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Superhero Comics and the Popular Geopolitics of American Identity

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Englantilaisen filologian oppialaan kuuluvassa lisensiaatintutkielmassani erittelen ja analysoin supersankarisarjakuvien roolia Yhdysvaltojen populaarisen geopoliittisen identiteetin rakentumisessa. Tutkimuksessani keskityn etenkin siihen, miten supersankarisarjakuvien kautta muodostuva populaari kansallinen identiteetti tarkemmin analysoituna paljastaa useita ristiriitoja supersankarin edustamien kansallisten ihanteiden ja hahmon käytännön toimien välillä. Yhdeksi keskeisimmistä ristiriidoista tutkimuksessa nousee demokratian puolustaminen epädemokraattisin keinoin, mikä tutkimuksessani edustaa sekä supersankarisarjakuvan että Yhdysvaltojen vallitsevaa ideologiaa.

Tutkimukseni keskeisen tutkimusaineiston muodostavat tarkkaan valitut ”avaintekstit”, joiden kautta tuon esille keskeisiä Yhdysvaltojen populaarin geopolitiikan ongelmakohtia. Näitä tekstejä ovat mm. Alan Mooren ja Dave Gibbonsin *Watchmen* (1987), Frank Millerin *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Mark Millarin *Superman: Red Son* (2003) sekä *Captain America* –sarjakuvat eri vuosikymmenten ajalta. Kaikki valitut avaintekstit omalla tavallaan rakentavat (tai purkavat) Yhdysvaltojen populaarista geopoliittista identiteettiä ja tuovat esiin sen keskeisiä ongelmakohtia. Useat näistä avainteksteistä on julkaistu viimeisten kolmen vuosikymmenen aikana, ja ne edustavat supersankarisarjakuvassa viime vuosituhannen lopulla tapahtunutta murrosta kohti avoimesti poliittisempaa ja synkempää tematiikkaa. Tutkimuksen metodi on harkitun poikkitieteellinen, ja tutkimuksessa yhdistyvät näkökulmat kirjallisuuden- ja kulttuurintutkimuksesta traumateoriaan ja yhteiskuntafilosofiaan. Tutkimuksen kantavana menetelmänä toimii kohdetekstien lähiluku, joka tapahtuu populaarin geopoliittisen identiteetin tutkimuksen kontekstissa ja korostaa nimenomaan populaarikulttuurin merkittävyyttä tässä identiteetinmuodostumisprosessissa. Supersankari määrittäyty tutkimuksessani nimenomaan amerikkalaisen monomyytin viitekehyksen kautta, mikä osaltaan vaikuttaa hahmon ja genren merkittävyyteen amerikkalaisen kansallisen identiteetin rakentumisessa.

Lisensiaatintutkimukseni on jaettu viiteen osaan, joista kukin keskittyy yhteen keskeiseen tutkimusalueeseen: ensimmäisessä osassa kartoitan supersankarisarjakuvan kulttuurihistoriallista merkitystä nimenomaan Yhdysvalloissa syntyneenä genrenä, joka osaltaan muokkaa maan kansallista minuutta, ja tuon esille supersankarin merkittävyyttä nimenomaan amerikkalaisen monomyytin edustajana. Toisessa osassa käsittelen tarkemmin geopolitiittisen identiteetin muotoutumista populaarikulttuurin kautta ja erityisesti supersankarin ikonisen hahmon merkittävyyttä tässä prosessissa. Kolmannessa osassa tuon esille maskuliinisen supersankari-ihanteen vastapuolen: naiset ja rikolliset. Molemmat ryhmät toimivat sankarille alisteisissa rooleissa, ja erityisesti naispuolisten sankareiden kyseenalainen asema miesvaltaisessa genressä kielii vastaavasta ongelmallisesta suhtautumisesta voimakkaisiin naisiin Yhdysvalloissa. Rikollisen rooli sankarin torjuttuna peilikuvana tuodaan esille Jokerin hahmon kautta, sillä hahmoon yhdistetty tekstuaalinen ja seksuaalinen anarkia toimii monilla tasoilla sankarin edustaman heteronormatiivisen identiteetin vastakohtana.

Neljännessä osassa keskityn supersankaruuden politiikkaan ja erityisesti ”Captain America Complex” –oireyhtymäksi nimettyyn ilmiöön, joka tuo esille supersankaruuden (ja Yhdysvaltojen) ideologian ristiriitaisuuden: demokratian toistuvan puolustamisen käytännössä epädemokraattisin

keinoin. Supersankarin kyvyttömyys edustaa puolustamiaan arvoja nousee keskeiseksi kysymykseksi, jota lähestytään sekä vallan että poikkeustilan käsitteiden kautta. Viimeisessä osassa käsittelen trauman ja geopolitiikan suhdetta tutkimalla 9/11 –iskujen vaikutusta supersankarisarjakuviin ja tapahtuman laajempaa merkitystä 2000-luvun Yhdysvalloissa.

Näiden viiden osan kautta tutkimukseni pyrkii muodostamaan eheän, moniulotteisen kuvan Yhdysvaltojen geopolitiisesta identiteetistä ja erityisesti supersankarisarjakuvan roolista ja merkittävydestä tämän populaarin minuuden kehityksessä. Tavoitteena on saavuttaa uusi tapa tarkastella kansallisen identiteetin rakentumista populaarikulttuurin kautta, ja samalla tuoda esille erityisesti Yhdysvaltojen geopolitiikan ihanteiden ja todellisuuden välinen ristiriita supersankarisarjakuvien esittämän ideologian kautta.

ASIASANAT: supersankari, amerikkalainen monomyytti, sarjakuva, Yhdysvallat, geopolitiikka, identiteetti, valta, 9/11, trauma

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INTRODUCTION

All comics are political.
- Alan Moore (qtd. in Sabin, 1993, 89)

Why study superheroes? Or, the question I faced while working on my dissertation, “You can actually study superheroes?” Again and again, I have found myself answering the same question Thierry Groensteen asked over a decade ago: “Why are comics still in search of cultural legitimization?” (2000/2009, 3). Comics, as a hybrid art form of text and images, go very much against the “ideology of purity” that has dominated the Western view on aesthetics for centuries (Groensteen, 2000/2009, 9). Despite the increase in scholarly work on comics especially in the 21st century, studying (superhero) comics still is often something to defend and justify. In the area of superhero comics, Mila Bongco identifies the reason behind this lack of academic credibility as one of readership, and especially the readership associated with comics as well as other popular fiction: children and adolescents (2000, 1). Even though the comic book audience has been acknowledged to be much more varied than that, and even though comics as an art form have gained a fair deal of academic credibility, the question still returns: why study *superhero* comics? In the next few chapters, I hope to both answer that question and also provide an outline of this dissertation and its aims and methods - the evolution of a study, so to speak.

Action Comics #1 (June 1938) saw the birth of the superhero, arriving in the form of Superman: “savior of the helpless and oppressed -- he battles the forces of evil and injustice” (Feiffer, 1965/2003, 10). The image of Superman lifting a car over his head was forever etched into the collective consciousness of the American nation, where the idea of a selfless, patriotic hero, individualistic yet willing to defend his community, resonated strongly. This positive response derives, I shall argue, largely from the fact that the character of the superhero very directly continues the established tradition of the mythical American hero as outlined by Lawrence and Jewett in *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002):

The monomythic superhero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers. He originates outside the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner. -- The monomythic hero claims surpassing concern for the health of the community, but he never practices citizenship. He unites a consuming love of impartial justice with a mission of personal vengeance that eliminates due process of law. He offers a form of leadership without paying the price of political relationships or responding to the preferences of the majority. (2002, 47-48).

As the quote above demonstrates, the superhero seen as a product of the monomythic American hero tradition allows multiple entry points into further analysis and problematizations of this seemingly simple character - power, motivation, citizenship, legality, and leadership, among others. One should not, however, confuse Lawrence and Jewett's definition with Joseph Campbell's famous universal monomyth introduced in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949): whereas Campbell's hero myth is focused on initiation and acceptance within society, the American monomyth is characterized by the hero's need for redemption and persisting nature as an outsider to the society he protects (for a more detailed discussion on the monomyth's differences with the American mythology, see Ch. 1.).

The comic book superhero, though often passed over as mere cheap escapist entertainment, in fact offers a rich topos for a host of problematic issues that deal with particularly American identity. As the Marxist critic C.L.R. James wrote already in 1950 in his book *American Civilization*, popular culture, from movies to comic books, 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." (1950/1993, 119). According to James, it is in these popular culture items 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). Similarly, as Robin Wood (1986, 77) has stated over two decades ago, it is precisely in the field of popular culture and entertainment where the nation's unconscious attempts to resolve tensions and problems manifest themselves, often without detection due to their fantastical and popular guises. The superhero opens

up an all too seldom chosen way to approach American identity and American ideology and to reveal some of the ambiguities and tensions embedded within the dominant 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 is linked to hegemonic political powers, and which can be 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" can be 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).

As Jason Dittmer argues, it is precisely the "seemingly innocent nature" of comics which deems its "significance in the battle over American identity because it usually operates beneath the gaze of most cultural critics" (2005, 628). Matthew Costello, too, has noted the relevance of comics as a seemingly "disposable commodity" with a very slim profit, which has led to the comics industry being very responsive to cultural trends, and thus providing "a unique window into American popular culture" (2009, 4). He stresses that especially from the 1960s onwards, the deliberate (and complex) continuity of the superhero universes enables close comparisons and analysis over longer periods of time of the "iconographic meaning" given to the images, events, and superhero characters, thus providing a "unique venue for cultural analysis" (2009, 12). The combination of the American monomythic superhero and the distinctively American medium of superhero comics has created a cultural phenomenon that is both quick to reflect US national responses and depicts characters who themselves are viewed as representations of the nation's "true" self. Thus it can be plausibly argued that superhero comics offer a very viable entry-point into further analysis of particularly American identity and mindset, and the problems and

possibilities within it. As the quote from C.L.R. James above shows, it is by now a generally accepted view that superhero comics by and large reflect the hegemonic values of their publication era. However, I shall argue that the values they reflect are not just the dominant values of the nation, but that they also reveal a deep tension within the culture, as the actual values of the superhero ideology derived from a close reading of the text are often in stark contrast with the perceived notion of American democratic ideals. It must also be acknowledged that superhero comics not merely reflect, but also comment and often even aim at affecting the dominant values of the nation, as happened for example in the 1940s when superhero comics campaigned for America's participation in WWII almost a year before the US officially entered the war. The simplistic view of comics merely mirroring hegemonic ideology should instead be seen as a dynamic relationship, and one of significant cultural, social and political relevance.

When discussing the phenomenon of a popular culture item reflecting the sentiments of a nation, one should not uncritically equal the superhero with "America," or accept that superhero comics could somehow offer a complete or "truthful" view of the American nation. Even though the superhero can be said to embody the national identity that is "particularly American" (Reynolds, 1992, 18), one should also be aware that the values and virtues projected onto the hero are usually those of the dominant, hegemonic culture, whereas the villains usually possess those qualities which the hegemonic culture views as unwanted and "other" to itself. 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 are 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). The use of archetypal elements in distinguishing heroes and villains is not by far limited to superhero comics, but, as Eco demonstrates, they appear in a variety of popular fiction, revealing the values of the hegemonic culture through its villains.

It must be stated that the American monomyth and the superheroes analyzed within it in this study are both, due to Lawrence & Jewett's limited viewpoint in their definition, restricted largely to the white, masculine monomyth, which does not fully encompass such categories as black or gay superheroes (though both exist). While it may be valid to claim that the classic superhero narrative 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 Costello (2009, 15) phrases it, one always has to remember that these "core values" come from within the dominant ideology and do not represent the multitude of views that exist within the nation. The view that superheroes in fact represent only the hegemonic values of America (as opposed to ALL Americans) has been noted also by Chris Murray, who strongly criticizes the simplistic view often presented that superheroes "were America." According to Murray, the superhero narrative showed America constructed by the hegemonic power structures and institutions, and the past exclusion of such groups as blacks, gays and even women¹ is as vital to the analysis of the superhero as the representation of the hero itself (2000, 143). Also, the death threats received by the Jewish authors of anti-Nazi superhero comics during WWII also testify that there indeed were ruptures in the seemingly simple view of superhero narratives as speaking for everyone (Yanes, 2009, 55). What can therefore be reached through the analysis of superhero comics is just one vision of what "America" is, but also this mythicized version that possesses the power of creating the illusion of a national consensus and collective imagined community.

With this context in mind, the aim of this dissertation is to examine and analyze the political and ideological elements of the superhero comic and its relevance to the formation and development of popular American geopolitical identity. According to Jason Dittmer, "geopolitical identity," when analyzed within the context of popular culture, refers to the way popular culture affects the formation of an imagined national and collective identity through a kind of

¹ 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).

“institutionalization of the nation’s symbolic space” (2005, 626). As Dittmer writes, “popular culture -- is one of the ways in which people come to understand their position both within a larger collective identity and within an even broader geopolitical narrative, or script” (ibid.). The analysis and examination of this kind of collective national and geopolitical identity created through superhero comics and their representation of the American monomythic hero is one of the main goals within this dissertation. The superhero is approached as a politically significant character who is in a dynamic relationship with the social and cultural context that produces it, and by analyzing the superhero, a deeper understanding of that culture and society is attainable.

It should be noted that this view of the superhero as a politically significant character has been questioned as recently as 2006, when Jamie A. Hughes claimed in an article 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. Hughes’ simplistic view of the superhero as a non-ideological being completely denies the obvious political significance and citizenship of the superhero, who by definition (if one follows the definition provided by Lawrence & Jewett earlier in this dissertation) alone is tied to the issues of nationalism, identity and power, all in the realm of ideology. Even though the superhero, if seen from the framework of the monomythic hero, does not practice citizenship, the paradoxical inside/outside relationship to the community still links him to the community he protects, both socially and politically. As Chris 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). Superhero comics are well within questions of politics and ideology, and through them one can trace and analyze the political and social climate changes of American consciousness, drifting from the xenophobia-laced patriotism of the 1940s to the violent individualism of the 1980s and finally to the increasing ambiguities of the 21st century.

Overview of the Dissertation

In order to comprehensively dissect the complex relationship between superheroes and popular American geopolitical identity, the dissertation is divided into five parts, each part focusing on one particular aspect of the superhero. The analysis will combine theoretical approaches from a cross-disciplinary range with close readings of chosen key texts and characters from the genre of superhero comics. These key texts have been chosen from both Marvel and DC (Detective Comics), the two most prominent publishing houses in superhero comics in America. While the publishing dates of the comics in question range from the 1980s to the 21st century, the connecting factor between them is the way each of the texts actively takes part in the debate of superhero politics and ideology, and by extension, the popular geopolitics of America. From revising and relocating established characters to embodying national ideals, each of the texts provides a base for analysis that enables a more comprehensive image of the construction of the American “self” through superhero comics. In the next paragraphs I will further elaborate the general outline of the dissertation as well as introduce the key texts² that I will be focusing on in each chapter.

Part one will provide an introduction to the origins and initial development of the superhero as stemming from the monomythical American hero tradition, offering a contextualization of the character and examining the superhero’s rise to popularity in America. While the arrival of the superhero will be contextualized through a variety of superheroes, the focus on the second chapter of part 1 will be on one particular text that actively deconstructs the entire paradigm of the superhero. *Watchmen* (1987), from writer Alan Moore’s exceedingly vast oeuvre, will be analyzed through its revision of the superhero tradition as it carefully de-(and re-)constructs the superhero genre, making it what Richard Reynolds refers to as “the last key superhero text, or the first in a new maturity of the genre” (1992, 117). *Watchmen* questions the very motivations of superheroism,

² Most of the key texts have been published both as single issues and later in collected trade paperbacks (TPBs); I will use trade paperback copies of each key text where available as they are paginated as single volumes, making a systematic reference possible.

extrapolating with real-world superheroes in a fictional US of the 1980s. This alternate world features Richard Nixon as President for the third term and a nuclear war with Russia not far ahead. It can be argued that *Watchmen* "parasitically" takes on the dominant ideologies embedded in the past decades of superhero domination, and produces another level of signification that reveals the dominant ideology as naïve (Sandoval, 2000, 109). Through these "heroes" *Watchmen* quite consciously violates the unwritten rules of the superhero comic and cleverly unravels some of the myths of the superhero, and, by analogy, of the popular American geopolitical identity.

Part two will expand on the concept of popular geopolitics and the construction of national identities and imagined communities as defined by Benedict Anderson in his study *Imagined Communities* (1991). The significance of the superhero's virtue as a patriot is central in analyzing the superhero's impact on the formation of a popular geopolitical national identity. The role of popular culture memory in defining cultural and national identities and communities is linked to the way a nation's idealized identity is perceived both as a projection and a reflection of the nation itself. The relevance of Captain America is crucial, as he literally embodies a fictional "America" through his costume, powers and character. The rewriting of his origin story in Marvel's *The Ultimates* (2002) will be briefly analyzed as an interesting reassessment of American geopolitical identity. The second chapter of this section will widen the scope of popular identity politics within the superhero narrative by focusing on Mark Millar's take on Superman mythology, called *Superman: Red Son* (2003). This "Elseworlds" tale approaches the Superman mythos from the following question: what if, instead of Smallville, Kansas, Superman had crash-landed in a Ukrainian collective in the Soviet Union and instead of "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," there now exists "an alien superman committed to communist ideals" (2003, 11). The consequences of this alteration of nationality are developed to a dramatic conclusion in the graphic novel, exposing to the fullest the fascist potential within the superhero and the incompatibility of totalitarian superheroic rule with the principles of democracy. The seemingly limitless power of the

superhero and the consequences of this totalizing power over society and the government of individualization are the central issues arising from the analysis. This reading of the comic book will be partially analyzed within a Foucauldian framework, drawing on Michel Foucault's writings on subjectivity and power, bringing forth questions of (bio)power, subjectivity and the crucial relevance of resistance in the formation of subjectivity.

The third part will relocate its focus on the resistant and sometimes deviant "others" of the hegemonic identity construction through the issues of gender and sexuality. As the other is essential in defining one's identity, the so-called "resistant others" need to be accounted for, too. Superhero comics are notorious for their questionable representation of the exaggerated female (and male) body and the often bypassed representation of sexuality and gender. The first chapter of this part will focus on the problematic function and role played by the female characters within superhero narratives, witnessing both the inevitable corruption and destruction of the too-powerful female hero as well as the questionable phenomenon of "women in refrigerators" that dooms the vast majority of the female characters within superhero comics to a brutal and violent fate. The latter part will approach the dynamics of queerness and masculinity through the character of The Joker in such texts as Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* (1988) and Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum* (1989). Both texts focus on the relationship between Batman and The Joker, exposing the similarities and the competing masculinities at work in the relationship. As the villain's role is to be the opposite of the hero, the qualities projected onto the villain often reveal the fears and prejudices that are essential in the construction of a hegemonic (male) identity. Within the key texts, The Joker is depicted as deliberately queer and fluid without a fixed identity, which represents a threat to the western, stable, masculine and heterosexual identity of the superhero, and this textual and sexual anarchy is at the center of his "grotesque" deviance.

In part four, titled "The Evolution of Superhero Politics," the demands of democracy and the political evolution of the superhero are the central themes. The superhero's position outside the law

is highly problematic, and will be read in the framework of Giorgio Agamben's writings on the "state of exception," which is used to open up the classic superhero dilemma of breaking the law in order to uphold it, and the wider problematic of the position of the superhero within society. Along with *Watchmen*, Alan Moore's earlier (and largely unavailable) superhero text *Miracleman* (1985) will serve as a key text through which the concept will be analyzed. A revision of Marvel's iconic *Marvelman* (through copyright issues renamed as *Miracleman* in the US), the narrative explores the actual Nietzschean *superman* and the quest for utopia that it entails in superhero narratives. The chapter will focus on the problematic relationship between the superhero and the state and the confusion of powers at work within this relationship. The second chapter of this section will approach the problematic relationship between the superhero and the state through the highly questionable trope of vigilante violence in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). Miller's Batman presents a dystopic Gotham city with a retired Batman who once more feels the call to fight crime as teen gangs called "mutants" terrorize the city. Aided by a teenage girl dressed as Robin, Miller's near-psychotic Batman is depicted as an extremely violent, neo-fascist vigilante who is no longer seen as a hero by the citizens of Gotham City. The significance of violence in Batman's actions is questioned within the context of mythical and empowering violence, analyzing its impact on popular American geopolitical scripts.

Finally, the last part will be devoted to analyzing the superhero's relevance in post-9/11 U.S. In this part I will combine popular geopolitical narratives with the actual geopolitics of America, and approach the national trauma of 9/11 and its effects on the superhero. The 9/11 attacks could not be ignored by the superhero universes, as both Marvel and DC, the two biggest publishing houses, are both located in Manhattan. Jason Dittmer argues that especially *Captain America Comics* after 9/11 were essential in the "reterritorialization" of American geopolitical identity, as they presented a clear inside-outside dichotomy immediately after 9/11 (2005, 637). However, in this chapter I shall argue that this dichotomy was not a permanent phenomenon, and instead, the

later *Captain America* comics after 9/11 are marked with increased identity confusion. This sense of uncertainty and moral ambiguity can be read in the Ed Brubaker -written Marvel storyline *The Death of Captain America*, published in 2007-2008, and which I will take a closer look at in the second chapter of this part. The death of the national icon in 2007 made the headlines all over the nation, and the symbolic significance of Captain America's assassination offers a variety of interpretations of a nation without heroes.

Through these key texts and concepts, this dissertation aims at producing a new and current analysis of the character of the superhero and especially the superhero's role in American mythology and in the formation of popular American geopolitical identity in the 20th and 21st centuries. Accessing the "ritualized mythic plots" as well as their revisionist versions, it is possible to reveal some of the "tensions, hopes, and despair concerning democracy within the current American consciousness" (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 5) The overall aim of these chapters is to produce a multifaceted, cross-disciplinary study of the superhero comic and its effects on the formation of American identity within popular culture. The evolution of superhero politics outlined in this dissertation makes no claims at totality, but instead hopes to offer one possible way of analyzing and accessing the superhero, and through him, the formation, development, and possible future of the American identity and American nation in the realm of the popular. Following Jewett and Lawrence in their later work, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil. The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (2003, 6), the character of the superhero (especially Captain America in their analysis) is seen as a "kind of iconic shorthand" that acts as a primary example of the way the "zealous mainstream of political sentiment" is carried out. Analyzing the popular narratives where this shorthand is present helps us form a more coherent picture of the nation today.

Finally, a few words need to be written concerning the methodological framework of this thesis. As the subject of this study - the superhero comic - can be viewed as a hybrid form of two different mediums, so is the methodological framework of this study a multidisciplinary hybrid that

combines various approaches across disciplines, ranging from literary and cultural studies to trauma studies, political philosophy and gender studies. In agreement with Annalisa Di Liddo, I recognize the multitude of approaches that can be applied to the study of comics, and aim at adopting a post-modern method “open to assorted critical approaches” (2009, 14). Previous studies on superhero comics have usually fallen either under structuralism, cultural history or cultural studies; literary criticism is a relatively late addition to the list (Klock, 2006, 10). It is the goal of this thesis not to restrict to any single approach, but instead create a synthesis of multiple theoretical dimensions that enable a cross-disciplinary research that could broadly be labeled under English philology as American Culture Studies, focusing on a multitude of essential aspects that comprise American identity and culture through the particular focus on superhero comics. While this thesis aims at providing a new, multilayered and concise analysis of the superhero comic and its connections to ideology, politics and identity within America, it cannot claim a totality of views as some fields, such as economics, are not included among the central issues within this thesis.

In order to produce a critical analysis of the ideology of the superhero comic, the mode of critique opted corresponds to what 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). A similar approach can be found in Pierre Macherey, who 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). It should also be acknowledged that no critique is free to exist outside ideology, or free to talk about ideology in a language that is void of ideology itself. This dissertation, too, is interwoven in complex ideological structures of its author that affect it. Indeed, following film critic Graeme Turner’s argument, the ideology of a text is located precisely within the discourses of the text, in the myths, images and conventions

employed (1999, 173), and this is accurate both in relation to the texts analyzed as well as the analysis produced of them, whether one discusses mainstream cinema or superhero comics.

The dissertation will not provide a separate chapter on the visual semiotics of comic book narratives,³ as its main objective lies elsewhere. In accordance, visual analysis of the key texts will be applied only when relevant to the overall aims and arguments of the dissertation. As the key texts vary greatly in their visual construction, systematically analyzing the visual language of each would be too time-consuming and distracting. However, it must be acknowledged that superhero comics' relevance to popular geopolitical constructions is sometimes present in the very narrative structure of the comic book page. Another central issue within the field of visual analysis is the superhero's relevance as an iconic figure and the relationship between this icon and popular American geopolitics. Within Peircean semiotics, as Kai Mikkonen (2005, 30) analyzes it, icons are formed through not just via external similarities and relationships, but also through metaphorical connections that are based on conventions. Similarly, Scott McCloud argues that "icon" can mean "any image used to represent a person, thing or idea" (1993, 27). What is crucial in McCloud's very wide definition is that any icon demands the reader's "participation to make them work" (1993, 59). In this sense, the superhero's iconic quality is very much tied to its relationship with the comic book audiences, who have bestowed him as the carrier of a wide variety of popular American virtues since the late 1930s. The superhero's iconic nature and its evolution becomes a continuous projection of its audience, loaded with symbolical meaning that this dissertation aims at unveiling.

Drawing from a vast area of cultural studies and philosophy, this thesis will present a way of studying superhero comics and their social, cultural and political dimensions and offer a way of interpreting these connections and pointing out their relevance today. Especially after 9/11, the relevance of the superhero has become increasingly problematic, and this is interwoven into the analysis on the post-9/11 American identity. According to Lawrence and Jewett (2002, 17) it is

³ For a basic overview on the visual aspects of comics, cf. Groensteen: *The System of Comics* (1999/2007), Mikkonen: *Kuva ja Sana* (2005, esp. 295-328) or Herkman: *Sarjakuvan Kieli ja Mieli* (1998).

precisely after 9/11 that studying the American superhero - “the endlessly repeated story of innocent communities besieged by evil outsiders” - may help us achieve a better understanding of the present. Understanding the role of the villain, the “evil outsider,” is essential in analyzing the way the American identity is constructed through the Other, and how this evil outsider is often located within the nation and within the hero himself.⁴

In conclusion, the goal of this dissertation is to examine and analyze the way the superhero comic and its representation of the superhero is tied to the formation of popular American geopolitical identity. This relationship is approached as dynamic and continually evolving and where the superhero is simultaneously both a reflection and a projection of American national identity, and the way the representation of the superhero has changed over the decades can be analyzed to interpret the changes that have taken place within the collective consciousness of the American nation. To achieve this goal, several superhero texts will be read symptomatically in order to decipher the ideology embedded in the superhero and the internal paradoxes that exist both within the character and the nation. These paradoxes will be approached within the contextual framework provided by the American monomyth, which ties the superhero to the collective consciousness that is particularly American, allowing an analysis of this consciousness in the form of popular geopolitical identity.

⁴ For simplicity’s sake, the superhero will systematically be referred to with the male pronoun “he,” though female superheroes like Wonder Woman do hold a significant position within the genre. As the majority of the heroes dealt with in this thesis are male, the use of the male pronoun is justifiable; female heroes will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

“Why is he doing it?”

“Doing what?”

“Dressing up like a monkey or an ice cube or a can of fucking corn.”

“To fight crime, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes, to fight crime. To fight evil. But that’s all any of these guys are doing. That’s as far as they ever go. They just ... you know, it’s the right thing to do, so they do it. How interesting is that?”

(Michael Chabon: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, 2000, 94-95)

1. Origin of a Species: A Short History of The Superhero

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the birth of the superhero is commonly agreed upon the publication of *Action Comics #1*, introducing Superman to the American public in June, 1938. Following the instant success of Superman, the decade’s end saw a proliferation of new superpowered heroes with their masks, superpowers and secret identities. While many of these heroes are now forgotten, some gained the iconic status of Superman. Batman, drawn by Bob Kane and written by Bill Finger, first appeared in *Detective Comics #27* (May 1939), and as Robert C. Harvey notes, he became to represent “the other half of what would become the traditional superhero profile” (1996, 21). Whereas Superman had his superstrength and other abilities, Batman relied on his physical and mental abilities alone, acquired through relentless training (as well as various technical devices, thanks to the Wayne fortunes). While Superman represented the orphaned outsider from a strange planet, Batman also carried the trauma of witnessing his parents’ murder, which motivated him to fight crime. Soon after this, as Harvey writes, the time was right for the arrival of the superpowered patriot, which took place most prominently in the form of Captain America by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby in *Captain America #1* (March 1941)⁵; in the atmosphere anticipating a war, the character sealed the superheroes’ place within the popular culture of America (1996, 31).

⁵ Although the issue is cover-dated with March 1941, it was sold in newsstands already in December, 1940.

Superman was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, both of an immigrant Jewish background. Though it took them a few years to get their character published, once they did it was an instant success: as Danny Fingeroth explores in lengths in his book *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (2007), the influences behind the creation of the Man of Steel were a “cultural stew” of biblical tales, myths, pulp magazines, science fiction comics, adventure novels and radio dramas (2007, 41). In his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Peter Coogan, too, attributes the roots of the genre 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 epic and myths, partially as a part of a collective cultural unconsciousness (2006, 116-125).⁶ Coogan expresses great concern in the legitimization of the superhero genre, and goes into great detail to prove the genre’s value through his vast historical overview, but does little to contextualize this development within the larger political and cultural contexts of America. As the aim of this research is not to legitimize superhero comics either as a genre or a research topic, the conceptual framework of the American monomyth provided by Lawrence and Jewett (2002) will be more useful here, despite the erroneous way they tend to use the terms “superhero” and “monomythic hero” as synonymous (Coogan, 2002, 375). While it can be argued that all superheroes tend to represent the American monomyth, not all monomythic heroes fit the superhero definition – a distinction worth making, as the superhero’s iconic quality is for a significant part derived from his outfit and symbol, characteristics not shared by a vast majority of monomythic heroes.

As already noted in the introduction, for Lawrence & Jewett the American monomythic hero equals primarily the privileged, white, masculine and heterosexual hero who represents the hegemonic white American hero and it does not address such aspects as ethnic or sexual minorities. As the superheroes dealt with in this dissertation are also of the white and masculine definition, the

⁶ In a similar vein, Scott McCloud argues that comics as an art form has its roots in Egyptian hieroglyphics (1993, 13-15).

theoretical framework offered by Lawrence & Jewett is applicable, but it should be noted that for example black superheroes,⁷ such as The Falcon and Luke Cage/Powerman, have been in existence within comics since the late 1960s, fuelled by such political movements as the Civil Rights movement and the Black Panthers. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, the definition of the superhero as emblematic of the hegemonic, white and masculine American monomyth will be suitable. As the superhero is approached in this dissertation as an avatar of popular American identity, then adopting the view of the hero as arriving from the tradition of the white American monomyth offers a more consistent framework for examination and analysis. However, one should be aware that this tradition does not cover the superhero phenomenon in its entirety, but offers a restricted approach that covers the dominating vision of the superhero as a monomythic hero which is also present in all the key texts within this dissertation.

Approaching the American Monomyth

As Lawrence and Jewett argue, the American monomythical hero is marked by his 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 described by Joseph Cambell:

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.
(Cambell, 1949, 30)

The focus within the traditional monomyth is, as Cambell 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 or Moses, is about the initiation of the hero into the world, where the hero travels, gaining (or regaining) his powers so that he may return

⁷ For more on black superheroes in comics, see for example: Brown, Jeffrey A. *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans (Studies in Popular Culture)*. Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

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:

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 & Jewett, 2002, 6)

The American monomythic hero is not focused on initiation the way Campbell's heroes tend to be, but instead he is obsessed with the task of redemption. The motivation for the hero is to earn his place within the society he protects, and paradoxically, due to his extrahuman nature as the one who defends the community, this is precisely the one thing he can never achieve. While 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 while on a zealous crusade against evil (1988, 158). Indeed, what characterizes the American monomyth is precisely the way the hero always exists outside the community he is called to protect, and in those few instances that he is accepted within that community, he is cast into the role of the "idealistic loner" (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 48). This basic narrative of the American monomyth is very recognizable from one of America's most popular and mythical genres: the western.

The American monomyth and its hero are 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). Heroes such as *The Virginian* (1902) by Owen Wister or *The Lone Ranger* (1933) by George Trendle and Fran Striker represented the individualistic American hero of the western, acting out the American monomyth as outsiders to the community and protecting the civilization 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, comprising 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 conflict 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 conflicts, culminating in the way the hero purges the community through his violence, which is in itself an act of “individualistic aggression”⁸ (2004, 147). The hero of the western had 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 American monomyth is closely related to the hero of the western, sharing many of its qualities, such as American individualism, the problematic relationship with authorities and the need for redemption. The hero is praised for his bravery and courage, yet simultaneously the fact that he bypasses the lawful authorities in the process makes him a criminal, too. All these issues can be found to characterize the superhero, too. It must be recognized, of course, that Lawrence & Jewett do not arrive at their much-quoted definition from nothing, but base their argument on the foundation of the well-studied American myth, which, as R.W.B Lewis argues in his classic text *The American Adam* (1955), is a distinctively “collective affair” born out of innumerable texts produced in and of America in the 19th century (1955, 4). The mythical western frontier as the new world, too, has its roots in this American mythology, as the new individual, self-reliant hero (the archetypal “American Adam”) was first imagined during this period.

