhero action. Laurie's role as the token female hero of the graphic novel is simply to witness this change and to enable it through her willingness to engage in sexual relations with him as his masculinity is restored—like the vast majority of female characters in superhero comics, her value is defined mainly though her relationship to the men in the narrative rather than as an individual.

Even though the role of women in superhero comics has a chapter of its own in this dissertation, the role of women in *Watchmen* merits a brief discussion here. As the above scene between Dan and Laurie reveals, the role of the female character in *Watchmen* is to make the male hero conscious of his masculinity, to reinforce and complement the man's maleness, and to prove his heterosexuality—and this she can only do by remaining "truly feminine" (Mosse, 1996, 74). There are only two female heroes in the main cast[60]: the original Silk Spectre (Sally Jupiter) from the 1940s and her daughter, Laurie, who continues in her mother's footsteps. Even though Moore and Gibbons could have seized the opportunity and done the same with the female heroes of *Watchmen* as they did with the male heroes, they ultimately do very little to destabilize the hierarchical relationship between the male and female heroes. Instead, the female heroes simply "reinforce stereotypes by wearing hypersexualized costumes" (Donovan and Richardson, 2009, 176), their role remaining mainly supportive of the male heroes. Laurie's mother, Sally, is not only sexualized but also a victim of sexual violence as the Comedian attempts to violently rape her in chapter II. This scene further stresses the nature of violence as sexual when inflicted upon women.

While women in *Watchmen* can become crime-fighters (a role usually reserved for men), they can only do it if their femininity remains unquestionable—and this is done primarily through their clothes (Donovan and Richardson, 2009, 176). As Mosse, too, notes, women ultimately cannot become warriors as they are required to provide the contrast between heroism and weakness, where the "ideal female body [is] a sensuous, sexual beauty as opposed to the heroic body of the ideal male" (1996, 53). In other words, the bodily nature between the sexes is what is contrasted through a binary division, and dichotomy is clearly present in the superhero genre, where male heroes' bodies are hard, stoic, active, and heroic, whereas the female body tends to be sexualized, overly sensual, passive, and static. It interesting to note that though *Watchmen* is often hailed as a work that deconstructs the superhero genre, it nevertheless actually conforms fairly well with the established gender binaries listed above. Accordingly, though Laurie as her civilian self is clothed in covering turtlenecks and long trousers, her first Silk

[60] The third female hero worth mentioning is the Silhouette from the 1940s, who was murdered by "a minor adversary seeking revenge" (I; 19). She is revealed also to have been a lesbian, which led to her expulsion from the original hero team, signaling that her heroism had become intolerable due to her transgression of expected gender boundaries.

Spectre appearance is marked with an objectified portrayal with several panels presenting close-ups of her uncovered legs (VII; 24–25).[61] During the mission when Silk Spectre and Nite Owl rescue people from the burning building, it is her feminine task to serve the victims coffee, while Nite Owl handles the more "masculine" task of flying the Owl ship. Male heroes are warriors, whereas female heroes, essentially, are not, and *Watchmen* makes no attempt to challenge this notion.

The different masculinities in *Watchmen*, from Rorschach's uncompromising and misogynist vigilantism and the Comedian's lethal patriotism to Nite Owl's sexual dysfunction and ornamental masculinity, all display some of the essential problematics embedded within the seemingly simple hegemonic ideal of white masculinity in superhero comics. Only the representation of women ultimately fails to reassert any major differences, succumbing to the weary tradition of hypersexualization without a hint of deconstructive irony. In the end, masculinity is just one of the many elements of the superhero genre that *Watchmen* problematizes; though an essential marker of the genre, the deconstruction of the superhero in Moore and Gibbons's text is not restricted to its partial reappraisal of the genre's gendered conventions. Moving on from *Watchmen* and its deliberate exploration of the fundamental tensions in superhero comics, the next section will take on a more recent example of masculine ideals that do not directly read as conscious hypertrophic extensions through the "ultimate" variations of some of Marvel's most iconic heroes in *The Ultimates* (2002).

Real Men: Reading the *Ultimate* Captain America

> And so it goes—go round again/
> But now and then we wonder who the real men are.
> (Joe Jackson: "Real Men," 1982)

In 2000, Marvel Comics launched a new imprint called the *Ultimate Marvel*. Marketed widely as "deliberately *realist* reprisals" of Marvel's most famous comics (Thomson, 2005, 105, emphasis in the original) and thus owing significantly to *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the comics represent more recent

[61] Interestingly, Laurie's only real action scene fighting a gang of "top-knots" takes place when she is *not* in her superhero costume (III; 12-15).

superhero fiction that aims to be “more ‘grounded,’ down-to-earth, and rooted in the self-consciously plausible” while still depicting super-powered beings (Morrison, 2011, 348). Whereas Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross’s *Marvels* (1994) a few years earlier had attempted to capture the child-like wonder and amazement of the genre, these “ultimate” versions of Marvel’s established heroes were significantly darker in tone and created an alternate universe separate from the official Marvel continuity. The series has so far featured such Marvel heroes as the Avengers, Spider-Man, the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four. As deliberate rewritings of iconic superheroes made contemporary and more believable, their relocation into a more realist present (Captain America is found and thawed in the 21st century instead of the 1960s, Spider-Man was recast as a half-black, half-Hispanic teen after Peter Parker’s death, etc.) creates a powerful commentary on the current geopolitical relevance of the 21st-century superhero as a representative of a contemporary and “more realist” vision of masculinity.

Within the context of American popular geopolitics, one that becomes of special interest is the rewriting of Captain America in the title *The Ultimates*, a remake of the classic Marvel team the Avengers which featured such established heroes as Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and the Hulk. Published in 2002, *The Ultimates* is a clear attempt at re-establishing a new popular geopolitical identity in a post-9/11 United States, giving, as Morrison notes, “a voice to Bush’s America’s posturing, superheroic fantasies of global law enforcement in a posttraumatic world” (2011, 348). What emerges is both an invigorated but simultaneously dangerously nostalgic vision of the re-masculinized all-American hero in the 21st century that shares a number of similarities with the previously mentioned German fascists as studied by Theweleit in *Male Fantasies*. Crucially, the “ultimate” Captain America represents masculinity redefined primarily through violent action, marking violence as a solution to the crisis in masculinity presented by the immediate post-9/11 America.

As I will study more fully in chapter 6, the attacks on 9/11 created a historical and national trauma that disrupted the geopolitical narratives of America and its masculine ideals, and as Smith and Goodrum note, superhero comics (among several other popular genres) helped the “return to hegemonic masculinity” through

a "rephallusization" (a term they borrow from Cynthia Weber[62]) (2011, 487–488). Smith and Goodrum call attention to the ways heteronormative and hegemonic masculinity was reasserted in superhero comics after 9/11 by "stressing the 'natural' connection between men and power" and casting the attacks in terms of gender through an emphasis on masculinity and self-control that found its opposite in female villains and loss of self-control (ibid., 493). Overall, this rephallusization aimed to "restore ideological belief in masculine ascendancy as a part of a wider project of soliciting faith in the dominant fiction" (ibid.). In this sense, the "ultimate" Captain America becomes an attempt to "rephallusize" America's hegemonic masculinity destabilized by the terrorist attacks. As the attacks also shattered the popular geopolitical narratives of the nation, this rephallusization is geopolitical, too. Instead of 9/11 and the terrorist threat, however, *The Ultimates* portrays an alien threat that allows the heroes to create a fictional catharsis as they defeat the aliens through masculine violence.

The Ultimates,[63] a 13-issue series by Mark Millar (writer) and Bryan Hitch (artist) was originally published in 2002–2004 and collected in two volumes *(The Ultimates Vol. 1: Super-Human* #1–6 and *The Ultimates Vol. 2: Homeland Security* #7–13). Rewriting the classic Marvel hero team the Avengers, the comic features such heroes as Captain America, the Wasp, Thor, and Iron Man (among others), coming together for the first time as a government-sponsored superhero team led by Nick Fury. Much in the vein of *Watchmen*, the comic reintroduces the iconic characters as deliberately more "realist" and with significantly darker tones, apparent in such explicit themes as Ant-Man/Giant-Man's spousal abuse towards the Wasp and Thor's left-wing, anti-Bush statements. Furthermore, the comic also features a guest appearance by President George W. Bush, whose "cool or uncool" rhetoric is clearly deployed to highlight his lack of political credibility. The comic's visual style, courtesy of artist Bryan Hitch, follows an almost photorealistic quality where images of George W. Bush are as believable as those of Captain America, creating a "dizzying, stifling collapse of fact into fantasy" (Morrison, 2011, 349). This collapse of fantasy and fact is further stressed by a continuous flow of

[62] Weber, *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a 'Post-Phallic' Era*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
[63] *The Ultimates* was followed by *The Ultimates 2* (2005-2007) and *The Ultimates 3* (2008-2009). However, this chapter will only deal with the first 13 issues that comprise the first miniseries.

appearances by and references made by the characters to actual living people, such as a number of actors and other celebrities.

The plot of *The Ultimates* firmly relocates the Marvel heroes into the 21st century, where the American government enlists a team of super-powered "metahumans," who, amidst personal antagonisms, end up fighting shape-shifting aliens who want to control all of Earth (and who used to be Nazis, too, thus deploying another classic trope of early superhero comics). As the Avengers (or, as they are now called, the Ultimates) take on the alien attack as a team, Captain America rises as the key definer of hegemonic masculinity in the narrative. This is made explicit in the way his masculinity is regularly contrasted with the other "heroic" masculinities present in the narrative. Iron Man, Tony Stark, is a joking, drunken playboy, Thor's extreme anti-U.S. left-wing ideology marks him as an unsuitable model for idealized U.S. masculinity, Bruce Banner (aka the Hulk) is a socially awkward loser, and Ant-Man/Giant-Man Hank Pym is taking anti-depressants while regularly beating his wife, Janet Pym (aka the Wasp). Contrasted with this range of masculine characters, Captain America is clearly presented to the reader as the "true" masculine ideal of America, a hero of the "lost world of traditional patriotic values" (Murray, 2011, 253) whose bodily perfection matches a seemingly uncorrupt moral stand straight from the 1940s. Unsurprisingly, Janet Pym's main role in the comic is to act as a token female through whom Captain America can demonstrate his masculinity, first by avenging her beating in the hands of her husband, and later, as a marker of his heterosexuality as a romance between the two is implied (although through nothing more than a chaste kiss).

However, this first impression of the ultimate Captain America as an example of the ideal masculine hero, the hegemonic ideal, is not as simple as it may initially appear. In its attempt at rephallusization, the comic creates a debatable vision of a new hegemonic ideal of masculinity. *The Ultimates* presents the reader with a 21st-century Captain America who has been floating in the Atlantic in suspended animation since 1945. Whereas the original Steve Rogers was located and thawed by the Avengers in the 1960s after only 20 years in the ice, *The Ultimates*' Steve Rogers has been in the ice for almost 60 years.[64] Highlighting the sharp dissonance between the 1940s' American masculine ideals and the grim 21st-

[64] Interestingly, the 2011 motion picture *Captain America: The First Avenger* (dir. Joe Johnston) follows this rewriting of the character instead of the original continuity.

century reality, Steve Rogers is a man dislocated in time, a soldier completely out of his era. In an effort to create a nostalgic character, a hero of the past, Steve Rogers is presented very much as a modern era Rip Van Winkle, removed out of time while everyone he knew and loved are either dead or dying of old age. Much like Washington Irving's hero from 1819, Captain America, too, has to come to terms with the changing world. He attacks Commander Nick Fury immediately upon waking, for in his time no black men could have reached commanding positions within the army (#3; 8). Like Rip, who foolishly announces his loyalty to the king after sleeping through the American Revolution, Steve Rogers, too, finds himself in a world very different from the one he lived in. However, whereas Rip Van Winkle soon adjusts to the new order of things (mostly by ignoring it), the "ultimate" Captain America decidedly holds on to his 1940s' worldview, refusing to integrate into the more relativist moral atmosphere of the 21st century.

Mirroring the 20th-century hegemonic ideals of white America masculinity that stress the hard male body and its explosive and violent force, Captain America's first reaction after regaining consciousness is to fight his way free, and his actions continue to follow the classic solution of the "decent right hook" that solved most of the problems in the Golden Age superhero comics. For example, his reactions to the modern era problems he witnesses include beating the Giant-Man as a punishment for his violent behavior towards the Wasp and brutally kicking Bruce Banner in the face after his rampage as the Hulk, both incidents illustrating his problematic tendency to solve issues with violence. This "ultimate" Captain America is pronouncedly more aggressive, more cynical, more sinister, and more violent than his official counterpart, signaling the arrival of an "ultimate" masculinity of a seemingly forgotten era into the 21st century.

To achieve this effect of "ultimate" masculinity, the comic makes Captain America's military background explicit by depicting him very much as a tough drill sergeant type, illustrated through his military-inspired outfits as well as his actions and language. As his sidekick, Bucky, gleefully describes him in the introductory flashback from his final WWII mission: "Don't you **read** the papers, pal? Captain America practically **never** wears a parachute… He says **parachutes** are for **girls**." (#1; 6). A few pages later, the reader is faced with a rare splash page depicting the

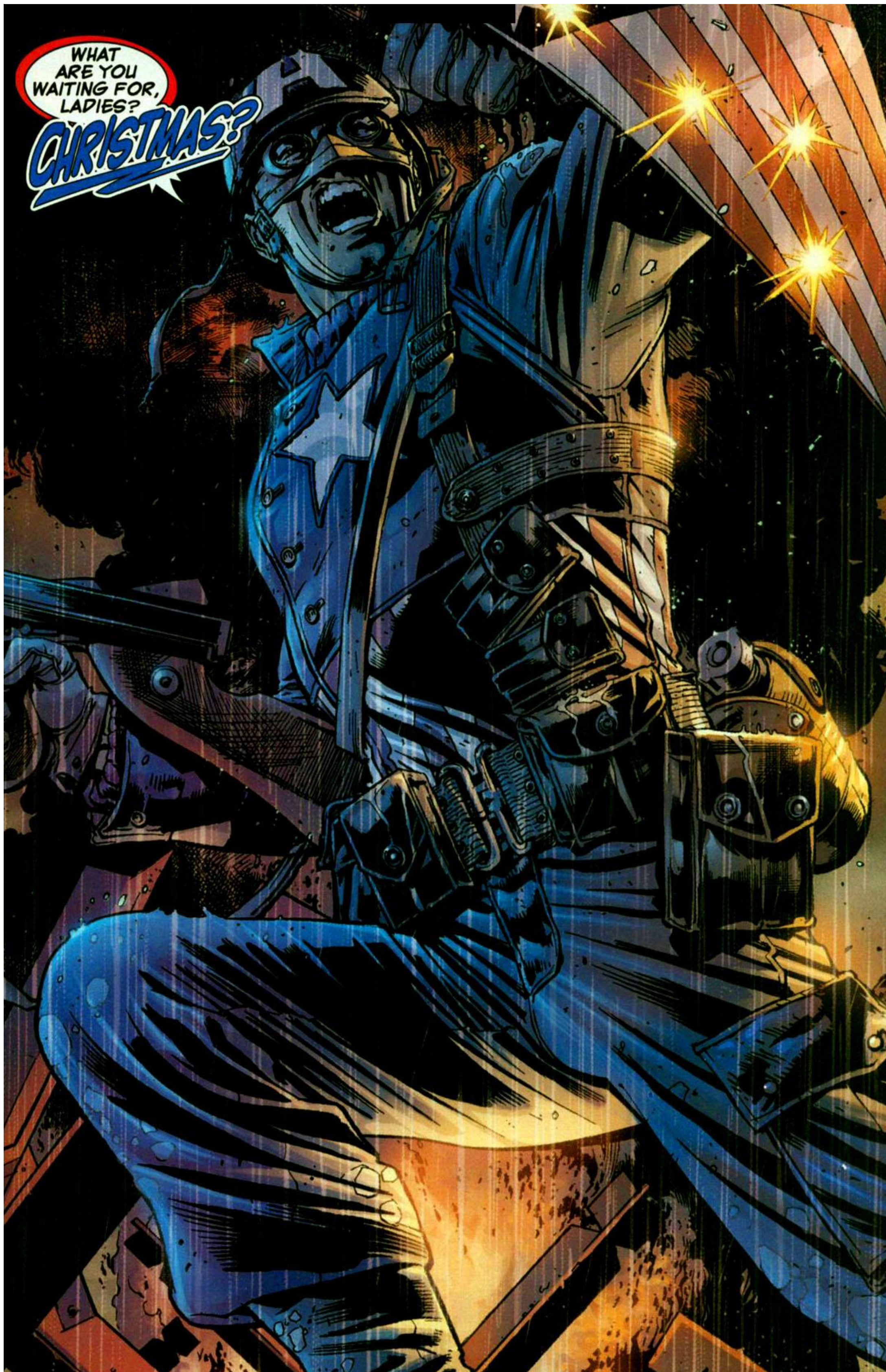

Fig. 2. *The Ultimates* #1 (Mar 2002), 16. © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

WWII-era Captain America in his full masculine glory, as he yells: "**What are you waiting for, ladies? Christmas?**" (#1; 16) (see. fig. 2). Taunting the other men as feminine through the mocking use of "ladies," he takes verbal control over the situation while his body completely commands the entire page, his looks and actions both offering a rephallusization of the nation after 9/11.

As Connell notes, violence tends to play an important role in the gender politics among men: as most occurrences of major violence takes place between men, violence becomes a central way of (re)asserting masculinity (1995, 83). Thus, Captain America's solution to stopping the Hulk's rampage in issue 4 echoes not only a desire for a simple solution of the past, but a clear desire for violent confrontation as Cap grins: "We just hit him until he **drops**." (#4: 23). In addition, he seems to view his violent behavior towards his teammates as "educating" them, echoing the fascist masculine discourses studied by Theweleit (1978/1989, 294–295). Indeed, as mentioned above, the final page of issue 5 shows him kicking a defenseless, now human-shaped and apologetic Bruce Banner brutally in the face in a manner that carries a distressingly fatherly tone as Captain America first states: "Why would I **hit** you, Bruce? You're one of the **gang**, for God's sake…part of the **team**." (#5; 25) After assuring Bruce he will not harm him, Captain America coolly proceeds to administer the brutal (yet educative) punishment, establishing a mode of masculine violence that seemingly approves the beating of a weaker man in the name of education. This act is clearly a "display of power as violence against the non-masculine" (Nyman, 1997, 98) as Bruce Banner comes to stand for the antithesis of Captain America's implicit hegemonic masculinity, further enhanced through the violent beating of the (now) weak male. This display of masculine power is visually emphasized by portraying the frail and naked Banner on his knees and gazing up to Captain America, whose position as the powerful male is clear from his higher position within the panels.

Captain America's use of violence in defining masculine relations becomes increasingly debatable as the comic progresses. For example, in issue 9, Captain America confronts Giant-Man Hank Pym for his violent attack on his wife. During their confrontation, Hank transforms into the Giant Man, yet the significantly smaller Captain America manages to defeat him, leaving him battered under dozens of metal pipes with the quip "How **big** do you feel **now**, dirtbag?" (#9; 12). While Captain America's deed could be seen as heroic, as he deals out a fairly "just"

punishment expected from a superhero, a closer reading of the scene allows for a more nuanced interpretation. What the closer reading reveals, in particular, is the way Captain America still holds on to the monomythic "good guy/bad guy" formula as he first demands and then violently provokes Hank Pym's transformation to the Giant Man so that he can have "something to hit" (#9; 4). This conditioning of violence signals a twisted version of the "who-shoots-first" scenario from the genre of the Westerns where the hero's use of violence is only justifiable and needed because of the imminent threat posed by the villain. In order to justify his violence, Captain America needs to deliberately provoke Pym into changing, which undermines the righteousness of his actions and problematizes the notion of justifiable violence as "self-defense." This principle of pre-emptive violence in the name of defense could arguably be claimed as an element of American foreign policy, which means that presenting it as void and provoked does have the potential to question the very premise of this geopolitical script. When "good" people are marked by a defensive stance and fair play and "bad" people by an offensive one with dirty play, the good guy stereotype that Captain America represents becomes questionable (Jewett and Lawrence, 2003, 223).

Despite Captain America's debatable brand of violent masculinity, he is still clearly stressed as the hegemonic ideal in *The Ultimates*. This becomes increasingly obvious when noting how he is contrasted with the other types of masculinity in the comic. Control becomes an important factor in defining masculinity, whether through drink (identified by Nyman as a major area of "masculine omnipotence", 1997, 319–321) where the alcoholic Tony Stark gloriously fails, or in basic self-control, most prominently displayed by Bruce Banner's transformation into the primordial and beastly Hulk. According to Nyman, the loss of control over one's body or seeing it as distinct and separate object represents "general cultural anxieties" (1997, 120), and the Hulk's transformation into an uncontrollable, super-powered being clearly represents such an anxiety. The Hulk's deviant masculinity is further emphasized through an "ultimate" rewriting that stresses the sexual motivations behind his transformation and loss of control. Driven by an uncontrollable sexual lust instead of the mere anger that motivates him in the original comics, the Hulk is now depicted as unleashed male desire, the very antithesis of proper, autonomous, and controlled masculinity. Transforming into the Hulk after hearing that his ex-girlfriend, Betty Ross, is having dinner with real-life

actor and late 90s' heartthrob Freddie Prinze Jr., Bruce Banner/Hulk makes no attempts at hiding his primary motivation:

> **Get away from Freddie Prinze Jr., Betty! You're supposed to be Banner's girlfriend! Banner too much of a woman for you, Betty? Maybe it's time you gave Hulk a try, huh? Hulk's gonna get you no matter who they send, Betty! Hulk hornier than a--** (#5; 6)

This Hulk's primary motivation is sexual frustration, which clearly marks him deviant in terms of controlled hegemonic masculinity. In addition, his homophobic nature is played to its full advantage in the final battle with the aliens, when Captain America provokes the Hulk to attack the aliens by suggesting that they called him "a sissy boy" (#13; 17). At the mere suggestion that someone questions his heterosexuality, Hulk attacks the massive alien aircraft bellowing "No! Hulk not sissy boy… **HULK STRAIGHT!**" (#13;17).

Apart from his fellow heroes, Captain America is also defined in terms of his villains, which in *The Ultimates* turn out to be shape-shifting Nazi aliens. In the final battle against the (Nazi) alien invaders in #12–13, Captain America (with the assistance of the provoked Hulk, whose uncontrollable power is only useful when instigated and thus controlled by Captain America) proceeds to beat the alien leader into a bloody purple pulp, eerily reminiscent of Theweleit's concept of a "bloody miasma": a situation where the man comes into physical contact with enemy elements that threaten his boundaries, and from which he must differentiate himself "by smashing them to pieces . . . or shooting at point-blank range, [escaping] by mashing others to the pulp he himself threatens to become" (1978/1989, 273–274). The Nazi aliens are a literal threat to Earth in their desire to either enslave or extinguish the entire planet, yet they also represent a more personal threat to Captain America himself: they threaten his identity by suggesting surrender. The idea of compromise or defeat is unacceptable in the hypermasculine world of Captain America. When the alien leader suggests that Captain America should surrender, he replies: "You think this letter on my head stands for **France**?" (#12; 24), while the accompanying image makes his stand extremely clear as his enraged face fills an entire page. Comics writer Grant Morrison sees this as a statement that "neatly encapsulated the mood in America" (2011, 349), yet he fails to reflect on the actual mood itself. Implicitly boosting an injured nation through his violent exclamation of reinvigorated national identity, the undertones imply a more severe change in the national consciousness. The America rewritten in the "ultimate" Captain America is

one of cynical nostalgia and an uncompromising attitude that aim at a violent remasculinization of the popular geopolitical narratives and scripts shattered by 9/11.

In geopolitical terms, the villains of *The Ultimates* are not really locatable in terms of either geography or politics (being Nazi aliens). This means that they become a blank sheet that any geopolitical Other can be painted on, as the "villain can represent any subject position which the U.S. national identity does not" (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 494). As the Nazi aliens in *The Ultimates* resemble humans on the outside, their true nature can literally be discerned only by tearing them to pieces and exposing their purple blood. By visually resembling humans, the Nazi aliens threaten Captain America's identity by suggesting that as both the stereotypical all-American boy (aka Captain America) and the ideal member of the SS both share the same masculine ideal with its "virtues, strength, and aesthetic appeal" (Mosse, 1996, 180), they must also possess a similar set of morals, too. Thus, the only way to tell the difference between the American hero and the alien villain is to expose the villain's "true" nature by beating them into a "bloody pulp" and violently reveal the false nature of the villain through Theweleit's "searing critique," a verbal or physical attack that allows one to remain whole while metaphorically (or literally, as in *The Ultimates*) tearing them to pieces:

> [A] rude encroachment that renders its objects unrecognizable, ripping them apart till they begin to resemble the critic's image of them as 'bloody crap.' It appears, too, in the impulse to 'expose': the urge to tear masks from others' faces, disguise from their bodies, and to reveal, through 'penetrating' intervention, that it was *right* to pursue them. (1978/1989, 274)

This notion of a desire to "expose" the true faces of the villains in the quest to justify their destruction that takes place at the climax of *The Ultimates* has an interesting parallel in the post-9/11 War on Terror and the massive U.S. military operation in Iraq to locate weapons of mass destruction. Though the disinformation concerning these weapons is still debated in the United States, John Carlos Rowe (2007, 38–39) makes a point in stressing that no matter who created this propaganda, the real issue lies in the way there had to be "a willing audience, one already prepared for certain cultural semantics" to readily accept this information—a cultural legacy of America that made the new war possible through its conception of the nation as "neo-imperial" (a discrete and separate nation that still has a global mission and identity) since 1945. In other words, the geopolitical narratives of

America played a part in how this information was readily accepted; a part of this discourse is present in the superhero narrative such as *The Ultimates*, where to justify the pursuit of the enemy, proof of the enemy's villainous nature must be located at all costs.

The rewriting of Captain America in *The Ultimates* is not restricted to his violent 21st-century reincarnation, but his past, too, receives a crucial makeover with one particular detail. Unlike the original Marvel hero, this 2002 ultimate version of him sees Captain America *alone* disarming the fatal bomb which presumably killed his sidekick Bucky Barnes in the original continuity.[65] This rewriting completely erases one of the central traumas of the original Captain America, who never could accept that he failed as a hero by allowing Bucky to die. This traumatic event (similar to Spider-Man's loss of Gwen Stacy in the 1970s) is a central trope within the original Captain America narrative, one that was heavily present in the 1960s' and 1970s' storylines,[66] reflecting similar notions of the nation struggling with the impeding loss in Vietnam. The complete removal of this defining trauma from *The Ultimates* explicitly denies this (national) trauma of failure, both from Captain America, and by analogy, from the popularized American identity. Evoked instead is the central trope of dying for your country, inherent in the redemptive nature of the American monomythic construction as well as the fascist masculine fantasy. Accordingly, as Dittmer argues, Captain America's willingness to give his life to protect his country "illustrates the essential centrality of the nation to him, and, by extension, to every American reading the comic book" (2005, 630), and in the context of war, this message gains in significance.

The Ultimates presents a Captain America who echoes the more simplistic morals of the past decades when most problems could be solved with a decent right hook. This version of Captain America asserts his ultimate masculinity again and again through violent action as he emphasizes his own masculinity against the "weak" masculinities represented by either men unable to control themselves (like Bruce Banner and Hank Pym) or by men categorized simply as the enemy (and shape-shifting Nazi aliens clearly fit the bill). In addition, the fact that Captain

[65] In the original continuity, Captain America and Bucky disarmed the bomb together, Captain America falling off into the Atlantic while Bucky was stuck to the bomb by his sleeve when the bomb went off, and was presumed dead.

[66] See for example *Captain America* #107 (Nov 1968) or *Captain America* #111 (Mar 1969); both depict Captain America heavily troubled by his inability to save Bucky.

America's solution to expelling his enemies (the "weak" masculinities) is primarily violent indicates a desire to violently expunge the unwanted qualities, whereas any attempt at compromise, of incorporating some of these qualities, is seen as wholly repulsive.

Rewritten as a violent action hero who drops tanks and jumps out of airplanes without parachutes with a twisted grin, he becomes the "ultimate" Captain America, representing what Sutliff sees as the "obituary" of the American dream (2009, 122), the idealized national icon turned hopelessly human. However, I would argue that more than an obituary, the Ultimate Captain America reveals a dangerously nostalgic desire for a rephallusized masculinity that relies on violent solutions instead of compromise, and shares a disturbing similarity with the early 20th-century fascist discourses of masculinity and violence as studied by Theweleit. It is not easy to designate a place for the *Ultimate* versions of these Marvel characters. Separate from the official continuity, they are still a part of the "ongoing process of creating and maintaining territorial practices and ideologies" (Dittmer, 2005, 626) despite their role as alternate versions. Rewriting national symbols and their origins, *The Ultimates* offers a redefinition of geopolitical relationships that the historical and national trauma of 9/11 called for. Yet, as this reading of the ultimate Captain America shows, the hegemonic ideal implicitly present in the national icon actually reveals a problematic and controversial image of a violent nationalist masculinity that flirts with fascism.

Whether we call it dominant fiction, geopolitical scripts, or master narratives, these stories of a nation's heroes usually aim at providing a "sense of belonging" that enables the reader to define and explain situations in the community as a part of a popular geopolitical identity (Sharp, 1998, 156), and the masculine ideal offered by these narratives gains geopolitical significance. Ultimately, as Dittmer argues, Captain America does not only define America, but also tells the reader what it is to be American and "what that means in relation to the rest of the world" (2005, 641). How, then, is this meaning affected by the deliberately violent, "realistic," and "darker" revision of the masculine ideal and the pronounced flirtation with fascist ideals the superheroes embody? The ultimate Captain America is the violent, masculine patriot willing to do what it takes for his country, simultaneously revealing a dangerous nostalgia for past simplicity as he is clearly presented as coming from an era that precedes the crisis of masculinity that

permeates the discourses on masculinity especially in the latter part of the 20th century. The immediate solutions of this ultimate masculinity may appear simple, but their consequences are far from it.

After looking at two different superheroic texts and their (de)constructions of superheroic masculinity, the next chapter will examine what this superheroic ideal excludes. Called "Displaying Deviance," this section will analyze those aspects ruled out by the white, heteronormative male hero: black superheroes, villains, and women.

3.2 Displaying Deviance: Sexual (and Textual) Others

The superhero comic is an excessively masculine and excessively white genre, relying heavily on the prominence of the white, heterosexual, and hypermasculine hero at the core of the narrative. In this sense, superhero comics belong to the vast amount of American popular fiction from action movies and detective novels to the Western that contribute to the hegemonic construction of American geopolitical identity as exceedingly white, heterosexual, and masculine. Interestingly, though, while other voices, such as those of women and non-white men, have forcefully emerged in other genre fictions, such as detective fiction, since the 1980s (Gates, 2006, 24), superhero comics by definition is still a masculine genre where the white, heterosexual, and masculine hero dominates over the other voices. When black heroes or female heroes appear, they often function to reinforce the male hero's whiteness or his heterosexuality, confirming Connell's view that hegemonic masculinity is emphasized not only through an exclusion of femininity, but also through the symbolic role of black masculinity (1995, 80).

Brown claims that traditional superhero comic book depictions of masculinity capture the "quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man," reading it as explicitly not "feminine" (1999, 26). I, however, will argue that other types of masculinity, too, play a crucial role in defining the hegemonic masculine ideal in superhero comics. As the male body is the primary signifier of masculinity, and the hero's body represents the ideal physical male, his others in superhero comics are surprisingly often drawn against other types of masculinities instead of femininity, which functions less to define masculinity, and

acts more as a complement to the already established ideal masculinity by reinforcing the hero's heterosexuality. The white male hero is needed to save the world, emphasizing a geopolitical narrative where neither black heroes nor women (as geopolitical "others") can save the Earth.

Though black heroes and female heroes have existed for decades, gay heroes have been far and few between,[67] and it has usually been the villain who possesses qualities that the hegemonic masculinity will reject (as Connell notes, gayness is not only "symbolically expelled" from hegemonic masculinity but often blurred with femininity in order to cast the homosexual man into a subordinate position in relation to the heterosexual man, 1995, 78–79). As we will see in later in this chapter, the extreme heteronormativity of heroes such as Batman has been deliberately challenged by such characters as the Joker, whose representation gained a significantly more pronounced sexual flair in the 1980s, challenging the hero's normative heterosexuality. However, instead of simply stressing a connection between "deviant" sexuality and evil, and thus strengthening the dominant notion of hegemonic masculinity as exclusively heterosexual, the representation of Joker in such texts as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Arkham Asylum* (1989) draws clear parallels between the hero and villain, revealing them as different sides of the same coin instead of the traditional binary opposites, and thus deliberately questions the binary division between "normative" and "deviant." Furthermore, the Joker in these texts increasingly celebrates his nature as a carnevalesque character and his liberated and free-flowing identity (and sexuality) becomes empowering instead of simply evil. With this reading, it is possible to challenge the common geopolitical reading of the villain as un-American: though Gates (2006, 278) suggests that the "sanctity of American culture and heroism" remains intact when evil or criminality is presented as foreign, the blurring of the boundaries between the hero and the villain clearly allows for a more problematic symptomal reading of both characters.

[67] A milestone was recently reached as *Young Avengers: The Children's Crusade* #9 (Mar 2012) depicted Hulking and Wiccan, an established gay superhero couple, embracing with a passionate kiss. Though the kiss is not a first in superhero comics, it was the first kiss shown by an established, loving gay couple, thus making it a first in mainstream superhero comics. Another milestone took place in 2012, as Northstar, one of Marvel's first openly gay superheroes (he came out in *Alpha Flight* #106 in 1992), entered into a gay marriage in *Astonishing X-Men* #51 (June 2012). Following the trend set by Marvel, DC, too, announced in May, 2012, that it will "out" one of their iconic characters as gay in the near future.

In brief, this chapter aims at discussing and analyzing the others of the white, heterosexual male hero. Though the title of this chapter claims to deal with "deviant others," I am not claiming that being black or gay (or female) in itself is in any way deviant. Instead, I will argue that within superhero comics, a clearly "white" and masculine genre, these characters have been represented as "deviant" in relation to the white hero, functioning to further define him. I will first discuss the representation of black superheroes and the way they have been depicted in mainstream superhero comics since the 1960s, from the early appearances of the distinctively color-aware Black Panther and the Falcon to the 1990s' Spawn whose blackness has literally been erased. In terms of popular geopolitics, I will pay special attention to the 2003 Captain America narrative *Truth: Red, White and Black*, which rewrote Captain America's history by introducing the first Captain America as a black man, Isaiah Bradley. This storyline gains geopolitical significance as it consciously aims at rewriting the national icon's past as well as exposing the nation's actual past, challenging some of the existing geopolitical narratives. After this, I will focus my attention to another type of "deviant" masculinity in the form of the villain. I will approach the villain as a threat to the hero's heterosexuality, and use the example of Batman and the Joker in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Arkham Asylum*. Both texts emphasize the relationship between Batman and the Joker, stressing the Joker's nature as a "queer" character whose fluid sexual identity threatens the hero's heterosexual identity and its borders.

Good Guys Don't Always Wear White: Superheroes and Race

It is a commonly acknowledged fact that early superhero comics were blatantly racist, regularly displaying blatant xenophobia through their caricatures of ethnic minorities. This can partially be explained by the fact that superhero comics emerged right before WWII, and during the war, they had their part to play, and were therefore filled with racist representations of fanged and long-clawed Japanese and cruel and militaristic Nazis (Wright, 2001, 45–49). While the Japanese undoubtedly received the worst of it, neither black nor Native American characters

have received any fairer treatment in the early decades of superhero comics.[68] Of course, this representation of racial others in superhero comics in the 1940s and 1950s was far from unusual, and similar racist characterizations can be found in a wide range of popular culture items of the era. Though these representations of ethnic groups and minorities became more subdued and less racist in the decades following the war, the appearances of non-white superheroes were still few and far between. After all, as discussed in the previous chapter, the Western standard for ideal masculinity is exceedingly focused on the hegemonic *white* male, the ideal that excludes all other skin colors and body types, leaving very little room for idealized non-white masculinity. Accordingly, Murray points out how in terms of race, "out of sight, out of mind" was a standard course in the 1940s as African Americans were not simply invisible, but when featured, they were usually deployed for comic relief (2011, 169; 175). Indeed, the black characters of early superhero comics featured all the "typical racial-markers of African Americans" from the blackface style facial expressions to the incomprehensible "jive talk" speech pattern (McWilliams, 2009, 68), marking them clearly as the racial other against the physical (and therefore spiritual; cf. Dyer, 1997, 72–75) perfection of the Western white male.

The racial representations in superhero comics could merit a dissertation in their own right, yet in this section I will primarily discuss the position of the black superhero, as it presents some of the more intriguing questions in regard to the theme of masculinity and identity, particularly due to the way the black man is often perceived as *too* masculine as opposed to the more common idea of "deviant" masculinity as effeminate and weak. After all, as Dyer claims, all concepts of race always entail notions about the body and sexuality, used to differentiate categories of hegemonic order (1997, 20). While the "others" of the hegemonic, white, and hard masculinity have usually included such obvious "weak" masculinities as Jewish men, gay men, and Asian men, Brown points out the unique way the black man has often been portrayed, not as a representative of weak or "false" masculinity, but as the very opposite: he is seen as "*too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily" (1999, 28, original emphasis). Black masculinity thus faces the paradox of

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[68] See for example McWilliams's detailed account on Captain America and racial representation: "Not Just Another Racist Honkey: A History of Racial Representation in Captain America and Related Publications" (2009).

being "too" masculine, simultaneously feared and oppressed through centuries of American history.[69] Unlike the other types of masculinities that are seen as not masculine enough (in other words, effeminate), black masculinity is a threat because it is perceived as too much, too masculine. Combining the excessively masculine and physical body of the black man with the excessively masculine character of the superhero appears to create a critical overload of masculinity; "an overabundance, and potentially threatening, cluster of masculine signifiers" that often necessitates the repositioning of the black superhero as a humorous character (Brown, 1999, 34).

In order to control the threat of black masculinity in the context of superheroes, comedy can be deployed to contain the potential threat. A surprisingly recent example of this kind of containment is the superhero parody movie *Hancock* (2008, dir. Peter Berg), in which the African American actor Will Smith played the titular role of an alcoholic superhero with anger management issues, mostly to a comical effect. More generally speaking, aside from comedy, another way of containing the sexuality of the black male character, as Gates argues, is to place the black hero into a white context, and thus offer the white audience "a familiar point of identification" that essentially ignores the character's blackness (2006, 213–214). Identifying the character as "white" by placing the black character into a white context means that the character can be portrayed as "white," with no changes to the plot or themes of the narrative. Whereas some black superheroes, such as Luke Cage or the Black Panther, are often written as markedly black, some mainstream black heroes, such as the Falcon, could easily be read as "white" in the current Captain America comics.

Even though non-caricature black characters have been present in the pages of superhero comics through various supporting characters such as *Daily Bugle* managing editor Joseph "Robbie" Robertson in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the title of the first black superhero to properly emerge on the pages of mainstream comics has usually been credited to the Black Panther[70] (alias T'Challa), created by Marvel's Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. First appearing on the pages of *Fantastic Four* #52 (Jul 1966), he joined the Avengers in 1966 and received his own title, *Jungle*

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[69] For a more detailed account of the history of black masculinity and superheroes, see Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (2001) or Adilifu Nama's more recent *Super Black: American Culture and Black Superheroes* (2011).

[70] Predating the founding of the actual Black Panther Party by several months, Wright cites the name as "apparently coincidental," yet clearly aimed at evoking "an image of black pride" (2001, 219).

Action, in the 1970s. The Black Panther has commonly been seen as "a response to the outrage voiced against centuries of racial oppression," born from the cultural upheavals of the 1960s' Civil Rights Movement in the United States (Regalado, 2005, 94–95). The 1960s also witnessed the emergence of the Black Arts Movement alongside the Black Power movement, which created a general upsurge in the cultural recognition of black culture in America, and as Wright notes, even Marvel comics began to acknowledge this, not only through black superheroes but through the gradual introduction of black citizens in the street scenes and backgrounds previously dominated by a distinctively white population (2001, 219).

However, due to the genre's tendency to racial caricatures, the early black superheroes have often been read as "tokenizing" heroes marked only for their race, which is often stressed through the character's name (Singer, 2002, 107).[71] Indeed, the black superhero's hero persona more often than not contains the prefix "black" in some form, which marks him in racial terms.[72] The way the hero's blackness was markedly stressed is apparent through another popular fiction of the era: Blaxploitation. As Brown (1999, 34) notes, the popularity of the so-called Blaxploitation films in the United States in the 1970s functions in part to explain the increasing numbers of black superheroes in the 1970s' comics. As Gates argues, the Civil Rights movement had brought forth an awareness of black culture and experience, whereas Vietnam and the hippie "flower power" demanded a more realistic portrayal of both violence and sexuality, creating a new kind of genre in Hollywood film that "hit a cultural nerve" (2011, 193):

> Blaxploitation took Hollywood stereotypes of black masculinity as violent, dangerous, and hypersexual . . . and blew them out of proportion. In doing so, blaxploitation films not only exposed them as stereotypes but also attempted to reclaim and reimagine the mythified conceptions of black masculinity as something determined by the black community—not white. (Gates, 2011, 195)

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[71] In 2000, *The Avengers* actually included a brief storyline dealing with the lack of racial diversity within the team. The issues pictured actual protesters outside Avengers Mansion, and even featured the Falcon stating: "I played Earth's mightiest token **once**, and I'd rather not do it **again**" as Captain America asked whether he would consider joining the team again (*The Avengers* #27, 11, Apr 2000).

[72] According to some critics, mainstream black superheroes did not really come "into their own" until the emergence of Milestone Comics, a DC imprint produced by African American artists and writers, which began publishing comics in the early 1990s (Wanzo, 2009, 346). Producing black superheroes who relied less on the exaggerated and violent action so characteristic of the genre and who instead used their wits and other intellectual abilities, Milestone heroes suggested "acceptable variations of the masculine ideal for their readers" (Brown, 1999, 38). However, Milestone Comics never reached a wide audience, remaining a relatively small enterprise when compared to DC and Marvel's top-selling heroes.

The new black superheroes, influenced by the popular Blaxploitation movies, were characterized (much like the movie heroes) by overtly macho origins, costumes, and language as well as an anti-establishment attitude, most prominent in characters like Marvel's *Luke Cage—Hero for Hire* (#1, Jun 1972). Also dubbed as "Power Man," Cage was a super-powered private detective, seemingly motivated by money rather than the iconic "Truth, Justice and the American Way," setting some doubts over his heroic stature. Yet, Luke Cage often seemed to do the "right thing" whether he was paid or not, conforming to the wider tradition of the genre as he followed his own moral code rather than one dictated to him by the authorities.

It would be hard to accuse Luke Cage's creators of positioning him as "white," yet his portrayal as a distinctively black hero is still not devoid of issues. As an example of the character's relevance to the issues of race, writer Brian Azzarello and artist Richard Corben (two white authors, it should be noted) took on Luke Cage as recently as 2002 in a five-issue storyline simply called *Cage*, where a gold-toothed, skullcap-wearing, absurdly muscular Cage of the Harlem ghetto takes on a job from a woman whose 13-year-old daughter has been an accidental victim in a drive-by shooting. Muscular, strong, and clearly virile (we first see him in a strip club, and later naked as he has sex with a female bartender), Cage clearly embodies the *too* masculine and *too* sexual of the black superhero, which the authors try to sidestep by not portraying him in any actual "superhero" clothes, erasing a part of the visual signs of his status as a superhero (the muscles still remain). True to his trope, Cage takes on the job for personal reasons (as the money offered by the poor woman is far from his "right price"), and ends up in the middle of a brutal gang war. Created in a style strongly influenced by the gangsta-rap style of colorful graffiti, the comic reasserts Cage as a 21st-century black hero, yet it resorts to a highly stereotypical portrayal of a ghettoized Harlem, where every black man carries a gun and poses a potential threat, ultimately reproducing the old image of the marginalized and feared other for the (mainly white) mainstream audience. [73]

Other black superheroes worth mentioning here are Sam Wilson aka the Falcon, introduced in *Captain America* #117 (Sep 1969), and John Stewart, the

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[73] Interestingly, despite his origins as the stereotypical muscular black brute, the post-*New Avengers* -era (2005 onwards) has seen Cage become one of the most stable Marvel superhero in many ways: his marriage to Jessica Jones and the birth of their daughter have re-focalized him in terms of family and stability. Though he is still a "rebel" hero in terms of the Superhero Registration Act, this re-focalization could also be read as a desire to "undo" some of these clichéd origins.

black Green Lantern from *Green Lantern* vol. 2, #87 (Dec 1971/Jan 1972). Becoming the Green Lantern, John Stewart was one of DC's earliest black superheroes. Perhaps best known today from the animated series *Justice League* (2001–2004) and *Justice League Unlimited* (2004–2006), John Stewart joined the Green Lantern Corps in the early 1970s, being the first black character to take on the title. Differing from other black superheroes of the era, John Stewart did not create a new identity as a superhero, but took on a title already familiar with the readers (the first Green Lantern story was published already in July 1940, and subsequent revisions had seen many other characters—including aliens—take on the Green Lantern's mystical power ring). The Falcon, on the other hand, was a brand new creation, becoming Captain America's partner and even receiving a cover-billing in the 1970s as the title was briefly changed into *Captain America and the Falcon* for a decade. As Wright points out, the Falcon is technically the first African American superhero: the Black Panther originated form the fictional nation of Wakanda, which technically made him the first African superhero (2001, 237).

In contrast to the Black Panther and his African roots, the Falcon's civilian identity, Sam Wilson, was distinctively American. When he was not the Falcon, he was a Harlem social worker who had to face such issues as education, poverty, and myriad social problems in his daily life, an obvious example of the 1970s' trend of introducing more real-life issues into superhero narratives (see ch. 2.1.). Despite Marvel's desire for more realistic and believable African American characters in the 1970s, the Falcon's original appearance and subsequent depiction in *Captain America* is nothing short of a stereotypical image of a black man from Harlem (of all places) who communicates with animals: from the beginning he is thus identified as a more savage "black" in contrast to the civilized "white" Captain America, as his ability to communicate with birds places him in the animalistic terrain between man and beast (McWilliams, 2009, 70). Though the two have long since given up on their official partnership, the Falcon is still a central character in *Captain America* comics today. Unlike the increasingly ghetto Luke Cage, the Falcon is distinctively more readable as "white": more mainstream and less threatening, his masculinity is increasingly subdued in comparison as his language lacks the common stereotypical

speech pattern of the ghetto culture and his countenance the skullcaps and gold teeth so prominent in characters like Luke Cage.[74]

As the brief recap above shows, black superheroes in mainstream superhero comics have been instantly and visibly labeled as explicitly black, either through their name or their visual representation, and their appearances in superhero comics have varied from contained and "white" depictions to the exaggerated ghetto look. However, Image Comics' 1990s' superhero saga *Spawn* (1992) by Todd McFarlane presents an interesting twist on superheroes and ethnicity by introducing a masked superhero who struggled to find out who (and what) he was. Once an ordinary man, it was revealed that he made a deal with a demon and was returned to Earth five years after his violent death to reunite with his loved one—with immense superpowers but his face and body burnt beyond recognition and without his memories. Crucially, his mask covers his entire face (presumably to hide his hideous burns) and his flashbacks and visions of himself and the mystery woman he loves are colored and drawn in a way that does not exclusively label them as either black or white (which, in the genre, invites a reading that casts them as white). It is not until halfway through the second issue that the ethnic identity of the hero is explicitly addressed: while Spawn's face is horribly burnt, his powers allow him to conjure up a human-like countenance, and as he does this, he becomes a fair-skinned, dashing, blue-eyed blonde—presumably the hegemonic ideal the reader expects from a mainstream superhero. Spawn's horrified reaction to his looks, however, finally reveals his true ethnic status: "Oh my God. NO! Jeez, no. COME ON!! WORK!! Not again. This can't be. I'm a **BLACK** man!" (#2; 12). Bitterly stating "I won't stay like this. Not **white**." (#2: 15), Spawn expels the expected whiteness his hero status otherwise suggests and chooses to return to his deformed self and not "pass" as white. "Deformed" is, of course, a poor choice of words here, as Spawn's visual look otherwise closely follows the visual convention of superhero comics: complete with the cape and skin-tight (and thus muscle-revealing) costume, nothing in Spawn's costumed, hypermasculine body implies deformity (unless one

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[74] Apart from these two heroes, the mainstream superhero comic features very few high-profile black superheroes; as far as black female superheroes go, the *X-Men* character Storm/Ororo still remains the most notable. A desire to incorporate more black heroes into mainstream superhero comics is seen for example in the way S.H.I.E.L.D. Commander Nick Fury has been recast as a black man in both *The Ultimates* -franchise and the hugely successful *The Avengers* movie franchise (to the confusing point where the comic book Nick Fury is depicted exactly like the real-life actor Samuel L. Jackson, who portrays the character in the movies).

counts the absurd muscles of the era's superheroes as "deformed"). It is only as he removes his mask that the skin beneath is revealed to be charred and demonic—"black" in a literal sense perhaps, but hardly readable in racial terms.

Though Spawn's blackness is in many ways atypical and differs from the previous, Harlem-based "black brother" stereotype of the Falcon or Luke Cage, the fact that his blackness is literally burnt off his skin and hidden under a whole-face mask works effectively to blur and, essentially, erase his blackness. As mentioned, even the memories and flashbacks of Spawn (as his human self, Al Simmons) and his wife in the first two issues are visually ambiguous enough not to be immediately mark them as black: their facial features distinctively lack any recognizable racial markers that would enable a reader to categorize them as black, the skin tones are colored in hues that do not suggest a reading outside the expected whiteness that categorizes the superhero comic. It is only in issue three, as Spawn, in his conjured look as a white "California beach bum" (#3; 11–12), meets his former wife that her skin tone suddenly darkens considerably, presumably to heighten the dissonance between Spawn's whiteness and her blackness.

Indeed, the fact that Spawn is not immediately categorizable as a "black" superhero may be one of the reasons behind the mainstream success of *Spawn*. As Wright cites Marvel's 1970s' writer-editor Roy Thomas, "you could get blacks to buy comics about whites, but it was hard to get whites to buy comics in which the main character was black" (2001, 249–250).[75] While Thomas's comment was made in the late 1970s and the situation, as Brown's studies show, has become more diverse since then, there still undoubtedly exists some truth in the claim that functions to explain the popularity of *Spawn* across the mainstream market. By blurring the racial categories with the effect of partially erasing the hero's blackness, the comic offers a possible reading that questions the issues of "race" and superheroes, yet these early issues do not really engage in any dialogue about racial representation or aim at redefining the position of the black superhero on wider terms. That is not to say that superhero comics as a rule never engage in serious discussions on the genre's racial past: a fairly recent example of this was published in 2003, which explored both Captain America's as well as America's past in purely

[75] Similarly, Mila Boncgo notes that "a nonwhite person, even if male, is too marginal to be THE superhero for the mainstream comic book consumer" (2000, 118). However, this phenomenon appears to be restricted to comics, as for example American mainstream cinema does not subscribe to this kind of division.

racial terms. As the text explicitly addresses both race and masculinity in the context of superhero comics, it merits a closer reading here.