⁸ For more on heroes and the use of violence, see Ch. 8.

Apart from the westerns, the superhero has his roots deep within both pulps and science fiction, too. The pulps of the 1930s with characters like the Shadow and Doc Savage contributed significantly to the superhero's birth through the concept of the hidden identity, the costume. However, as Peter Coogan notes, what separates the superhero and the pulp hero is the iconic quality of the costume that in superhero comics came to "emblemize the character's identity" (2009, 79). A defining and central trope of the superhero is his dual identity, the everyday persona the hero had to disguise in order to protect his true identity as the masked hero. 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). This dual nature is one of the central reasons behind the hero's inability to integrate into the community, and always deems him as an outsider in some sense. Another defining characteristic of the American monomythic hero is the hero's sexual renunciation, the "rejection of sexual union as primary value" (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 237). The superhero must reject his desires in order to protect the community and fully engage in his mission. 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. The superhero may have romantic relationships, but they are rarely permanent, or end up happily,⁹ as the combination of a satisfactory relationship and fulfilling the heroic mission are rarely compatible within the monomythic tradition.

A less-cited influence, as Curtis C. Smith notes, can be found from science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon, whose book *Odd John* (1935) precedes Superman by years and is, according to Smith, "a standard for superman stories" in its utopian and markedly Nietzschean explorations into superhumanity (1976, 54). Especially through this link to Nietzschean ideology, critics have often viewed the superhero as possessing significant fascist tendencies. As Nicole Devarenne points out, the 20th century witnessed the rise of multiple nationalist movements laced with fascist ideologies,

⁹ Symptomatic of this is the so-called "Women in Refrigerators" –syndrome where female characters are either killed, injured, or depowered as a plot device in a narrative focusing on a male comic book character. For more, see Ch. 5.

and that, "even in a democracy such as the U.S., the superhero comic reveals the darkness at the heart of much nationalist sentiment" (2008, 49). This "darkness" at the heart of the superhero hints at the fascist element embedded within the character's very foundations. As Klaus Theweleit writes in his influential study on fascism and masculinity in early 20th century Germany, fascism usually becomes "a specific form of production of reality" rather than just a form of misrecognition or seduction to be simply followed (1978/1989, 349). The superhero shares a disturbing amount of similarities with Theweleit's fascist subject, who, like the American monomythic hero, renounces all physical needs and becomes a "man-machine" with a "steel body," an armor that contains his "over-wrought body" that yearns to explode and erupt like a bullet in battle (1978/1898, 160-179). The similarities become even more underlined as Theweleit has chosen illustrations from both Captain America and The Mighty Thor, which contain very similar visual imagery with explosive dynamics of battle, complete with sound effects and action lines denoting speed and power and their construction as massive, explosive confrontations.

The fascist male body aims at becoming hard, impenetrable, and the imaginary superhero is this ideal realized through his hard, perfect and impeccably phallic body that surges outward and penetrates the enemy. The exaggerated physicality and perceived perfection of the superhero, when combined with the violent actions that take place without any legal consent, have been seen as sufficient to label superhero comics as "fascist" – a notion which the revisionist superhero tradition explored in detail through works such as *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*.¹⁰ However, the recent discussions in the US on the possible rise of neo-fascism in the wake of the Tea Party Movement have stressed the "ultranationalist" and violent nature of fascism that aims at transporting "the country to a mythic place" (Rothschild, 2010, 15). Within this definition, the relevance of a popularized American monomythical hero like the superhero cannot be overlooked,

¹⁰ Geoff Klock, for example, sees Batman's "obsession with control and order, his disregard for civil rights, and his use of violence to force others, though often criminals, into submission to his will" as a conscious point made about superheroes' "flirtation with fascism" in *The Dark Knight Returns* (2006, 41).

as the character evokes both national ideals and the mythical projection of an idealized nation. The term “fascist” will be used in this dissertation within this context of idealized masculinity, national ideals and violent paradigms that aim at total control of society through the suspension of civil rights.

Heroes of a Nation

The comic book superheroes’ arrival coincided with the end of the Great Depression in the US, and as Richard Reynolds notes, millions of Americans had had “their faith in the notion of uninterrupted economic progress seriously undermined” (1992, 18). As William Savage, Jr. describes it: the “world was in turmoil, the economy was in serious trouble,” and to escape this, comics began to offer readers transport elsewhere through the adventures of such heroes as Tarzan, The Phantom and Buck Rogers (1990, 4). These characters precede the superhero, but their popularity particularly within the comic book medium paved way for the arrival of the superhero, created precisely for the pages of a comic book. As Robert C. Harvey writes, superheroes and comic books were “made for each other:”

In symbiotic reciprocity, they 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)

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 can be seen for example in the way the character of the superhero offered the audience a way to identify with the hero through a secret identity. In the midst of an economic crisis, the superhero gave hope that through dedication and hard work, anyone could succeed and be a hero, even though others failed to notice it. During economically stressing times, popular culture in general tends towards offering escape to the nation, focusing more on the past or future than the “economic calamity” of the present (Savage, 1990, 3).

Another significant factor in the rise of the superhero comics was WWII, which sealed the superhero's role as the quintessential American patriot. From the very beginning, the superhero was associated strongly with the virtue of US patriotism, and several superheroes fought for America, whether in the front lines like Captain America or at the home front like Superman.¹¹ 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 producing geopolitical narratives and scripts that are particularly American. The war tied the hero concretely into the war effort and produced the ultimate cultural response to it in the virtuous and patriotic superhero. It must be noted, though, that the response to the patriotic heroes was far from unanimous, as for example Captain America's first issue elicited angry reactions from "isolationists and Nazi sympathizers," culminating in death threats aimed at the authors (Wright, 2001, 36). The fact that the majority of comics writers and artists were of Jewish descent functions to explain the strong support expressed by the superheroes for entering the war against Nazi Germany, and as Nicole Devarenne suggests, authors like Jack Kirby may have created characters like Captain America in order to express their "solidarity with an idealized America, pluralistic and undivided" (2008, 48).

After the war, however, the declining sales meant that only a few heroes, such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman continued to be published.¹² As Reynolds identifies, the so-called Golden Age of superhero comics lasted until the late 1940s (1992, 8), collapsing ultimately with the 1954 Congressional hearings on juvenile delinquency and comics. What many critics view as the "crucial blow" to superhero comics (as well as EC's horror comics) was delivered by Dr. Fredric Wertham, whose book *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) explicitly blamed the increased

¹¹ 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)

¹² The reasons behind the plummeting sales are manifold: war time restrictions for paper were lifted, opening the doors for new publishers and a host of new titles to cash in on the superhero craze, many of which would not survive for long as the supply often outstripped the demand (Wright, 2001, 57). The loss of the military audience, as well as the new economic growth both had an effect on the decreasing sales (ibid.).

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 the 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 older generations (1998, 19).

The pressure from the authorities lead to the creation of *Comics Magazine Association of America Inc*, which soon produced its own internal censorship tool, *The Comics Code Authority*, in October, 1954. The Code immediately proceeded to control the entire industry, and, in Mila Bongco's view, proved "fatal to the medium's growth and development" and lead to generic and thematic stagnation of the entire genre (2000, 4). The Code insisted, 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.¹³ No comic book without the stamp of approval from the Code made its way to the newsstands, which refused to put unapproved comics on sale. 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 commented of the Code's actual effects on the comics as being "business as usual" for the majority of comics 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 and its significance to the narrative. Similar argument is made by Italian critic Marco Pellitteri, who calls for the critical consideration of both content *and* audiences in the criticism of comic books (2010). In the 1950s, the expected audience was still very much of the male adolescent kind, and the narratives by and large were

¹³ The complete list of the 1954 Code can be found at : www.comicartville.com/comicscode.htm. Accessed 10.2.2010.

produced with this particular audience in mind. As the audiences grew more diverse, 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 US underground comics movement as well as in some of Marvel's Silver Age comics, which began to tackle domestic political issues such as college protests, discrimination and drug abuse as the code's power began to wear off.¹⁴

The arrival of the so-called "Silver Age"¹⁵ of superhero comics coincides with the aftermath of the 1954 hearings, often dated in 1956 and the revival of the Flash (Reynolds, 1992, 9) and coming to full bloom in the 1960s with the new heroes of Marvel comics under the editorial leadership of Stan Lee, who would produce such iconic Silver Age heroes as the Fantastic Four and Spider-Man. More realistic, these characters no longer showed the absolute moral certainties of the war like Superman and Batman, but instead portrayed what was perceived as "believable human qualities and failings" (Wright, 2001, 207). Most clearly this manifested itself in characters like Fantastic Four's the Thing, who challenged the notion of physical beauty and moral virtue as inseparable. 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 with the physical attractiveness of the superheroes, implying that "the political economic system [the villains] represent is not only ideologically repulsive but morally bankrupt" (Costello 2009, 63-5). This binary division began to shatter with the arrival of such Marvel heroes as The Hulk or Thing, who were physically grotesque, yet both were cast as heroes. Characters such as these reveal the initial disillusionment with the Cold War -absolutes of good and evil, preceding the disintegration of the

¹⁴ 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 officially renounced the Code in 2001 and DC as recently as January, 2011. (The Beat. The News Blog for Comics Culture). Available from: <http://www.comicsbeat.com/2011/01/20/dc-ditches-comics-code-for-video-game-like-rating-system/> . Accessed January 21, 2011.

¹⁵ There exists no single view on the exact dates of these periods: while most scholars can agree on the Golden and Silver Ages with some consistency, the attempt to define the so-called "Ages" since the 1970s have been blurry at best: while Peter Coogan (2006) calls for several distinct ages (including both Bronze *and* Iron Ages), Geoff Klock argues for a third age that begun with the arrival of writers like Frank Miller and Alan Moore, calling it the "revisionary superhero narrative" (2006, 3). Paul Gravett, on the other hand, settles for the more simpler "dark" age when discussing these texts (2007, 77).

consensus identity in America. This phenomenon can also be located in other movements of the post-war era, such as the Beat movement, which John Tytell described as “a crystallization of a sweeping discontent” with so-called American virtues (1976, 4). The Beat movement thus presents a wider context to the changes within superhero comics, which soon began to express similar tendencies. As Jack Z. Bratich has identified, the Cold War of the 1960s saw not only the physically challenging heroes who defied the notion of virtue always accompanying beauty, but the era also witnessed the emergence of a “paranoid style” that no longer required a foreign threat. Instead, the danger was increasingly located within the borders of the nation – and by analogy, national American identity (2003, 79).

As Bradford Wright (2001, 110) has noted, anticommunism was initially one of the most successful themes of the early Cold War comics, informing young readers about the deep divide between East and West and their role in this war. Wright identifies the beginning of the Cold War as coming to existence right after WWII, and while he does not explicitly note the end, it can be deduced that he (alongside many historians) views the ending in 1991 along the collapse of the Soviet Union¹⁶ (he refers to the *Death of Superman* from 1993 as post-Cold War, p. 282). The Silver Age comics that were published within this era of deep East-West-division began with a very clear anti-communist theme, identifying the communists as the new Nazis in the hopes of creating new villains for the heroes to fight. However, this approach was not a successful phenomenon within superhero comics: whereas anyone could easily identify the Nazis by their boots and helmets, the communists were much harder to separate from the good guys (Lang & Trimble, 1988, 164). This identification issue, as Matthew Costello suggests, led to the solution that since America defined by conflict proved untenable after the War, America defined by consensus was envisioned to replace it, a myth of a national identity that characterized anyone against it as un-American (2009, 39). This, as Tytell notes, led to an atmosphere of conspiracy which standardized

¹⁶ Within this dissertation, the term “Cold War” is used to refer to the tensions between United States and the Soviet Union throughout these years, while acknowledging that within this time period, several smaller significant eras can be located.

what constituted “Americanism” through internal security, mistrust and political similitude (1976, 7).

As the physical division between ugly villains and beautiful heroes began to shatter in the 1960s, so did the “unquestioning portrayal of American virtue” within superhero comics themselves, too (Costello, 2009, 63). The rise of the Hippie movement and “flower power,” the anti-war protests and the Civil Rights movement all played a significant role in the changing attitudes of the 1960s America. By the 1970s, the consensus identity was no longer aided by an “unending progress toward an affluent, equalitarian society,” but instead these were 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 (2009, 86). As Costello points out, the tensions between the US and the USSR began to ease as well, removing a key factor in creating the American consensus. Now the question was: “But if the USSR was not the enemy against which Americans defined themselves, who was?” (2009, 87).

This identity crisis became 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. For example, Captain America staged the death of his alter ego, Steve Rogers, in the 1970s. According to Costello, this left Captain America without a private self to support his public self.¹⁷ Without a private self, the hero is left alone, dislodged and without meaning, as he cannot integrate into the community through his hero personality. 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).

It was in the 1970s, too, when Steve Rogers momentarily abandoned the Captain America mask, becoming truly disappointed with the nation’s government (a plot line involving the villain as being

¹⁷ Similar situation can be found in *Watchmen*: Dr. Manhattan gradually loses the distinction between his private self, the scientist Jon Osterman, and the moniker given to him, Dr. Manhattan. Addressing his alter ego as “Osterman” instead of “me,” he begins to see the division as pointless, which contributes to his isolation from Earth and humanity. He becomes truly dislodged from humanity, thus eradicating the need for a human alter ego.

the President himself was published shortly after Nixon's resignation). Taking on the role of Nomad, Steve Rogers became a hero without a nation, if only to resume the title later in hopes that he could still steer the country towards the right path. These developments within the superhero narrative speak strongly of a crisis within US patriotism, and belie a deep distrust towards the democratic processes and officials. Yet they do not undermine the very basic ideology behind the character of the superhero himself: the superhero is still a popular fascist hero who is not elected to a position to uphold the law, who finds the limitations of constitutional government a source of frustration and who is needed to keep the community safe (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, 29). Much like Theweleit's fascist soldiers (see 1978/1989, pp. 392-396), the superhero, too, needs the violent conflict in order to exist; he requires the battle to "discharge" his explosive superhero body. This demonstrates well how deep the American monomythic tradition goes, and how the superhero, even when dissatisfied with his own country, cannot resign his superpowered mission, as it is the only thing that keeps him in existence.

The line separating the hero and the villain would grow increasingly blurry towards the end of the 20th century, culminating in the 1980s in the nigh-dystopic representations of the violent and fascist superheroes of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*. As Costello notes, the superhero and the government are more frequently confronting each other at the end of the 20th century, as the government is portrayed in a less than ideal light, while the hero is supposedly virtuous; if the government takes an opposing standing to the hero, this weakens the moral standing of the government (2009, 75). In fact, if the government even expresses the need for the hero and his actions, it at the same time implies that it is unable to adequately protect its citizens with its authorized use of power. This logically soon leads to the conclusion that the government should not under any circumstances condone vigilantism, as it implies that they cannot keep the nation safe and protected on their own. Often enough, the American monomyth does imply very strongly that neither the public nor its representatives are equipped to deal with real evil. "Real evil" is pictured

as something deceptive and manipulative, indicating an “evil mastermind” far superior than the common law enforcement can even imagine. Indeed, as Jewett & Lawrence argue, “careful deliberation, knowledge of the law, and mastery of book learning” are very often portrayed as signs of impotence and moral corruption (2003, 42). The American hero, superior both in his physical as well as mental abilities, must indeed protect the society, from itself if from no-one else.

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a change not just within both the superhero narrative, but also in its audiences. Whereas the audiences had consisted mostly of adolescents (and wartime soldiers) in the 1940s and 1950s, the 1960s saw a shift towards college students with the new, more mature Marvel heroes such as Spider-Man, complete with the more adult themes dealing with student protests, drugs and alcoholism. Increasingly, 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 underground comics movement of the 1960s, with such names as Robert Crumb, Jay Lynch and Gilbert Shelton, attacked the very basic conventions of society and began to produce comics that were aimed at “an audience of their peers – at adults” (Harvey, 1996, 140-141). Comics, due to their previous role as a condemned and thus controlled medium was now repossessed by the underground comics movement and used as a tool to openly criticize and ridicule the conservative values of America through exaggerated representations of sex and drug abuse. Within these movements, superhero comics, too, were sometimes ridiculed through parody (something Harvey Kurtzman had done with *MAD Magazine* already in the 1950s). The underground comics movement not only challenged the establishment and its ideals, but it also challenged the comic book economy by allowing authors to retain the ownership of their art and by selling the works outside the established syndicates, proving that nation-wide newsstand distribution was not a prerequisite for economical success within comics (Harvey, 1996, 143-144). The significance of the underground comics is central to the later developments within superhero

comics, as several of the 1980s comics artists and writers 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”¹⁸ visibly marked the division of the audience into children and adults in concretely economic terms. As Richard Reynolds very aptly put it: “At £10 a copy, comics can’t be just for kids” (1992, 96-97). This also suggested that questions of audience and readership could not be ignored by the production and marketing division of comic book publishers, but instead they should be viewed as different facets of the same phenomenon. The audiences of comics had, as noted above, evolved towards a more mature nature since the 1960s, and mainstream comics publishers began to understand this by the 1980s. Readers now responded more to narratives where institutions were not fully trusted, motives were numerous and often conflicting, and irony was the dominant voice of the story; heroes became less discernible from the villains (Costello, 2009, 166). This was apparent both thematically and visually, as heroes were depicted as vigilantes, and the blurring of lines between good and evil was visualized in the very *mise-en-page* through what Scott McCloud (1993, 103) refers to as “bleeding” panels and action that was no longer contained within the panels.

In terms of marketing, the publishers 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). However, as mentioned above, the phenomenon was much the result of a very active underground comix movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, which also forced the mainstream publishers to reconsider their sales methods as the direct sales approach permanently altered the comic book market. As Bradford Wright has pointed out, the *New York Times Magazine* published a favorable article on the

¹⁸ The term “graphic novel” has been subjected to much debate, and opinions on its origins and meaning differ between scholars. Many quote the term to Will Eisner (*A Contract with God*, 1978), while 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; Gravett, 2007, and DiLiddo, 2009.

maturation of comic books already in May 1971, distinguishing the “more sophisticated themes” of the texts (2001, 233). The “maturation” of the genre that has been claimed to have taken place in the 1980s may therefore have been more a marketing move by the publishers than any real change within the medium at that time. A real factor that could explain for the changes that took place within the genre may have been the maturation of a new generation of comics writers and illustrators who had grown up reading superhero comics, and who had an intricate knowledge of the workings of the 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 rules, began to carefully rewrite some of the central tropes.

One of the most prominent reworking 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 former 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 the institutions of authority - government, business - and in the mirror, they saw betrayal” (2009, 166). Interestingly, the heroes present in the narratives of the era are more often regarded not as heroes - neither by the government or the people they claim to protect. Frank Miller’s *Dark Knight*, Batman, is a psychotically violent, fascist “hero” whom the citizens of Gotham City show very little acceptance or understanding. The heroes of *Watchmen* have already been forced to retire in 1977 after massive police strikes and protests against them. The distrust towards authorities prominent within the superhero comics of the era displays questions of power and authority that reflect the Reagan-era US, as heroes now often had to be ready to consciously break the law in order to uphold it, blurring the boundaries between hero and villain even further.

All these ambiguities concerning the state and authority as well as the decreasing difference between the hero and the villain can be detected 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 showed an increasingly challenging mode in the visual representation of the superheroes, too: 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 chaotic visual representation 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” with its disillusionment lead to the superhero comics of 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). In a famed media event, DC killed Superman in 1993, only to revive him a year later in a confusing storyline involving no less than four Supermen, demonstrating what Coogan deems as “the essential failure of the reinvigoration approach” (2006, 217). In the 1990s, Marvel, too, tried to “reboot” its series by going back to the successful days of the past, and tried to convey it especially through the visual narrative: “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). This effort, however, failed in trying to recreate old themes and certainties. All this testifies to Costello’s claim that the rhetoric of American identity had indeed lost its power, and this showcases in the failed attempts to establish

classic American superheroes through reboots and re-evaluations. Partial reason to 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 focused mainly on glorified violent fight sequences with heroes whose bodies were beyond absurd in their dimensions, leading to “overblown fighting orgies without rhyme or reason” (2000, 191-193). The desire to reboot older series within superhero comics can also be read in as a factor for the nostalgia that arose in the 1990s - but as Bongco is quick to note, this nostalgia towards a more innocent past of the superheroes was a dead end, consisting of “selective remembering” of a past that really was far from “innocent” (2000, 195). It was not until the 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.

In this chapter, I have briefly outlined the historical development of the character of the superhero and genre of superhero comics, seeing it as a continuation of the American monomyth as defined by Lawrence and Jewett. In order to approach and analyze the superhero as an avatar of the hegemonic popular American identity and to examine the character in a dynamic relationship with the dominant ideology of its publication era, the character must first be contextualized as one closely linked with such phenomena as virtuous patriotism and nationalism. In the next chapter, I will provide a close reading from one of the central revisionist superhero narratives of the 20th century, *Watchmen*, which takes on many of the central aspects of the superhero as the American monomyth as discussed above, and will therefore provide an interesting insight into the nature of the superhero.

2. Who Watches the Watchmen? The Superhero Deconstructed in *Watchmen*

“What’s happened to America? What’s happened to the American Dream?”

“It came true. You’re looking at it.”

(*Watchmen*, 1987, II; 18)

As already briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, the 1980s saw a revisionist streak in superhero comics that produced such works as Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons’ critically hailed *Watchmen* (1987) and Frank Miller’s equally praised *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). As cultural critic Steven Shaviro has noted, these works were 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” (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, 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 (Shaviro, 1997, 64). What made these deconstructions of superhero mythology extremely relevant was the way in which, by deconstructing the American monomythic hero, the texts simultaneously deconstructed and exposed the paradoxes embedded within American ideology and popular geopolitics. In this chapter, I will focus on *Watchmen* as an example of the way the superhero myth was deconstructed in the 1980s, only to inevitably support the genre even further.

Watchmen, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, is a 12-part graphic novel that portrays real-life superheroes in a fictional US of the 1980s. It is explained that superheroes became real in this version of the US, and that people inspired by superhero comics took on the crime-fighting in tights in the 1940s, which quickly lead to the extinction of the superhero comic book itself. Outlawed in 1977 by the “Keene Act” in what Tony Spanakos refers to as an attempt to “emphasize the authority of the state over the coercive capacity of the superheroes”

(2009, 35), the heroes of *Watchmen* are either retired (Night Owl/Dan Dreiberg, Silk Spectre/Laurie Juspecky) 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. Through their assistance the US has won the Vietnam War and gained substantial technological progress thanks to the contributions of Dr. Manhattan. The graphic novel's twelve chapters are each accompanied by a short textual appendix, and the contents vary from excerpts of one of the heroes' memoirs to newspaper clippings and psychological reports. The function of these fictional "paratexts," as Kai Mikkonen (2005, 304) argues, is to construct various turning points in several different spaces in time, and in a way, as I have argued previously (see Miettinen, 2006, 22-23), act as "textual evidence" of the universe of *Watchmen*, becoming a vital part of the larger narrative constructions of the text that relies on decades of genre tradition.

Watchmen begins with the brutal murder of one of the heroes, The Comedian. Investigating his death, the uncompromising vigilante Rorschach becomes convinced that there exists a plot to kill former superheroes, and attempts to convince his former colleagues of this. Night Owl and Silk Spectre are at first unconvinced, but soon they begin to unravel a plot much greater than just killing superheroes. Adrian Veidt, also known as superhero Ozymandias, has decided to use his superior knowledge and vast fortunes to unite mankind by fooling them into believing there's a fake alien attack on New York. Three million New Yorkers may die, but Veidt believes he is introducing the world to utopia, as the Americans and Russians will now point their guns at the sky instead of each other. During the uncovering of the scheme, the heroes recall their past and try to accept their now forbidden desire to fight crime in a mask. One scene between Laurie and Dan, for example, raises the hitherto unspoken question of sexual fetishism in connection to the costumes. Dan fails to perform sexually until one night when they go out in their costumes and save several people from a burning building. Afterwards, Laurie asks him: "Did the costumes make it good? Dan...?" (1987,

VII; 28) and he confesses to the excitement of the costumes as something he's been ashamed to admit, linking this shame rhetorically to the coming-out narratives traditionally associated with gay and lesbian discourses.

Hypertrophic Extensions

Through these “heroes,” *Watchmen* quite consciously unravels some of the myths of the superhero, producing what Iain Thomson has labeled as “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)

If one approaches the character of the superhero as the idealized version of a popularized national identity and national ideals – in other words, if we agree with Thomson's notion that our heroes “help tell us who we are” (2005, 100) - then turning these ideals into nightmares by realizing (and in the process, shattering) them can be used to analyze the potentially dangerous and subversive potential within these perceived “ideals” fully realized. The American monomyth as embodied in the superhero is developed to the literal extreme, where the idealized patriotism of the superhero is turned into outright fascism through The Comedian, while the vigilante ideals of the romanticized pulp detective are developed into nihilistic extremes in the character of Rorschach. The romanticized “idealistic loner” of the American monomyth who exists at the fringes of society truly becomes one in *Watchmen*: a completely isolated sociopath with a notion of purifying violence that will act as the remedy to a thoroughly corrupt society. The superheroic fantasies that characterize the American monomyth and American ideals of power and success go through a hypertrophic development that deconstructs the motivations behind superheroism, and by analogy, the very core of American ideals.

The heroes of *Watchmen* are far from the four-colored supermen of the 1940s and 1950s who lived in a binary world of good vs. evil. Rather, they are now made to appear as “realistic” portraits

of people battling with questions of sanity and personal relationships. The text draws on decades of superhero comics, deconstructing the familiar image of the superhero by extrapolating on the idea of real-life superheroes and exposing the embedded ambivalences of traditional superhero narratives. As Karin Kukkonen argues in her comics-oriented PhD dissertation *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism*, tradition is closely linked with subversion: as the notion of tradition refers to a “continuation in intertextuality” through such aspects as genre conventions, subject matter or imitation, then it is in the inversion of previous contexts through parody and breaking of decorum that the subversive potential of the text is realized (2010, 106-107). Without the decades of tradition of the superhero genre behind *Watchmen*, there could be no subversion of this tradition. The text subverts the traditional superhero narrative by questioning its conventions and imitating its style and subject matter in order to produce a narrative that deconstructs the genre. I will approach *Watchmen* not just as a case study, but as a work that actively deconstructs and rewrites the conventions and traditions of the superhero comic, and holds a key place in the evolution of superhero politics. Through a hypertrophic deconstruction of a genre that represents popular national ideals, the reality of both the genre’s ideals as well as those of the nation can be exposed and re-read in a way that enables a better understanding of the nation today – and this is done especially through the various superhero “archetypes” rewritten in *Watchmen*.

Of the superheroes presented in *Watchmen*, only two come close to representing the true *superman*, the so-called Nietzschean *Übermensch*¹⁹ that preceded the superhero genre and thrived within early science fiction: the super-powered Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias. Ozymandias’ powers are significantly lesser than Dr. Manhattan’s, but as they are deliberately sought, they bring with them “a desire to control and reform human affairs from above through direct intervention” (Reynolds, 1992, 107-108) that places him in relation to the *superman* framework. Whereas the traditional superhero is focused on preserving the present and protecting the community only when

¹⁹ The Nietzschean nature of *Watchmen*’s superheroes has been subject to much debate: whereas Wolf-Meyer (2003) sees Ozymandias as an excellent representation of the *übermensch*, both Pellitteri (2010) and Keeping (2009) argue against it. For a more detailed analysis on the relevance of the *übermensch* to the superhero, see Ch. 7.

it is directly under outside threat, Ozymandias is a proactive hero/villain who is “more interested in the future than the present, more interested in the big world picture than the local one” (Fishbaugh, 1998) with very pronounced utopian motives.

The name Ozymandias of course refers to Shelley’s epic poem by the same name, and the epigraph in chapter XI actually quotes two lines of the poem: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” However, the rest of the poem goes: “Nothing beside remains: round the decay/ Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, The lone and level sands stretch far away.” The short quotation in *Watchmen* is triumphant, as the tyrant announces “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” Veidt’s plan has succeeded, but combined with the rest of the poem, the lines receive an ironic tone, as the triumph is revealed to be short-lived. Nothing more than a “colossal wreck” will remain of Ozymandias’ utopia. As Brent Fishbaugh (1998) notes, the works of the original Ozymandias did not survive the king’s death, and the literary allusion clearly implies that the utopia achieved in *Watchmen* will not last (1998). In the graphic novel, Ozymandias believes that he can guide mankind towards utopia by uniting them to fight against a single (if fictional) enemy. In a brilliant sequence of temporal juxtaposition within the sequential narrative, the other heroes slowly uncover this plot, only to find out that they are too late to stop him. Morally “checkmate,” as Ozymandias calls it, the heroes agree to never reveal the truth. However, truth-revealing diary of one of the heroes has already been delivered to the hands of the yellow press, hinting at the inevitable return of the nigh-dystopic status quo. Similarly, the visual structure of the narrative explicitly suggests the return of the beginning by framing the image of the “bloodied” smiley face of the first panel again in the last in an act of deliberate symmetry.

Ozymandias is a superhero in the universe of *Watchmen*, but paradoxically he is also the villain of the story. It is Ozymandias’ plot that motivates the story and in the end leaves millions of people dead in the hope that it will unite mankind. By following the traditional structure of the superhero narrative of action-reaction –formula, Veidt can be read as a villain through the dynamic

structure of the plot itself: as the traditional superhero is always essentially a passive, not an active figure, the events leading up to the confrontation are usually initiated by the supervillain. The hero becomes passive, as he is not required to act unless the status quo is threatened by the villain (Reynolds, 1992, 50-51). This means that the hero who becomes the protagonist of the story, the hero who actively aims at changing the status quo, will inevitably take on the role of the villain in the narrative dynamics of the plot. As Reynolds puts it, “the villains are concerned with change and the heroes with the maintenance of the status quo” (1992, 51). Ozymandias becomes the hero-villain as he actively aims at change (at utopia), whereas the other heroes remain as “heroes” as they only wish to maintain society, not to alter it, fighting local instead of global evils. Ozymandias also possesses a more detailed set of values than the other heroes, which, according to Fingerroth, links him to the side of the villains, as he is “inflexibly sure” of the correctness of his own values (2004, 163). By casting his villain in the physically perfect and seemingly virtuous Ozymandias, *Watchmen* comments on the “beauty equals virtue” approach that characterized the earlier superhero comics.

In the light of the apparent moral and visual chaos that took over the superhero narrative in the late 1980s (as mentioned in Chapter 1.), it is interesting to study the visual narrative of *Watchmen*, which at first glance appears to have more in common with the early 1960s clear-cut narratives than the violent and bleeding imagery of the 1980s. The page layout (*mise-en-page*, if you will) of the Cold War –era comics reflected the clear-cut moralities of the early Cold War with a very contained and controlled look where the captions were closely tied to the frame, and the illustrations were contained within the frame, not stretching out into the gutters - and all this at six to nine panels per page (Costello, 2009, 68). According to Costello, this suggests a “perspective of certainty” within the narrative, which reinforces the equally apparent “moral certainty” within the stories (2009, 68). It is interesting to compare this view of visual containment and clarity as the expression of clear moralities on comic book narration in the 1960s to the visual narration of

Watchmen two decades later: Moore and Gibbons' graphic novel follows a strict panel division of six to nine panels a page with occasional splash pages, and the action is completely contained within the panels, never once escaping into to white eternal void of the gutter. As Thierry Groensteen has analyzed, this type of devotion to classical layout does not indicate a "zero degree" of what he refers to as "spatio-topical expression," but instead creates a world based on order and rationality - and in the case of *Watchmen*, enables the significant impact of the sudden ruptures of the rare splash pages (1999/2007, 49; 97). One of the most striking examples of the symmetry and strict panel composition can be located in Chapter V, which follows a symmetrical layout throughout the chapter, so that the last page of the chapter mirrors in layout the first, and the second to last the second page, and so on. This chapter culminates in one of the rare splash pages in the graphic novel at the exact middle of the chapter, resulting in a staggering effect of "fearful symmetry" in a single opening (See Figure 1.). This reference to a "fearful symmetry" is derived from William Blake's famous "The Tyger" poem (1794), and it is also evoked in the epigraph of Chapter V, serving as an apt description of the entire text's complex structure.²⁰

Even though *Watchmen* subscribes to the classical layout Costello interprets as a sign of moral certainty, *Watchmen* is far from morally certain, and its use of this "perspective of certainty" actually transforms the entire superhero narrative and its politics into a new, revolutionary level of superhero ideology by deliberately using the visual conventions of the traditional and unambiguous narrative to its own revisionist and highly ambiguous ends. The graphic novel takes the established conventions of the genre and uses them to write (and illustrate) against it; the apparent clarity of the visual narrative proves in closer examination to be far from certain, as texts and images from separate storylines are constantly combined to create an ambiguous text that requires the reader to locate the meaning from the intertwined levels of narrative storytelling that flow in the visual and

²⁰ For more on Blake and Moore, see for example Whitson: "Panelling Parallax: The Fearful Symmetry of Alan Moore and William Blake" (2007) in which he discusses how both Blake and Moore "form a fearful symmetry where rebellion and visionary transgression become indiscriminately intertwined."

textual levels (for a more detailed analysis on the narrative structure of *Watchmen*, see Miettinen 2009). One such example of the intertwined levels of the narrative structure in *Watchmen* is the metanarrative of the pirate comic, *The Tales of The Black Freighter*, which is read by a character within the comic, and the textual captions and the panels from that comic book intertwine with the main narrative. The captions of the pirate comic are combined with the visual images of the main narrative, and vice versa, and the deliberate juxtaposition creates new contexts and new interpretations of the text and images. Contrasting the black and yellow coloring of a fallout shelter with the caption from the pirate comic: “I saw that hellbound ship’s black sails against the yellow Indie’s sky, and knew again the stench of powder, and men’s brains, and war” (1987, III; 1) connects the threat of nuclear war and impending death with the hopelessness of the pirate comic, painting a grim future in both narratives (See Figure 2.). This use of *mise-en-abyme* in *Watchmen* comments and counters the main plot in the graphic novel through skillful use of juxtaposition, reaching a level of transtextuality, embracing such Genettean textual practices as intertextuality, archtextuality, paratextuality and metatextuality by drawing on such transtextual elements as genre conventions, real world history, the use of image/text juxtaposition, and offering a way for the text to comment on itself (Di Liddo, 2009, 57-61).