In 2003, Marvel published a miniseries called *Truth: Red, White and Black* by Robert Morales (writer) and Kyle Baker (artist). A seven-issue limited series, the story recounts the origins of the first Captain America, presenting a "retro-continuity explanation" on how the Super-Soldier serum that created Captain America in the 1940s was first tested on unsuspecting black soldiers, thus creating a black Captain America, Isaiah Bradley, who preceded Steve Rogers (McWilliams, 2009, 75). These additions to a character's past (commonly referred to as "retro-continuities" or "retcons") are fairly common in superhero comics: going back to a character's past and "discovering" a previously unnoticed event is a standard way of introducing or re-introducing characters, events, and plotlines into the present by locating their origins in the previously hidden past. By rewriting the first Captain America as a black man, the comic acknowledges the unsaid realization that the U.S. military would never have tested the Super-Soldier serum on a white American kid before testing it on other subjects. The story's inspiration came from the real-life events of the Tuskegee Experiments in the United States in 1932–1972, in which countless African American men with syphilis were purposefully misdiagnosed so that researchers could observe the disease's progression when left untreated (Carpenter, 2005, 51). Representing the absence and exclusion of black history, the comic becomes a commentary on the constructions of American history itself, where the black Captain America comes to epitomize "not only the failure of U.S. democracy to work equally for all citizens but also the ways in which the fantasies of U.S. democracy can be built on the backs of those it uses and then discards" (Wanzo, 2009, 341).

Truth begins by presenting the reader with three possible black Captain Americas who all stand for different "masculine models for citizenship" (Wanzo, 2009, 347): Isaiah Bradley, the family man; Luke Evans, the nihilistic army Sergeant; Maurice Canfield, the educated and wealthy social activist. Of these three, Isaiah Bradley is the one who ultimately will be credited the title "black Captain America." The three men are carefully humanized throughout the first issues, thus highlighting the inevitably inhuman and cruel nature of the would-be Super-Soldier serum experiments (McWilliams, 2009, 75). Along with hundreds of other black soldiers, they are subjected to the medical trials that hope to determine the correct

dosage for the body-altering serum. The results of the test, as one can imagine, are brutal, as the serum grotesquely deforms the men's bodies: with visible droplets of sweat, bulging and veiny muscles, and pained expressions, the panels refrain from actually depicting the inevitable explosion of the body, content with showing the bright red spots of blood on the walls with the clinical remark: "Subject A-23 expired at 1718 hours." (#3; 8). Eventually, some of the men survive the serum, but with absurd bodies that defy logic, as their biceps are twice the size of their heads in a freakish nod to the 1990s' Image Comics and their visual style of the hypermasculine "pure image" (Brown, 1999, 33). These black supersoldiers ultimately become "grotesque cartoons that emphasize distinctive physical features, reflecting mainstream perceptions of visible cultural identities as not only different but also malformed" (Ryan, 2011, 78).

It is noteworthy to mention that of these three characters, only Isaiah chooses to restrain himself when he is "called to violence" by an announcer at the 1941 World Fair (Wanzo, 2009, 348), whereas both Luke and Maurice are repeatedly defined by violent confrontation. Maurice is even introduced to the reader after a violent fight, with a swollen lip and a black eye (#1; 7), while Luke is revealed to have lost his Captain's status in the army after violently resisting a racist officer (#1; 16). Violence, as chapter 4 will discuss, is an essential definer of masculinity, and the use of violence to gain power or control is a highly relevant issue when discussing masculinity and its wider implications with the popular geopolitics of the United States—and even more so when discussing the violent vigilante actions of superheroes. The fact that Isaiah Bradley, the family man who will not resort to violence even when provoked, is transformed into a cartoonish muscleman meant for nothing but violent action becomes a cruel irony.

Shipped to Europe to fight as members of a secret super-soldier team, all the other black supersoldiers die in action (or by each other's hands), and only Isaiah Bradley remains, destined now to become the first Captain America. While in Europe, Isaiah reads the actual *Captain America* #1 from 1941, confused when he reads what he recognizes as his own story in a comic book, realizing that "this **Steve Rogers** fella the brass is so high on" (#4; 12) is arriving to take on the costume and the title of Captain America while their contribution to the mission will never

receive a similar ovation.[76] Sent on a final suicide mission in issue 5, he secretly steals the Captain America uniform that is waiting for Rogers, literally adopting the official title of the first black Captain America while simultaneously committing a serious offence against the nation by appropriating the image of the national icon. The first image of Isaiah in costume is done through a splash page that depicts him dropping from a plane with a parachute, without the familiar "A" mask and with his left fist raised in a pose reminiscent of the Black Power salute. The caption's voice-over comes from his commanding officer, who states "…we've escalated to a new level of **deniability**" (#4; 21). This refers not only to the secret mission to destroy the Nazi camp, but also to the problematic status of Isaiah as a black hero and the nation's desire to erase him: as Ryan argues, one of the comic's central concerns is precisely the "ways in which histories of ethnic minorities suffer erasure in the service of monolithic nationalism" (2011, 67). In other words, *Truth* aims at demonstrating the ways black history has been "erased" from America's geopolitical narratives and geopolitical history.

Though sent on an apparent suicide mission, Isaiah Bradley ultimately makes it back to the United States, but the effect of the serum has permanently damaged his brain, reducing him to a child's mental abilities (#7; 16). Instead of being rewarded for his sacrifices, he is sentenced to 17 years in solitary confinement for stealing Captain America's costume and thus challenging the established vision of white heroic masculinity. In the 21st-century present, Captain America Steve Rogers is finally discovering the truth from Isaiah's wife, Faith, and promises to make amends by confronting the people in charge and by personally apologizing to Isaiah Bradley. In terms of defining masculinity, a central image is the final panel depicting the two Captain Americas side by side: posing for the camera, Captain America wears his full superhero suit, whereas Isaiah Bradley wears normal clothes

[76] This is a clear reference to the treatment of black soldiers in the U.S. army during WWII. Segregation was very much preserved in the army during the 1940s, as black units were given "poor training, poor equipment, and were sent to the least promising parts of the battlefield" when compared to their white counterparts (Brogan, 1999, 622).

Fig. 3. *Truth: Red, White and Black* #7 (Jul 2003), 22. © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

on top of which he has draped the remains of his ragged Captain America suit from the 1940s (see fig. 3). As Ryan points out, this image shows white Captain America's "legitimate ownership" of the iconic uniform, whereas Bradley's distinctive racial traits sever his costume from its official origins, "suggesting that his blackness both exceeds the boundaries that attempt to contain it and undermines the ideological basis of American patriotism" (2011, 67). The image further underlines the idealized position of white masculinity by contrasting Captain America with Isaiah Bradley while simultaneously problematizing the black body as patriotic. Due to the serum's deteriorating effects, Isaiah is all body and no mind, and he can no longer express himself. In this regard, Wanzo (2009, 360) has read his body in this final image as "postrevolutionary:" his uniform in shreds, he is denied full citizenship by the very establishment Captain America represents:

> [Isaiah's] body and this story express a desire for full citizenship and ask an ongoing question in the United States: how does one construct oneself as a self-determining black citizen in spite of white hegemony? (2009, 351)

Truth in no unclear terms challenges the view of privileged white masculinity and black masculinity as its counterpart. Furthermore, the comic addresses the discourse of U.S. patriotism from the point of view of the black citizen, making "visually explicit" the crisis in 20th-century American culture that stems from the denial of black citizenship by white hegemony (Ryan, 2011, 71).

Truth was a controversial publication, receiving a great deal of media attention as well as mixed reviews when it was first published in 2003. As McWilliams points out, the sales of the series dropped significantly as it progressed: the first issue sold almost 75 000 copies whereas the final issue's number was just 33 000 copies (2009, 75). According to Carpenter, the introduction of a black Captain America in 2003 was "a move that enraged fans and impressed mainstream audiences" in its revision of the Captain America mythos (2005, 46). Carpenter adds that the reason for the strong reaction arises from the fact that, in the eyes of the reader, a black Captain America "doesn't so much add too [sic] the mythos as it tarnishes his fair-skinned counterpart" (2005, 50). Indeed, as McWilliams notes, the comic book is in part difficult to read because of its "overcompensated respect for African Americans" which resulted in overtly idealized black characters and nearly demonized white characters (2009, 75–76). A similar reading has been offered by Adilifu Nama:

> Even though [*Truth*] strained for racial relevance by highlighting the incongruity of black men fighting for freedom abroad while living in a racially unjust society at home, the comic and its superhero settled for crude racial polemics that either indulged in gory victimization or sanitized triumphs. (2011, 118)

Whereas the black soldiers are juxtaposed with Jewish concentration camp prisoners and their tragic similarity is emphasized (see for example the cover for #5, which features a black man's head painted with strings of white numbers that evoke the number tattoos of the Jewish holocaust victims), the white characters are portrayed often in cartoonish terms which could be called even "subhuman": for example, Lt. Merritt, a white racist officer, is depicted as short, ugly, and cruel, faithfully following the dated trope mentioned in chapter 2.1 of mirroring one's moral status through one's malformed looks. His fiery belief in white supremacy, physically manifest in Captain America, receives a brutal juxtaposition from his cartoonish and exaggerated look when his grotesque face is presented next to the issue of *Captain America* #1 from 2002 as he asks for the Cap's autograph as "one veteran to another" (#6; 20).

In a further desire to take a stand, Ryan sees *Truth*'s visual look as a deliberate nod to the social-realist art of the 1930s and 1940s, communicating "dissatisfaction with contemporary inequalities" through the comic's angular visual style with solid coloring, no shading, and heavy use of silhouettes (2011, 72). Distinctively different from the traditional, more photo-realistic superhero comics of the 21st century, Wanzo sees this as a deliberate choice that emphasizes the nature of the story itself and "the possibility of reading tragedy even in stereotypical rendering of the black body" (2009, 345):

> [The author's] intervention into superhero rhetoric thus goes beyond mere inclusion of the rare black body into the superhero pantheon. He demonstrates how the specifics of the black experience can tell an audience something universal in a more pronounced way than a white body can in this context. (Wanzo, 2009, 353)

This "universal" effect is partially achieved through an atypical, cartoonish style which divided the comic's audiences.[77] Stanford W. Carpenter's interviews with the comic's authors reveals that the artist, Kyle Baker, "consciously tried to develop a look that would appeal to the Hip Hop market…a market with an aesthetic that he identified as being urban and Black" (2005, 57). The comic's visual look is

[77] According to artist Kyle Baker, many comic book fans wrote to him complaining about the color of the comic, refusing to believe that the characters were meant to be black: "They absolutely [thought] there was something wrong with the color!" (Carpenter, 2005, 59).

therefore decidedly different from the traditional visual style of other 21st century superhero comics, with a graffiti-inspired, loose and sketch-like drawing style that deploys bright colors and a lot of action (ibid.).

The black Captain America highlights the often bypassed issue of race in superhero comics by bestowing the iconic star-spangled costume onto a black body, yet severs the black body from its "too-masculine" status by stressing Isaiah Bradley's childlike stage and his sterility, caused by the serum. Ultimately, the black hero has to be contained, lest he become too powerful, too masculine, either through stereotypes and clichés like the ghetto Luke Cage or through literally burning the racial markers from the heroic body like Spawn. The black Captain America, too, is contained through his infantilization and juxtaposition with Steve Rogers, the "real" Captain America.[78] Despite this, *Truth* does have its merits, as it aims at exposing the inherent notions of "whiteness" associated with superheroism and patriotism by rewriting not only Captain America's history, but the history of the American nation, exposing some of the nation's "true colors." As *Truth* was published relatively soon after 9/11, its views on patriotism and citizenship, and positioning of the U.S. government as the villain, was a highly controversial move. As we will see in chapter 6, Morales and Baker were not alone in their desire to question America's role as an innocent victim in a post-9/11 climate of fervent patriotism.

To conclude this section (and to build a bridge towards the next section), I would like to point out that though non-white superheroes tend to be caricaturized and stereotyped, what is even more curious is the significant lack of non-white supervillains. Noted at least by Phillip L. Cunningham (2010), contemporary mainstream comics feature surprisingly few black supervillains, marking a significant absence which in itself speaks volumes. From the xenophobic and highly racist representations of the early 1940s' superhero comics the genre seems to have reached its opposite end of political correctness where any representation that might be seen as racist is shunned, even to the point where supervillains of a certain ethnic background are avoided in the fears of accusations of racism. As the vast majority of supervillains are white males (from Lex Luthor and Magneto to Dr. Doom and the

[78] However, Isaiah Bradley's legacy lives on in his grandson, Eli, who is one of the founding members of the Young Avengers, taking on the moniker "Patriot" in honor of his grandfather. While Eli initially had no super-powers (his powers came from a drug he was secretly taking), he ultimately receives his grandfather's powers after a blood transfusion between the two in *Young Avengers* #12 (Aug 2006).

Red Skull), the villain's deviance must be often (though not always) expressed in terms that do not stem from his ethnicity or race. For example, Gates points out how American popular culture tends to associate such traits as intellectualism and cultivation with "an ineffectual, homosexual, or even villainous masculinity" (2006, 256). One such sign of villainous masculinity is presenting the villain as opposite to the hero's hypermasculine image by stressing his effeminate nature. This perceived effeminacy is often marked with a "queer" element that translates as a threat to the hero's pronounced heterosexuality. In the next section, I will define this "queer" threat the villain can pose, using the Joker and Batman as an example of the close relationship the hero and villain possess and the conflicting masculinities these characters represent.

The Joker is Wild: Masculinities in Question in *Arkham Asylum* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*

> "It's salt. Why don't you sprinkle some on me, honey?
> Aren't I just good enough to **eat**?"
> (The Joker, *Arkham Asylum*, 1989, 18)

Within superhero scholarship, the villain has usually been identified as the one who acts as a catalyst, the one who is "proactive" and wants to change the world; the villain sets things in motion, forcing the hero to react as the villain's plan threatens the status quo (Reynolds, 1992, 50–51; Fingeroth, 2004, 162–163). As the hero aims at protecting the status quo, the villain threatens social norms, organization, and law, and he may be physically grotesque or deformed—in other words, he is the very opposite of the hegemonic ideal. Perhaps due to the villain's transgressive nature, John Cawelti (2004, 163) has argued that the supervillain is by far the more interesting character than the one-sided and two-goody-shoed hero whose brand of justice is perfect, transcendent, respectable, and purely reactive with no other agenda other than his concern for justice. Partially due to this, Cawelti argues that the supervillain emerges as the more enjoyable character within the superhero narrative because he invites the reader to secretly root for the villain as the "official conventionality of the myth and the certainty of the superhero's ultimate triumph enable us to delight in the villain's criminality without having to worry about its

consequences" (ibid.). By offering a safe way of experiencing the other, rituals (and I approach the superhero narrative as a ritualized plot and the reading of a superhero comic as a ritual) present people with "a *liminal* time—a temporal punctuation in everyday reality, a conceptual 'time out'—when people can work out and reconcile" some of the ambiguous and contradictory elements in their lives and cultures (Gilmore, 2003, 20).

The safe enjoyment of the superhero narrative and its villains may enable a partial reconciliation of the popular geopolitical identity's ambiguities as well as reveal the society's fears and prejudices over diverse forms of masculinity and identity. The villain within the superhero comic offers the reader a safe way of experiencing the other, and through that process, as Gilmore seems to suggest, a way of integrating some of the qualities the general hegemonic order may deem as somehow "deviant." Considering that the villain may often possess characteristics that are deemed as un-masculine and effeminate by the hegemonic order, the option of reconciling some of these "unwanted" qualities instead of their rejection and demonization may ultimately lead to a more diverse and multifaceted view on masculinity. A particularly fruitful supervillain, in terms of masculinity, can be located in the arch-nemesis of Batman: the Joker. One of the most deviant and mysterious villains of the genre, the Joker, especially in the 1980s, has been increasingly depicted as pronouncedly more "queer" and flamboyant in his representation of gender and sexuality, becoming a distinct counterpart to the extremely conservative and obsessively heteronormative "lethal patriot" of Batman. I will first sketch out the Joker's character (as much as it can be done) and then move on to addressing the complex concept of "queer" and how it can be used to analyze the Joker.

The Joker was first introduced as a villain in *Batman* #1 in the spring of 1940. A mysterious clown-faced villain, his true identity has always been clouded in mystery, and subsequently several possible origins for the character have been sketched out throughout the years, allowing for what I have elsewhere referred to as "textual anarchy" to take place.[79] Dubbed the "Clown Prince of Crime," the Joker has become one of the most popular supervillains of the entire genre, appearing in countless comics, several animated series, and three feature films, not to mention

[79] Miettinen, "Past as Multiple Choice: Textual Anarchy and the Problems of Continuity in *Batman: The Killing Joke*." *The Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* 1.1 (2012).

several other formats and mediums.[80] Quickly adjusting to his role as Batman's arch nemesis, the Joker became the other side of a unique dynamic where neither character could really exist without the other; citing an early issue of *Detective Comics* from 1942, Robert Inchausti notes that even when the Joker has Batman tied up and helpless, he decides not to remove Batman's mask, remarking "Ha, Ha! No! It's too simple -- unworthy of my intelligence. And I like these battles of wits! The hunt… the chase… that's the breath of life to me!" (1983, 70–71). The Joker deliberately does not desire to know whose face lies beneath the mask—for him, the mask is Batman's real face, and the hunt between the two characters must go on.

The Joker functions to define Batman in a number of ways, often read as the chaos to Batman's order, the anarchy to his discipline, the comedian to Batman's straight man (Wallace, 2011, 37). While Batman's universe has been inhabited by a number of female characters that testify to his heterosexuality, Batman has no stable female companion to "legitimize his sexuality" the way Superman has Lois Lane (Taylor, 2007, 356), and thus he needs to define his hard masculine identity through the villains he battles; they become his gendered and sexualized Other, and at the same time mirror his own masculine identity.[81] Even though homoeroticism has been read into the superhero comic, and especially Batman, since the 1950s, it was not until the 1980s that the sexual ambiguity and tension in the comic was explicitly brought forth. However, whereas previously the focus had been on the scandalous nature of the Batman/Robin relationship[82] (which psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham famously labeled as "a wish dream of two homosexuals living together," 1954, 189–190), in the 1980s' comics the stress was shifted onto the obsessive tension between the Joker and Batman.

Though the close relationship between Batman and the Joker was always subliminally present as the two characters played their never-ending cat-and-mouse

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[80] The Joker is the first (and so far the only) comic book supervillain to receive a retrospective book devoted to him in 2011 by Daniel Wallace, simply titled *The Joker*. A collection of edited essays with the preliminary title *The Joker: Critical Essays on the Clown Prince of Crime* (edited by Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner) is currently being scheduled for a 2013 release.

[81] Interestingly, neither *Arkham Asylum* nor *Dark Knight Returns* actually depicts Batman/Bruce Wayne in romantic, heterosexual relationships. While Selina Kyle (aka Catwoman) is in contact with him in *DKR*, there is no reference to an actual romantic or sexual relationship. No textual evidence is given of Batman's heterosexuality, yet by marking his Other as clearly deviating from this norm, the assumption would be that Batman represents the (heterosexual) norm the Joker violates.

[82] By recasting *DKR*'s Robin as a teenage girl called Carrie Kelley, author Frank Miller subtly referenced this infamous homoerotic subtext that has "haunted" the Batman-Robin relationship since the 1950s (Smith, 2007, 253).

game, the 1980s' revisionist era, together with the times that saw the establishment of the "Gay Pride" parades[83] and other visible markers of the gay movement (Zinn, 2003, 617), tuned in with the Joker's resistance to normative heterosexuality in works like Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Grant Morrison (writer) and Dave McKean's (artist) *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989). *Arkham Asylum* shows Batman in Arkham Asylum, Gotham's mental hospital for the criminally insane, where he is forced to play a hideous hide-and-seek with the inmates comprising solely of his foes. Exploring the line between sanity and insanity, the graphic novel also features a Joker who is clearly characterized as "queer" to Batman's "straight" man. *The Dark Knight Returns*, on the other hand, depicts a retired Batman who once more becomes the Dark Knight, causing the catatonic Joker to awaken as well. Their relationship becomes almost an obsessive love affair, and the Joker is depicted as bohemian, decadent, and dandyish, deviating again from the heteronormative "rule" of hegemonic masculinity represented by Batman. I will focus on these two texts because they both address the Batman/Joker relationship with a conscious homosexual tension between the characters. As both texts were published during the 1980s, their Joker is clearly a product of that particular time and culture. The Joker in the texts chosen here showcases and also challenges some of the anxieties of the 1980s' America, which, according to Judith Halberstam, had "seriously reinvested in such equivalencies as family and normal, pervert and criminal, sexual deviance and disease" (1995, 167). By presenting the Joker as a markedly "queer" character, these texts aim at both challenging and incorporating some of these issues into the popular geopolitical scripts of the era.

The term "queer" itself requires a brief definition at this junction. The *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* defines it as

> *1 a*: worthless, counterfeit <~ money>, *b*: questionable, suspicious
> *2 a*: differing in some odd way from what is usual or normal
> *b (1)*: eccentric, unconventional, *(2)*: mildly insane: touched
> *c*: absorbed or interested to an extreme or unreasonable degree: obsessed
> *d (1)*: *often disparaging:* homosexual *(2)*: *sometimes offensive:* gay

As the entry shows, the term queer has not always referred to homosexuality, but, as Judith Butler has noted, has also compassed "an array of meanings associated with

[83] Though the first "pride" parade is often credited to the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York, the events became significantly more organized and institutional in the 1980s as the gay movement itself became more visible.

the deviation from normalcy which might well include the sexual" (1993, 176). While the disparaging and offensive potential of the term is noted, *Britannica* also mentions that, in the last few decades, the term has received increased use as "a neutral or even positive term" among some gay people and academics. This realization is crucial, for the Joker can be characterized as a "queer" character in nearly every sense of the word. Though the wider context of hegemonic masculinity might be eager to cast the Joker's queerness in the simple terms of unwanted masculine qualities, I will argue that the Joker's queerness can also be read as a positive and even empowering form of masculinity despite the fact that even Butler herself has doubted the term's ability to "overcome its constitutive history of injury" (1993, 223). However, it should be noted that since Butler's original thesis, queer studies has become a distinctive scholarly field, suggesting that this "history of injury" indeed has been overcome. Accordingly, "queer" is here used in its multiple meanings, characterizing the Joker both through his deviation from normalcy through his insanity and villainy, but also in the terms of sexuality. While I will ultimately argue that the Joker exists beyond any such labeling, the term will be used as an indicator of the Joker's deviation from the norm represented by the hegemonic construction of masculine identity in the superhero comic.

Both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Arkham Asylum* highlight the Joker's role as the clearly gendered and sexualized opposite of Batman. His green hair, white skin, and ruby-red lips have traditionally been combined with a dandyish look of a purple suit with white gloves and spats, clearly separating him as softer and more effeminate than the all-black, armored, and rigid Batman. Yet, both texts underline the hidden similarity between Batman and the Joker: *DKR* suggests that all of Batman's villains are a "reflection" of him (1986, 55), while *AA* explores the feeble lines of sanity and insanity that separate Batman from the inmates at Arkham. This thematic can also be applied to the seemingly "opposite" masculinities of the Joker and Batman. After all, if Batman can even momentarily doubt his sanity, can he also be temporarily inhabited by the uncanny elements that "unleash" effeminizing effects that threaten his masculine identity? (Brinks, 2003, 12). By blurring the boundaries between the hero and villain, both texts also seem to suggest that Batman, too, may be in possession of this "queerness" that characterizes the Joker. After all, as both characters need each other in order to define themselves, they exist

in a sort of gothic "double bind" that both threatens as well as establishes their identities and invites a reading of the two as a gothic pair.

Generally speaking, gothic[84] tales often reaffirm that "heterosexuality needs homosexuality as its other," and that the gothic male subject exists in a "double-bind of transgression and discipline, of subversion and containment" (Brinks, 2003, 18). Batman can easily be read as a variant of the "gothic male" with his gargoyle-like poses and sinister visual tones of blacks and grays, which already give visual clues of his nature (not to mention the Bat-cave!). The setting of the comic in *Goth*am City also clearly aims at establishing the interpretation of the narratives as gothic (albeit in a very broad way). This gothic aspect of Batman is also stressed in the extremely grotesque rogue gallery of Gotham City, which features physically disfigured and grotesque villains such as the Joker, Penguin, or Two-Face, all functioning as mirrors and opposites to Batman (Klock, 2002, 35–36). As Andy Smith writes in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (2007, 251–252), gothic literature and comics share a number of attributes ranging from generic hybridity to juxtaposition and horror. Reading Batman as "a figure already replete with Gothic meaning," Smith cites the "psycho-sexual doppelgänger" of the Joker as a major gothic element in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (ibid., 253). Within this context, it is thus plausible to read Batman as a gothic character, and the Joker as the gothic doppelgänger who threatens his masculine identity.

As Halberstam writes in her study on gothic monsters, *Skin Shows*, the role of the monster (or the villain) is a place where one can locate the way national communities are created through an indispensable inside/outside dichotomy (1995, 15). Although Halberstam's argument revolves on 19th-century literature and 20th-century horror movies, the Joker fits surprisingly well Halberstam's definition of the gothic monster as one who displays rhetorical extravagance, deviant sexuality and gendering, and functions as a site for multiple interpretations and "a plurality of locations" (1995, 2–23). Halberstam describes the gothic monster as "the sexual menace of perverse desire and the epistemological menace of unstable identities" (1995, 64), and the Joker with his free-flowing identity and deliberate sexual fluidity

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[84] The term "gothic" is used very loosely in this dissertation. According to Alexandra Warwick, "Gothic is a mode rather than a genre -- and its defining characters are its mobility and continued capacity for reinvention." Or, as Warwick quotes James Kincaid, "gothic was whatever made you feel gothicky." (2007, 6-7).

clearly fits this description, marking him and his unstable identity as an "epistemological menace" to Batman's order and stability.

It is the unstable and uncontrollable nature of the Joker that marks him as unwanted and negative in the orderly and heteronormative world of Batman, who clearly represents the idealized masculinity that arises from the 19th century, where self-control, particularly controlling one's sexual desires, becomes crucial in defending masculinity from a distortion of body and mind (Mosse, 1996, 62). The remnants of this definition of masculinity are clearly present in the superhero genre itself, as the hero's partial renunciation of a sexual union persisted (and still persists, to an extent) as a defining trope for several decades. As a marker of this lack of self-control, the Joker's sex drive is markedly pronounced in both the *Dark Knight Returns* and in *Arkham Asylum*, deliberately challenging Batman and his rigid and controlled heteronormative masculinity. In *Arkham Asylum*, for example, the Joker constantly flirts with Batman, asking him "Aren't I just good enough to **eat**?" and referring to Batman as "sweetheart", "honey pie," "darling," and "dearest," deliberately injecting a lover's discourse into his dialogue with Batman. In a mildly humorous scene, he presents Batman with a Rorschach inkblot card with an obvious bat-like image, asking him to tell what he sees. After Batman tersely refuses, the Joker asks "Not even a cute little long-legged boy in swimming trunks?" (1989, 29–30), deliberately referencing the subtexts Fredric Wertham claimed to read in Batman's adventures years earlier.

The Joker's flirtation with Batman is physical, too: he taunts Batman by mockingly pressing the face of the male administrator of Arkham to his bosom as he exclaims: "Kiss me, Charlie! Ravish me! But no **tongues**, y'hear? Not on our first date." (1989, 23) as Batman watches silently. The Joker's actions are an obvious provocation, as any kind of sexual and gendered exaggeration is usually looked upon with suspicion by society as the opposite of normative and controlled masculinity (Mosse, 1996, 62). This is clear in Batman's reactions, as the Joker even gropes Batman with the line "Loosen up, tight ass!" to which he furiously roars "**Take your filthy hands off me**!" (1989, 20), then calling the Joker a "filthy degenerate" (ibid.) after he has inquired after the Boy Wonder, Robin. Later, in a very symbolic scene on pp. 53–54, Batman confronts a minor villain called Clayface in the dark corridors of Arkham. The first panel of the spread shows the brownish wall with the scribbled words "Tunnel of Love," an ironic reference to the Tunnel of

Love that often serves as a location for the final battle for Batman and the Joker (including *The Dark Knight Returns* a few years earlier). But this "tunnel of love" contains a plague ("AIDS on two legs," as author Morrison describes the character in his script notes), as a small, naked, and generally grotesque-looking Clayface, repeating the word "sick," tries to touch Batman in order to "**share** [his] disease" (1989, 54). Batman's violent rejection of this diseased touch culminates in his brutal attack on Clayface, whose leg is nearly broken apart.

The Joker's visual representation in *Arkham Asylum* further stresses his role as a "queer" character. His facial expressions are grotesquely exaggerated yet intimately fascinating, but he lacks the traditional suit, garbing himself instead in a baggy overcoat. In fact, the original script notes added to the 15th anniversary edition of the graphic novel reveal that writer Grant Morrison originally wanted artist Dave McKean to portray the Joker in a Madonna-esque drag of stilettos and fishnets:

> Pale and emaciated, he should look simply grotesque but standing there, hand on thrust-out hip, he projects an absolute confidence that confers upon him a bizarre kind of attractiveness and sexuality. It is the attraction of the perverse and the forbidden. The Joker personifies the irrational dark side of us all. (1989, unpaginated)

Despite the fact that Morrison and McKean were not allowed to conduct such a drastic makeover to the iconic DC villain, the authors do insert some physical features that aim at conveying this perverse and forbidden yet attractive sexuality, testifying to their desire to portray the Joker as "queer" in an attractive and empowering way. On page 24 he asks "You trying to ruin my heels?" after Two-Face has wet himself and the floor, and though his feet are rarely featured in the panels, a deliberate close-up of the Joker's feet on page 97 reveals that he is, indeed, wearing very feminine high heels. The Joker's fingernails are extremely long and painted green, and his postures frequently carry the dramatic flamboyance that one would often associate with portraying a stereotypically "queer" or "camp" gay character.

Due to his often stereotypical representation of "queer" it is possible to argue that the Joker "performs" a particular queer gender identity in order to aggravate Batman. However, this "performance" should not be confused with Butler's well-known idea of performativity of gender, which approaches gender performativity as a "ritualized production . . . reiterated under and through constraint" (1993, 95). As

Butler stresses, performativity cannot be equated with performance, which is more related to a theatrical self-presentation than gender identity (ibid.). The Joker's theatrical and hyperbolic "queerness" in *Arkham Asylum* is more of a "performance," a parody of gender aimed at destabilizing Batman, than "performative" in the sense that Butler defines it. As Gates argues, a "performance" of gender can also be approached as a masquerade, which has the ability to go against masculinity because masculinity is traditionally seen as "natural": presenting one type of masculinity as a performance implies that any masculinity can be a "false" one—a masquerade, in other words (2006, 43). In this sense, the Joker's flamboyance and theatrical representation of "queer" which stresses the term's homosexual connotations does not actually refer to any real gender identity, but it should be approached as a masquerade, a carnevalistic performance aimed at challenging Batman and his essentialist binary oppositions of sane and insane, good and evil, straight and gay.

Ultimately, the Joker is a character beyond definition, beyond categorization, beyond all these binary definitions. As the Joker's therapist, Ruth Adams, analyzes him in *Arkham Asylum*: "[S]ome days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He **has** no real personality. He **creates** himself each day. He sees himself as the lord of misrule, and the world as a theatre of the absurd" (1989, 28). Like the 2008 feature film *The Dark Knight* (dir. Christopher Nolan), *Arkham Asylum*, too, suggests that there is no permanence in the Joker's personality, there is no stabilizing core or motivation besides chaos and disorder.[85] As he creates himself each day, he may be the ultimate urban denominator: though he is a "gleefully sadistic mass murderer," as Shaviro (1995, 66) muses, yet he also embodies the postmodern subject. Instead of choosing and organizing his perceptions of the past and present and maintaining a permanent identity, he simply goes "with the flow," free of any restraints of society. According to Shaviro, "he *lives* and *enjoys* the postmodern condition, this mutation of our sensibility into non-linear, non-Euclidean forms" (ibid., 67). It is this fluidness of his identity, not limited to the realm of masculinity, which threatens Batman and his obsessive black-and-white worldview; it is this liberating deviance that allows the Joker to completely reject it

[85] A similar theme is visible in the 1988 graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, where the Joker states: "If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!" (1988, 39).

in order to define himself through his parodic and ultimately subversive portrayal of gender and sexuality.

Whereas *Arkham Asylum* emphasized the subversive (and empowering) "queerness" of the Joker through a deliberate performance of sexuality aimed at challenging Batman, the relationship between these two characters reaches a mutual romance-like quality in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. The comic begins with an emasculated, retired Bruce Wayne, whose inevitable return to the Dark Knight's attire is what ultimately reawakens the Joker from a catatonic state he presumably fell into after Batman's disappearance. The Joker, imprisoned in Arkham, mutters his first words in ten years as he sees the familiar Bat-logo on a TV screen: "Batman. Darling." (1986, 41). The visual depiction of the Joker highlights his effeminate and flamboyant nature: for example, he is pictured putting on lipstick before his TV interview, and generally has the air of an "aging, degenerate rock star" (Klock, 2002, 35). His sexual drive is exaggerated and obviously lethal, as he literally kills the sex therapist interviewed on the same TV show as he is by passionately kissing her (1986, 127). Later, during the climactic final battle between the heroes, the Joker's inner monologue in the captions becomes almost a love letter to Batman as he muses over the number of people he has killed: "No, I don't keep count. But **you** do. And I love you for it." (1986, 140). It is made obvious that the Joker's actions are all in the attempt to gain Batman's attention; once Batman arrives to the fairground (the classic location for the battle), the Joker is pictured looking up in obvious adoration, with the caption "Darling" within the panel underlining the amorous nature of this weird and violent reunion (1986, 141).

Crucially, this emphasis on a lover's discourse is not limited to the Joker, which would imply an obvious connection between the "deviant" (that is, non-heterosexual) sexuality and evil. Instead, Batman, too, expresses a clear lover-like intensity as he addresses the Joker in his mind:

> Can you see it Joker? Feels to **me**... like it's written all over my **face**. I've lain awake **nights**... planning it... **picturing** it... endless nights... considering every possible **method**... **treasuring** each imaginary **moment**... from the **beginning**, I knew... that there's nothing **wrong** with you... that I can't **fix**... with my **hands**... (1986, 142)

Batman's monologue borders on obsession as he imagines ”every possible method” of how he could ”fix” the Joker, and the entire monologue can be read through the

double meaning of a sexual encounter. To complete this amorous narrative, the Joker, too, is revealed to be lying awake in his bed, unable to sleep at the thought of once again being reunited with his one true opponent, Batman (1986, 117).[86] This romantic discourse between the two characters ultimately merges into the violent, as the romantic quality of the relationship between Batman and the Joker can be further examined through a framework that makes deliberate associations between "love" and "battle" by using "similar rhetoric to describe the battle as one would love-making" (Theweleit, 1978/1989, 184). Batman's monologue above is a clear example of this deliberate association, as his rhetoric is both battle and love simultaneously. This violent lover's discourse is not limited only to Batman's relationship with the Joker: earlier in the graphic novel, Batman uses similar rhetoric of romance in his monologue as he comments on how he and Two-Face Harvey Dent "tumble like lovers" through a broken window (1986, 54).

The final confrontation (or, indeed, consummation) between the Joker and Batman begins in the highly metaphorical House of Mirrors and ends in the equally significant Tunnel of Love. Miller brings together hero and villain, and "hints at the collapse between them" as the Joker's white speech balloons take on the same gray as Batman's in the final pages before his death (Klock, 2002, 38). By providing a "subterranean connection between two characters who seem, on the surface, to be diametrically opposed" (Klock, 2002, 35), the text deconstructs the traditional hegemonic gender binary that views the effeminate and non-heterosexual masculinity as the opposite of hegemonic masculinity. Instead of constructing the hegemonic masculinity of the hero through a villanization of the "queer" masculine character, both *DKR* and *Arkham Asylum* explore this expected binary and open it up to new interpretations where the hero and villain begin to collapse into each other, essentially destabilizing the expected binary construction. Both comics suggest that these two characters usually seen as opposites are in fact much more alike, whether through (in)sanity like *Arkham Asylum* or through the blurring of the hero/villain binary in *DKR*. The Joker and his "queerness" are not derogatory, but instead deployed to expose the similarities between the two characters, his carnival

[86] As the Joker in movie *The Dark Knight* declares to Batman almost two decades later: "You… complete me." (2008, 01:24:25), testifying that, just like the Joker's multiple pasts, the pathological "love affair" between the Joker and Batman, too, has gained the power of a resonant trope. The hero is incomplete without the villain, and vice versa.

flair and flamboyance a joyous embrace to a new, free-flowing identity unstrained by the hegemonic power structures that define and, indeed dominate the white male hero.

According to Dittmer (2005, 631), popular geopolitical narratives such as the superhero comics help shape the worldview that the readers can adopt and act on, and in constructing this worldview, the role of the supervillain is commonly determined as the dichotomous other. Despite the generalized notion that the villain is often the one who possesses some of the society's unwanted qualities and, indeed helps define the nation's ideals through exclusion, the examples of the Joker discussed in this chapter appear to ultimately challenge this idea by undermining the binary opposition between the hegemonic and un-hegemonic forms of masculinity. By stressing the similarities between the hero and the villain and by presenting the Joker as a "queer" villain to be enjoyed rather than expelled, the texts challenge normative views of heroes and villains. Geopolitically, the Joker offers both a source of identification as well as a vehicle for the "expiation of guilt as well as aggression" (Gilmore, 2003, 4). After all, his is not made foreign; he is not described in any geopolitical terms other than those stemming from within the white, hegemonic culture (and even his whiteness is pronounced, thanks to his garish chalk-white skin). The Joker's geopolitical weight does not stem from an "us–them" dichotomy as domestic–foreign, but instead it invites a new organization of the geopolitical identity as stemming from the nation from itself.

Additionally, the Joker could even be read as an example of the "cult of villainy" identified by Gates, where villains, though evil and psychotic, are ultimately more popular than the detectives pursuing them (2006, 259). Exemplified by such popular movie villains as Hannibal Lecter (*The Silence of the Lambs*, 1991), Keyser Soze (*The Usual Suspects*, 1995), or John Doe (*Seven*, 1995), Gates cites the villain as America's ultimate hero as the myth of America's heroism turns inwards and recognizes that "evil is not readily discernible from good and that it resides within society as well as without" (2006, 281). The Joker's popularity as a villain among comics readers has been evident from the start, and the 1980s' rewritings of the character analyzed here clearly stress the similarities between the hero and the villain that claims the blurring boundaries between good and evil that the popular geopolitical narratives of America began to produce in the late 20th century.

While the villain often enjoys a popular place in the superhero narrative, the role of the female character, whether heroic or not, creates an exceedingly more complex equation. In the white, heterosexual, and hypermasculine genre of superhero comics, the position of the female character, as the next chapter will demonstrate, has often been—literally—in the refrigerator.

3.3 Women in Refrigerators[87]: The Problem of the Female in Superhero Comics

> The inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance, and should be drawn realistically, without exaggeration of feminine physical qualities.
> (DC Comics' official Editorial Policy Code from the 1950s)[88]

As established in the previous chapters, the superhero comic is an excessively masculine genre, predominantly characterized by the white, heterosexual, and masculine character of the superhero. As the masculine ideal of the superhero is mainly defined through a dominant position in terms of other masculinities, where does this locate the female character? As the quote above states, the 1950s' comics creators (comprised mainly of white men), were explicitly discouraged from writing female characters that would have equaled the male heroes. As the perceived audience of superhero comics has been seen as predominantly male,[89] the genre has become one written largely by men for men, resulting in the partial exclusion and marginalization of the female character in superhero comics. Especially females with significant power tend to be demonized, their power often seen as a geopolitical threat to the entire world, echoing clearly the "crisis in masculinity" where masculinity is seen as challenged by female empowerment. In this chapter, I will examine the position of the female character—both the female superhero and the non-superpowered female—in superhero comics. I will especially focus on how the female character in superhero comics is often sexualized, demonized, or

[87] The term "Women in Refrigerators" will be explained in detail later in the chapter. Briefly stated, the term originates from comics writer and critic Gail Simone, who coined it in order to describe the way superhero comics frequently took a female character and had her either assaulted, raped, depowered, or, as the name indicates, "cut up and stuck in the refrigerator" (1999).
[88] Qtd. in Madrid, 2009, 77.
[89] And not without reason; as a Cambridge University study shows, a majority of surveys claim that less than 10% of mainstream superhero readers are female (Brienza, 2011).

victimized, and how this can be related to the wider context of American popular geopolitics.

The female character, whether superpowered or not, has been a problematic element within superhero comics since its inception. Indeed, the female superhero poses a challenge to the entire genre through her nature as an oxymoron: both feminine and powerful, the female superhero ultimately leads to the underscoring of the traditional masculine-subject/feminine-object binary (O'Reilly, 2005, 280). Concurrently, the female character functions less as the binary opposite of the male hero, and more as a complement to his masculinity through her femininity. This becomes most apparent when approaching the female character in superhero comics through the phenomenon called "women in refrigerators," which draws attention to the way women are often treated as subsidiary in superhero comics as their main function is to further complement the male hero's character development. I will be addressing the two primary types of female characters in this chapter: female superheroes and other female characters. Of the other female characters, the superhero's girlfriend will be the primary category discussed. Both female superheroes and the girlfriends hold a specific function within the genre, and will be discussed accordingly.

The female superhero holds a problematic position both in terms of the gender politics of the genre as well as the wider geopolitical inclinations of the superhero narrative. The role of the female superhero in the popular geopolitical space of the superhero narrative is often widely different from that of her male counterpart, promoting the question: who is allowed to act in a certain geopolitical space? Though both male and female characters are needed in the creation of a geopolitical space, studying the politics of these representations reveals a contrast: as for example Jukarainen has noted, popular fiction usually portrays the male character as a geopolitical subject whereas female characters tend to be either tools or the object of male geopolitics (2003, 88). In superhero comics, male heroes are granted active roles, while women are more often depicted as passive, static, and objects of assault or in need of rescue. This binary opposition becomes questionable in terms of geopolitics, for it can be used to further enhance gendered geopolitics which is then used to justify the very binary it stems from (ibid., 89).

Just like her male counterpart, the female superhero has possessed a geopolitical element since her inception. Though technically not the first female

superhero,[90] Wonder Woman remains to this day the most successful female superhero since her introduction to the American public in *All-Star Comics* #8 (Dec 1941). Invented by psychologist William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman is the only superhero to share the distinction with Superman and Batman of having been in publication continuously since her inception (Daniels, 2004, 58). Sent by the Amazons to fight for America, "the last citadel of democracy," Wonder Woman (with her alter ego, the mousy Diana Prince) was a deliberate effort by a trained psychologist to create a female hero who would combine the strength of Superman with "all the allure of a good and beautiful woman" (Marston, 1944; qtd in Smith 2006, 129). Appearing nearly simultaneously with the attacks on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Wonder Woman (like Captain America and several other superheroes) was heavily influenced by the war, battling a variety of Nazi villains in the pages of comics. Like Superman, Wonder Woman was not a native U.S. citizen, yet she chose to fight for the American nation, stressing the geopolitical ideology that superheroic empowerment arises from nation rather than ethnic origins.

Crucially, Marston wanted to appeal to both boys *and* girls with his creation, self-consciously designed to "change perceptions of gender and sexuality" by deconstructing some of the hierarchical binaries of gender and power (Saunders, 2011, 39). Despite Marston's aims, many critics[91] have ultimately stressed Wonder Woman's fetishistic nature that frequently features bondage and humiliation and regard the character as anti-feminist and traditionally gendered. However, Saunders argues that this interpretation of Wonder Woman as traditionally gendered is in fact often based on a careless reading of Marston's comics, and that Marston in fact sincerely supported women's liberation and his goal, though dated, was to portray positive and strong images of women who enjoy both submission and dominance (2011, 45–50). Wonder Woman's sexual politics aside, she remains one of the few independent and strong female superheroes of the 20th century, although the decades have seen her de-powered and domesticated at various points in her career, reflecting the ambiguous status of the powerful female hero in superhero comics.

[90] This distinction is often credited to Fantomah, a superpowered Egyptian woman who debuted in *Jungle Comics* #2 (Feb 1940).

[91] For example, Reynolds reads Wonder Woman as nothing more than "a frank appeal to male fantasies of sexual domination" (1992, 34), while Wright reads the stories as examples "the Victorian assumption that superior female virtues like compassion and empathy were best applied as a restraining influence on men, not as a means to self-sufficiency" (2001, 21).

Celebrating strong and powerful women as such is not a new phenomenon in the United States: already during WWII women took on several of the positions left behind by men fighting the front. "Rosie the Riveter" with her "We Can Do It!" slogan became "an icon of female empowerment" (Murray, 2011, 135) in the United States during the 1940s, as women did their part for their nation just like men. However, as the war ended, women were expected to return to their kitchens and dutifully resume their places as wives and mothers. The female superhero, too, felt this backlash, as the post-war female superheroes began to adapt more to the "dominant, mainstream cultural expectations of the post-war, white middle-class woman" (D'Amore, 2008). A clear example of this backlash can be seen in the new Silver Age superheroine, the Fantastic Four's Sue Storm (aka the Invisible Girl).[92] Not only did Sue's power of invisibility stress her submissive role (women should be neither seen nor heard), but her main function especially in the early stories was to act as a surrogate "mother" to the dysfunctional family comprised of her male companions: her fiancé Reed Richards played the role of the father, Sue's brother Johnny was already family, and the Thing was appointed the position of the grumpy "child" of the family (D'Amore, 2008). Sue's early attempts at superheroism mostly resulted in her either fainting or being captured: as Trina Robbins notes, "Sue Storm's power and flaws were almost a caricature of Victorian notions of the feminine, an invisible woman who faints when she tries to exert herself" (1996, 114).[93]

Though these Victorian notions of the feminine are less frequent in superhero comics today, the female superhero now faces other ways of control and submission, most prominently through her body. As anyone (growing up in the Western world) asked to describe superhero comics could tell, after all, a significant mark of the genre is the physical representation of the hero: muscular and perfect, crammed into a skintight costume, the superhero is instantly recognizable precisely due to his/her body and costume. The superhero body is one of the clearest markers of the hero's identity and, as I quoted earlier (but it bears repeating), it has the potential to defy and to exist beyond the limits of "all traditional and normalizing

[92] The first issue of *The Fantastic Four* was published in November, 1961.

[93] As D'Amore notes, Sue Storm's role in the Fantastic Four was a topic of much debate in the fan letters section of the magazine: Sue's "worth" in the series was argued for and against, the main argument against her being that "she never does anything" (*The Fantastic Four* #6, 1962, 25; qtd. in D'Amore, 2008): "She was a commodity to be measured against the productivity of her fantastic family, which was not a fate the male members had to endure."

readings" (Taylor, 2007, 345). Yet, especially female bodies in mainstream superhero comics tend to be overtly fetishized and exaggerated year after year. Shown in the panels in parts rather than as a whole, the female body is often forced into impossible positions in angles that offer the (male) reader most cleavage and/or rear ends, often at the same time (Stuller, 2012, 237).[94]

A recent example of the persistency of the disparaged depiction of male and female superheroes emerged in the massive DC re-launch that took place in 2011: the first issue of the new *Catwoman* (Nov 2011) clearly demonstrated the differences between male and female heroes, as it pictured Batman, fully clothed and in control (#1; 29), whilst Catwoman was portrayed in several states of semi-undress (#1; 1–3), her spine often forced to an impossible angle that stressed both her bosom and her hips in an obviously sexualized manner (this visual stress on her body in various states of undress and anatomical impossibility was repeated several times throughout the issue, climaxing in a highly controversial and much-discussed sex scene with Batman). The difference in the representation between the two characters reveals a rather obvious double standard still in place in superhero comics between the clothed and controlled male body and the half-naked and uncontrollable female body.

This representation of the body, both male and female, becomes increasingly relevant as comics as a visual medium pays a substantial amount of attention to the physical look of the superhero, with a particularly fetishizing attention given to the female superhero. Consequently, a significant amount of critique has focused on the physical representation of the female superhero. Geoff Klock, for example, notes that female superheroes have traditionally been "simply objects of sexual voyeurism," resembling pin-up girls more than actual characters (2002, 111). Part of this accusation of voyeurism derives from the superhero costume, which for female heroes often means excessively skimpy clothing combined with highly impractical shoes. Accordingly, Reynolds gives much critical attention to the superhero costume and its resemblance to Saussure's *langue/parole* system, where *langue* is represented by the genre conventions, whilst each individual costume becomes as

[94] This is not to say that male bodies are any less exaggerated or distorted; however, the male bodies in superhero comics tend to focus on the body's power and ability for action, whereas the female bodies are portrayed in a way that suggests deliberate posing for the (assumed) privileged male reader. Furthermore, as Stuller points out, action sequences involving female heroes tend to be sexualized, and they often contain violence that is explicitly more sexual in nature than those involving male heroes (2012, 237).

example of an utterance, a *parole* that can be interpreted within those conventions (1992, 26). Within this initial framework, Reynolds appears extremely critical of the subject of depicting gender in superhero comics, deeming especially the female heroes as nothing more than "pawns or tools of male fantasy" who "dress up in the styles of 1940s pornography" (1992, 79). Reynolds also accuses the female heroes as behaving like male heroes in battle while being either "smugly domestic" or "brooding and remote" when in repose (1992, 80), which in his reading makes them not only unattractive but also problematic.

One reason behind the contradictory treatment of female superheroes can perhaps be located in the expected audiences of superhero comics mentioned above: the infamous "adolescent males." Especially during the early decades of the genre, the comics industry was heavily dominated by male artists, writers, and editors who, Stuller suspects, were not perhaps the most competent people in "addressing true female sensibilities" (2012, 246). Furthermore, superhero comics were mainly marketed to a male audience despite the fact that women, too, read them. Though any actual data of audience demographics from the past decades is hard to come by, the fact that women also read superhero comics can be fairly easily deduced, for example, from the letters columns published by the editors in each issue, which regularly feature both male and female letter writers. Yet, the comics were marketed mainly to a male audience, as the advertisements in the comics reveal: for example, Stuller's own sample analysis, focusing on the 1970s' issues of *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*, features advertisements for the classic bodybuilding courses as well as an ad for an inflatable pillow printed with the image of sex symbol Raquel Welch, no less (ibid.), which leave very little doubt as to the intended audience of the comic book. A similar conclusion can be drawn by analyzing any older sample issues from the Golden and especially Silver Age superhero comics, which tend to advertise primarily to a male audience with advertisements for G.I. Joe toys, miniature soldiers, warships, and other "masculine" items. Thus, while actual data from reader demographics from the Golden and Silver Age is not available, these advertisements do give clues as to the expectations of the marketers when discussing potential readers and expected audiences.

As superhero comics are aimed at a predominantly male audience, they accordingly offer a particular vision of what Reynolds refers to as "domestication" of female sexuality:

> In their simultaneous offering and denying of sexuality, plus their cool strength and determination in battle with supervillains, the superheroines offer a reconciliation of all the conflicting demands of adolescent male sexual desire. Sexuality is domesticated (i.e. made safe) and yet remains exceptionally exciting. Women are visually thrilling, and yet threatening and dangerous only to outsiders and strangers. (1992, 81)

According to Reynolds, female sexuality in superhero comics is controlled and contained by depicting female superheroes as visually enticing, yet simultaneously safe. By portraying a female hero in provocative poses with revealing outfits, the female superhero is made an object of the male gaze, and contained as the female character is turned into an object of voyeurism. A similar conclusion has been drawn by Mitra Emad, who sees the "hypersexualizing" of the female superhero as a way to control and reign in female power by the way of making the female body of the hero an object of male sexual pleasure (2006, 982). By emphasizing the physical appearance of the female hero through hypersexualization, her other traits (or even what she has to say) are conveniently subdued. D'Amore, too, notes how the female superhero's identity is often presented as "inseparable from her physical appearance," which in turn contributes to her objectification as the focus of the sexualizing male gaze (2008).

The hypersexualization of the female hero has another function besides stressing the role of the female as an object. By portraying female heroes as physically hyperfeminine and sexualized through exaggerated physical qualities and costumes that left very little to the imagination, their femininity "remains beyond question," thus enabling them to engage in the masculine social role of crime-fighter in the first place (Donovan and Richardson, 2009, 176). As Brown notes, one of the central paradoxes of the action woman, especially within superhero comics, is the way she is "required to be both active and static at the same time" (2004, 64). In other words, even when in action, the female superhero is often posing as a pin-up for the male reader. One way of achieving this is granting female heroes superpowers which are not physical, such as telepathy or telekinesis, which allows them to retain feminine and attractive poses whilst engaging their enemies.[95] Although some female superheroes, such as She-Hulk and Spider-Woman, do engage in physical fighting (and almost all female heroes seem to master the basics

[95] Mike Madrid calls these "strike a pose and point" -powers: psychic powers that do not require physical contact, and let the women take part in the battle while staying still and "still look fabulous doing it" (2009, 292).

of martial arts by default), the demand to "look fabulous" while doing it signals a strong desire to harness and control female power.

Another way of domesticating female superheroes and their power is to analyze the central trope of guilt within superhero comics and how male and female heroes tend to differ in this respect. As Sara Crosby writes, the male heroes' guilt (like Spider-Man's failure to save his uncle Ben) usually becomes the motivation for their heroism, whereas the female heroes often feel "guilt *because of* their heroism," seeing their agency and toughness as their "sin" (2004, 155, emphasis original). A telling (and early) example is DC's *Brave and the Bold* #63 (Dec 1965/Jan 1966) storyline "Revolt of the Super-Chicks." The narrative sees Supergirl and Wonder Woman renouncing their superheroism and flying off to Paris to model high fashion and "make out with French men," as Stuller summarizes (2012, 235). Hiding their superpowers, both women struggle to keep their secret in the fear that the men they date would reject them if they discovered the truth. Wonder Woman fears that the man she dates will lose "the wonderful notion of [her] being weak and feminine!" (#63, 15) if she uses her Amazon powers to prevent an accident. Supergirl, too, abhors that she will "no longer seem feminine" to her beau if she reveals her powerful nature (#63, 16). Both women display a clear sense of guilt and shame over the fact that they are physically powerful superheroines, and fear that their true power will alienate men who expect women to be weak and submissive. By the end of the issue both women have learned their lesson and dutifully resumed their positions as heroes as Superman commands. What is revealing here is that, compared to male heroes like Spider-Man, who frequently declared his retirement from superheroism, Supergirl and Wonder Woman reject their heroism out of a desire to have fun, whereas Peter Parker always struggles with his ability to really be a hero—a clear distinction that labels the female hero as frivolous and the male hero as tragic.

The female hero must more frequently justify her desire for *wanting* to be a hero, whereas the male hero must come to terms with his *failures* as a hero—a clear difference which distinguishes the male hero from the female, as the male hero is never required to justify his position as a hero because of his gender. Directly linked to this, female superheroes also tend to lack the memorable origin trauma that most prominent male heroes have: whereas Batman is born out of the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents, the original Batwoman Kathy Kane is given no similar motivation

for her crime-fighting career, her primary motivation especially in the 1950s appearing to be a desire to reveal Batman's true identity and then blackmail him into marrying her. Though some superheroines, like Supergirl and Spider-Woman, do possess origin traumas that match their male counterparts, they are rarely mentioned whereas the male heroes' origin traumas have received a substantial amount of attention. For example, Philip Sandifer's article "Amazing Fantasies: Trauma, Affect, and Superheroes" (2008) discusses the origin traumas of several superheroes in great depth, but not even once mentions a single female hero in this context. This revealing absence may ultimately support Fingeroth's claim that there may exist a "societal unease" about placing female characters in the traumatic positions reserved to the male characters (2004, 88).

In contrast to the contained and hypersexualized pin-up superheroine, the superhero comic has usually presented its alternative as a variation of the *noir*-inspired femme fatale: the exotic, seductive, and ultimately deviant female. According to Best, the threat of the femme fatale to the hero's male power, her seductive and eroticized nature, was always "contained via her identification as 'bad'" (2005), whereas Gates defines her simply as a "strong, independent woman that embodied all that ailed masculinity" (2006, 96). The concept of the femme fatale itself, as Mosse (1996, 74) notes, has its roots already in the Romantic movement of the 19th century, which began to recognize the threat strong women posed to masculinity: the dangerous and lethal female became a way to define masculinity through the idea of control, as the femme fatale was marked by sexual danger due to her independence. Masculinity was defined by the ability to refrain from and control one's sexual urges, while women were in danger of being "absorbed" in it (ibid., 75).

Lack of control over one's sexual desires and emotions is a sign of deviance in the superhero comic, and this is clearly visible in the way evil females are often depicted in superhero comics as completely driven by their emotions and/or unable to control their own superpowers (and, presumably, their sexual appetites). As Fingeroth, for example, notes, apart from Wonder Woman there exists no successful female superhero "who was *femme* but not *fatale*" (2004, 80), signaling that women could not be both good and powerful, but instead, their increase of power would inevitably lead to evil and corruption. By threatening the established order, the powerful female superhero becomes a geopolitical threat as she risks destroying not

only herself but the world; her femininity will destroy the world unless reined by a masculine authority, and the narratives that depict these dangerous females serve to strengthen the popular geopolitical narratives that stress male authority over the female.

Though it has become a standard to read such well-known storylines as *X-Men*'s "The Dark Phoenix Saga" (1979–1980) as an example of how superhero comics treat powerful females, I wish to briefly analyze some of the reasons behind this reading of the powerful female character and her "transgressions that threaten the established order" (Taylor, 2007, 353). It is noteworthy to mention that "The Dark Phoenix Saga" was published during the late 1970s and the early 1980s, during an era that witnessed the beginnings of the trend of "remasculinization" in U.S. popular culture which would blaze into full glory by the mid-1980s with spectacular and muscular action heroes such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The era, as Gates points out, also featured a clear "backlash" against women as well as strong and independent female characters who were either demonized or excluded as a part of this remasculinization of American culture (2006, 101). Within this context, the treatment of Jean Grey as the Dark Phoenix becomes a part of a larger trend in America's popular geopolitical narratives that stress the role of the femme fatale. "The Dark Phoenix Saga" (*The Uncanny X-Men*, #129–#137, Jan 1979–Oct. 1980) has become notorious within superhero comics for its handling of the powerful female superhero, the term "Dark Phoenix" becoming synonymous for any powerful female who becomes "evil" in a variety of popular culture items. In a storyline written by Chris Claremont and drawn by John Byrne, the original X-Men member Jean Grey (known as Marvel Girl in the 1960s' original series[96]) became the Phoenix after being exposed to radiation in space and acquiring god-like abilities that initially turned her into pure thought (McLaughlin, 2012, 106).[97] Even though she is gradually able to control the Phoenix power, she ultimately succumbs to it, becomes the Dark Phoenix and, after fighting her former teammates who in vain try to restrain her, she travels to a distant galaxy where she

[96] The original *X-Men* was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963. However, the series ended its run less than a decade later, in 1970. It was re-launched in 1974 by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum, becoming a huge hit that still spews spin-off titles and blockbuster movies (McLaughlin, 2012, 106). Jean Grey was one of the central characters that continued in the new revised *Uncanny X-Men* of 1974.

[97] The story begins in issues 101-108 (Aug 1976-Oct 1977), while the "The Dark Phoenix Saga" itself takes place is issues 129-137 (Jan 1979-Oct. 1980).

devours an entire star, thus killing over five million inhabitants of a nearby planet. Now seen as an intergalactic threat, she is sentenced to death by the Shi'ar alien race. When the X-Men try fight for Jean, momentarily in control of the Phoenix power, she ultimately realizes her inability to control the power within her, and commits suicide in order to save the universe from the all-consuming Phoenix power.[98]

Before becoming the Dark Phoenix, Jean is already briefly seduced to the "dark side" by a powerful male telepath, Mastermind. As an all-but-subtle visual marker of her transgression, the evil Jean, under the clichéd moniker "Black Queen," is dressed in high-heeled leather boots and a tight-laced corset, complete with a heavy layer of make-up signaling her corrupted and sexualized nature, which translates to "evil" in very basic and dichotomous terms of the femme fatale (1980/2006, 32). In similar terms, the villainess of the storyline, the White Queen Emma Frost, is also depicted as wearing almost identical boots and corset, only in white. Later, as Jean turns into the Dark Phoenix, her eyes often display only the whites with no pupils, her hair is like flames, and her speech balloons have a thick, black edge that separates her from the rest of the X-Men. Jean's "evil" nature is systematically stressed through her visual look, which is less contained and controlled as her hair flows in flames and her speech balloons are distinguishably out of shape. Indeed, Charles Xavier's characterization of Jean Grey/the Dark Phoenix aptly describes the dilemma of the powerful and corrupted female hero: "Power without restraint -- knowledge without wisdom -- age without maturity -- passion without love" (1980/2006, 145). Unable to control her power, Jean (and her feminine power) is a threat to the established (masculine) order, and must thus be contained—by none other than the male Professor X.

Jean's ultimate sin is the lack of self-control: unable to restrain her Phoenix power, she lacks the (male) ability for total self-control. Crucially, Jean is not only unable to control her power, but she is also unable to control her emotions, which causes her to become a danger to the entire universe. As McLaughlin notes, "Jean's fury is always triggered by harm done to those she cares about," meaning that her rage actually arises from love (2012, 109). This is apparent in "The Dark Phoenix

[98] A later retcon from 1986 revealed that the Jean Grey/Dark Phoenix of 1980 was not Jean but a copy of Jean created by the Phoenix Force. However, the fact that this doppelgänger (and the readers) at the time believed she was Jean means that her death and it impact remain intact.

Saga" as the male villain Mastermind, who has ensnared Jean as the Black Queen, kills Jean's lover Scott Summers in a telepathic plane (though not in reality), thus causing her to shock out of his mind control (1980/2006, 106). However, what this also ultimately implies is that Jean's emotions are a source of weakness as well, as she lacks the ability to control them. What is more, Jean is revealed to enjoy the power she possesses as the Dark Phoenix, further revealing her corrupted nature (1980, 106; 143). It is only in suicide that she becomes heroic, at least if we follow Mosse's line of argumentation where a woman can be heroic either as a victim or as a martyr (1996, 167); the too-powerful female must ultimately atone for her sins by sacrificing herself.[99]

According to Madrid, the female superhero turned evil demonstrates the fear that men have when discussing female power:

> [T]he secret betrayer, the dormant evil waiting to awaken, the weak creature who can't handle power. These stories suggested that there was something tragic, yet expected, about a woman's inability to control her power. (Madrid, 2009, 232)

Though Jean Grey became the Dark Phoenix over thirty years ago, this the trope of punishing powerful females can still be found in mainstream superhero comics today. Indeed, a more recent example of this "fear" of uncontrollable female power can be found in the Marvel character Scarlet Witch (aka Wanda Maximoff): the daughter of X-Men villain Magneto, she was first introduced in *X-Men* #4 (Mar 1964) as a villain together with her twin brother Quicksilver, but both later reformed and joined the Avengers in 1965. With a mental superpower giving her the power to alter probability (another "static" female power) and later gaining abilities in "chaos magic" that allow her to alter reality, the Scarlet Witch, like the Dark Phoenix, is in fact possessed by a power she is ultimately not able to control. The Scarlet Witch's mental breakdown is highly emotional and linked to her twin sons whom she conjures into existence only to have them erased from her memory as they were never "real." Holding the Avengers responsible for the loss of her children, her attack on her fellow teammates and subsequent collapse is documented in *Avengers: Disassembled* (2005) and *House of M* (2005). Revealed responsible for the attacks on the Avengers in *Avengers: Disassembled*, Dr. Strange's description of the Scarlet Witch stresses her mind as consumed by a power she is unable to control:

[99] This is a trope seen in a number of popular culture texts of the 21st century; for example, the titular characters of popular TV shows *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* and *Xena, The Warrior Princess* both sacrifice themselves through suicide in a "complete erasure of female agency" (Crosby, 2004, 155).

> With powers she did not earn nor can she control... Powers she never fully understood. Can you understand the delicate mindset of a woman, a person, who has control over reality? It means reality controls **her** . . . A little more of her slips away. She loses herself. Her reason. But she struggles quietly every day to keep it in check . . . to keep it all together. For a person of strong mind and body, for a person of pure spirit... The task of coping with these powers would be **all-consuming**. (*Avengers: Disassembled* #503, Dec 2004, 11–13)

Not only is she viewed as unworthy of her power ("powers she did not earn"), the Scarlet Witch's inability to control herself is clearly seen as arising from her nature as female ("the delicate mindset of a woman"), suggesting that as even a "strong mind and body" (aka the male mind and body) would be challenged to control these powers, for the Scarlet Witch it becomes impossible.

Ultimately, the Scarlet Witch's inability to control her power results in a total state of amnesia in the storyline *House of M*, where she is manipulated by the men around her into altering reality from a world ruled by mutants to a world where mutants are all but extinct.[100] Her inability to control herself is stressed yet again, and in a move eerily reminiscent of the Dark Phoenix, Wanda even considers taking her own life: "It should have ended months ago. Am I a coward... for not wanting to kill myself? Even though I know I should?" (*House of M*, #7; 10).[101] Her death is demanded by many other heroes, who conveniently choose to forget that several of their own numbers are, like Wanda, former villains. Later, as she is confronted for her actions, she exclaims she has no control over any of them:

> *Wanda*: "I-I didn't mean that. He was so mad at me. I was-- I needed to protect my children. The children have to be—"
> *Dr. Strange*: "Wanda, listen to me..."
> *Wanda*: "I-I can't control any of it."
> (*House of M*, #7; 17)

Additionally even her visual depictions, such as the alternate cover to #1 of *The House of M* (see fig. 4), stress her inability to literally hold herself together. The Scarlet Witch's fate was a central theme in the recent miniseries *Avengers: The Children's Crusade* (2010–2012), which explicitly deals with her fate. Revealed to have been manipulated by yet another male character, Dr. Doom, she ultimately

[100] While this is a gross simplification of the actual events, it is a truthful description of what happened: the Scarlet Witch first altered reality into one ruled by mutants as the dominant race, and then once more altered that reality back to the "original" Marvel reality, but with the exception that all but few mutants lost their powers (or died) in the process. This plot also enabled several stories located in various alternate universes.

[101] In *Avengers: The Children's Crusade* (2010–2012) she even goes as far as trying to sacrifice herself, but she is stopped by the Wiccan who tells her that her children are still alive (#6, 10).

Fig. 4. *The House of M* #1 (Aug 2005). The Variant Cover by Joe Quesada. © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

escapes the fate of the Dark Phoenix as she rejoins the Avengers with the hope of redeeming her past actions.

Despite, or perhaps because, this ambiguous relationship female superheroes have with power, it is interesting to note, as Saunders does, that "the most popular female comic book superheroes of the past 30 years, such as The Black Widow, Phoenix, Elektra, Spider-Woman, Catwoman, and the Huntress, are moody, haunted, erratic, and often untrustworthy: many are (partially) reformed villains" (2011, 156). The list could easily be continued with the Scarlet Witch, whose tragic transgressions of power make her recent appearances even more haunting. Saunders also points out the clichéd nature of the notion of a "super-woman with a dark side" like Dark Phoenix or the Scarlet Witch, noting that some more recent works, such as *Alias* by writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Michael Gaydosor or *Birds of Prey* (several authors) manage to transcend this characterization, producing female characters of depth and "self-reflexive wit" (ibid.). Indeed, the aim of this section has not been to claim all portrayals of female superheroes in comics as misogynistic and hypersexualizing, but rather to analyze some of the ways female heroes tend to be represented in mainstream superhero comics and analyze the reasons behind this construction of biased gender representations. As with defining masculinity (see 3.1), the issue of control arises as a critical qualification for a proper gender identity, as the lack of control becomes a sign of weakness and evil, signaling the existence of a similar geopolitical construct. The way female characters are depicted is in itself a commentary on the way male heroes and masculinity are viewed, and thus merits an analysis in itself. In the next section, I will include the other female characters into the analysis through the particular phenomenon often referred to as "women in refrigerators."

The role of the female within a superhero narrative is, as discussed above, contradictory: simultaneously tempting and in need of control, the power of the female hero is often denied (Reynolds 1992, 80). But a larger issue can be located when analyzing the relevance of the female characters within the male-dominated genre of the superhero, one that applies to heroic and non-heroic females alike, one that comics writer and critic Gail Simone has infamously dubbed as the "women in refrigerators" syndrome. Initially created as a web site in 1999, [102] Simone collected

[102] Now located at: http://www.unheardtaunts.com/wir/. [Accessed January 26, 2012].

on the site the numerous instances when superhero comics decided to take a female character, and, simply, have her "either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator" for the sake of the plot.[103] Furthermore, this plot almost as a rule focuses on the male superhero, deeming the fate of the female character as little more than a plot device to further the male hero's tragedy. This has been noted by Stuller, too, who has studied how female characters often serve as "motivation for the hero's journey, rather than as characters of substance in and of themselves" (2012, 237–238), which reveals the secondary role female characters still often play in superhero narratives. Though the "syndrome" is a rather colloquial construction, Stuller, for example, argues for its usefulness due to its ability to critically approach gender portrayals and the messages they send concerning the production and the intended audiences of these texts (2012, 238).[104]

Characters often subjected to this cruel fate are the superheroes' unfortunate girlfriends, whose role tends to be one of reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations through their subordinate status: as Wright argues, for decades the "primary function" served by the female characters (especially girlfriends) within superhero comics was "to resist the romantic advances of the superhero's alter ego, pine for the superhero, scheme to get close to him, screw things up, get captured by the bad guy, and await for rescue by the hero" (2001, 184–185). In other words, the female character served as "proof" of the male hero's heterosexuality while at the same time being unattainable. Being the most famous of these girlfriends, Lois Lane may have usually survived these functions, yet many other superhero girlfriends and/or superheroines were often less fortunate.

A famous example (to quote one of numerous) of the cruel fate of the female character is presented in *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) by writer Alan Moore and artist Brian Bolland, where the former Batgirl, Barbara Gordon, was shot (and probably sexually assaulted, though this is not explicitly stated) and paralyzed by the Joker just to induce madness on Commissioner Gordon and to arouse the attention of Batman. Sanctioned by DC's official editors (by the now-infamous

[103] The term "women in refrigerators," naturally, comes precisely from such an incident: *Green Lantern* #54 (Aug 1994) showed the titular hero entering his apartment and finding his girlfriend, Alex DeWitt, killed by the supervillain Major Force and literally stuffed into his refrigerator.

[104] A similar colloquial construction can be found in the so-called "Bechdel Test," developed by Alison Bechdel in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985). The test evaluates the representation of women in fiction through three basic requirements: "**One**, it has to have at least two women in it…who, two, **talk** to each other about, three, something besides a **man**" (Bechdel, "The Rule," 1985).

phrase “cripple the bitch”[105]), the event was made part of the official continuity, and a wheel-chair-bound Barbara Gordon was reintroduced into the DC universe in *Suicide Squad* #23 (Jan 1989) with her injury, taking up the alias of “Oracle.” Crucially, even though it is Barbara who is shot and abused (she is stripped naked and photographed), it is the male characters, Commissioner Gordon and Batman, who experience the tragedy. It is *their* response to this horrific event (not Barbara’s) that forms the center of the narrative through what Stuller (tongue-in-cheek) calls the “you-touched-my-stuff” syndrome, where women are seen as the male hero’s property and it is the violation of this property that motivates the hero’s revenge (2012, 250). As the Joker never makes any allusions to Barbara Gordon’s career as a crime-fighter, it becomes even more obvious that her only function is to act as the instrument with which he can cause most emotional pain to her father, Jim Gordon. As The Joker replies to Barbara’s pleas of a reason: “To prove a **point**. Here’s to **crime**.” (1988, 14).

However, as Barbara Gordon had forfeited her career as a masked avenger earlier that year, she is doubly to blame for her fate: in a special one-off issue published earlier the same year titled *Batgirl Special* #1 (Jul 1988), Barbara officially retired from her position as the Batgirl after realizing that being a superhero could ultimately result in her death. While several male superheroes, such as Spider-Man, have often momentarily renounced their careers as masked avengers, they have rarely faced a fate as violent as Barbara. There is an obvious double standard in the way male and female superheroes have encountered violence, as women have tended to face significantly more sexualized and graphic violence than men (Stuller, 2012, 250). For example, both Batman and Barbara Gordon have suffered serious spinal injury (Barbara in *The Killing Joke*, Batman in “Knightfall” from *Batman* #497, Jul 1993), but only Barbara was exposed to sexual abuse, and she was also left without a “miraculous comeback” granted to Batman (ibid.). Madrid suggests that the reason behind this difference between male and female heroes and how they are depicted in terms of violence results in part from a perceived “lack of dedication”: the female superhero is not as dedicated to the mission as the male superhero, as the female heroes’ desire for love and safety

[105] This phrasing has been confirmed by Moore in at least one interview by *Wizard Magazine* in 2006, where he identified DC’s Len Wein as the editor in question.

proves stronger than their "quest for justice" (2009, 57). The implication seems to be that female superheroes, driven more by their emotions than by their sense of justice, will ultimately abandon their careers for their desire of stability and romance, and are therefore more deserving of their violent punishment.

This desire for love and romance was a weakness not only in the female superhero, but in the often forgotten category of the girlfriend: whether Lois Lane or Mary Jane Watson, to be a superhero's girlfriend meant to be in constant danger. And even if technically this was due to the male hero's desire to love, the fault always seems to be on the weaker sex. Possible knowledge of the hero's civilian identity led the girlfriend to the immediate risk of injury and even death, as her ignorance no longer protected her. By becoming a part of the team, she now was in constant danger, to herself and to the hero's secret identity, which could be revealed accidentally. Similarly, the notion persisted that any female who knew the hero's secret identity was a threat, as the knowledge gave the women control, and posed the threat of settling down and getting married (Madrid 2009, 62).[106] Marriage, as Best (2005) notes, has been a traditional trope in superhero comics of an "emasculating threat to male power and freedom" especially in the 1950s and 1960s, motivating the male heroes to conceal their civilian identities at any cost. The superhero narrative thus tends to portray the female character as ultimately driven by her emotions and desire for love and marriage, and therefore lacking the realization of the importance of the hero's mission, his quest for justice—and this makes her not only expendable, but also a very prominent threat. Despite the origins of this trope in the 1950s, it still exists today, as DC's acclaimed *Identity Crisis* miniseries from 2004 testifies.

Identity Crisis (2004), by Brad Meltzer (writer) and Rags Morales (artist), focuses on the Justice League of America and especially on the relationships between the heroes and their families. The narrative is filled with iconic heroes such as Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman, but the stress is on the slightly lesser known heroes: Green Arrow, the Flash, and the Atom, among others. The reader is presented with the Elongated Man, Ralph Dibny, whose loving and adorable wife,

[106] In the sexual politics of the 1950s' superhero comics, female superheroes such as Batwoman and Batgirl were often represented as threats to the male homosocial bonds as the women aggressively pursued the heroes and continuously threatened them with "romantic entanglement" which would, worst case scenario, result in domestication and emasculation (Best, 2005).

Sue, is brutally killed at the beginning, prompting the heroes to search among their numerous enemies for the guilty party. Throughout the narrative, the central theme of family is emphasized as the heroes are forced to realize the danger they not only expose themselves, but which they expose their loved ones to, painting "a bull's-eye" on their families' chests by choosing the career of masked avengers (2004, 15). Sue Dibny's gruesome fate dutifully follows the "women in refrigerators" formula as her death acts as the catalyst to the (largely male cast of) heroes' trauma and tragedy. To further stress the role of women as victims, the flashbacks also reveal that Sue had been assaulted before by Dr. Light, who had discovered the true weakness of the heroes in the people they love. Sue Dibny's rape scene, a brutal and distressing visual in itself, solidifies her role as the victim, and the narrative affirms the women-in-refrigerators syndrome as Ralph notes: 'He [Dr.Light] couldn't beat us… so he decided to beat her.' (2004, 47). The superhero's significant other becomes the substitute target, a tool to hurt the hero who cannot be physically hurt, testifying to the idea of women as tools of male geopolitics.

However, what the final twist reveals is that the villain is not one of the grand, delusional supervillains of the traditional rogue gallery, but Jean Loring, the estranged ex-wife of the Atom (Ray Loring), who had attacked (and accidentally killed) Sue in the hope that a threat aimed at the families of superheroes would unite her once more with her ex-husband. In this narrative, *both* the victim and the villain come from the same circle of superhero spouses, whose emotional and therefore weak natures cause one to die in the hands of the other. Sue Dibny's fate is dictated by her desire for love and family life (and wanting nothing more, she thus undermines the heroic mission), and Jean Loring's need for emotional fulfillment leads to her ultimate destruction. To add an ironic twist to the misogynistic tragedy, Jean Loring herself is a former victim of the WiR syndrome: in *Atom and Hawkman* #45 (Oct/Nov 1969), Jean was captured and driven insane by alien supervillains, and although she was quickly released, she had to suffer from her insanity almost a year until finally cured in *Justice League of America* #81 (Jun 1970). Once shattered, her sanity would face further challenges in the subsequent years, yet *Identity Crisis* carefully refrains from giving her any status as a victim, thoroughly villanizing her through her emotional and feminine needs.

Though the women in refrigerators -formula is clearly present, the text makes no attempt to either discuss the theme of sexual violence or problematize this

representation of women in any way. Instead, the misogyny of the text is apparent from the very opening pages of the comic. For example, as Ralph Dibny, the Elongated Man, comments on his female partner in his internal monologue as they kill time on a stakeout, he reveals the genre's basic assumptions of the male/female division: "This is Firehawk. She's a puppy. I sit here for over two hours to make sure she doesn't get herself killed." (2004, 2). The condescension of the male hero is obvious, though he is otherwise pictured as a loving and respectful man; it is, however, in his relationship to the female heroes that his misogynistic stand is revealed. Indeed, a few pages later, it is stressed how female heroes are too involved with emotions as Firehawk asks how Ralph met his wife and he replies: "Can I say one thing?--and not to be sexist--…but when you're on a stakeout with Batman, he **never** asks that. Black Canary did. So did Zatanna. Power Girl didn't, God bless her, but that's--" (2004, 8). It is clearly implied that it is not a heroic quality to be interested in such trivialities as romances, and that Power Girl's reluctance to ask implies her more masculine aka less emotion-driven state, which is seen as a clear credit to her name.

The subordinate position of female characters is subtly stressed through the comic's frequent use of captions, too. As the characters are introduced in the comic, the captions provide them with titles that stress their various relationships from parents to spouses. Tellingly, Sue Dibny only receives the title "wife," underlining her submissive and devoted role that dismisses her agency and independence as a former Justice League monitor (interestingly, Lois Lane is given the title "soul mate" despite the fact that she, too, is married to Superman/Clark Kent—presumably her desire to pursue her career as a journalist gives her more agency). Sue Dibny is presented as nothing more than a spouse, and soon, a victim. Being content with the role of wife (and to-be mother; the opening scenes reveal that she had just discovered she was pregnant), Sue Dibny is not worthy of the superheroic mission in a narrative tradition supported by the WiR syndrome.

Sue Dibny's death becomes the male community's tragedy, and the guilt the heroes feel is not that they chose a career that would jeopardize their loved ones, but simply that they failed to protect them—the heroic mission itself remains intact and unquestioned. Her death is all about the men who narrate the story: the few females to receive any narrating in the captions are Sue herself, for a single page, and Lois Lane for two pages—and all they talk about is their husbands, implicitly supporting

the doctrine that females are emotion-driven, which renders them weak. Furthermore, it supports the claim made by Stuller that female characters in superhero comics, whether heroic or civilian, are often defined primarily through their relationship with the male hero (2012, 238). Whether a love interest, nemesis, temptress, or side-kick, the female character in superhero comics rarely functions as an independent protagonist; instead, her ultimate function is often to complement the male hero's development. *Identity Crisis* repeatedly presents scenes where the male narrative overrides the female ones, as Wonder Woman's speech at Sue's funeral is completely overthrown by Green Arrow's inner monologue, testifying again to the primacy of the male experience within the superhero narrative. Later, as the heroes go and question a small-time villain, Slipknot, over the death of Sue, Wonder Woman is there to interrogate him with her truth-compelling lasso—but all we see of her is her crotch, as all interaction is between Slipknot and Green Arrow, the two males, while her single contribution to the dialogue comes from outside the panel, barely recognizable as hers (2004, 114–115).

Jean Loring's plot to unite with her ex-husband, like Sue Dibny's desire for family life, becomes an ultimately fatal transgression against the superheroic mission. Jean realizes her plan through the knowledge and technology she gained during her time with Ray, deploying an old suit of the Atom that allows her, too, to become atom-sized. She even goes to the extreme of faking an attack on herself in order to get attention from Ray, who saves her in the last minute in the standard formula of the hero saving the damsel in distress. The nostalgia for the Silver Age gender roles is apparent, as Jean lovingly mutters "J-just… just like the old days…" as she gazes adoringly at her ex-husband (2004, 107–108). However, the power Jean utilizes is ultimately destructive, as she is using the superpower against the superhero principle: for personal gain. Though this trope alone evokes the notion often deployed by popular geopolitical narratives of America of technology being good in the right hands and bad in the wrong hands (Orchard 2006), Jean's crime of misusing superhero powers is a crime that will ultimately land her a place at Arkham Asylum.

Both Sue and Jean, in their own ways, are victims of the genre's WiR syndrome where women, through their presumably uncontrollable emotional needs, become a threat to the masculine hero mission. This threat emerges either as the domesticating effect (Sue and her domestic demand) or through the use of

superheroic technology for personal gain which undermined the mission (Jean and her selfish desire for love that overrides even the life of her friend). Furthermore, their fates act as a catalyst and a motivator for the *male* tragedy that promotes the narrative: while Sue's death is the cause for the male heroes to act, Jean's "madness" is ultimately a crisis for her ex-husband, Ray, who manages to make Jean's tragic desire his own tragedy by stressing her actions as motivated by *himself*: "The only thing I know right now is I need to get out. And get away. By myself. My ex-wife killed one of our best friends. For me. I've never felt so small in my --" (2004, 221). Once more, the male tragedy overrides the female one, as Jean's incarceration and subsequent harassment in Arkham merits a mere mention in a newspaper headline partially shown in two panels, while Ray's sorrow is given an entire page.

In conclusion, this subchapter has aimed at demonstrating some of the misogynistic layers of superhero comics and their handling of female characters. Though exceptions exist, there is no denying that the female character still often holds a subordinate position evident already in the 1950s. Interestingly, the "evil" that female power represents is not made foreign in terms of geopolitics, but shown as internal and most prominently as lack of control, much in the same way as the Joker in the previous chapter. As the analysis above demonstrates, female power is often represented as corrupting and evil due to the way women are portrayed as unable to control their powers due to their emotional nature as women. Through this representation, the idealized image of masculinity is constructed through the idea of control: the ideal, masculine hero is able to control his emotions, and thus his powers. Furthermore, female characters are visually contained through a hypersexualized depiction that subjects them to the control of the male gaze as images of sexualized male fantasies. In contrast to this, the male body, though similarly exaggerated, attains the function of a power fantasy instead of a sexual one, demonstrated by the more contained representation of masculine bodies. Exemplified by the DC re-launch of 2011, the genre still struggles with presenting female characters who are more than just their bodies. Despite the existence of independent, powerful, and good female superheroes, evidence for the contrary still abounds, making the issue a relevant one when discussing popular culture narratives that narrate America's geopolitical identities.

* * *

The popular geopolitical narratives of a nation tend to portray heroes who aim at providing a sense of “belonging” through the creation of a particular geopolitical identity, and masculinity arises as one of the chief definers of this popularized identity. In this chapter, I have argued that the comic book superhero embodies a particular myth of American masculinity, effectively telling the reader what it is to be American and what this means in relation to the rest of the world in terms of masculinity. The superhero comes to represent the hegemonic ideal of the white and muscular male, whose “others” are projected onto the black superheroes and the “queer” villains. However, this hegemonic ideal can also be challenged and deconstructed, as the close readings of the key texts have shown. Indeed, what my analysis claims is that superheroic masculinity is primarily defined in relation to other, non-hegemonic masculinities, which occupy a more central position than the masculine-feminine binary.

The role of gender in defining national popular identities is closely tied with the issue of violence; while women tend to be portrayed as victims of violence, ideal masculinity is often defined through the use of violence, inviting a complex discussion of masculinity, violence and power, which the next chapter will undertake.

4. Fantastical Forces: The Superhero, Violence, and Power

> The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world. (Arendt, 1969, 80)
>
> ***
>
> The responsibility for violence lies with those who perpetrate it.
> (Salman Rushdie, *In Good Faith*, 1990, 19)

Superman's famous and oft-quoted intro from the 1941 animated cartoon states, "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!" This description shows well how Superman's abilities were initially measured primarily by man's technological achievements, and how they connected mechanical power with physical power. Additionally, according to Aldo Regalado (2005, 84), by measuring Superman's power against these particular elements, they stressed Superman's unique Americanness where the skyscrapers and trains came to signify American expansion and capitalist wealth in major cities. But, Regalado claims, it is the bullet we should really take notice of:

> Bullets, and the guns that fire them, conjure images not only of speed, but also of violence and power; violence and power employed in imperialist ventures both on the North American continent and abroad, as well as in urban crime and in law enforcement. (2005, 84)

The bullet becomes a unique metaphorical vehicle, going all the way back to the frontier and the iconic lone gunmen of the West who wielded the mythical and purifying violence through their guns. A similar view has been expressed by Cawelti, who notes how the gun has become America's "prime symbol of moral violence," inseparable from the moral position of the individual in American society (2004, 157). Even though guns are rarely seen in the hands of superheroes, their metaphorical connection to superheroes, also visible in Theweleit's masculine subjects and their exploding steel bodies discussed in the previous chapter,

highlights the superhero's violent nature, apparent both in their actions and their physical appearance, which often equals strength and power with physical violence.

Approaching superheroic violence and its representations, this chapter will aim at connecting the previous chapters on American geopolitics and masculinity further to the concepts of violence and power in superhero comics, and discuss the problematic notion of vigilante violence as empowering in superhero comics. I will analyze three different texts with the aim of discussing the issues of violence and power through them. I will first examine vigilante violence and its justifications through the fascism-layered and nigh-psychotic Batman of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), a work commonly credited for starting a more violent trend in American superhero comics in the mid-1980s. Following that, I will contrast Miller's Batman with Mark Millar (writer) and John Romita Jr.'s (artist) more recent graphic novel *Kick-Ass* (2008), which will serve as an example of a satirized depiction of superheroic violence in the 21st century. As a superhero parody, the comic exposes some of the issues with superheroic violence that more "straightforward" texts within the genre, such as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, cannot. Finally, I will analyze the issue of violence and its relationship to power and authority in the 2003 "imaginary tale" *Superman: Red Son* (2003) by Mark Millar (writer), Dave Johnson, and Kilian Plunkett (artists). This chapter will also act as a bridge towards chapter 5, which will focus even more on the controversial relationship between superheroes, power, and authority. However, before descending into these violent fictional worlds or their political dimensions, I will first briefly discuss superhero comics and their violence on a more general level with the aim of tying the frequent depictions of superheroic violence more broadly to American popular fiction and geopolitics.

Superhero comics and violence have had an uneasy relationship since the 1950s, when Dr. Wertham accused them (alongside crime and horror comics), in his controversial book *The Seduction of the Innocent*, of portraying too much sex and violence, which in his view directly contributed to the rising juvenile delinquency of the era. As Mila Bongco points out, this view persisted for decades, condemning all violence in comics as pointless and irrelevant and created with the aim of corrupting innocent children and inciting aggression and rebellion by repeatedly portraying heroes who defied certain types of authority through violence (2000, 37). Bongco also notes how the "underlying assumption" behind a vast majority of studies on

violence and comics between the 1950s and the 1970s stressed the "self-evident" connection between teenage boys and violence, plainly assuming that the impulse to violence was not only innate to teenage males, but inextricably linked to gender, and easily provoked by exposure to violent comics (2000, 40). This view of violence as gender-specific and somehow "naturally" evoked through exposure to violent fiction is not only problematic but it also ignores several key issues from the actual representation of violence to its various justifications.[107]

Instead of studying the presumed effects of comics on their readers, the texts themselves need to be studied in order to reveal the multiple discourses of violent representation that are linked to such issues as power, identity, and masculinity. In this sense, this chapter directly continues from the previous one in its analysis of violence as linked to masculine authority, and of equating this authority as physical power. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, violence can be viewed as a central means of empowerment in the politics of masculinity where the use of violence is often overwhelmingly held by the dominant gender, which is usually masculine (Connell, 1995, 82–83). This discourse of violence as an empowering expression of masculinity becomes highly questionable when read in the framework of popular geopolitics, as the way violence and its justifications are transferred from fiction into the geopolitical narratives of the nation.

Overall, the criticism superhero comics have received for their overt violence since the 1950s is, especially by today's standards, a slightly overstated claim: as Cawelti pointed out already in mid-1970s (before the rise of violence that took over the genre in the 1980s), the superhero's actual violence at the time was very often "muted": he rarely if ever killed criminals, and instead simply knocked them about for a while before turning them over to the police, remaining an agent of society with no personal gain or satisfaction other than knowing that justice would prevail (2004, 163). Whereas early issues of superhero comics do show criminals being killed (although always by their own fault or as the unavoidable result of the hero's self-defense), the Silver Age, influenced by the Comics Code and its

[107] The studies on violence and its representations have been more frequent in the past couple of decades, thanks to the rise of video games and graphic violence in films and novels.

restrictions, led to the genre adopting a no-killing policy that partially erased the superhero's problematic position as a vigilante.[108]

Overall, the Golden and Silver Age superhero comics often portrayed violence as a sort of play, a predetermined performance with very little visible effects. Iconic artist Jack Kirby, who has discussed the issue of violence in superhero comics at length, reveals a great deal in the following quotation:

> I know there's violence but I like to show violence in a graceful way, a dramatic way, but never in its true way. I just don't like to look at it that way. There is something stupid in violence as violence . . . I feel what I'm doing in my comics is violent, but my kind of violence. I feel dancing is a kind of violence. I feel any kind of movement is violence in a lesser degree . . . I'll show a reaction. I'll show a plat or a bang. Now you'll see a guy flying and you'll see him go through a house, but you'll never see him hurt or you'll never see the house completely destroyed. You'll notice there is no realism in anything I do because they are things as I like to see them. I just like to see them that way; that's my bag and it's my fantasy. You want to sue me, great. (Kirby, *Nostalgia*, 1976, 26; qtd. in Regalado, 2005, 93–94)

Addressing the issue of superhero violence before the 1980s, Kirby (like Cawelti) testifies to the rather innocent and essentially fantastical nature of violence of earlier superhero comics, where violence became almost a dance, a choreographed ritual with no noticeable after-effects besides a carefully positioned scrape on the hero's chiseled chin. It was not until the grim 1980s that this tradition was effectively deconstructed by the emergence of heroes rewritten as realist, violent, cynical, and nihilistic.

However, the ultimate issue here is not the level of realism or fantasy when describing superheroes and their violent feats of power, but the representation of violence itself; as Cawelti, who has spent a great amount of time studying the role of violence in American popular culture, states, "American culture has long been defined by books, films, and television programs in which violence plays a central role because there has always been a large public demand for violence" (2004, 155). Though Cawelti reached his conclusions in the 1970s and 1980s, thus preceding the wider discussions on popular culture and violence that have followed to this day,[109] the weight of his views is not lessened because of this. After all, violence, and the

[108] For example, Batman's adamant refusal to kill became such a famous attribute to the character that Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* was able to comment on it by depicting the Joker as committing suicide just in order to implicate Batman as his murderer.

[109] Indeed, discussions on the harmful effects of violence in popular culture continue to this date: for example, *The Telegraph* published an article in 2010 citing the Convention of the American Psychological Association that claimed superhero movies and their violence were harmful especially to young boys (Alleyne, 2010).

necessity of violence, has been a part of America's popular narratives since their inception, also testified by Richard Slotkin and his thesis on the frontier and the famous "regeneration through violence" that provides violence a mythical significance that has thoroughly permeated American culture (1992, 12–13). While Americans do regularly express a "national anxiety about fantasy violence as entertainment" (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 201) and question the correlation between real-life violence and violence in popular culture through studies that focus on the relationship between the two, the violent narratives within superhero comics are rarely analyzed by themselves. Through what Lawrence and Jewett dub as "golden violence,"[110] seductive images of mythic violence are carefully "wrought" into popular cultural texts in a way that suggests that a "negative form of integration" is possible through violent retribution (2002, 107). Because violence plays such a crucial role in American culture and its popular fictions, the next subchapter will outline some of the central issues between violence and vigilante politics, visible in the superhero narrative, too.

4.1 From *Dark Knight* to *Kick-Ass*: Justifying Vigilante Violence

The superhero, by definition, is always a vigilante, but the visibility of his/her vigilante status varies considerably—Superman is rarely portrayed as wanted by the police, whereas both Spider-Man and Batman are far more often condemned and wanted by either the law enforcement or the media. "Vigilantism" commonly refers to defending the established order by means that violate the boundaries set by that established order (Rosenbaum and Sederberg, 1976, 4). Yet, at the same time vigilantism also entails the assessment that society and its institutions are inefficient, and vigilante justice is required in order to defend the community. In analyzing vigilantism, the intention behind the act becomes central, whether aimed towards creation, maintenance, or restoration of values (ibid.). As established in the previous chapter, the superhero's actions are motivated by a mission, the perceived necessity to act, which always entails a politically motivated decision to "build a better

[110] Taken from *Dick Tracy Comics* following the day of Robert Kennedy's assassination; the complete line goes "Violence is golden when it's used to put down evil." (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 106).

tomorrow." Whereas traditional superheroes have by and large belonged to the category of maintaining current values, or the status quo, which the villain aims at overthrowing (Reynolds, 1992, 51), during the last three decades the society has been increasingly depicted as corrupt and degenerate, creating a dissonance between the superhero's moral principles and the official authorities that challenges the status quo assumption often read into the genre.

If we follow this definition of vigilantism as conceptualized through intentions, as Rosenbaum and Sederberg suggest, then the *ideology* behind the motivations of the vigilante superhero is crucial. Indeed, what becomes central, as DuBose notes, is how "vigilantes do not earn their status through their actions but are labeled as such for their political beliefs" (2007, 918). In other words, it is the (political) motivation and the moral necessity behind the hero's actions that separates the hero from the villain. What makes the use of political and personal beliefs (paralleled in this dissertation with "ideology") as justification for vigilantism a hazardous approach is the way it is often made to appear "natural," even though ideology is always constructed, and often promoted through the use of a mythical construct like the superhero.

As Barthes writes in his classic text *Mythologies*, it is through the use of myth that "historical intention" is given "a natural justification" (1957/1972, 142). This role of naturalization is crucial in analyzing the superhero's role as a violent vigilante. In his writing, Barthes recognizes the way the bourgeois ideology applies its "reality of the world into an image of the world," how the ideology of the leading class and institutions become the hegemonic values of a culture (1957/1972, 141). In this discourse, which Dittmer (2010, 31) cites as clearly influenced by Antonio Gramsci, culture (and especially popular culture) becomes a major component of power and politics as the values of the hegemonic culture are constantly present in the various popular cultural texts across media. In this context, the American monomyth provides an interesting anomaly: as Lawrence and Jewett argue, the superhero actually consistently undermines and denies the very essence of the "democratic ethos" that is viewed as the essential component in American ideology (2002, 282), and consequently embodies the ongoing tension between democracy

and individualism that characterizes American culture.[111] Yet, the hero's actions are still justified by that very ideology which they simultaneously override, and analyzing these (often violent) actions becomes a necessity in order to fully understand popular American geopolitics. Cawelti sees Americans as possessing "a deep belief in the moral necessity of violence and [which] accounts for the paradox of an ostensibly peace-loving and lawful people being obsessed with violence" (2004, 156–157). Furthermore, violence is perceived as a *moral* necessity, thus making a violent act a "moment of supreme fulfillment" (ibid., 158), and this fulfillment is frequently achieved in the nation's popular fictions, including the often highly violent superhero comic.

In her study on the nature and significance of violence in the Western culture, Barbara Whitmer persuasively argues that violence is always marked by a moral evaluation of the violent act as either good or bad (1997, 55), further supporting Cawelti's claim of violence being *perceived* as a moral necessity in American culture. This moral evaluation that separates the superhero's violent actions from the supervillain's violent actions is thus derived from the motivations behind these actions, and these motivations can rely on particular popular geopolitical identities and narratives that "guarantee certain associative interpretations" in order to assure their moral justification (ibid., 74). By employing a rhetoric that evokes the nation's geopolitical myths, it is possible to approach such rhetorical choices as President Reagan's "Star Wars" or President Bush's "War on Terror" as deliberately deploying the nation's geopolitical narratives to promote particular goals. One of the most frequently deployed geopolitical narratives that justify the use of violence arises from the way the hero/villain binary is defined in relation to it.

The binary opposition of good and evil used to justify vigilante violence is far from unproblematic. After all, both the superhero and the supervillain are, in fact, technically criminals. As both hero and villain act outside the law in order to reach their goals, it becomes a matter of ideology and motivation that makes one a hero and the other a villain. As Jewett and Lawrence argue, the hero usually respects lawful authority, rejecting it only when "the impotent and incompetent community

[111] According to Costello, the individual holds a "persistent rhetorical power" in American culture, most visible in the American vision of heroism that ranges from Daniel Boone and Natty Bumppo to the cowboy, the private detective, and the comic book superhero (2009, 42).

is threatened," while the villain tends to flaunt the way he rejects the law, "provoking audience displeasure as much by his demonstration of disrespect as by serious violations" (2003, 224). These views best describe the traditional hero/villain dichotomy of old Westerns, but they work here to contrast the different motivations usually associated with heroes and villains in American popular culture. It should also be noted that a crucial separation between the hero and the villain is most apparent in the way the hero's motivation is overshadowed with the feeling of "unpleasant obligation" towards the violent actions he must take in order to save the community (ibid., 225). This is accordingly manifested, for example, in the symbolic function of Popeye's spinach, which may be unpleasant to consume, but is physically (and morally!) good for you. Similar development has been noted by Michel Foucault, too, in the changing nature of the penal process: as he writes, the distribution of punishment is not seen "as a glorification of [justice's] strength, but as an element of itself that it is obliged to tolerate" (1977, 9). Accordingly, despite its central position in the geopolitical myths of America, violence is rarely to be enjoyed, but taken to as the last resort, and even then with pronounced reluctance.[112]

As the hero's relationship to violence is one of unpleasant obligation, the way his use of violence is justified becomes essential. Accordingly, one of the most common ways of "justifying" the superhero's violence comes from the classic who-shoots-first scenario most commonly associated with the genre of Westerns. The archetypal duel of the general American monomyth often shows the "bad guy" drawing and shooting first, yet being killed by the more skilled hero (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 34). This type of violence gains the justified aura of self-defense, which is never questioned, as "the danger is not only clear but also present, and the end justifying the means is immediate" (Arendt, 1969, 52). Even if the hero has in fact provoked the situation (which often is the case, especially in the genre of Westerns), the righteousness of violence as self-defense is never doubted.[113] In superhero comics, a similar dynamic is present in the oft-cited formulaic narrative of the status quo where the hero is never proactive, but as a rule only reacts to the threat posed by the villain, thus justifying his use of extralegal violence as means of

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[112] This is a common trope in American heroic fiction, ranging from the 1980s' TV-hero MacGyver's refusal to use guns to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1993) and its protagonist, driven to violence as his last option.

[113] A reversal of this trope can be found in the 1953 movie *Shane*, where the villain (played by Jack Palance) first provokes a farmer into drawing his gun, then shoots him in cold blood while claiming it as self-defense.

defense. Indeed, even a work like *Watchmen*, hailed for its deconstructionist approach to the genre, actually re-enforced this view by posing a proactive superhero, Ozymandias, as the villain of the plot.

Justifying vigilante violence goes easily beyond the mere concept of self-defense. Whitmer (1997, 54), for example, goes on to distinguish between *legitimate* violence and *illegitimate* violence, where the former is seen as socially acceptable in order to control the latter (which lacks sanction by society). This division between legitimate and illegitimate violence is, according to Whitmer, a sign of a contrast between social right (validated by law or social acceptance) and moral justification (ethical/moral principles) (ibid.). This contrast enables both immoral but legitimate actions by someone with authority (such as a corrupt cop) as well as actions that may be viewed as morally justifiable, but which lack state sanction, and it is easy to categorize the superhero's actions as belonging to this latter category. As Whitmer concludes, "legitimate violence" is created through the rationalization of "illegitimate" violence as socially justifiable and acceptable (1997, 11), and in superhero comics, this takes place as the superhero's violence is used to put down characters that are marked as "evil" in purely black and white terms.

Another essential issue in legitimating violence is viewing violence as natural. Indeed, Whitmer strongly criticizes the Western popular cultural belief that views violence (and only masculine violence) as natural and innate, which contributes quite directly to the acceptance of violence as a part of Western community and at the same time quite clearly denies the responsibility of violent action by attributing it to natural instinct rather than rational choice (1997, 19–24). By representing violence as a natural masculine expression, popular fiction such as superhero comics may contribute to this acceptance of violence as a natural and intrinsic part of (American) culture. Superheroes use violence as an instrument with which to fight crime, and their actions are presented as justified when contrasted with either the incompetent (and often corrupt) state authorities or the illegal and unjustified form of violence by the villains. Investigating the way the "political legitimation of aggression" takes place within different cultural productions, of how different cultural products and narratives legitimate, rationalize, and give meaning to violence, both through what is present and what is absent (Whitmer, 1997, 21), a more comprehensive view of the Western (or in this case, American) culture can be attained.