This level of self-reflection which weaves its way through the comic book from the instant visual images to the more intricate textual cues represents what may probably now be referred to as the height of the revisionist superhero narrative. Hiding highly complex narrative structures in what appear at first glance to be quite simple page layouts, the text raises questions of similar tendencies within American policies of the 1980s. Underneath the mythical Reagan-era absolutes, tensions were building up within the nation, increasingly attuned to the archetypal binaries borrowed from popular entertainment (such as the labeling of Reagan’s defense initiative as “Star Wars,” Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, 107). As Costello, too, analyzes, the moral certainties and the consensus myth of the early Cold War US did not last long. Already by the mid-1960s both questions of self-identity

and national identity began to rise within the US. The confusion of national identity within the US was reflected in similar themes within the superhero narratives, which now focused more on the identity issues of the hero and his civilian and public personae: this can be seen in the themes of tension between “personal desire and public duty that start to emerge and in the decreasingly clear identification of the heroes and villains.” (Costello, 2009, 73). This is strongly linked to the fact that the threats to the nation were no longer clearly identified as coming from outside the US, but increasingly from within the nation.

Lethal Patriots and the “American Dream”

Watchmen extrapolates the premises of the fascist masculinity of the superhero most clearly in two of its main characters, Rorschach and The Comedian. 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 while 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. Rorschach is the archetypal vigilante superhero, but “with every semblance of glamour apparently taken away” (Reynolds, 1992, 107). Rorschach is, indeed, the American monomyth at its most extreme, renouncing all sexual relationships as his violent passion for impartial justice is combined with a “mission of personal vengeance that eliminates due process of law” (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 48). This renouncement of sexuality, which has been a classic trope since the arrival of Superman, has rarely been taken to such extremes within superhero comics, where women are usually shunned for their own safety or seen as intruders to a male comradeship, but never attacked with such viciousness as Rorschach. In this sense, 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” (*Foreword*, Benjamin & Rabinbach, 1989, xvii).

Indeed, Rorschach exemplifies the more extreme and highly misogynist version of the sexual renunciation of the superhero: he can be read as an embodiment of the “lethal patriot” who must resist women in order to survive the “crisis of masculinity” that Lawrence & Jewett (2002, 151-155) identify as rising in the late 1970s and early 1980s in connection to the Women’s Rights movement. 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”. (1987, I; 1)

The “vermin” drowning in its own filth is identified as either prostitutes or politicians; 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’s monologue’s also problematizes the justification of vigilante violence, as his rhetoric is one of “naturalizing” violence through organic metaphors: “This city is an animal, fierce and complicated. To understand it I read its droppings, its scents, the movement of its parasites.” (1987, 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, which creates a highly problematic premise for vigilante actions.²¹ Linked to this misogynistic and violent patriotism represented by Rorschach, then, is also the discovery of the government as evil and corrupted, a theme prominent in the popular entertainment of the 1980s. As for example Sylvester Stallone’s popular *First Blood* - film (1982) and its several sequels demonstrate, there exists what can be read as “deep schizophrenia” within the American nation which praises the democratic ideals yet celebrates in fictional visions that which in reality would horrify it (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 152-153).

²¹ For more on the problematic nature of naturalized vigilante violence, see Ch. 8.

As Lawrence and Jewett define it, the American monomyth presents Americans with “a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud the moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they can -- smite evil before it overtakes them” (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 48). This moral clarity is 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. (1987, 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. (1987, 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. (1987, VI; 15)

“Never surrender” comes directly from the “mouth” of the monomyth, where the hero, even against insurmountable odds, faces the enemy, whereas the absolute binaries of the black and white -moral view echo strongly the monomythical good-evil-dichotomy. Rorschach’s uncompromising rhetoric of good and evil is 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). It is interesting to note that Alan Moore himself was dissatisfied with the way the majority of readers positively identified with Rorschach 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). Moore’s extreme take on the monomythic superhero, meant to expose the schizophrenic and unsupportable nature of the monomyth, still ultimately created a “hero” the audience thoroughly embraced, testifying to the persuasive power of the national myth even in its most extreme variations.

While Rorschach clearly functions as the hypertrophic extreme of the vigilante ideal, Moore and Gibbons use the character of The Comedian to problematize the patriotic virtue often associated with the superhero. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan immersed himself in the “monomythic cast” with the company of Luke Skywalker and John Wayne as he appropriated the mythic images

of the American monomythic tradition in an attempt to counteract the consequences of the loss of the Vietnam War (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, 117). Within this contextual framework, *Watchmen* can be read as an obvious critique towards this notion of monomythical politics as the text reveals the untenable consequences behind this political rhetoric. The Comedian is a military superhero working under a special license for the US government, which, in itself, severely undermines his heroic mission as a monomythic hero. The Comedian works for the government as it allows him to continue his violent exploits, not because he sees the government as inefficient. In Jamie A. Hughes' 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). If one accepts Hughes' interpretation of The Comedian, it becomes apparent that what The Comedian realizes is the paradox of the American monomyth and democracy that not only characterizes the hero narratives, but describes the very core of American popular culture and ideology. American popular imagination is profoundly anti-democratic, which is apparent in the way the audiences are "willing to relax and enthusiastically enjoy values contrary to those embodied in its religious and political institutions" (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 278). The American monomyth is applied to justify the deployment of undemocratic and fascist actions in the name of preserving democracy, and it effectively naturalizes these actions through popular superhero narratives, providing a very strong "emotional force for violent politics" (ibid.).

Watchmen's later era Comedian is a clear mockery of Captain America with his militant stars' n' stripes costume: as Reynolds among others has noticed, The Comedian can be analyzed as "a satirical reworking of the state-sponsored, nationalistic breed of superhero most notably exemplified by Captain America" (1992, 107). But whereas the original Cap didn't engage in Vietnam,²² The Comedian (with the assistance of Dr. Manhattan) actively fights in Vietnam (where

²² 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 & Albright, 2009, 18). Overall, the small amount of Vietnam-related storylines is telling of the reluctance to take a stand on the issue.

the US wins, with the assistance of Dr. Manhattan). As Dr. Manhattan describes The Comedian (alias Eddie Blake):

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 that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding. Blake's different. He understands perfectly... and he doesn't care. (1987, IV; 19)

The Comedian's morality (or the lack of it) is interpreted by Dr. Manhattan, who sees Blake's actions as insane, but at the same time reflecting the society in which he exists, realizing that insanity may be the only way to cope with the world.²³ Blake does not experience the "growing unease with the moral certainty of the American Cold War identity," as Costello (2009, 94) names it; he simply does not care. *Watchmen* also comments on the Vietnam War in a very straightforward manner through The Comedian, who during the victory celebrations in Saigon states: "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." (1987, II; 13). The Vietnam War is a national trauma that affected the American geopolitical identity, perhaps driving it "a little crazy," as The Comedian prophesizes.²⁴

Both Captain America and The Comedian can be interpreted as embodying one variation of the "American Dream," and it is through their striking differences that one can assess the dramatic changes within American popular culture and collective identity. The Golden Age Captain America represents the monomythic ideal, the perfection of civic religion: the hero who possesses "the power to save earth combined with an ego that seeks nothing for itself" (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, 32). While the superhero already in Captain America does contain the potential for fascism, as the hero by his very actions defies the democratic order, it is not in Captain America but in the hypertrophic development of The Comedian that the fascist potential is realized to its full, horrifying potential. As The Comedian fires at the rioting crowds in *Watchmen* (the very crowd

²³ Interestingly, similar rhetoric is often evoked through The Joker, whose insanity is often portrayed as a way to stay sane. For more on this, see Ch. 6.

²⁴ Similar themes can be found for example in Michael Cimino's film *The Deer Hunter* (1978), which deals with the tragic consequences of the Vietnam War.

who is protesting against his actions as a “hero” without state sanction), the dumbfounded Night Owl asks who they are protecting the people from, to which The Comedian answers: “From themselves” (1987, II, 18). On the same page, The Comedian even goes as far as identifying himself as the embodiment of the new and irrevocably twisted American dream as Night Owl despairingly asks him: “But the country’s disintegrating. What’s happened to America? What’s happened to the American Dream?” (1987, II; 18). The disintegrating and disillusioned American mindset of the late 1970s has found its physical representation in The Comedian much in the same way the original Captain America embodied the optimistic worldview of the 1940s. But whereas The Comedian offers a single, deliberately subversive point in time, Captain America contains several decades of American history, which enables multiple entry points into the same character.

This is striking also in the visual representation of these two characters: the iconic images of Captain America with his shield emphasize very clearly a defensive stance, symbolized by his shield, implying that the bad guys are in turn marked by an offensive stance. As Jewett and Lawrence argue, the “cool zeal” of the good guy stereotype is marked with an essentially passive and peaceful type of behavior (2003, 223), and this is emphasized in the visual look of Captain America, too. In contrast to this, The Comedian is armed with a gun - a weapon of offense. Whereas the shield indicated that America only acts in “name of security, not empire” (Dittmer, 2005, 630), the gun symbolizes a change within superhero politics, indicating a larger change within the international politics of the United States towards a more aggressive stance. Similarly, the new Captain America following Steve Rogers after his much-publicized death in 2007, Bucky Barnes, chooses to carry a gun along the famous shield. When analyzed from this view, this choice becomes highly problematic as the character is an established national icon. The inherently iconic nature of the gun as a weapon echoes the American monomythic narratives of the Western, invoking the mythical frontier that Coogan has identified as “central to the cultural functioning of the United States,” and which, alongside the American monomyth, contains all the major “plot

formulas, character types, and basic settings common to the commercial stories produced in and for the US market” (2002, 38). The use of these myths that have so closely determined the superhero genre, as Coogan (2002, 200) argues, has created a trope that continues to thrive in the urban environment of the 20th century as a “struggle between the forces of civilization and savages,” justifying the use of violence to save people “from themselves.” This rhetoric, of course, is precisely what The Comedian uses as he attacks the protesters.

Watchmen ends on the very same image it begins, a blood-stained smiley face. While the text seems to be deconstructing the heroes and exposing the national ideals for what they truly are, at the same time it rejuvenates the genre instead of destroying it. Rorschach’s journal is in the hands of the yellow press, hinting that the truth will resurface and the status quo restored. *Watchmen*, as an extremely popular superhero comic, did not extinguish the genre by producing the “last key superhero text,” as Reynolds predicted, but instead sparked numerous ill-written offspring that focused on the violent and nihilistic themes without any serious content or deliberation. As 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)

While Moore’s response to his superhero work today is one of dismissal, the effect on the genre is not seen as bleak by all 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. And, though Moore himself may like to deny it, the visual structure of *Watchmen* with its fearful symmetry does, quite clearly, imply the restoration of the status quo –and the values of the hegemonic American geopolitical identity.

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)

3. Popular Geopolitical Scripts: Defining Nations, Defining Identities

”You think this letter on my head stands for **France**?”

(Captain America, *The Ultimates* #12; 23, 2002)

As Jason Dittmer argues, in order to fully understand national identities, one must investigate the nation’s popular geopolitics, how the nationality and nationhood of a particular nation are created and maintained through its popular culture (2005, 626). “Geopolitics” in itself is comprised of the “spatial practices, both material and representational, of statecraft itself,” and the critical analysis of geopolitical identities must be very much tied to the popular cultural myths of the particular nation (Dalby & Tuathail, 1998, 3). Dalby & 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 culture artifacts and their relationship to geopolitical scripts and identities (1998, 4). The scope of this dissertation is very clearly focused on the last category of popular geopolitics and its relevance especially to superhero comics. “Popular geopolitics” within this dissertation refers primarily to the relationship between popular culture (aka superhero comics) and the cultural myths of America and “Americanness” and how superhero comics create and sustain an idealized and mythicized American identity, not to the actual state leadership and foreign policies.

The American identity that emerges through the analysis of popular geopolitics is, as stated, a fictional identity, one created through the nation’s popular fiction and cultural myths. In his exhaustive 2002 PhD dissertation on the origins of the superhero genre in America, Peter Coogan

recognizes the relevance of the superhero genre in analyzing American culture and identity, rightfully claiming the genre 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). Disappointingly, however, Coogan explicitly refuses to go deeper into this “broad contemporary cultural analysis” he briefly sketches out, instead instantly retreating back to his safe haven of definitions and characteristics (2002, 9). It is precisely this wider cultural analysis Coogan shuns that this dissertation embraces as its primary goal.

Popular culture is arguably one of the key elements that affect the way geopolitical scripts are defined and re-defined in the collective consciousness of a nation, and the character of the superhero is particularly suited for analyzing American geopolitical identity. Popular culture is closely linked to what Kukkonen (2010, 111) refers to as *cultural memory*, which accounts for the microlevel of the actual reading process with the macrolevel of the text’s social dimension. Originally a concept by Jan Assmann, cultural memory (*kulturelle Gedächtnis*) is a sort of shared cultural “public domain,” as Kukkonen phrases it, 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, too, rely on this “popular culture memory” that functions as a formative text, and helps in creating and maintaining identities and scripts of a particular community (ibid. 127-128). Popular culture’s relevance to this process is further enhanced when approaching popular culture’s unique role as an easily consumed artifact. As both Edwardson (2003, 185) and Kukkonen (2008, 270) agree, national identity is a product of a repeated consumption of various media which creates itself through this very act of consumption; the purchase of commodities that embody cultural identities confirms these identities by validating and proposing particular myths and symbols as a part of a national identity, resulting in a shared popular culture memory that ultimately leads to a sense of a national identity. Of course, these identities are not necessarily tied to a nationality, and it can be argued that globalization has

produced a general “Western” identity that is simply dominated by American popular culture. However, superhero comics in my view possess a quality that is particular to American culture, and which resonates to its fullest when consumed within the larger cultural context of American popular culture memory. In this chapter, I will go further into the concept of popular geopolitics and national identity, and examine the superhero’s significance in this process. I will contextualize this discussion through the framework of American Utopianism, and argue that the superhero’s relevance to popular American geopolitical identity is crucial as it actively reproduces the cultural myth of the American self.

As Iain Thomson reminds us, while it is through villains and enemies that people and nations define who they are not, it is through the choice of its heroes that the nation defines its ideals (2005, 100). As demonstrated in the previous chapter, through the deliberate deconstruction of these ideals, the ideologies behind them, too, are exposed to what they really are. Thomson’s statement, however, really generates nothing new in the discussion of heroes and villains, and therefore serves only as a starting point into the more comprehensive analysis of the relevance of the superhero in defining national identities. As Richard Reynolds claims, the superhero “by his very existence asserts American utopianism, which remains -- a highly potent cultural myth” (1992, 83). As I mentioned earlier, the superhero can be read as a version of the American monomyth, which is distinctively different from the traditional monomyth in its focus on redemption instead of initiation. The American monomyth, as Lawrence and Jewett write, typically depicts an Eden-like setting, suddenly disrupted by a threat that challenges the community’s ability to cope with the situation. Out of this failure of the institutional powers to act, the (male) superhero has to act in order to restore the Eden (2002, 22). This basic setting characterizes the American monomythic narrative, and it has had a significant impact on the geopolitical scripts of America as well. However, this mythical narrative of the American Eden has its roots, as quoted by Reynolds above, in American history and especially American utopianism. Interestingly, this is a factor completely

ignored by Lawrence and Jewett despite its major significance in the creation of the American hero mythology. Combining ideologies of national identity with popular culture narratives, the hero myth is restored into history, and this offers a way of analyzing such characters as the superhero as constructions within national history (Jones & Watkins, 2000, 8-9). By adding the analysis of the relevance of American utopianism into the paradigm of the American monomyth, it is possible to gain a more comprehensive view of the superhero as a particular emblem of America, and analyze how that mythical construct still defines American geopolitical identity today.

American Utopianism and the Consumption of Popular Identities

American utopianism in the late 17th and early 18th century was about the potentiality of utopia rather than reality. America, as the new continent, was seen as a potential utopia because of its status as a blank slate on which a new and better society could be created. As R.W.B. Lewis writes, the mythical America created in the imagination of its writers and artists in the 19th century “had no past, but only a present and a future” (1955, 7). America was the object of utopian hopes for Europeans; later, as the colonies settled, those hopes became America’s own hopes (Segal, 2000, 5-6). The premise of this view relied heavily on mercantilist ideas, where everyone had to work hard, and this hard work “might eventually bring modest rewards to all” (ibid., 7-8). This view was gradually replaced in the late 18th century by a more technological view on utopia emphasizing endless progress (not change!), development and growth, thanks to technological developments. The rapid 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” (ibid. 9-10). The notion of America as a realized utopia 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 US a de facto utopia, “unique among the world’s

nations yet a model for them all.” (2000, 11).²⁵ 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, a place where anyone could succeed.

It is interesting to approach this idea of the US as a utopia *in practice* within the context of the classic Golden Age superhero narrative which has always been interpreted as aiming at *preserving* the status quo, not changing it, attributing the desire for change to the villains. As for example Umberto Eco’s famous study of “The Myth of Superman” (1962/2004) argued, the traditional superhero merely upholds the (dystopian) status quo and never actively pursues utopia (which the superhero could presumably do, as he is a superhuman with superpowers). In this context, if the US is in fact viewed as a utopia *in practice*, then the superhero, who has been widely criticized for merely upholding the status quo, actually *preserves* utopia, and therefore has no actual need to actively change the society. In this logic, the villain’s evil nature is revealed through his apparent dissatisfaction with the utopian present he wishes to overthrow. Approached from this premise, the entire paradigm containing the superhero and his relationship to the status quo is significantly shifted, and the hero’s actions receive a wholly different meaning: utopia not as fantasy but as reality. Despite the fact that the claim of America as utopia today is easily disproved, it is the power of this mythical view of America as Eden which still holds ground in the popular cultural imagination of American geopolitical scripts. As the monomythic narrative still repeats the same narrative that stems from the utopian view of America, some of the elements of this ideology are still transferred through their mediation in popular culture images, functioning as a “conduit of memory” (Kukkonen, 2008, 264). The collective contextual memory of American national identity is still reproduced through the superhero narrative, which in itself is far from unproblematic.

One central (and potentially problematic) aspect within American utopianism is the way it nurtured the American myth of the everyman being able to make something of himself, if only he

²⁵ This is exemplified already in John Winthrop’s “A Model for Christian Charity” (1630), which visioned America as a “citty upon a hill” that should act as an example to the rest of the world.

worked hard enough. The superhero is the ultimate embodiment of this goal to be achieved, either by hard work and dedication or by a higher power (and an inheritance like in the case of Batman does usually help). In *Watchmen*, for example, this myth is consciously fulfilled in the character of the self-made “smartest man on the planet,” Ozymandias. Paradoxically, this “utopian project” of America actually stresses what could be referred to as the “anti-utopian nature” of the US: the continuous strive for perfection expected and stressed by the society and the media (“all that is required is the desire for perfection and the will to achieve it,” 1987, X; 32) can have the opposite effect of suppressing people, leading to disappointment and disillusionment. As Matthew Costello points out, the story of American success may have been one of prospering individuals with limitless opportunities, but for example in the 1950s, “the new reality of the postwar political economy was an organized capitalism in which the individual was in fact a part of the great capitalist organizations.” (2009, 36-37). Realizing that they are merely a part of a larger organization and although live in abundance, the lack of individual success acts as discouraging and, in a very concrete sense, essentially anti-utopian. This contextual background is crucial in aiming at analyzing the geopolitics of America in the 20th century, as it is one of the central American myths behind the superhero ideal consumed daily.

As mentioned earlier, popular geopolitical identities are “consumed” through the purchase of popular culture items that in some way embody national ideals, symbols, and myths. This links popular geopolitical identity closely with Benedict Anderson’s view of nationality, which he sees as a particular “cultural artifact” (1991, 4). In order to understand these phenomena, we must examine their development, change, and as Anderson stresses, “why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy” (ibid.). The superhero, both as a mythical character and as a popular culture item in the form of the superhero comic book (and countless other formats from radio shows and computer games to collectible cards and chewing gum), clearly embodies these national symbols and myths of America, and for its part creates and upholds the “cultural artifact” of popular

American geopolitical identity. Crucial in this approach, in my view, is Anderson's definition of the way of defining nationality itself as an artifact, which implies clearly 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). The birth of this "commodification" and consumption of nationality is very much connected to print media, which Anderson recognizes as central in developing what he refers to as "imagined communities" such as national identities. To Anderson, a nation is an "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (1991, 6). Limited because every community has finite boundaries (them/us) and sovereign due to the concept's rise during a time when freedom was replacing divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynasties (ibid.). The commodification of nationality, as Edwardson, too, has noticed, produces a "mass national identity" through the production of mass culture (2003, 186). Following Jean Baudrillard's theory on consumption, consuming national identity becomes not "a function of enjoyment, but a *function of production*," which becomes collective rather than individual, and where it becomes an ideological system. Still, enjoyment is not excluded from consumption; as Baudrillard argues, consuming is simply never a private act, but sustained by the wider ideological discourse on consumption (1998, 78). Consuming a national identity becomes inseparable from producing it in a consumer society, and it provides the grounds for the assertion of popular geopolitical identity.

Consuming printed newspaper media plays a key role in creating an imagined community, as it establishes a print-language that creates a national community. What made imagined communities possible to begin with was the staggering rise of interaction between "a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity" (Anderson, 1991, 42-43). All these aspects combined in an unforeseen way in superhero comics, as capitalist mass production of superhero comics was combined with a mass reading audience. Furthermore, comics as a visual medium (much like

movies) required a very low level of literacy (demonstrating what Anderson refers to as a “fatality of human linguistic diversity”), which enabled the wider formation of an imagined community of “America” where superheroes began to embody the ideal national myth. This kind of literal embodiment of nationalities of course has its predecessors in the late nineteenth-century newspaper caricatures, which often were in the tradition of casting countries as personified characters from Miss Britannia to Uncle Sam (Edwardson, 2003, 186). The iconic quality of these personified images has the power to create and sustain national ideals in a way written literature often cannot, and it served a particular purpose especially in the beginning of the 20th century through the rise of various nationalisms. It is easy to argue that superhero characters like Captain America, Captain Canuck or Captain Britain are a part of a clear continuation of this tradition, as they literally embody their nation’s ideals in their flag-inspired costumes, becoming national signifiers that empower national identity. However, only in America has the significance of the national superhero reached the levels of nation-defining proportions, whereas both his Canadian and British counterparts have been less significant to their respective nations.²⁶

Another aspect to consider is the hybridized nature of national identity through the demands of global capitalism, which introduces the complicated question of intended audiences:

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, the intended audiences of such popular culture items as superhero comics are produced with the 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 wide, more generic construction of the American self, and the popular geopolitical scripts embedded in the comic books acquire a sort of ageless, universal nature through this generalization. It must be noted, too, that comic book audiences themselves are what Duncan & Smith refer to as a “fascinating and

²⁶ For more on the role of Canadian and British “Captains,” see for example Edwardson (2003) and Dittmer (2009).

understudied culture” (2009, 172). While comic book fandom has received some academic attention (most notably Matthew Pustz’s *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* from 1999), there exists very little data on the actual demographics of comics audiences apart from the generalized and often-quoted “adolescent male.” Overall, comic book readership today still lacks a comprehensive empirical analysis,²⁷ which means that any argumentation on the intended readership has to come from within the text, which in itself becomes the most reliable basis for any analysis on the reading audience. The role of the audience is relevant in creating communities with a shared popular cultural memory, and this is especially true with superhero comics and their complex continuities and intricate character mythologies, which create an “audience community” based on shared experiences of reception and common context knowledge:

Those “in the know” of this context knowledge, those with a share of the popular cultural memory of a particular genre, are then part of the in-group of this audience community. They can make sense of the connotative dimension of media texts through their possession of the relevant context knowledge. (Kukkonen, 2008, 265)

Whilst superhero comics understandably create a smaller sub-group of fans who are in possession of a larger context knowledge, superhero comics as a larger phenomenon within American culture possess and narrativize some of the national myths and scripts that resonate through a much wider, shared knowledge of popular geopolitical identity.

As already mentioned, one of the reasons behind the superhero’s impact on the popular American geopolitical identity lies undoubtedly in the nature of the superhero comic as a form of visual communication that, much like cinema, enables the following of the basic narrative even without grasping the words, creating a wider audience than any single written language could. As Edwardson points out, comics as a visual medium “engage this act of [imagining nations], in turn facilitating the mental construction of the nation and national identity” (2003, 185). Comics, through its uses of images, becomes one of the most powerful mediums through which popular

²⁷ As Duncan & Smith quote Jeffrey A. Brown’s *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and their Fans* (2001), the comics industry estimates that only 10 to 20 percent of comic book audiences consist of hardcore fans, while the rest are an elusive group labeled “casual readers,” which are yet to be studied empirically (2009, 173).

cultural memory forms its “communities of recipients” (Kukkonen, 2008, 264). As a product of mass production, popular media creates imagined communities through its simultaneous consumption, a “mass ceremony” that paradoxically is performed in privacy, yet in the knowledge that this act is being replicated by thousands simultaneously all over the community (Anderson, 1991, 35). This ceremony is also repeated at certain shared intervals, which highlights the communal nature of the act. While Anderson’s argument is based on newspaper audiences, there is no reason to assume the same would not be true of comic book audiences reading each new issue of their favorite superhero comic the day it appeared in a sort of shared private ritual around the nation. Anderson recognizes also the “allies” of print media, namely radio and television, which aid in conjuring imagined communities beyond literacy and language barriers through audiovisual storytelling (1991, 135). What should also be noted is that superhero comics are not just printed entertainment, but usually a part of a larger consumer culture offering everything from pins and t-shirts to fan clubs with fans-only special merchandise (ibid., 195). Arguably, then, the mass culture related to the superhero is not restricted to the comic books, but it takes on various other aspects of consuming a national identity. Furthermore, the national identity offered by popular culture items such as superhero comics is one of mass culture, and its relationship to actual innumerable identities within the nation is cursory, at most. However, this mythicized identity presented by mass consumed and mass produced media such as comics does play a significant role in the development of popular national ideology and identity. In the next section I will approach one particular incident of national ideology and identity within superhero comics through the rewriting of Captain America.

Captain America – Creating the Ultimate Icon

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). As “raw matter of ideology,” it is one of the functions of cultural context knowledge that derives from our shared popular culture memory to enable us to narrate this identity (Kukkonen, 2010, 158). A nation is therefore created through narratives which are simultaneously consumed and produced in our cultural memory, and in the US one of the most potent popular culture characters to produce these settings in the 20th century has been Captain America. From his looks to his actions, Captain America literally is America, offering an excellent example of the way the popular geopolitical narratives and scripts of America have been produced. From his inception, Captain America’s dedication to America and its people, according to Jason Dittmer, “modeled proper American behavior, ensuring that his behavior was marked as American by his star-spangled, red, white, and blue costume” (2009, 136). Of course, Captain America was not the only patriotic superhero to dress up in the flag. As Bradford 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 such an introduction as Captain America: the cover of the first issue of *Captain America Comics* shows Captain America punching Hitler in the jaw while being shot at by Nazis as the background shows the US munitions factories as targets, making the move to attack Hitler a defensive one (See Figure 3.). As Yanes writes, this cover is not simply filled with patriotic imagery, but also clearly identifies the Nazis as the enemy and the US 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 through not just the narratives, but through the visual representation of the heroes.

However, when analyzing cultural and national mindsets through comics, what is not depicted is as crucial as that which is. As Pierre Macherey argues, literary analysis should not remain with what has already been said, but instead aim at confronting the denials and silences of

the text (1966/1978, 150). In comics studies, what is shown/not-shown is as crucial as that which is said/not-said, and sometimes these two levels complete each other, the textual narrative sometimes omitted in favor of the visual, and vice versa. As an example of such telling omission is the absence of the Vietnam War from the pages of *Captain America Comics*.²⁸ As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, Captain America made only a few appearances in Vietnam, and none of them were presented in a particularly positive light (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). As Peter Coogan has noted, it is almost surprising how the genre that had previously participated in actively creating consensus and morality in WWII 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 steadily a part of Captain America's agenda, Vietnam was markedly absent throughout, despite the 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). According to Shawn Gillen, he would have been "exactly the type of hero our national leaders called for and needed to get America behind Vietnam" (2009, 105). As the ultimate patriot, Captain America was a character who felt the pressure of the Vietnam War the most, and this was an issue recognized by both readers and creators alike, as Wright reminds us (2001, 244). However, instead of fighting in Vietnam, Captain America was busy battling old WWII foes such as the Red Skull with very few real world political connections. The internal problems of the nation were consuming Captain America as well, as he waged against racism, poverty, pollution and corruption within the US. In the wake of the internal problems of the US in the 1970s, Captain America was forced to face the fact that the principles of freedom and democracy he claimed to protect entailed the arrival of "multiple interpretations of what America really means" (Hayton & Albright, 2009, 21). Captain America could no longer claim to represent "all" of America, despite his iconic nature which clearly implied it.

²⁸ Other Marvel comics did engage more with Vietnam: Iron Man's origins were literally relocated 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.

In this context, it is interesting to view a recent rewriting of Captain America in Marvel's *The Ultimates* –series. *The Ultimates* –series, which has so far featured such established heroes as the Avengers, Spider-Man, the X-Men and the Fantastic Four, is a “deliberately *realist*” reprisal of Marvel's most famous comics (Thomson, 2005, 105). In rewriting the national icon of Captain America in the *Ultimate Avengers*, both story-wise and visually, the comic also clearly attempts at re-establishing a new popular geopolitical identity, too. What emerges is both an invigorated but also dangerously nostalgic vision of the all-American hero in the 21st century that shares a number of similarities with the previously mentioned German fascists as studied by Klaus Theweleit in the 1970s.

The 13-issue series *The Ultimates*²⁹ by Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch was originally published in 2002-2004 and collected in two volumes (*The Ultimates Vol. 1: Super-Human* #1-6 *The Ultimates Vol. 2: Homeland Security* #7-13). Written by Millar and illustrated by Hitch, *The Ultimates* rewrites the classic Marvel hero team of the Avengers, featuring such heroes as Captain America, Thor and Iron Man (among others). Much in the vein of *Watchmen*, the comic reintroduces the characters as deliberately more realistic and with significantly darker tones, apparent in Ant-Man/Giant-Man's spousal abuse and Thor's left-wing hippie mentalities. Yet, each character is clearly recognizable (to the awkward point where Nick Fury is depicted exactly like Hollywood actor Samuel L. Jackson, who would portray the character in the 2008 film feature of *Iron Man* as well as the numerous sequels within the *Avengers* universe). The plot relocates the heroes into the 21st century, and entails the American government enlisting a team of superpowered “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). This rewriting of the characters is separate from the official continuity of the Marvel characters, belonging firmly to the doubly fictional “imaginary stories” which take place outside the official canon. What makes the reading of this

²⁹ *The Ultimates* was followed by *The Ultimates 2* (2005-2007) and *The Ultimates 3* (2009-). However, this chapter will only deal with the first 13 issues that comprise the first miniseries.

miniseries intriguing, however, is the concept of rewriting popular geopolitical narratives and scripts through these superheroes. 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 established characters and their pronounced flirtation with fascist ideals?

The Ultimates presents the reader with a 21st century Captain America who has been frozen since the 1940s. 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. Highlighting the dissonance between the 1940s American heroic ideals and the grim 21st century reality, Steve Rogers is a man dislocated in time, a soldier out of his era. His 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 all the problems in the Golden Age. His violent “solutions” to the modern era problems include beating the Giant-Man as a punishment for his violent behavior towards the Wasp and brutally kicking a stuttering and apologetic Bruce Banner in the face after his rampage as the Hulk. This “ultimate” Captain America is more aggressive, more cynical, more sinister, and more violent than his official counterpart. As his sidekick, Bucky, gleefully describes him in the introductory flashback: “Don’t you read the papers, pal? Captain America practically never wears a parachute... He says parachutes are for girls.” (2002-2004, 1; 6). After this, Captain America jumps off the plane onto the WWII enemy. He literally becomes the bomb, the bullet shot from the plane, embodying the fascist ideal of battle where the steel-men attack the enemy as if “hurtling from the military machine towards their body targets.” (Theweleit, 1978/189, 181).