In the following sections, I will address the issues outlined above through two very different superhero texts, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Kick-Ass*. As both texts explicitly deal with superhero violence and its justifications, they provide distinct entry points into the problematic notion of vigilante violence in superhero comics, the first representing the more "realist" trend of superhero violence of the 1980s, whereas the latter stands as an example of more recent superhero parody expressed through violence. The questions of justifying violence and its legitimacy as well as violence as empowering and natural expression of masculinity will be examined in detail, not forgetting the wider mythical framework of violence that has permeated American popular culture as a central part of American popular geopolitics.

Violence Justified in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*

> "We've always been criminals. We have to be criminals."
> (*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 1986, 135)

In March, 1986, the first issue of Frank Miller's four-part *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* set the tone for a Batman comic where, as Alan Moore wrote in the introduction for the collected graphic novel edition, "[e]verything is exactly the same, except for the fact that it's totally different" (1986; quoted in Pearson and Uricchio, 1991). Often cited as the work that ignited the 1980s' revisionist superhero narrative trend in full, the comic re-envisioned the rather campy Dark Knight as an aging, cynical, and most importantly for our argument, a decidedly more violent superhero who is no longer seen as the benevolent hero he once was. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (henceforth referred to as *DKR*) opens with an aged and embittered Bruce Wayne ruminating over a "**good** death" (1986, 10). He has not worn the Bat-cowl for a decade, and due to this, he is shown to be not only suicidal but also drinking heavily. This emasculated and tormented Bruce Wayne ultimately succumbs to the call of the Batman as Gotham City is plagued by violent teen gang known as "the Mutants," and returns rejuvenated into the streets of Gotham. Enlisting a 13-year-old girl, Carrie Kelley, as his new Robin, Batman battles not only his old foes but also his former allies, as his vigilante actions are no longer condoned by Gotham's authorities.

The comic consciously addresses multiple issues ranging from superheroic ideology to sexuality, yet what arises as most problematic for this discussion is the display of violence in the comic. The comic has often been commended (cf. Harvey, 1996; Klock, 2002) for its gritty realism and rejuvenation of the genre as more "mature" through the adult themes of sexuality and violence, no longer constricted by the Comics Code and its strict rules. Even though violence has always been a central part of superhero comics, its connection to masculinity and empowerment had rarely been addressed in such high-profile heroes as Batman. Appearing in an era that also featured the rise of the muscular action movie hero in Hollywood, the comic is clearly a part of a larger cultural trend that arose in the 1980s during what Wright refers to as "the new cultural politics of President Ronald Reagan and the ascendant New Right," which offered a brand of nostalgic and neoconservative patriotism (2001, 266). Wright describes the superheroes of this era, most notably represented by Miller's Batman, as a "force for ruthless morality in a corrupt society" who had become victims of paranoia and psychosis that "lurked" behind Reagan's vision of America (ibid.), whereas Bongco sees the early influence of what would become the 1990s' Generation X and the "apocalyptic impulse in mass culture and a certain impotence in dealing with it" in the Unites States as particular reasons for the emergence of such cynical and violent heroes as Miller's Batman (2000, 142). However, while the contextual factors contributing to the birth of this new and violent superhero are important, in this chapter I wish to focus on an issue often bypassed in the discussions on *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*: namely, the way this "new" superheroic violence noticed by nearly every critic is represented as empowering and natural, which creates a far more questionable subtext than the obvious and misguided critique/praise on the violent depictions themselves. This questionable representation of vigilante violence, linked to the representation of Batman as the dissident and "true" patriotic hero, creates a discourse where violence becomes not only natural, but also acceptable in regaining the control of America. I will first discuss Batman's role as a vigilante, and then analyze the ways his use of violence is justified in the text.

From his first appearance, *DKR* makes apparent the exceedingly violent nature of this returning Batman. While his first appearances are kept in the shadows as the reader only gets a glimpse of a boot or a gloved hand (presumably to heighten the effect when he is finally depicted in all his glory on p. 34), the results are made

clear through a powerful and frequent use of sound effects denoting the results of his violent action. Even though no-one is killed by Batman, the amount of broken bones and other serious injuries he leaves in his trail stresses the inevitable fact that his violent actions have visible consequences, something still rarely seen in superhero comics in the 1980s. Visually, the comic is intertwined with panels taken from TV-screens, recording different reactions to Batman's return from the citizens of Gotham:

> The only thing [Batman] signifies is an aberrant **psychotic force** -- morally **bankrupt, politically hazardous, reactionary paranoid** -- a **danger** to every citizen in **Gotham**!
> (1986, 41)

> …a ruthless, monstrous vigilante, striking at the foundations of our democracy -- maliciously opposed to the principles that make ours the most noble nation in the world -- and the kindest… (1986, 65)

> Who gave this **thug** the right to declare **Martial Law**, hm? Last I heard, that takes an act of **Congress**. (1986, 144)

These TV-comments view Batman's actions as illegal and criminal, recognizing the undemocratic nature of Batman's vigilante justice and the immediate danger his brand of vigilante justice signifies. The comments point out what should be obvious in regard to the paradox of the superhero itself: that a man dealing justice based on his own moral code without legal sanction is "a danger to every citizen in Gotham."

Batman's vigilante status is questioned by those he aims at protecting, yet it is made clear that he himself is also very aware of his role as an outlaw. This is exemplified well in a scene in *DKR* where Batman interrogates a small-time crook about Two-Face Harvey Dent's whereabouts:

> *Batman*: "You're going to tell me everything you know, sooner or later. If it's later -- I won't mind."
> *Crook*: "**No**! Stay **back** -- I got **rights** --"
> *Batman*: "You've got rights. Lots of rights. Sometimes I count them just to make myself feel crazy. But right now you've got a piece of glass shoved into a major artery in your arm. Right now you're bleeding to death. Right now I'm the only one in the world who can get you to a hospital in time." (1986, 44–45)

This piece of dialogue indicates how well Batman is aware of his vigilante status and the laws he repeatedly breaks in his mission to save Gotham City.[114] It also signals his increased impatience with the impotence of the state to punish criminals. Vigilante actions are at the heart of the American monomythic tradition, which

[114] Indeed, he is also reported as stating: "We've always **been** criminals. We **have** to be criminals." (1986, 135), revealing that he has no doubts about his legal status as a vigilante.

expresses frustration with the constitutional government and its constant compromises, and embodies the national need for total and immediate solutions. As Jewett and Lawrence argue, the vigilante narratives demonstrate how, “when confronted with genuine evil, democratic institutions and the due process of law always fail” (2003, 29). According to Batman’s origin story, Bruce Wayne’s parents were murdered precisely “because the state was incapable of maintaining law and order” and Bruce Wayne responds to this by becoming Batman, trying to fulfill what he perceives as a “lack of order in his city” (Spanakos, 2008, 56). Similarly, in *DKR* Batman is seemingly “forced” to resume his actions as it becomes apparent that the Mutant gangs terrorizing Gotham City cannot be contained by regular uses of state-approved force, consequently validating Batman’s use of un-sanctioned vigilante violence.

Indeed, Batman’s use of violence is validated by clearly employing what Lawrence and Jewett identify as a “mythic paradigm” of violence that stresses “*mythic selectivity*, *mythic massage* and the *invitation to emulate*” (2002, 113, original emphasis), all of these elements subtly justifying the vigilante’s use of violence. *Mythic selectivity* tends to occur when factual realities of a situation are distorted through selective elimination, such as presenting a city only by night, focusing only on its back alleys and sinister ghettos, and omitting any positive elements that might be present (ibid., 113–114). Accordingly, by offering a selective picture of Gotham City as violent, dangerous, and decrepit, the city becomes an urban hell, populated by teenage gangs, full of pain and misery. Through a careful and deliberate selection of shown and not-shown, of presences and absences, the comic presents the reader with a lost and decadent city, as Bruce Wayne walks the gray, forgotten streets of Gotham among madmen holding “WE ARE DAMNED” signs. The city is never showed during daytime and not a single patch of green is present in the gray and desolate urban abattoir, yet this view of the world is never questioned, encouraging the reader to read this distortion as the world “as it is.”

The never-ending stream of news that punctuates the visual narrative only stresses the negative, driving Bruce Wayne over the edge as he turns from channel to channel, only to be confronted with more bad news:

> …children were last seen with two young men…who were dressed in the distinctive costume of the mutant gang…Anyone with any information regarding the children is urged to call the **crisis hotline…** [KLIK] -- four killed in a senseless **attack** on --

> [KLIK] -- subway **deaths** reached an all-time high this -- [KLIK] -- **rape** and **mutilation** of…[KLIK] -- here's Dave with some good news. Dave? (1986, 24)

This key scene visually juxtaposes these news items with flashback images of Bruce Wayne's parents' murder, creating a heightened sense of terror and anxiety through the tight repetition of panels. The never-ending news of violence and death cause a shift in Bruce Wayne, who finally realizes that he can no longer contain "Batman," that he is needed once more. This conviction is linked to the idea of *mythic massage*, the second element in the mythic paradigm of violence, which functions to assure the reader that justice can be achieved only through vigilante methods, that the "gap between myth and reality can be bridged" (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 116). In other words, it aims at convincing the reader that the complex social problems the hero faces can be neatly solved with a single stroke of extralegal violence. This is achieved by depicting the villains as always unwaveringly evil and deserving their fate, while the hero is never wrong or makes a mistake.

Mythic selectivity obviously occurs in *DKR*, yet its mythic massage proposes a slightly more complex reading. As pointed out above, Batman is not really perceived as a hero by the citizens of Gotham City; indeed, he is almost characterized as an anti-hero through his fascist and nihilistic worldview. However, the reader is privileged to Bruce Wayne's thoughts and emotions through focalization, which essentially allows for the reader to read Batman as the hero of the narrative, and it is the reader who is ultimately meant to redeem him and read him as the (misunderstood) hero. This is linked to the final element of the mythic paradigm, the *invitation to emulate*: the invitation to respond to a "real" situation through behavior patterns acquired from mythical dramas (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 117). What is meant by this "invitation" is the way individual behavior is modeled after mythic paradigms, and this can take place both within fiction (the protagonist emulates a mythical hero) and in reality (a reader decides to become a vigilante). In *DKR*, this happens on the level of the fiction as 13-year-old Carrie Kelley responds to the restored Bat-signal in the sky of Gotham or when the Mutant gang agrees to accept Batman as their new leader after witnessing him defeat their leader in hand-to-hand combat. At its most extremes, the invitation to emulate suggests that actual readers of these violent texts would become vigilantes

themselves, follow in Batman's footsteps.[115] On a geopolitical level, invitation to emulate would suggest that these kinds of narratives featuring vigilante superheroes would be at least partially incorporated into the nation's geopolitical narratives and scripts, where this mythic paradigm begins to guide the actions of the nation. From the view of popular geopolitics, then, Batman's highly violent solutions in *DKR* can be viewed as even more problematic: though initially questioned, his brand of justice is shown as correct after a nuclear blast creates a nation-wide blackout, causing a full-out panic in Gotham City. Roaring "Tonight, **I** am the law" (1986, 173), Batman and his new army of reformed mutants ride to the city, saving it from destruction and implicitly validating their vigilante actions.

Though technically all superhero actions can be categorized as illegal, it is possible to divide actions within this category into "legitimate" and "illegitimate." *DKR* presents several violent acts that can be classified as either legitimate or illegitimate: for example, Superman's actions in the graphic novel have been state-sanctioned and are thus by definition legitimate, serving as a contrast to Batman's illegitimate violence. Similarly, Commissioner Gordon stands for the legitimate, state-sanctioned brand of violence, his violence falling into the legitimate even when he kills (which he does). However, it is through the illegitimate acts of violence by the Mutant gang, contrasted with Batman's illegal violence that a new dissonance between the legitimate and illegitimate is slowly carried out:

> This heat wave has sparked many acts of violence here in **Gotham City** -- The most **hideous** of which has to be the brutal slaying of three nuns last week by the gang known as **mutants**. (1986, 11)
>
> [A] dead **cat** has been found stapled to the door of the First Church of Christ the Redeemer... The **mutant** gang is suspected... (1986, 14)

In addition to these examples, a single page is devoted to Margaret Cochran, whose hard life is blown away by a mutant prank as the teens steal her handbag only to return it, filled with a live hand grenade (1986, 69). These examples of random violent acts by the Mutant gang are presented mainly through television news reports (except Margaret, whose fate becomes even more tragic as she is shown to

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[115] Lawrence and Jewett (2002, 118-120) cite Bernard Goetz, the "*Death Wish* vigilante," as an example of this. Apparently inspired by Charles Bronson's famous vigilante movie *Death Wish* (1974), Goetz shot and wounded four teens in the New York subway in 1984 after they tried to get him to give them money. Goetz became a national celebrity, seen by many as an inspiration. However, as his violent methods clearly overreact to the crime (the teens were asking for five dollars), his vigilantism remains highly questionable.

the reader through focalized internal narration, which acts to further heighten the sense of tragedy), and these actions are unanimously condemned, as their violence is viewed as simply destructive and senseless and thus, unjustifiable. The Mutants have no goal, no sacred mission to legalize their violence, which further emphasizes the need for Batman's "golden violence" to put down their evil. To further dehumanize the mutants, they are depicted with red sunglasses that hide their eyes (and glow in the dark) and the leader of the gang's teeth are drawn as sharp razors. The narrative testifies how, in the face of the Mutant brutalities, in the face of "genuine" evil, the traditional democratic institutions (and even Superman) are powerless. Even though legally, neither the violence by Batman nor the violence by the Mutants is state-approved, the way Batman's violence is instrumental in nature and deployed to achieve a goal (to end the Mutant violence) gives his violence a more justified and therefore "legitimate" air. By presenting Batman's illegal use of vigilante violence as more justifiable, he attains "legitimacy" for his actions through a common morality that overrides the inefficient state and its impotent legislation.

This apparent legitimacy of Batman's vigilante violence, however, is not as simple as it may first appear. Though he uses violent means for good ends, this "means-end category" carries with it the danger of losing sight of the ends which were used to justify the means (Arendt, 1969, 4). In other words, violent actions are always in the risk of becoming an end in themselves instead of the means. In accordance, though Batman's violence does have an end that may in a sense justify the means, it still has a different quality to it, one that raises doubts as to the means becoming too central:

> There are seven working defenses from this position. Three of them disarm with minimal contact. Three of them kill. The other -- hurts. (1986, 39)
>
> Something tells me to stop with the **leg**. I don't listen to it. (1986, 101)

These examples of violence by Batman are from his inner monologue, and they illustrate the way he experiences the violence he is inflicting as nearing pleasure (thus implying sadism, which would mark him as morally questionable). Indeed, it is apparent from the sound effects of the visual narrative accompanying the captions that the "working defense" he chooses is the one that causes most pain in the first example, suggesting that he may in fact be taking some joy in his violent and never-ending retribution. Instead of the "unpleasant obligation" of violent action taken to as a last resort, Batman contests the mythical view of heroic violence as something

not to enjoy ("Something tells me to stop with the **leg**. I don't listen to it." being a prime example of this), blurring the divide that separates his brand of legitimate violence from the illegitimate violence of the Mutant gang.

Ultimately, what makes Batman's violence truly problematic is not just the way his violence appears to be something he enjoys inflicting, but the way his violence is presented as something *natural* and *intrinsic* to his nature that he has to control. This aspect of violence as a natural instinct for Batman is played out both in the way he is described and the way he is depicted visually. The first full splash page of Batman presents him as larger than life, absurdly muscular, nearly jumping out of the page and onto the reader: he is described on the same page by eye witnesses as "wild **animal**," "**werewolf**," "**monster**! . . . with **fangs** and **wings**" (1986, 34) and indeed, visually he is almost an animal, brutal and growling (see fig. 5). This description of Batman in animalistic terms is further supported in the way Bruce Wayne, too, experiences "Batman" inside him as a creature that "**writhes** and **snarls**" and tells him what he needs (1986, 12). After realizing he can no longer restrain his true nature, the captions address Bruce as a "hollow shell, a rusty trap" that is unable to hold the "smoldering" and fierce impulse to violence that is Batman (1986, 25). Through this kind of rhetoric, the comic delicately and deliberately naturalizes Batman's violence, masking it as justifiable as it becomes a natural expression of Bruce Wayne's inner masculine urges.

This view of violence as a natural and innate masculine impulse is a part of a larger discourse Arendt has identified as the discourse of violence which portrays human behavior as analogous to animal behavior (and therefore, natural). Arendt labels this kind of thinking extremely dangerous: according to her, thinking of power and violence in biological terms and organic metaphors is "deceptive" in its plausibility as it makes violence appear as a "prerequisite for the collective life of mankind as the struggle for survival and violent death for continuing life in the animal kingdom" (1969, 75). Batman's inner monologue throughout the graphic novel identifies his Batman-self as an extremely violent, yet a completely natural instinct within him, a natural impulse which, in the beginning of the graphic novel, he has attempted to deny for the past ten years. This denial of his "true" nature has led to depression, powerlessness, and heavy drinking. As Bruce Wayne describes himself at the beginning of the comic: "I'm a **zombie**. A **Flying**

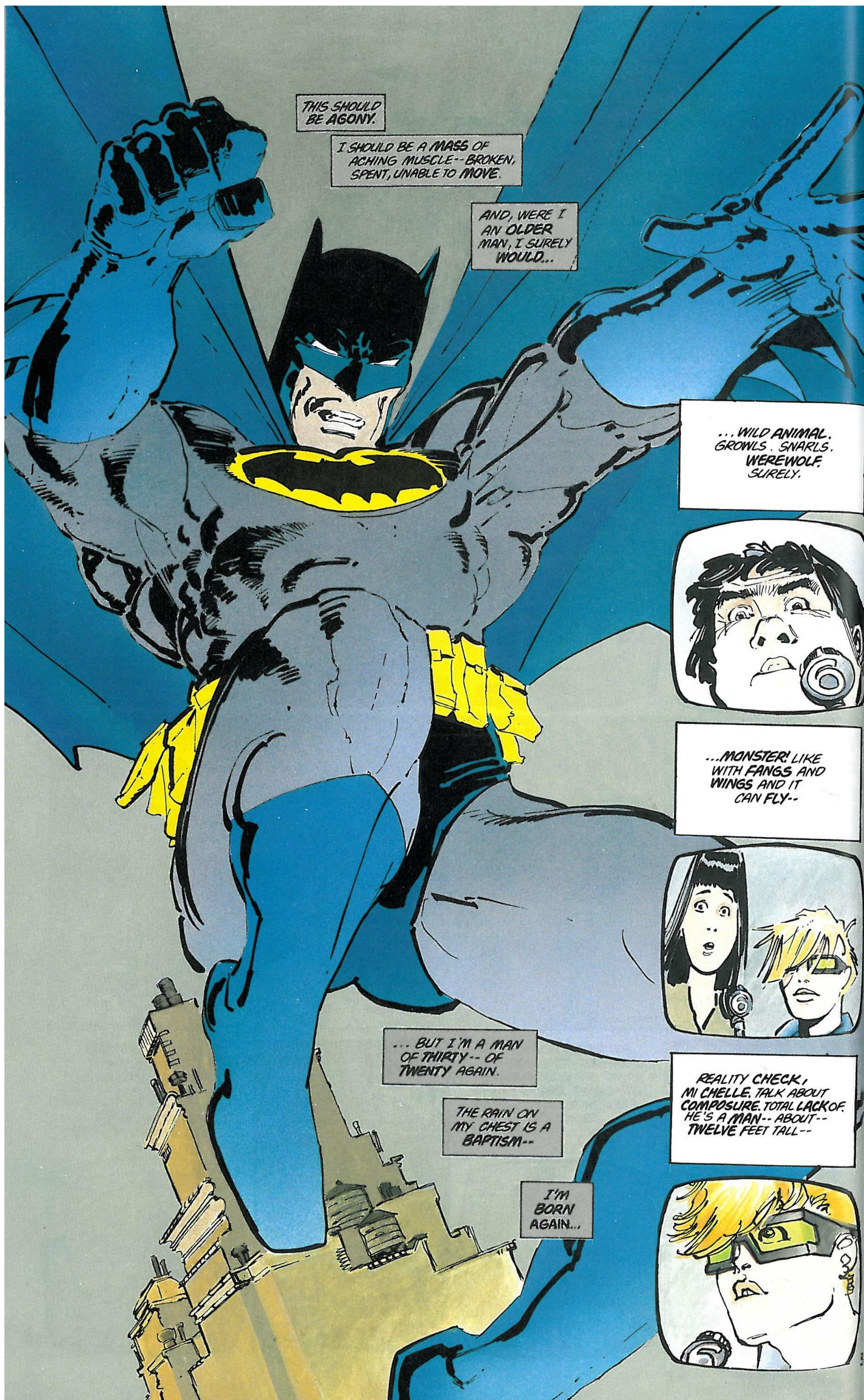

Fig. 5. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986, 34). © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.

Dutchman. A **dead** man, **ten** years dead…" (1986, 12). This kind of rhetoric closely interweaves with what Arendt has identified as the "tradition of organic thought" that characterizes the discourse on violence she criticizes: that to "cure" man from such "natural" *human* emotions as rage and violence "would mean nothing less than to dehumanize or emasculate him" (Arendt, 1969, 64).

Concurrently, once Bruce Wayne has donned the iconic Bat-suit and returned to the streets of Gotham, he states:

> This should be **agony**. I should be a **mass** of aching muscle…broken, spent, unable to **move**. And, were I an **older** man, I surely **would**… but I'm a man of **thirty**... of **twenty** again. The rain on my chest is a **baptism**… I'm **born again**… (1986, 34)

In an obvious testimony to the empowering and rejuvenating force of violence, Bruce Wayne's masculinity is once more restored and his identity intact as Batman. He claims to feel rejuvenated, young, and full of energy as he once more embraces his "true" nature as Batman. Return to violence becomes a means of masculine empowerment, of "asserting masculinity" especially in relation to other men (Connell, 1995, 83), which is precisely what Batman does (all his "victims" are male). Whitmer (1997, 14), too, argues that violence is often rationalized as "acceptable male behavior" precisely by visioning it as "natural" and by sublimating it as virtuous via physical strength and a display of innately intentional aggression. Indeed, arguments on masculinity are often based on the belief that there exists "a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life" that is inherent to the male body, including a more aggressive and uncontrollable nature (Connell, 1995, 45). Bruce Wayne's experience of life without his Batman alter ego is depicted as leading to his emasculation, a spiritual castration that has left him defected and incomplete. It is only through Batman that he feels rejuvenated, and he uses the pretext of his pro-social mission to elevate his violent aggressions.

In this paradigm of naturalized violence, brutally violent actions are used to regain control over the self, to regain power. Furthermore, the use of organic metaphors are used to further justify vigilante violence by claiming society as somehow "sick" and the different social problems as "symptoms" of this disease, a

thematic all the more resonant in the 1980s' America ruled by Reagan.[116] Whitmer (1997, 4), too, questions this view of violence as natural and symptomatic and portrayed through organic metaphors. Whitmer seems to be following Arendt in her critique of the way the distinction between anger ("rage" in Arendt) and violence has collapsed, leading to an equation between anger (an emotion) and violence (a behavior) in a way that naturalizes violence as logical and acceptable expression to anger. Batman's "natural" violent impulses are masked under the guise of the vigilante hero and his ends are deployed to justify his violent means. This view of Batman's violence as naturalized presents a highly debatable vision of superheroic violence as somehow "natural," justified, and a means to masculine empowerment.

Apart from regaining his own masculine power, in *DKR* Batman also gains the Mutant gang's respect through violence, as he defeats their leader in physical combat (1986, 100–102). Similarly, at the end of the comic Batman finally confronts Superman in a climactic duel on the alley where his parents were murdered decades ago. There, through nothing more than pure violence, Batman wishes to teach Superman a lesson by physically beating him (much like the "Ultimate" Captain America discussed in 3.1). In both instances, it is assumed that masculine power is achieved through violence, that power "rests upon the consent and the beliefs of the people that respect the power" (Whitmer, 1997, 68). By challenging Batman to the final duel, Superman implicitly validates this notion of power and violence, just like the Mutants follow Batman after he has won the battle. However, the way the Mutants become "the Sons of Batman" after viewing Batman defeat their leader testifies to the dangers of viewing power and violence as the same.

Indeed, after the Mutants have accepted Batman as their new leader, the Mutants now reform under the moniker "the Sons of the Batman" (SoB's, pun most likely intended), who then proceed to follow Batman's model of "justified" vigilante violence:

[116] This discourse is particularly visible in *Watchmen*'s Rorschach: "This city is dying of rabies. Is the best I can do to wipe the random flecks of foam from its lips?" (I; 16); "This city is an animal, fierce and complicated. To understand it I read its droppings, its scents, the movement of its parasites." (V; 11). This view of the city as a wilderness, while obviously echoing the mythical frontier of the Western, creates a questionable paradigm where the hero's violence becomes justifiable as a part of a violent nature.

> The **Sons of the Batman** have struck again. In front of a dozen witnesses, they accosted a **shoplifter** and... chopped his **hands** off... The **shoplifter** is said to have been carrying several **magazines** and a **candy bar**. (1986, 132)

The ridiculously exaggerated actions of the gang "following" Batman's set example demonstrate precisely the paradox of vigilante violence: that vigilante practices ultimately increase rather than decrease violence (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 116). Violence, even if aimed at a good cause, will inevitably only lead to more violence. Yet, through superhero comics (and, of course, various other genres of popular fiction), American popular culture continues to advocate narratives of justified violence and the vigilante's sacred mission to take the law into his own hands. When the superhero's justified violence is analyzed as a component in the formation of the American geopolitical identity, the "naturalization" of what is essentially a chosen behavior becomes increasingly problematic as violence is suggested as "natural" to America. The rise of these kinds of violent superheroes in the 1980s' America has been read as symptomatic of the 1980s' political and cultural climate of neo-conservatism and mass culture. The relationship of power, authority, and violence further increases the complexity of vigilante justice as executed by the superhero, for as Arendt concludes, by substituting violence for power victory can be achieved, but at a high cost, as the victor has to sacrifice his own power in the process (1969, 53). (I will return to these issues in 4.2).

DKR allows for a multifaceted analysis on the various justifications of superheroic vigilante violence and the questionable way violence is displayed as natural masculine expression, while the later works in the genre have been able to take a more satirical look at the issue of superheroes and violence. Relying on parody, the 1980s' superhero comics' stress on violence has itself become an object of satire in such recent superhero comics as Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson's brutal superhero series *The Boys* (2006) with its extreme violence and sexuality or Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s more mainstream graphic novel *Kick-Ass*. In the next section, I will examine *Kick-Ass* and analyze the way the comic parodies the entire genre, most notably its tropes of violence and gender.

“John Rambo meets Polly Pocket”: Satirizing Superhero Violence in *Kick-Ass*

> *Kick-Ass*: “No way. **I’m** not going to kill anybody. I’m supposed to be a fucking **superhero**.”
> *Hit-Girl*: “Oh, kiss my ass. What is this? **The Silver Age**?”
> (*Kick-Ass*, 2008, 128)

Kick-Ass, an 8-issue limited superhero series by Mark Millar (writer) and John Romita Jr. (artist), is a superhero comic most noted for its excessive and very graphic depictions of violence. Sold with such cover statements as “Sickening violence: just the way you like it!” (#2, 2008) and “They started it!” (#3, 2008), the comic is focalized through Dave Lizewski, an ordinary teenage boy with no superpowers, who decides to become a real-world superhero after asking “Why do people want to be Paris Hilton and nobody wants to be Spider-Man?” (2008, 9). After a rough start (he nearly dies after he is stabbed and run over by a car during his first “heroic” mission), he becomes an internet phenomenon and meets Hit-Girl and Big Daddy, a daughter-father superhero duo after the mafia. It is especially through Hit-Girl, the ten-year-old killing machine, that *Kick-Ass* (henceforth referred to as *KA*) parodies the more violent superhero comics that began to dominate the genre since the 1980s. Furthermore, the comic forcefully eschews almost all justifications for vigilante violence by stressing the desire for internet fame and recognition above the heroic mission, directing its satirical gaze not just at the superhero genre, but at the audience who praises superheroes and their violent exploits. I will first address the more general ways in which *KA* produces a superhero parody, and then discuss the way the character of Hit-Girl is deployed to satirize superheroic violence especially in terms of gender.

Satire, as Gray et al. note, usually refers to “a particular kind of humor that makes fun of human folly and vice by holding people accountable for their public actions” (2009, ix). Satire can also act as a form of social criticism, and it can be presented as anything between a brutal attack and a playful mockery. In American television, satire has recently been recognized not only as an independent TV genre but as a key element of televised political culture following the popularity of such shows as *The Colbert Report* or *The Daily Show* (ibid., 2009, 6). The generic conventions of various popular genres are often a fruitful source of parody, which is in itself a central tool of satirical writing, as exemplified by such recent satirical

superhero parodies as the comic *Superman: True Brit* (2004) or the 2010 feature film *SUPER* starring Rainn Wilson and Ellen Page.[117] Drawing on previous texts in order to satirize contemporary society, parody at its widest definition can include "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (Dentith, 2000, 22). Parody has become a subversive tool of postmodern literature, "breaking genre decorum" through retellings and reversals of traditional representations (Kukkonen, 2010, 107). In other words, an effective superhero satire should feature a parody that transgresses the genre expectations of the reader and subverts the narrative in a way that comments not only on the genre itself, but ultimately, creates a polemical discussion involving the wider cultural and social practices behind the genre.

The subversion of traditional superhero narratives is apparent in *KA* from its very opening sequence, which depicts what the reader with any previous knowledge of the genre can clearly identify as a superhero: a moderately muscular man standing on top of a tall building, the skyline of a city behind him echoing the traditional urban setting of the superhero narrative. The man, dressed in an obvious superhero costume (marked as such by the reader's previous knowledge of the genre's langue/parole system of costumes [Reynolds, 1992, 26]) jumps off the building with the obvious intention of flying. Combined with a voice-over caption discussing superheroes, the next page shows him falling straight down onto a parked car, effectively dismantling any reader expectations regarding the genre as the comic's protagonist, Dave, states in the captions "[t]hat wasn't me, by the way" (2008, 3). Setting the tone for the rest of the comic, *KA* proceeds to dismantle the genre decorum around superheroes through an excessively violent, yet self-reflexive tone.

From its opening pages, then, *KA* clearly parodies the established textual and visual conventions of the superhero genre, and ironically reassesses the powers-mission-identity aspects identified as the essential markers of the character (see ch. 2.1). With self-deprecating irony, the very first issue of *KA* was marketed with the tagline "The greatest superhero book of all time" (#1, 2008), the ironic message of this statement made apparent as the protagonist, Kick-Ass, clearly had neither

[117] *SUPER*, too, parodies the justifications of vigilante violence as the protagonist, calling himself "the Crimson Bolt," violently beats a man for cutting in line at the movies, exposing a sharp discrepancy between his superheroic "justice" and the level of the "supposed" crime.

superpowers nor a particular superhero identity stemming from a distinct origin trauma, his mission forgotten as he agonizes over his internet fame. Kick-Ass's unusual status as a superhero is further emphasized by the fact that he is a scrawny teenager with no resemblance to the muscular and hypermasculine heroes the genre traditionally espouses apart from his whiteness (even Peter Parker, who became Spider-Man during his teens, was endowed a distinctively muscular frame after the legendary spider-bite). His costume is a wetsuit he has purchased from the web-auction site eBay, and he has no real superhero identity until one, the moniker Kick-Ass, is assigned to him by the internet audience. In the vein of postmodern self-reflexivity, Dave/Kick-Ass is himself very much aware of the genre expectations that are entailed with "[p]utting on a mask and **helping** people" (2008, 9):

> I was just an ordinary guy. There was nothing in my history to suggest the typical hero's journey. No radioactive spiders or refugee status from a doomed alien world. Yes, my mother died when I was fourteen years old, but she was killed by an aneurysm as opposed to a hitman. You might have hoped for a little… 'I will **avenge** you, mother!' …but the reality was more like feeling numb and playing video games while my father cried in the next room. (2008, 6–7)

With no "hero's journey," superpowers, or trauma to motivate his hero persona, Kick-Ass *knows* he falls short on the traditional superheroic traits.

Concurrently, Kick-Ass's career as a crime-fighter is largely spent balancing on rooftops and trying to find a suitable superhero name. When he finally feels the need to engage in actual heroics, his first battle results in a stab wound, two broken legs and a crushed spine (2008, 23). Despite his promises to never venture out on the streets again, as soon as he has recovered, Dave puts on the mask once more. He accidentally stumbles upon a gang beating, which he feels obligated to stop. This time he succeeds, and the video clip of him shot by a passer-by makes him an overnight sensation after it reaches the internet: "I was the little guy who refused to give up. The world's first real-life superhero." (2008, 51). As the scrawny Kick-Ass shouts "I'm not leaving him!" even when he is outnumbered and beaten bloody, his refusal to give up resonates with the American monomythic tradition and the refusal to compromise and give in, most visibly present in the idea of the "extra effort" and the popular myth of the underdog (see 2.2). His underdog status is signaled not only through his three-to-one opponents, but through the size disparity which in itself indicates an imbalance of power (Parsons, 2005, 357). Interestingly, though, the reader is never revealed the reason why the gang was beating the victim, which

removes some of the mythical assertion that violence can be used to solve problems; ultimately, one beating is simply exchanged for another—only this one is applauded by the passers-by.

While violence remains the main focal point in this section, it is worth mentioning that a significant portion of the satire in *KA* is directed at both Dave's egoistic desire for internet fame ("Dave Lizewski had **eight** friends on MySpace and Kick-Ass had **thousands**. I think that tells you everything you need to know." [2008, 58]) as well the society that idolizes him. Kick-Ass's first "heroic" act interrupting a gang beating by three Puerto Ricans mentioned above is witnessed by dozens of bystanders, none of whom is willing to interfere. Despite Kick-Ass's pleas to call the police, the only thing people do is call their friends to come and watch the fight because it is "fucking **awesome**!" (2008, 42). One of the bystanders records the entire event on his cellphone with the lines "Man…this is so going on YouTube." (2008, 46–47). Though the underdog may be a national myth beloved by Americans, none of them are willing to go and aid the weaker hero facing a near-insurmountable enemy. Throughout the comic, artist Romita Jr. is careful to include multiple images of cellphones and other devices that record the violence that takes place, adding a level of social critique into the text through a visual emphasis on the way people are content to let the hero fight their battles for them.

Another point of parody arrives in the form of masculine empowerment. Indeed, it is made very clear that, like Bruce Wayne in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (as discussed in the previous section), Dave experiences being Kick-Ass as the ultimate masculine empowerment. However, whereas *DKR* failed to insert critique towards this discourse of violence and gender and produced a highly controversial narrative justifying vigilante violence as means of masculine empowerment, *KA* repeatedly undermines this belief through Dave/Kick-Ass. As already mentioned, Dave is still in his teens and has none of the muscular build of the superhero, which contrasts with his self-congratulatory claim of gaining "some real muscle" (2008, 14) with a high protein diet and exercise.

Echoing the masculine animal instinct to violence that was so prominent in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* Dave/Kick-Ass even himself cites the desire to be a superhero as a "beast" within him. Though he is determined to resign his crime-fighting career after his near-death experience, he soon states: "…but who was I kidding? The beast was friggin' **in** me, man." (2008, 35). However, the comic

deploys this trope with a clear sense of irony, as the adolescent Dave is the very opposite of a “beast.” Pictured in the school corridor with Band-Aids across his face (clear visual markers of violence), the contrast between his rejuvenated and empowered monologue at the awareness of his violent encounters is sharply contrasted with his visual look:

> I swaggered into school with that weird karate-confidence all martial arts guys seem to have. I didn’t actually know karate, but just having the costume under my clothes seemed to empower me a little. (2008, 53)

Feeling as if he is “oozing superhero pheromones” (2008, 53), Dave feels both the costume and the violence as empowering and enhancing his masculinity and desirability, echoing both the notion of ornamental masculinity analyzed in chapter 3.1 as well as the idea of violence as masculine empowerment. A few pages later, Dave even states: “…but I’d have opened a vein if I didn’t have that costume to hide inside.” (58), signaling the strong connection between the superheroic costume and his masculine identity by comparing giving up his superhero identity to suicide.

However, Dave’s experiences of this newly-found empowerment and masculine vitality are not perceived the same way by the community around him. His father worries that he is being bullied at school due to his frequent bruising, and instead of becoming cool and popular in the eyes of Katie Deauxma, the girl of his dreams, he discovers that her newly-found interest in him is motivated by an erroneous belief that he is gay (2008, 54–55). To further make the point that becoming a superhero does not solve one’s problems, Dave’s confession of love to Katie at the end of the comic does not yield the expected outcome of a happy ending (which, curiously enough, the 2010 feature film did deliver), resulting in him getting a furious rejection and a beating ordered by Katie. As Dave/Kick-Ass is also more than once rescued by Hit-Girl, his masculine empowerment is clearly made void. Accordingly, it is through Hit-Girl that *KA* produces one of the comic’s most controversial subversions as she challenges most of the traditional expectations of a female superhero.

As Kukkonen (2010, 53) notes, in order for a text to be subversive, it has to be “subversive of a particular tradition,” whether this tradition is European fairytales or American superhero comics. One of the most common ways to subvert traditions, as Kukkonen, too, has noticed, is the subversion of gender norms in the representation of female characters (ibid.). In this way, one of the most subversive

elements in *KA* is the introduction of a 10-year-old girl as a violent killer. Violating cultural taboos on both age and gender, the comic's representation of the blood-spattered and cursing pre-teen is a striking contrast to the traditional superhero myth. Trained by her father, Hit-Girl's childhood, described by her, can indeed be called "unconventional":

> Where most girls my age are cooing over Bratz or My Scene dolls, I asked Santa for an M-16 and a pair of silver knuckledusters. Other girls beg for a new pair of heelies. I'm begging Dad for a PEARL-HANDLED SWITCHBLADE. (2008, 120)

Trained by her father, Hit-Girl is a martial arts expert who unflinchingly kills grown men with her bare hands while swearing profanities. In a satirical reworking of the female superhero, Hit-Girl subverts a vast array of gender expectations that traditionally have marked the female character in the superhero comic as passive and silent, granting her a violent agency that surpasses even most male superheroes.

Wielding two katanas bigger than herself, Hit-Girl's first entrance on page 67 is visually marked with an outpour of blood, guts, and severed limbs, all the mere jarring when contrasted with a small and frail-looking girl in a mask. As Dave describes her:

> She was like John Rambo meets Polly Pocket. Dakota Fanning crossed with *Death Wish 4*. She handled those knives like a fucking surgeon. I still can't believe she was only ten… (2008, 73) (see fig. 6)

Through Hit-Girl, *KA* parodies the conventions of superheroic violence which generally attribute excessive physical violence to masculine heroes. As stated in chapter 3.3, female superheroes have usually (though not always) been portrayed through a very hierarchical gender binary that has stressed the static and passive role of the female hero as opposed to active masculine hero, often casting the female character as the victim or as corrupted by her own power. In *KA*, it is Hit-Girl who arrives to Kick-Ass's rescue as he is faced with a half a dozen drug dealers, slicing away at the men over twice her size with an ease that is powerfully juxtaposed with her delicate looks. Her self-assured nonchalance at the massacre further stresses the complete reversal of the gendered stereotypes that categorize the female as victim and the child as innocent, instead endowing her with the role of the violent avenger rescuing the male hero.

Fig. 6. *Kick-Ass* (2008, 73). Kick-Ass © 2010 Mark Millar and John S. Romita. All rights reserved.

To enhance the contrast even more, Hit-Girl's language is pronouncedly foul. After introducing herself with "Okay, you cunts. Let's see what you can do." (2008, 67) and killing every man in the room, she proceeds to follow the only female in the room desperately trying to make her escape:

> Where the hell are **you** going, asshole? Off to phone your **lawyer**? Hoping someone cares about your **underprivileged childhood**? Well, **bad news**, you sorry bag of shit… (2008, 75)

By killing the woman (unarmed and trying to escape), Hit-Girl is firmly cast into the more problematic category of vigilante heroes who kill without remorse (and with dubious reason). Indeed, Coogan's definition of a superhero firmly states that though superheroes take the law into their own hands because they view their own power as a justification, killing marks an exception to the rule: as it transforms the hero from reactive to proactive and essentially villanizes the hero (2006, 112). Unforgiving and even gleeful, Hit-Girl's decision to murder an unarmed woman signals a shift away from the monomythic frontier tradition where violence is only taken to as the last resort, and never done lightly. To further emphasize this aspect, on pp. 91–94 Hit-Girl and Big Daddy are shown gathering information from Cheadle, a crook on the mafia payroll. After giving them all his information under the obvious threat of violence (he is trapped upside down in a car inside a car demolisher, with blood in his face), he asks "So now I get to **go**, right? C'mon man.

I gave you all those **names** and **addresses**… you ain't gonna **fuck me over** here, are ya?" (2008, 91). Hit-Girl and Big Daddy exchange a knowing look, after which Hit-Girl presses a button and the machine proceeds to crush Cheadle to death in gory detail.

Indeed, as the wealth of violent detail shows, one of the ways *KA* parodies superheroic violence is precisely through its visual depiction, which is characterized by an exaggerated and highly graphical representation of severed limbs, decapitated heads, and eyes popping out of their sockets, all floating on gallons upon gallons of blood that goes beyond absurd. In contrast to *DKR*, which introduced the notion of "realist" violence in superhero comics, *KA* subverts this violence by amplifying it even further by perversely "returning" the superheroic violence back to the unrealistic through cartoonish exaggeration. Detailed displays of exposed guts and exploding heads are combined with an excessive amount of spattering blood, colored with an unnaturally bright red that sticks to every surface with an unforeseen and unnatural brightness. Entire splash pages are devoted to single images of blades piercing skulls and the blood-spattered tween heroine standing among a room full of corpses. The after-effects of violence are visible, too, as Dave's face is markedly disfigured after each of his violent confrontations. The over-blown orgies of violence transgress into the realm of parody, of exaggeration that challenges the entire notion of vigilante violence as justifiable.

Hit-Girl's introductory flashback shows her killing grown men while simultaneously chatting with her father, who drills her with trivia questions ranging from movie stars to gun facts. Her attitude towards killing is light, even joyous, severely undermining the traditional notions of troubled superheroes haunted by every death they inflict. As Hit-Girl drives chair legs through throats and causes open fractures by the mere force of her body, the unrealistic level of violence in *KA* is unmistakable—a clear contrast to the standard superhero fiction, which tends to portray violence that arouses "not a ruffle of doubt" (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 115) despite its fantastical nature. Instead, *KA* specifically aims to expose it by depicting a slim ten-year-old slicing people to pieces. Furthermore, the justifications of this violence are partially omitted, as she clearly acts neither in self-defense nor to explicitly put down any supreme evil that the official law enforcement fails to control (the mafia in the comic is not depicted as any kind of viral threat, their violence apparent only *after* Hit-Girl and Big Daddy have already killed two dozen

of their workers). Ironically, all of Hit-Girl's victims as if by accident turn out to be drug dealers or other criminals, and her actions ultimately appear to redeem her, as even the police are claimed to know "**something** was going on, but word online was they actually kinda **liked** it" (2008, 185). Despite her excessive violence, Hit-Girl (and Kick-Ass) is redeemed by the "word online" replacing the more traditional word on the street.

Though popular culture, including superhero comics, has portrayed independent and powerful female heroes as violent avengers before from Buffy and Xena to the "Bride" in *Kill Bill* (it could even be argued that the powerful female has become an established figure in the Hollywood action genre), Hit-Girl goes partially beyond any previous representations, mainly due to her young age and complete remorselessness. There is no hesitation in her actions, no feminine emotion that hinders her as she coolly and without remorse dissects all villains in her sight. It is only during the final battle scene with the mafia bosses that her femininity is momentarily emphasized as she is captured. According to Gates, female heroes who demonstrate masculine strength are often deliberately "temporarily re-feminized" through "a moment of feminine weakness just before the climax" in order to make the heroic finale even more gratifying as the heroine then reasserts her strength while also assuring the audience that she can still be female and has not become totally masculine (2011, 205). In *KA*, Hit-Girl is captured by the mafia thugs and struck on both cheeks with a meat hammer (2008, 179–180). Kick-Ass arrives to help her, momentarily reasserting the traditional gender roles of active male and passive female before Hit-Girl admonishes her explosive revenge. She is again feminized after the final confrontation, after she has killed every single gangster in sight, as she asks Dave: "Would you give me a **hug**? My **daddy** just died." (2008, 184).

However, unlike such powerful female characters as the Dark Phoenix or the Scarlet Witch, Hit-Girl is not punished for being an independent, powerful female character that kills; neither is she controlled in any way by her perceived power or a mystified bloodlust. While the comic clearly questions the idea of violence as somehow intrinsic and empowering to masculinity, it also criticizes the view that women are somehow unable to master these instincts, and that for women to embark on these violent actions perceived masculine is punishable. Instead, Hit-Girl's violence is never portrayed as an inner instinct; it is never made to appear natural or

innate to her in any way. Instead, her violence is depicted precisely for what it is: a choice she makes. Not given power or born with it, she is shown meticulously training in order to gain power, and though trained to become the killing machine that she is, she is never presented as unable to control her violent behavior or feeling empowered by it. When she decides to quit adventuring at the end of the comic, it is her own choice, not a choice dictated to her by authorities or even Kick-Ass.[118] Furthermore, she is able to reintegrate into society as she returns to her mother, resuming her life as a normal child. Even though Hit-Girl's final violence could be characterized as revenge and therefore separate from her previous actions, she is not punished for this despite the fact that the desire for revenge often tends to destroy the female protagonist and mark her as an outsider to society (Gates, 2011, 213–214). Additionally, she does not give up her power completely, as is exemplified by the way she defends herself against bullies in her new school.

Hit-Girl's subversive nature as a superhero is further emphasized by the fact that despite being a female hero, she is never sexualized in any way. Whereas more traditional female superheroes often tend to be, as Reynolds (1992, 81) notes, fetishized and overly sexualized in order to contain and domesticate them, Hit-Girl remains beyond this categorization mainly due to her young age. By presenting a pre-teen and non-sexualized character who is still powerful and independent, the comic sketches out an unusually strong female character rarely seen in superhero comics (or in any other media, for that matter). By subverting the child from the traditional victim to the vigilante avenger dispensing violent justice, the comic clearly parodies the established conventions of superhero comic as well as the dated studies on violence and comics cited by Bongco that focus primarily on violence as triggered in teenage boys through violent popular culture (2000, 40). By casting a comics-savvy 10-year-old girl (she demonstrates a decent knowledge of the genre and its conventions, as the quote in the beginning of this section shows) as a highly violent heroine, *KA* challenges these underlying assumptions related to violence and gender.

KA, much like *DKR*, takes on the mythic paradigm of popular culture violence, but approaches it mainly to dismantle it. There is no mythic selectivity, as

[118] Although it must be noted that *Kick-Ass* does undermine Hit-Girl's subversive nature at the end of the comic by commenting how Hit-Girl "finally got to do all the things little girls were **supposed** to do," (2008, 186) effectively claiming that being a superhero goes against the established gender norms.

the city Dave lives in is depicted as a sunny, normal-looking suburb instead of the traditional urban hell of the superhero universe. The city is not threatened by an excessive amount of urban violence or a power-hungry supervillain, and Dave's motivation for becoming Kick-Ass derives from his own loneliness and desperation rather than perceived necessity to act. Even Hit-Girl's "secret origin" involving her mother's death at the hands of "bad guys" (2008, 128) is revealed to be a fabrication, invented by her father simply out of a desire (much like Dave) to have "an exciting life" (2008, 153).[119] The text makes no pretenses at ensuring the reader that all of Hit-Girl's victims are even deserving of death, eschewing the mythic massage behind the narrative as the villain of the story is revealed to have been chosen at random. Thus, the role of the mythic massage is severely undermined: though officially functioning to assure that justice can be achieved through vigilante methods, that the "gap between myth and reality can be bridged" (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 116), in *KA* this gap is torn even wider than before. Instead, it is deliberately exposed for what it is and parodied as the "public redemption," the public acclaim for the hero that combines the idea of America as an ideal for the rest of the world with the "naïve narcissism typical of the superhero cult" (ibid.) through the internet fame received by Kick-Ass. Batman may still have gathered his fame through the word on the streets, whereas Kick-Ass is a 21st-century "superhero" whose reputation comes from the word on the internet.

Ultimately, the use of violence is inextricably linked to power in its various forms. Superheroes especially are faced with multiple issues linked with violence as power (or vice versa) and of using extralegal violence to uphold the very laws they themselves break. Superheroes often possess super*powers* that grant them physical power, which creates clear connotations between violence and power. Violence and power are not synonymous, yet one is often closely attached with the other, and their close relationship in superhero comics signals a similar proximity within the wider construction of American popular geopolitics. While I will address the issue of the superhero's legal status as a defender of democracy in more detail in chapter 5, I will first devote a joining subchapter to the superhero's violence realized as totalitarian power that threatens individual subjectivity.

[119] It is worth pointing out that the 2012 movie adaptation of *Kick-Ass* (dir. Matthew Vaughn) omitted the fact that Hit-Girl's mother is alive and that her entire origin story is a fabrication, erasing some of the satirical elements from the comic book by offering the audiences a more "justified" version of Hit-Girl and her origins.

4.2 All Men Are Not Created Equal: Power, Subjectivity and Resistance in *Superman: Red Son*

> Who do you think you **are** flying around and wearing our flag? How can they call you a symbol of everything we **believe** in when you aren't even from this **planet**? You're the **opposite** of Marxist doctrine, Superman. Living proof that all men **aren't** created equal.
> (*Superman: Red Son*, 2003, 32)

"The great American icon … Reimagined as a Soviet hero!" So claims the cover of the collected edition of the three-issue *Superman: Red Son*, published in 2003 by DC Comics. Written by Mark Millar and drawn by Dave Johnson and Kilian Plunkett, the story spans a little over 150 pages, detailing the rise (and ultimate fall) of the communist Superman in three acts (*Red Son Rising*, *Red Son Ascendant*, *Red Son Setting*). The story belongs to the curious superhero genre convention of "imaginary tales" or "Elseworlds tales": a narrative solution that overrides the structural problem of the superhero as an "oneiric" hero without character development, allowing the reader to experience such events as Superman's marriage to Lois Lane without "consuming" the characters[120] (cf. Eco, 1972/1986, 336). These stories embarked on a "what if?" premise, developing the stories to their logical conclusion but always reminding the reader that the story they are reading is "imaginary" and does not take place in the official continuity of the fictional universe.[121] Though sometimes done for comical purposes, these narratives do have the power to address serious issues, as *Red Son* demonstrates.

Superman: Red Son falls clearly into the category of the doubly fictional imaginary story, its premise being the question: what if, instead of landing in the middle of Kansas, near Smallville, Superman had crash-landed into a Ukrainian collective in the Soviet Union, and consequently proceeded to become a communist hero devoted to Marxist ideals instead of the familiar American icon?[122] Whereas this alone provides a fruitful ground for the extrapolation of superheroic ideals, the

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[120] This, of course, before the two characters finally did tie the knot.

[121] In a self-reflexive and knowing manner, Alan Moore introduced his own imaginary tale, "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?" (1986) by stating: "This is an **imaginary story**… Aren't they all?" (*Superman* #423, 1).

[122] This is not the only time Superman's origins have been relocated. In 2004, Kim Johnson collaborated with John Byrne and Mark Farmer (with a little help from John Cleese) to produce *Superman: True Brit*, which depicted the "what if?" scenario of Superman landing in the UK instead of the United States. However, whereas *Red Son* ambitiously produces a serious extrapolation of Superman as a totalitarian ruler, *True Brit* is clearly aimed at a more humorous intent as "Colin Clark" desperately attempts to learn to control himself "like a true Brit" (2004, 22).

text also offers an interesting perspective into the politics of power, subjectivity and resistance in the hands of truly superheroic power. Violence, as I will demonstrate, becomes a crucial element in the construction and execution of power as it is made increasingly problematic through its relationship to resistance, which in turn enables subjectivity in a Foucauldian sense. As violence, power, resistance, and subjectivity are all closely intertwined, they will all be addressed in this chapter, whereas *Red Son* will act as a case study that will enable a closer look at these issues.

"Power" in itself is a major element in superhero comics. Often used to denote the actual "powers" of the superhero from flight to invincibility, the majority of comic book superheroes possess some kind of physical or mental (in other words, measurable) powers. Naturally, superheroes themselves have also been read as metaphors of power; Coogan even goes as far as equating the superhero's "overwhelming power" with that of America, citing the way they solve problems by enforcing their own morals on others as similar to America's position after the Cold War (2006, 231). However, these readings ignore the more complex definitions of power, viewing power as something static and possessed by the hero (or the nation). Whereas superheroes may possess static "powers" that manifest as their personal abilities, the various power relationships that they are a part of present a much more complex and dynamic issue to discuss. The term "power," in this sense, becomes a distinctively different concept due to the superhero's quite paradoxical relationship with the state and the powers it in turn represents. To add to this mixture of "powers," the concept of *biopower* will also be discussed as central to the politics of Superman's totalitarianism.

As Giorgio Agamben writes in the introduction to his work, *Homo Sacer* (1998), Foucault's main interests evolved precisely around two directives of power: the political techniques of the state and the "technologies of the self," which together combine into a technique of "subjective individualization" where the subject is simultaneously bound to his identity and the state (1998, 5). Immediately after this, however, Agamben proceeds to criticize Foucault for his refusal to develop a "unitary theory of power" that would merge the two (ibid.). This demand reveals a crucial difference between the ways these two writers perceive "power" itself: Agamben's desire to locate power in juridical or institutional instances and models and in their intersections conflicts with Foucault's emphasis on power relations and formations of subjectivity.

According to Foucault himself, he sees his whole work as an attempt to "create a history of the different modes by which . . . human beings are made subjects" (1982/2003, 126), whether through the discourses of language, mental illness, or sexuality, among others. All these discourses are immersed with power, and form dynamic relationships of power that function to create "subjects," i.e. individuals. This "government of individualization," as Foucault dubs it (ibid., 129), leads to a "production of individuated subjects" which results in subjects experiencing such aspects as sexuality and gender as "a part of their core identity" (Halberstam, 1995, 141). In this perspective, then, the concepts of "subjects" and "identities" are not completely separate, but at least partially collapse into each other as the complex process of individualization into a governed subject can actually be perceived as coming from within, as a part of one's perceived identity. Transferring this idea of an identity to a national scale, one can argue that national identities are created through a similar process in the way they rely on a cultural context knowledge that derives from a shared popular culture memory (Kukkonen, 2010, 158) that narrates this identity.[123] A nation is therefore created through narratives which are simultaneously consumed and produced in our cultural memory, and this consumption of popular culture narratives that narrate nationality and identity becomes a particular discourse within this government or "matrix of individualization" as perceived by Foucault (1982/2003, 132) that has spread over a multitude of institutions.[124]

Superman: Red Son highlights the various power relationships that are embedded within the seemingly simple narratives of the superhero genre, and through them, it questions some of the larger power relations that are at work in the creation of identities. As noted above, because "power" can be understood on multiple levels, the text, too, can be accessed on several levels of power relations. On the surface of the story, the vast majority involves Superman, whether with his "loyal" subjects or his antagonists, most notable of which undoubtedly are Lex Luthor and, unsurprisingly, Batman. While Lex Luthor is widely known as

[123] As nations have no "clearly identifiable births" or natural deaths, their identities differ from those of actual persons: nations' identities cannot be "remembered," so they need to be narrated in a historical and sociological setting (Anderson, 1991, 204-5).

[124] These institutions contain all that "ensure the distribution of individual bodies in space and time, and which organise around these bodies a whole field of visibility, ordering them or rendering them orderable, in institutions such as universities, secondary schools, military barracks, and workshops" (Crome, 2009, 52).

Superman's iconic arch–nemesis in the official DC continuity, casting Batman as a "villain" to Superman's "hero" is clearly in keeping with the two heroes' antagonism that has become even more prominent within the last three decades. Even though these two heroes have traditionally been seen as the two halves of the essential superhero myth and their earlier incarnations often saw them teaming up to fight various villains, their later versions (especially since the 1980s' so called "dark turn") have more frequently seen them on the opposing sides. However, the power struggle between these two heroes is not measured through physical force (which would undoubtedly leave Batman very slim chances of winning), but through a more complex equation of power and totalitarian rule which offers very narrow margins for actual resistance or subjectivity. Ultimately relocating the conflict on the surface of the individual body, the power struggle between Superman and Batman is resolved through the right to death.

The arrival of Superman in Soviet Russia permanently alters the power structures of "real" world politics. This becomes clear from the start as a Russian newscast warns his audience after Superman's existence has been made public: "Let our **enemies beware**: there is only **one** super-power **now**" (2003, 13), indicating the permanent power shift between the two super-powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The balance between the two super-nations has been shattered as the Cold War evolves "into a whole new **animal**" (ibid.). Following the death of Stalin (another "Man of Steel," pun very much intended), Superman initially rejects but soon accepts the role as the new Soviet leader, promising to "rescue" the world after noting that he "**could** take care of everyone's problems" if he ran the place (2003, 54). Essentially doing what Umberto Eco (1972/1986) called him to do several decades earlier, Superman's political consciousness finally overrides his civic consciousness as he proceeds to exercise good on a global scale, enforcing a political unity that encompasses almost the entire world.

Visually, the comic skillfully combines the famous iconic poses of Superman, one fist raised in flight, with socialist propaganda imagery of Stalin and the Soviet Union (see fig. 7). The image depicts a whole splash page of Superman, poised in flight, with massive portraits of Lenin and Stalin in the background, red flags waving. The Soviet hammer and sickle is prominent, both in Superman's costume and in the background. While the background is heavily layered with Soviet iconography (all the way to the Russian men in Cossack hats), Superman

Fig. 7. *Superman: Red Son* (2003, 55). © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.

himself is portrayed in a slightly different way. Initially, his posture, one hand raised in flight, appears to simply mimic his "traditional" flight pose from the original comics: both hands clenched as fists, one extended forward while the other is held back. However, a closer inspection reveals that his extended arm does not end in a fist, but instead opens in a way eerily reminiscent of the Nazi salute. Later, Superman is clearly inserted in images that pastiche old Soviet propaganda posters, somewhat ironically casting Superman as the "ideal worker" with his chiseled chin, muscular build, and incorruptible morals.[125] This visual image works to create a subtle effect of what Darko Suvin has called "cognitive estrangement," depicting imagery the reader can instantly recognize, yet at the same time find strangely unfamiliar, due to a new variant in an otherwise familiar world (1979, 6). Though Suvin's original term referred to science fiction and the genre's textual conventions, this application of the term in terms of visual intertextuality produces a host of new meanings, as the familiar icon is anchored into a different visual context. This relocation of the national icon of the United States into a communist setting is all the more unsettling as the reader is immersed in the tradition of Superman and his "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," and visually reproducing it in a contradictory setting relies precisely on this cultural knowledge in order to have an effect.

Two decades after Superman's ascension to the top of the Communist Party nearly the entire world has succumbed to Superman's rule. Only Chile and the United States resist, described as "the last two capitalist economies on Earth and both on the brink of fiscal and social collapse" (2003, 63). Alongside such past afflictions as poverty, diseases and illiteracy, individual freedom is also a thing of the past in Superman's all-seeing and all-hearing global nation. As one of his dissenters ventures to say: "We're like his **pets**. Animals in a **cage.** He might feed us and **shelter** everyone, but we're never going to be free while **that** monster's running the show." (2003, 64). Though the credit of this new "utopia" (as Superman himself calls it, p. 71) is officially given to the Communist Party, it is obvious that the party is a mere mask for Superman's totalitarian rule which has "virtually eliminated" all disobedience. Criminals, rebels, and dissidents to Superman's rule are turned into

[125] For example, the alternate cover for the 2010 "Deluxe Edition" is an obvious copy of *The U.S.S.R. is the Avantgarde of the World Proletariat*, a 1931 Soviet propaganda poster by artist Gustav Klutsis.

mind-controlled robots, as Superman's "Big Brother" like abilities assure that no-one can safely express their opinions, even in conversation. The superhero narrative has always contained such elements as "elitism, irrationalism, stereotyping, and an appetite for total solutions instead of compromise" (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 282), expressing the superhero's potential for totalitarianism *Red Son* makes visible. In *Red Son*, this transformation is enforced visually by appropriating the traditional iconic costume of Superman. Not only is the familiar "S" chevron[126] replaced with the Soviet hammer and sickle, but as his totalitarian power increases, his attire begins increasingly to resemble a military uniform as he adds military collars to his costume and loses the traditional "underwear" he wears over his tights. In this way, the visual images convey a more powerful message than the written narrative alone, as his gradual transformation evokes not only cognitive estrangement through the altered chevron, but also clear connotations of increased military power.

These connotations are inserted quite deliberately, and the entire comic should be read through the context of a post-9/11 United States coming to terms with the consequences of the nation's increased militarism. Writer Mark Millar himself stated in an interview in March, 2003:

> It's very, very political, very much an allegory of what's happening with the USA at the moment and a very, very mainstream project aimed at the same people who picked up the first *Dark Knight* book. Just as this was a commentary on the Reagan years, *Superman: Red Son* is an Orwellian examination of what happens when the balance of power tilts in the world and one country finds itself the only world superpower. (Younis, 2003)

The comic and its commentary on the moral implications of too much power in the hands of one man has obvious parallels in the post-9/11 America as the fear of terrorism led to restricted civil rights and increased paranoia as safety can only be ensured through total control.

This total control requires freedom as its price. Thus, even as Superman accomplishes his utopian vision, his relationship to the subjects of his global nation is transformed: as no resistance is allowed, the subjectivity of the people (how the people experience themselves as free individuals in the Foucauldian sense) is effectively removed. The power relationship of the totalitarian ruler and his citizens is transformed into total domination as Superman pursues his dream for universal rule, accomplished once the few remaining nations fall. After all, totalitarianism

[126] Peter Coogan refers to the superhero's logo on his chest as a "chevron," citing it as "a simplified statement" of the hero's identity and codename (2009, 79).

must by definition aim for a global rule (Arendt, 1951, 392), and therefore even Superman can never be satisfied until even the United States (with Lex Luthor) has surrendered to his loving utopian vision. Furthermore, totalitarianism views itself as beyond any traditional form of legislation or government:

> [Totalitarianism's] defiance of positive laws claims to be a higher form of legitimacy which, since it is inspired by the sources themselves, can do away with petty legality. Totalitarian lawfulness pretends to have found a way to establish the rule of justice on earth—something which the legality of positive law admittedly could never attain. (Arendt, 1951, 462)

As Superman claims to be able to solve everyone's problems once he is in charge, he clearly implies that he is in possession of this higher form of legitimacy and can thus "do away with petty legality" (i.e. the bureaucratic and inefficient legislation that in superhero comics validates the hero's actions to begin with) in order to establish his rule.

Even though Arendt's original critique cited above was aimed at Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, this statement echoes eerily the justifications behind superheroes' vigilante justice (as discussed in the previous sections), which often seems to come from some intrinsic knowledge of right and wrong and is usually distributed because of the law's frequent inadequacies. Being physically more evolved, Superman overcomes even law, literally surpassing all humanity in his role as a variation of the ultimate Nietzschean übermensch with a "will to power," a superman taking the place of the one who gives life its meaning, thus literally "overcoming man" on every level as Nietzsche famously predicted in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–1885/2006, 5; 42). Surpassing man, the "superman" is free of society's constraints, the creator of new values, and a subject in complete control over himself who has no need for society as we know it (Keeping, 2009, 50–51). A rare instance in superhero comics, *Red Son*'s Superman actually engages with the übermensch thematic, even at one point referring to himself as a "god" against his human antagonist Lex Luthor: "What was the **point** of Lex Luthor? A human being who dared to challenge a **god**, he was surely the **greatest** of his **kind**." (2003, 59).

The concept of the übermensch can even be connected with the Foucauldian framework of subjectivity: what in Nietzsche's work was dubbed as the "breeding of a political animal" that created the subject by planting and cultivating a sense of responsibility which made him "regular, calculable, and necessary" (Ansell-Pearson, 1995, 20) can be found in Foucault's work in the individualizing power of the state

he labels the "government of individualization" (1982/2003, 129). Whether subjectivizing individualization or the breeding of political animals, it is apparent from both approaches that the person able to surpass those socializing demands of society, the person able to exist outside those requirements, becomes the true subject, a sovereign of himself, i.e. the superman.[127]

While I will return to the idea of sovereignty and its wider significance to the political nature and power of the superhero in the next chapter, I will for the moment only comment on the way this Nietzschean "will to power" is central in the creation of the *true* superman, yet the genre of superhero comics for several decades shied away from addressing the issue. Only since the mid-1980s and the publication of such texts as *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* have superhero comics truly dared to tackle the question of the *superman*, problematizing the superhero in terms of violence, consumerist and/or corporate power, and world–altering politics.[128] Yet, the frequent misperception still persists that superhero comics simply transform the vigilantism of the superhero into flawless law enforcement (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 46). In this rather simplistic view, power is perceived as something possessed by an individual which is then applied to the well–being of the community, and as Eco (1972/1986, 342) notes, each hero who possesses this power is usually "profoundly kind, moral, faithful to human laws" and will only use his powers for good (because it is the "nice" thing to do). In other words, traditional Golden and Silver Age superheroes have tended to uphold and follow human laws instead of surpassing them in a Nietzschean manner. However, as I have already mentioned, "power" begins to receive more meanings even in the context of superhero comics when analyzed from other perspectives. Instead of viewed as monolithic and "possessed" by the hero, power should be assessed as dynamic and decidedly asserted upon others.

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[127] The superman paradigm is consciously raised in the very first issue of Moore's run of *Miracleman,* titled *Rebirth*, as the final page quotes Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1885): "Behold… I teach you the superman: he is this lighting, he is this madness!" (1985, 1; 11). During this quote, the panels do a slow cinematic close up of Miracleman's face, zooming deep into the darkness of his eye. The effect of this slow zoom is distressing as it slows down narrative time, forcing the reader to look this fearful "superman" in the eye, clearly evoking the well-known "abyss stares also" line from Nietzsche, hinting at the moral vacuum behind his eyes. Miracleman is the superhero who truly becomes *superman*—something rarely seen in superhero comics.

[128] For superhero comics that engage in these issues, see for example *The Authority* (1999) by Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch, *Kingdom Come* (1996) by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, *Squadron Supreme* by Mark Gruenwald (1985–1986) or *Miracleman* (1985–1989) by Alan Moore and several artists.

As Keith Crome states, Foucault identifies power with force, and this stresses power as something that must be understood through its effects, "as inherently relational, as a relation between forces or actions" (2009, 51). In Foucault, power is about *power relationships* and defined as follows:

> [Power is] a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon action, on possible or actual future or present actions. (1982/2003, 137).

In essence, then, power is about the possible effects of power. As a result, "power" does not necessarily involve any action as such, but instead it should be viewed as a response, which suggests that an action (by the one with the perceived "power") will occur only if a previous (unwanted) action is done before that. In the context of superheroes, this means that the presence of a superhero should be enough to deter any criminal from even attempting crime, as the superhero with his superpower will catch and punish the criminal. Crucially, this notion of power and its force relies heavily on the threat of violence, as the superhero usually has superior physical abilities with which he will execute the (violent) punishment. It is important to notice that power is still not dependent on consent or violence in establishing power relations; however, as Foucault (ibid.) notes, the exercise of power usually can never do without one or the other. But even though both consent and violence are instruments or results, neither of them can "constitute the principle or basic nature of power" (1982/2003, 138).

Similarly, Arendt argues that violence can never be the essence of government due to its instrumental nature—as a means to an end, violence always requires justification, and thus "cannot be the essence of anything" (1969, 51). Ultimately, violence has only passivity as its opposite pole, and coming up on any resistance, has no choice but to break it down (Foucault, 1982/2003, 137). Revealingly, Superman is adamant that no actual violence (equaled with killing here) is deployed to force his perfect vision of society in *Red Son*:

> *Pyotr*: "Why can't we **kill him**, Superman? God, my **father** must be **spinning** in his **grave** out there! . . . I say it's time we got tough and cracked a few skulls just like we did in the **good old days!**"
> *Superman*: "**No**, there must be **no killing**, Pyotr. You might run the K.G.B., but I'm the one who runs the **country**. This utopia will not be built on the **bones** of my **opponents**. That was **comrade Stalin's** way. Not **mine**." (2003, 71)

However, what Superman appears to be oblivious to is the fact that it is the mere threat of violence that is enough to transform the power relationship between him

and his subjects into totalitarian domination, as the threat of violence in itself can constitute violence. Superman's principles echo the very classic premise of the superhero as a mythical frontier hero, where the hero's mythical powers make it possible to carry out vigilante violence without incurring blame, as the actions that provoke this violence always come from the aggressor, justifying the hero's actions. Furthermore, as he is unwavering in his conviction to not kill, he is revealed to be deeply affected by the superhero code and its firm refusal to kill (cf. Coogan, 2006, 112).

In *Red Son*, it becomes clear that the power relationship between Superman and his citizens has turned from a power relationship into slavery: there is no chance of escape, no chance of confrontation, no chance of resistance, which means there really is no power relationship. After all, in real power relationships, where the exercise of power is defined as "a mode of actions upon the actions of others," *freedom* can be said to be the condition for the exercise of power (Foucault, 1982/2003, 138–139), and without freedom, there literally cannot exist a power relationship:

> Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available. (1982/2003, 138–9)

In other words, without a certain level of freedom, there can be no power. In "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self" (1984/2003, 25–42), Foucault even defines the freedom that enables power relations as being possible "only insofar as the other still has the option of killing himself, of leaping out the window, or of killing the other person" (ibid., 31). In its most extreme dimension, suicide then becomes the last opportunity for resistance, the ultimate act of freedom, and in *Red Son*, Superman literally removes even the right to suicide, first by preventing Pyotr (Stalin's illegitimate son, head of the secret police) from committing suicide (2003, 37) and later by actually adding chemicals to the drinking water in order to keep everyone happy in his "utopia" (2003, 108). This idea of suicide as the ultimate expression of freedom becomes crucial when discussing power relations and the formation of subjectivity: in preventing even the option of suicide, Superman executes what I will identify as a literary variation of *biopower*, power over people's right to control their own bodies.

Biopower is a concept introduced by Foucault as a part of biopolitics in the first part of his multi-volume work *The History of Sexuality* called *The Will to Knowledge* (1976). Developing the concept further in his other writings, Foucault defines biopower as follows:

> A set of processes such as the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of the population and so-on. It is these processes—the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity, and so-on—together with a whole series of economic and political problems which . . . become biopolitics' first objects of knowledge and the targets it seeks to control. (1976/2003, 243)

In other words, biopower denotes the various "mechanisms, techniques and technologies" that make the human both a subject and an object of power—the "exercise of power over life and death" (Crome, 2009, 47; 52). Though biopower is very much a technique of power that aims at controlling the subject, it is clearly a part of the "government of individualization" outlined earlier, a normalizing and individualizing force that creates particular subjects.[129] Yet, it must be noted that these techniques of power, as Crome points out, are not focused on controlling the individual body, but the "species body," the processes of human life itself are individualizing and "massifying" at the same time (2009, 53).

When contrasted with Foucault's definition above, Superman's description of his established utopia sounds quite similar—almost a communist dream society:

> Every adult had a job, every child had a hobby, and the entire human population enjoyed the full eight hours' sleep which their bodies required. Crime didn't exist. Accidents didn't happen. It didn't even rain unless Brainiac was absolutely certain that everyone was carrying an umbrella. Almost six billion citizens and hardly anyone complained. Even in private. (2003, 107)

Superman's control over people's bodies and even private voicing of opinion is a grotesque imitation of literal biopower as he manages every aspect of life—both the individual body and the species body—as a political force. His control over the human population echoes literally Foucault's definition (1976/2003, 246) of biopower as a general modifier of general phenomena such as mortality or birth rates, as Brainiac reports to him: "Life expectancy has increased to one hundred and twelve Earth years . . . Birth rates are on the rise, all increases localized to the prearranged spots…" (2003, 108). Foucault describes the highly complex power structures of modern society and the way they manage the self, whereas Superman's

[129] Agamben reads this as the "politicization of bare life as such," seeing it as a key turn in the transformation of modern thought (1998, 4).

biopower is a perversely literal variation of biopower, regularizing all human life through his omnipotent control.

In a way, Superman himself becomes the ultimate "matrix of individualization" discussed above as he governs every aspect of people's lives, partially removing the need for people to subjectively govern themselves at all. For example, Superman notes how "[n]obody wears a **seatbelt** anymore [and] ships have even stopped carrying **lifejackets**" (2003, 75), a clear sign that people have resigned the responsibility for their lives in part to Superman. Superman's total power and control make it very hard to resist him in any way, as his superpowers create a fantastical superhero version of a Foucauldian panopticon where his super-senses allow him to observe nearly everyone, making sure no-one expresses dissent "even in private." However, resistance is offered through one particular character: the quintessential vigilante hero, Batman. Through his resistance, the comic presents a way through subjectivity, even if this subjectivity ultimately results in death.

In the essay "The Subject and Power" (1982/2003), Foucault suggests a new approach to the study of the economy of power relations, which consists of approaching the "forms of resistance against different forms of power" instead of the internal rationality of power itself. This resistance can be analyzed as "a chemical catalyst" which brings to light different power relations and locates their positions, finds out their point of application and the methods used (ibid., 128–9). In the case of superheroes, one might approach the resistance to superheroes and superpowers, and begin to discover some of the power structures inherent in the superhero. In order for a power relationship to be a real power relationship, it has to recognize "the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) and always maintain the other as a subject who acts. Also, one must realize that when confronted with a relationship of power, "a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up" (Foucault, 1982/2003, 137–8). Of this "field of responses," one of the most crucial ones is the option of *resistance*. More importantly, these power relations and the resistance within them is, as Foucault has previously stressed, not an "all-or-nothing"; there should exist innumerable points of confrontations, instabilities, conflicts, and struggles, sometimes leading to temporary inversions of power relations (1977, 27).

It is interesting to seek this resistance within the alternative superhero narrative such as *Red Son*. What is the resistance in the relation of the superhero to

the nation/state/society or other superheroes? Can they even resist him, and how? Following the precedent of Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* where Batman rebelled against the governmental authority of Superman, *Red Son*, too depicts Batman[130] as the true vigilante as he takes on the role of the human adversary to the all-powerful Superman. As Superman bitterly describes him:

> **Batman**: A force of **chaos** in my world of **perfect order**. The **dark side** of the Soviet dream. Rumored to be a thousand **murdered dissidents**, they said he was a **ghost**. A walking **dead man**. A symbol of **rebellion** that would **never fade** as long as the **system** survived. Anarchy in black. (2003, 68)

The visual representation of this Soviet Batman is the opposite of the established millionaire superhero/playboy Bruce Wayne, as the communist Batman has no luxury of the Wayne inheritance, stealing his technology from the military instead. He has a ragged old cape and a padded, fur-lined Cossack variation of his mask, and in this universe, his parents were killed by the secret police for opposing Superman.

A thorn in the side of Superman's perfected utopia, Batman directly rebels against Superman's tyrannical rule through terrorist acts: he blows up government buildings and explicitly criticizes the despotic rule. As his monologue reveals, he knows exactly what he is doing:

> My apologies for interrupting a perfect evening of **totalitarian oppression**. But I've got a message here for anyone who values breathing. In precisely four minutes' time Moscow's **Superman Museum** will erupt into a beautiful flickering **fireball**... Please stay where you are if you'd like to make a stand against the tactics of my **terrorist organization**. Otherwise I'd recommend you run like hell. (2003, 66)

Batman identifies his actions as terrorism, as well as the "totalitarian oppression" of the Superman rule, and his resistance is one defined largely by violence.

Batman's ultimate goal is to end Superman's reign, and though he momentarily manages to defeat and capture Superman, he ultimately fails in this attempt. Yet, Batman's final victory over Superman is achieved as, rather than surrendering, he takes his own life: "Surely you know I'd rather martyr myself for **the cause** than end my days as one of your ridiculous **Superman Robots**." (2003, 97). Indeed, Batman's suicide serves a highly symbolical purpose in terms of power, and especially biopower. The option of suicide is central in defining biopower, after

[130] Interestingly, Batman's "bat cave" in *Red Son* is full of American-themed items: a torn American flag, a Big Boy -styled statue, a jukebox, among other things. These visual cues tellingly reveal Batman's desire to side with the perceived notion of the American culture of "freedom" as opposed to Superman's Soviet totalitarian rule.

all, for even though biopower aims at affirming life (extending mortality, increasing birth rates etc.), it simultaneously denies life through a definition of "good life" as prolonged life, where "the sustenance of a life of freedom . . . becomes supplanted by the administration of mere, biological, life" (Crome, 2009, 47; 56). When biopower is defined as administrating life, death receives a new privileged position as it grants the subject power. As Superman's total power aims at ultimately denying even death (the average life expectancy in his "utopia" has already risen to 112 years), the ability to choose to end one's life becomes a source of empowerment and subjectivity—and Batman is fully aware of this as his suicide can be interpreted as what Crome refers to as a "nihilistic affirmation of life" (2009, 46). The body and its forces, utility, and docility are a crucial site of resistance (Foucault, 1977, 25), and in *Red Son* this is taken to the extreme as Superman turns enemies of the state (in other words, anyone who resists his vision of utopia) into mind-controlled robots through invasive brain surgery. Superman literally forces his control over the body, and it is the body that becomes the ultimate location of resistance for Batman, too. Instead of submission, he remains free by choosing his own destruction.

Aside from his resistance to the biopower administered by Superman, Batman also functions to highlight the issues regarding the superhero and the state through his vigilante status. After all, superhero narratives are not just about restoring the law and defending the precious status quo; they are also about breaking the law, transgressing the rules:

> Viewed from this perspective, the narratives become more interesting and take on more dimensions especially in relation to power and control. It is possible to perceive the genre as actually dealing with the transgression of the law, or at the very least, showing an ambivalence about law and order. (Bongco, 2000, 93)

The superhero narratives' display of power, control, and lawless action is central in the analysis of popular geopolitical identities and narratives of America, as they repeatedly celebrate narratives that explicitly transgress the law and defy impotent and incompetent governmental authorities. As Costello (2009, 65) notes, the superhero is a markedly individualist hero, and to place him in an opposition to those who seek total domination clearly celebrates the virtue of American individualism. Yet, by placing the superhero as this dominating power, *Red Son* distorts the division between individualist thinking and governmental control, asking the very geopolitical question: what if there was only one super-power in the world?

The resistance to state control is a central theme in superhero narratives, and, indeed, a central thesis of American politics, though rarely expressed as straightforwardly as in *Red Son*, which is very much characterized by various forms of power struggles. *Superman: Red Son* depicts the dark side of the superhero in relation to power, identity, and authority by extrapolating the what-if scenario of super-powered totalitarian rule. The Foucauldian view of power as "exercised rather than possessed" stresses the dynamic nature of power that comes into existence through the struggle against it (1977, 26–7), and through this framework of power relations, the significance of the superhero as an agent of power must be analyzed. The role of resistance in the "matrix of individualization" (Foucault, 1982/2003, 132) is, in *Red Son*, the only way towards subjectivity and authentic power relations. When contrasted with the conceptual framework of defining America's popular geopolitical identities and scripts, then, it could be argued that works such as *Red Son* that consciously extrapolate the paradoxes of superhero ideologies aim at problematizing the seemingly innocent consumption of fictionalized national identities through popular narratives. The premise of *Red Son* may to the casual reader appear to be to critique Soviet ideology—after all, Superman is hailed as "committed to communist ideals," initially indicating that the ideology behind his actions is that of the Communist Party. However, a closer inspection reveals that the ideology exposed in the comic book is the ideology of the superhero himself, who, regardless of nationality, originates from American popular culture. By relocating the narrative to not-America, *Red Son* does remove some of the explicit criticism towards the superhero, and by analogy, American popular geopolitics. Yet, what are exposed are the violent and totalitarian elements always present within the character (and, analogously, within America) but never realized (the superhero's actions, as Umberto Eco noted decades ago, seem always to be focused on the local, never the global scale[131]), suggesting a similar potential within actual American geopolitics, too.

* * *

In this chapter, the focus has been on the way violence is represented in superhero comics. Intrinsically linked to the theme of masculinity discussed in the preceding chapter, the representation of superheroic violence has been established as

[131] Cf. "The Myth of Superman", 1972/1986.

problematic through its justifications, most notably through its depiction as an expression of natural masculine instinct rather than a chosen course of action. The use of organic metaphors in the justification of violence and the equation between emotions and violent behavior create a discourse where violence becomes natural, which directly contributes to the mythic paradigm of violence alongside such aspects as mythic selectivity, mythic massage, and the invitation to emulate. In this mythic paradigm violence is presented an essential part of American culture, and the violent superhero directly contributes to the popular geopolitical narratives that promote violent solutions as instinctual and natural to the nation.

Additionally, we have seen the ways violence directly contributes to other discourses of power as exemplified in *Superman: Red Son*. Though violence and power are not synonymous, their close relationship in superhero comics signals a similar proximity within the wider construction of American popular geopolitics. Analyzing the superhero's power executed through a totalitarian rule, the representations of superheroic rule and power were located into a Foucauldian "matrix of individualization" where the superhero's unlimited power became a threat to subjectivity. The superhero's inherent inability for democracy is a topic that requires further analysis, as the totalitarian tendencies embedded in the superhero signal that similar tendencies are located within American geopolitics, where the popular national identity is repeatedly consumed and enjoyed as a part of the governmentalizing of individuality. Therefore, the next chapter will concentrate on the superhero's contradictory relationship with democracy and the permanent Agambenian state of exception his existence causes.

5. Confusion of Powers: The Superhero in a State of Exception

Democracy: 1. Government by the people; that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them (as in the small republics of antiquity) or by officers elected by them. In mod. use often more vaguely denoting a social state in which all have equal rights, without hereditary or arbitrary differences of rank or privilege. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989)

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"Democracy is coming to the USA."
(Leonard Cohen, "Democracy," 1992)

From the very first issue of *Action Comics* in 1938, the superhero has had an uneasy relationship with the society he protects, as his "devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law" (Reynolds, 1992, 16). Indeed, as Thomas Andrae points out, early Superman stories actually portrayed him as "a social menace who threatened fundamental American values and institutions," and his radical individualism was replaced by a "wholesale identification with the state" only after his publishers became aware of his "outlaw" status (1987, 124–131). Though the subsequent decades have seen him become the very emblem of the truth, justice, and the eponymous "American Way," his early years reveal the complex relationship the superhero by definition has always had with the law, and more broadly speaking, the state.[132]

In the comics of the Golden Age, Commissioner Gordon may well have called Batman to help in catching the bad guys, but the relationship between the superhero and official state powers is, at a closer look, far more problematic than it initially appears. As Tony Spanakos explains, the superhero genre has "taught us to

[132] I will alternate in this chapter between "state "and "nation," which are not to be confused with each other. "State" refers to a politically organized government of a defined territory, whereas "nation" will refer to a community of people united by a common sense of shared nationality. In other words, a nation is an ethnic and cultural construct whereas state is a more political construct. The superhero addresses both, the nation through his cultural resonance within the American monomyth, and the state through his complex relationship with the legislative and juridical powers which he repeatedly challenges.

believe our liberty is more likely to be protected by heroes, who are above and beyond the state, than by the bureaucrats who comprise it" (2009, 37). We are to trust the vigilante heroes more than the official law enforcement, as the superheroes' infallible moral views are seen as incorruptible by comparison. Spanakos identifies this "fundamental tension" within the genre as one that deals with the legitimacy of authority in general, and with the authority of the state over the "coercive capacity of the superheroes" (2009, 34–35) in particular. This view creates a curious contrast with the widely accepted view that superheroes simply support the status quo, and have no desire to destabilize or challenge it—yet their very actions repeatedly undermine official authorities and, ultimately, the state.

In order to protect society, the superhero must inevitably become a criminal, a vigilante who breaks the law in order to save it when the more traditional state powers fail to do so. Indeed, as Gates notes in her study of American detective fiction (a close generic relative of the superhero comic), the conflict between the hero and society becomes intrinsic to the mythical American hero who has to remain an outsider to the society he aims to preserve due to his willingness (and ability) to use the same methods as those he battles despite the fact that he is using these methods to fight crime, not to commit it (2006, 33–34). The superhero becomes a paradox, as superhero narratives tend to promote the premise of democratic equality by the fact the superpowers are projected onto ordinary citizens, yet it is ultimately the very transformation into superheroes that makes them "incapable of democratic citizenship" (Lawrence and Jewett, 2002, 46). Interestingly, Rowe has argued that it is precisely through these kinds of U.S. cultural productions (the so-called "culture industry") that Americans are conditioned to "accept the undisguised militarism and jingoistic nationalism" that drives post-9/11 U.S. policies (2007, 37). Though superhero comics are only a small fraction of this massive cultural production of America and undoubtedly this "conditioning" does not apply to all Americans, the narratives they promote through their permanent state of exception offer a way to analyze the wider discourses on American popular geopolitics.

In this chapter, I will analyze the character of the superhero through the concept of the state of exception with the aim of re-assessing one of the central paradoxes of the genre. I will first discuss the state of exception on a more general level in 5.1, and examine the way this concept can be used in analyzing superhero comics. I will also discuss the concept of the so-called Captain America complex

and the superhero's relationship to democracy as one way of addressing the state of exception, and analyze how the superhero's vigilante politics and democracy are rarely compatible, yet the first is repeatedly justified in defense of the latter in American popular culture (which is in itself, as Dawson and Schueller note, immersed with fantasies of revenge which justify acts of "extralegal retribution" [2007, 14]). Finally, chapter 5.2 will take a closer look at Marvel's 2007 crossover-storyline *Civil War*, which offers an example of a recent superhero comic that explicitly addresses the issues of legality and authority in the superhero universe. Furthermore, the comic will be read as an allegory of the post-9/11 policies of the United States in terms of popular geopolitics. In addition, chapter 5.2 will also act as an introduction to the final chapter of this dissertation through its focus on the superhero comic and its relevance in terms of 9/11.

5.1 Exceptions within the State, or, How the Superhero is a Fascist in Disguise

> "With great power there must also come -- great responsibility!"
> (*Amazing Fantasy* #15, Aug 1962)

As I already argued in chapter 3, the superhero is very much entangled with a discourse that can be labeled as "fascist" through the strong emphasis on idealized masculinity, nationalism, and violence, which feature heavily in superhero comics. In addition to these issues, the notion of preserving society through the suspension of civil rights that characterizes the superhero's vigilantism further contributes to his classification as "fascist." Whereas the issues of masculinity, nationalism, and violence have all been addressed in the previous chapters, this section will concentrate on the challenging notion espoused by superhero comics that justice is ultimately more important than the due process of law. It is this violation of the very structure the superhero aims at upholding that, according to Duncan and Smith, has invited the accusations of superheroic fascism for the last seventy years (2009, 231). Indeed, the only thing that seems to separate the superhero from the fascist is the notion of individuality: as Mosse argues, individualism is not a priority within fascism, which instead strongly stresses the role of a man as a part of his nation and army, a "camaraderie" between men that is voluntary, not enforced (1996, 159). In

contrast, the American superhero is clearly marked by his uniqueness, his individuality that allows him to act according to his own moral standards, independent yet beneficial for the community. The superhero proclaims that the needs of the state are best served by the actions of individualistic heroes, whereas the fascist nation expects the opposite (the state is best served by the unified masses); in this sense, the superhero tradition differs significantly from the fascist ideal.

Through his vigilante status, the superhero becomes an exception within the state, an anomaly whose actions threaten to make void the very legal structures he aims at preserving through his vigilante actions. Essentially described through a paradox of breaking the law in order to uphold it, this conflict can also be read in terms of power and politics, as Arno Meteling has done: by the virtue of his superpowers, the superhero assumes the position of the sovereign:

> [The superhero] even has the power to supersede any law, acting as a vigilante. If a superhero is involved, every situation becomes a "state of exception," and the superhero is the one who dictates it. This makes him, according to Carl Schmitt's definition, the sovereign ruler of his world. (Meteling, 2010, 134–135)

This view of the superhero as a sovereign, a leader exercising supreme authority with absolute power over every citizen, becomes "even more convincing" when thinking about the way sovereignty has bound the state to the body of the sovereign ruler, unifying and naturalizing the dignity of the state by literally embodying it (most famously in Louis XIV's utterance "L'état c'est moi.") (Meteling, 2010, 145). Considering how strongly characters like Captain America are held as the embodiment of "America" and how the definition of the word "sovereign" includes such terms as "possessed of supreme power" (*OED*), the sovereign element within the superhero becomes more than evident.

The "state of exception" is a term devised by German political theorist Carl Schmitt in the early 20th century and developed further by Giorgio Agamben in 2005, and it refers to the momentary suspension of civil rights or executive or legal powers which, when prolonged, has become a dominant paradigm. In this dissertation, this term will be used to characterize the superhero and his relationship to the state as well as the people he aims at protecting, yet the concept has also been used in recent critical discussions on contemporary U.S. culture and America's new imperialism in the 21st century, creating a geopolitical connection between 21st-century U.S. imperial politics and culture where the "imperial policies are both the

consequence and cause of a certain kind of culture" (Dawson and Schueller, 2007, 5). Though "culture" in this context does contain a vastly wider trajectory than that of just superhero comics, it does establish the existence of a dynamic geopolitical connection between U.S. policies and (popular) culture in the sense that they exist in a reciprocal relationship, where the superhero narrative does not only reflect but actively affects particular geopolitical scripts and narratives that resonate within actual real-world policies. As superhero comics are connected with actual real-world policies and actions, they contribute to the realization that cultural texts, such as superhero comics, can act as vital instruments for analyzing political life because they provide the reader with "visions in which familiar realities are destabilized and transformed" (Paik, 2010, 2) which stress their geopolitical significance.

Through examples from such revisionary superhero comics as *Miracleman* (1985) by Alan Moore and *Kingdom Come* (1996) by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, this chapter will examine and analyze the state of exception and its relevance to both superhero comics and American popular geopolitics. In both *Miracleman* and *Kingdom Come* superheroes take the law into their own hands in hopes of creating utopia, essentially doing what Umberto Eco called for them to do several decades earlier. By becoming proactive, these superheroes openly address the usually hidden issue of the hero's legal and political status and the consequences of the hero's political activism.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility? Reading the State of Exception in *Miracleman* and *Kingdom Come*

As Spider-Man's first story concluded, "With great power there must also come -- great responsibility!" (*Amazing Fantasy* #15, Aug 1962). However, this power does not come with the corresponding authority, as Lewis (2008) poignantly notes. As someone whose actions systematically consist of breaking the law in order to uphold it, the superhero by definition creates a political state of exception as he becomes the "absolutist sovereign" (Meteling, 2010, 145) who exists in the terrain between law and politics, in a "zone of indistinction between law and nature, outside and inside, violence and law" (Agamben, 1998, 64). Overriding the law via his supernatural powers, repeatedly exiling himself from the society he aims at protecting, and

through a blurring of law and violence in vigilante action, the superhero fully inhabits this "zone of indistinction." Consequently, the superhero becomes a liminal figure who executes acts of power, but at the same time has no legislative power, creating a state of *emergency* that ultimately threatens to empty the law itself of any meaning as it becomes the state of *exception*. Despite the fact that the state of exception vitally characterizes one of the most controversial contradictions of the superhero genre, the issue has rarely been addressed in superhero scholarship.[133] I will analyze *Miracleman* and *Kingdom Come* in this section as examples of superhero comics that aim at highlighting the superhero's exceptional state, rendering visible some of the contradictory elements within this popular discourse.

Miracleman (1985)[134] is a superhero comic by Alan Moore with several collaborating artists (including Garry Leach, Alan Davis, Rick Veitch, and John Totleben) that depicts a superhero who sets out to achieve an actual utopia. Originally created for the UK market by Mick Anglo in 1954 and called "Marvelman" (later re-named *Miracleman* in the American reprints to avoid confusion with Captain Marvel), *Miracleman* was rewritten by Alan Moore in the early 1980s. In terms of American popular geopolitics, *Miracleman* is perhaps the most challenging text within the corpus due to its strong connections to the UK instead of the United States. Written by a British author for the British market, how does *Miracleman* fit in with the aims of discussing American identity and American geopolitics? As already stated in the introduction, superhero comics are approached as transnational texts, meaning that texts outside the United States will also be included in the wider discourses of popular geopolitics. Crucially, *Miracleman* explicitly addresses several issues that essentially define the superhero genre, and therefore consciously addresses the popular geopolitics of America through its critical take on the superhero mythos.

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[133] For the few examples, see Meteling, 2010; Miettinen, 2011.

[134] *Miracleman* #1-6 were originally published in black and white in a British comics anthology *Warrior* between 1982-1984. Eclipse Comics, an American comics publisher, acquired the rights to the character in 1985, and these issues were subsequently republished in the United States in color, after which the authors (Moore and several artists) began to produce all-new issues for the American audience. Moore wrote the comic until #16, after which he was replaced by Neil Gaiman. However, Eclipse folded in 1994, and the series was left unfinished, the final issue being #24 (Aug 1993). The subsequent trials over the ownership of the character (and especially the 1980s' material) have caused the comic to become a collector's item, as no reprints of the material have been published since the mid-90s.

A predecessor to the revisionist superhero trend that bloomed with *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Miracleman*, too, exhibits a more realist and darker version of his former self, as the comic creates a "shattering eruption of the fantasy of geopolitical omnipotence into a social order that regards itself as final, unsurpassable, and posthistorical" (Paik, 2010, 13). *Miracleman* begins with a middle-aged and tired Michael Moran (Miracleman's civilian self) who has forgotten that he ever was Miracleman, until he happens to utter the word "Kimota," which turns him into a superhero. Tracing his origins as a government-sponsored superhuman in the fittingly titled "Project Zarathustra," he kills his maker and reunites with his female counterpart, Miraclewoman. After his former sidekick, Kid Miracleman, goes insane and massacres over 40 000 people in London, Miracleman realizes that he has only one option left: to rule Earth as its sole sovereign. Instead of remaining the protector of the fragile status quo, Miracleman decides to take over the world and govern it as the true omnipotent sovereign. Crucially, this utopia is never shattered or shown as untenable (the way superheroic utopias usually are), but instead it is given what Paik identifies as an "ominously irrevocable character," which creates a growing unease over the actual reality of these gods amongst our midst (2010, 11).

Kingdom Come (1996) by Mark Waid (writer) and Alex Ross (artist) uses the iconic DC heroes of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman to discuss the actual consequences of proactive superheroes. Located in the near future, these classic heroes have almost all retired, leaving the Earth for the new and reckless generation of heroes to protect. However, as one of these new, young heroes causes a massive nuclear detonation that takes out all of Kansas (the geopolitical "heartland" of America), Superman decrees that the older heroes must take control of the superhuman population in order to bring "justice" to the world once more. The narrative is focalized through Norman McCay, a disillusioned minister chosen by Spectre, a mystical spirit avenger, to bear witness to the apocalyptic events about to take place. Much like *Miracleman*, which explicitly addresses the state of exception that exists at the core of the genre by breaking what Paik calls the "geopolitical taboo" of the genre by depicting the "ineluctably revolutionary dream of unconstrained expansionism and unlimited power that has been dreamt—and become magnified—within liberal democratic society" (2010, 12), *Kingdom Come*, too, realizes the unlimited power dreamt but rarely realized in the superhero genre

by portraying heroes who take over world politics. Both comics actualize the state of emergency and the sovereign rule after a geopolitical crisis (*Miracleman*'s mass murder, *Kingdom Come*'s nuclear explosion), which justifies their actions and their partial removal of civil rights. Thus, both texts serve as excellent examples of the state of exception within superhero comic realized, the superhero's exceptional nature explored to its horrifying potential.

As already mentioned, the state of exception is a concept introduced by Carl Schmitt in the first half of the 20th century. However, I will refer to the term as further developed by Giorgio Agamben in his identically titled *State of Exception* (2005), in which he discusses the concept in relation to 21st-century politics and especially post-9/11 U.S. policies. Agamben's definition offers therefore a more contemporary approach to the concept, enabling its application to the more contemporary superhero comics. The state of *exception*, basically, is the result of a prolonged state of *emergency*: the momentary suspension of civil rights or executive or legal powers which has become a dominant paradigm. A relevant and fairly recent example of a state of emergency that led to this kind of suspension of rights is the controversial USA PATRIOT Act[135] (26.10.2001), which reduced the restrictions on law enforcement agencies and intelligence gathering, expanded the state's authority to regulate finances, and authorized the "indefinite detention" of noncitizens suspected of terrorist activities. This kind of state of emergency emerges primarily from the enemy's violation of the state and it is marked by an "absolute independence from any juridical control and any reference to the normal political order" (Pease, 2007, 66). Whereas the violation that caused the USA PATRIOT Act was 9/11, both *Miracleman* and *Kingdom Come* contain similar emergencies that motivate the heroes to renounce their passive stance and actively control the world (both in this sense differing from *Superman: Red Son*, which otherwise shares many similarities with these comics). As Superman states in *Kingdom Come*:

> We have **returned** to **teach** [the new generation of heroes] the **meaning** of **truth** and **justice**. Together, we will **guide** this new breed with **wisdom**…and, if necessary, with **force**. Above **all**, we will restore **order**. We will make things **right** again. (1996, 68)

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[135] The name is an acronym of Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001. For more, see http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ56/pdf/PLAW-107publ56.pdf [Accessed Mar 22, 2012].

This statement reveals the superhero's position as the sovereign who will bring the world justice, and, crucially, is ready to do it even by force, overriding the due course of law if necessary. The initial state of emergency created by a terrorist (or a supervillain) allows the state (the superhero) to violate its own laws, which it does by claiming to protect the very rules it defies; in other words, the state/superhero declares itself exempt from the rules it protects (Pease, 2007, 75).

The state of emergency, which gives way to the state of exception, is the result of a political crisis that presents itself as the legal form of that which can have no legal form:

> [W]hat is specific for the state of emergency is not so much the confusion of powers as it is the isolation of the force of law from the law itself. The state of emergency defines a regime of the law within which the norm is valid but cannot be applied (since it has no force), and where acts that do not have the value of law acquire the force of law. (Agamben, 2003, unpaginated)

This description fits the superhero, one who has no legal position as an agent of the law, yet he acts like one. Ultimately, justice is always more important than the law, as the superhero's personal moral code, though aimed at upholding the law, cannot abide it and its slow bureaucratic forms. Furthermore, the state of emergency and the suspension of civil rights it entails radically erases any legal status the individual may have, producing a "legally unnameable and unclassifiable being" (Agamben, 2005, 3). The individual apprehended and punished by a vigilante superhero holds quite a similar position as the hero abolishes the "distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers" (Agamben, 2005, 7). Extreme examples of such comic book superheroes that take on the role of the judge, jury, and executioner could be seen in the title characters of the futuristic lawman *Judge Dredd* (1977), the antihero vigilante *The Punisher* (1974), Frank Miller's *Batman* and, of course, *Watchmen*'s Rorschach. Whereas a temporary and regulated use of full powers (of the hero) is, according to Agamben, compatible with democratic constitutions, a systematic and regular suspension of civil rights (or the actions of the superhero) ultimately leads to the "'liquidation' of democracy" (2005, 7).

One could even claim that the mere existence of the superhero, being in a constant state of exception, indeed "liquidates" democracy by transforming the democratic principles and forces redundant and pointless, as the omnipotent hero could "take over the government, defeat the army, or alter the equilibrium of planetary politics" (Eco, 1972/1986, 342). Ultimately, this is what Miracleman,

together with Miraclewoman and an alien race called the "Warpsmiths," proceed to do. Issue 16 of *Miracleman* (following the bloodbath of #15) shows the superhuman intervention as Miracleman and Miraclewoman simply inform the British government of the re-structuring of the entire world economy, while the Warpsmiths assist them with the total removal of all Earth's nuclear bombs and other nuclear facilities by teleporting them to the sun (#16; 6–7). Later, they regenerate the deserts of Africa, heal the environment from industrial pollution, eliminate poverty and hunger, and legalize drugs (#16; 10–12). Creating utopia, they wish to make all humans "perfect in a perfect world" (#16; 33). Yet, as Paik notes, the narrative contains a "growing unease" as it becomes clear that Miracleman has become a God, a divine power that signals the arrival of a new era that alters "the very fabric of social reality" (2010, 13–14). The society will never be the same again after the introduction of the "real," truly omnipotent superhero.

In a state of exception, there exists a confusion between the executive and legislative powers, as "full powers" are assigned to the executive and separated from the legislative, and the confusion between the acts of these powers is what characterizes the state of exception (Agamben, 2005, 7; 38). Indeed, as Jessica Whyte notes, this "blurring of law and life," the barrier between legislation and its actual execution, is a central characteristic in defining the state of exception, as the law is suspended while the sovereign takes on the force of the law (2008, 69). Accordingly, the superhero, with his superpowers, becomes this sovereign, uniting through his superpowered body the "authority and dignity of the state" by representing both the "doctrine of divine right" as well as the social body of the nation (Meteling, 2010, 145). With his seemingly divine superpower casting him in the role of the sovereign, the superhero creates a state of exception, and takes on the executive power of the law without the legislative power. In other words, he has no legitimacy of authority behind his actions.