In the final battle against the alien invaders in #12-13, Captain America (with the assistance of the Hulk) goes on to beat the alien leader into a bloody pulp, eerily reminiscent of Theweleit’s

“bloody miasma,” where the fascist soldier 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. He escapes by mashing others to the pulp he himself threatens to become.” (1978/1989, 273-274). Captain America’s dedicated beating of the alien body into a “bloody pulp” even resembles what Theweleit refers to as “searing critique”:

[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)

As the aliens in *The Ultimates* resemble humans, their true nature can literally be discerned only by tearing them to pieces and exposing their purple blood. This desire to “expose” the true faces of the villains in a quest to justify their persecution and destruction shares an interesting parallel with the post-9/11 War on Terror, where the right to pursue the enemy at all costs required that the enemy be exposed for his true nature. This attempt can be located for example within the massive military operations in Iraq to locate weapons of mass destruction, as the rhetoric relied heavily on the expected eventual discovery of proof which would then justify the mission.

The rewriting of Captain America goes back to his 1945 origins, too, and not only is his past rewritten, his uniform, too, gets a makeover. The iconic image of the war-era superhero is reproduced with an aggressive and powerful iconography, which is enhanced by the use of a full splash page (See Figure 4.). Captain America has been re-imagined as an overtly masculine hero, echoing the mythical premise of the frontier hero who laughs at the face of death and, like the fascist soldier, is glorified in battle. This rewriting sees Captain America alone disarming the fatal bomb which presumably killed Bucky in the original series, erasing the central trauma 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) is a central trope within the original Captain America narrative, and its complete removal from *The Ultimates* –rewriting

explicitly denies this trauma of failure, both from him, 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 monomyth as well as the fascist fantasy. This geopolitical narrative offered echoes strongly Anderson's claim that nation can ask for sacrifices, making dying for your country a gesture of "moral grandeur" that dying for "the Labor Party" cannot rival (1991, 144).

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. After he is found from the ice decades later, Tony Stark comments on his return: "It's like something out of a Joseph Cambell book, General Fury. A country's greatest hero coming back in the hour he's needed most?" (2002-2004, 3; 5). While Tony Stark seems to be unaware of the American monomyth, the recognition of the mythical power of Captain America does not escape him. In an effort to create a nostalgic character, a hero of the past, Steve Rogers is presented very much as the Rip Van Winkle –character, tragically out of time while everyone he knew and loved are either dead or dying of old age. Much like Washington Irving's original tragic hero from 1819, Captain America, too, has to come to terms with the changing world as he immediately upon waking attacks Nick Fury, for in his time no black men could have reached commanding positions within the army (2002-2004, 3; 8). Like Rip, who foolishly announces his loyalty to the king after sleeping all through the American revolution, Steve Rogers, too, finds himself in a world very different than 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 holds on to his 1940s worldview as he desires the ways of the past, signaling a somewhat disturbing nostalgia for a "simpler" past. This is highlighted in a rather bizarre short sequence with the former (then current) President George W. Bush, in which the President asks Captain America: "Well, what's your verdict on the

21st century, Captain America? Cool or uncool?” (2002-2004, 3; 21). While Captain America’s response to the nation’s leader is an affirmative one, the image of President Bush mimics the more comic representations of him, creating an extra level of narration that seems to be clearly mocking him and his “cool or uncool” rhetoric.

The rewriting of Captain America reveals a problematic nostalgia for past simplicity which is immediately contrasted with undeniable moral ambiguity. The immediate solutions may appear simple, but their consequences may not be. His similarity to the fascist fantasy creates a discord, as he claims to represent the nation, yet he, like the German fascist soldier, “best fulfills that function as an isolated, self-interested individual, a man searching for the flow of desire.” (Theweleit, 1978/1989, 191). Captain America’s solution to stopping the Hulk’s rampage in issue 4, for example, echoes not only a desire for a simple solution of the past, but a clear desire for violent confrontation: “We just hit him until he drops.” (2002-2004, 4: 23). In addition, he seems to view his violent behavior towards his teammates as “educating” them, much in the vein of the fascist German soldiers in the 1920s (Theweleit, 1978/1989, 294-295). Indeed, the final page of #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” (2002-2004, 5; 25) before administering the brutal (yet educative) punishment. Similarly, his outraged exclamation at the suggestion of surrender, quoted at the beginning of this chapter (“You think this letter on my head stands for **France**?”) betrays his inability to adapt into the current political relativism of the 21st century. As Jackson Sutliff has noted, he may be waving the flag, but in this version, he is simply condescending about it (2009, 121). The America rewritten in the “ultimate” Captain America is one of cynical nostalgia and an uncompromising attitude manifest in the dislocated man out of time that paints a questionable picture of the current ideologies at work behind the geopolitical scripts of America.

According to Sharp, national narratives usually provide “sense of belonging” that enables the reader to define and explain situations in the community as a part of a popular geopolitical identity (1998, 156). However, presenting a national icon like Captain America as obviously not belonging creates a rift in the formation of a geopolitical script, and this rift can be interpreted as both criticism towards the superhero mentality or a nostalgic desire for a simpler monomythic worldview of good and evil. As Steve Rogers confronts Hank Pym for his violent attack on his wife, The Wasp, Rogers still holds on to the monomythic “good guy – bad guy” formula as he demands Pym to transform into the Giant Man so that he can have “something to hit” (2002-2004, 9; 4). This conditioning of violence signals a twisted version of the “who-shoots-first” scenario from 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 in “self-defense.” As this principle of pre-emptive violence in the name of defense could arguably be claimed as an element of American foreign policy, presenting it as void and provoked does have the potential to question the very premise of this geopolitical script. As “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, too, represents) becomes questionable (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, 223).

The Ultimates depicts a Captain America who echoes the more simplistic morals of the past decades when most problems could be solved with a decent right hook. He is rewritten as a violent action hero with fascist underpinnings who drops tanks and jumps out of airplanes without parachutes with a twisted grin. To Jackson Sutliff, the “ultimate” Captain America represents 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 the mythicized American Dream, the monomythical superhero of

the past with a deceptively simple moral code that shares a disturbing similarity to early 20th century German fascism. It is not easy to designate a place for the *Ultimate* versions of these Marvel characters. Separate from the official continuity, they still are 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 signals rewriting national scripts and redefining geopolitical relationships, and the hypertrophic overtones that can be located within the comic books signals a desire to shatter some of the established ideals. In the following chapter, I will go further into the reconstruction of national icons and the identity politics entailed within.

4. 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 theme of identity within the context of the superhero is manifold and by far not covered by the general discussion on popular geopolitical identities and scripts in the previous chapter. Linked to those themes, the ways identity and subjectivity are presented within superhero narratives also contribute to the discourses of power and nationality and their relevance in popular geopolitical dynamics. All these concepts are very closely intertwined, and in order to access them in this chapter I shall approach the themes of power and subjectivity within the superhero narrative through a text that deliberately estranges the established character of Superman. Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son* (2003), drawn by Dave Johnson and Kilian Plunkett, connects with the previous chapter not just through its writer, but also in the way it is a very conscious take on the geopolitical relevance of the superhero, this time highlighted through the deliberate insertion of an American hero into a distinctively non-American nation.³⁰ In *Red Son*, Superman lands in Soviet Ukraine instead of the US, and proceeds to become a communist hero devoted to Marxist ideals instead of the familiar American icon. Throughout the text, Millar problematizes not only the geopolitical status of Superman as an American hero, but also the entire premise of the superhero and its highly problematic relation to issues of nationality, power and subjectivity through totalitarian regime. In this chapter, my aim is to widen my scope on the superhero's relevance to popular American geopolitical identity through a reading of *Red Son* that reflects the French writer

³⁰ 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 US. However, whereas *Red Son* ambitiously produces a serious extrapolation, *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).

Michel Foucault's arguments on power and identity politics and the role of resistance in reaching subjectivity.

Commonly speaking, the majority of comic book superheroes possess some kind of "powers": whether speed, flight, invincibility or other supersenses, in the context of superheroes, the word "power" most often denotes these types of actual superpowers. However, the significance of the word "power" reaches a new context when discussing superheroes as a part of the larger power structures of their fictional societies as well as their relevance in constructing the geopolitical identities and scripts of a nation. Whereas the superheroes may possess static "powers" that manifest as their personal abilities, the power relationships that they are a part of present a much more complex and dynamic issue to discuss. The term "power," in this dynamic sense, becomes a highly problematic concept due to the superhero's complex and quite paradoxical relationship with the state and the powers it in turn represents. In order to produce a satisfying analysis of the way superhero politics reflect and affect American geopolitics and national identity, the various roles of power within the superhero narrative must be critically analyzed – and Foucault, whose work very much focuses on the issue, provides a suitable starting point for this analysis.

Superman: Red Son and the Techniques of (Bio)Power

As Giorgio Agamben writes in the introduction of his work, *Homo Sacer* (1995), 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 (1995, 5). Immediately after this, Agamben proceeds to criticize Foucault for his refusal to develop a "unitary theory of power" (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 somewhat with Foucault's focus on power

relations and formations of subjectivity. As Foucault himself writes, he sees his whole work as trying 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 in 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), proposes a new angle into the formation of geopolitical identities and scripts, too, for this “production of individuated subjects” leads to these subjects experiencing such aspects as nationality, sexuality or gender as “a part of their core identity” (Halberstam, 1995, 141). In this perspective, then, “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 and experienced as a part of one’s core identity. Consuming popular culture narratives and other objects that narrate nationality and geopolitics and create a nation’s popular cultural memory can be read as a particular discourse within this government of “matrix of individualization” as perceived by Foucault (ibid., 132) that has spread over a multitude of institutions. The power of the superhero comic, both as a fictional narrative that conveys idealized nationality and as a popular culture item to be consumed, is a dynamic power that actively in dialogue with its audience takes part in the subject-making of a nation. And with the superhero, this subjectivization creates a particularly American geopolitical subject, complete with popular geopolitical narratives and scripts that function as a larger framework for both private and public actions.

Superman: Red Son highlights the problematic 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 geopolitical identities, especially through popular culture narratives. The text itself contains many obvious power relations on its surface structure: the vast majority involves Superman, whether with his “loyal” subjects or his

antagonists, most notable of which undoubtedly are Lex Luthor and, somewhat surprisingly, Batman. While Lex Luthor is widely known as Superman's arch-nemesis, casting Batman as a "villain" to Superman's "hero" is a curious reversal of the traditional superhero profile. The arrival of Superman has also permanently altered the power structures of world politics in an underlined way the original comic never displayed. This becomes clear from the start as a Russian newscast warns his audience: "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. Following the death of Stalin (another "Man of Steel," pun very much intended), Superman initially rejects but soon accepts his 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). Two decades later, nearly the entire world has succumbed to his rule (only Chile and the US resist, with very little success).

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 nation. Under Superman's totalitarian rule, criminals and revolters are turned into mind-controlled robots, and only Batman attempts to fight against the benevolent oppression forced on the world. In the US, Lex Luthor plans Superman's demise, becoming the President of the United States in the process (and as a by-product, rescuing the country from economic and social demise, proving the capitalist way's superiority to communism). Through these different power relations, the comic effectively exposes the full power of the superhero as unsustainable and violent, demonstrating the way the power relationships are effectively removed when a superhero reigns. *Superman: Red Son* explores the superhero myth's fascist possibilities, which can be defined as "elitism, irrationalism, stereotyping, and an appetite for total solutions instead of compromise" (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 282) to their logical (hypertrophic) conclusions, completely severing the superhero from any pretenses of defending democracy.

As Lawrence and Jewett have pointed out, while superhero narratives promote the premise of democratic equality by the fact the superpowers are projected onto ordinary citizens, it is ultimately the very transformation into superheroes that makes them “incapable of democratic citizenship” (2002, 46). The superhero is not elected to his position and he has no sanction for his actions from the state, and the inevitable use of violence in solving political problems echoes more of the fascist than of the democratic tendencies. As Superman realizes the fascist potential latent in the superhero by establishing his utopia by force, it is the superpowers that he possesses that give him power to modify people’s behavior. He goes even further, with the help of the reformed Brainiac, and performs involuntary neurosurgery on those who object to his totalizing vision of utopia. However, even as Superman accomplishes his dream society, his relationship to the subjects of his nation is simultaneously transformed: as no resistance is allowed, the subjectivity of the people is removed. The power relationship between a sovereign and his citizens is transformed into total domination, as Superman pursues his dream for global rule. This transformation is enforced visually by appropriating the traditional iconic costume of Superman. Not only is the familiar “S” chevron³¹ replaced with the Soviet hammer and sickle, but as his totalitarianism increases, his attire begins increasingly to resemble a military uniform as he adds collars and loses the “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.

According to Hannah Arendt, this struggle for a totalitarian rule is a necessity for a totalitarian regime, as every individual “can be absolutely and reliably dominated only under global totalitarian conditions” (1951, 392). Arendt continues later by describing totalitarianism with such binaries as lawful/lawless and legitimate/arbitrary; in her definition, totalitarian rule receives its

³¹ 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).

power by going beyond traditional legislation and government - it claims to obey the very laws of Nature or History (1951, 461). This transforms the totalitarian rule “beyond” lawlessness:

[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. (1951, 462)

Even though Arendt’s original critique was aimed at Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, this statement echoes eerily the justifications behind superheroes’ vigilante justice, which often seems to come from some intrinsic knowledge of right and wrong and is usually distributed because of the law’s frequent inadequacies. The mixing of totalitarian imagery with the iconic vision of Superman has a powerful resonance, as artists Johnson and Plunkett recreate the familiar icon, retaining the classic posture of Superman in flight but inserting it to the visual context of communist Russia, complete with the images of Stalin (See Figure 5.). The use 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 West 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.

Within superhero comics, the total power possessed by the monomythic American hero has been pictured as completely benign, thus transforming the vigilantism of heroes into flawless law enforcement (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 46). The hero’s superpower, his ability, is usually depicted as a static, stable quality that is innate to the hero. As has already been established, however, “power” in superhero comics has other, more significant manifestations. Power, in this sense, is not monolithic and “possessed” by the hero, but dynamic. In a Foucauldian sense, 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, having power does not necessarily involve any action as such, but it is an action on possible action, which suggests that an action (by the one with power) will occur only if a previous (unwanted) action is done before that. In the context of superheroes, 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. This power relies heavily on the threat of violence, as the superhero usually has superior physical abilities with which he'll execute the punishment. It is important to notice that having power is still not dependent on consent or violence in establishing power relations; however, as Foucault notes, the exercise of power usually can never do without one or the other. But even though both are instruments or results, "they do not constitute the principle or basic nature of power" (1982/2003, 138).

Similarly, Hannah 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). Violence, as Foucault notes, has only passivity as its opposite pole, and coming up on any resistance, has no choice but to break it down (1982/2003, 137). In *Red Son*, Superman is adamant that no actual violence is deployed to force his utopia: "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 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.

In *Red Son*, it is clear that the power relationship between those who govern and those who are governed has turned from a real power relationship into slavery: there is no chance of escape, no chance of confrontation, which means there is no power relationship. In 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):

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 “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). This opportunity for resistance is the ultimate freedom, and in *Red Son*, Superman literally removes even the right to suicide, first by preventing Pjotr (Stalin’s illegitimate son, head of the secret police), from committing suicide (2003, 37) and later by actually adding chemicals to the drinking water to keep everyone happy in his utopia (2003, 108). Arendt, too recognizes the possibility of suicide as the final oppositional freedom that remains in totalitarian regimes, but warns of the possibility that “the consequences of its exercise are shared with completely innocent people” (1951, 433). In preventing even the option of suicide, Superman executes what could be identified as *biopower*, power over people’s right to control their own bodies:

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 the ultimate power over the human body as he manages every aspect of life as a political force. In a way, he becomes the matrix of individualization that governs every aspect of people’s lives, removing the need for people to subjectively govern themselves. Superman’s total power and control make it very hard to resist him in any way, as his superpowers create a Foucauldian human panopticon where his supersenses allow him to observe nearly everyone. However, resistance is offered through one

particular character: the ultimate vigilante hero, Batman. Through his resistance, the comic presents a way through subjectivity, even if this subjectivity results in death.

A Force of Chaos in a Perfect World – Batman and the Role of Resistance

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 the internal rationality of power itself. This resistance can be analyzed as “a chemical catalyst” which brings to light the various existing 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 - but all these are localized events (1977, 27). While superhero comics usually portray the superhero as the one who often has to rebel against various authorities in order to pursue his rightful quest for justice, in *Red Son* the superhero is now the very authority that needs to be rebelled against.

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 Frank Miller’s *The*

Dark Knight Returns where Batman rebelled against the governmental authority of Superman, *Red Son*, too depicts Batman³² as the true vigilante who takes on the role of the human adversary to 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 depiction of this Soviet Batman depicts the opposite of the millionaire superhero/playboy of 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 variation of his mask, and in this universe, his parents were killed by the secret police for opposing the totalitarian rule of Superman. A thorn in the side of Superman's perfected utopia, he directly rebels against Superman's tyrannical rule through violent terrorist acts: he blows up government buildings and explicitly criticizes the despotic rule:

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, Superman rule as "totalitarian oppression", and his resistance is one defined largely by violence. Batman nearly manages to contain Superman in his quest to free the nation from his rule. While he ultimately fails in this attempt, he yet manages to remain a free subject to the very end by committing suicide, which is the ultimate form of resistance available to him. As Foucault identified earlier, a crucial site for resistance is the body, its forces, utility and docility, distribution and submission (1977, 25). 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 surgery. Superman literally forces his control over the

³² Interestingly, Batman's "batcave" 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.

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.

Batman's double role as hero/villain in *Red Son* highlights his vigilante status. What is rarely mentioned is that most superheroes in fact operate as vigilantes, outside the law and without its sanction. This means that they have an uncontrolled power over people's actions, as the effects of their power are acted directly on the people without the mediation of official authorities and legalities. As Mila Bongco claims, the plots of the 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' depiction of power, control and lawless action is central in the analysis of popular geopolitical identities and narratives, as they repeatedly celebrate narratives that transgress the law and defy impotent governmental authorities. The resistance to state control is a central theme in superhero narratives, though rarely expressed as straightforwardly as in *Red Son*, which is very much characterized by various forms of power struggles. According to Foucault, it is the "power effects as such" that become the targets of the power struggles instead of institutions or groups with power themselves (1982/2003, 129). This means that these struggles are also "immediate" in the sense that the critique and the resistance is aimed at the instances of power that are the closest to them, at those who actually exercise their action on individuals (which would be the superhero) (ibid.). Foucault claims that the struggle against the forms of subjection is one that affects the immediate everyday life today: it categorizes the individual, makes him a subject by marking him by his own individuality, and attaches him to his own identity. It is the resistance and struggle towards this form of subjection which Foucault sees as becoming more important today, although it is still closely linked to other forms of economic and social processes. (ibid. 130-1). The

superhero narrative actively takes part in these identity struggles, as it depicts the vigilante who embodies the American monomythical hero, the one who resists governmental control and applauds individuality.

Superman: Red Son depicts the dark side of the superhero in relation to power and subjectivity by extrapolating the what-if scenario of superpowered 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 can be analyzed. The role of resistance in the “matrix of individualization” (1982/2003, 132) is, in *Red Son*, the only way towards subjectivity and authentic power relations. When contrasted with the conceptual framework of defining 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 national identities through popular narratives. The initial premise of *Red Son* may 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 USSR. However, closer inspection reveals that the ideology exposed in the comic book is the ideology of the American monomythic superhero himself. What are ultimately exposed are the fascist and totalitarian elements always present within the character but never realized (the superhero’s actions, as Eco noted decades ago, seem always to be focused on the local, never the global scale), revealing the similar potential within American politics, too.

As *Superman: Red Son* explicitly criticizes the superhero, relocating the narrative to not-America also removes some of the explicit criticism towards the superhero, and by analogy, American ideals. Whilst DC has occasionally extrapolated with the idea of Superman as the President of the United States, these narratives have always belonged to the category of the so-

called “Elseworlds” –tales depicting “what if?” –scenarios that do not take place in the official continuity of the narrative universe and thus do not imbalance the “oneiric climate” of the story world (Eco, 1979, 114). Extrapolation of this kind, especially, closely resembles Darko Suvin’s concept of “cognitive estrangement,” as it shows a world we recognize, yet at the same time find strangely unfamiliar, due to a new variant in an otherwise familiar world (1979, 6). The role of visual intertextuality is central, as the recreation of the familiar cultural icons makes the characters instantly recognizable, yet their re-envisioning through a different visual tradition makes the strange at the same time. The prominently used “what if?” –formula applied in superhero comics subscribes precisely to this principle of “making strange.”³³ Extrapolation through cognitive estrangement, making strange, is a quality shared by both superhero comics and science fiction, testifying to the close relationship between the two literary genres.³⁴

The what if? –narratives tie the superhero genre to alternate histories, which are closely tied to science fiction, a prominent genre for utopian (and dystopian) narratives. Utopian narratives, in turn, are always political, as Fredric Jameson has argued in his 2005 work *Archaeologies of the Future*. According to Jameson, the utopian narrative “reflexively charts the impossibility of that achievement and the ways in which the wish outrumps itself,” essentially proving the unsustainability of the utopian wish (2005, 84). As Matthew Wolf-Meyer points out, superhero comics as a genre usually discard the process of gaining utopia, and are more concerned with the after-effort narratives, and the rare instances when superheroes truly aim at changing the world (like Superman in *Red Son*) have produced some of the most vital comic books in history, terrifying in their level of idealism (2003, 501). Wolf-Meyer identifies works such as Alan Moore’s *Miracleman* (1985) and *Watchmen* (1987) as well as Mark Gruenwald’s *Squadron Supreme* (1985) and Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch’s *The Authority* (1999) as primary examples of the political superhero

³³ This resembles closely German writer Bertolt Brecht’s technique of “alienation” or “Verfremdungseffekt”.

³⁴ Interestingly, Peter Coogan devotes a vast amount of space in order to demonstrate the generic lineage of superhero comics through pulps and westerns in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006), but he hardly seems to recognize the relevance of early science fiction stories such as Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories* published a decade before Superman’s arrival.

narrative where superheroes actively decide to use their powers to fight such universal problems as hunger, poverty and war (ibid., 505).

In conclusion, this chapter aimed at discussing the themes of power and subjectivity in the superhero narrative through a reading of Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son* (2003), connecting it to the Michel Foucault's ideas on power relationships and the formation of subjectivity through processes of individualization and resistance. What became apparent was the way most superhero comics portray power as benign and unproblematic, and the way the potential totalitarian power of the superhero was extrapolated within the context of Soviet Russia demonstrates the inherent impossibility for democracy of the superhero, and analogously, it reveals the similar dangers embedded in popular American geopolitics. The relevance of superhero comics and the idealized identity presented there is arguably a crucial part in the vast Foucauldian matrix of individualization that produces subjects within the nation who experience the nation's popular geopolitical narratives and scripts as a part of their core identity. The role of resistance is central in achieving subjectivity, and accordingly, *Red Son*, too, aims at questioning the ideology behind the superhero through the representation of a totalitarian rule by a superhero. The superhero's inherent inability for democracy is a topic that requires further analysis, as the fascist tendencies embedded in the superhero signal that similar tendencies can be located within American geopolitics where the popular national identity is repeatedly consumed and enjoyed as a part of the governmentalizing of individuality. The role of resistance is essential in creating subjects as well as forming identities, and within superhero comics, resistance can be located within the body itself: not just the superheroic body, but the villainous and monstrous body as well as the female body. The next part, therefore, will focus on the "resistant others" of the superhero myth: the problematic female and the deviant villain.

Part Three RESISTANT OTHERS

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; qtd. in Madrid, 2009, 77).

Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at or portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable. – Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.

(The Comics Code, 1954)

5. Women in Refrigerators: The Problem of the Female in Superhero Comics

It took over twenty years after the publication of *Action Comics* #1 until Supergirl finally appeared in 1959. Considering that before her, the audience had already witnessed the arrival of such Super-characters as Superboy (1945) and even Krypto, the Superdog (1955) (not to mention the soon-to-arrive Super-Monkey and Super-Horse!), the late arrival of the fairly obvious female counterpart is a telling sign of the problematic position the female superhero held within the genre. The American ideals of “fair play” quite clearly demanded that there should be female superheroes, yet the nation’s antagonistic and conflicted notions towards women with power lead to the development of female heroes who would for decades be deemed less than their male counterparts (Fingerroth, 2004, 82). For example, while young Billy Batson would become the adult Captain Marvel at the utterance of “Shazam!,” his sister, little Mary Marvel, always stayed in her preteens while being the super-powered Miss Marvel. Adding to the problematic nature of the female superheroes was the fact that they were characters created *by men for male audiences*, and this in part meant that the early Golden and Silver Age representation of the female superhero “closely follows dominant, mainstream cultural expectations of the post-war, white middle-class woman” (Mattoon D’Amore, 2008). The conflicted position of the female superhero signifies a similar conflict within popular

American geopolitical identity, as the powerful female was often celebrated while simultaneously seen as a threat to the society through her gender.

It is troubling to note that Lawrence and Jewett's *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), though much quoted in this dissertation, not once mentions the female superhero in its assessment of the American monomythic hero. In their discussion, the American monomyth is firmly assigned into the domain of the white, masculine and heterosexual hero, and they are unable to account for either black or female heroes. Instead, they assign the female "hero" strictly into the domain of the domestic, where women become the virtuous redeemers of their societies but without the violence inflicted by their male counterparts (2002, 67). While quoting such characters as Little Heidi or Mary Poppins as female representatives of the American monomyth, the complete absence of such iconic characters as Wonder Woman or Supergirl or even such established action movie heroines as Ripley from *Alien* (1979) or *The Terminator's* (1984 & 1991) Sarah Connor seems a strange (and highly regrettable) oversight. As Lawrence & Jewett's inability to account for the powerful female hero testifies, the female superhero holds a conflicted place in American mythology, and as elsewhere in this dissertation, it is through these discrepancies that I shall aim at examining and analyzing the dimensions of popular American geopolitics. In this chapter, I will therefore focus on the problematic position of the female in superhero comics, and analyze the way the powerful female is often presented as either overtly sexualized or as succumbing to evil. I will also pay attention to the problematic phenomenon labeled by comics writer and critic Gail Simone as "Women in Refrigerators," in which female characters in superhero comics are violently deployed as narrative tools for the male hero's main narrative.

Though the powerful female appears to create a problematic discourse within superhero comics, women in power in itself is not a new phenomenon in the US: already during the war, the women took on several of the positions left behind by the men fighting the front. "Rosie the Riveter" with her "We Can Do It!" slogan became a national icon of empowerment, as the women

did their part for their nation just like the men. However, as the war ended, the women were expected to return back to the kitchen and dutifully resume their places as wives and mothers. While female superheroes were an established phenomenon by 1945, their position within the larger mythological framework of American identity remained a site of conflict for decades. One of the most iconic superheroines is undoubtedly Wonder Woman. As Danny Fingeroth writes, Wonder Woman literally “was Rosie the Riveter writ large” who, with both power *and* skill, empowered herself and her readers (2004, 87). Invented by psychologist William Moulton Marston in 1941, 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). Probably due to the educational desires of its creator, there was from the start an educational aspect to Wonder Woman that Jules Feiffer, for one, deemed as “choppily written and dully drawn,” and even worse, felt that “nobody’s heart was in it” (1965/2003, 55). Yet, despite these accusations, Wonder Woman remains popular to this day, and continues to represent the iconic female superhero of America, her star-spangled outfit making her markedly American despite her Paradise Island origins. However, Wonder Woman, like all the other female superheroes in comics, ultimately faces the same problem: as Julie O’Reilly notes, “the female superhero” is essentially an oxymoron as she is “both feminine and aggressive,” leading to the underscoring of the masculine-subject/feminine-object relationship binary (2005, 280). In the next part, I will analyze the problematic position of the female superhero and the oxymoron of being both female and powerful within superhero comics.

Pin-Up Girls and Femme Fatales

As anyone asked to describe superhero comics could tell, a significant mark defining 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 Aaron Taylor argues, it has the potential to defy and to exist beyond the limits of "all traditional and normalizing readings" (2007, 345). However, as Taylor then notes, this makes it even more ironic that despite their potential, the vast majority of superheroes are "constructed along very gendered lines," and comply to notions of exaggerated femininity/masculinity, and are thus contained within a very traditional gender dualism of extremely visible binaries (ibid.). Similarly, Geoff Klock notes that female superheroes have traditionally been "simply objects of sexual voyeurism," resembling pin-up girls more than actual characters (2006, 111). Richard Reynolds, too, 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 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 representing gender within superhero comics, deeming especially the female heroes as nothing more than "pawns or tools of male fantasy" due to their pornography-inspired costumes (1992, 79). Reynolds also sees the female hero as a "slightly threatening male fantasy" who behaves like male heroes in battle while being either "smugly domestic" or "brooding and remote" when in repose (1992, 80).

While this analysis may reveal more of Reynolds' own attitudes towards women and how they should act, it cannot be denied that female heroes received a fairly conflicted treatment especially in the early decades of the genre. Reynolds locates one central reason to this in the perceived audience of superhero comics: the infamous "adolescent males":

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. (Reynolds, 1992, 81)

This “domestication” of female sexuality, according to Reynolds, derives from the way the female superheroes were depicted as visually enticing, yet their power was either condemned, or, as it often was, of a significantly lesser degree than those of the male heroes. A similar conclusion is drawn by Mitra Emad, who sees the “hypersexualizing” of the female superhero as a way to control and reign in female power by making the female body of the hero an object of male sexual pleasure (2006, 982).

In her reading of *Wonder Woman*, Emad connects the rise of the women’s movement in the US in the 1970s with the increased depictions of female superheroes as becoming too powerful, and in need of serious constraint. As Emad writes, both *Wonder Woman* and the women’s movement were “perceived as a threat”:

By 1979, for instance, *Wonder Woman* had become a “menace” – female power unleashed, uncontrollable, “gone berserk” – who by the 1980s had been tamed into a glamorous, unthreatening “Miss Clairol” model. (Emad, 2006, 968)

This “female power unleashed” had to be restrained, both in reality and in the pages of the comic book, and the re-envisioning of *Wonder Woman* as a glamorous and domesticated model of femininity can indeed be read as a signal of a similar desire to control the feminist movement.³⁵ By focusing on the physical appearance of the female hero alone, her other traits (or even what she had to say) were conveniently subdued. The female superhero’s identity was often presented as “inseparable from her physical appearance,” which in turn contributed to her objectification as the focus of the sexualizing male gaze³⁶ (Mattoon D’Amore, 2008). However, whereas *Wonder Woman* was perceived more clearly as a threat (perhaps due to her lack of male companions), the

³⁵ The rise of the feminist movement can be located in other popular media of the 1970s, such as feminist science fiction like Joanna Russ’ *The Female Man* (1975) or Ursula LeGuin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).

³⁶ While the male superhero’s identity, too, can be said to be inseparably linked to his physical appearance, it is unlikely that he is similarly objectified by the (male) reader, offering instead a focus for identification instead.

Silver Age heroine Sue Storm, also known as the Invisible Girl in the Fantastic Four, represents a “feminist awakening that is non-threatening,” negotiating a balance between femininity and power as a part of a male dominated superhero “family” (ibid.). Subdued by her male companions (including her brother, Johnny Storm, and her fiancée, Reed Richards), Sue was infinitely less threatening than Wonder Woman, and her power of invisibility, too, stressed her submissive role.

As Jeff Brown argues in his article “Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books” (2004), one of the central paradoxes of the action woman, especially within comics, is the way she is “required to be both active and static at the same time” (64). Similar problematic has been identified by Mike Madrid, who points out the way several female superheroes have what he calls “strike a pose and point” powers: psychic powers that do not require physical contact, powers that let the women take part in the battle while staying still and “still look fabulous doing it” (2009, 292). Very few female superheroes (She-Hulk, for example) engage in physical combat, which is a male arena where very few women are allowed (and if they are, they usually fall under the category of evil). Again, it seems, the female power is being harnessed and controlled by the demand to “look fabulous,” and the female hero’s actions are restricted by a desire to have her “pinned down,” located and, in essence, domesticated. Indeed, the central trope of guilt within superhero comics functions well to demonstrate the differences that separate the male hero from the female: as Sara Crosby writes, whereas the male hero’s guilt (like Spider-Man’s failure to save his uncle Ben) is what motivates his heroism, the female superheroes often “feel guilt *because* of their heroism” (2004, 155). The female superhero must atone for her crime of *wanting* to be a hero, whereas the male hero must atone for his failures as a hero – a clear difference which distinguishes the male hero from the female. A similar tendency can be located within the notion of the origin trauma: as Danny Fingeroth notes, there exists a “societal unease - - about putting women in the traumatic positions into which popular culture puts men” (2004, 88). Partially due to this refusal to believe women may recover from trauma like men (or even surpass

them!), the female heroes usually lack the origin trauma that makes them truly interesting in the vein of Batman or Spider-Man.