In superhero comics, this usually involves the idea that conventional law enforcement organizations such as the police are not able to fulfill their task, and the vigilante hero is needed to act as the executive force of the law. Executing what they see as the force of the law, the superheroes simultaneously undermine the power of the state by removing public punishment from the sphere of governmental authorities, which are partially stripped of their power. This becomes highly relevant, for as Foucault writes in his renowned work, *Discipline and Punish* (1977),

the scaffold—the spectacle of the public punishment—is essential to the state. According to Foucault, the public punishment restores the sovereignty of the state, which the crime has momentarily injured, and it therefore has the function of restoring and reaffirming the state's power (1977, 47–50). In the context of the superhero comic, the hero's actions as executing the punishment traditionally reserved for the state remove this power from the state, and consequently undermine the power of both the state and the government officials. Executing vigilante justice, the spectacle of the public punishment is not removed, but its power is transferred to the superhero who now becomes the spectacle, the public face of punishment that in his quest to restore the state's power ends up diminishing it.[136]

Sovereign power is manifest in the state of exception that violently produces the norm that presupposes the law, the indistinction between law and violence marking sovereignty (Whyte, 2008, 79). As already discussed in chapter 4, violence is an important marker in the superhero's character, and its justifications and implications are extremely problematic. *Kingdom Come* still very pronouncedly subscribes to the heroic ethos whereby violence is the last resort and killing must be avoided at all costs: Superman opposes Wonder Woman's demand for war because "you can't have a **war** without people **dying**" (1996, 147) and later joins forces with Batman on the ground that "the deliberate taking of human -- even superhuman -- life goes against every belief we have" (1996, 151). This principle is thoroughly violated in *Miracleman*, where the titular hero very early on kills without remorse those he sees as deserving death. In a very clear allusion to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Miracleman kisses his devious maker on the lips before flinging him to his death from the air (#7; 16). Miracleman has no moral ambiguities about killing, which clearly sets him apart from the "heroic" violence discussed in the previous chapter, where the violence executed by the hero is marked by reluctance and characterized as a last resort. Miracleman goes decidedly further than his counterparts: in deciding to take over the world, he in essence becomes the state and the force of law: "Omnipotent, I can thus turn to no one. Cannot share my guilt or shame… The buck stops here." (#15; 1).

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[136] Unless, of course, the superhero literally represents the state itself (as a government-sponsored agent), in which case the question of power and authority may become even more complex: as Max Weber has observed, the "right" to use violence is ascribed to institutions and individuals "only to the extent to which the state permits it" (1991, 78). However, superhero comics like *Watchmen* problematize this, showing that "even when the state 'permits' the use of violence by superheroes, their violence hardly seems legitimate" (Spanakos, 2009, 39).

However, Agamben does point out that the suspension of the legislative power and the norm does not mean its abolition. Instead, the state of exception creates a "zone of indifference, where the inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other" (Agamben, 2005, 23). However, this "zone of indifference" does not refer to a perceived lack of interest, but it can be used to describe the subversive nature of the superhero, who exists within the society, yet he is always an outsider to it due to his dual nature of civilian and hero personas. This duality has been one of the cornerstones of superhero comics, and *Miracleman* depicts its ultimate abolition as issue 14 ends with Miracleman's human self, Michael Moran, committing a symbolic suicide. Unable to adjust to the life of "marvels" and the alienation from his wife and child, Miracleman's human self climbs a mountain, undresses and leaves a note: "Michael Joseph Moran 1942–1983 Rest in Peace." (#14; 11). He says "Kimota," and transforms into Miracleman, who immediately realizes his wish and has not uttered his transformative word since, granting Michael Moran the oblivion he desires.[137]

This destruction of the superhero's human self, however, runs its risks: in *Kingdom Come*, the superheroes are openly accused of the loss of their humanity, which has led to them erroneously believing they are "gods." Norman McCay, the story's human "witness," brings this accusation to Superman as he is about to demolish the UN building:

> Listen to me, Clark. Of all the things you can **do**…all your **powers**…the **greatest** has always been your **instinctive knowledge**…of **right**…and **wrong**. It was a **gift** of your **own humanity**. You never had to **question** your **choices**. In **any situation**…any **crisis**…you **knew** what to **do**. But the **minute** you made the **super** more important than the **man**…the day you decided to turn your **back** on **mankind**…that **completely cost** you your instinct. **That** took your **judgment** away. (1996, 193)

While Miracleman sees himself and the other superhumans in *Miracleman* as a Pantheon of Olympian gods and renounces his humanity by allowing Michael Moran to cease to exist, Superman comes to the opposite conclusion in *Kingdom Come*. As one of the UN officials says, "We saw you as **gods**," Superman replies:

> As we saw **ourselves**. And we were **both** wrong. . . . The **problems** we face still **exist**. We're not going to solve them **for** you…we're going to solve them **with** you…not by ruling **above** you…but by living **among** you. We will no longer

[137] Miracleman's transformation from human to superhuman is made possible by alien technology that takes advantage of an alternate dimension where the "second body" is stored (unconscious) when the other one is in use; the transition between bodies is activated through a key word. If Miracleman no longer utters the key word, Michael Moran will permanently remain in the alternate dimension.

> **impose** our power on humanity. We will **earn** your **trust**…using the **wisdom** one man [Captain Marvel] left as his **legacy**. I asked him to choose between **humans** and **superhumans**. But **he alone** knew that was a **false division**…and made the **only** choice that ever truly **matters**. He chose **life**…in the hope that your world and **our** world could be **one** world **again**. (1996, 194–196)

Through this "simple moral," the narrative challenges the binary between human and superhuman, in its own way answering the question "who watches the watchmen?" evoked by Moore and Gibbons's seminal work a decade earlier (Klock, 2002, 95). Contrary to Miracleman, who deemed it his responsibility to solve all mankind's problems, Superman and his cohorts ultimately opt for a third way out, one that reintegrates them back into society instead of casting them outside or setting them above it.

Transgressing the outsider status of the superhero, *Kingdom Come* resolves to integrate the superheroes into society and end the state of exception their reign has evoked. This is clearly stressed in the epilogue of *Kingdom Come* as Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman gather together in a restaurant where Superman and Wonder Woman announce their pregnancy, asking the aging Batman to be the child's godfather. Significantly, they are all in plain clothes, signaling an end to the costumed era and the state of exception their presence created. No longer separated from the legislative forces or the community, their normality suggests a new phase of heroism without the sovereign rule of the superhero. *Miracleman,* on the other hand, gives us superheroes who come to believe they are gods: whilst they begin to promote the chance for anyone to reach the status of the superhero (as the technology for it exists), they still literally demonstrate their status as outsiders by building an actual Mount Olympus in London. As Agamben (2003) writes, "to be outside and yet belong: such is the topological structure of the state of emergency," and, I shall claim, often that of the superhero. The superhero is a potential sovereign, at the same time outside and inside the juridical order through the state of exception, he is the sovereign exception that traces a threshold, a liminal juridical space that provides an entry into "those complex topological relations that make the validity of the juridical order possible" (Agamben, 1998, 15–19). It is the sovereign who has the power to decide on the state of exception, and paradoxically the superhero can become the sovereign by his mere existence alone.

So why do superheroes choose to act as heroes, make themselves public and through their superhuman abilities challenge the force of law as they become its true

applicator? Hughes claims that superheroes become superheroes "for some intrinsic responsibility," and are thus freed from ideological constraints (2006, 548), completely oblivious to the political motivations and beliefs that characterize the superhero genre. Though the "mission" aspect of the superhero is, as Coogan (2009, 77) has argued, "essential to the superhero genre" precisely due to its selfless and pro-social nature, it is not sufficient. Heroes become heroes out of perceived necessity, the need for someone to act. Ironically, both *Miracleman* and *Kingdom Come* feature mass destructions *caused by* people with superpowers, yet the heroes have no qualms about claiming these events as the reason to elevate themselves as sovereigns; after all, the state-approved authorities have clearly proved themselves incapable of handling the risks related to super-powered individuals! Failing to see themselves as a part of the problem, their judgment is essentially flawed.

Agamben has stated that necessity always entails a subjective judgment and that "the only circumstances that are necessary and objective are those that are declared so" (2005, 29–30). The superhero is always motivated by a political or a moral stand:

> The recourse to necessity entails a moral or political (or, in any cases, extrajuridical) evaluation, by which the juridical order is judged and is held to be worthy of preservation or strengthening even at the price of its possible violation. (Balladore-Pallieri, 1970: 168, qtd. in Agamben, 2005, 30)

Thus, the hero always has to make a political and/or moral choice, where he deems the current law enforcement as inadequate, the present society as worth saving, and begins to act in order to maintain it, that is, to uphold the status quo or in rare cases, to build utopia. The price to pay is, of course, the possible violation of the forces of law that need to be broken in order to uphold them in the state of exception that holds the superhero.

By reading the superhero through the conceptual framework of the state of exception, the defining paradox of the superhero is revealed to create a political ideology that is characterized by contradiction, a division between legislative and executive forces that suspends the law it aims at upholding. In the following section, I will further discuss the politics of the superhero through the concept of democracy, examining how the superhero, though repeatedly named as its primary defender, in fact severely undermines it.

The Captain America Complex: Democratic Principles Denied

> We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their CREATOR, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. ("The Declaration of Independence," 1776)

American democracy is, as Ward poignantly notes, remarkable for its dependence on a single document written mainly by one man (2002, 16). As Ward claims in his book, *The Writing of America*, America as a nation, as a community of people within a defined territory, was (and still is) very much invented, not discovered, through literature, the literal writing of "America" from Puritan sermons to hip-hop lyrics (2002, 1; 17). These writings of America (of which the superhero comic is a part) create an ongoing "rhetorical battleground," as Bercovitch points out, and they cannot be approached as "some abstract corporate monolith" that would produce a single, solid image of the nation (1993, 355). The representations of "America" contain multitudes, and many of them are surely in conflict with each other. The superhero comic stands for only a fraction of these representations, and the genre itself inhabits several conflicting views of what "America" and its ideals entail at specific moments in time. In this section, I will go further into the state of exception by focusing on the superhero's relationship to democracy, and how the superhero in fact decisively denies the very democratic principles he aims at upholding. This paradox, which is characteristic of the state of exception, has been labeled as "the Captain America complex" by Jewett and Lawrence in 2003.

In their studies of the superhero in American culture, Jewett and Lawrence see the superhero narrative as a "kind of mythic induction into the cultural values of America," and approach Captain America as one of the "popular stories of secular entertainment that gradually became the most pervasive expressions of the national complex" of American civil religion, one that embodies the so-called "Captain America complex" where nondemocratic means are employed to achieve democratic ends (2003, 5–6; 28). By labeling the phenomenon Captain America *complex*, Jewett and Lawrence stress the way Captain America embodies America's "neurotic conflicts" that developed in the 1930s and were expressed through the

repeated telling of stories where good triumphed over evil as an Everyman with superpowers saved the innocent community (2003, 28). One of these essential conflicts embodied in Captain America are WWI and especially WWII: as America had, until the 20th century, subscribed to the isolationist Monroe Doctrine, taking part in the world wars could be seen as a departure that required new geopolitical narratives to contain it. Indeed, it was not until WWII that America began to gain the "superpower" status it has subsequently adopted, and it was during the same era that the superhero comic, too, rose to popularity.

Jewett and Lawrence tie the Captain America complex strongly to the pre-WWII-era in American history by stressing the role of the nation's religious history and its pervasive power dating back to the colonial times, and they view Captain America comics as a prime example of the "civil religion" of the United States (2003, 28). This "civil religion" of the superhero comic comes to stand for a ritual expression of 20th-century patriotism that stresses a mythical "crusade against evil" arising from the zealous nationalism of America (ibid.). Within this complex, American life is seen as continuously marked by holy wars (crucially, both within the nation and outside the nation), from the Civil War to the so-called War on Terror. Essential in all of them is the way the idea of a national mission of war and peace is embedded into popular culture narratives of good and evil, which weave the ideology of the holy mission against evil into the very fabric of popular American geopolitical structure (Ibid, 5–6). Jewett and Lawrence see Captain America as an "iconic shorthand" for the repeated tendency of American popular entertainment to embody the "zealous mainstream of political sentiment" (ibid., 6). Though this view is further supported by Captain America's literal inclusion of the American flag in his costume where the "sacredness of the flag to the American civil religion" marks it as beyond discussion (Dittmer, 2007, 257), this is a very strong claim that must be approached with some caution, as Captain America tends to carry more of the American ideal rather than America itself.

To further stress the religious undertones embedded in the Captain America complex, Jewett and Lawrence note the way the complex views itself as blessed by God, which is then used to justify the use of whatever means are deemed necessary to defeat the enemy (who is portrayed as the ultimate evil). Accordingly, the complex thrives on stereotypes, and relishes absolute binary oppositions of good and evil as well as ultimate solutions. The adversary must either be killed or

converted, and due to the relentless nature of this dichotomy, violence for the noble cause is always justified, whereas violence by the enemy is always unjust and cruel (Jewett and Lawrence, 2003, 24–25). These basic principles define the crusading hero (and by analogy, the crusading society), and they are primarily expressed through (super)heroic adventures of epic proportions. Jewett and Lawrence (2003, 39) note with concern the disturbing nature of a nation that prides itself as the pinnacle of democracy whilst being simultaneously enthralled with fascist and undemocratic heroes. They conclude that contrary to what one might hope, these fantasies do not produce the catharsis required to invigorate democracy, but instead create an "interplay between entertainments and political threats" that pulls Americans away from their "democratic ideals" (ibid.).

The zealous mainstream sentiment of the American mission permeates the nation's popular cultural narratives, which becomes a part of the culturally shared memory of America through its repeated consumption. For example, as the nation's iconic shorthand, Captain America often undergoes changes and personal crises on the pages of his comic while America as a nation goes through similar bouts of doubt and questioning (Dittmer, 2007, 258). This reading of Captain America undergoing America's national crises gains further support from archival researchers Bill E. Peterson and Emily D. Gerstein, whose 2005 study on superhero comics published between 1978 and 1992 discovered that superhero comics produced during times of "high societal or economic threat" contained more "authoritarian imagery than comic books produced during times of low threat." The researchers arrive at their definition of high and low threat through an examination of statistical data on crime rates, unemployment, consumer prices and other measurable social and economic factors, noting relevant increases and decreases that mark certain periods as "high" or "low" in terms of experienced social and economic threat, which then either encourage or discourage authoritarian imagery in superhero comics. Peterson and Gerstein identified such eras as 1978–1982 (the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iran hostage crisis) and 1991–1992 (the Gulf

War, Rodney King, Hurricane Andrew) as times of high threat, whereas the era between was one of low threat (ending of the Cold war, economic recovery).[138]

Though many of the events mentioned above did not take place on American soil (nor featured in superhero comics), the perceived threat they create, together with the nation's internal problems, in the collective consciousness of America contributes directly to the geopolitical weight they attain. U.S. involvement in foreign wars has a direct impact in the formation of national identity through a sense of security that, especially in superhero comics, tends to heavily focus on the themes of good and evil (us vs. them), which makes superhero comics particularly suitable for investigating the "threat-authoritarian link" (Peterson and Gerstein, 2005, 890). Peterson and Gerstein define a precise "authoritarian imagery" of superhero comics in times of high threat, and this imagery includes such aspects as the overt depiction of conflicts between hero and villain, more aggressive villains whose actions justify a violent retribution, a display of more conservative values, and greater respect for governmental authorities, among other things (2005, 890). Consequently, their findings show that during the periods of perceived high threat, women had fewer speaking roles and were generally portrayed in more subordinate ways, and that comics written during such a period featured more aggressive themes, moralized more about negative effects of sex and drugs, and generally featured fewer anti-government storylines than comics produced during a low threat period (2005, 900). In this way, the darker and more cynical superhero comics of the mid-1980s discussed earlier in this dissertation also "fall in" with the researchers' claims, as they were published in an era of "low threat" enabling more critical representations of both the heroes and the government.

These results, despite the authors' claim that all the study proves is that "the content of commercially created products is somehow linked to social and economic threat" (2005, 901), seem to suggest a connection between the crises within American society and the increased authoritarian themes within popular culture items such as superhero comics. Furthermore, the results show how the medium is quick to respond to domestic (and to an extent, global) events, supporting Costello's

[138] While the authors have no data after this, they hypothesize that a low threat period came about in Clinton's presidency and that a new high threat period began with 9/11. (2005, 891-892). Additionally, it should be noted that the authors' perception of 1983-1990 as a period of "low" threat does not take into account the Reagan era conservatism and the backlash against women that took place in Hollywood together with the rise of violent action heroes.

claim on the way 1970s' and 1980s' political and social tensions, such as Nixon's resignation, rising unemployment, drug usage, slow inflation, the fear of exhausting fuel supplies, and visions of overgrowing the Earth's carrying capacity were reflected within the superhero comics of the era (2009, 86).

As Costello argues, all these social issues created a sense of loss, an age when the Americans "looked at the institutions of authority—government, business—and in the mirror, they saw betrayal" (2009, 166). Consequently, in a society characterized by betrayal, the hero is required to act even at the expense of legality, defending the nation "no matter what the cost" (ibid, 167), and this can result in highly authoritarian depictions of superhero violence. A new era of high threat becomes visible in the period following 9/11, as America adopted the rhetoric and rigor of ridding the world of evil and favored the pre-emptive strike while avoiding international accountability. As Pease states, President Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric deliberately evoked national myths such as the homeland and the Virgin Land, and converted national metaphors into historical facts by using the dominant fictions of the nation to authorize the state's actions (2007, 61–62). Indeed, Rowe argues that events like the U.S. military actions in Iraq could not have been even possible had it not been for the cultural legacy of America that conceived America as "a discrete nation that nonetheless has a global identity and mission" (2007, 38–39).[139]

As the discussion of the state of exception in the previous section demonstrates, the superhero forms a paradoxical equation when facing the demands of democracy: though promoted as the prime defender of (U.S.) democracy, the superhero's actions in fact repeatedly undermine the very democratic ethos they aim at protecting. Though "democracy" technically is a form of government (and not a "virtue"), in superhero comics the idea is often simplified and explicitly associated with such lofty virtues as "liberty" and "freedom." Thus, it is no coincidence that Wonder Woman is sent to "America, the last citadel of *democracy*" (emphasis mine) or that Superman comes to stand for "Truth, Justice, and the *American way*." These heroes are deployed to narrate a particular nation, to borrow Bhabha's famous

[139] However, it should be noted that this "global mission" of America as a defender of the world was not self-evident; the famous Monroe Doctrine from 1823 stated a clear policy of U.S. isolationism where the United States stated its refusal to interfere with events outside its borders (Brogan, 1999, 255-256). While the doctrine became less influential during the 20th century, its effects in American geopolitics can still be located in the anti-imperialistic rhetoric of the United States.

expression from *Nation and Narration* (1990), and they come to define American virtues through their narratives as defenders of "democracy," and in the process define anyone against America as one against democracy and freedom.

Indeed, the geopolitical identities arising from superhero comics are largely based on what America is *not*, the external enemy depicted as the "opposite of the pragmatic, free democracy that [is] the virtue of the United States" (Costello, 2009, 59). Deriving from the monomythical heroic construction of America, the superhero becomes a myth, a metaphor of American virtues, and these kinds of myths "take place in the gap between . . . a culture's perception of contingent historical events" (Pease, 2007, 61) and reality, and assimilate them into the nation's collective memory. The popular geopolitics of American democracy in superhero comics receives its most recognizable form in the way the stories narrate anti-Americanism as synonymous with anti-democracy and anti-freedom, and consequently create abstract boundaries for national identities where anyone not for America is automatically against it.

Yet, the superhero's role as the defender of American democracy is sharply contrasted by the Captain America complex and its stress on the hero's undemocratic means. The Captain America complex implicates a rupture, a dissonance between the ideal vision of American democracy and what the popular geopolitical narratives of the nation represent as acceptable and even righteous. Recognizing this essential paradox is not a given in superhero scholarship, where the superhero is usually approached as embodying the values of a society and maintaining them and his narrative as offering "an avenue through which one can access the core values of a society, the ideals that give that society an identity, and the 'other' that society fears" (Costello, 2009, 15). In this creed, Superman would truly stand for the "Truth, Justice, and American Way" of his emblem and offer Americans an ideal to aspire to and to identify with. However, in the context of the Captain America complex, this would imply that the "core values" of American society, however vague a term it is, are a similar paradox and that this paradox can be "rendered visible" either through literary texts seeking to directly expose them, or through a "symptomal reading" that aims at revealing this paradox beneath a seemingly hegemonic text.

However, rendering this paradox visible does not mean it is in any way robbed of its persuasive power; as Pease notes, national fantasies often hold such

power that even when exposed as "unreal" or otherwise flawed, they are still embraced over other forms of reality because of their favored status as dominant master narratives (2007, 63–64). In addition, when analyzing such popular genre fiction as superhero comics, one must bear in mind that "all genre fictions rest on conventions that must simply be accepted by their audiences if they are to be enjoyed" (Saunders, 2011, 27). Though the reader can be aware of these conventions and actively read against them, reading a hegemonic text as counterhegemonic ("against the grain," so to speak) does not automatically signal either its acceptance or any other reaction or change within the dominant ideology.[140] Furthermore, as already mentioned, even when writing with the aim of exposing the vigilante ideal for what it is, the author may have to come to terms with the audience hailing the character as a hero (as happened with Rorschach in *Watchmen*).

One of the first comics to openly question the superhero's status as a defender of democracy, *Watchmen* already posited the question "who watches the watchmen?" (borrowed from Juvenal's *Satires*, VI, 347: "Quis custodet ipsos custodies?") in order to draw attention to the "democratic aversion" of the superhero comic (Dittmer, 2007, 254). Quoted also as the epigraph of the Tower Commission Report from 1987 (which dealt with the Iran–Contra affair), the linkage to actual political accountability of those in power is made explicit, as the comic clearly comments on the actual politics of 1980s' America. Zinn rather bluntly states that the Iran–Contra affair was "one of many instances in which the government of the United States violated its own laws in pursuit of some desired goal in foreign policy" (2003, 588). While undoubtedly the situation was more complex than Zinn lets us believe, it does lend some support to the notion that as the popular geopolitical narratives of the nation repeatedly promote and celebrate this kind of "breaking of rules" through their vigilante heroes in movies, comics, and other popular formats, the unaccountability linked to these kinds of real-life actions (no official involved in the Iran–Contra affair spent a single day imprisoned, for

[140] A similar argument can be found in Murray, who claims that recognizing the fact that "propaganda and popular culture did not communicate the truth did not necessarily mean that the audience knew what the truth was"; instead, Murray notes how, for example, Americans were quite willing to embrace the fictionalized version of the war offered by the superhero comic during WWII (2011, 79).

example [Zinn, 2003, 587]) may become more acceptable in the mind of the general public.

As Jewett and Lawrence argue, American popular culture is made of essentially contradictory strands of "thoroughly fascist notions":

> [T]hat super power held in the hands of one person can achieve more justice than the workings of democratic institutions; that democratic systems of law and order, of constitutional restraint, are fatally flawed when confronted with genuine evil; that the community will never suffer from the depredations of such a super leader, whose servanthood is allegedly selfless; that the world as a whole requires the services of American superheroism that destroys evildoers through selfless crusades. (2003, 42–43)

Following the definition above, the superhero is, indeed, a fascist in disguise, who ultimately betrays a paradoxical image of American popular geopolitics. This description of the superhero (or, in broad allegory, American policy), is in striking contrast with the democratic premises of equality and freedom the Declaration of Independence stated over two centuries ago. The superhero principle states that power possessed by a single entity is more justifiable than following democratic principles; that evil cannot be dealt with by the systems provided by those democratic principles and that the world requires, needs, the superhero/America to defend itself—and that the government is not to be trusted whereas vigilantes are. As Dittmer, tongue-in-cheek, asks:

> Is there anything less democratic than a group of super-men acting as vigilantes, enforcing morality as they see it and existing separate from the political system through which morality becomes encoded as law? (2007, 254)

However, instead of simply reasserting that heroes act against their own principles, the question may ultimately not be about who watches the watchmen, but who has the "*ability* to watch the Watchmen" (Spanakos, 2009, 45, emphasis in the original). Whereas some superhero comics, such as *Watchmen*, explicitly discuss this paradox, a wide portion of superhero comics do not draw attention to it.

However, during a new era of crisis after 9/11, the superhero comic had to face its own paradoxes as it came closer to reality than perhaps ever before. In Marvel's epic crossover series, *Civil War* (2007), the demands of freedom and security finally clashed in the characters of Iron Man and Captain America. In the next subchapter, I will focus on *Civil War* and its political and geopolitical dimensions as it depicts a clear allegory of a post-9/11 America and the rhetoric of freedom and security that permeated the popular geopolitics of America.

5.2 Freedom and Security: Marvel's *Civil War*

> While I love my country, I don't trust many politicians. Not when they're having their strings pulled by corporate donors. And not when they're willing to trade freedom for security.
> (*Captain America,* #22, Nov 2006, 14)

The superhero comic cannot be nonpolitical, despite claims to the opposite as recent as 2006, when Jamie A. Hughes argued that "by placing [superheroes] on pedestals as champions of justice and perfection, their creators also positioned them outside of the realm of ideology" (546). By existing outside ideology, the superhero would also be exempt from political relevance or referentiality. As the discussion in the previous chapters has shown, this claim completely ignores the obvious political significance of the superhero, who by definition is tied to the issues of nationalism, identity, and power, all in the realm of ideology, which in itself cannot be nonpolitical. As for example Murray proposes, one reason behind the superheroes' strong linkages to cultural and political discourses and the issues of legitimacy and power is to be found precisely in the relationship between ideology and myth within the popular superhero narrative (2000, 145). Indeed, despite the escapist overtones of the superhero narrative, it cannot escape its political referentiality, whether intentional or otherwise (Meteling, 2010, 146):

> [Superhero comics] transport some political meaning because they not only literally show politics as a form of struggle by different parties (e.g. showing superheroes fighting supervillains, each other and also ordinary criminals), but, they show different political systems and different aesthetical grasps of reality at work: absolutist or mythological systems, represented by the superhero, and a modern realistic society, represented by the urban setting and particularly by its crime rate. (Meteling, 2010, 146–147)

The political nature of the superhero comic is undeniable, and the popular geopolitics of the superhero act to narrate the nation by addressing a particular national identity both through the representation of heroes and villains as well as geographical location.

A particularly controversial example, both in terms of superhero politics and actual geopolitics, is the massive Marvel crossover "comics event" *Civil War*. While the core narrative by Mark Millar (writer) and Steve McNiven (artist) of the same title consists of seven issues published between 2006 and 2007 (and subsequently collected in a TPB in 2007, which I will be using), the storyline was continued,

explored, and otherwise present in over a hundred Marvel publications somehow connected to the *Civil War* series (giving it the over-arching title "comics event").[141] In this subchapter, I will mainly analyze the core issues with occasional materials from other essential crossover issues with a special emphasis on the three characters at the center of the *Civil War* narrative: Spider-Man, Iron Man, and Captain America. The *Civil War* storyline positions old Avengers allies Captain America and Iron Man on opposing sides after a battle between superheroes and supervillains results in a massive nuclear explosion in a residential area. This event leads to the swift passing of a controversial "Superhero Registration Act" which aims at regulating the actions of superheroes and, essentially, transforming them into superpowered government agents. The act divides the Marvel heroes into two camps, with Iron Man encouraging the registration and Captain America furiously against it, and Spider-Man struggling in the middle as he moves from one side to another, trying to decide whether to follow the law or his inner conviction of what is "right." Read by many critics as a rather obvious allegory to the USA PATRIOT Act and the War on Terror (cf. Swafford, 2008; Costello, 2009), the comic offers a case of explicit superhero politics with strong geopolitical overtones.

The desire for a Superhero Registration Act after a nationwide crisis caused by incompetent superheroes is shown as coming largely from the civilian public that seems to finally be realizing that the heroes their culture has praised for decades are in fact unsupervised vigilantes answerable to no-one. However, unlike *Watchmen* and its "Keene Act" two decades earlier, *Civil War* is not preaching a ban on superheroes (which would perhaps not be as big a deal as superheroism is by definition illegal vigilantism), but demanding that all superheroes become government-supervised and controlled or face imprisonment. Iron Man advocates for the public accountability of the heroes, and the Registration divides the superhero community in two:

> *The Falcon*: "I can't believe I'm **hearing** this. The masks are a **tradition**. We can't just let them turn us into **super-cops**."
> *Yellowjacket*: "Are you kidding? We're lucky people have tolerated this for as long as they have, Sam. Why **should** we be allowed to hide behind these things?" (2007 19)

[141] Importantly, a substantial amount of these connecting works in the "event" were written and illustrated by authors other than Millar and McNiven, which may account for some of the shifts in tone (and possible inconsistencies) between different issues within the event.

The Falcon's argument is echoed a few pages later as Captain America justifies his rebellious stand by stating how "[m]asked heroes have been a part of this country for as long as anyone can remember" (2007, 24). Firmly establishing the superhero's brand of vigilante justice as an explicitly American tradition, Captain America's stand holds on to the "traditional vision of the hero as above politics, operating under a self-directed moral code," which is in direct conflict with the notion of the superhero as a government agent (Costello, 2009, 235).

This conflict between the superhero and the government has been long in the making. Indeed, DuBose identifies the 1980s as the definite era when superheroes truly began to sever their ties with the government officials, claiming through their actions that "true heroship did not occur without defining oneself as an entity separate from the powers that be and transcending traditional notions of law, order, and justice" (2007, 916). This clearly relates to what Costello (2009, 166) saw as the "betrayal" experienced by the American nation after such scandals as Watergate and Nixon's resignation, the Vietnam War, and the rising economic and social threats already mentioned in chapter 2. An obvious early example of this separation is *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, where Batman's independent morality makes him a "political liability," while Superman, who has allowed his morality to be dictated by the state, is seen as nothing more than a "joke" (1986, 194). In a similar vein, Captain America found himself before a committee of government officials demanding him to work only on U.S. government assignments or turn in his uniform in the mid-1980s (#332, Aug 1987). Realizing that submitting to the role of a "glorified agent of America's official policies" meant compromising his position as a hero, Captain America resigned his hero identity (only to resume it a few issues later as his replacement is revealed to be less than heroic) (#332, 13).[142] As DuBose claims, the central issue here is the recognition that one of the essential characteristics of a "true hero" is the way he transcends both politics and

[142] To further stress the incompatibility of superheroes and governmental politics, in *Captain America* #250 (Oct 1980) Captain America was asked to run for president in the 1980s by the "Populist Party." He ultimately declined, claiming that he could not serve the nation as President due to the demands of diplomacy. As Costello notes, the comic highlights "the contrast between the American dream and American reality posed by Captain America [and] suggests that there is something fundamentally wrong with the reality of the American system" (Costello, 2009, 137). A few months later, a separate *What if?* issue (#26, Apr 1981) with the story "What if Captain America Were Elected President?" extrapolated with the idea of Captain America as president. The narrative ends with Captain America's death, further signaling the impossibility of joining the dream with the reality.

authority—and that subjecting the hero to governmental authority will not only compromise his ideals, but ultimately "force him to become a police vigilante figure instead of a hero" (2007, 931). "Politics" in this instance refers to actual party politics, and the superhero's moral stand does not allow him to take part in in them anyway. However, this does not mean that he would somehow transcend ideology, too.

Two decades later, *Civil War* once more addresses these issues as it problematizes the superhero's position in relation to the government. Dividing the superhero community in half, the Act means superhuman war, as both sides appear irrevocably sure of their mission's righteousness. As Iron Man explains the situation to a confused Spider-Man in *Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man*:

> *Iron Man*: "Everybody -- **everybody** -- in a mask is going to have to take it off, reveal himself, and register with the government."
> *Spider-Man*: "Good guys **and** bad guys?"
> *Iron Man*: "You still don' get it, Peter -- Right now, in the eyes of the people and the government, for as long as we remain anonymous -- we're **all** bad guys." (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* #532, 9)

As far as the government is concerned, all masked vigilantes are bad guys unless they follow the new Registration. This also very much echoes S.H.I.E.L.D. Commander Hill's remark quoted already in 2.2: "I thought super-villains were guys in masks who refused to obey the law" (2007, 23). Indeed, in a world inhabited by supervillains, the government is not out to illegalize all superheroic activity. DuBose claims that the issue is not that the government condemns vigilantism because the government is somehow conservative, but the issue is more a matter of control (2007, 921). Ultimately, the government can never fully endorse vigilantism, because it would deem it unable to protect the nation; yet, by posing the hero and the government in conflict, the hero's attachment to American virtues has the risk of weakening the government's moral standing as the superhero by definition has "a more certain sense of justice than legal authorities who are limited by bureaucratic procedures, legalities, or politics" (Costello, 2009, 65; 75). In other words, the government must control the superhero, yet by posing itself as opposed to the superhero, the government runs the risk of becoming the "bad guy."

Unsurprisingly, Captain America's primary objection to the Registration stems from his deep distrust with politicians and the entire U.S. government he has expressed since the late 1970s:

> Governments change, administrations come and go. I had to become **Nomad** and later **the Captain** when certain politicians decided they didn't like the way I operated. The Registration Act takes away any freedom we have, any **autonomy**. You don't know who could get elected, how public sentiment might change. (*Casualties of War* #1, 12)

Citing his personal conflicts with elected U.S. officials as an example, Captain America's stand towards the government is one of suspicion, while he simultaneously asserts the strongly American virtue of "freedom" as above any other moral or ethical concerns.[143] Freedom has been pronounced as an American virtue since the Declaration of Independence, and its role as a key rhetorical element (along with such vague notions as "progress" and "providence," Costello, 2009, 3) in the geopolitical discourses of America cannot be overlooked. Freedom has gained relevance as a near-synonym to America, exemplified by such instances as President Bush's address to the nation after 9/11 in which he referred to the terrorists as "enemies of *freedom*" (emphasis mine) as opposed to enemies of America and suggested that Americans were attacked because "[t]hey hate [American] freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."[144] The doctrine of "freedom" is so inscribed into the overlapping discourses of American geopolitics and American culture that it becomes the symbol of America itself, and this rhetoric is powerfully evoked in *Civil War* when Captain America fiercely identifies himself as a defender of this mythical freedom, accusing Iron Man of selling out:

> **We** maintained the principles we swore to defend and protect. You **sold** your principles. You **lost** this before we started. . . . I know what **freedom** is. I know what it feels like to **fight** for it and I know what it **costs** to have it. You know **compromise**. (*Civil War: The Confession*, #1, 20–21)

Iron Man has no response to give, finding himself opposed to the rhetoric of the individualist American hero where his desire for regulation and control is contrasted with the American "core value" of liberty that marks him as evil for wanting to trample the American virtue of individual freedom (Costello, 2009, 66–67).

Captain America and Iron Man, former Avengers allies, are positioned on the opposing sides of the "civil war" among the superheroes. In a special one-off issue *Civil War: Casualties of War* (Feb 2007), Iron Man and Captain America meet

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[143] A very similar view is expressed by the hero Hawkeye in *Avengers: Disassembled*: "We aren't politicians, we're superheroes. We're the guys people can count on because they know they can't really count on anyone else!" (*Avengers: Disassembled*, #502, 4).

[144] Cited from *The Washington Post,* 20 Sep, 2001.

at the ruins of the Avengers Mansion (an apt location considering that heroism itself is being questioned in the *Civil War* event) to discuss the Registration Act. Ultimately, the two heroes are unable to reach a solution, as Captain America accuses Iron Man of putting his own desires before those of the community: "You can be the nicest guy in the world, Tony…the bravest hero, the staunchest ally…but at the end of the day, what **you** want trumps everything else." (*Casualties of War*, #1, 22). This accusation reveals one of several contradictions within the American superhero myth, and through it, American popular geopolitics: the hero, though an individual above and beyond politics and governed only by his own moral code, should still act in the best interest of others, not himself. Captain America appears to arise as *Civil War*'s "true" hero because of his uncompromising stand towards the issues he fights for: "What's right is right. If you believe it, you stand up for it." (*Casualties of War*, #1, 24).

In *Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man*, Captain America reassures Spider-Man that his decision to abandon Iron Man's cause is just by giving him the following speech:

> This nation was founded on one principle above all else: the requirement that we stand up for what we believe, no matter what the odds or the consequences. When the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth, and tell the whole world -- "No, you move." (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* #537, 14)

Accompanied by a splash page image of Captain America, looking down on Spider-Man with a menacing grimace, the overall effect becomes one of defining "America" and virtues of the nation, both visually and textually. In his uncompromising and unrelenting attitude, Captain America comes to represent the "characteristic American gesture in the face of adversity" (Slotkin, 1973, 267): he never flees, never surrenders, but instead he digs in his heels and fights even harder (*Casualties of War*, #1, 24). According to Swafford, this determination to "stand firm in one's own beliefs" even when they are contrary to the society's beliefs tells the reader that "dissent is vital" (2008, 642). Though this may sound as going against the idea of the superhero as the maintainer of the status quo, it actually is more related to the idea that the values the hero stands for are depicted as "so timeless and objectively real that they transcend the very political economic organization of society," his moral code transcending those of laws and politics (Costello, 2009, 15). Thus, when confronted with politics, the hero is often marked

as a dissenter due to his timeless American morals that mark him as a "true" American hero against the corrupt and inefficient governmental authorities. This perceived moral "superiority" of the superhero makes it all the more jarring when Captain America ultimately declares his surrender at the climax of *Civil War*.

According to Costello, Iron Man's main argument for regulating and training superheroes in *Civil War* implies "a vision of moral certainty for the established authorities" that confronts the rhetoric of individualism Marvel's Cold War era comics possessed (2009, 235). When the pro-registration heroes take down a doombot (an evil robot sent by Dr. Doom), Iron Man claims that their heroic status will remain despite the Registration:

> *Iron Man*: "Hear that? That's the sound of people starting to believe in **super heroes** again."
> *She-Hulk*: "Will we still technically **be** super heroes after all this, Tony? Won't we just be **S.H.I.E.L.D. agents** when we're all on the federal payroll?"
> *Iron Man*: "No, we're **super heroes**, Jennifer. We **tackle** super-crime and we **save** people's lives. The only thing changing is that **the kids**, **the amateurs**, and **the sociopaths** are getting **weeded out**." (2007, 39)

However, Iron Man (as Tony Stark) is later shown as expressing doubts as he says: "Please let us be doing the right thing here…" (2007, 43), revealing that the "moral certainty" expressed by the Registration Act may not be as certain as it appears. After all, the Registration Act not only essentially reduces the heroes to "super-cops" as the Falcon fears, but even more so, it threatens to remove "the internal direction that once defined their heroism" (Costello, 2009, 236). Indeed, as Costello continues, the very need to implement a Superhero Registration Act suggests that heroes cannot be trusted and that anyone asserting a "higher moral duty" is deemed suspicious (ibid., 238). In other words, it erases the mission-aspect of superheroism deemed most essential in Coogan's definition of the superhero (see chapter 2.1) as they no longer act based on an inner moral code, and even if they did, that code is no longer to be trusted.

Another of Coogan's essential characteristics is also jeopardized through *Civil War*: the secret identity. While the reader has always shared the knowledge of the civilian identities of the heroes, and some have already made themselves public, such as the Fantastic Four or Captain America, for the majority of Marvel heroes the secret identity is still a valid trope to be held on to. The Superhero Registration Act requires all heroes to identify themselves to the government and to reveal their carefully hidden civilian identities. Iron Man even convinces Spider-Man, one of

Marvel's most fiercely private heroes, to reveal his civilian identity on live TV. By unmasking Spider-Man, the comic raises the issue of everyday heroes, with Aunt May encouraging Peter to reveal his identity to the world:

> Every day, prosecutors and judges and governors and senators go to work, knowing their loved ones may be jeopardized by their work. But **they** don't wear masks to work. Do you know **why**? -- Because their loved ones want it that way. Because they would rather die than see the face they love, the face that gives so much to the world, covered in shame. (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* #532, 15–16)

Aunt May's speech evokes the popular post-9/11 rhetoric of real-life heroes, mostly applied to the policemen, firemen, and other ordinary people who became heroes that day. However, all the officials mentioned by Aunt May are government-regulated officials, and to be counted as one of them, Peter must comply with the Registration Act and, as a consequence, begin hunting down his former friends who still oppose the law.

"The law" arises as a definer of right and wrong, especially in *Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man*. The superhero genre has systematically reproduced the geopolitical narrative where, as Spanakos points out, the freedom and liberty of the people are "more likely to be protected by heroes, who are above and beyond the state, than by the bureaucrats who comprise it" (2009, 37). The legitimacy of authority—who has the right to enforce the law—is questioned, but additionally, the validity of the law itself is repeatedly doubted:

> *Mr. Fantastic*: "The law is the law, Peter. I support it because I honestly believe we have to support it, no matter what."
> *Spider-Man*: "And if the law is wrong?"
> *Mr. Fantastic*: "Then eventually it'll be changed, in an orderly, lawful way. We can't just obey the laws we **like**, or --"
> (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* #535, 16)

As Spider-Man and Mr. Fantastic (of the Fantastic Four) discuss the law and moral validity, neither of them realizes the actual suspension of the law in total their actions as superheroes entail. Mr. Fantastic has been working together with Iron Man in creating a new super-prison for the rebellious superheroes whose civil rights have been suspended due to their refusal to obey the new laws.

The comic, focalized through Spider-Man, stresses his view as the "right" one, depicting Mr. Fantastic dramatically left in the dark, unable to answer as Spider-Man condemns his actions. Later, Spider-Man agonizes over the moral dilemma of right and wrong:

> [T]he laws of the country decide who's right. Even the laws we don't like. Even the ones that suck. Cap thinks in terms of right and wrong, but this isn't a matter of right and wrong, moral or immoral. It's legal vs. illegal. At least, that's what I tell myself in the middle of the night, when I wonder what the hell I'm doing here. I'm legal. I'm registered. I'm authorized. And as I feel this whole situation starting to unravel around me -- I just hope to God that I'm also right. (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* #534, 23)

Despite being "legal," Spider-Man is not comfortable with battling his friends, realizing that by becoming a government agent, he is giving up his own, personal moral codes and beliefs. At the "heart of the issue," as Swafford puts it, is that while the law is clear, the morality-side remains unclear (2008, 638). Later, as Captain America announces this personal moral conviction as the "one principle" above all others that makes America great, Spider-Man has no choice but to denounce the Registration and resume his position as an outlaw vigilante once more. The personal moral code of the superhero, his personal sense of right and wrong, overrides the public moral code of the law.

Thus, at the end of issue 536, Spider-Man makes a public announcement where he condemns the Registration Act in the highly polarized terms of freedom and security:

> We all want to be safe. We all want to go to bed at night and have a good chance of waking up without somebody in a costume blowing up the building. But there's a point where the end doesn't justify the means, if the means require us to give up not just identities, but who and what we are as a country. The question isn't what does a country stand for when things are easy. The question is -- what does a country stand for when standing is the **hardest**? When does the country we're **living** in stop being the country we were **born** in? Some people say the most important thing in the world is that we should be safe. But I was brought up to believe that some things are **worth** dying for. If the cost of silence is the soul of the country…if the cost of tacit support is that we lose the very things that make this nation the greatest in human history -- then the price is too high.
> (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* #536, 22)

Here, Spider-Man advocates what could be called a Kantian ethic where "every action should position beings as an end to themselves, not as a means to an end" (Swafford, 2008, 639). As Spider-Man states, "the end doesn't justify the means, if the means require us to give up not just identities, but who and what we are as a country," effectively accusing the government of using superhumans for their own ends and justifying Captain America's cause as morally righteous. Focalized through Spider-Man, the narrative persuasively argues for the reader, too, to side with Captain America as Spider-Man gradually realizes where he should stand. This, according to Swafford, further resonates with the American nation in the

aftermath of 9/11, as the people first supported the new legislations, yet they later became disillusioned and bitter after realizing the true consequences of such legislation as the USA PATRIOT Act (2008, 633). According to Pease, one such moment of disillusion came with the series of photographs showing American soldiers displaying "an orgy of penal violence" at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2004, which resulted in an opposition to the war and the state's violations of civil rights (2007, 76–77).

At times, the noted allegorical levels of *Civil War* become so painstakingly obvious they border on becoming a burden, as the allegory is repeatedly hammered home. One such instance is the mysterious "Plan 42," which is revealed in *Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* to be a superhuman detention center built in the alternate dimension known as the Negative Zone. While Iron Man claims that the prisoners are made "comfortable" during their stay by providing virtual realities to those who cannot use it as a weapon, the reality is brutally depicted in the panel as a prisoner is tied to a chair with a visor over her head, while the next panel shows what she is supposed to be seeing—a lovely tropical scenery—yet her small speech balloons contain the words "Help me…please…help me…" that indicate her being far from "comfortable" (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man*, #535, 9). As Spider-Man questions Iron Man about the ethical aspects of building a prison in the Negative Zone, it comes clear that none of the prisoners have received a trial, their civil rights effectively removed through their detainment:

> *Iron Man*: "But we have no choice. We have to follow the law --"
> *Spider-Man*: "Following the **law** means these people get a **trial** before you send them away **to be imprisoned for the rest of their lives**! You can't just lock people away --"
> *Iron Man*: "Yes, we can. And we have. And that's the end of it."
> . . .
> *Iron Man*: "This is outside the jurisdiction of local and federal courts. This is an Act of Congress, signed by the President. Only the Supreme Court can intervene, and I happen to know they won't. This place [the Negative Zone] is not on American soil. American laws don't touch here, American lawyers don't come here. Once non-**registrants** come here, they're legal **nonentities**. Occupants. Prisoners."
> (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* #535, 11–12)

Spider-Man recognizes the state of exception created by the Registration Act which allows the infamous "indefinite detention" authorized by the USA PATRIOT Act, where the individual's civil rights could be removed in the name of national security.

By stressing that the prison is on non-American soil and by referring to the prisoners as "legal nonentities," Iron Man's rhetoric echoes the one related to the U.S. detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay. Both Guantanamo Bay and the Negative Zone prison utilize "extraordinary rendition to move prisoners beyond U.S. jurisdiction" (Swafford, 2008, 636), and as Amy Kaplan writes, Guantanamo Bay has gained the image of a "lawless zone" through its various descriptions as a sort of legal "black hole," a location close to the United States in terms of geography but miles away politically (2009, 445). According to Leti Volpp, over 1200 "noncitizens" were "swept up into detention" during the subsequent months after 9/11 under the new USA PATRIOT Act, the vast majority detained based on their racial, religious, or ethnic identity and with no information on either the length of the detainment or the charges against them (2009, 78). In January, 2002, the first prisoners were transferred to Guantanamo Bay, a location Kaplan analyzes as "an ambiguous space both inside and outside different legal systems" due to its unique geographical location and imperial history (2009, 446). Ultimately, Kaplan argues that this blurring of legal boundaries does not weaken executive authority, but instead creates an ever-widening gap between U.S. administration and its citizens (and non-citizens) (ibid., 454); in this sense, Guantanamo Bay comes to stand for the state of emergency and its further implications.

As Pease defines it, the state of emergency inhabits a "realm quite literally beyond good and evil" because it is exempt from the rules of law it enforces (2007, 75); one could argue that the Negative Zone (much like Guantanamo Bay), a physically distinct dimension outside America, is a literal "state of exception," concretely beyond any legal or moral attributes. Both Guantanamo Bay and the Negative Zone exist outside U.S. jurisdiction, and both are categorizable in terms of "foreign territory" due to their "unincorporated territorial possession" that exempts them from the juridical reach of any nation (Pease, 2007, 74). An obvious geopolitical construction, this "negative" space is imagined as distinctively non-American, visually resembling a sort of steam-punk-influenced dystopian vision of a decayed space-age future (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man,* #535, 6–7). The Negative Zone is a geopolitical non-space where moral or legal attributes no longer hold as the inhabitants of the prison become, as Iron Man bluntly states, "legal nonentities," turning into the "legally unnameable and unclassifiable being[s]" identified by Agamben (2005, 3). The extraordinary rendition of the rebel

superheroes, the illegal transportation across national (and dimensional) borders into the Negative Zone becomes an obvious allegory to the War on Terror and its geopolitical dimensions.

The Negative Zone is not the only geopolitical space made explicitly visible in *Civil War*. In terms of geography and geopolitics, *Civil War* creates several distinctive spaces of "America" that ground it to what could be broadly called the contemporary cultural atmosphere of the United States.[145] For example, the comic opens with a group of minor superheroes filming a reality TV show in a residential suburb in Stamford, Connecticut. The wooden fences, the houses, and the yellow school bus all visually locate the scene as distinctively American, the unmistakable school with hundreds of playing children further enhancing the tragedy as the battle goes awry and results in a massive nuclear explosion (2007, 6). Referred to by Iron Man as "an 'it' of national magnitude" (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man,* #532, 4) that compares with 9/11, the geopolitical significance and similarity of these two events is clearly articulated. The town, Stamford, becomes a representative Ground Zero as the heroes deal with the aftermath in the ruins, desperately looking for survivors. This scene is crucial, for it clearly echoes 9/11 and the way the "psychic impact of an attack on American soil shattered the sense of security held by many American . . . individuals" (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 491). The two-page spread containing the comic's title shows Iron Man and Captain America among the ruins with a burnt and torn American flag at Captain America's feet, further stressing the American setting of the comic. By referring to the event as similar to 9/11, the comic declares all superheroes as potential "weapons of mass destruction" (Johnson, 2011), showing how a single destructive act can give rise to "a public demand for governmental action" (Swafford, 2008, 635). The allegorical relationship between Stamford and 9/11 is further underlined by deploying imagery of superheroes working together with firemen and other rescue workers, a visual trope that was heavily used in the superhero comics immediately following 9/11 (see ch. 6).

[145] In a rather unusual article, Martin de la Iglesia (2010) has studied the "art geography" of *Civil War*, aiming to discover if the authors' geographical backgrounds were visible in the narrative. Interestingly, de la Iglesia notes that while the comic's American settings tend to be recognizably American, the non-American locations (Wakanda, Atlantis, the North Pole, the Negative Zone, and even Canada) show almost no signs to real-world geography (2010, 7). In contrast to this, the comic repeatedly stresses its American setting by placing a number of national symbols into the comic, most notably the U.S. flag, which is featured on numerous accounts, either burned and torn, or in flight behind characters in iconic settings (de la Iglesia, 2010, 8-9).

Indeed, as de la Iglesia (2010, 10) points out, the iconographically well-known images of the 9/11 attacks are clearly exploited in *Civil War*, not just on the pages depicting the aftermath of Stamford where superheroes and rescue workers work together (despite the fact that these heroes have just been labeled as potential WMDs). The connection is evoked again in the climactic battle between Captain America and Iron Man in the final pages of the comic, as their fighting is interrupted by ordinary bystanders just as Captain America is about to strike Iron Man down for good:

> *Man 1*: "**Get the hell away from him**!"
> *Woman*: "**Hold him down! Hold him down**!"
> *Captain America*: "Let me **go**! Please, I don't want to **hurt** you…"
> *Man 1*: "Don't want to **hurt** us? Are you trying to be **funny**?"
> *Man 2*: "It's a little late for that, man!"
> (2007, 178)

Some of these bystanders wear recognizable uniforms, further stressing the "real" heroism of the ordinary rescue worker. As among these men and women who stop Captain America are a black man and an Asian man, the image stresses not only the connection to 9/11, but also the image of the United States as a multicultural nation (de la Iglesia, 2010, 10). It is the intervention by these ordinary men and women, the ones the heroes claim to be protecting, that causes Captain America to see the destruction their battle has caused. Seeing the flames, the buildings in ruins, and the casualties of the heroes' civil war, Captain America experiences an epiphany:

> *Captain America*: "They're **right**. We're not fighting for **the people** anymore, Falcon… **Look** at us. We're just **fighting**."
> *The Human Torch*: "Cap, what are you **doing**? They'll throw us in **jail** if you surrender."
> *Spider-Man*: "We were **beating** them, man. We were **winning** back there."
> *Captain America*: "Everything except **the argument**."
> (2007, 180)

Though Captain America and his band of anti-Registration heroes were winning the battle, he comes to challenge the implicit notion of superhero comics that physical power always equals "moral validity" (Dittmer, 2007, 261).

The battles of the superheroes carry a geopolitical weight where the validity of the hero's views is usually enforced by the use of violence (or the threat of it). Spider-Man's monologue in the last issue of *Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* captures this idea in the following sentence:

> Whether a law is right or wrong, moral or immoral, is an idea, a personal philosophy…but it always seems that fights over **IDEAS** skip over the barrier into the real world and become battles of real violence. (*Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man* #538, 5)

The final battle over conflicting views becomes a battle of "real violence," and the geopolitical implication seems to be that the one whose moral stand is superior is the one who will remain the victor. However, by recognizing the reality of the situation, Captain America transcends the superhero rationale of the most powerful. This side of Captain America has been emerging since the 1980s, the era when DuBose claims Captain America first recognized "his opinions *as* opinions, morality as being largely relative, and that being a dissenter does not itself make someone anti-American" (2007, 928):

> What is evil—and un-American—about Captain America's adversaries in the eighties is not necessarily their morals but their desire to inflict their morals on others . . . Such villains, however, inevitably use violent means to force their message, which is why Captain America treats them as enemies . . . Even explicitly anti-American villains are not berated by Captain America for their ideals but for their execution of those ideals. (DuBose, 2007, 929)

In this light, Iron Man's desire to train and control superheroes is in itself not something Captain America opposes; it is the execution of this desire through the implementation of governmental control and the removal of "freedom" that forces him to oppose Iron Man's actions.

The geopolitical vision offered by *Civil War* is a challenge, as the comic aims at engaging issues of power and legality without impaling the continuity of the superhero universe. Restricted by what Dittmer calls the "tyranny of the serial," *Civil War* must answer to the demands of commercial continuity in a way self-contained and limited works like *Watchmen* do not (Dittmer, 2007, 255). Thus, whereas comics like *Watchmen* or *Miracleman* can question these issues of legality and power and end in a radically different world that has solved some of society's fundamental tensions, the mainstream superhero comic (like *Civil War*) must always ultimately privilege plots that will some way re-constitute the status quo:

> Mainstream superhero comic books, due to the tyranny of the serial and their inability to portray systemic revolution, function as representational spaces of legitimation in that they reinforce the prevailing assumptions of the international system to the detriment of other, alternative, geographies. (Dittmer, 2007, 255–256)

In other words, mainstream superhero comics like *Civil War*, despite their desire to challenge the genre and its premises by drawing attention to the superhero's moral

and legal status, are partially tied by the genre's "prevailing assumptions" (not to mention the publisher's concretely financial expectations) and still seemingly subscribe to the restoration of the status quo. However, despite this conclusion that mainstream superhero comics are inherently conservative, they do still contain the potential for counter-hegemonic readings. Indeed, Swafford claims that *Civil War* in fact offers an atypical "preferred reading" (a term he borrows from Stuart Hall): according to Swafford, *Civil War* goes against the hegemonic ideology of American society, asking the reader to challenge rather than support the government during a time of crisis (2008, 637). Especially in *Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man*, the reader follows Spider-Man's ethical struggles as he slowly comes to realize he has made a mistake, and joins Captain America and his resistance as the superheroic principle of justice overrides the demands of the law. Though Swafford acknowledges that *Civil War* can be read as either for or against the government and the law, the preferred reading he suggests is clearly the one where morality overrides the law (2008, 639).

As Smith and Goodrum note, the serial nature of the superhero comic destabilizes the superhero and his never-ending quest for order by drawing them into "an uncertain future robbed of the simplicity of the past" (2011, 493). This uncertain future was largely brought upon the hero by the unimaginable events of 9/11 and the following War on Terror, which forced the superhero to face his inability to prevent a catastrophe: indeed, *Civil War* begins with this very failure. If the superhero is to be seen as a part of American mythology and its discourses on security and freedom, this failing must be addressed by the comics (ibid., 492). The new geopolitical economy of America after 9/11 transferred into the popular geopolitical economy of the superhero universe, where the stories slowly began to question not only the government's ability for moral action, but they began to "render problematic the very possibility of heroism in the modern world" (Costello, 2009, 200). *Civil War* explores this notion of heroism through the conflicting discourses of freedom and security, presenting them as ruling each other out and dividing the heroes into two opposing sides.

* * *

In this chapter I have analyzed the superhero's relationship to the state, and problematized the superhero's central paradox of breaking the law in order to uphold it. By deploying Agamben's view of the state of exception as a different way

of conceptualizing the superhero, I propose a new way of analyzing the complex equations of power, law, and authority that are a standard feature in superhero narratives, and therefore also relevant in the understanding of America's popular geopolitics. Linked to this, the so-called Captain America complex addresses the superhero's innate inability to democracy, marking another central contradiction within the superhero genre as the hero repeatedly restores democracy through clearly undemocratic means, ultimately threatening to liquidate democracy completely. These issues rise to the surface in *Civil War*, which openly questions the superhero's status through a rhetoric that revolves around freedom and security in a distinctively post-9/11 United States.

Accordingly, the next and final chapter will approach the present by analyzing how the dramatic events of September 11, 2001 were depicted in superhero comics. As 9/11 became an event with immense geopolitical relevance, it had a significant impact on the superhero comic, challenging the entire genre's survival.

6. After 9/11: From Defense to Offense

> *[Caption]*: Nightfall. Bruce Wayne walks the crowded streets of downtown Manhattan. A little boy cries aloud and points to the sky.
> *Boy*: "Look, mom! A dirigible!"
> *Bruce Wayne*: "Strange-looking ship. Hmm…more like a rocket ship."
> *[Caption]*: Suddenly red beams of light shoot from the ship. . . . As the rays strike, the buildings explode, hurling their wreckage upon the crowded streets below.
> ("The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom," *Detective Comics* #33, Nov 1939, 3)

The final part of this dissertation will focus on the superhero comic in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001. As both DC and Marvel, the two biggest publishing houses on superhero comics, were located in Manhattan, they became instant witnesses to the events of 9/11 and reacted quickly to what would become a national trauma. Furthermore, a significant amount of comics artists and writers themselves lived in Manhattan and witnessed the destruction firsthand (Scott, 2007, 336). While the devastation of 9/11 sparked innumerable accounts of graphic commentary, memoir, and fiction from cartoonists and artists stretching from editorial cartoons to journalistic reports (including a graphic novel adaptation of *The 9/11 Commission Report* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón in 2006), the superhero comic faced a unique challenge as the destruction in Manhattan was eerily reminiscent of the very earliest stories of the genre. Indeed, as quoted above, one of the first Batman stories from 1939 already depicted an aerial attack on "downtown Manhattan" that resulted in the death of thousands (#33, 3). Still located in Manhattan rather than the more mysterious Gotham City, Bruce Wayne stood witness as the city's trademark skyscrapers exploded upon the innocent bystanders desperately crying for help. This marks only the first of endless attacks on the city, as New York and especially the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center have since then been demolished again and again on the pages of superhero comics, firmly in

the stronghold of fictional destruction.[146] On 9/11, this frequent fictional destruction became reality, forcing the entire genre to reassess its position in relation to the wreckage—and especially to the heroes unable to prevent it and the geopolitical narrative that expected them to.

The immediate reaction to the event was one of disbelief and feeling of powerlessness, yet superhero comics were quick to react. After all, the destruction of the scale of 9/11 was hardly a new phenomenon in superhero comics, where attacks often took place with hazy political motivations rather than clear political or legal agenda (Kading, 2005, 215–217). As noted above, there exists an eerie resemblance to comic book supervillains in the attack on 9/11, as if the real world had actually reached that of comic books, the "fantasy of comic book nightmares" becoming reality (Wright, 2001, 293). Though 9/11 could be assimilated into the superhero narrative with "jarring ease" due to the event's similarity to supervillainous ploys, it simultaneously forced the genre to face the reality of the attack and its significance to the popular geopolitical narratives of the superhero comic. This had the risk of exposing the dominant geopolitical narratives of superhero comics as fictional constructs, which could then cause the loss of the "natural" appearance that was crucial in the "continued investment of ideological belief" within the narrative (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 491). This loss of belief can have serious consequences, as dominant fiction and dominant popular geopolitical narratives risk the fragmentation of society as they lose their ability to promote national consensus (ibid.). Superhero comics were therefore heavily invested in the writing (and rewriting) of these dominant fictions, attempting to offer narratives of national unity and consensus through a revised geopolitical narrative stemming from a shared national identity against a common enemy. While this approach was initially adopted after 9/11, it was soon challenged by the emergence of more ambiguous narratives articulating a nation divided in two (cf. the discussion on *Civil War* in the previous chapter).

In this section, I will argue that two contradictory approaches can be found in the superhero comics published after 9/11: the immediate approach following the

[146] Perhaps most unintentionally tragic, *The Adventures of Superman* #596 (Nov 2001) that was published and distributed on September 12, 2001 contained an image of what appears to be two skyscrapers side by side, smoking after they have been hit. While the buildings are not the Twin Towers but Lex Luthor's own LexCorp Building, the visual similarity to the actual events was unsettling (and unfortunately timed), prompting DC to recall the issue.

event emphasizing national unity and "real" heroes, and a gradual challenge to this approach that began to question this newly-found national consensus and increasingly displayed America as a nation divided and confused. Both of these approaches are central to this chapter, and will be referred throughout. The "immediate" responses consist largely of superhero comics produced within a year of the event, whereas comics published after that already begin to display signs of doubt over America's role as a victim and the righteousness of the War on Terror. Though the superheroes' immediate reaction to 9/11 was to promote a message of national unity and strength as they discouraged any attacks on the Islamic minority, I will argue that this consensus was a fairly short-lived phenomenon, gradually replaced a year later with a new geopolitical narrative that had even Captain America, the icon of the nation, doubting America's position as a victim as he began to ask whether the United States was in fact partially responsible for the attack.

I will first discuss the initial answers superhero comics offered their readers after 9/11 as the attack severely shook the popular geopolitical identity of America. As stated above, the superhero was forced to seriously reposition himself after the violent fictions of the superhero comic became reality, and one way to do so was to state the fictional nature of the superheroes and transfer their power to the actual real-life heroes consisting of firemen, policemen, and other rescue workers. After analyzing this transference of authority, I will concentrate on the gradual search for the enemy and its inevitable consequences in *Captain America*. As a hero of immeasurable national significance, Captain America in particular felt the consequences of 9/11, and he had no choice but to ultimately go after the terrorists responsible. However, this narrative already began to show doubts that would flame into full conflict in *Civil War* and culminate in the highly allegorical *The Death of Captain America* in 2007, which will be analyzed in 6.2. The much-publicized death of the national icon challenges the relevance of the 21st-century superhero and evokes a possible future without superheroes in the geopolitical structures of America that shift from defense to offense through the new post-9/11 U.S. imperialism.

In analyzing these issues, I will draw on the wider context of trauma studies, which will enable an analysis of 9/11 as a collective trauma and position post-9/11 superhero comics as a form of trauma fiction. I will discuss trauma on a collective level in 6.1, and return to trauma again in 6.2 as a central trope of the genre.

6.1 United We Stand: Narrating American Identity after 9/11

Generally speaking, 9/11 and its effects have been explored in countless works of fiction ranging from Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), not to mention the vast number of documentaries, feature films, and TV shows featuring the attacks. While Kent Worcester (2011, 141) claims that practically anything published after 9/11 commenting on U.S. foreign policy is likely to reference 9/11 either implicitly or explicitly (thus enabling the all-encompassing label of "9/11 literature"), what becomes clear is that the events profoundly shook America's sense of security, and the surge of fiction surrounding the event can be read as one way of re-establishing the nation and its popular geopolitical identity. Indeed, the period after the attack has been described as being "marked by an attempt to comprehend the event, and re-establish a context of individual and collective security" (Kading, 2005, 207)—and as Smith and Goodrum (2011, 491) argue, superhero comics especially reflected a "shattered sense of security" and the trauma it caused both on the individual and on the national level.

Superhero comics, much like other popular media, have a small but significant role in creating and sustaining collective trauma, which, unlike psychological trauma, is not "worked through" with such psychological defenses as coping. Instead, collective trauma exists as a "constant, recurrent struggle" which can flare up even after periods of quiescence, and acts on the level of social agents and groups, and it must be established and sustained through a process of "deliberate efforts" from such cultural carriers as politicians, intellectuals, and journalists (Smelser, 2004a, 38–42). Superhero comics, for their part, offered a way to incorporate the trauma of 9/11 into the nation's geopolitical narratives by acknowledging the event and depicting the heroes' (and even the villains') responses to it.

"Trauma" in itself has traditionally been viewed as a brutal intrusion to the psyche which the mind is unable to grasp, as the event cannot be fully assimilated or experienced due to its usually sudden and violent nature (Caruth, 1995, 4–5; Erikson, 1995, 187). Trauma studies, which emerged as a distinctive field in the

1980s, have largely focused on psychological trauma, memory, and witnessing, all located more within the sphere of individual experience rather than the collective one (with the notable exception of the Holocaust, which is studied both as a collective and as an individual trauma). Though the concept of individual trauma is by far the most common and well-known today, it cannot be directly applied to collective trauma. According to trauma theorist Kai Erikson, individual trauma attacks one's psyche, whereas collective trauma attacks the very foundations of society and severs people from their sense of communality (1995, 187). Collective trauma, more specifically, threatens a culture's individuals and their personal identities which are tied to that culture (Smelser, 2004a, 40), in essence shattering some of the geopolitical narratives of that culture.

Though collective traumas are not "worked through" in the way individual traumas tend to be, they are nevertheless often reworked in the nation's cultural consciousness through the deliberate use of national myths and legends in the hope of creating moral unity. Notions such as "who we are" and "what we are to become" as a nation suffering a trauma are largely shaped through the "shared identities that grow out of both extraordinary difficulties and extraordinary accomplishments in the social realm" (Neal, 1998, 21), and these notions are expressed through popular culture narratives reasserting the nation's collective identity. Thus, collective trauma also has the potential to re-envision and reinvigorate a community as the traumatizing event can give rise to a newfound solidarity and unity within the community. A nationalist response and a shared collective identity may arise when faced with a common enemy after a trauma, and the way a nation's mythical heroes are represented after these traumatic events can have a great impact on national identity, or, in this case, "what it means to be an American" (Neal, 1998, 22). Thus, when analyzing the effects of 9/11 on the popular geopolitical identity of America, this view of trauma as collective is central, because it broadens the use of "trauma" from its clinical applications to the sphere of social studies, suggesting that "traumatized communities" are something distinctly different from "assemblies of traumatized persons" (Erikson, 1995, 185). Collective trauma can be the result of any event that is experienced as threatening the community's social reality, and usually results in viewing the present as discontinuous and perceiving events as uncontrollable; furthermore, as the effects of collective trauma are usually seen as irrevocable and fundamental, they permanently mark the memories and nature of a

collective and social group subjected to a terrible event (Neal, 1998, 7; Alexander, 2004, 1).

What becomes crucial when discussing collective trauma in the context of popular geopolitics is the way the traumatic event and its effects are represented. This becomes apparent when discussing an essential characteristic of a traumatic event that is often bypassed: the fact that "it is *how people react to them* rather than *what they are* that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have" (Erikson, 1995, 184, emphasis original). In a similar vein, cultural trauma theorists Alexander et al. (2004) argue in their book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* that events themselves do not *have to* possess any inherent "trauma-inducing" qualities, but a collective cultural trauma can emerge out of the social processes as people react to these events. The "trick" in analyzing collective trauma, according to Alexander, is the realization that collective trauma is not a naturally existing phenomenon, but something that has been constructed by society, and that while the events are one thing, the representations of these things are quite another (2004, 2; 10). In representing trauma (whether national or personal), comics have a unique ability to express traumatic symptoms such as compulsive repetition and helplessness through visual signs from color to panel size and repetitive imagery, which can all be used to illustrate the "impact of traumatic experience" (Blake, 2009).[147]

The attacks on 9/11 have been viewed as unprecedented in more ways than one. Both Cord Scott (2007) and Terry Kading (2005) write that what made 9/11 such a momentous event was not just the scale of the attack or the fact that the attack took place on American soil, but the way it was presented through a "constant stream of immediate images" (Scott, 2007, 326). Though the Gulf War in the 1990s had already been displayed in the media, Kading stresses the way the media coverage elevated 9/11 "beyond belief" like nothing before, pointing out the way this event was expressed "in the vivid colors of comic representation" in real time, repeated over and over again much like flipping through the most graphic images in

[147] For example, the use of panels in framing is a key factor in conveying time in comics, with effects ranging from precise timing and tight panels to a feeling of complete timelessness as panel frames are completely removed and the panel "bleeds" to the very edges of the page (Eisner, 1985, 28–37; McCloud, 1993, 102–103). While the full advantage of the medium in displaying trauma has perhaps been taken by such "comix" artists as Art Spiegelman, superhero comics, too, display some of the traumatic elements of 9/11 through narratives that can be characterized by confusion and distortion created through repetition, flashbacks, and hallucinations.

a comic book (2005, 214). An event witnessed by millions of Americans as it took place, 9/11 "spectacularly violated the basic geopolitical division" of the inside/outside dichotomy of us/them that very much characterized the established discourses on popular American geopolitical identity (Dalby, 2003, 83), as America found itself attacked on its own soil.[148]

9/11 created a historical and cultural trauma that disrupted the popular geopolitical narratives of America as the attack challenged their validity by revealing them as faulty. Some superhero comics even expressed doubts of whether the United States in some ways was complicit of the events, thus further questioning the validity of the existing geopolitical constructions. This line of questioning was a serious challenge to superheroic morality:

> [It] cuts against the usual construction of superhero masculinity and morality—a sort of "might makes right" that appears to be the only viable way of solving problems. It is the loss of ideological belief in this "natural," unthinking masculine power as the means of ordering and protecting society that indicates the impact of historical trauma. (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 493)

The "historical trauma," Silverman's term already familiar from chapter 3.1, refers to a disruption of the dominant fictions of a nation, the dominant geopolitical scripts and narratives which the terrorist act has destabilized, calling into question the current ideological beliefs behind these narratives (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 487). Historical trauma is always closely tied to the particular historical moment of its occurrence: as Smelser suggests, 9/11 is so traumatic precisely *because* of its present context, occurring at a time when American society and culture were at the beginning of a new century, looking forward to the future and its challenges at the dawn of the new millennium (2004b, 270). That the attacks took place when (and where) they did is in part responsible for the particular nature of the trauma, but, naturally, this point in time is built upon centuries of national history. The long history of American utopianism and the rhetoric of American exceptionalism were a substantial part of American identity and geopolitics, which was now deeply and

[148] This was not the first time America experienced terrorism as such: the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995 had already showed that even the United States was not immune to terrorism, and the World Trade Center had already been the target of an attempted bombing in 1993. However, no previous attack had reached such proportions the attack on 9/11. As Volpp notes, whereas for example the Oklahoma bomber, Timothy McVeigh, had been seen as "an individual deviant," 9/11 was immediately seen as a representative act of a particular ethnic group, demonstrating the way racial subordination sees non-whites as group-based but whites as individuals (2009, 79-80).

brutally violated by 9/11 (Dalby, 2003, 70; Spigel, 2004, 239), and this violation was felt in the superhero comic.

What emerged immediately afterwards therefore were narratives downplaying the superhero's power and praise for the "true" heroes of 9/11: the ordinary men and women. In the next section, I will examine the post-9/11 superhero comics and the way they responded to the resulting trauma within the first year after the event.

"…we are writ small by the true heroes": Narratives of Unity and the Rise of the "True" Hero in Post-9/11 Superhero Comics

> I can defy the laws of gravity.
> I can ignore the principles of physics.
> I can breathe in the vacuum of space.
> I can alter the building blocks of chemistry.
> I can fly in the face of probability.
> I can bring smiles of relief to a grateful populace.
>
> But unfortunately…
> …the one thing I can not do…
> **…is break free from the fictional pages where I live and breathe…**
> …become real during times of crisis…
> …and right the wrongs of an unjust world.
>
> **A world, fortunately, protected by heroes of its own.**
>
> "Superman: Unreal" (2002, 15–16)

Located in the heart of Manhattan, both DC and Marvel were quick to react to the events on 9/11, gathering their (largely New York based) writers and artists to publish comics anthologies to express their grief and support. DC came out with the two-volume *9/11: September 11, 2001 (Artists Respond)* and *(The World's Finest Comic Book Writers and Artists Tell Stories to Remember)* in 2002, while Marvel published three 9/11 themed collections, from *Heroes: The World's Greatest Superhero Creators Honor the World's Greatest Heroes* (an obvious tribute to the "real" heroes of 9/11) to *A Moment of Silence: Saluting the Heroes of 9/11* featuring silent stories based on actual events. The proceeds of these comics were given to various funds, and as Worcester notes, these comics were very much aimed at mainstream audiences with a very high marketing profile, and they clearly

“embraced liberal humanism and eschewed anti-Muslim rhetoric,” deliberately steering the nation away from a war footing (2011, 147).

The Superman story “Unreal” cited above is a very telling example of the kind of superhero narratives that emerged early on to help Americans come to terms with the collective trauma of 9/11. The two-page story by Steven T. Seagle (writer), Duncan Rouleau, and Aaron Sowd (artists) begins with Superman describing his superpowers. The second page, however, begins to zoom away from the panels as Superman laments: “…the one thing I can not do…**is break free from the fictional pages where I live and breathe**…become real during times of crisis…and right the wrongs of an unjust world” (2002, 16). As the panels zoom even further, the reader realizes that Superman is speaking from the pages of a comic book, read by a young boy being rescued from the ruins of the World Trade Center. The focus shifts to the firefighter rescuing the boy, who is saluted by Superman as the true hero in a world where he is nothing more than fiction. In this way, the comic through Superman symbolically endows the rescue workers with the characteristics and qualities of the superhero (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 495).

Another (untitled) single-page story in the same volume by Tim Sale (writer), Chuck Kim, and Mark Chiarello (artists) shows a boy in a Superman t-shirt going into a phone booth and re-emerging defiantly wearing a FDNY t-shirt, effectively reversing the famous Clark Kent/Superman transformation (2002, 70). Both these stories testify to the notion that superheroes cannot directly intervene in 9/11, and they stress the “transference of the authority of the superhero to a real-world civic authority” (Sandifer, 2008, 185) as they emphasize the heroic stature of the rescue workers. Similar salutations can be frequently found in superhero comics following 9/11, as the superheroes saluted the “real” heroes of 9/11 and firefighters and policemen replaced superheroes as children’s number one heroes, at least on the pages of comics.

This transference of authority is not really that surprising. After all, as Wright wistfully points out, costumed superheroes were really not the best of metaphors in the wake of the attacks, as even Superman’s famous “Look, up in the sky! Is it a bird? Is it a plane?” received an ominous tone (2001, 288). The superhero acknowledged his limited metaphorical meaning and, instead of retribution, offered narratives of national unity and tolerance to replace misdirected hatred. American comics in general aimed to come to terms with the events,

focusing on the lives of the victims and the heroes, offering a variety of (semi)autobiographical attempts to make sense of the tragedy (ibid., 289). In superhero comics, undoubtedly the most famous example of the post-9/11 response can be found in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36 (Dec 2001) by Joseph M. Straczynski Sr. (w) and John Romita Jr. (a). Quickly rewritten and redrawn (as the issues are usually produced months in advance), the cover of the issue was completely black, while the narrative depicted a speechless Spider-Man witnessing the ruins of the collapsed towers, his reaction one of silent horror with the single word "God" uttered at the sight (see fig. 8). The image of him in front of the ruins captures the powerlessness of the heroes in the face of such events, allowing the reader, too, to feel powerless at the destruction.

Spider-Man, the "most certifiable New Yorker" (Wright, 2001, 289) of all of Marvel's heroes, has to face the questions any superhero had to face on 9/11: "Where were you? How could you let this happen?" (#36, 4). Spider-Man's only answer is a stunned admittance of the limits of the hero: "How do you say we didn't know? We couldn't know. We couldn't imagine. . . . We could not see it coming. We could not be here before it happened. We could not stop it. But we are here now." (#36, 4–6). The accompanying panels show the ruins, where firefighters and policemen work side by side with superheroes clearing the rubble and searching for survivors, the superheroes almost obscured by the prominence of uniformed everyday heroes the narrative aims to promote. Even villains appeared to help the rescue workers, as Magneto, Kingpin, Dr. Octopus, and Dr. Doom were present among the rubble, clearly evoking what Spigel refers to as a "myth of transcendence," the idea of heroes and villains working together (a myth originating from the era of Depression and WWII), putting aside their differences for a common cause (2004, 238). By drawing on this myth, the narrative claims 9/11 a tragedy of such proportions that even a supervillain must set aside his personal goals as the event transgresses all common notions of good and evil.

However, this presence of the supervillains has caused some debate. As Morrison (2011, 347) notes, the disorientation and shock of the event was perhaps most clearly present in "a single giddy moment" featuring Marvel's dictator/terrorist/supervillain Dr. Doom at Ground Zero with tears in his eyes as the caption attached read: "Because even the worst of us, however scarred, are still human. Still feel. Still mourn the random death of innocents." (#36, 9). Most of the

Fig. 8. *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36 (Dec 2001), 2-3. © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

debate over this panel took place on internet discussion forums and other non-academic platforms, the consensus being that depicting a supervillain who had on multiple occasions attempted similar devastation himself as moved to tears was pushing it a little too far. However, what this panel achieves is close to what the Superman story “Unreal” discussed above aimed at. The tears of Doom make visible the transgression from fiction to reality, they reveal the limits of the superheroic fantasy. In a way, they testify to the “real” nature of 9/11 that separates it from the fictional destruction of superhero comics which remain (just like Superman) firmly in the realm of the fictional. It is this conflict between reality and fiction and reality’s violent intrusion into the realm of the fictive that the controversial tears of Dr. Doom render visible.

Arising as one of the dominant narratives of immediate post-9/11 superhero comics, Spider-Man, too, spoke strongly for the real heroes of 9/11, further emphasizing the civic authority of real heroes over superheroes:

> But with our costumes and our powers we are writ small by the true heroes. Those who face fire without fear or armor. Those who step into the darkness without assurances of ever walking out again, because they know there are others waiting in the dark. Awaiting salvation. Awaiting word. Awaiting justice. Ordinary men.

> Ordinary women. Made extraordinary by acts of compassion. And courage. And terrible sacrifice. (*The Amazing Spider-Man*, #36, 10–11)

Accompanying this monologue is a montage featuring not simply the policemen and firemen already established as "heroes," but also the ordinary people made extraordinary through their actions during 9/11. By stressing the word "ordinary" over and over again, the narrative powerfully and purposefully deploys repetition to emphasize the *ordinary* citizen as the true hero while the superheroes are completely absent. Instead, the panels show glimpses of New Yorkers helping each other during the attack, consoling each other, and for two panels, the passengers of the United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed on a field in Pennsylvania instead of Washington D.C. (theirs is the "terrible sacrifice" alluded to above). The issue's emotional climax further stresses the transference from superheroes to real heroes as the captions claim that "the future belongs to ordinary men and ordinary women" (#36, 19), while the last page is dedicated to a whole page portrait of the heroes of 9/11 with a caption encouraging everyone to "stand tall." Significantly, even though the Marvel heroes are present in the final page, they are in the background, leaving the front of the image to the heroic portraits of the "ordinary" heroes: firemen, policemen, nurses, doctors, military personnel, construction workers emerging and recognized as heroes while the superheroes "slide into the background" (Kading, 2005, 222).

Additionally, these real heroes are distinctively ethnicized, stressing the other dominant narrative that emerged right after 9/11: national unity through diversity. Indeed, apart from the frequent emphasis on real heroes over fictional ones, another dominant geopolitical script that emerged immediately after 9/11 in superhero comics clearly emphasized national unity within the United States, and strongly discouraged any attacks on the Arab and Muslim population within the nation. This attempt to discourage attacks on the Muslim community was not without reason, either: as Volpp notes, more than one thousand incidents of hate violence against the Arab and Muslim population (and other minorities mistaken for Arabs or Muslims) were reported in the United States during the first six months following 9/11 (2009, 78). Spider-Man's monologue underlined the issue by asking: "What DO we tell the children? Do we tell them evil is a foreign face? No. The evil is the thought behind the face, and it can look just like yours." (#36, 17). Instead of

locating the guilty and demanding retribution, Spider-Man called for tolerance and understanding, encouraging people not to equate all Arab Americans with terrorists. The narrative offered a message of unity, as the captions stated: “We have become one in our grief. We are now one in our determination. One as we recover. One as we rebuild.” (#36, 20). This message of unity is underlined with a depiction of people from a vast multitude of different cultures and different ethnicities, staring out of the panel directly into the reader, defiant, clearly evoking the geopolitical narrative that draws on the nation’s monomythical (yet multicultural) past.

Kading claims that the way 9/11 was presented through instant and repetitive media images stressed their similarity with the fictional destruction often present in superhero comics (2005, 219). This visual similarity, according to him, gave superhero comics a unique way to “present commentary on thoughts, emotions, and insights” from their particular vantage point (ibid.). According to Kading, superhero comics offered one way of understanding and appropriating the collective trauma of 9/11 through their superpowered yet ultimately powerless protagonists that stressed the magnitude of the event and the following “degree of shock and disbelief”:

> What stands out in the comic representation/superhero response [to 9/11] is the extreme degree of shock and disbelief by the superhero characters, maintaining what was and remains an appropriate reaction to the carnage and death of that morning. (2005, 219)

As I have shown, superhero comics, for their part, illustrated the “appropriate reaction” to the collective trauma of 9/11, guiding the nation’s responses and actively constructing new popular geopolitical scripts to help make sense and cope with the national trauma. A similar conclusion has been drawn by Smith and Goodrum, who see superhero comics as capable of re-enacting the “unspeakable” in a way which recognizes the emotional trauma the events caused and, through the insertion of familiar superheroes, can integrate an element of control into the terrifying narrative (2011, 488–490). The loss of control and the feeling of helplessness are key elements in experiencing trauma, so the integration of control serves a very crucial purpose of regaining it. By “reliving” the events through superheroes (best perhaps exemplified by *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36), a new narrative of the attacks becomes possible (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 490).

However, it should be remembered that as important as what is shown in post-9/11 superhero comics is that which is not shown. Whereas the immediate post-9/11 superhero stories unanimously praised the real heroes and eschewed any

aggression in favor of a narrative stressing strength against adversity, what is not visible is just as important. For example, we encounter no terrorists in these early post-9/11 superhero comics: no hijackers, no perpetrators with recognizable economic or religious motives or specific and identifiable cultural backgrounds are present in these narratives (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 495). Instead, the villain is identified simply as a "madman" whose actions are incomprehensible and, essentially, unknowable and totally alien; the evil in these comics is completely incomprehensible and "other," which allows the focus to remain on the nation united over a common grief.

In addition, there is a curious lack of leaders, replaced almost completely by the "ordinary heroes." Indeed, what Kading recognizes as truly noteworthy is the total absence of "declarations affirming faith or trust in political leaders or government institutions" (2005, 221) in the post-9/11 superhero comic. As with Captain America's notable absence from Vietnam in the 1970s, this omission of trustworthy leaders and officials is very telling of a crisis of leadership within the popular geopolitical identity after 9/11, envisioning a nation without leaders and expressing a lack of trust towards the government. Instead, as Kading points out, it's the superheroes who come to advise the absent political powers, warning them not to act as if they were superheroes and encouraging them to listen to the "voice that says **do not do as they do, or the war is lost before it is even begun**. Do not let that knowledge be washed away in blood." (#36, 18). Spider-Man speaks for all the superheroes as he discourages the authorities from embarking on a quest for revenge.

What, then, are the actual popular geopolitics of 9/11 in the superhero comics published after the event? The comics discussed above represent only the early initial responses still heavily influenced by the event itself, and produced with the clear aim of making sense of the collective trauma. The immediate post-9/11 period was characterized especially by a desire to understand the event and to "re-establish a context of individual and collective security" (Kading, 2005, 207). However, these comics did *not* yet feature what Dalby has recognized as a major geopolitical script emerging in America after 9/11: the need for a violent retaliation (even without a clear enemy), the notion that the war was clearly American, and that the event had to be revenged violently instead of focusing on the causes behind the attack (2003, 64). This geopolitical script was evoked most prominently in the post-

9/11 rhetoric of President George W. Bush, whose speeches were influenced with a "core cultural theme" of dualistic morality that stressed good and evil in the moral crusade against a "sacred evil" justified by the cultural trauma of 9/11 (Smelser, 2004b, 277).[149]

This geopolitical script relies on the basic inside/outside dichotomy where America's secure interior is threatened by an external force and which relies on a simple geographical basis that categorizes the event "as a simple spatial violation, an external attack on an innocent, supposedly safe interior" (Dalby, 2003, 64). This spatial violation evokes the division of inside/outside that characterized the Eden threatened by an outside evil in the American monomyth discussed in chapter 2. Indeed, the initial responses to 9/11 did aim at adapting the event to this existing geopolitical narrative where a vigilante American hero was needed to serve justice (not vengeance!) to the perpetrators of this crime. As a response to the spatial violation of 9/11, superhero comics clearly aimed at reinvigorating the nation's geopolitical narratives, stressing a national unity which, as Spigel notes, was also a definite trend on American TV after 9/11 (2004, 240). However, Spigel further claims that the "grand narratives of national unity" that emerged in popular culture after 9/11 were largely performative, not sincere (2004, 255). In other words, the newly-inspired patriotism of America was recognized as performance by many, yet it was deemed necessary to perform the role of a patriotic citizen no matter what your real feelings towards the situation were (ibid.).

This doubt was further boosted by the fact that Osama bin Laden remained aloof for nearly a decade, denying America the swift justice its geopolitical narratives were demanding. Ultimately, superhero comics had to contend with a swifter justice delivered through Captain America. After all, Captain America represented not just the citizens of New York, but all of America, and like America itself, Captain America could never admit defeat, as the "symbolic baggage" he had to bear through his name and costume was far too great: "representing the best and the bravest, and singularly identified with the United States, he must act" (Kading, 2005, 223). Little less than a year after 9/11, in a three-issue storyline titled

[149] And, as Smelser makes sure to note, the Arab and Muslim worlds themselves have often claimed to have suffered a cultural trauma through centuries of Western economic, military and cultural invasion, underlining the way both the Western world and Arab and Muslim world have felt equally traumatized by the other, creating a polarized, rigid binary where "violence [is] perpetrated in the name of the holy" by both sides (2004b, 277).

"Enemy," Captain America finally did what many Americans wished he would do: he went after them, beginning a new phase in the post-9/11 geopolitics of American popular culture. However, what this new phase contained was no longer a narrative of national unity, but one beginning to express doubts over its validity.

Locating the Enemy: The Post-9/11 Geopolitics of Captain America

Of all the superheroes in America, it was Captain America, the nation's emblematic icon, who was expected to react to the events of 9/11, to provide a narrative of catharsis and closure. Though the character did make a brief, if silent appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36, it was his own title where he had to take a stand. Beginning the title's fourth volume with yet another #1 issue, the three-part storyline "Enemy," published in the summer of 2002, initially appears to take a stand much similar to the other post-9/11 superhero comics discussed above: highly patriotic and with a clear air of propaganda. Indeed, as Murray (2011, 254-255) points out, the covers of these first issues are direct references to old American WWI and WWII propaganda posters, created in completely identical style and with identical poses. The cover of #1 is identical with the "Buy War Bonds" Uncle Sam poster from 1943, replacing Uncle Sam with Captain America. Similarly, the cover of #3 asks the reader, "Are you doing your part?" with Captain America's finger pointing directly at the reader instead of Uncle Sam in his "I want you for U.S. army" poster from 1917.[150]

Especially the first part of "Enemy" is heavily invested in the iconic nature of Captain America, containing full splash pages of Captain America, depicted from below, surrounded by American flags, and accompanied with overly patriotic caption narration stating: "We share -- We are -- The American Dream." (#1, 24) (see fig. 9). The page appears after Captain America has prevented an attack on a man named Samir (who in this instance represents all the Arab Americans born and raised in America). Condemning all violence against innocent minorities, Captain

[150] However, the later covers begin to display a more ambiguous tone: for example, Costello makes a special note of the cover to *Captain America* #6, which depicts Captain America at the center of what he sees as "a seemingly fascistic display of American national symbols, standing atop a plinth on which are carved the words 'Liberty and justice for all'" (2009, 214). According to Costello, this "melding of ideological ideals and symbols creates an unsettling projection, problematizing the ideal of virtue without ever uttering a word" (ibid., 214-215).

Fig. 9. *Captain America* #1 (Jun 2002), 24. © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

America advices the attackers to "Save [their] anger for the **enemy**," clearly signaling that the real enemy is somewhere else, outside the nation. This first issue clearly adheres to the newly evoked geopolitical narrative of national unity, calling for the nation to unite itself under a common cause as Captain America addresses the reader:

> We've got to be **stronger** than we've **ever** been -- As a **people**. As a **nation**. We have to be America. Or they've **won** . . . We're going to make it through this -- We, the people. United by a power that no **enemy** of **freedom** could **begin** to understand. (#1, 21–23)

Resting heavily on a rhetoric that equates "America" with "freedom" (just like President Bush's address to the nation after 9/11), Captain America's first issue of the comic's fourth volume begins with a strong patriotic message, but already in this first post-9/11 issue, small cracks emerge underneath this seemingly simplistic propaganda of national unity.

As already mentioned in the previous section, one of the most striking omissions in the immediate post-9/11 superhero comics is the absence of faith in political leaders or authority figures, and this is echoed in *Captain America* #1, too. Captain America, significantly as his civilian self, Steve Rogers, is depicted as one of the rescue workers at Ground Zero, hoping (and failing) to reach a victim in time. He is interrupted by S.H.I.E.L.D. Commander Nick Fury ordering him to get on a plane to Kandahar, Afghanistan, presumably to hunt down the terrorist leaders responsible. However, Rogers violently refuses, stating that the victims still caught in the rubble need him more than Fury, who can "go be a hero" himself if he wants to (#1, 14). As Captain America is a superhero modeled after the perfect soldier, his refusal to obey a direct command from a superior officer is a clear sign of distrust towards governmental authorities. Any other figures of authority are notably absent, and Captain America becomes the only authority figure, telling the nation how to cope with the collective trauma and what the nation's true priorities are.

Much like Spider-Man, Captain America, too, is fascinatingly vague on the topic of the terrorist, the villain, the ultimate evil behind the attack. While the opening pages of #1 contain an image of a bearded, Taliban-looking terrorist, this remains one of the few allusions to any specific ethnic origin of the perpetrators. Later, none of the terrorists featured in subsequent issues, including the main villain al-Tariq, display any recognizable ethnic traits apart from the terrorist's name. The terrorists are dressed in clothes resembling Western military gear, and they resemble

more the stereotypical vision of an American military "redneck" than the image of the Muslim terrorist still evoked in the first issue. As the terrorist is not really categorizable as non-American in terms of his looks, he becomes a variation of the uncategorizable Other, "necessarily unknowable" as the terrorist is constructed in the cultural imagination of all the things that are unknowable (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 495), yet he may look just like everyone else. The xenophobic representation of evil in terms of the inside/outside dichotomy is challenged further as Captain America finally confronts the "Master" behind al-Tariq's actions in *Captain America* #6 (Dec 2002) who remains equally uncategorizable and cannot be located in geopolitical terms.

As he battles Captain America, the "Master" promises to surrender if Captain America can guess where he is from:

> Guerrillas gunned my **father** down while he was at work in the fields -- With American bullets. American weapons. Where am I **from**? My father didn't **know** the **Cold War** was at its height -- **Remember?** When the **Soviets** were your great enemy? The **evil empire**? My **mother** didn't know that our nation was in the throes of an undeclared civil war between **your** allies and the allies of **evil** -- When she ran to find her husband. My mother was **interrogated** and **shot**. Our home was **burned**. That fire gave me my **face**. But **fire** didn't make me a monster. You know your **history**, Captain America. Tell your **monster** where he's **from**.
> (*Captain America* #6, 16–17)

As the villain's face is burned beyond recognition, his face is erased from any ethnic or racial trait, making him literally an unknowable other. His nation of origin is never stated, as his experiences could locate him in a number of countries in Asia, South America, or the former Eastern Bloc, yet he clearly claims himself as a product of America's questionable policies, and implies that this "new" evil in a way actually derives from American policies and is, therefore, "American" in origin.

In this sense, the terrorist and the villain become a variation of what Gates has identified as a new 21st-century evil where the villain has become almost invisible, indistinguishable from the average American:

> [H]e wears the mask of normalcy and appears to be an average American. The myth of national heroism has taken an inward turn, recognizing that evil is not readily discernible from good and that it resides within society as well as without. (Gates, 2006, 280–281)

This vision of evil as undistinguishable employs some of the existing ideas of invisible enemies, echoing the communist spy scare that marked the McCarthy era

and the serial killer fiction of the late 20th century: as the villain is no longer discernible from the rest of the population, this view gives room for a new era of ambiguity which leads to a cultural atmosphere of paranoia, fear, and distrust that would soon be very visible in superhero comics as former allies began to attack each other.[151]

From a geopolitical standpoint, the first half of "Enemy" takes advantage of some very typical geopolitical tropes by contrasting innocent American airline travelers with identifiable Arab terrorists with beards and turbans, clearly recognizable from the endless media coverage of al-Qaeda that permeated the media soon after the attacks, effectively re-establishing the geopolitical structure of inside/outside that has categorized America. Additionally, the first part of issue 1 carefully deploys of the emotional connotation of Ground Zero and the landscape of the ruins that became a new, highly emotional geopolitical space in American culture. However, the second half of the issue (which takes place seven months after 9/11) already begins to cast shadows of doubt over the righteousness of this narrative. The comic shifts its focus from Ground Zero to the fictional town of "Centerville," a very typical-looking, peaceful small-town in the heartlands of America, now under attack by the same terrorists responsible for 9/11. Geopolitically, the war is once more literally brought to America, but this time Captain America still has time to prevent the catastrophe he failed to prevent on 9/11. Metaphorically representing "America" much in the same way many people claimed all Americans were New Yorkers after 9/11, the landscape of Centerville in all its stereotypical normality becomes "highly symbolic", as the geopolitical significance of this landscape is stressed through its violent violation (Dittmer, 2005, 634). The terrorist attack traps most of the Mid-American (and exceedingly white) population in a church during Easter service, and the subtle use of "jihadist rhetoric," contrasted with an excessively open and tolerant view of Christianity, creates a narrative where "culture and religion serve as the fundamental schism in world politics" (Dittmer, 2005, 639). Through these geopolitical constructions, the comic begins to create some very strong dichotomies of America and its enemies.

[151] In this sense, Spider-Man's attempt at restraining xenophobic attacks with the phrase "What DO we tell the children? Do we tell them that evil is a foreign face? No. The evil is the thought behind the face, and it can look just like yours." (#36, 17) receives a whole new level of signification by proclaiming that "evil" can be found everywhere, even within America.

Considering this initial stand, it is even more striking to read the rest of "Enemy," as the comic effectively proceeds to "puncture the innocence of America" it has so far created by challenging America's innocence and questioning the nation's global role (Dittmer, 2005, 640). Suggesting that the whole idea of such a simple binary is questionable from the start, the simple inside/outside dichotomy of good and evil receives its first shadow of doubt as the terrorist al-Tariq addresses his hostages, noting that many of them work "at the bomb manufacturing facility at the edge of this peaceful town" (#3, 1). This accusation is made even more resonant as one of the hostages, a woman, asks her husband: "**This** is how you feed our **baby**? With **bombs**? You make bombs?" to which her husband can only feebly say "No! Components… We make **components**" (#3, 10), his eyes betraying a sense of shame and guilt despite his denial. America's innocence is put to doubt again as Captain America makes his way to the church to release the hostages. On his way there, he is interrupted by four children in Arab-esque clothing, armed with axes and knives. Al-Tariq's voice comes from the speakers on the children's necks and the conversation between the two casts more doubts on the dominant geopolitical narrative the previous issues have created:

> *al-Tariq*: "I am al-Tariq. I am hate. These are my **shepherds**. My children, American -- and **yours**."
> *Captain America*: "Call them off. This is **America** -- We don't make **war** -- on **children**."
> *al-Tariq*: "**No**? **Tell** our children then, American -- Who sowed **death** in their fields -- and **left it** for the **innocent** to harvest? Who **took** their hands? Their **feet**?"
> (#3, 2–4)

During this exchange, the panels zoom in on the child soldiers' hands and feet, revealing prosthetic metal limbs in place of real hands and feet.

By calling these child-assassins as Captain America's "children" as much as his own, al-Tariq again evokes the idea that America this "evil" is born out of American deeds, and thus becomes "American." Though Captain America aims at defining America by a refusal to cross certain lines (such as using children as soldiers), these claims ultimately leave him without an answer: Captain America makes no serious attempt at rebuking these accusations, he makes no claims either denying or even doubting al-Tariq's words. A few pages later, al-Tariq states to a news camera:

> I am not a terrorist. I am a **messenger** -- Here to show you the **truth** of war. **You are the terrorists**! . . . When innocent **Americans** die -- it's an **atrocity**. But when **we** die -- **We** are "collateral damage." (#3, 13–15)

Instead of offering any counterarguments to these accusations, Captain America quietly begins to question "the validity of the dominant geopolitical narrative" which has presented America as the innocent victim under brutal attack (Dittmer, 2005, 640): "**Are we** hated because we're **free** -- free and prosperous and **good**? Or does the light **we see** cast shadows that we **don't --** where **monsters** like this **al-Tariq** can plant the seeds of hate?" (#3; 15). Indeed, Captain America continues to promote another geopolitical script, one which is clearly critical of America and American foreign policies and continues to challenge America's innocence. In *Captain America* #5, Steve Rogers arrives in Dresden and remembers the fire-bombing of the city by the British and U.S. troops in 1945:

> Dresden. You didn't understand what we'd done here -- Until September the Eleventh. Before then -- You would have said we were doing what we **had** to do -- To defeat Hitler and the Nazis. Crush the Axis. End their **evil**. But now -- What do you see? February the Thirteenth and Fourteenth. 1945. These people weren't soldiers. But they died. They huddled in the dark. Trapped. While the fire raged above them. Faces pressed to the broken walls that locked them in. Clawing at the cold earth until it grew too hot to touch. And when there was nothing left to breathe there in the dark, they died. -- There were no survivors. History repeats itself. Like a machine gun. A **madman** lights the spark -- And the **people** pay the price.
> (*Captain America* #5, 21–22)

Equating 9/11 with the bombing of Dresden, Captain America draws clear parallels between these two tragedies while simultaneously claiming that America may not be as innocent a victim as the geopolitical narratives evoked in its wake suggest.

Dittmer writes of the dual role of *Captain America* comics as both literally narrating the popular geopolitical narratives of America as well as expressing dissident geopolitical narratives, claiming that Captain America's ambivalent views on American foreign policy can lead to a more ambiguous reading of these popular geopolitical scripts (2005, 641). The critical approach towards America's perceived innocence or even a mere discussion to examine the motivations behind the WTC attacks were deemed by some critics as "nigh on unpatriotic" at the time of the comic's publication in 2002–2003 (Dalby, 2003, 64), and the way *Captain America* comics so soon after the attacks produced a narrative that questioned America's involvement in the terrorist actions is a telltale sign of the ambiguities within the nation which began to build instantaneously.[152] Dalby even argues that the

[152] Michael Medved, for example, cited these issues as an example of "deep cultural malaise" aimed at influencing children, deeming any narrative that doubted America's innocence as "both illogical and obscene" (2003).

"discoursive field" of this dichotomy of friend/foe was taken to such extremes that any critics of American foreign policy were labeled instantly as supporters of terrorism (2003, 72). Yet, the ambiguities towards the national trauma began to accumulate almost immediately. As Smelser notes in his article (written only four months after the attacks), there exists a peculiar twist within the trauma of 9/11, as the national response to the attack immediately showed signs of deep ambivalence, demonstrating simultaneous contradictory reactions: "shocking and fascinating, depressing and exhilarating, grotesque and beautiful, sullying and cleansing—and leaving the country feeling both bad and good about itself" (2004b, 269). Indeed, despite the overwhelming surge of a community united through trauma, the very beginnings of this trauma already contained a rift that would later emerge as a major division even within the superhero universe.

In fact, what is crucial in analyzing the post-9/11 superhero narratives is the realization of a substantial paradigm shift in the security vs. empire dialogue which challenges the established semi-isolationist geopolitics of America that has characterized itself in terms of anti-imperialism:

> [C]hanging the spatial understanding of American identity from an innocent violated territorial identity to an imperial actor challenges the dominant scripts of 11 September and so reveals the invocation of taken-for-granted geopolitical tropes as a political strategy that is both efficacious in mobilizing the population for war and in obscuring the larger patterns of interconnection in the global (imperial?) policy. . . . This is supported by the peculiar practices of American military power, ones that frequently defeat enemies but do not conquer, annex or fundamentally remake the defeated polity. The resulting 'Empire of Disorder' allows American national identity to maintain its anti-imperial rationalizations while committing troops to garrison duties and counter-insurgency operations in many places. (Dalby, 2003, 81–82)

The geopolitical position that justifies the actions of military power through offense instead of defense allows America to become "imperial" while simultaneously defining itself as essentially anti-imperialistic as it does not "conquer, annex or fundamentally remake" other regions.[153] This issue of the United States and its imperial (or anti-imperial) nature is still very much a debated issue in scholarship, and arguably, 9/11 had an effect on America's global policies. Whether this shift

[153] This view still prevails, despite the acquisitions of Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico at the turn of the century. According to Singh, these events are considered minor episodes in U.S. history in comparison to the territorial conquest that took place within the national territory (2009, 13). As Dawson and Schueller also note, the official rhetoric of America has in the past stressed its anti-imperialistic and passive nature, marked by what has been seen as "empire by invitation" that stresses the nation's reactionary and ultimately reluctant nature to enter into global issues (2007, 4).

from anti-imperialism to a new neo-imperialism has actually taken place is difficult to say, yet within the fictional world of superhero comics, there are some signals that read as indicative of some kind of change.

Indeed, this debated ideological shift within American imperialism becomes visible in the image of the new Captain America, Bucky Barnes in 2008: after the death of Steve Rogers, the original Captain America, in 2007, his old sidekick Bucky eventually took up the star-spangled shield and cowl. However, the dominant images of this new Captain America held the notable addition of a gun, pointed either aggressively at the reader or visibly uplifted in a way Steve Rogers's Captain America never had. This new Captain America's posture and offensive weaponry distinguish him quite clearly from the old Captain America of Steve Rogers, whose stance was one of defense with the shield (a weapon of defense) as his primary weapon. Even a relatively small transformation in such a visual icon as Captain America marks a fundamental change in the popular geopolitical narratives and scripts of America, too (see fig. 10).