Similarly, their power as females appears to be one that emphasizes the “successive nature of their power,” as Julie O’Reilly describes it (2005, 281). Whereas male heroes can self-proclaim their heroism and uniqueness, the female hero’s status as a hero is often sanctioned by the institution that grants her power (ibid.). This, of course, most notably refers to Wonder Woman, granted her title and position by her fellow Amazons on Paradise Island. But the argument is still valid, as it exemplifies the disparate relationship between male and female superheroes where women must constantly balance their double binds as superheroes and women, constantly being forced to prove their worth, attempting to reconcile the “oxymoron” of femininity and aggression by presenting a female-female identity instead of a male/female one. For example, Wonder Woman’s alter ego, “Diana Prince,” enables her to hide her public and masculine nature through the private feminine sexuality, as she pretends weakness and submission in order to keep the binaries apart (Emad, 2006, 965). This separation differs crucially from the dual identity of the established male heroes, who do not seek the acceptance of their society through their civilian identities, but revel in their heroic roles.

Wonder Woman, as already should be apparent, is indeed the only female superhero who still stands alone today (Supergirl was killed in the infamous DC’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-1986) and subsequently written out of continuity³⁷). Most of the other female superheroes, especially within the Marvel Universe, were always a part of a male-dominated team, most notorious of these teams being *The X-Men*. While featuring powerful females with “strike a pose and point” powers such as Storm, Rogue, and Jean Grey, the female superheroes of the X-Men creed were, at some point in their careers, almost as a rule depicted as intoxicated by their own power, which “made them cruel, maniacal menaces who cast aside loyalties to friends and lovers”

³⁷ Naturally, following superhero conventions, Supergirl has since then been recreated numerous times, but with new origins that mark her as separate from the pre-Crisis identity.

(Madrid, 2009, 231). As a part of controlling and punishing powerful females, it seems, the female superheroes were employed as signifiers of otherness for the definition of male subjectivity, “transgressions that threaten the established order” (Taylor, 2007, 353). A powerful female hero would inevitably transgress the boundaries set to her, unable to control her power, and she would have to be de-powered or killed. As Fingerroth, for example, notes, apart from Wonder Woman there existed no successful female superhero “who was *femme* but not *fatale*” (2004, 80). Women could not be both good and powerful, but instead, their increase of power inevitably lead to evil.

A notorious example of this is the handling of the *Dark Phoenix Saga*³⁸ in the *X-Men* in 1980: Jean Grey, who had begun her journey as the telekinetic Marvel Girl in the *X-Men* in the 1960s, acquired the “Phoenix force,” a massive psychic power which turned her into an all-powerful, planet-devouring entity. Ultimately, this power turned her into the evil Dark Phoenix, who devoured entire universes while laughing about it. The Marvel solution: she had to die to atone for her crimes. A classic example of the fate of the too-powerful female within superhero comics, the Dark Phoenix case demonstrated the genre’s inability to create good and powerful female characters, and as Mike Madrid among others has noticed, the writers often saw no other solution to the woman with too much power than death. This escalated to the point where it was seen as the *X-Men* cliché where “all of the team’s heroines would go off the deep end and turn evil at some point” (2009, 229):

These heroines-turned-villainesses represented the ultimate fear that men have about female power – the 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)

Indeed, the death and/or de-powering of the female hero is a alarmingly standard trope within superhero comics, signaling a very disturbing attitude towards powerful and independent female characters. While the American monomyth is useful in analyzing the superhero as an emblem of the popular American geopolitical identity of the hegemonic white masculinity, it is increasingly

³⁸ *Dark Phoenix Saga (X-Men [vol. 1] #129-138, 1980.*

apparent that this theoretical approach is unable to contain powerful female superhero, as the domesticated and virtuous female is the only one who is allowed into the mythology. The rest, as the next part will analyze, often face a grim fate of the Dark Phoenix.

Women in Refrigerators: DC's *Identity Crisis*

The role of the female within a superhero narrative is, as testified above, a problematic one: 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 mythical superhero, one that applies to heroic and non-heroic females alike, one that comics writer and critic Gail Simone has infamously dubbed the “Women in Refrigerators” –syndrome. Initially created as a web site³⁹ in 1999, Simone collected on the site the numerous instances where superhero comics decided to take the female character, and, simply, have her “either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator” for the sake of the plot.⁴⁰ What’s more, this plot almost as a rule focused 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. The expendable nature of the female character is a revealing sign of the way the female character is still often perceived as secondary within superhero comics, and often the female superhero is herself to blame for her fate, as her feminine traits, such as emotionality, cause her to fail in her mission. In trying to be more like her male counterparts, the female hero fails too, for she is then guilty of renouncing her feminine nature, which ultimately deems her punishable by society.

A famous example (to quote one of numerous) of the cruel fate of the female character is presented in *The Killing Joke* (1988) by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, where the former Batgirl, Barbara Gordon, was shot (and probably sexually assaulted, though this is not explicitly stated) and

³⁹ Now located at: <http://www.unheardtaunts.com/wir/>. Accessed October 12, 2010.

⁴⁰ The term “women in refrigerators,” naturally, comes precisely from such an incident: *Green Lantern* #54 (1994) showed the hero entering his apartment and finding his girlfriend, Alex DeWitt, killed by a supervillain and literally stuffed into his refrigerator.

paralyzed by The Joker just to induce madness on Commissioner Gordon and to arouse the attention of Batman. This controversial act divided the readership at the time, some of whom were appalled by the way the violence towards the former Batgirl was done merely to antagonize the male characters, while others hailed the narrative as one of the greatest Batman stories ever told. The male characters, Commissioner Gordon and Batman, are the ones who experience the tragedy, and their responses to this horrific event is what is at the center of the narrative, while Barbara's sufferings and her tragedy of permanent paralysis are swiftly bypassed for the sake of the final confrontation between the hero and the villain. It is obvious that The Joker is even unaware of Barbara's status as the former superhero, as she is merely 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, he merely quips: "To prove a point. Here's to crime." (1988, 14). Barbara Gordon's suffering at the hands of The Joker serves no other purpose than to "prove a point."

However, as Barbara Gordon has forfeited her career as a masked avenger, she is doubly to blame. As Mike Madrid notes in his celebrational book on female superheroes, *The Supergirls* (2009, 57), the female superheroes of the comic book world often lacked the dedication to the cause that motivated the male heroes, and ultimately their desire for love and stability proved greater than their "quest for justice." Indeed, the female character's most dire weakness appears to be her emotional nature and desire for romance instead of justice. The need for love is a weakness not only in the female superhero, but in the often forgotten category of the superhero girlfriend: whether Lois Lane or Mary Jane Watson, to be a superhero's chosen means to be in constant danger. And even if technically this is due to the male hero's desire to love, the fault always seems to be on the weaker sex, who allows herself to be captured. The girlfriends, if allowed to know they were dating a masked avenger, often became the hero's assistants:

While the secret identity was a precious commodity for most male heroes, some were confident enough to share theirs with a special someone. Heroes like Dr. Fate, The Flash, and Sandman revealed their heroic identities to their girlfriends, who then became their assistants, or 'helpmates.' (Madrid, 2009, 11)

Of course, this lead to the immediate risk of injury and even death, as their ignorance no longer protected them. By becoming a part of the team, they now were in constant danger, to themselves 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). As the American monomythical hero (despite his pronounced heterosexuality) by definition resists the stability of a sexual union, the female temptress luring him towards such grim fate must be denounced. This threat is a clear indicator of the way the women are often portrayed as characters lacking the realization of the importance of the hero's mission, his quest for justice. This lack of vision makes her not only expendable, but also a very prominent threat, as DC's fairly recent *Identity Crisis* -miniseries from 2004 testifies.

Identity Crisis, written by Brad Meltzer and illustrated by Rags Morales, focuses on the Justice League of America and especially to the relationships between the heroes and their families. The narrative is filled with iconic heroes such as Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman, but the main focus is on the slightly lesser known heroes: Green Arrow, the Flash, Green Lantern and the Atom, among others. The focus is on the Elongated Man, Ralph Dibny, whose wife 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 arises as the heroes are forced to realize the danger they not only expose themselves, but which they expose their loved ones to, as they paint "a bull's-eye on his family's chests" by choosing the career of masked avengers (2004, 15). Initially, Sue Dibny's fate serves as the catalyst to the (largely male cast of) heroes' trauma and tragedy, following the "women in refrigerators" formula. 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 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 girlfriend becomes the substitute target, a tool to hurt the hero who cannot be physically hurt. 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, who had attacked (and accidentally killed) Sue in the hopes that a threat aimed at the families of superheroes would unite her once more with her ex-husband. In this narrative, *both* victim and 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 at any cost leads to her ultimate destruction.

The victim and villain of the narrative quite clearly deem the emotional weakness of the female as the evil of the narrative, but the hidden misogyny of the text is not constricted to these two characters. Instead, it is made apparent from the very opening pages of the comic. 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 basic assumptions of the male/female division among superheroes: "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 in regarding his wife. It is, however, in his relationship to the female heroes that the misogynist views are revealed. Indeed, a few pages later, it is stressed how the 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 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.

As characters are introduced in the first pages of the comic, they all are given titles within the captions, most of them stressing the various family relations between the characters from parents to spouses. Tellingly, Sue Dibny only receives the title “wife” (p. 16), underlining her submissive and devoted role (interestingly, Lois Lane is given the title “soulmate” 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 nothing more than a spouse, and soon, a victim.⁴¹ Satisfying herself with the role of wife (and to-be mother), Sue Dibny is not worthy of the superheroic mission. On pages 19-20, Sue’s brutal death is juxtaposed with images of the small-time crooks being shot in a back alley that Ralph and Firehawk are witnessing. Perhaps unintentionally, by juxtaposing these two characters and their violent fates, the narrative stresses not the violent nature of these attacks, but their equally minimized status within the narrative. Neither character is important to the plot, and can be killed off at the start. The only difference between the two acts of violence is that the crooks still call an ambulance to the shot man who may still survive, whilst the villain who attacked Sue proceeds to make sure she is dead by incinerating her, displaying ultimate cruelty.

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 (and the popular geopolitical narrative it holds) itself remains intact and unquestioned. Her death is all about the men who narrate the story, and 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, testifying to the established doctrine that females are emotion-driven, which renders them weak. The male narrative repeatedly overrides the female ones, as Wonder Woman’s speech at Sue’s funeral is completely overridden by Green Arrow’s inner monologue, testifying again to the primacy of the male experience within the superhero

⁴¹ It should be noted that Jean Loring, too, is a former victim: a 1969 storyline of *Atom and Hawkman* #45 saw her driven insane by a supervillain, and not cured until over a decade later.

narrative. Later, as they go and question the villain Slipknot, Wonder Woman is there to interrogate him with her truth-compelling lasso. However, all we see of her is her crotch, as everything else is between Slipknot and Green Arrow, the two males.

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

As Mike Madrid points out, ever since the early days of the Justice Society of America, the notion has been that "women were better assistants to male heroes, rather than working on their own" (2009, 12). However, as Madrid continues, the fact that they fought crime merely to please their boyfriends yet again meant that they failed to understand the missionary nature of superheroism, and as a result were not as highly regarded by the readers (ibid, 12-13). It may partially be this aspect of the female superhero/girlfriend that has led to the frequent attack on the female within the superhero universe. As she has no true mission, being merely supportive of her man (and often becoming a liability by allowing herself to be captured), she "deserves" to be depowered/assaulted/killed. Thus, both Sue and Jean are a threat to the male hero, as their involvement in the heroes' lives and secrets may pull the men away from their crime-fighting

mission. They represent the domesticating and constraining effect of family life outside the superheroic mission, and therefore they have no place in the male universe of the superhero.

As Laura Mattoon D'Amore writes, the superheroine's ideal strength is in her ability to complement the male heroes of her universe, to be the mother figure, the stabilizing impact, the one who holds the dysfunctional family together (2008). However, this may ultimately prove fatal, as the emotional stability of home life may lessen her devotion to the male cause of justice, making her expendable. The female character, whether a superhero or a supporting cast member, still far too often faces the grim fate that so many before have met. *Identity Crisis* even makes an odd tribute to this violent and misogynist continuum by reproducing the original panel of the shooting of Barbara Gordon in *The Killing Joke* from a slightly different angle (see Figure 6). This single image evokes a small part of the vast continuum of violence inflicted on female characters for the sake of male tragedy, which transforms women into mere plot devices serving the narrative purposes of the genre. While Barbara Gordon's fate is a cruel example of the women's fate in superhero comics, there is an interesting element to her case, as her injury did not lead to her disappearance from the continuity. Instead, she was later reintroduced to the series with her disability, now acting under the title "Oracle" and serving the JLA through her computer skills. Her reintegration into the DC universe as Oracle in 1989 and her subsequent main role in the title *Birds of Prey* in 1999 signals a possible change for the women in refrigerators. Although works like *Identity Crisis* still espouse to the geopolitical narratives that do not question the heroic mission and depict the female characters as emotion-driven, weak and unfit for heroism, the fact that Barbara Gordon is able to still be a "superhero" despite her disability perhaps indicates the emergence of a new kind of heroic female. Similarly, the latest incarnation of the Batwoman quotes her as openly lesbian in a clear attempt to reconfigure some of the prejudices embedded within superhero rhetoric since Fredric Wertham accused Wonder Woman of inducing lesbianism in 1954.

Truly powerful female characters who are not depicted as evil are still few and far between in the superhero universes, as the notion still lives on that female power “must be tempered so that female power does not ‘go berserk’ and become ‘a menace to society’” (Emad, 2006, 982). The imagined community of America and the popular geopolitical scripts that comprise it in superhero narratives reveal a deep confusion when it comes to the powerful *and good* female characters. Powerful female characters have had successful runs outside of superhero comics, hopefully signaling that a similar development would eventually take place within comics, too. Fingerth (2004, 80-84), among many others, quotes the arrival of such empowered TV heroines as *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) or *Xena, The Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) in the 1990s as a revolutionizing phenomenon, quoting them as the first examples of powerful and good female superheroes (similar discussions often quote such previously mentioned female heroes as *Alien*’s Ripley, *The Terminator*’s Sarah Connor and even the computer game character of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* (1996-) as female superheroes). However, what Fingerth and others have missed is that whereas these characters do represent the strong female hero so long lacking within popular mainstream media, these characters are not in fact *super*heroes. By the definition presented in first chapter of this dissertation, these characters lack the essential characteristics of the superhero trope, such as the dual identity and the iconic costume that label the superhero as one. They are powerful and good, but they do not represent a part of the superheroic gallery.

Yet, there are promising female superheroes emerging within the superhero comics, too: Alan Moore’s *Promethea* (1999-2005), for example, depicts a female superhero of the title’s name, whose purpose is to bring about the end of the world. An exploration of the cosmic order itself, the text is highly complex and multilayered while simultaneously evoking the classic tropes of the superhero order as her mission is to “help those who are in need and to fight against the forces of evil” (Di Liddo, 2009, 88). However, the text’s visual narration and organization explores the limits of space and time in comic book narration, making it at times a challenging read (note for example,

the two-page spread in *Promethea Book 3*, 64-65, that is built as a Moebius strip, forcing the reader to turn the comic in order to read it and simultaneously distancing the reader from the story world). Ultimately, *Promethea* will not hold a significant geopolitical relevance due to its limited audience. While *Promethea* as a superhero narrative may struggle with “the status of a female superhero in a masculine continuity,” aiming at creating a space for the “genuinely female superhero narrative,” as Geoff Klock argues (2006, 98-99), the relevance of it is somewhat diminished when analyzing its presumably limited effect on the imagined communities and popular geopolitical scripts that construct the idealized American identity.

The role of gender is crucial when analyzing the superhero narrative, especially within the larger framework of popular geopolitical identity construction. Particularly due to the restrictive nature of the essentially masculine American monomyth and its inability to contain powerful female characters, the issue of gender must be separately discussed. The traditional gender binaries still often prevail within superhero comics, although exceptions to this rule have begun to emerge. The effect of these changes may be too early to note within the larger popular geopolitical narratives and scripts, as female characters are still all too often created with the notion that women are emotionally compromised and thus prone to evil and corruption. Some TV heroes, like Buffy and Xena, have already made the leap from TV screens to the pages of comic books,⁴² hopefully paving the way for more mainstream female superheroes within comics who do not have to be evil to be powerful. In a further exploration of evil within superhero comics, the next chapter will delve further into the problematic of gender and sexuality through the deviant and “evil” character of The Joker.

⁴² *Buffy The Vampire Slayer Season Eight* comic book was launched by Dark Horse Comics in 2007, and it is still ongoing. *Xena The Warrior Princess* made the leap to comics already in 1996, but was discontinued in 2000. Later, the comic was picked up by Dark Horse Comics and continued in 2007.

6. Displaying Deviance: Textual (and Sexual) Anarchy in The Joker

Anarchy needs to be carefully constructed.
(Alan Moore, Northampton, 2010)

In order to produce a comprehensive analysis of the superhero, one must inevitably turn the focus on his nemesis: the infamous supervillain. From Lex Luthor to the Red Skull, each superhero has his significant Other, his opposite who in turn helps the hero to define himself. The villain is indeed the capitalized Other, the one in possession of the traits that the norm represented by the white, masculine and heterosexual hero excludes. This was most evident in the WWII –era superhero comics, where both Nazis and especially the Japanese were portrayed as grotesquely ugly and subhuman in contrast to the noble and virtuous superheroes (Wright, 2001, 45-49). After the war, other traits, such as deviant sexuality and physical weakness, became the categories through which otherness was defined. Within traditional 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 (Fingerhuth, 2004, 162-163). The villain sets things in motion, forcing the hero to react as the villain's plan threatens the status quo (Reynolds, 1992, 50-51). The villain threatens social norms, organization and law, and he may be physically grotesque or deformed. Within the dynamics of the superhero genre, then, the villain cannot be overlooked, and this dissertation will proceed by devoting this chapter to one of the most enigmatic villains ever to have been drawn on the pages of a comic book: The Joker. Through The Joker, Batman's most iconic arch-nemesis, this chapter will focus on the deep deviance within the supervillain, expressed both textually and sexually as The Joker resists both linear continuity and normative gender roles, assuming the role of the anarchistic and flamboyantly queer antagonist to the obsessively heteronormative order of Batman.

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 originations for the character have been sketched out throughout the years, allowing for what I shall refer to as “textual anarchy” to take place. This textual anarchy of The Joker is most apparent in the way his past is presented as “multiple choice” in Alan Moore and Brian Bolland’s *The Killing Joke* (1988), while The Joker’s sexual ambiguity and resistance to normative heterosexuality in works like Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s *Arkham Asylum. A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) and Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) testify to The Joker’s sexual anarchy and highlight his nature as opposite to the hero. By analogy, I would argue, The Joker in these works also comes to represent a variant of the Other of the popular American geopolitical identity of the 1980s, too. As Judith Halberstam writes in her study on Gothic monsters, *Skin Shows* (1995), the role of the monster is a place where one can locate the way national communities are created through an indispensable inside/outside dichotomy (1995, 15). The Joker fits surprisingly well Halberstam’s definition of the Gothic monster who displays rhetorical extravagance, deviant sexuality and gendering and functions as a site for multiple interpretations and “a plurality of locations” (1995, 2-23). Batman himself is a heavily Gothic-influenced character, too, with his gargoyle-like poses and sinister tones. The setting of the comic in *Gotham City* does, naturally, lead to the interpretation of the narratives as Gothic as well. This gothic aspect of Batman is also stressed in the extremely grotesque rogue gallery of Gotham City, which features prominently physically disfigured and grotesque villains such as The Penguin or Two-Face, all functioning as mirrors and opposites to Batman (Klock, 2006, 35-36).

The plurality of locations and interpretations of the monster/villain as described by Halberstam is what I will refer to as “textual anarchy” that can be located within The Joker. This textual anarchy is most apparent in *The Killing Joke* - a rare instance where the entire comic was published not serially, but as a single, 46-page story – which offers one possible reading of the origins of The Joker, Batman’s arch-nemesis. The Joker’s origins have been explored several times within the character’s history, but never conclusively. Accordingly, illustrator Brian Bolland

stresses in the afterword of the 2008 Deluxe Edition that the story of *The Killing Joke* is “just one of a number of possible origin stories.” In the hands of these two British auteurs, the origins of Batman’s arch-nemesis, The Joker, are examined and consequently, the entire comic book continuity and its paradoxes are exposed. Simultaneously faithful to the Batman lore and challenging it, Moore and Bolland’s adaptation of the characters of Batman and especially The Joker reveals the impossibility of a linear superhero narrative in the wake of decades of work by innumerable artists and writers⁴³, and instead suggests a form of textual anarchy in accessing the characters’ past as one of “multiple choice.” The version of the origin story offered by *The Killing Joke* was originally published in *Detective Comics* #168 from 1951 (Klock, 2006, 58). Depicting The Joker as a failed comedian who agrees to rob a chemical factory to support his pregnant wife, he disguises himself as the Red Hood and is pursued by Batman. He escapes by swimming in a polluted channel, where the chemicals from the plant alter his appearance for good, making his skin white and his hair a garish green. Seeing his reflection, he goes insane.⁴⁴ In trying to prove that all it takes is one bad day to make anyone go insane (the way he did), he shoots and paralyzes Barbara Gordon, and exposes Commissioner Gordon to images of her, naked and suffering, in an attempt to drive him mad:

All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That’s how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day. (1988, 38)

Ultimately, The Joker fails, as despite his attempts, Gordon remains sane. However, what makes *The Killing Joke* an example of so-called textual anarchy is the way the work stands “separate and unresolved at several key moments, exposing the cracks in the sanity of organization” (Klock, 2006,

⁴³ One attempt at solving these issues within the DC universe was the infamous *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in 1985-1986 which effectively tried to solve all the continuity issues by a massive crossover that explained the conflicts in continuity through parallel superhero universes and, as a result, wiped entire characters completely out of the continuity by denying their existences.

⁴⁴ Similar version of The Joker’s origins is presented in Tim Burton’s movie version *Batman* (1989). The Joker, played by Jack Nicholson, is revealed to have been Jack Napier, a local gangster, who falls into a chemical solution after Batman has stopped him and his men raiding a chemical factory. The solution disfigures his face, which drives him mad. In an attempt at closure, it is revealed at the end that Jack Napier (and not Joe Chill as in the comics) was also the criminal who shot and killed Bruce Wayne’s parents, and in effect created Batman. Thus, the theme of origins is strongly present in the movie.

59). These “cracks in the sanity of organization” force the reader to realize the impossibility of a linear continuity within The Joker’s past, which is exposed as consisting of several options.⁴⁵ The past with its several versions of his origins becomes a multiple choice for The Joker, who is free to reinvent himself over and over again.

The Past as Multiple Choice

I mean, what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the mob, maybe? Brother carved up by some mugger? Something like that, I bet. Something like that...Something like that happened to me, you know. I.. I’m not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I’m going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! (1988, 39)

In *The Killing Joke*, The Joker refers to his past as one of “multiple choice,” which highlights the character’s shattered past as his origins and past exploits have been written and rewritten so many times even he cannot keep up with them. This multiple choice is not restricted to comics, but follows the character through various other formats, such as animation, TV-series and cinema. Who he is and how he came to be The Joker is unclear even to him. This disorganization of non-linear forms that characterizes The Joker’s past can be read as kind of textual anarchy, a refusal to obey traditional meanings and linear histories. His past as multiple choice is ambiguous, open to new interpretations, new readings of the same character, and in this way, he presents a threat to the stability of the hero’s (and the nation’s) identity. As Philip Sandifer has argued, the night-compulsive retellings of the superhero (or –villain) origin story are symptomatic repetitions of the origin trauma that refuses to stay still in a historicized past, returning in constant repetition in order to provide a stable center for the narrative in question (2008, 178-181). However, whereas the hero’s origin story has a stable nature (Batman’s trauma is always his parent’s death etc), The Joker’s origin story has multiple permutations. This leads to his solution of a “multiple choice past,”

⁴⁵ Interestingly, a similar approach is taken in Neil Gaiman and Andy Kubert’s *Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?* (2009), which depicts the funeral of Batman. During the funeral, each guest (whether hero, villain, or friend) shares the events of his death in very different circumstances, often blatantly denying the other guests and their narrative “lives” in a similar act of textual anarchy.

which may be compulsively retold like the hero's, but due to its unstable nature, it cannot offer similar stability to the narrative, but instead questions the entire structure of the narrative by exposing its fabricated nature.

To call *The Killing Joke* and its exposition of the constructed nature of The Joker's past a form of "textual anarchy" can be seen as somewhat hazardous a choice, as "anarchy" is usually defined as a situation without organization or control. This presents an intriguing contrast when discussing Alan Moore's work, precisely notorious of its high level of organization and control. This apparent paradox, however, can be sidestepped with Moore's own statement in the first ever academic conference devoted to his work in Northampton in May, 2010, where he argued that anarchy always needs to be "carefully constructed" in order to exist. To label *The Killing Joke* as a type of textual anarchy is, in this sense, more than valid: through the denial of a single linear narrative and the embrace of a multitude of past histories and choices, the textual anarchy is in fact presented through a carefully constructed and highly organized text. Through this approach of a carefully constructed textual anarchy, the narrative structure of *The Killing Joke* can be approached in a new and interesting light.

The narrative structure of *The Killing Joke* produces this carefully constructed anarchy through various methods. The visual construction of the panels creates the illusion of a coherent narrative that alternates between the present (where the plot takes place) and past "flashbacks" that illustrate the Red Hood origin story. In a familiar style from both comics and cinema, these two narrative levels of *then* and *now* are separated through their coloring schemes: the present is in full color, while the past is sepia-toned. The transitions between the past and the present rely on the visual markers of transferring the character's pose and stature from the present to the past, indicating an active "memory" through the juxtaposition of two consequent panels. This very clearly invites the reader to interpret these shifts as active visual memories of The Joker, depicted to the audience through internal focalization by juxtaposing past and present events. Within comics,

internal focalization often results in “the reader actually witnessing the character’s conscious memories” (Miettinen, 2006, 52-53). However, it must be remembered that as this type of focalization is attributed to the character, it cannot be equated to the narrator, and it can therefore mislead the audience, as character misperceptions can be presented as factual within the narrative (Branigan, 1992, 102-103). To make matters more conflicting, this visual interpretation is repeatedly denied by The Joker himself, who claims no memory of who he was before he became The Joker (1988, 39). The visual cueing implicates him as the source, while the textual narrative claims The Joker has no memory of these events, creating a strong dissonance that causes the reader to become aware of the problematic nature of the origin story and to question the source of these “memories” as actually coming from The Joker (who, to be fair, is very far from what any narratologist would label as a “reliable narrator”).

The questionable temporal shifts through focalization within The Joker’s origin story are not by far the only visual marker of the impossibility of a single, coherent narrative within the superhero genre. The visual narrative repeatedly underlines the impossibility of containing the narrative in a linear and continuous plane. This is done by carefully extending chosen actions just slightly over the panel frames: sound effects break out of the panels, as do the pictures of the naked and suffering Barbara Gordon (1988, 25). The Joker repeatedly breaks out of the frames, which clearly functions to underline his uncontrollably chaotic and anarchistic nature as the Other who cannot be contained (1988, 6; 25; 32 but also 45). The effect of is clearest on page 32, where the black lines of the frames disappear completely as The Joker manically laughs while he is “born” (See Figure 7.). There is no frame, and even the assumed frame that holds his laughter cannot contain him, as he escapes beyond the limits set to him by the frame.

As Thierry Groensteen has concluded, the functions of the panel frame include such basic aspects as closure and separation (1999, 39). The majority of the visual narrative of *The Killing Joke* is very much contained within the panels, making it even clearer that the panel frames are

intentionally breached in order to deny this closure. *The Killing Joke* very discreetly produces broken frames, denying the consistency and containment of the image within. The page layout is otherwise quite regular and extremely contained, highlighting the importance of “sudden and spectacular ruptures from the initially given norm” (Groensteen, 1999, 97). The images break the limits set to them by the frames, producing an anarchy that is no longer textual just but also visual, yet doing it so delicately that the reader may not even be aware of it. The transgression of the limit set by the panel frame encompasses in a way the whole space of its trajectory. As Foucault (1963/2003, 445) writes, “it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses,” and the line and its transgression are interdependent, and neither would be possible without the other. The existence of a limit enables a break away from it; similarly, the existence of a narrative genre formula and its continuity enable a break from it, and this break simultaneously enhances the formula itself.

Transgression can be located in another, clearer way of visual “anarchy,” which can be found in illustrator Brian Bolland’s way of appropriating existing artistic renditions of The Joker and Batman into the comic. Thus, the ambiguity of past as “multiple choice” is not restricted to the history of the character, but it can also be traced in the visual design. Bolland often copies the style of previous artists from the 1940s and 1950s in a kind of pastiche, inserting other artists’ styles in photographs as well as in the general visual style of the comic. Bolland draws on the vast iconography of the Batman comic book continuum, showing familiar and instantly recognizable images from different decades, sometimes even within a single panel. This kind of “layering of iconography” consciously refers to images from different periods of the character’s visual history, revealing a “discursive discontinuity” within the text (Collins, 1991, 175-177). The iconographic layers of the narrative can be located for example in the photographs within the comic book: one such instance is the image of a family portrait of sorts in the Batcave, showing Batman, Robin and Commissioner Gordon with some 1950s characters (such as the Bat-Mite and Ace the Bat-Hound)

that have since then written completely out of the story's continuity. There is even a recognizable signature from Bob Kane on the right-hand corner of one photo, dramatically exposing that Batman's own history, too, is one of "multiple choice" (Klock, 2006, 59). In this homage to previous artists, Bolland also exposes the impossibility of a complete and whole past for the characters by allowing "Batman's dialectic history to stand in suspension" (ibid.). Acknowledging the various artists (and writers) who have worked with the characters in the past, Bolland explicitly demonstrates the impossibility of reconciling the various narrative continuities into a single, linear structure.

When approaching the genre from the viewpoint of popular geopolitical identity construction, this problematic continuity of a multiple choice past presents an interesting dilemma: how is it possible to argue the relevance of superhero comics in national identity construction when the genre itself is characterized (plagued, even) by a complex (and often contradictory) narrative histories? One possible answer to this question is the use of so-called "resonant tropes." Peter Coogan, for example, has attributed the success (or failure) of superhero movie adaptations to the use of these tropes:

Every superhero, particularly the ones who have been around for decades, has certain tropes - familiar and repeated moments, iconic images and actions, figures of speech, patterns of characterization - that have resonance; -- they embody or symbolize some aspect of the character, and have gained this resonance through repeated use by storytellers. (2006, 7)

This concept of resonant tropes within the superhero narrative can be applied to explain the resonance of the seemingly non-linear and multiple narrative history that is apparent in The Joker's character. As the character is constructed of familiar resonant tropes which work by offering the reader familiar images and moments that resonate with him/her, he is instantly recognizable and familiar even if the text would somehow differ from the previous version the reader is familiar with. When appraising the merits of a superhero text, the creative and innovative use of these tropes can in itself lead to what Geoff Klock refers to as a "revisionist" text - a deliberate Bloomian "misreading" of the tradition (2006, 25) that subtly both supports and denies the continuity of the

texts on several levels. The comic book author can attempt to adapt the character through these tropes by offering the reader familiar images and moments, while at the same time try and make these tropes seem unfamiliar and strange. Like Alan Moore himself wrote in relation to another great adaptation, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and its essential resonant tropes:

Yes, Batman is still Bruce Wayne, Alfred is still his butler and Commissioner Gordon is still the chief of police, albeit just barely. There is still a young sidekick named Robin, along with a batmobile, a batcave and a utility belt. The Joker, Two-Face and the Catwoman are still in evidence amongst the roster of villains. Everything is exactly the same, except for the fact that it's totally different. (1986; quoted in Pearson & Uricchio, 1991)

The original adaptation of existing resonant tropes can at best lead to revisionist texts such as Miller's or Moore's discussed here, producing something that is, indeed, "exactly the same, except for the fact that it's totally different." In a self-conscious estrangement produced by a combination of the familiar and unfamiliar, a revisionist adaptation reassesses the established character, shows him/her in a new light, while still retaining the resonance of the significant trope. This can lead to a paradoxical situation, in which a text like *The Killing Joke* can be composed completely of the very formulaic elements of the genre which still, when assembled, are able to contradict the narrative conventions and audience expectations attached to the genre, making them hybrids that could be labeled "post-generic" (Collins, 1991, 179).