Fig. 10. *Captain America* #5 (May 2005) and *Captain America* #34 (Mar 2008, variant cover by Alex Ross) © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

This change from defense to offense through the addition of a gun to the visual imagery of Captain America is crucial in weighing the iconic power and significance of the superhero, and as Cunningham reports, this transformation received a highly mixed response from fans, who saw the adding of a pistol as going completely against the spirit of the character (2009, 176).[154] Cunningham arduously proves that Captain America, in fact, has never been a stranger to either weapons or lethal force, thus claiming this critique as "irrational" (2009, 187), yet he fails to satisfyingly address the sharp distinction the gun nevertheless adds to the character in terms of iconic representation.[155] The visible change not only signals a new, more aggressive and offensive stance, it also reflects the society's "attitude toward the technology of warfare" (Orchard, 2006). The role of science, technology, and power has always been questionable within the United States, and one solution to this is the reimaging of technology as good *in the right hands* (as for example in *Iron Man*, where Tony Stark uses the Iron Man technology for good, yet repeatedly has to fight against the technology's adaptation for other purposes). Similarly, as the terrorist threat that emerged after 9/11 was of decidedly unknown origin, the xenophobic characteristic linked to the threats towards the American nation had to be "replaced by an anxiety of dangerous technology on the wrong hands" (Steinmetz, 2009, 199). Orchard, too, notes how the way superheroes could exceed the power of technology reflects the anxiety of the use of technology to "antisocial purposes" (2006). Thus, the choice to arm Captain America with a gun signals a shift in the way the superhero's power is perceived, creating a more active and aggressive stance for the

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[154] Indeed, Captain America has usually been very vocal against gun use: in #322 (Oct 1986), for example, Captain America states: "I believe that guns are for killing, and killing is the ultimate violation of individual rights - the ultimate denial of freedom. I never carry a gun. I have never taken another person's life." (3-4). While a closer inspection of early war time Captain America comics does reveal this statement as dubious, it still represents the popular image the character's readers hold of him as "a defender of liberty who is willing to fight hard, yet do as little harm as possible" (Cunningham, 2009, 178).

[155] In an email conversation with this dissertation's author, comics writer and illustrator Stefano Gaudiano (who has worked with both Alex Ross and Ed Brubaker) revealed that the authors of *Captain America* have actually claimed that the choice of adding a gun was made purely "on an aesthetic basis," as the illustrator Alex Ross especially "thought it looked cool" (2010) and denied any ideological or political agendas behind the addition.

hero and, by analogy, a justification or desire for America's status in world politics, and acts as a justification for the increased use of pre-emptive violence.[156]

Dittmer, among others, has argued that a clear "reterritorialization of American identity" right after 9/11 was possible through a clear "inside/outside dialectic" of us vs. them (2005, 637), and this dichotomy can indeed be located in the beginning of the "Enemy" storyline. This "reterritorialization" refers to an opportunity to strengthen national unity, a consensus identity that gains strength from a shared adversary. Superhero comics were, after all, especially suited for narrating this division, as the superhero narrative's main appeal lies in good always triumphing over evil as well as the use of vigilante justice, a swift execution of undeniable justice where the hero does not resort to the ways of the enemy (Kading, 2005, 224–5):

> The superhero offers everything: rapid and effective action, a just and proportionate response, and above all, in achieving results no more innocent lives are lost. . . . There are no compromises with questionable characters or nations, calculations concerning the loss of more innocent lives, or limits to freedom/liberty to achieve a safe and secure end. (ibid.)

While the superhero narrative could initially promote the geopolitical response of us vs. them after 9/11, this approach soon proved unsustainable, as the closer reading of the rest of "Enemy" demonstrates. Just like Captain America began to question America's role as a victim, the nation began to realize that while the "overarching narrative" of America after 9/11 was one of war, there really was no-one to fight (Dalby, 2003, 61–62), no discernible enemy to batter as Osama Bin Laden could not be located and the swift justice promised could not be delivered.

Ultimately, the failure of the existing geopolitical narrative to contain the event of 9/11 has been written down to the atmosphere of anxiety that permeated the nation soon after the attacks, as the American public remained unsure as to who the enemy was or where the next danger lay (Dalby, 2003, 68). The failure to clearly identify the enemy gave birth to an enhanced sense of insecurity and vulnerability, which was further stressed by the rhetoric deployed by the Department of Homeland Security where everything was to be assessed as a potential threat (Kading, 2005, 218). This sense of insecurity and confusion over the enemy was even more evident

[156] In a similar vein, Marvel's fictional espionage and a secret military law-enforcement agency S.H.I.E.L.D. was replaced with H.A.M.M.E.R. during the "Secret Invasion" crossover event in 2008. However, H.A.M.M.E.R. was eventually dissolved after it was revealed as an evil plot by Norman Osborne (aka the Green Goblin) to gain access to the database containing the identities of all registered superheroes.

as it was revealed that some of the hijackers had been legal residents in the United States, where they had trained for their future mission (Dalby, 2003, 68). The lack of a clearly definable and nameable external enemy meant that lines between friends and enemies could not be drawn with conviction. Superhero comics initially offered a sense of unity through a nationalist response of solidarity, guiding reactions and offering narratives that enabled a shared response and a new geopolitical identity, but like Costello writes, without “an acceptable rhetoric with which to articulate that identity, however, it could be asserted with neither conviction nor acceptance” (2009, 225). The nationalist response lasted less than a year, as such national icons as Captain America quickly began to question America’s position as a victim, and instead, the effects of collective trauma began to emerge, resulting in an alienated, fragmented identity (Neal, 1998, 31).

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, shattered the dominant geopolitical narratives of America as the nation was revealed to be vulnerable just like any other. No monomythic superhero emerged in the last minute to save the “Edenic” community of America from its foes. In terms of superhero comics, the imagery that was transmitted through the constant media streams shared a strong likeness to the fictional devastations of the superhero universes, collapsing the distinction between reality and superhero imagery. National security shattered and supervillains’ reality affirmed, the crisis that ultimately emerged in the popular geopolitical identity of America after the failed nationalist response would receive its most extreme realization in the assassination of a national icon, Captain America, in 2007. However, the death of a national symbol is but the starting point in analyzing the crisis in geopolitical identities at work in the 2007 comic. The next (and final) subchapter will focus on the disintegration of the imagined community re-remembered after 9/11, and expose the deep ambivalences within the geopolitical unity of America through the death of Captain America.

6.2 No More Heroes: Evil and Fractured Identities in *The Death of Captain America*

> An era can be said to end when its basic illusions are exhausted.
> (Arthur Miller, 1974, 30)

Of all the post-9/11 superhero narratives, it was the death of Captain America that became an event so momentous it made the national headlines in the United States in March, 2007. Though another national icon, Superman, had already been killed (and revived) in the 1990s, Superman's "death" in 1992 did not carry the same geopolitical implications as Captain America's over a decade later. Indeed, many critics saw Superman's death as nothing more than a cheap publicity stunt aimed at attracting more readers, as it was obvious DC would not permanently kill such an iconic character (Rhoades, 2008, 74–75). In comparison, Captain America's death was treated as permanent, both by the editors and the marketing of Marvel Comics, with the epigraph of the collected TPB from 2008 still claiming that "Steve Rogers is gone from comics" (2008, 154). In this way, Captain America's death received the tragic gravity and permanence Superman's death at the hands of the morose and monotonous Doomsday never gained.

Whereas the "Captain America Reborn" storyline from 2009 has already established that Steve Rogers's death has not been permanent after all (as death rarely is within the superhero universe), I will contain my analysis in this chapter to the 18 issues (#25–42)[157] depicting the actual death and its initial aftermath in the storyline named *The Death of Captain America* (2007–2008). Representing the culmination of the *Civil War* crossover event that began in 2006, the surrender and subsequent death of the American icon on the steps of a New York courthouse offers not only a rather obvious allegory of the death of a particular American hero myth, but it also enables an analysis on the later effects of the collective trauma of 9/11. Though there are some clear efforts at establishing a new continuity with the appointment of a new Captain America after Steve Rogers and an emphasis on masculinity and feminine evil that could be characterized as "rephallucizing," the storyline's portrayal of confused and disoriented identities and internalized evil

[157] Issues #25-30 are collected in *The Death of Captain America Vol. 1: The Death of a Dream* (2007), issues #31-36 are collected in *The Death of Captain America Vol. 2: The Burden of Dreams* (2007-2008), and issues #37-42 are collected in *The Death of Captain America Vol. 3: The Man Who Bought America* (2008).

creates an ambiguous reading of a post-9/11 popular geopolitical identity of America.

The Death of Captain America begins where *Civil War* ended: Captain America has surrendered after realizing the collateral damage caused by the battle between superheroes. As Captain America, Steve Rogers, is being escorted to a New York courthouse, he is assassinated and pronounced dead on arrival at a nearby hospital. The hero's death shocks the superhero community determined to locate the guilty party. While Captain America's arch-nemesis, the Red Skull, is responsible for the assassination plan, the end of #25 reveals that Captain America's ex-lover, S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Sharon Carter was in fact responsible for the fatal bullets. The subsequent issues focus on Sharon, the Falcon, and the Cap's old sidekick, Bucky Barnes, as they try to figure out how to live after Steve's death. Bucky ultimately becomes the new Captain America, while the Red Skull tries to destroy America from within through a fire sale-esque economic crisis. Even though corporate evil is shown as Red Skull's weapon of choice, what emerges as an even greater danger throughout the series is the loss of self-control, the loss of identity, and the paranoia and doubt followed by not knowing who to trust. The Red Skull employs Dr. Faustus, an old Captain America villain, who deploys psychological methods that allow him to assert control over other people's minds—including Sharon Carter, whose actions killing Steve were done under Dr. Faustus's mind control, and who attempts to regain control of herself throughout the narrative. The clear-cut conventions of good and evil are replaced with moral ambiguity and distrust, as *The Death of Captain America* displays a confused disorientation that is characteristic of many post-9/11 superhero narratives, reinforced through the frequent use of flashbacks, hallucinations, and repetition within the comic (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 489).

As this kind of fragmentation of identity and narrative is typical of trauma fiction, I will discuss the relevance of the superhero's origin trauma and the representation of traumatized identities in superhero comics, and analyze the death of Captain America as an expression of a geopolitical trauma that necessitates the re-envisioning of the superhero in the post-9/11 America. As a trauma narrative, the comic explores the possibility of American heroism after 9/11, positioning not one but two new Captain Americas on opposing sides, evoking two competing forms of new patriotic masculinity. Finally, I will focus on the representation of evil in *The*

Death of Captain America, as the inside/outside dichotomy of traditional superhero narratives is replaced with a view of evil as internalized, both nationally and personally. Ultimately, what may emerge from this vision of evil is a new kind of superhero, a new geopolitical identity and narrative that no longer rests on the impossible expectations laid out by such virtuous superheroes as Captain America.

Revised Origins: Trauma, Identity, and the Death of an Icon

In a broad sense, trauma has always been at the core of the superhero narrative: as Sandifer (2008) and Brody (2006) both have argued, the superhero's trauma of origin is one of the most essential characteristics of the genre, and it is told and retold so many times it becomes inseparable from the character itself. The origin trauma of a superhero can be read as a particular manifestation of America's larger anxieties pertaining that era, from Batman's loss of parents (street violence) to the Fantastic Four's exposure to the cosmic rays (the fear of nuclear power). Importantly, the individual trauma of the superhero tends to mask a collective trauma, becoming a part of a wider process that "promotes increased strength through adversity" (Brody, 2006, 105). By individualizing these collective anxieties through fictional trauma, superhero comics can enable the reader to "make sense" of these anxieties by clearly suggesting that they can be worked into doing "good" in the same way the hero turns his personal trauma into good instead of turning to evil (like the equally traumatized Joker and Batman in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, for example). According to Brody's Freudian reading of superheroes, the superhero origin entails an identification which can lead to a "conversion from the passive and helpless . . . to the active and masterful" (2006, 110). In fact, the superhero's origin story (in all its variations) is the most told and retold story within the genre, and it is often told even when it has no direct relation to the plot in question, which marks it as "a ritual re-enactment of the traumatic event" (Sandifer, 2008, 177).

The origin story rarely offers any new information to the reader, but serves as a marker in the overall structure of the superhero comic that stresses the obsessive retelling of the origin story (ibid.). Consequently, it is interesting to note how often Captain America's origins are retold as late as the 21st century. For example, his origins are referred to in the fourth volume (2002–2004) in both "The

Extremists" (#7–11) and the following "Ice" (#12–16) storylines, and revisited once more in the alternate vision of "Cap Lives" (#17–20) and "The Bucky Issue" (#26). In volume 5 (2005–2009), the "Winter Soldier" issues #1–7 and #8–14 alone contain over ten separate "flashbacks" or other kind of retellings of Captain America's traumatic experiences in WWII, whereas *The Death of Captain America* (2007, #25–30) begins with a several page montage of Captain America's origin story and also contains several flashbacks relating his history. Captain America's origin story is then again told in detail twice in the *Road to Reborn* (2009, #49–50 and #600–601) a little more than a year later. What is remarkable is not only the frequency of these retellings, but the way their validity is increasingly put to doubt: already in *Winter Soldier*, Captain America begins to experience black and white "memories" which he cannot control nor vouch as real: "What are these memories? Someone…someone's getting inside my head…" (#4, 16).

One possible explanation for the frequent retellings of Captain America's origins and the ambiguity regarding their validity can be drawn from a desire for reaffirmation, a deliberate attempt to make sense of the past in order to define the present where Captain America's individual trauma comes to stand for the collectivity's anxieties. This kind of revision of identity can have significance on a collective level:

> [I]dentity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life. (Alexander, 2004, 22)

The way Captain America's origin trauma repeatedly emerges in his post-9/11 narratives signals a desire to re-remember a collective past, a need for a new geopolitical narrative that can assimilate some of the present traumas through a reconstructed past. Captain America's past and the comic book's constant referral to this past in order to understand the present reflects similar processes going on within the popular geopolitical identity reconstruction of the American nation after 9/11. The rewriting of Marvel's established heroes in the alternative *Ultimate* series (discussed in 3.1) serves as a more extreme example of this kind of rewriting of national heroes and their origins and identity. According to Smelser, these kinds of reconstructions are often expressed through a more dualistic morality, increased

sense of nationalism-patriotism, and the notion of instrumentalism,[158] "a sense that if there is a problem or task to be done, the thing to do is to attack it directly and without ceremony" (2004b, 276–278), all of which are clearly present in the post-9/11 *Captain America* comics.

Captain America's origin trauma is strongly tied to the collective experience of WWII, which resonates strongly with the new "War on Terror" that arose after 9/11. Consequently, the flashbacks and revisited origins of the character in the post-9/11 atmosphere clearly emphasize this link by inserting scenes and images from the Cap's time fighting the Axis as the ultimate patriotic hero. Apart from the war, Captain America's other great trauma is the death of Bucky Barnes, his teenage sidekick. Superheroes often have other significant traumas aside their origin traumas, created through "empty and symbolic repetitions" of this trauma in a manner similar to their origin stories; they are "empty and symbolic" in the sense that their inclusion into the narrative has usually no relation to the story, and they are simply retold in "empty" symbolic gestures common to traumatized subjects (Sandifer, 2008, 177–178). For example, the death of Gwen Stacy in 1973 has become as central a trauma in Spider-Man's mythology as his original loss of his beloved Uncle Ben. In a similar vein, Bucky's death emerged in the 1960s as Captain America's other major trauma, haunting him through psychedelic dream sequences and hallucinations. The trauma and guilt of failure over Bucky have become a vital part of the Captain America mythos, which adds to the significance that after 9/11, Bucky was revived not once but twice: first, *The Ultimates* remake of the Avengers myth completely erased this trauma in 2002 by letting Bucky survive while Captain America alone was plunged into the icy waters for decades. In 2005, the official Marvel continuity, too, revealed that Bucky had not in fact died, but that he had been discovered by the Soviets soon after the crash, revived, and brainwashed into a Soviet super assassin. As the trauma of losing Bucky was strongly tied to Captain America's failure as a hero, the attempt to erase this trauma by reviving Bucky in the 21st century shows a desire to rewrite the popular geopolitical narratives of America—in other words, to rewrite some of the Cold War era geopolitical scripts. This is done, among other things, by presenting Bucky as a

[158] This brand of "instrumentalism," as Smelser puts it, is an element clearly inscribed into the early post-9/11 superhero in general, who seems to advocate the "getting the job done" principle that echoes the need to dispose of formalities and return to the simpler frontier moralities of the old and mythical West (2004b, 276-278).

Cold War assassin who has to come to terms with his past, acting as a mediator in the path towards redemption as he tries to make amends for his past crimes by once more becoming an America superhero.

The Death of Captain America becomes a trauma narrative of a national scale as it tries to make sense of the death of a national icon. In order to produce a fragmented and dislocated narrative of America *The Death of Captain America* effectively removes Steve Rogers from the narrative. As Captain America himself is largely absent from the pages of the comic book focusing on his death, there is no "iconic shorthand" that would allow the reader to directly access any "American" sentiments. Captain America, in the title carrying his name, is predominantly portrayed through the eyes of others: friends, enemies, and lovers. His former lover, Sharon Carter, describes Captain America as a man who had "fought through the worst days of the 20th century, and he was still the most decent man you could ever meet" (#25, 8), while Bucky describes him as a legend, "that sainted can-do-no-wrong big brother. The guy you can't help but look up to…because you just **know** you can never be that good…that graceful under pressure…or that strong in the face of horror" (#25, 11). The narration of the comic relies heavily on captions containing internal monologues from all the main characters except Captain America. This allows the authors to draw a picture of a hero larger than life, as each of Captain America's friends gives a new perspective on him in commemoration, each time adding something to the picture, yet simultaneously denying the Captain's own voice. As public property made of the very iconic stuff of myths, it may indeed be that he cannot define himself, but has to allow the world around him to tell him who he is. On Captain America, very literally, the nation's hopes and aspirations are projected, over and over again, and his death, too, is an expression of this.

Visually, *The Death of Captain America* displays characteristics that fit a trauma narrative, as the past continues to intervene in the present and the characters are often forced to question the validity of their memories, visualized to the reader. For example, Bucky is captured at the end of #31, and subsequently subjected to Dr. Faustus's mind games. With no signs other than an unfamiliarly colored caption, the reader is shown what appears to be one of Bucky's WWII era memories—that is, until the memory goes "wrong" and Captain America begins to shoot his own while shouting "Heil Hitler! Make way for the master race!" (#31, 5). Bucky even experiences a page (#31, 19) of hallucinatory visions that are an obvious visual

tribute to artist Jim Steranko, whose psychedelic surrealism in the 1960s captured Captain America's traumatized guilt over Bucky in *Captain America* #111 (Mar 1969) to a memorable effect. Whereas the original page stressed Captain America's guilt over Bucky's death, the homage reverses this scene by placing Bucky as the one experiencing the trauma. These kinds of "false" memories and surrealist hallucinations create a feeling of disorientation and doubt, which, as I will argue, are characteristic of a trauma narrative.

However, *The Death of Captain America* takes only a very limited advantage of the medium's potential of expressing trauma through the visual narrative and its ability to portray fragmented narratives and the feeling of dislocation and timelessness. The overarching color scheme is one of bleak, grayish colors, one of the few exceptions being bright red, which highlights the otherwise grim world without Captain America. The choice of coloring differs substantially from the primary-colored world of the older *Captain America* comics, and indicates the change from the old clear-cut morals to a much more ambiguous and morally unclear palette where heroes are equally ambivalent. While the dark gutters between the panels and the overall color scheme do express some of the darkness, despair, and mourning experienced by the characters, the narrative structure does not really take advantage of such elements as juxtaposition or fragmented visual narration to truly convey a sense of trauma. Instead, the effects of the trauma are represented more on the thematic level through the aforementioned issues of isolation, helplessness, and loss of self-control and identity—issues that are simultaneously both private and national.

The death of Captain America suggests a geopolitical crisis, the "death of a dream" as the sub-title of the first collected volume of *The Death of Captain America* boldly stated. Whereas the 1970s and the 1980s saw him repeatedly resigning and giving up the cowl and shield of Captain America, in the 21st century he has no other choice but to die. Already the fact that he surrenders at the end of *Civil War* marks a shift in his position as an American hero: as Jewett and Lawrence (2003, 74) have argued, the rhetoric of American nationalism has always viewed compromise as "repulsive" and all controlling institutions as statements of doubt towards its moral crusade. The Superhero Registration Act is a clear expression of this kind of doubt towards the superheroic mission, and Captain America's refusal to participate is therefore perfectly logical. Crucially, when Captain America

surrenders at the end of *Civil War*, he simultaneously places himself in a highly ambiguous position as a national hero in terms of this rhetoric, as his surrender implicitly signals a confirmation that his (and by broad allegory, America's) crusade may not be as valid as the nation would like it to be. Testifying to the dramatic effect of his surrender, the crowd is pictured holding either "FREE CAPTAIN AMERICA" signs or "TRAITOR" signs, showing the deep division within the nation that replaced the initial responses of national unity discussed earlier. He is hit in the face with a rotten tomato, accompanied by the accusation "Since when does Captain America **surrender**?! **Loser**!" (#25, 13). Captain America's status as an American hero becomes questionable precisely *because* of his surrender, as it brutally undermines the view of the hero's (and by analogy, the nation's) mission and its righteousness. No longer just a matter of a new identity, Captain America literally has to die rather than accept defeat.

In the place of Steve Rogers, *The Death of Captain America* presents not one but two Captain Americas: Bucky Barnes, taking on the cowl and shield reluctantly with Tony Stark's approval, and the "Commie Smasher!" Captain America of the 1950s, presumed dead but revived by the Red Skull. In the midst of a national identity crisis, these two Captain Americas come to represent two competing geopolitical visions of America, both dressed in the American flag and embodying a variation of the hegemonic masculine ideal that still dominates the genre (see chapter 3). The comic offers its readers two visions of a new Captain America to replace Steve Rogers, both patriotic but different in the way they are willing to implement their patriotism.[159] While the 1950s' Captain America embodies the violent tendencies of the Golden Age, it is Bucky's Captain America who emerges as the 21st-century Captain America through his partial refusal to solve ideological issues solely with violence. Bucky's willingness to solve matters without violence becomes crucial, as it signals a new feature of the American hero: a desire to incorporate new aspects into himself:

> If Captain America defeats his villains by physically beating them in combat, it is indicative of further repression of American anxieties. If, however, he attempts to reconcile with his villains, America has accepted that characteristic of the shadow as a part of its national identity. (Steinmetz, 2009, 193)

[159] These two Captain Americas would meet again in a 2010 storyline "Two Americas," where again their conflicting worldviews would be measured in physical combat. As before, the differences between the two Captain Americas was seen in the way they implemented their patriotism on others rather than the patriotic virtue itself.

The confrontation of the two Captain Americas is inevitable, as is their good/evil division. Bucky Barnes becomes the "good" Captain America, whilst the 1950s' Captain America, famous for persecuting communists in the 1950s, becomes the "evil" Captain whose moral values, though implicitly from the Golden Age, are inevitably corrupt and dated. Crucially, the fight ends with Bucky offering his help to the other Captain America, signaling a willingness to incorporate some of the values embedded in the idealized dreams of the past. However, the 1950's Captain America refuses this incorporation, choosing to escape instead. In his unrelenting black-and-white worldview, compromise (which marked Steve Rogers as a traitor) is not an option, and this eventually becomes his downfall, as he is unable to see and accept 21st-century America for what it is.

In this light, the fact that Bucky Barnes becomes the new Captain America after Steve Rogers is not without significance. While Steve Rogers became Captain America after being injected with a Super-Soldier serum that gave him supernatural abilities, Bucky is not a super-soldier, his only advantage being a mechanical arm originally built by the Soviets and subsequently upgraded by Nick Fury. By making Bucky Captain America, the comic is arguably doing what Smith and Goodrum see as the "rephallucization" of the United States: as they claim, 9/11 revealed that superheroes could no longer protect the nation, signaling that the superhero needed to be redefined, and this was done by "endowing non-superheroes with superhero-like qualities" (2011, 495), by rephallucizating and thus empowering the ordinary people without superpowers. By giving Bucky Barnes the cowl and shield of Captain America, the comic redefines Captain America as a distinctively more human hero—something that the saintly super-soldier Steve Rogers could never be. Bucky's masculinity is not enhanced through the Super-Soldier serum the way Steve Rogers's was, thus branding him distinctively more "man" and less "super." Furthermore, Bucky expresses feelings of doubt over his masculine abilities in terms of heroism, as in comparison with Steve he always finds himself lacking. In other words, Bucky's masculinity is ultimately more human, prone to error and miscalculation in a way Steve Rogers (at least in Bucky's view) never was.

Bucky does not only rephallucize American heroism through his masculinity, but his past as a Soviet assassin and his conflicted views on being a hero mean that his actions are redemptive, thus pulling at the very core of the

American monomyth. After years as a Soviet assassin, he needs to make amends, to redeem himself through heroic acts, yet his past crimes may mean that he is never granted a permanent position within society as a "good guy."[160] Redemptive action itself, according to Smith and Goodrum, can become an ideological tool that "reinforces ideologies of masculinity thrown into confusion through a loss of ideological belief in the dominant fiction precipitated by the terrorist attacks" (2011, 495). As the new Captain America, Bucky Barnes looks for redemption while attempting to live up to the ideal left by Steve Rogers, his confusion and doubt over the "right thing" mirroring a new geopolitical status emerging at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. This confusion and doubt is most clearly distinguishable in the ambiguity and distrust that characterizes *The Death of Captain America* and the way the traditional inside/outside dichotomy of good and evil is replaced with a new variation of internalized threat. In the next and final section, I will examine these "shades of gray" that emerge in *The Death of Captain America* and the internalization of evil that signals an era of new, more ambiguous superheroes.

Shades of Gray: Negotiating Between Good and Evil

As Brandy Ball Blake's analysis on graphic novels as trauma fiction suggests, trauma (whether national or individual) is experienced primarily as a sense of helplessness and increased isolation from society (2009), and this feeling of helplessness is often expressed through a sense of losing control, of not being able to control one's actions or emotions. In comics, this may be presented through hallucinations, flashbacks, and fragmented narration, all central characteristics of trauma fiction. As *Civil War* and *The Death of Captain America* both demonstrate, this helplessness and isolation can also manifest through an inner conflict over choosing the right course of action and choosing a side when neither option can be defined as simply "good" or "evil." The moral shades of gray that began to appear in the superhero comic in the 1980s are now developed into a slightly different variation that exploits some of the popular geopolitical themes from the past decades (such as the threat emanating from within the nation, which has been a part

[160] Indeed, as Bucky attacks the villain Crossbones after Captain America's assassination, Crossbones asks "Don't tell me…you think…you're a **good guy** now?" to which Bucky merely replies "Not exactly" (#25, 24), testifying to his position as neither hero nor villain.

of the genre since the Cold War as a fear of communist spies, and which is now transformed into the fear of the faceless corporate executive and the corrupt government official who cripple the nation from within).

The threats the hero faces are increasingly featured as coming from within, and in *The Death of Captain America*, evil is often literally within the characters: for example, the Red Skull literally inhabits the mind of his partner in crime, the Russian CEO Alexander Lukin, where the two villains battle for control. The most shocking loss of control, however, comes with Sharon Carter, Captain America's colleague and former lover, whose hands are responsible for the fatal bullets that take Steve Rogers's life. To add to the dramatic narrative of #25, neither Sharon nor the reader is aware of this until the very end of the issue, when Sharon is forced to remember her actions and the reader witnesses these memories (#25, 31). The final page of the issue contains a shocking visual, as Sharon's disbelief ("What did I do ...? What did I do?" #25, 32) is contrasted with an image of Steve Rogers, dead and partially covered on a hospital gurney, showing one open, dead eye looking seemingly straight at the reader. In this way, Sharon Carter comes to reflect the nation's collective paranoia, affirming the "rhetoric of conspiracy" that suggests that the control of one's mind and body may not be one's own (Knight, 2000, 4).

Though Sharon is hardly the main villain of *The Death of Captain America*, the fact that it is she who kills Steve Rogers fits in well with Smith and Goodrum's claim that post-9/11 superhero comics tend to cast women in the role of the aggressor in an attempt to reassert masculine power (2011, 494). This analysis is further supported by the way Sin, the Red Skull's daughter, is presented as aggressively sexual and highly violent, a "female terrorist" the new Captain America has to defeat. Evil women are often characterized as mentally unstable, which tends to suggest that women are somehow "beyond reason" (Smith and Goodrum, 2011, 494) and they can become a threat to the male protagonist.[161] Read from this perspective, it becomes quite obvious that by casting the female as the foreign binary opposite to the male hero, the comic does very little to deconstruct the simplistic binaries of the genre, as the "invading unknowable" is cast in terms of femininity in a way that allows the superhero to regain his phallic power by rejecting this feminine evil.

[161] This also closely ties in with the discussion in 3.3 concerning female superheroes and the way their emotions are often depicted as a weakness.

In addition to casting evil in clearly gendered terms, *The Death of Captain America* also stresses the connection between masculinity and violence where violence once more arises as the chief way to regain control and establish an identity after the death of a nation-defining icon. Isolated by their past experiences and actions, both Sharon Carter and Bucky Barnes are depicted as disconnected from everyone else, striving to regain control of their selves. While Sharon Carter succumbs to the feminine stereotype by battling for control in her mind (and thus remaining static), Bucky's attempts to regain his position as a hero are done in accordance with the myth of masculine violence as empowering, aiming for an illusion of control (as discussed in chapter 4.). Despite the fact that he aims to solve his conflict with the other Captain America without violence (as mentioned in the previous section), that ultimately remains the only occasion within the comic where Bucky expresses any wishes to refrain from violence, which also casts doubts over Bucky's role as a "hero": after all, as I argued in chapter 4, vigilante violence should never be a source of enjoyment, but rather something to be taken to as a last resort, and by expressing a clear comfort in violence, Bucky's use of violence, though empowering (and thus echoing the desire to "rephallusize" the nation) ultimately comes to challenge his role as a hero.

This is very apparent in the way Bucky reacts after a man with a U.S. Navy tattoo calls Steve Rogers a traitor:

> I know what Steve would do here. He'd debate. He'd point out that just because a majority of people believe something doesn't mean it's right. He'd remind the room that a majority of the American people once supported **slavery**, too. But I'm not Steve. (#26, 18–19)

The last line "But I'm not Steve" opens up to a new splash page, showing Bucky starting a bar brawl instead of acting the way he knows Steve would (and he should). The relevance of regaining control through this violent action is clearly present, as Bucky muses: "I get lost on the explosion of violence. Maybe because it's where I belong." (#26, 20), indicating that he at least partially feels in control of his identity and actions through violence, even enjoys it. This view of violence as "natural" and intrinsic to his identity is repeated in #38 as Bucky's monologue states: "…it feels like the good old days. Much as I hate to **call them** that…to realize that death and combat are **this** comfortable to me. But they are. This is what I was born for" (#38, 14–15) while the panels show him brutally attacking nameless and faceless A.I.M. agents. Furthermore, in the initial hopelessness he feels after

Steve's death, Bucky comes to the realization that the "one thing" he can do—in other words, the one thing that will empower him—after Steve's death is to kill Tony Stark, whom he holds responsible for the death (#26, 22). All these examples demonstrate the way Bucky not only regains control of his identity through acts of extreme violence, but they also suggest that he actively seeks out this violent confrontation he experiences as natural, further entering into the discourses of vigilante violence already problematized in this dissertation (see chapter 4).

While Bucky's battle for control over his emotions and the reconstruction of an identity after Captain America's death is largely solved through the use of external violence, Sharon Carter comes closer to the idea of internalized evil through the battle taking place completely within her mind.[162] In depicting this battle, the comic book relies on the unique vehicle of captions to indicate the ongoing struggle for control.[163] The coloring of the captions on each page assists the reader in identifying who "speaks," and the visual narrative usually confirms it within a few panels. Sharon, being blonde, is originally identified by a bright yellow, whereas the Falcon's captions echo the red coloring of his outfit. Bucky speaks in gray, indicating that his role as a hero may be equally gray. This coloring of the captions becomes a crucial clue within the comic: starting from #31, Sharon's captions become black, indicating her loss of self-control in Dr. Faustus's power. The captions also address Sharon directly, indicating a presence in her mind that is not her, controlling her actions:

> *[Caption]*: Captain America is dead... and **we** killed him. We **killed** Steve Rogers.
> *Sharon*: Stop it... that's not fair. It was **Doctor Faustus**, controlling us...or **me**...but it **wasn't** me.
> *[Caption]*: It was our hand on the trigger, Sharon. You **can't** deny that.
> *Sharon*: No...
> *[Caption]*: Why are you fighting this? What reason **have you** to fight? That's right. None. Now do as we were **told**...and go join the revolution. (#31, 1)

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[162] Mind control itself is an old source of fear and fascination in American culture, as the so-called "Manchurian Candidate" program by the American government and the popularity of various conspiracy theories related to "brainwashing" and mind control show (Knight, 2000, 173).

[163] Whereas *The Death of Captain America* by and large misses the full potential offered by the medium, it does present clear images of trauma. One such instance of timelessness and isolation occurs on p. 5 (#26), where Sharon retells her resignation after Steve's death: her image and speech balloon are in a panel that fades to complete black, distancing her from her surroundings and stressing her feeling of isolation and hopelessness. This is repeated after one panel, as Val asks her: "Life without S.H.I.E.L.D.? What will you **do**?" Again, the panel fades to black without any distinguishable background, indicating the desolation Sharon will face without her career as an agent.

After this dialogue within her mind, the black caption voice wins, and Sharon no longer controls her own mind. Later in the narrative, though, she slowly manages to fight back by telling the voice inside her head to "**Shut up**." (#32, 18). It is clear that Sharon's mind is occupied by a controlling force, which she attempts to resist (and succeeds, momentarily, as she frees Bucky from Dr. Faustus). At the end of #36 she manages to silence the voice in her head and presumably regain the control of herself, and her own caption narration resumes its familiar yellow shade, indicating that, at least momentarily, she has been able to silence the "evil" within her.[164]

The Death of Captain America continues the theme that arose in the genre already in the 1980s' "dark turn" that aimed to remove the binary division between the hero and the villain. However, instead of simply casting the hero in terms of the villain, the comic aims to challenge the entire dichotomy through its paranoia-laced representation of evil as an internal threat rather than something that exists on the outside (though evil *does* also take physical form in the villains, Dr. Faustus and the Red Skull). Arising from the culture of paranoia that has been present in American culture in the 1950s' communist hunts and which escalated after the assassination of President Kennedy (Knight, 2000, 25–28), the comic enters this discourse of paranoia and conspiracy by stressing the suspicion and doubt that emerges both between the heroes as well as in connection to the legal authorities. This internalized evil is repeatedly portrayed as a real threat, from Sharon Carter's fatal bullets to the brainwashed S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who open fire on unarmed civilians at Dr. Faustus's command (#34, 21–22). The threat of mind control means that no-one can be trusted, as friends can become enemies at the utterance of a single word. The 21st-century superhero, rising from the ashes of the virtuous and idealized Captain America, no longer fits to the old categories of heroes and villains, subscribing instead to a moral palette of various shades of gray instead of the old black and white. For example, a prominent role is given to the Black Widow (Natalia Romanova), a Soviet-trained super-spy who defected and is now working with the Avengers. A former villain turned hero, her status is still deliberately ambiguous. As

[164] Somewhat similarly, at the beginning of Vol. 2 Bucky's captions are of an unfamiliar color, and what we perceive as his memories show Captain America as a traitor. The next pages then reveal that neither the captions nor the memory are in fact Bucky's but dictated by Dr. Faustus (and rejected by Bucky). Through these visual cues in the captions, the comic book delicately highlights the identity confusions that form one of the core themes of the story.

the Black Widow herself states when questioned about assisting Bucky, the new Captain America, on his first unsanctioned mission: "Ah, well… I'm the Black Widow…I live among the shades of grey." (#34, 4).[165]

When evil is presented as internalized, its geopolitical relevance can also be analyzed from a different perspective. The villains in *The Death of Captain America*, the Red Skull and Alexander Lukin, are clear echoes of the genre's past villains as the Red Skull's origins tie him to both fascism and Nazism, whereas Lukin's Russian origins also strongly evoke the Cold War past of the nation. Thus, both characters carry with them a myriad host of geopolitical connotations and expectations that cannot be erased. However, what their depiction stresses are not their pasts, but their new role as 21st-century villains. Instead of gaudy Nazi uniforms, monocles, or other "subtle" signs of past villainy, the villains now wear sleek suits and inhabit luxurious penthouses that stress the corporate side of their evil. Both the Red Skull and the Russian CEO Alexander Lukin, the story's main villains, are depicted as "sophisticated and Machiavellian,"[166] hiding behind Lukin's massive multinational Kronas Corporation while orchestrating the massive economic chaos that threatens the entire United States (Steinmetz, 2009, 199). When Lukin and the Red Skull ultimately end up in the same body—thanks to the deus ex machina device called the Cosmic Cube that enables its owner to imagine anything into reality—they become corporate evil manifest. The Red Skull's fascist origins as a Nazi villain emerge only once during *The Death of Captain America*, as he addresses his own private army while wearing a military uniform (#31, 12). Indeed, even a 1944 flashback of the Red Skull watching the Allied march across Paris in the opening pages of #37 shows the Skull wearing a black suit and a tie rather than the "goofy green jumpsuit with a swastika" (Steinmetz, 2009, 199) he used to sport for decades. Suits, limousines, and penthouses have replaced the traditional fascist and military imagery that for decades stood for the epitome of supervillainous evil in superhero comics.

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[165] The Black Widow's ambiguous nature as hero was a key issue in the second volume of *The Ultimates*, Marvel's separate revamped continuity of the Avengers. In this universe, the Black Widow became romantically involved with Tony Stark, agreeing to marry him only to reveal herself a traitor and a spy a few issues later.

[166] Another such transformation can be found in Superman's arch nemesis, Lex Luthor, who began his life of crime as a mad scientist, but has been increasingly depicted as a corporate tycoon and "richest man on earth" since John Byrne's revision of him in *The Man of Steel* in 1986 (Daniels, 2004, 192).

Despite the fact that these villains technically stand for foreign money and influence, the way they corrupt the nation from within is noteworthy here: indeed, it is made clear that even the U.S. government itself is corrupt and bought by Lukin/Red Skull, suggesting that the government should be viewed with suspicion (a similar suggestion is made even in the 2012 feature film *The Avengers*). So while the corrupting influence may come from outside, it reaches so deep within that it threatens to remove the xenophobic element traditionally associated with the Other (Steinmetz, 2009, 199). Instead, the comic restores the "culture of paranoia" that has been read as characteristic for postwar America, even claimed as one of the nation's defining features as the "emerging state was shaped by the continual fear of sinister enemies, both real and imagined, both external and internal" (Knight, 2000, 2). Indeed, one of the central features of this culture of paranoia is the increased distrust towards governmental authorities, a theme most prominently present in superhero comics since the 1980s. Furthermore, Knight argues, the turn of the millennium and the "era of transnational corporations and a globalized economy" furthered the suspicions that America may not have been in control of its own national economic destiny (2000, 4)—a fear clearly expressed in *The Death of Captain America*.

Drawing from this deep cultural paranoia and fear of conspiracy, the popular geopolitical narrative of America as threatened is expressed through *Captain America*, which is marked by internal evil and constant betrayal as even each of Captain America's closest allies turns against him: *Civil War* saw Tony Stark siding against him in the Superhero Registration Act, his old sidekick Bucky returned from the dead as a Soviet assassin attempting to kill him, and his lover, Sharon, ended up killing him. Even the government sees him as a threat that needs to be subdued, while simultaneously shown making deals with the evil corporation that aims to "cripple" America (#35, 8–9). All Captain America's allies turn against him, in some way betraying him. In this "new political economy" of the Marvel universe, which Costello sees mirroring that of the United States, everyone has their own sinister agenda, leading to "the realization that the source of these threats emanates from those who are supposed to be defending against them" (2009, 199) as even the government is revealed as corrupt. The ultimate level in internal evil arises from the nation itself, from its authorities and transnational corporations.

This variation of 21st-century evil is distinctively intangible, invisible, and internal; it cannot be battled with force or solved with the good old right hook of the

Golden Age hero. The cathartic battle between hero and villain, between two competing ideologies, has been removed and replaced with a threat that is less categorizable in terms of inside/outside. Despite the fact that the evil does enter into the mind from outside, it has become less discernible—even concretely, as Marvel's 2008 limited series "Secret Invasion" shows: the comic dealt with a long-term invasion of Earth by the alien race the Skrulls, who as shapeshifters had secretly replaced several Marvel heroes with impostors over the years (the paranoia-inducing tagline for the series was "Who do you trust?"). In a rising culture of paranoia, the lines between heroes and villains are less distinguishable, further blurred by such heroes as Bucky, whose past actions and current views on violence and his own heroism cast him as a morally ambiguous hero. As Jeff Geers writes, instead of the traditional hero, a new hero must emerge from the traumatized culture of 9/11, reconstructing the culture and his heroism from within (2012, 260).

It is tempting to read Captain America as "an anachronism in tights" (Lawrence, 2009, 6) and the death of Steve Rogers as an allegory of the death of a mythicized "America," as an end of an era in many ways. *The Death of Captain America* depicts an America in the process of an identity crisis through heroes who face a world without moral certainties. Steve Rogers, the epitome of the American national hero and "the paragon of American virtue," (Costello, 2009, 240) is dead, and his boots may well prove impossible to fill. In his place, Bucky Barnes offers a "more flawed, less virtuous ideal" trying to do his best while knowing he may never reach the goals set up by Steve Rogers's example (ibid.). The shades of gray that shadow the increasingly blurred hero/villain dichotomy are most clear in the depiction of evil as internal, coming from within and manifested as loss of self-control and identity. Yet, the past is still evoked in order to make sense of the present in order to create a coherent popular geopolitical identity of America in the wake of 9/11 and the War on Terror.

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In this chapter, I have analyzed the superhero comic in the aftermath of 9/11, and identified two contradictory ways in which the post-9/11 superhero comics attempted to reconstruct America's geopolitical narratives. While the superhero initially stressed national unity and the role of "real" heroes, this approach was soon replaced with geopolitical narratives questioning this unity, representing a nation divided with a deep distrust. This division culminated in the death of Captain

America, leaving the nation momentarily without a national hero. Instead, the divide between heroes and villains began to shift, and a new variety of an internal and intangible evil was introduced in the form of corporate evil and loss of self-control.

Out of this shifting identity, a new superhero may perhaps be born. Although Captain America's presence is still strong within the text despite the fact that he himself narrates nothing, he is no longer a hero of today's world. The abstract idea of America created out of the descriptions of Steve Rogers is larger than life, an ideal to aspire to. He has truly become a national myth, and as Neal writes, it is precisely through the myths and legends of a nation that both social continuity and frames of reference are created, aiding at shaping a collective identity (1998, 202). However, the darker contexts and ambiguous threats of the 21st-century superhero comics like *Captain America* clearly imply that America is threatened, but both the enemy and the way to respond to it are constantly being rewritten. Similarly, without a way to define the mission while continuously questioning American virtues, the nation lacks a way to approach the War on Terror (Costello, 2009, 213). The time for unambiguous heroes like Steve Rogers may have passed, and the choices today's "heroes" face are much more complex, and involve compromise and moral ambiguities that are completely new to the traditional monomythic tradition of the American superhero, and by extension, to the popular American geopolitical identity.

7. Conclusions: …to Be Continued?

> I intend to speak before the **United Nations** tomorrow and inform them that I am **renouncing** my **U.S. citizenship**. I'm tired of having my **actions** construed as instruments of **U.S. policy**. "Truth, justice, and the **American** way" -- it's not **enough** anymore. (Superman, "The Incident," *Action Comics* #900, May/Jun 2011)

There is an old joke saying that Superman, who stands for "truth and justice" on the one hand and the "American Way" on the other, must surely be an oxymoron (cf. Gordon, 2006, 177). In a way, this idea of Superman as an oxymoron is precisely what this dissertation has been about: the essentially contradictory nature of the superhero, who is often cited as a representative of America, yet a closer look at the superhero's actions quickly challenges this notion. Though the superhero is often cited as America's "iconic shorthand," "emblem," or "avatar," a closer analysis of this national icon during the last three decades has revealed a multifaceted and often paradoxical character whose significance to the nation and its popular geopolitical narratives is evident in the way the superhero comic still actively engages with these issues. The superhero's relationship with American geopolitics is ridden with issues pertaining to identity, power, and authority, and the popular geopolitical narratives rendered visible in recent superhero comics reveal a serious geopolitical confusion, as evidenced by Superman's threat to renounce his U.S. citizenship in 2011 (as cited above) or the Tea Party incident quoted at the beginning of this dissertation. The superhero's refusal to become an "instrument of U.S. policy" is a clear indicator of the rift that exists between the superhero as the nation's ideal and the superhero as an actual representative of that nation. In fact, Superman's refusal to remain a representative of America in 2011 echoes a similar refusal stated several decades earlier by Captain America himself, who, even more than Superman, carries the weight of the being America's emblematic hero. Yet, as we saw in chapter 6, even Captain America could not survive the 21st century, leaving behind him a nation in confusion. Though Steve Rogers has since then returned from the dead (as superheroes are wont to do), his death marked a turning point in the superhero

narrative in terms of popular geopolitics, suggesting an era without superheroes. Yet, in a society without heroes but only enemies, the nation is at risk of defining itself negatively and ultimately becoming "empty, hostile, and closed-in" upon itself (Thomson, 2005, 118).

The superhero's popular geopolitics is defined through the interwoven concepts of masculinity, violence, and the superhero's complex relationship with the state, the last of which is approached in this dissertation through the concept of the state of exception. A slightly separate, yet vital issue arises from 9/11 and its impact on the superhero comic in terms of popular geopolitics. Narrating nationality and narrating how to be an American, the late 20th-century and early 21st-century superhero comics form a popular discourse of the fantastic, yet they retain a connection to the real as they address such issues as 9/11 and its consequences through their heroes. The superhero is able to both sustain and criticize America's ideals, drawing attention to domestic issues through depictions of abuse of power, or even questioning the nation's "defining principles" of equality and freedom by exposing the superheroic ideal's undemocratic and untenable premises. For example, such narratives as *Truth: Red, White and Black* show a clear desire to critically readdress America's history, both in the fictional world of Captain America and in the real world of silenced black history.

However, there are hazards in reading popular culture only in terms of ideology, as this kind of analysis is in danger of ignoring the elements of cultural economy that may be less tied to geopolitics and more to the dynamics of production and consumption of popular culture (Dittmer, 2011, 127). To put is simply: though political agendas may exist in superhero comics, they are also produced in hopes of financial gain. Furthermore, though superhero comics can "offer certain cultural resources for audiences with which to operate and shape their geopolitical imaginations," many readers may choose to ignore these political implications in favor of a more escapist and redundant reading (ibid.). It should also be remembered that superhero comics are usually directed to a rather marginal (if vocal) audience, which raises the inevitable question of how such a subcultural product is able to reflect the popular sentiments of the entire American nation.

Aiming at a "symptomal reading" of my key texts, the close reading of the chosen comics enabled the analysis of the way the superhero comic narrates American popular geopolitics as well as the deconstruction of some of the ethnic,

gendered, and social binary oppositions within the genre. The superhero comic offers the hegemonic ideal of masculine perfection, yet it often does this at the cost of other, non-hegemonic forms of masculinity. The superhero's actions are defined by violence, which becomes a particularly challenging dilemma in the superhero comic as violence becomes an intrinsic element in defining hegemonic masculinity and masculine empowerment. These displays of masculine violence, in terms of popular geopolitics, carry with them a host of issues as their principles transfer to the actual policies of America. The superhero's contradictory nature is revealed to the fullest when examining his relationship with the state, as the superhero essentially has to break the law in order to uphold it and consequently threaten the very premises of democracy. Ultimately, through the close examination of these popular culture narratives, this dissertation has aimed at reaching a more comprehensive understanding of the collective geopolitical identity of America and how it is constructed and sometimes contested in superhero comics.

Arguing that comics require an interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation follows a conceptual interdisciplinarity that has allowed for a more synthesized approach to superhero comics. This kind of approach has allowed for a multilayered and challenging research which has stressed the role of a theoretically informed close reading of the chosen texts. While some of the key texts were explicitly counter-hegemonical, other texts were read with the aim of revealing some of the hidden bias within the text by rendering visible the way they narrate American identity and geopolitics in their representation of masculinity, violence, or the state of exception. As a result, these central concepts and their relevance in the study of superhero comics have been made evident through the analysis, whereas the comics themselves have been opened up to new interpretations and readings that enrich the expanding field of comics scholarship. By especially focusing on superhero comics produced within the last three decades, this dissertation has produced both completely new scholarship through its analysis of recent superhero comics as well as contested some of the existing research on such works as *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*.

Studying American culture through comics as well as comics as American culture, this research falls into the double categories of Comics Studies and American Studies with the goal of reorienting some of the established themes of previous scholarship on superhero comics. Indeed, one of the things this dissertation

has accomplished is the way it has engaged the "myth of the American superhero" (as defined by Lawrence and Jewett) with actual analysis of the superhero comic. Though the term "superhero" features heavily in Lawrence and Jewett's writing, the authors repeatedly generalize the term outside superhero comics and never actually focus on the superhero comic itself. Ultimately, this has also meant that in order to study the comic book superhero as a representation of the American monomyth, this monomyth had to be critically reassessed and put into a dialogue with both the nation's cultural history and the superheroes themselves. As a result, both the comic book superhero and the American monomyth gain new critical insights. For example, the "familiar themes" of American nationalism, democracy and citizenship, and what constitutes an "American" identity as identified by Radway et al. (2009, 4), can be reassessed in the light of recent superhero comics with the aim of gaining a better understanding of some of the contradictions at the heart of American history and identity in the 21st century. As Radway et al. point out, the study of these contradictions can expose "the intersection between new frameworks for analysis and older ways of narrating the American past" in the ongoing tensions that characterize American life (2009, 4). Recent superhero comics such as *Superman: Red Son* or *Civil War* have been analyzed in this dissertation as new narratives of American geopolitical identity that clearly aim at a politicized representation of the superhero, while other comics, such as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* or *Identity Crisis*, have been read critically in order to render visible the problematic ways they feature such issues as vigilante violence or the representation of women.

Though assessed critically within this study, there is no denying that the superhero, especially Captain America, holds a central role in popular American geopolitics. Comic book superheroes like Captain America (or his Canadian counterpart, Captain Canuck) represent "popular cultural characteristics, myths, symbols, and stereotypes" that function to legitimize and reinforce the conception of a national identity (Edwardson, 2003, 184). The superhero's currency today is not any lesser, despite the questioning of the superhero tradition after 9/11. Indeed, superhero cinema has experienced a surprising rise in popularity in the 21st century, the latest example being Marvel's *The Avengers* movie (dir. Joss Whedon), which set new box office records in May, 2012, as it grossed over 200 million dollars

during its opening weekend in the United States alone, and over one billion dollars globally less than a month after its release.

The superhero has often been claimed to embody America and its ideology, yet rarely has any research seriously engaged with this claim. By actually investigating the superhero and the popular geopolitical identity he represents, the superhero's relationship with American ideology has proven to be infinitely more complex as well as contradictory. Overall, what this study has accomplished is a more comprehensive view of both the superhero comic and American popular geopolitics. Superman's famous claim to stand for Truth, Justice, and the American Way may be an oxymoron, but it is still a highly fascinating and engaging oxymoron that actively addresses the discourses on power, identity, and authority in the 21st century.

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