Approaching The Joker's multiple pasts as a type of textual anarchy could be argued to have transformed into a resonant trope itself: the critically acclaimed Batman movie *The Dark Knight* (2008) by Christopher Nolan presented The Joker as decidedly ambiguous about his past. Played by the late Heath Ledger, The Joker in the movie repeatedly tells the story of how he got his hideous scars. However, instead of reinforcing the unified and linear narrative by repeating the same story and providing the audience with a stable narrative center, at each time of retelling the story is markedly different:

Wanna know how I got these scars? My father was... a drinker. And a fiend. And one night he goes off crazier than usual. Mommy gets the kitchen knife to defend herself. He doesn't like that. Not-one-bit. So - me watching - he takes the knife to her, laughing while he does it! Turns to me, and he says, "why so serious, son?" Comes at me with the knife... "Why so

serious?" He sticks the blade in my mouth... "Let's put a smile on that face!" And... Why so serious? (*The Dark Knight*, 2008, 00:30:12)

Is it the scars? You want to know how I got 'em? -- So I had a wife, beautiful, like you, who tells me I worry too much. Who tells me I ought to smile more. Who gambles and gets in deep with the sharks... -- One day, they carve her face. And we have no money for surgeries. She can't take it. I just want to see her smile again, hm? I just want her to know that I don't care about the scars. So... I stick a razor in my mouth and do this... to myself. And you know what? She can't stand the sight of me! She leaves. Now I see the funny side. Now I'm always smiling! (*The Dark Knight*, 2008, 00:50:49)

These origin stories (involving both child abuse and self-mutilation) are markedly different each time, thus underlining the conflicting ambiguity behind The Joker's chaotic character (his third attempt, while cut short by Batman, would have undoubtedly produced yet a third version). As Jim Collins points out, these kinds of "simultaneous options" of a character's history are made even more complicated by the fact that some of the texts (like *The Killing Joke*) are reconstructions or reinventions of the origins of the characters instead of being just continuations of the original text (1991, 164). What Nolan's film suggests, in fact, is that the ambiguity of The Joker's past and his confusing origin stories have in themselves acquired the status of a resonant trope within the Batman mythos in the 21st century.

The Killing Joke retains several of the classic tropes and images of the classic comic. Especially the visual tropes resonate strongly: the Batcave is showed with glimpses of some of the classical memorabilia of past foes, such as the giant U.S. penny and a mechanical Tyrannosaurus Rex. Similarly, the iconic image of The Joker's grotesquely grinning face is instantly recognizable and familiar, echoing the very first images of the character decades ago. But, as has previously been noted in this article, artist Brian Bolland again cleverly uses various different artists' visions of The Joker in the comic, as the various screens in the Batcave show The Joker in various visual styles. The images in *The Killing Joke* paradoxically both conform to the continuity and familiarity and deny it by deliberately exposing the inability to conform to a single, unified vision. Other resonant visual tropes include the playing cards (especially the joker card), as well as the derelict amusement

park and the house of mirrors as the setting for the battle between Batman and The Joker. All these visual tropes resonate strongly within the Batman saga of past decades, and visually tie the text firmly into the familiar continuity of the comic. However, the conscious disjointedness produced through a variety of visual styles within the visual narrative at the same time forces the reader to recognize the impossibility of continuity within the narrative continuum. In this way, *The Killing Joke* also questions the unity of the popular geopolitical script that views the national identity as complete and coherent, and underlines the inconsistencies and conflicts that are bound to surface in every identity construction. One such conflict is the impending question of masculinity, one of the essential aspects that comprise the American monomyth in Lawrence & Jewett.

“Batman – Darling”: Masculinities in Question

The Joker’s textual anarchy may occasionally deny the coherence of the linear narrative (and, in the process, the coherence of a popular geopolitical narrative). However, it is clear that his most vital function is in creating and maintaining the popular geopolitical script of the hero/villain dichotomy in which the villain becomes the Other to the hero, possessing all the unwanted, deviant characteristics the hegemonic “normalcy” refuses. While some of the gender politics of the popular geopolitical narratives can be located within the problematic representation of the female characters (as discussed in Chapter 5.), the villain’s role is also significant as it functions as the gendered “other” to the masculine hero through a feminized (and often queered) portrayal of masculinity. The Joker as an androgynous and sexually ambiguous character embodies the threat of fluid sexuality and gender, becoming the Gothic monster of Halberstam’s vision as he is depicted as “the sexual menace of perverse desire and the epistemological menace of unstable identities” (1995, 64). This aspect of The Joker is most prominently displayed in two key texts from the 1980s: *Arkham Asylum. A Serious House on a Serious Earth* by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean and to a lesser extent in *Batman: The Dark Knight Return* by Frank Miller. Both texts approach the Batman/The

Joker –relationship as a perverse love affair, and visually stress The Joker’s queerness through his clothing, posture, actions and language. The Joker is the destabilizing force, the taboo of Batman’s identity, performing the deviant gender role within the popular geopolitical scripts constructed through superhero comics.

Both *Arkham Asylum* and *The Dark Knight Returns* stress the deviant and threatening sexuality of The Joker. Both Morrison and Miller portray their Jokers as deliberately queer characters, bringing out into the open the implied homoeroticism that has been read into the superhero comic book since the 1950s. However, whereas previously the focus had been on the Batman/Robin -relationship (which Dr. Fredric Wertham famously labeled as “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together,” 1954, 189-190), now the focus is on the obsessive tension between The Joker and Batman where sexuality arises as the “dominant mark of otherness” (Halberstam, 1995, 7). *The Dark Knight Returns* also uses the mirror metaphor to analyze the relationship between The Joker and Batman. The final confrontation begins in the House of Mirrors, which clearly invites the interpretation that the two characters mirror each other (the battle culminates in the Tunnel of Love, underlining the amorous nature of these two characters). Reynolds supports this view of the mirror metaphor, claiming that The Joker “epitomizes the dark and negative side of the personal obsessions” which motivate Batman (1992, 68). The villain is not the opposite of the hero, but his mirror image; had he chosen differently, the hero, too might be a villain. As Reynolds concludes, The Joker embodies the other side of the “personal obsessions” which motivate Batman’s career as a crimefighter, and he becomes “a constant reminder that strength which derives from traumatic experience can be turned towards evil as easily as good” (1992, 68).

Arkham Asylum, on the other hand, stresses the similarity between Batman and The Joker by presenting Batman trapped in the asylum with the inmates playing a cruel hide-and-seek organized by The Joker, and through the striking visuals of McKean’s signature style of mixed media presents Batman’s journey through the asylum. Madness and insanity arise as the central themes, as the

narrative explicitly questions Batman's sanity and the thin red line that separates him from the rest of the inmates. As The Joker bids him farewell at the end of the graphic novel, he reminds him: "Just don't forget... if it ever gets too tough... there's always a place for you here." (1989, 100). *Arkham Asylum* probes into the feeble line that separates the sane from the insane, and the good from the evil. The binary opposition is taken away, and instead we are shown how the villain in fact embodies the dark and forbidden side of the hero. As Richard Reynolds has observed, Batman's arch-enemies all in some way manifest qualities of insanity which manifest through "a radical inability to function in the everyday world" (1992, 67). According to Reynolds, madness is an integral part of Batman's identity, and this links him to his enemies in a more personal way than many other superheroes (ibid.). By depicting the hero and villain as the different sides of the same coin, the narrative questions the differences between them. In the light of this approach, then, The Joker's deliberate queerness indeed presents a threat to the almost ridiculously masculine and heterosexual hero, and the text aims at questioning the division between the hero and the villain, suggesting a threat of similar assimilation of the different sides within the popular geopolitical narratives of the era.

The overarching theme of *Arkham Asylum* is one of madness and sanity, with Batman himself questioning whether "it'll be just like coming home" when he enters Arkham (1989, 10). While Batman doubts his sanity and feels a sense of belonging among the criminally insane, it is The Joker and his open invitation to a more fluid sexuality that he furiously rejects. As The Joker teasingly gropes Batman with the line "Loosen up, tight ass!," Batman roars with rage "Take your filthy hands off me!" (1989, 20). The Joker continues with his aggressive flirtation a few pages later, as he mockingly presses the 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) while Batman watches silently. Later, in a very symbolic scene on pp. 53-54, Batman confronts the villain Clayface in the corridors of Arkham. The first panel shows the wall with the scribbled text "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*). But this “tunnel of love” contains a plague (“AIDS on two legs,” as Morrison describes the character in his script notes), as Clayface 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. It is as if Clayface comes to represent the outcome of The Joker’s deviant sexuality in the mind of Batman, the fear of sexuality itself as something unclean and diseased that must be expelled from his body.

In *Arkham Asylum*, The Joker constantly flirts with Batman, addressing him with expressions commonly associated with a lover’s discourse: “sweetheart,” “honey pie,” “darling” and “dearest” being the most common. In addition, he repeatedly confronts Batman with his grotesque exaggeration of queer sexuality, which clearly makes the masculine and uptight Batman uncomfortable. The script notes added to the 15th anniversary edition even reveal that Grant Morrison originally wanted 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)

While Morrison was not allowed to conduct such a drastic makeover to the iconic villain, he does insert some physical features that aim at conveying the perverse and forbidden yet attractive sexuality. A close-up of The Joker’s feet on page 97 reveals that he is, indeed, wearing high heels. The Joker’s fingernails are extremely long and painted green, and his postures carry the dramatic flamboyance that one would often associate with portraying a queer character. However, to argue that The Joker’s queerness is “just” a gender performance to aggravate Batman is to misunderstand the performativity of gender completely. As Judith Butler argues, to equate performativity of gender with free play or dramatic performance is to ignore the iterative nature of performativity; instead, performativity should be approached as a “ritualized production – reiterated under and through constraint” (1993, 95). Indeed, it is never a free choice of action, but dictated through a matrix of

various individualizing practices. Gender performativity, though a useful concept when discussing gender constructions, is ultimately an inadequate tool when discussing The Joker, who as a character resists any definition. He is above all characterized through anarchy, both textual and sexual, which places him outside the gender matrix which dictates the performativity of gender. 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 movie *The Dark Knight* quoted earlier in this chapter, here *Arkham Asylum* too suggests that there is no permanence in The Joker's personality, no stabilizing core or motivation besides chaos and disorder. As he creates himself each day, he may be the ultimate urban denominator: while The Joker may indeed be a "gleefully sadistic mass murderer," 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. As Shaviro notes, "he *lives* and *enjoys* the postmodern condition, this mutation of our sensibility into non-linear, non-Euclidean forms" (1997, 67). It is this fluidness of his identity, which is not limited to the realm of sexuality, which threatens Batman and his obsessive black-and-white morality; it is this liberating deviance that allows him to completely reject it in order to define himself.

The relationship between the hero and the villain can be seen as opposing masculinities within the American monomyth, either unable to exist without the other. As Jeffrey Brown has noted, traditional comic book depictions of masculinity capture the "quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man. In general, masculinity is defined by what is not, namely, 'feminine,'" (1999, 26). Especially the male body becomes a signifier of masculinity, and the hero's body represents the ideal physical male. Within the popular geopolitical narratives and scripts, too, the hero comes to stand for the idealized national identity as embodies within his

fictive body, as the villain functions as is Other. The Joker embodies the opposite of everything the superhero is: he is skinny, effeminate, he uses makeup and dresses in bright colors and dandy-ish clothes; he rarely resorts to physical violence himself but instead uses poison or complex devices to kill his foes.⁴⁶ The images of the Joker usually highlight these sides of him: in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, for example, he is pictured putting on lipstick, and generally has the air of an “aging, degenerate rock star” (Klock, 2006, 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.

Whereas *Arkham Asylum* portrayed The Joker as a queer character whose grotesque nature represents the deviant sexuality Batman furiously rejects, the relationship between these two characters reaches a mutual romance-like quality in *The Dark Knight Returns*. This can be read in Batman’s monologue, which reaches a 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 obsession with The Joker reaches a lover’s intensity as he imagines “every possible method” of how he could “fix” him, and the entire monologue receives a double meaning of a sexual encounter. The romantic quality of this relationship is intensified further as The Joker’s reactions, too, evoke the courtship framework. The Joker, too, lies awake in his bed unable to sleep at the thought of once again being reunited with his one true opponent, Batman (1986, 117). Like in *Arkham Asylum*, in *The Dark Knight Returns* The Joker refers to Batman as “darling” as he comes out of catatonia (1986, 41) and later as his plot to gain Batman’s attention has finally brought Batman to him (1986, 141). Especially through language, the romantic discourse is emphasized over the violent one. The romantic quality of the Batman/Joker –relationship can be further

⁴⁶ This description of the villain reveals some interesting parallels with the problematic female superheroes discussed in the previous chapter, as the female heroes, too, rarely resort to physical violence.

examined through the fascist 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). Male bodies clash violently in each others’ arms, the other’s embrace ultimately killing the other.

Whereas *Arkham Asylum* questions the sanity of Batman and blurs the division between the hero and his villains, *The Dark Knight Returns* brings the homoeroticism embedded into the superhero comic out into the open. However, as Geoff Klock has pointed out, it is not simply to align homosexuality with evil, but rather to provide “a subterranean connection between two characters who seem, on the surface, to be diametrically opposed” (2006, 35). Klock also observes that the lover’s discourse is not limited only to The Joker, which would suggest only a simple connection between “deviant” sexuality and evil. As such, the popular geopolitical identity arising from this kind of simple binary would be problematic, too. Earlier in the graphic novel, Batman uses similar rhetoric of romance as his monologue comments on how he and Harvey Dent “tumble like lovers” through a broken window (1986, 54), later identifying himself as a “reflection” of Harvey (1986, 55). The final confrontation (consummation?) between The Joker and Batman takes place in the Tunnel of Love, and as Klock argues, Miller brings together hero and villain, and “hints at the collapse between them” (2006, 38).

The seemingly opposing masculinities of the hero and villain collapse into each other through the sexual tension that exists between the hypermasculine and “uptight” hero and the feminized and deviant villain. In fact, instead of seeing these two types of masculinities as binary oppositions, they should be viewed as being in a hegemonic relationship where one type of masculinity is idealized and accepted more than the other. As Brown notes, the status of the idealized male body can only be achieved in contrast to the bodies that are not:

This myth of idealized masculinity which is still incredibly pervasive remains dependent upon the symbolic split between the *hard* male and the *soft* Other. And in the misogynistic, homophobic, and racist view of this ideology, the despised Other that masculinity defines itself against conventionally includes not just women but also feminized men. (1999, 27)

The Dark Knight Returns and *Arkham Asylum* both explore this relationship, bringing it out into the open and exposing it to new interpretations, showing that the hero and the villain are far from being opposites. Instead, they represent different sides of the same coin, and are much more alike than previously may have been noted. As The Joker of 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.

The villain has a crucial part to play in the superhero myth, a part of which the villain of the 1980s superhero comic (such as the texts in question here, apart from the film) is often quite aware of, altering the dynamics of the superhero narrative and consequently blurring the boundaries of the hero/villain relationship. *The Dark Knight Returns*, for example, casts Batman as an “older and slightly mad right-wing moralist” in a dystopian US where the superhero is no longer the hero of the society he protects, but instead he is seen as a dangerous and violent force to be controlled (Wright, 2001, 267). The Joker, on the other hand, has been rehabilitated, and as Johnston has noted, “the qualities that once branded him a menace are now seen as making him an interesting and eccentric curiosity” (1989, 45). This rehabilitation of course proves to be false, as The Joker annihilates the entire audience of the TV show where he is interviewed - Batman has returned to form, so The Joker has a reason to act, too.

The textual and sexual anarchy, the deviance of The Joker has multiple functions within the Batman mythos: he functions as the hero’s doppelganger, his Other, the one against which he defines his heroic identity. The Joker comes to represent the chaotic, uncontrollable and grotesque, and on a larger framework, this is the function of the villain in general within the construction of geopolitical narratives. As Jason Dittmer (2005, 631) argues, the hero helps shape the worldview that the readers can adopt and act on, and in constructing this worldview, the role of the supervillain is determined as the dichotomous other. The depictions of The Joker chosen for this chapter all

represent the later incarnations of the character, which therefore come to represent some of the elements viewed as “other” during their publication era. The prominence of sexual deviance and queerness located in *The Joker* in these texts very clearly resonates with the discovery of AIDS and the fear of disease as well as the gradual acceptance of homosexuality that took place in the 1980s, and the incorporation of these themes into major works of the superhero genre signals the attempt to incorporate some of these issues into the popular geopolitical scripts. As David D. Gilmore argues, the relevance of fictional monsters (like *The Joker*) is precisely the way they provide a convenient metaphor for human qualities deemed unwanted, such as aggression or sexual sadism, but at the same time these monsters with their denounced otherness still provide a source of identification and a vehicle for the “expiation of guilt as well as aggression” (2003, 4).

This identification with the villain is linked to other issues. John Cawelti, for example, sees the supervillain as the more interesting character of the two, deeming the superhero’s brand of justice as 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 interesting and enjoyable character within the superhero narrative, inviting us to secretly root for the villain while 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” (2004, 163). The villain within the superhero comic offers the reader a safe way of experiencing the other, and through that process, perhaps helps us integrate some of the deviant and other qualities into the larger hegemonic geopolitical frameworks as well. As Gilmore continues later on, rituals (and I approach the superhero narrative as a ritualized plot) 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 (2003, 20). The safe enjoyment of the superhero narrative as ritualized fiction and the

representation of its villains may enable a reconciliation of the popular geopolitical identity's ambiguities as well as reveal the society's fears and prejudices.

What I have aimed at demonstrating in this chapter is the way the role of the villain and his devious ways are a crucial element in the formation of the popular geopolitical identity within a nation. Especially the representation of The Joker in the texts chosen here showcases the anxieties of the 1980s America, which, according to Halberstam, had "seriously reinvested in such equivalencies as family and normal, pervert and criminal, sexual deviance and disease" (1995, 167). Simultaneously, I have aimed at showing the way popular geopolitical identities are not constructed only through the positive image of the hero, but through a more complex equation of the hero/villain binary. The Joker is a fascinating villain due to his inherently anarchistic nature, which defies all efforts at a cohesive analysis. But what needs to be remembered is that the monster, by his very essence, can never represent just a single anxiety, but instead hosts a site for multiple interpretations of a nation's anxieties (Halberstam, 1995, 36). The textual and sometimes sexual anarchy present within The Joker reveal a few ways in which identities are in a constant flux, being reworked and reconstructed and how the essential tropes, though sometimes combined in a slightly unfamiliar manner, ultimately still produce an image one can recognize in the mirror.

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*, Second Edition, 1989)

7. Corrupting the Democratic Processes, Or, How the Superhero Is a Fascist in Disguise

Umberto Eco's classic reading of Superman sees him capable of doing good on a cosmic scale, yet limiting himself to local crime. He could literally force utopia with "precise ethical lines everywhere," yet he chooses to fight evil on the community scale (1962/2004, 163). The superhero, though with abilities to end wars, solve the energy crisis and end world hunger, chooses not to do so (unless one wants to count in the Elseworlds -tale *Superman: Red Son* discussed in Chapter 4.). To Eco, the reluctance of the superhero to impose utopia (or dystopia, for that matter) is a direct result of the iterative scheme, which prevents the consumption of the narrative and ensures the ageless universe of the hero's world. The traditional superhero of the Golden and Silver ages must sustain, not alter the present, and thus conform to the mythical quality of his narrative where he repeatedly restores the status quo. However, the superhero of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is far more complex a character than Eco's classic Superman, and offers a much more challenging interpretation of the politics of the superhero.

As already established, the character of the superhero possesses an iconic quality which offers a rich topos for a host of problematic issues that deal particularly with popular American geopolitical identity. Stemming from the tradition of the American monomyth, the superhero offers what could be called "an iconic shorthand" (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, 6) that allows the reader to access "American" sentiments at various points in time. The superhero opens up a way to approach hegemonic American identity and American ideology within the context of popular culture and to reveal some of the ambiguities and tensions embedded within the popularized dominant ideology.

In accordance with the previous chapter which dealt with the power and identity politics of the superhero, this chapter aims at analyzing further the problematic relationship between the superhero and democracy, and ties these issues firmly into the discussion on popular American geopolitical identities and scripts. The focus will be especially on the problematic nature of the superhero as a defender of democracy through means which can themselves be labeled as clearly undemocratic. This paradox, I shall argue, is in fact symptomatic to popular American geopolitics in general, and the larger connotations of this will be analyzed in accordance with the aims of this dissertation. The superhero's paradoxical view on democracy, when approached from the contextual framework of popular geopolitics and national identity, reveals a deep tension within the American nation itself. This part of the dissertation will focus on the problematic nature of superhero politics as essentially undemocratic, and then analyze the particular issue of vigilante violence as symptomatic of this problematic relationship between the superhero and the state.

I will approach the paradox of vigilante justice through Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *state of exception*, read through two of Alan Moore's most openly utopian superhero narratives, the widely acclaimed *Watchmen* (1987) and the copyright-plagued (and thus hard to come by) *Miracleman* (1985). *Miracleman*, out of print since its first publication due to copyright issues, is a narrative of a superheroic utopia, discussing the Nietzschean *übermensch* and its relationship to superhero narratives. It focuses on Michael Moran, who becomes Miracleman at the utterance of "Kimota" through multi-dimensional alien technology. After discovering that he is the result of a secret government project called "Project Zarathustra," initiated to create a super-human, he destroys the facilities and gradually proceeds to abandon his human self in order to create utopia. Although located in the United Kingdom, the character is still very much stemming from the American hero *Marvelman*, and the theme of superhero utopias is firmly located within the sphere of American superhero narratives, justifying its place among the other key texts. These two revisionist superhero narratives from the 1980s both expose the hidden tensions that lie beneath the

surface of vigilante justice, effectively serving as points of entry into the evolution of superhero politics, and, by extension, popular American geopolitics.

Democratic Principles Denied – Superhero Comics and the Captain America Complex

When facing the demands of democracy, the superhero forms a complex equation: the very transformation into a superhero, whose aim it is to protect and preserve the democratic society, immediately places the hero outside the democratic order by his very existence. Despite his outsider status, the superhero's mission always entails the protection of the democratic values of society, perceived as worthy of protection (what these values exactly are is a significantly harder task to carry out). This is perhaps most clearly represented in Superman, who intuitively seems to recognize the state's authority and knows the right thing to do, which, "in turn, authorizes him to act on its behalf" (Spanakos, 2008, 56). However, the superhero is not always endowed with the blessing of the state, as the hero's actions are usually required not by the state itself, but the state's perceived inability to uphold law and order. This leads to a conflict in the power relations of the state and the superhero, for as Foucault has written, punitive systems and methods are central as techniques and modes of exercising power (1977, 23). In this way, punishment is not seen as just a consequence of legislation, but a part of a larger matrix of power relations that aim at defining and controlling the human subject, both mentally and physically. For the superhero to take on the executive role of in this power matrix challenges the state's established modes of power, threatening to overthrow the entire society, which ultimately may lead to a permanent state of exception.

The superhero is usually seen as embodying the values of a society and maintaining them, his narrative 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,

giving Americans an ideal to aspire to and to identify with.⁴⁷ However, this type of argumentation as presented in the previous chapters of this dissertation can be deliberately contrasted with Lawrence & Jewett's (2002, 282) discovery of the inherently fascist and anti-democratic element within the American monomyth, which is also present in the superhero. Contrary to the popular view of the hero who sustains the core values of a society, both the American monomythic hero and the superhero systematically overthrow the democratic values and components of society:

Although American superheroes consistently strive to redeem corrupted republics, the definition of their roles and the means of their triumphs reflect fascist values that ultimately undermine democratic processes and hollow out the religious faith of the enchanted. (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 282)

These fascist values include, among others, a "metaphysical ethics" that entailed the idea of a natural aristocracy, an intellectually and physically superior group of people who had a natural instinct of good and evil (2002, 276-277). This "natural aristocracy" very much resembles the superhero, one who is physically and often intellectually above his peers, and through this superiority, has the implicit power to decide what aspects of society are worth protecting.

These metaphysical "ethics" resonate strongly with the concept of the *übermensch*⁴⁸ as devised by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century. Surpassing man, the "superman" was free of society's constraints, the creator of new values and a subject in complete control over himself who had no need for society as we know it (Keeping, 2009, 50-51). This concept of the *übermensch* can be connected with the Foucauldian framework of subjectivity discussed in Chapter 4: what in Nietzsche's work was labeled the "breeding of a political animal" that created the subject

⁴⁷ Ian Gordon reminds us of the "old joke that Superman, standing for truth and justice on the one hand and the American way on the other, was surely an oxymoron" (2006, 177).

⁴⁸ There exists a difference between the Nietzschean *übermensch* and what Peter Coogan recognizes as the "pulp *übermensch*". This separation of the two notions is useful, for as many critics have noted, comic book superheroes, though often referred to as supermen in the Nietzschean sense, 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 *übermensch*, not the active engagement of any philosophical debates (2002, 312). As Wolf-Meyer, among others, wrote no more than a year later, 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, to overthrowing the status quo, very few of the superheroes have ever truly fit the *superman* role as defined by Nietzsche.

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 idea of the individualizing power of the state Foucault 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 and beyond those requirements, becomes the true subject, a sovereign of himself, i.e. the superman. 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. (See Figure 8.). Miracleman is the superhero who truly becomes *superman* – something rarely seen in superhero comics.

The superhero, by definition, is a physically and intellectually superior person who always seems to know he is doing the right thing, following his intuition and his pro-social and selfless mission (Coogan, 2009, 77-78). Yet, the superhero usually portrays none of the traits of the true *superman*, choosing instead the double life of both hero identity and private identity through which he hopes to “fit in.” Still, despite these ambitions, the superhero, even without the desire to lead humanity like Miracleman, manages by his existence alone to create unease within the realm of politics and power. Indeed, what makes his actions (and existence) questionable from the larger ideological and political framework is the fact that he is not elected to his position by the people he protects. Similarly, the superhero lacks the sanction for his actions from the state, and the inevitable use of violence in solving political problems that defines the genre echoes more of the fascist than

the democratic tendencies of truth and justice he proclaims. The superhero is, indeed, a fascist in disguise, who ultimately betrays a paradoxical image of American policies. As Jewett and Lawrence argue, the superhero's policy carries an eerie resemblance to world politics:

[S]uper 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 deprivations 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. (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, 42-43)

This description of the superhero (or, if you will, American policy), is in striking contrast with the democratic premises that America claims to uphold. The superhero's actions promote the view 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. The rhetoric of the superhero, of vigilante justice that justifies means over the ends, is still one that resonates very strongly within the American public.

In analyzing the phenomenon of the American superhero, Lawrence and Jewett come to the realization that America's popular culture is one of fundamental contradictions, as the ideals the nation claims to stand for are repeatedly denied in the popular entertainment enjoyed by the nation daily (2002, 154). In a sense, the case is the same C.L.R. James identified over half a century earlier in his discussion on American detective novels (themselves a variation of the monomythic narrative). Whereas James realized that no-one could seriously take these tales as representative of the American reality as a whole, he still argued that there existed a string of tension beneath, "and that is what is characteristic of modern American life - an enormous tension" (James, 1950/1993, 125-126). All this could be said of the superhero comic, too. While they obviously do not represent American geopolitical identity in its entirety, the tension within it at least in part derives from the inevitable rupture between the hero's actions and the state's official ideology. This type of tension rose to the surface in American popular culture already in the 1970s with movies like Clint

Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* (1971) or Charles Bronson's *Death Wish* (1974) (which both enjoyed numerous sequels), where solitary vigilantes executed justice as the ordinary and often corrupt police force failed to do so. As Lawrence and Jewett note, these movies present violence "carefully wrought in golden imagery," justified and righteous as a part of the vigilante hero's mission (2002, 107).

The connections of American nationalism and the "crusade against evil" have produced what has been labeled as the "Captain America Complex," where essentially nondemocratic means are employed to achieve democratic ends (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003, 28). Within this complex, American life is continuously marked with major missions, from the Civil War to the so-called War on Terror. Crucial in all of them is the way the idea of this mission of war and peace is embedded into popular culture narratives, which weave the ideology of the mission into the very fabric of popular American geopolitical structure (ibid, 5-6). As noted earlier in this dissertation, through the repeated consumption of popular culture narratives that celebrate this mission, the mission becomes a part of the culturally shared memory of America and the rhetoric used to defend it becomes a naturalized part of the popular geopolitical scripts of the nation. Especially after 9/11, the zealous nationalism of America once more declared its mission to rid the world of evil, preferring the pre-emptive strike and avoiding international accountability. The popular geopolitical script of pre-emptive vigilante justice that needs to be executed in order to protect the community was evoked once more, with America taking on the role of the lone gunman. As the naming of the democratic complex reveals, in order to understand the political mindset of America, one must study the popular culture stories located within the field of entertainment, especially those in the superhero genre, which Jewett & Lawrence identify as "the most pervasive expressions of the national complex" (2003, 5-6). The paradox of the Captain America Complex implicates a rupture, a dissonance between the ideal vision of American democracy and what the popular fiction both in comics and movies represents as acceptable and even righteous.

The Captain America Complex views itself as blessed by God, thus justifying the use of whatever means necessary to defeat the enemy (who is portrayed as the ultimate evil). 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 & 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 note with concern the disturbing nature of a nation that prides itself as the pinnacle of democracy whilst being simultaneously so enthralled with fascist and undemocratic heroes, concluding that unlike 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 us away from our democratic ideals” (2003, 39). While it can be argued that the Captain America Complex is present in the American monomythic ideal, it is not until the 1980s revisionist superhero narratives that this tension is deliberately exposed. In the best-known examples, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons aimed at revealing the “worthlessness of the vigilante ideal” through the heroes of *Watchmen* (Reynolds, 1992, 117-118), while Frank Miller’s dystopic view of Gotham City examined the violent and fascist aspects of vigilantism through Batman. These texts consciously extrapolated this schizophrenic tension between national myths and reality, as the reality of the principles of the violent superhero was portrayed as drastically different from the idealized virtues hailed as American.

As C.L.R. James noted, the popularity and the vast number of these kinds of heroes who took the law into their own hands makes the clear statement that “for preserving order against the real criminals the police are not needed” (1950, 124). The heritage of American utopianism echoes still in the highly individualistic view of solitary avengers as well as the right for every man to

defend himself. This need for vigilantism, as has already been mentioned, is mirrored in the superhero comics of the late 1970s and early 1980s as the themes of betrayal experienced by the American people begun to rise, a betrayal for which government authorities were seen as responsible. In fact, studies have found evidence of a correlation between increased authoritarianism and the display of authoritarian aggression, conventionalism and authoritarian submission in superhero comics in America. In their research, archival researchers Bill E. Peterson and Emily D. Gerstein 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." According to them, the superhero genre has the potentiality to be extremely well suited for "assessing the threat-authoritarian link because of its clear focus on themes of good and evil" (2005, 890). Peterson and Gerstein identified such eras 1978-1982 (Afghanistan war, Iran hostage crisis) and 1991-1992 (Persian Gulf, Rodney King) as times of high threat, whereas the era between was one of low threat,⁴⁹ finding that during the periods of high threat, women had fewer speaking roles and were generally portrayed in more subordinate ways, and that comics written during this period featured more aggressive themes, moralized more about negative effects of sex and drugs and generally featured less anti-government storylines than those comics produced during a low threat period (2005, 900).

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), nevertheless reveal a strong connection between the tensions within society and the increased authoritarian themes within popular culture items such as superhero comics. Furthermore, it shows how the medium is quick to respond to global events that affect the popular geopolitical scripts and narratives of America, supporting Costello's claim on the way 1970s and 1980s political tensions

⁴⁹ While the authors have no data after this, they hypothesize that a low threat period came about in Clinton's time and that a new high threat period begun with 9/11. (2005, 891-892).

were reflected within the superhero comics of the era. As Costello argues, in a society characterized by betrayal, the hero was required to act even at the expense of legality, defending them “no matter what the cost” (2009, 167), and this can result in highly authoritarian depictions of superhero violence. The official law enforcement was not capable of acting out the requirements of the law, and from the state of exception that is created by that confusion of powers, the vigilante hero emerges to enforce the power of law.

Confusion of Powers – The Superhero in a State of Exception

This dilemma of the superhero and the state resonates well when contrasted with the Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “the state of exception.” The superhero by his nature exists in the terrain between law and politics, in the state of emergency, breaking the law in order to uphold it. The superhero executes acts of power, but at the same time has no legislative power, which contrasts well with Agamben:

[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. (2003)

The state of emergency is the result of a political crisis that presents itself as the legal form of that which can have no legal form (Agamben, 2003). This is the superhero, who has no legal position as an agent of the law, yet he acts like one and through his actions, creates a political crisis. As Reynolds points out, while Superman is a character whose loyalty and patriotism are above his devotion to the law, yet his problematic position outside the law becomes a central theme around which endless stories can be built, as the hero battles his conscience over the right way to follow (1992, 15). The terminology used by Agamben divides the state of exception into two phases, where the state of emergency, prolonged, may become the state of exception, the dominant paradigm in contemporary politics and the “war on terror.” Once it has become the rule, it entails “the loss of the traditional distinction between different forms of Constitution” (Agamben, 2003). The superhero

very much exists in this prolonged state of exception, and therefore his mere existence forms a threat to the society in which he lives.

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). Accordingly, the superhero is one who usually has a “superpower,” an ability that makes him superior to others. With this superpower, 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, yet he acts to reinforce these very laws. 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. While 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 official governmental authorities. In his renowned work, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault writes at length of the importance of the scaffold, the spectacle of the public punishment. According to him, it restores the sovereignty of the state, which the crime has momentarily injured, and has the function of restoring and reaffirming power (at least pp, 47-50). In the context of the superhero, the hero’s actions as executing the punishment effectively remove this power from the state and seriously undermine the power of the state and government officials. Executing vigilante justice, the superhero becomes the spectacle, the public face of punishment who in his quest to restore the state’s power ends up diminishing it.

However, as Agamben points out, the suspension of the legislative power and the norm does not mean its abolition. Instead, the hero exists in a “zone of indifference, where the inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other” (2005, 23). This “zone of indifference” does not refer to a perceived lack of interest, but describes the subversive nature of the superhero, who exists within the society, yet he is always an outsider to it due to his dual nature.

This duality, the definition of the American monomythic principles already revealed, is one of the many paradoxes that characterize the superhero. The superhero exists outside state-sanctioned power structures, and while his powers are often physical and private, he still uses them to uphold the public norm that excludes him. In a similar vein, the state of exception usually includes the suspension of civil rights in order to preserve and protect the very system that guarantees those rights. The superhero becomes a subversive character acting beyond the traditional structures of society, one who aims at supporting the institutions of democratic power while at the same time undermining their legitimacy with his actions.⁵⁰

The significance of the superhero and his actions can be read in association to US initiatives such as the Patriot Act (26.10.2001), which authorized such actions as “the indefinite detention” of noncitizens suspected of terrorist activities. As Agamben (2005, 3) points out, these initiatives radically erased any legal status the individual may have, producing a “legally unnameable and unclassifiable being.” The individual apprehended and punished by a vigilante superhero holds a position quite similar as the one above, as the hero abolishes the “distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers” (Agamben, 2005, 7). Extreme examples of such comic book heroes that take on the role of the judge, jury and executioner could be seen in the title characters of *Judge Dredd* (1977), *The Punisher* (1974), Frank Miller’s *Batman* and, of course, in *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 exercise of the institution [in my reading, the superhero] necessarily 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, makes the democratic principles and forces redundant and pointless, as the omnipotent hero could, should he choose so, “take over the government, defeat the army, or alter the equilibrium of planetary politics” (Eco, 1962/2004, 162).

⁵⁰ Note: the subversive role of the superhero applies to the legitimacy of his actions supporting the power of *democratic* states and/or regimes. In authoritarian and totalitarian regimes the executive and legislative are usually subsumed by a single party or a ‘junta’ which act as a ‘superhero’.

And this is precisely what happens in *Miracleman*. Whereas Superman has never shown interest in world peace, Miracleman (together with Miraclewoman) is convinced that their mission as superior beings is to take over the government of world politics and economy. While addressing the UN, they simultaneously destroy all of Earth's nuclear weapons (1989, 16; 6-8). Whilst page 9 depicts a debate over human free will, what is most terrifying is the final utterance by Miraclewoman: "We're going to love them, Michael. We're going to make them perfect." (1989, 16; 9). A truly terrifying notion, it echoes the cruel love of the Judeo-Christian God who will hurt you only because he loves you. The society will never be the same again after the introduction of the "real," truly omnipotent superhero. According to Spanakos, the presence of a superhero as an almost unrecognizable Other makes humans more insecure (2009, 44), and this is what is evoked through *Miracleman*, too.

The problematic use of violence becomes clear in *Miracleman* early on, as (unlike many of his colleagues) he appears to suffer no remorse over the brutal killing of those he perceives 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 (1986, 7; 16). Miracleman has no moral ambiguities about killing, which separates him from the tradition of the American monomythic superhero where the violence executed by the hero is marked by reluctance and characterized as a last resort. Similar representations arise in *Watchmen*, too, as both the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan express very little remorse over their brutally violent actions. What separates the heroes of *Watchmen* from *Miracleman*, however, is the relationship the heroes hold to the state: as vigilantism is forbidden in the world of *Watchmen* through the legislative "Keene Act," the powers of the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan have been harnessed to serve the legislative powers, removing them from their vigilante status.

The Comedian's and Dr. Manhattan's status as state-sanctioned vigilantes gives them the right to use violence. However, as Max Weber observes, the "right" to use violence is ascribed to

institutions and individuals “only to the extent to which the state permits it” (1991, 78). Thus legitimized by the state, The Comedian and Dr. Manhattan fight the Vietnam War and release American hostages when required: as Dr. Manhattan states: “The newspapers call me a crimefighter, so the Pentagon says I must fight crime.” (1987, IV; 14). Both heroes seem to be removed from the state of exception as they now act within the state authority that defines the force of law. However, as Spanakos points out, *Watchmen* immediately begins to question the Weberian state and its legitimized violence, as it soon becomes apparent that “even when the state ‘permits’ the use of violence by superheroes, their violence hardly seems legitimate” (2009, 39). This becomes quite apparent as we see Dr. Manhattan disintegrating criminals and The Comedian brutally executing his pregnant Vietnamese girlfriend. The violence, though permitted to them, is hardly justified. In contrast to these government-sponsored “heroes,” Miracleman goes decidedly further: 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.” (1988, 15;1). Both the legislative and the executive forces join in him, inseparable.

The superhero’s relationship to the state is, as demonstrated above, a paradox which undermines the very structure of society. The superhero aims at upholding the status quo, yet his presence alone is enough to liquidate the idea of democracy. The superhero’s arrival has other effects, as well: in *Watchmen*, the existence of the nigh-omnipotent Dr. Manhattan has alone begun to affect the society through technological achievements, which is unable to return to a “pre-Dr. Manhattan state of purity” (Wolf-Meyer, 2003, 507). The knowledge that he exists is enough to render some aspects of society meaningless, as he has the power to destroy the world in an instant: one of the characters in *Watchmen* even describes him as a “goddamn walking H-bomb” (1987, II; 8). Of course, this sounds very similar to the threat of nuclear war during the Cold War and the fear of “mutually assured destruction,” a threat which is very real within the world of *Watchmen*, too. As the “article” by Professor Milton Glass in the appendix to chapter IV asks:

If threatened with eventual domination [by the US], would the Soviets pursue this unquestionably suicidal course? Yes. Given their history and their view of the world, I believe that they would. (1987, IV; 32)

As the Soviets are powerless when faced with Dr. Manhattan's powers, they are "sufficiently unnerved" to make a pre-emptive strike (Reynolds, 1992, 106). As the superhero liquidates the democratic principles of society, he unwittingly creates a state where no principles hold, and thus "anything goes."

The superhero must often choose to exist outside the society he defends. Texts such as *Watchmen* exemplify this through their literary outsiders such as Rorschach, a vigilante who almost literally lives outside the bounds of his society. His bad manners, failing hygiene and violent behavior make him a hero removed of all heroic attributes (Reynolds, 1992, 107). Similarly, Dr. Manhattan has become increasingly detached from the human world, and at the end of the graphic novel, leaves humanity for a galaxy "less complicated" (1987, XII; 27). *Miracleman*, on the other hand, depicts 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 a Mount Olympus in the middle of London in issue 16. As Agamben (2003) says, "to be outside and yet belong: such is the topological structure of the state of emergency," and, I shall claim, that of the superhero. The superhero is a sovereign, at the same time outside and inside the juridical order, he is the sovereign exception that traces a threshold between outside and inside, providing an entry into "those complex topological relations that make the validity of the juridical order possible" (Agamben, 1995, 15-19). It is the sovereign who has the power to decide on the state of exception, and paradoxically the superhero becomes the sovereign by his existence alone, as he exists within the state of exception.

So why do superheroes choose to act as heroes, make themselves public and through their superhuman abilities, challenge the force of law to become its true applicator? Hughes claims that superheroes become superheroes "for some intrinsic responsibility," and are thus freed from

ideological constraints (2006, 548). While the “mission” aspect of the superhero is, as Peter 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 of society for someone to act. As the state-approved powers are seen as failing, the superhero must step forward and take on the executive power of the law; they must become, like Miraclewoman states, “the builders of tomorrow” (1989, 16; 10). In a similar vein, one of the “heroes” in *Watchmen* cries out: “Somebody has to save the world...” (1987, II; 11). 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 recourse to necessity entails a moral or political (or, in any cases, extrajudicial) 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 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. 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 hold 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 slowly destroys itself. Does the perceived American geopolitical ideal, then, too corrupt itself through the Captain America Complex by constructing its geopolitical scripts from fundamentally contradictory elements of realized fascism and idealized democracy, and is it even possible to view the superheroes as representatives of American ideals when such a steep rift exists between the character and what he is supposed to represent? In the next section, I will approach these questions is through Frank Miller’s violent rewriting of Batman in the acclaimed *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). As Miller’s interpretation of the Dark Knight demonstrates, the hero of the monomythic superhero tradition today is not always endowed with the blessing of the state, as the

hero's actions are required by the state's inability to uphold law and order. Thus, analyzing a superhero narrative that questions the very premise of vigilante justice offers a controversial entry point into the politics of the superhero.

8. Vigilante Politics: Violence Justified in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*

The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world. (Hannah Arendt: *On Violence*, 1969, 80).

As already argued in the previous chapter, the American popular myth of the superhero repeatedly undermines the “democratic ethos” of the American nation. Furthermore, when the nation itself is conceived as embodying the myth, Lawrence & Jewett warn of the way the tendency to violent solutions in popular fiction can easily slip into public discourse and policy (2002, 339). Justifying political actions through mythical views on national identity is a highly problematic, yet rarely questioned approach, and especially its frequent appearance in popular culture aids in its naturalization.⁵¹ Vigilante politics and democracy are not compatible, yet the first is repeatedly justified in the defense of the latter in American popular culture. It could be even argued that vigilante action is always a form of political violence, as it directly comments on the obvious impotence of the state to act accordingly. 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). The wider significance of vigilante violence and the politics embedded into it dramatically demonstrate the incompatibility of vigilante ideals and democratic principles, which this chapter aims at examining in detail through Frank Miller’s highly violent *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986).

While the problematic premise outlined above has been present in the superhero narrative from its conception, it has not usually been played out as dramatically until the 1980s revisionist superhero narrative. The exceedingly violent nature of Batman is made very explicit early on in *The Dark Knight Returns*, which actively attacks the perceived notion of Batman as a righteous hero.

⁵¹ For an interesting study on myths and politics in America, see Jan Hanska’s PhD dissertation *Reagan’s Mythical America – Towards a Narrative Theory of Prophetic Politics* (2010), where he discusses “Reagan’s civil religion narratives” (2010, 8) and their relevance in creating American identity.

This is exemplified well in a scene where Batman interrogates a small-time crook about Harvey Dent's whereabouts:

“You’re going to tell me everything you know, sooner or later. If it’s later -- I won’t mind.”
“No! Stay back -- I got rights --”
“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, 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. It also signals his increased impatience at the impotence of the state to punish criminals. Vigilante actions are at the heart of the American monomythic tradition, which expresses frustration with the constitutional government and its constant compromises, and embodies the national need for total solutions. As Jewett & Lawrence argue, the vigilante narratives demonstrate how, “when confronted with genuine evil, democratic institutions and the due process of law always fail” (2003, 29). In this chapter I will examine the role of vigilante action and especially vigilante violence and its justifications within superhero comics and analyze the contradictions and problematic issues within the representations of that violence which in turn affect the popular geopolitical scripts and narratives of America.

Questioning Vigilante Justice

Vigilantism commonly refers to defending the established order by means that violate the boundaries set by that established order (Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976, 4). Yet at the same time vigilante justice also entails the assessment that society and its institutions are inefficient, and the need for vigilante justice is required in order to defend the community. In assessing 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 not just by the mission, but of the perceived necessity to act, which always entails a politically motivated decision to “build a better tomorrow.” Superheroes by and large belong to the

category of maintaining current values, or the status quo which the villain aims at overthrowing (Reynolds, 1992, 51). If we follow this definition of vigilantism as conceptualized through intentions, then the *ideology* behind the motivations of the vigilante superhero becomes crucial in establishing the relationship between superheroes and democracy. As Slavoj Žižek argues, to critically study ideology, one should analyze fictional, or “Utopian” narratives of “failed alternative histories” which reveal the antagonistic character of society and “estrangle” us from the established identity (1994, 7).

Revisionist superhero narratives such as *Watchmen* or *The Dark Knight Returns* are well suited for such critical studies of ideology, as the world they represent is one of dystopia, an alternate history that makes the familiar strange and questions the seemingly simplistic ideology behind superhero narratives in order to reveal the complex ideological questions that lie beneath the surface. In superhero comics, it is precisely through ideology that vigilante actions and violence are made acceptable and justifiable. What makes the use of 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 Roland Barthes writes in his *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 relationship to democracy and vigilantism.

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). Popular myths are central in this process, as the representations of the values of the hegemonic culture are constantly present in their different media representations. In this context, as already noted, the American monomyth provides an interesting anomaly: as Lawrence & Jewett argue, the superhero consistently undermines and denies the very essence of the “democratic ethos” that is viewed as the essential component in American

ideology (2002, 282). 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 American geopolitical scripts. According to Barbara Whitmer (1997, 55), it is not enough to identify an action as violent, but a moral evaluation of the act as good or bad is also needed in order to contextualize the behavior. Generally, a moral evaluation of these violent actions within popular culture is derived precisely from the motivations behind these actions. As Whitmer (1997, 74) argues, myths act to "guarantee certain associative interpretations of symbols" in order to assure their moral justification within society. This invoking of authority, called in to support mythical practices, actually reinstates the myth into the "institutional realm of social rights," and wields mythical power to either enforce or sustain particular ideologies (ibid.). In this view, the way violence is justified within the context of the mythical superhero narrative can be argued to implicitly carry with it the justification (among others) of American (military) violence in various wars through several decades, from Reagan's "Star Wars" rhetoric to Bush's "War on Terror." The way violence is justified in superhero comics is also crucial in defining the hero/villain binary, as the mythical good/evil dichotomy is often evoked in justifying military actions.

The binary opposition of good and evil used to justify vigilante violence is far from unproblematic. Though rarely mentioned, both the superhero *and* the supervillain are, in fact, technically criminals. As both hero and villain act outside the law to reach their goals, it becomes a matter of ideology and motivation that makes one a hero and the other a villain, and a key role in this is played by violence. As Jewett & Lawrence argue, the hero usually respects lawful authority, rejecting it only when "the impotent and incompetent community is threatened" (2003, 224). The villain, instead, flaunts the way he rejects the law, "provoking audience displeasure as much by his demonstration of disrespect as by serious violations" (ibid.). These stereotypical 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. 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 (2003, 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 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). Violence is never to be enjoyed, but taken to as the last resort, and even then with pronounced reluctance.⁵² Lawrence & Jewett also claim that the superhero's commitment to the norms of cleanliness, law, and passivity act as way of legitimizing the inevitable breaking of the law through the vigilante action he must take, whereas the villain's equally illegal actions are seen as evil, as he also actively disobeys these unwritten norms of society (ibid.).

This separation through commitment to norms and the view of violence as an unpleasant duty in justifying vigilante actions is an element that functions extremely well in creating ambiguity in the hero/villain dichotomy. A clear example of this is the way *The Dark Knight Returns* functions in contextualizing Batman's vigilante actions: the visual narrative is often interrupted with (or accompanied by) a TV talk show, where Batman's actions are commented on by a number of people, and most of them clearly condemn him (Lana Lang remains the sole defender):

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)

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

Both 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

⁵² This is a common trope in American heroic fiction, ranging from 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.

justice signifies. The comments point out what should be obvious in regard to the paradox of the superhero itself: "a danger to every citizen in Gotham!" Yet Batman is still viewed as the monomythical hero of the nation, whose actions, even as extremely violent, should still be justified by the mythical superhero mission.

Physical violence is an essential part of the hero myth in general, and it is also a crucial element both in the American monomyth and the superhero tradition as its representative. As Lawrence & Jewett testify, heroic violence in the American monomyth is portrayed as both cleansing and regenerating (2002, 112). In order to fully understand the way the myth operates and to analyze the formation of American identity, violence and its justifications and rationalizations within the narratives of the monomyth must be exposed. The use of "justified violence" is precisely one of the ways the superhero's innate incapability for democracy becomes apparent. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, an aged Bruce Wayne resumes the Batman identity after a 10-year retirement as he deems the current gang-infested situation of Gotham City as requiring his return. As Tony Spanakos argues, Batman's angst (and inevitable return) is the direct result of Gotham's incompetent government: Bruce Wayne's parents were murdered "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." (2008, 56). Similarly, Batman is 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. This is the reaction of the American monomythic superhero, who is disillusioned with his nation and its way of governing, and takes the law into his own hands. However, justifying vigilante violence is far from simple, as I shall demonstrate in the following section.

Justifying Vigilante Violence

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 the Western. The archetypal duel of the American monomyth always depicts the “bad guy” drawing and shooting first, yet being killed by the more skilled hero (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, 34). This type of violence has 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 the Western), the righteousness of violence as self-defense is never doubted. Through what Lawrence and Jewett dub as “golden violence,”⁵³ popular entertainment materials are carefully “wrought” in seductive images of mythic violence that suggests that a “negative form of integration” is possible through violent retribution (2002, 107). This image of mythical and righteous violence is, however, far from unproblematic, as the justifications behind the violence are questionable, especially when they are deployed into larger popular geopolitical narratives and scripts.

In her analysis on the violence mythos, Whitmer (1997, 54) distinguishes 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 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. *The Dark Knight Returns* presents several types of violent acts that can be classified as legitimate or illegitimate: for example, Superman’s actions in the graphic novel are state-sanctioned and thus legitimate, serving as a contrast to

⁵³ 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 & Jewett, 2002, 106).

Batman's vigilante status. However, it is through the illegitimate acts of violence by the Mutant gang, contrasted with Batman's violence, that the dissonance 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)

This just in -- 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)

These examples of violent acts by the Mutant gang are presented mainly through television news reports, and the actions are unanimously condemned, as their violence is viewed as simply destructive and senseless and thus, unjustifiable. They have no goals, no sacred mission to legalize their violence, and Batman's golden violence is needed to "put down" the evil represented by the mutant gangs. The narrative testifies how, in the face of the Mutant brutalities, in the face of "genuine" evil, the traditional democratic institutions are powerless. Even though 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.

Batman's vigilante violence, however, is not as simple as it may first appear. Despite the goal of ending violence, Batman's actions, too, belong to the category of illegitimate violence. As Hannah Arendt has analyzed in her famous study *On Violence* (1969), violent actions are governed by the "means-end category," which has always been in the danger of losing sight of the ends which were used to justify the means which are required to reach it (1969, 4). In accordance, though Batman's violence does have an end that may in a sense justify the means, the violence by Batman 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)

"You've got a lot of teeth left. And I haven't even touched your tongue." (1986, 67)

Something tells me to stop with the leg. I don't listen to it. (1986, 101)

These examples of violence by Batman are all either Batman's dialogue or his inner monologue, and they illustrate the way he experiences the violence he is inflicting. Indeed, it is apparent from the sound effects of the visual narrative accompanying the captions that the "working defense" he chooses in the first quote is the one that causes most pain. Although we do not get quite the same effect from the Mutant violence, as the mutant violence is mostly reported through media sources, a notable difference can be found between these two "types" of violence, even though they both can be categorized as *illegal*. The initial assumption is that Batman's use of violence is justified through his noble ends, whereas the Mutant violence appears to be violence for violence's sake, acted out to fight boredom and for amusement. However, what makes Batman's violence highly problematic is the way his violence is justified not just by the ends, but by 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 (See Figure 9.). The full splash page presents him as larger than life, nearly absurdly muscular, musing how he feels tens of years younger: he is described on the same page by eye witnesses as "wild animal," "werewolf," "a monster - - with fangs and wings" (1986, 34) and indeed, visually he is almost an animal, brutal and growling. This coincides clearly 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). All this acts to subtly naturalize his violent impulses. Through this type of rhetoric, Batman's/Bruce Wayne's violent behavior is made to appear natural, and therefore justifiable.

This view of violence as natural can be expressed through use of various organic metaphors, viewing society as "sick" and different social problems as "symptoms" of this disease, which are one way of naturalizing the discourse of vigilantism.⁵⁴ Whitmer (1997, 4), too, questions this view of violence as natural and symptomatic and portrayed through organic metaphors. Whitmer seems

⁵⁴ 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?" (1987, I; 16).

to be following Arendt in her critique on 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, his ends are deployed to justify his violent means. However, as it becomes increasingly clear, the way Batman’s violence is naturalized actually problematizes the entire concept of “justified” vigilante violence. As Lawrence and Jewett point out, the vigilante superhero of the monomythic tradition should never enjoy the violence he inflicts, but instead accept his fate with stoicism (2002, 115). In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman’s apparent enjoyment of the violence he inflicts problematizes his status as a monomythic hero, who should not take pleasure in his violent duties. Batman’s violent impulses are seen as natural and coming from within him, while he as Bruce Wayne has to control these impulses or to obey their bidding (“Something tells me to stop with the leg. I don’t listen to it.” being a prime example of this.). The “natural” violent part of Batman clearly takes pleasure in the violence he inflicts, questioning his position and legitimization as a vigilante hero.

Hannah Arendt has identified this discourse of violence that portrays human behavior as analogous to animal behavior (and therefore, natural) as extremely dangerous. According to Arendt, thinking of power and violence in biological terms and organic metaphors is “deceptive” in its plausibility as it makes violence appear as a natural “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 a violent, yet a 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: “I’m a zombie. A flying Dutchman. A dead man, ten years dead...” (1986, 12). Following Arendt’s argument, this kind of rhetoric closely interweaves with the “tradition of organic thought” that characterizes the discourse

on violence: that to “cure” man from such “natural” *human* emotions as rage and violence “would mean nothing less than to dehumanize or emasculate him” (1969, 64). In this discourse, violence becomes a means of empowerment, an instrument through which natural (and thus, by implication, healthy) masculinity can be regained. As Whitmer (1997, 14), too, argues, violence is often rationalized as “acceptable male behavior” by envisioning it as “natural” and by sublimating it as virtuous via physical strength and as a display of innately intentional aggression. This view of violence as unavoidable part of society needs to be legitimized and, when possible, made to work for the social order (ibid.). 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 vigilantism to elevate his violent aggressions through his pro-social mission.

In this paradigm of naturalized violence, brutally violent actions can be used to regain control over the self, to regain power. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman gains the Mutant gang’s respect through violence, as he defeats their leader in physical combat. Similarly, Batman confronts Superman at the climatic duel on the alley where his parents were murdered decades ago. There, through nothing more than “golden” violence, Batman wishes to teach Superman a lesson. In both instances, it is assumed that authority and power can be 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. The way the Mutants become “the Sons of Batman” after viewing Batman defeat their leader testifies to the way power and violence are (erroneously) seen as the same in the worldview of the American monomyth, and by implication, within American geopolitical scripts. Batman literally embodies the myth of violent, masculine power that is portrayed as natural and innate, and he elevates this by making it work for the social order. The way Gotham City is portrayed also assists in justifying his actions. By offering

a selective picture of Gotham City as violent, dangerous, and decrepit, the city becomes an urban hell with stereotypical gangs, full of pain and misery. As Jewett and Lawrence, too, have noticed, the use of stereotyping is a central ideological tool in justifying extreme violence (2003, 215). In the face of these stereotypes, the return of the Dark Knight becomes a necessity, and his extreme methods are seen as equally necessary to bring order. This, in turn, resonates with Arendt's view that there are certain circumstances where violence is viewed as "the only way to set the scales of justice right again" (1969, 64). The use of this kind of distortion in the depiction of the urban environment of the vigilante can aid in the acceptance of the mythic paradigm of justified vigilante violence as the only possible way to gain justice.

After gaining the respect of the Mutant gang through a display of extremely brutal violence, the Mutants now reform under the moniker "the Sons of Batman" (SoB's, pun most likely intended), who then proceed to follow Batman's model of "justified" vigilante violence:

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 & Jewett, 2002, 116). Yet, American popular culture continues to advocate the popular geopolitical narrative of justified violence and the vigilante's sacred mission to take the law into his own hands through superhero comics (and, of course, various other formats). When the superhero narrative of justified violence is analyzed as a component in the formation of the American geopolitical identity, the motivations and justifications of US military actions can be examined in a new way, and the "naturalization" of what is essentially a chosen behavior becomes increasingly problematic. The relationship of power, authority and violence further increases the complexity of vigilante justice as executed by the superhero, for as Hannah 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).

As Whitmer concludes, “legitimate violence” is created through the rationalization of “illegitimate” violence as socially justifiable and acceptable (1997, 11). Whitmer continues to criticize the cultural belief that views 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 (1997, 19-24). It can be plausibly argued that representations of violence as natural within popular fiction such as comics contribute quite directly to this acceptance, and justification of vigilante violence as “natural” affects the way American identity is formulated as integrating this aspect. Lawrence and Jewett see analyzing the “golden” redemptive violence as one possible key to accessing the high amount of violence by young males and the passivity of the general public, both phenomena they recognize as characteristic of the current American society (2002, 113). For Arendt, the “glorification” of violence in the 20th century has much to do with the frustration caused by the limited ability for political action (1969, 81-83). In the context of the superhero narrative, the frustration caused by impotent state control over crime features very clearly as a justification for vigilante violence. Superheroes use violence as an instrument with which to fight crime, and their actions are presented as justified when contrasted with the incompetent (and often corrupt) state authorities. Investigating the way the “political legitimization of aggression” (1997, 21) takes place within different cultural productions, both through what is present and what is absent, as Whitmer points out, a more comprehensive view of the Western (or in this case, American) culture can be attained. Vigilante violence and its justifications in popular culture texts, as exemplified in this chapter, reveal the inherent contradiction that also characterizes popular American geopolitical scripts.

Doomed! Doomed to drag this damned albatross around my neck, and compulsively retell the calamities of September 11th to anyone who'll still listen! I insist the sky is falling; they roll their eyes and tell me it's only my Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder... That's when Time stands still at the moment of trauma... which strikes me as a totally reasonable response to current events! ...I see that awesome tower, glowing as it collapses!

(Art Spiegelman: *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004, 2)

9. Trauma in Community: The Search for American Identity After 9/11

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, and examine the relevance of this national trauma on the geopolitical identities and scripts of America. The focus will be primarily on the collective, not individual trauma, and the various ways this traumatic event was portrayed in the pages of superhero comics. "Trauma" 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). Traditional trauma studies, which emerged as a distinctive field in the 1980s, have largely focused on psychological trauma, memory and witnessing, all more located within the sphere of individual experience rather than collective experience. On a larger scale, individual trauma itself has always been at the heart of the superhero narrative: as both Philip Sandifer (2008) and Michael Brody (2006) have argued, central to the character of the superhero is the trauma of his origin, which often reflects society's larger anxieties of the time. From Batman's loss of parents (street violence) to The Fantastic Four's exposure to the cosmic rays (the fear of nuclear power), the superhero's origins are very much engulfed in individual trauma masking a collective trauma, which, as Brody claims, becomes a part of a wider process that "promotes increased strength through adversity" (2006, 105). Sandifer takes note on the way the superhero's origin story is the most told and retold story within superhero comics, and that it is often told without any direct relation to the plot within the issue, remaining no

more than “a ritual re-enactment of the traumatic event” (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 is focused on the obsessive retelling of the origin story (ibid.).

Accordingly, it is interesting to note the amount of retellings of the origins of Captain America as late as the 21st century. For example, the *Winter Soldier* –volumes 1 and 2 (2006) 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) begins with a several page montage of Captain America’s origin story and also contains several flashbacks. Captain America’s origin story is then again told twice in the *Road to Reborn* (2009) a little more than a year later. Together, these collected volumes contain issues 1-14, 25-42 and 49-50 (600-601), and it is highly likely that issues between those volumes, too, retell the origins at least once. This obsession with Captain America’s origin trauma, and especially the way the validity of several of the flashbacks in the volumes mentioned is questioned, implies a similar rupture within American geopolitical scripts in the 21st century: a desire for reaffirmation, making sense of the past in order to define the present. This kind of drastic revision of collective identity, of course, is in itself a central aspect of experiencing trauma:

This identity 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)

To reconstruct the origins of an established national icon can therefore be viewed as a desire to re-remember a collective past, to recreate a coherent identity that allows the national identity to assimilate the present traumatic events into it, to make sense of them. Captain America’s past and the comic book’s constant referral to the past in order to incorporate and understand the present illustrates the similar processes going on within the popular geopolitical identity reconstruction of the American nation. The rewriting of Marvel’s iconic heroes in *The Ultimates* –series (see Ch. 3) is

another striking example of this re-remembering of national myths and identity which simultaneously contains a “posture toward international aggression” expressed primarily through dualistic morality, nationalism-patriotism and instrumentalism (Smelser, 2004b, 276). *The Ultimates* embodies all these qualities as it evokes the traditional good-evil dichotomy through its use of increased binaries, stressing the virtue of patriotism and most strikingly of all, forcefully subscribing to “instrumentalism,” which Smelser defines as “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, 278). This brand of instrumentalism is clearly inscribed into the post-9/11 superhero, who especially in *The Ultimates* -series 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.

When seeking the way myths enable a nation to “make sense” of trauma, it is clear that the message is to turn the trauma into doing “good” the way the hero does instead of turning to evil (like, say, *The Joker*, see Ch. 6.). According to Brody, the superhero origin entails an identification with the aggressor that caused the trauma, leading to a “conversion from the passive and helpless -- to the active and masterful” (2006, 110). What makes Captain America’s origin trauma particularly potent is the way it is inescapably tied to the national trauma of WWII. Born precisely to enhance American military power, Steve Rogers’ linkage to real-world national politics is clear in his origin trauma: war. However, as Sandifer, too, argues, this type of origin trauma that ties directly into questions of national and political identity are exceptions to the rule (2008, 179). Captain America represents the nationalistic virtue, the perfect hero – and his other great trauma,⁵⁵ of course, is the failure to be the hero and save his sidekick, Bucky, from the bomb. It is noteworthy to point out that while *The Ultimates* –remake completely denied this trauma by allowing Bucky to survive, the official continuity, too, brought Bucky back in 2006 by revealing that he had not died, after all.

⁵⁵ Sandifer (2008, 177-8) acknowledges that the origin trauma is not the only significant trauma of the superhero: for Spider-Man, for example, the death of Gwen Stacy holds a similar position, as does Bucky’s assumed death in Captain America, both of which have acquired the status of very similar to the origin story through the act of “empty and symbolic repetitions.”

However, Bucky's fate as a brainwashed Soviet assassin introduced a whole series of further issues relating to guilt and failed heroism that still are present in the original series.

Captain America himself is both a product and a victim of trauma. As Costello argues, he is a man out of time as he spends decades frozen in the Atlantic: finally thawed into a different time, he is "left alone, dislodged, and without meaning" as his public identity as Captain America increasingly dominates his private identity as Steve Rogers (2009, 98). His alienation suggests a similar process within American geopolitical identity, which is becoming increasingly isolationist after 9/11. As Lawrence & Jewett claim, the impact of 9/11 was one towards isolated and mythical "cowboy" stances, as America withdrew itself from several issues of international concern, such as the Kyoto Protocol or any weapons treaties (2002, 14-15). While the superhero comics immediately after 9/11 tended to reflect the isolationist and instrumentalist principle of immediate and justified action, the national icons gradually began to express different views, depicting a national identity in crisis.

Collective Trauma and "True" Heroes after 9/11

While the view of individual trauma is by far the most common today, it cannot be directly applied to collective trauma. As Erikson argues, in contrast to the individual trauma that attacks one's psyche, collective trauma attacks the very foundations of society and severs people from their sense of communality (1995, 187). When analyzing the effects of 9/11 on the popular geopolitical identity of America, this view of trauma as collective is central. In his work, Erikson aims at broadening 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" (1995, 185). Similarly, Arthur G. Neal describes in his book *National Trauma and Collective Memory* (1998) how an event can transform into a collective trauma when it threatens a nation's social reality, and results in viewing the present as discontinuous and perceiving events as

uncontrollable (1998, 7), while Jeffrey C. Alexander goes a little further by arguing that collective trauma occurs when a collective cultural and social group is “subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (2004, 1). What becomes clear through these definitions is that despite the shattering effects of collective trauma, a traumatizing event can also have the positive effect of creating communities, transforming collective trauma into a complex equation where collective identities are torn apart and brought together simultaneously.

Indeed, as a distinct way of both severing communities and constructing them, trauma can play a vital role in not only shattering but also reconstructing popular geopolitical identities, and the sudden and violent attack on the World Trade Center can be classified as a traumatic event that shook the very basis of America. This trauma and its multiple effects can be located within superhero comics, both in the representation of the event itself, but more importantly, in the changes that took place within the character of the superhero. The attacks on September 11, 2001 transformed instantly into a collective trauma experienced by an entire nation through real-time news coverage in various media formats. As a media format, as Brandy Ball Blake has argued, comics are extremely suitable for depicting trauma, as such elements as timelessness, loss of control and loss of coherence can be expressed in the comic book format (2009). The use of panels in framing time 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 as the panel “bleeds” to the very edges of the page (Eisner, 1985, 28-37; McCloud, 1993, 102-103).

Superhero comics reacted instantly to the events of 9/11, as both DC and Marvel, the two biggest publishing houses in superheroes, were located right in the heart of Manhattan. However, they both did much more than just reflect the national trauma of 9/11. Like many other mass media products, they took part in actively creating what would be seen in the popular media as the trauma of 9/11. 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). In a similar vein, cultural trauma theorists Alexander et al. (2004) argue in their book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* that indeed, events themselves do not possess any inherent “trauma-inducing” qualities, but it is through the social processes that people react to these events that the trauma is created. The “trick” in analyzing collective trauma, according to Alexander, is the realization that trauma is not a naturally existing phenomenon, but something that has been constructed by society, and that while events are one thing, the representations of these things are quite another (2004, 2; 10). Superhero comics, much like other popular media, have a significant role in creating and sustaining cultural trauma, which, unlike psychological trauma, is not “worked through” with such psychological defenses like coping. Instead, it 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).

Within the field of comics and graphic novels, the traumatic events of 9/11 were approached through very different perspectives. One very powerful approach came, not from superhero comics, but from Art Spiegelman, whose previous work includes the Pulitzer-winning *Maus*, the retelling of his parents’ experiences during the Holocaust in comics form. Spiegelman took on the impossible trauma of 9/11 through *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), giving visual form to the personal and national trauma as comic book panels slowly transformed into smoking towers (2004, 2). Through the unique visual format of comics, the text is not merely trying to make sense of the traumatic event, but it ultimately aims at conveying the chaotic and all-encompassing nature of the event through its impressionistic and fragmented structure (Nakari, 2008, 14). Spiegelman’s experience, while executing the traumatic event and the associated timelessness, discontinuity and loss of control, is ultimately a psychological trauma, where he himself is the traumatized individual.

Powerful as it is, the massive work does little in the vein of large audiences, partially as it is in the form of an expensive, thick-paged coffee table volume affordable only to a very limited audience. *In the Shadow of No Towers* lacks the same impact on American geopolitics as superhero comics, partially due to its unavailability to large audiences, and partially due to its nature as a private trauma text that presents a fragmented, disjointed view of the event that fails to guide a proper response to the traumatic event. Superhero comics, on the other hand, offered an immediate response, a way to interpret the traumatic event through the iconic heroes and their responses as the heroes in many ways represent the idealized “American identity.”

The most famous example of immediate post-9/11 superhero comics is the issue #36 (November, 2001) of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Quickly 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. The image of him in front of the ruins capturing the powerlessness of the heroes in the face of such events is a powerful one, allowing the reader, too, to feel powerless at the destruction (See Figure 10.). As Terry Kading notes, 9/11 and its instant and repetitious media images resembled superhero comics and their fictional wreckages in a way that allowed them to “present commentary on thoughts, emotions, and insights” on the event through the vantage point of the superhero (2005, 219):

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)

Superhero comics, for their part, illustrated the “appropriate reaction” to the collective trauma of 9/11, guiding the nation’s responses and actively constructing the popular geopolitical scripts to help make sense and cope with the national trauma. As a rule, one key narrative in the superhero comics published immediately after 9/11 was praising the courage of the “real” heroes of 9/11, with

very few outspoken cries for vengeance. Spider-Man's monologue in #36, too, praised the civic heroes of WTC as the visual narrative depicted the firemen and policemen of New York:

But with our costumes and our powers we a writ small by the true heroes. Those who face fire without fear or armor. --- Ordinary men. Ordinary women. Made extraordinary by acts of compassion. (2001, 36; 10-11)

Indeed, as Spider-Man's words testify, the immediate post-9/11 superhero comics are very much characterized by a "transference of the authority of the superhero to a real-world civic authority" (Sandifer, 2008, 185), a complete reversal of the superhero ideology outlined within this dissertation. DC Comics proceeded to publish two collections⁵⁶ dedicated to the survivors and their families, which depicted superheroes such as Superman and Wonder Woman addressing the readers and declaring their nature as fiction as well as self-reflective comics where the authors of superhero comics themselves pained over the futility of their work in the face of such a catastrophe.

However, what Kading recognizes as truly noteworthy is the total absence of "declarations affirming faith or trust in political leaders or government institutions" (2005, 221). As with Captain America's notable absence from Vietnam in the 1970s, this omission of trustworthy leaders and officials is very telling of the crisis of popular geopolitical identity, envisioning a nation without leaders and a lack of trust towards the government. In the first part of the three-issue story *Enemy* (2002) depicting 9/11, Captain America furiously rejects Nick Fury's command to go on a mission and be "a hero," choosing to stay and work on the ruins of the towers in hope of finding survivors (2002, 1; 15-17). Even though the villainy of the terrorists is recognized and unanimously condemned, no national leaders appear within the superhero comic immediately after 9/11. Even the perfect soldier, Captain America refuses to take orders from his commanders. Instead, the heroes brought forth represent the "ordinary" people, the common American. As Kading states, the essential problem behind this phenomenon is that the US suddenly found itself "confronted by

⁵⁶ These comics comprise of two volumes: *9-11: Artists Respond, Volume 1*. (2002) and *9-11: September 11, 2001 (The World's Finest Comic Book Writers & Artists Tell Stories to Remember, Vol. 2)* (2002). Featured writers and artists include Will Eisner, Neil Gaiman, Stan Lee, Alex Ross and numerous others, and the proceeds were given to various charity funds.

supervillainous acts, but hav[ing] no superhero response” (2005, 224). The response to this trauma, within superhero comics, soon revealed the tensions within this reaction and an ultimate inability to create a coherent popular geopolitical script that would encompass the event.

In relation to the pre-9/11 superhero politics, the post-9/11 period is characterized partially by a desire to understand these events and to “re-establish a context of individual and collective security” (Kading, 2005, 207). This need for re-establishing collective security is closely related to the need to redefine geopolitical identities and scripts within popular culture. Simon Dalby recognizes three major geopolitical scripts that were evoked after 9/11: the need for a violent retaliation (even without a clear enemy), the notion that the war was clearly American, and that in turn had a significant effect on the way the event had to be revenged violently instead of focusing on the causes behind the attack (2003, 64). Smelser, among others, has identified the post-9/11 rhetoric of President George W. Bush as heavily 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 (2004b, 277).⁵⁷ It is precisely this core theme of American culture that has been identified and outlined within this dissertation as a key component of popular American geopolitical identity, as its paradoxes have been discussed and examined in detail through the highly responsive genre of superhero comics. All these scripts are closely intertwined, motivating and supporting each other. They all, as Dalby, too, recognizes, hold the popular geopolitical view of a dialectic inside/outside dichotomy, where America is under external threat (ibid.):

War talk frequently silenced careful reflection, but did so on the basis of a complicit geography, a geography that specified matters as a simple spatial violation, an external attack on an innocent, supposedly safe interior. (2003, 64)

⁵⁷ 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 nations 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).

This division to inside/outside resembles closely the setting of the Eden threatened by an outside evil that characterizes both the American monomythic narrative and the superhero narrative, and the popular geopolitical script evoked here calls for a vigilante superhero to question democracy in order to salvage the community. In superhero comics this was delivered, ultimately, through the character of Captain America. While Spider-Man's role was highlighted due to his eminent New Yorker –status, Captain America represented not just the citizens of New York, but all of America. As Kading mentions, Captain America, like America itself, could never admit to 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). How he should act after 9/11, however, was not as simple as it seems: as John Shelton Lawrence notes, many of the post-9/11 episodes were symptomatic of a “disintegration from the conflicting vectors that arc through his conscience” (2009, 6). One immediate response was giving the readers exactly what they wanted: Captain America confronting the villains behind 9/11.

In the second and third parts of *Enemy* (2002), Steve Rogers goes on to track the terrorists behind the WTC attack as they attempt another attack, this time in the quintessential American small-town of fictional Centerville. Whilst battling the terrorists (on American soil, of course), the terrorist leader al-Tariq points out that it is precisely American bombs, manufactured in small towns like Centerville, that cripple and kill children in his country. This forces Captain America to question “the validity of the dominant geopolitical narrative” he stands for 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?
(2002, 3; 15)

Dittmer points out the dual role of Captain America comics as both literally narrating popular geopolitical scripts of America and as a vehicle of dissident geopolitical narratives. Captain America's ambivalent views on American foreign policy leads to a more ambiguous reading of the

popular geopolitical script. (2005, 641). The critical approach towards these issues 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 their publication (Dalby, 2003, 64), and the way Captain America comics so soon after the attacks produced a narrative that even slightly questioned America’s involvement in the terrorist actions is a telltale sign of the ambiguities within the nation that began to build instantaneously.⁵⁸ As Dalby writes, the “discursive 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 Neil J. 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 it immediately showed signs of deep ambivalence, demonstrating simultaneous contradictory reactions: “shocking and fascinating, depressing and exhilarating, grotesque and beautiful, sullyng 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 within the cultural identity.

It is important to contextualize 9/11 within the larger framework of the superhero as the iconic representation of popular American geopolitical identity and as a representative of the American monomyth. As Smelser suggests, 9/11 is traumatic *because* of its present context: it “occurred in the context of American society and American culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the shape of the national reaction was intimately conditioned by that context” (2004b, 270). That the attacks took place when they did in part is responsible for the nature of the trauma, but, naturally, this point in time is built upon centuries of national history where superheroes hold a significant place. As Dalby (2003, 70), too, points out, the long history of

⁵⁸ Later, in accordance with the controversial Patriot Act, this ambiguity would grow to a full-blown conflict within the Marvel Universe, as the clearly allegorical Superhero Registration Act divided the superheroes in the *Civil War* - storyline.

American utopianism was a substantial part of American identity, which now was deeply and brutally violated as America was revealed as not being invulnerable after all. Comic book creators, too, were forced to reevaluate their place within American popular culture, as costumed heroes did not necessarily serve as “the best metaphors in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks” (Wright, 2001, 288). Whilst the motivations and reasons that led to 9/11 are myriad, Terry Kading insists that the event can also be distinguished by its shared qualities with the superhero narrative, mainly due to somewhat hazy political motivations behind the act that more resemble the evils of comic book supervillains than any political or legal agenda (2005, 215-7). There exists, indeed, an eerie resemblance to 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).

As both Cord Scott (2007) and Terry Kading (2005) have stressed, 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” (2007, 326). Kading goes further in stressing the role of the media coverage which elevated 9/11 “beyond belief” by pointing out the way this horrifying 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 a comic book (2005, 214). A national trauma witnessed by millions of Americans as it took place, 9/11 was an event that “spectacularly violated the basic geopolitical division” of inside/outside dichotomy that very much characterized the discourse on popular American geopolitical identity (Dalby, 2003, 83). The instantly globalized nature of the WTC attacks witnessed not just by America, but by the world, gives the ensuing collective trauma a distinctly globalized air. Following Bernhard Giesen’s analysis on the global nature of the trauma of the Holocaust, one could argue that 9/11 shares some of the same characteristics. As Giesen notes, the Holocaust forced not just Germany, but the whole world to question the optimistic nature of the enlightenment as a destructive illusion by implicitly stating: “If this could happen in the heartland

of modern European culture, then there is no safe haven where a relapse into barbarianism can be excluded.” (2004, 144). Similarly, it could be argued, witnessing an attack of such a devastating scale on America soil made it obvious that no-one could be excluded from terrorist acts.

Naturally, the way immediate global media coverage allowed people all over the world to witness the collapse of the towers possesses traumatizing qualities, but a crucial role must be attributed to the concluding realization above that even America was not safe from terrorist attacks. This realization, combined with the global witnessing of the event worldwide, is what transforms the event into a globalized collective trauma. But whereas with the Holocaust this was primarily done with the aid of public confessions of guilt (Giesen, 2004, 146), with 9/11 the admitting of guilt has been replaced with an aggressive search for the guilty. Indeed, as Smelser writes, placing the blame can be approached as a divisive ingredient in the cultural trauma: as conflicting finger-pointing and demonization appear, they themselves can become sources of cultural trauma (2004a, 52). It can be plausibly argued that at least after 9/11, the resulting War on Terror itself created a cultural trauma that divided the nation. One reason behind this division, as Smelser recognizes, is the fickle nature of the “victim” status of America (ibid.). As I have argued elsewhere in this dissertation, a central element within the American monomyth is the idea of justified violence where the hero (aka America) is forced into action only after the villain has already attacked, thus removing any blame from the hero’s side. Smelser, too, has noticed the tendency of America to evade guilt by justified aggression, by being provoked into action. Whether Pearl Harbor or 9/11, America views itself as under assault, which instantly legitimizes its wars without guilt or responsibility, allowing such characters as Captain America to resort to any means necessary in order to fight the global evil of terrorism. However, as Smelser points out, this “guiltless” crusade for justice is in constant risk of turning into something else as the hunt for terrorists continues still (Smelser, 2004b, 272-273), as became apparent during the mass operation by the US to locate weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Making Sense of Trauma

The loss of control and a sense of dislocation are crucial when analyzing both the superhero and the geopolitical identity of America after the trauma of 9/11, as the ways of regaining control are often violent and extreme. In Lawrence and Jewett's interpretation of the American monomyth, the central narrative revolves around a peaceful Eden attacked by outsiders that requires a (super)hero to its rescue (2002, 16-17). This mythical frame of outside/inside dichotomy attempted initially to contain the World Trade Center attacks, trying to make sense of them, but ultimately the monomyth failed in its goal to explain the trauma that affected the nation. In recognition of traumatic events on a national scale, acts of commemoration take place through symbolic representations that are aimed at "rejuvenating cultural values and promoting images of society as a moral community" (Neal, 1998, 207). However, as both A. David Lewis and Matthew Costello have noticed, the moral unity projected onto the nation after 9/11 was a short-lived phenomenon within superhero comics, and it was soon replaced with narratives of distrust and suspicion between superheroes and the government. Later post-9/11 superhero comics began to feature themes of questionable authorities and the abuse of power, as images of a consensus identity could not be presented with an acceptable rhetoric, which left them lacking both conviction and acceptance (Lewis, 2008; Costello, 2009, 225). The post-9/11 superhero comics attempted to create a moral unity, but ultimately, they presented a fractured and traumatized national identity full of fear and doubt, which, when examined closely within this dissertation, presents a highly problematic discourse within popular American geopolitical identity.

Making sense of a national trauma in defining popular geopolitical identities is significant, and as Neal argues, especially collective responses to trauma are often formulated through the use of national myths and legends in the hope of creating moral unity: concepts of "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” (1998, 21). The portrayal of the monomythic superhero is one such way of using a national myth in order to create a sense of unity within the nation in America. The first part of *Enemy* underlines this attempt by playing heavily on the iconic nature of Captain America: a full splash page with Captain America in his iconic stance, the background filled with American flags, accompanied by the overly patriotic captions: “We share -- We are -- The American Dream.” (2002, 1; 30). The power of the visual representation is clear, as Captain America serves to remind the reader of the “American Dream” he, and by implication, the reader, too, should hold.

As A. David Lewis has noticed in his analysis of post-9/11 war comics, while the attack on September 11, 2001 “could not be denied” within the superhero universes, the consequent wars in Afghanistan (and Iraq) presented a host of problematic issues the previous American wars had not:

[T]hese wars appeared either too unwieldy, too complex, or too uncertain to boil down into plotlines. Rather, [post-9/11 superhero comics] presented an ersatz conflict, one that could parallel the issues raised by the real-life wars all without engaging them. Metaphorically, they would paraphrase, not quote. (2008)

Lewis identifies with some alarm the themes that arose after 9/11 in superhero narratives, in which the relationship to authority was revised, and abuse of power became prominent theme (ibid.). As already mentioned, Marvel’s *Civil War* –storyline (2006-2007) mirrored the Patriot Act and its consequences in many ways, while their *The Ultimates* –series re-envisioned their established heroes as darker, more cynical and nihilistic versions, reflecting similar developments within popular American geopolitics that revealed a yearn towards the “simpler” morals of the nostalgic past with a pronouncedly more instrumentalist attitudes.

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 geopolitics of America:

[The] changing 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)

This new geopolitical script that justifies the actions of military power through offense instead of defense allows America to remain "anti-imperial," while simultaneously defining itself as essentially anti-imperialistic as it does not "conquer, annex or fundamentally remake" the defeated nation. This ideological shift within popular American geopolitics is strikingly obvious in the visual image of the new Captain America, Bucky Barnes in 2008: armed with a gun, his posture and weaponry distinguish him quite clearly from the Captain America of Steve Rogers, whose stance was one of defense with the shield (a weapon of defense) as his primary weapon. (See Figure 11.). Even a relatively small transformation in such a visual icon as Captain America marks a drastic shift in the popular geopolitical narratives and scripts of America, too.⁵⁹

The change from defense to offense through the addition of a gun is crucial in weighing the iconic power and significance of the superhero, as it reflects the society's "attitude toward the technology of warfare" (Orchard, 2006). The role of science, technology and power has always been problematic within the US, and the solution to this was the reimagining of technology as good *in the right hands*. As Orchard, too, notes, the way superheroes could exceed the power of technology reflected 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 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.

⁵⁹ Another significant phenomenon is the rise of so-called "national security cinema", exemplified by such recent box-office hits as *The Dark Knight* (2008, dir. Christopher Nolan) and *Iron Man* (2008, dir. Jon Favreau). Portraying the US as vulnerable and under attack, the embedded discourse in these films supports the need for heightened national security and justifies pre-emptive violence through a near-obsessive perception of threat (Bernard, 2009).

As already briefly argued, national traumas are an essential way of creating and defining collective identities. The way heroes are represented during traumatic events has a great impact on national identity, especially in America, on the content of “what it means to be an American” (Neal, 1998, 22). Dittmer, among others, has argued that the “reterritorialization of American identity” right after 9/11 was a possibility through the way Captain America comic books clearly portrayed the “inside/outside dialectic” of us vs. them (2005, 637). This is also apparent in Kading’s work, where he argues that the appeal of the superhero narrative is not just about “good” triumphing over “evil,” but the way it is done through what has earlier in this thesis been labeled as “vigilante justice”: a swift execution of undeniable justice where the hero does not resort to the ways of the enemy (2005, 224-5):

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. (2005, 225)

This uncompromising ideal with the clear dichotomy of inside/outside, though promoted immediately after 9/11, did not last. While the initial response, then, was one of “us vs. Them,” this geopolitical approach proved unsustainable. As Dalby has noted, the rising insecurity that followed led to an atmosphere of anxiety, as the public was “unsure as to where the danger lay or who the enemy was” (2003, 68). As Kading notes, the post-9/11 state of the US was one of exponentially increased insecurity and vulnerability, enhanced through the rhetoric of the Department of Homeland Security: everything was to be assessed as a potential threat (2005, 218). This is easily noted in the later post-9/11 superhero narratives, which are marked with increased distrust and doubt, a darker perspective through which the world is viewed. While *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36 professed unity and strength of America in the face of the enemy, it simultaneously verbalized what would later become a significant threat:

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. (2001, 36; 17)

By proclaiming that “evil” can be found everywhere, the comic may have aimed at preventing vengeful attacks on ethnic minorities held responsible for the attacks, but ultimately, what the statement reveals is a seed of a deep distrust planted within the nation. Indeed, the inside/outside dichotomy instigated by the existing popular geopolitical scripts began to crumble even more as it was revealed that some of the hijackers were legal residents in the US, where they had trained for their future mission (Dalby, 2003, 68). The lack of a clearly definable, external enemy meant that lines between friends and enemies were re-drawn in a variety of ways.

Collective trauma has the potential to both destabilize and re-envision a community, and as an event which is perceived as a collective trauma it may give rise to newfound solidarity and unity as well as anger and distrust. When faced with an attack of the scale of the WTC catastrophe, one could assume it would have cleared out some of the moral ambiguities of good and evil and helped America once again define itself through its enemies. A sense of unity was being offered through a nationalist response, a chance to go back to the old consensus identity of America past. But, as Costello writes, without “an acceptable rhetoric with which to articulate that identity, however, it could be asserted with neither conviction nor acceptance” (2009, 225). While it can be argued that sometimes national traumas can enhance the sense of unity within a nation, in other cases collective traumas can have the opposite effect, resulting in an alienated, fragmented identity (Neal, 1998, 31).

Trauma, whether individual or collective, shatters the identity. Cultural trauma, more specifically, threatens a culture’s individuals and their personal identities which are tied to that culture (Smelser, 2004a, 40). Cultural trauma is above all a “socially mediated attribution” which is constructed through various media channels and public speeches, and it is even possible to create a cultural trauma even without an event (Alexander, 2004, 8). Cultural and collective traumas in fact tie in closely with Benedict Anderson’s theory on the formation of imagined communities as discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, as collective traumas can function as both devastating and invigorating events in communities. As Smelser notes, the blend of negative and positive

elements is a complex phenomenon that manifested itself after 9/11 both in the negative affects commonly associated with traumatic events, but also within a collective surge of solidarity and celebration of America (2004b, 281). This is apparent especially within the superhero comics' praise of the "ordinary" heroes, who were lauded as the true heroes while the superheroes had to admit their fictive nature and limited abilities. A community can be united while torn apart, and the unraveling of this double effect is still visible within American culture. Superhero comics took an active role in creating the traumatic event of 9/11, guiding reactions and offering narratives that enabled a shared response, while simultaneously questioning America's "sacred quest" against evil. 9/11 had a significant impact both in the geopolitical narratives of America as well as superhero comics, which were faced with their fictional nature as they were powerless to prevent the attack.

This change is apparent in the visual reworking of Captain America, which testifies to a popular geopolitical script of battle, invoking further violent actions through a conscious opposition. After 9/11, the "overarching narrative" of America was one of war, despite the fact that there really was no-one to fight (Dalby, 2003, 61-2). This new geopolitical script drew from the shared national trauma of witnessing 9/11 through constant media streams, and as Kading argues, the imagery "collapsed the distinction between graphic superhero imagery and our own reality," as "supervillainous acts" from the pages of comic books entered real life (2005, 214). This collapsing of boundaries between fiction and reality, it can be argued, lead to a questioning of the relevance of superheroes, which Kading identifies as symbols for national security (2005, 207). National security shattered and supervillains' reality affirmed, the crisis in popular geopolitical identity within America received 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 analysis of the crisis in American geopolitical identities at work in the 2007 comic. The next chapter 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.

10. 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 US in March, 2007. Whereas the current issues (as of August, 2010) have already revealed that Steve Rogers' death has indeed not been permanent (as it rarely is within the superhero universe), I will focus my analysis on the 18 issues (#25-42)⁶⁰ depicting the actual death and its initial aftermath in the storyline *The Death of Captain America* (2007-2008). I aim at particularly examining and analyzing the way the comic reflects the later impact of the national trauma of 9/11 and the consequent War on Terror on the popular geopolitical identity of America through its representations of heroes and villains. As already argued, analyzing Captain America in particular allows one to access the way American identity itself is envisioned in popular culture, as he is generally acknowledged as being the "avatar" of America itself (Costello, 2009, 98). In this light, the death of Steve Rogers on the steps of the courthouse in New York gains a new significance, as it raises the question of redefining the American nation as one without heroes.

In this last chapter of my dissertation, I will first approach the question of popular geopolitical identity in America and how *The Death of Captain America* -storyline responds to the later ambiguities produced by collective trauma of 9/11. I will argue that this is done primarily through the portrayal of heroes who are increasingly isolationist and at the constant risk of losing control, and how this loss of self control represents a very tangible evil in the post-9/11 America. I will also focus on the concept of evil within the comic book, arguing that evil is now depicted as internalized - both nationally and personally - and linked to the control of self, loss of which could

⁶⁰ 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).

be analyzed as the real “villain” in the narrative, as the inside/outside dichotomy of good and evil is deliberately collapsed. 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, 3-5). The feeling of helplessness can be translated as a sense of losing control, which is precisely what the reader is presented with in *The Death of...* . The danger comes from the loss of identity, and the loss of self control where evil is at least partially the result of (national) trauma and the inability to cope with it. In this sense, too, this chapter deepens some of the arguments made about collective trauma in the previous chapter.

The Death of Captain America is a part of the ambitious Marvel crossover project that began in 2006: The *Civil War* -storyline, which focused on the Superhuman Registration Act that divided the superheroes in the Marvel universe (in a quite clear allegory to the Patriot Act⁶¹), and placed old Avengers allies Captain America and Iron Man on opposite sides. This story arc culminated in Captain America’s eventual surrender in order to avoid more damage to the innocent civilians stuck in the middle of the battle between superheroes. The fact that he surrenders and allows himself to be taken into custody places Captain America in a highly ambiguous situation as a national hero. As Jewett and Lawrence (2003, 74) have argued, the rhetoric of American zealous nationalism has always viewed compromise as “repulsive,” as it implied the necessity of controlling institutions and thus doubted the moral superiority of the cause and its heroes. This is underlined in the narrative as the news reporter by the courthouse states: “Though his stand on the issue was unpopular, Captain America himself remains an icon.” (2007, 7). In the background, the crowd is pictured holding either “Free Captain America” signs or “Traitor” signs, showing the division within the nation. He is called a “loser” while a rotten tomato hits him in the face. These accusations are not without base, either: Captain America’s status as an all-American hero becomes questionable precisely *because* of his surrender, as it brutally undermines the hero’s (and by analogy, the nation’s) mission and its

⁶¹ For a more detailed analysis on the Civil War as an allegory of the Patriot Act, cf. Costello: *Secret Identity Crisis. Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America* (2009).

righteousness. Within the Marvel universe, the need for a Registration Act for superheroes, too, signifies a distrust towards the heroes and their motives. For Captain America to surrender equals his confirmation of this doubt that the “crusade” he is on may not be as valid as the nation would like it to be, blurring the divide between hero and villain and questioning the righteousness of the zealous American mission in the process.

Traumatized Identities and the Death of an Icon

To produce a fragmented, dislocated national identity of America, *The Death of Captain America* reaches the desired effect by effectively removing 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 allows the reader to access “American” sentiments. Captain America, in the title carrying his name, is predominantly portrayed through the eyes of others: friends, enemies, lovers, each painting a picture of a virtuous hero, an idealized man they can only hope to become. As the icon of America himself is absent, what remains is a fragmented, dislodged vision of a national identity struggling to come to terms with something it is unable to either define or control, trying to create the perfected vision of idealized America through the iconic character of Captain America.

The visual narrative of the comic book also contributes to the creation of the ideal American hero. Images from his past as a war hero are shown through news reel footage and flashbacks, presenting a hero of physical perfection clad in the famous star-spangled red, blue and white, while the textual descriptions offered by the narrative stress his character as a saintly and morally superior (2007, 9-12). 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, 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 literally 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, can be read as an expression of this.

As the disillusionment with the nation's government lead to Captain America's momentary resignation already back in the 1970s, it could be argued that the trauma of 9/11 and its aftermath is visible in the identity crisis reflected in the heroes of *Captain America Comics* and most symbolically in the death of Steve Rogers. No longer just a matter of a new identity, he literally has to die. In his place, *The Death of...* presents not one but two Captain Americas: Bucky Barnes, taking on the mantle reluctantly with Tony Stark's approval, and the imitator Captain America of the 1950s, presumed dead but revived by The Red Skull. In the midst of a national identity crisis, these two represent opposite ideologies of America, and violence is presented as the solution to discover which ideology will prevail. According to Christian Steinmetz's (2009, 193) Jungian interpretation of the villain as the symbol of The Shadow that projects a threat on both personal and state levels, the representation of evil/villainy becomes a central conceptual tool in outlining the imagined community within popular geopolitical scripts:

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)

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 Cap, 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. Naturally, the "false" Captain America resurrected by The Red Skull is doomed to lose, as he never was the original Steve Rogers to begin with, revealing the impossibility of resurrecting the idealized past of the American dream, too. However, 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. Compromise (which marked Steve Rogers as a traitor) is not an option to him, as it defaces the values the traditional hero stands by.

The arrival of another Captain America also problematizes the right for Bucky to wear the costume at all. As Annabel Orchard writes, the armor/costume signalizes the hero's marginal position in society, and "he is transformed by the divine technology of the armor into a superior and more powerful being" (2006). According to Orchard, the hero and his costume mirror "his culture's attitude toward the technology of warfare" (2006), with the stress on the costume and its intrinsic power. Both Batman and Superman, though distinctively different in their sources of power, both possess a strong force in their instant recognizability.⁶² Similarly, Captain America's costume possesses its greatest power in its iconic nature: literally dressed in the American flag, he *is* America in more ways than one. As Jason Dittmer (2005, 627) convincingly argues, the character of Captain America connects the national and individual scales of American nationalism, and his body acts as connecting these two scales literally by embodying American identity:

[Captain America's] characterization as an explicitly American superhero establishes him as both a representative of the idealized American nation and as a defender of the American status quo. (Ibid.)

This makes Captain America a very potent topos for the comics' creators to address issues relating to America as a nation. This is apparent for example in the film critic Michael Medved's (2003) attack on *Captain America: The New Deal* –storyline (containing the three-issue story *Enemy*, discussed in Chapter 9), published after 9/11. It is apparent that Captain America's critical stand on issues such as American accountability on terrorism can quickly lead to accusations of anti-Americanism. Referring to the storyline as "cultural malaise" due to its questioning of American actions, Medved's stance also testifies to the cultural potency of Captain America in defining the

⁶² See also McCloud and the iconic power of color in superhero comics, 1993, 188.

popular geopolitical identity of America. One of the key elements to further open up this potency is the trope of dual identities of the superhero.

As Jules Feiffer mused already in 1965, one of the key elements in the success of the superhero comic itself was the issue of identity, and with the superhero, there were several, as the hero needed a secret identity, a “typical” identity that initially allowed the reader to identify with the hero (1964/2003, 12-13), as well as his “true” identity as the hero. Sandifer, too, writes of the crucial distinction between the superhero and his alter ego, arguing for the viewpoint that the superhero identity is the “real” identity, while the secret civilian identity is an extension of that main identity (2008, 182). In this view, then, it becomes apparent that Bucky Barnes has to become the new Captain America, not because he needs to be a hero, but because it is the superhero identity that has to carry on. It is the superhero who has the secret identity, not the alter ego, as the superhero identity is viewed as the “real” identity while the civilian one is a construction:

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)

Similarly, Matthew Costello has argued that the “mechanism of the dual identity” itself is one of core elements that makes superhero comics a highly suitable vehicle for the analysis of national identity (2009, 15). Since the 1960s, the secret identities of the heroes have often been exposed, and Captain America, too, has revealed his civilian identity as Steve Rogers to the American public. Even though the trope of secret identities has been effectively destabilized in the Marvel universe through the Superhero Registration Act, the battle for identities is still very much at the center of the superhero narrative. Now, instead of focusing on the possible exposure of the hero’s identity, the conflict takes place within the hero’s mind, and more often than not focuses on choosing actions and taking sides, neither of which is easily defined as “good” or “evil.” The most prominent example of this new identity crisis in *The Death of Captain America* is the identity of Captain America’s murderer: S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent 13, Captain America’s ex-lover Sharon Carter is

responsible for the fatal bullets, but this fact is not revealed (to the reader or to Sharon herself) until the end of #25. Sharon Carter has been secretly brainwashed by Dr. Faustus, and she has no memory of the killing until she is triggered (by a word) to remember what she has done.⁶³ Her reaction is one of incredulous disbelief: “What did I do ...? What did I do?” (2007, 33) she asks herself as she realizes that she has become the murderous villain. A traumatic event, it begins to affect her narration on several levels, signaling a possible response of the trauma of the perpetrator.

Trauma, whether national or personal, can be presented through the formal techniques of the graphic novel by combining personal experiences with national traumatic events (Blake, 2009, 1). This is an issue that should not be overlooked when analyzing the significance of Captain America in defining national identity, for as Blake argues, national traumatic events “represent the growing fear, the helplessness, and the isolation” a nation experiences after a traumatic event (ibid.). Whereas Blake’s argument revolves around the trauma of the nuclear bomb and its representation in *Watchmen* through Dr. Manhattan, the trauma present in *The Death of...* could be argued to be the ongoing War on Terror and its impact on the popular geopolitical identity of America, resulting in a fragmented and traumatized experience that divides the nation. The Marvel *Civil War* -storyline can be interpreted as an allegorical narrative of this, and the culmination is the traumatic assassination of Steve Rogers. As Blake points out, graphic novels are particularly suitable for depicting trauma, as aspects such as “emotional impact, repetition compulsion, states of helplessness and other symptoms of trauma can be delivered through visual clues, such as color, panel size, and repetitive imagery,” which can all be used to illustrate the “impact of traumatic experience” (2009, 3).

The narrative of *The Death of...* can be analyzed as a trauma narrative, and indeed, the story contains numerous traumatic memories that intervene the present in the way of traumatic flashbacks. Most prominently, Sharon Carter experiences not only the trauma of realizing she is a murderer, but also the state of helplessness as she loses her self control in the hands of Dr. Faustus.

⁶³ Similarly, Bucky’s attack on the Red Skull in Vol. 1. (2007, 134) is stopped with a single word programmed into his mind during his time as the Winter Soldier. In Vol. 2, this power of words and the subconscious is brutally demonstrated as the brainwashed S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents turn their guns on unarmed protesters in Washington.

However, the narrative structure of *The Death of...*, both visually and textually, takes only a very limited advantage of the medium's potential of expressing trauma through the visual narrative and its potential for timelessness and fragmented narratives. While the dark gutters between the panels and the overall color scheme do express some of the darkness and despair experienced by the characters, the narrative structure does not take advantage of such elements as juxtaposition or fragmented visual narration to truly convey the sense of trauma. Instead, the focus of the trauma is 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.

Shades of Gray – Ambiguous Morals and Questionable Heroes

In *The Death of...*, the view of a nation unified against a common evil is replaced by a country that is divided and threatened by an identity crisis and marked with a growing distrust between heroes and government officials. The national trauma experienced by the US is manifested especially in characters like Sharon Carter and Bucky Barnes: isolated by their traumatic past experiences, they have consequently been isolated themselves, and disconnected from everyone else. In efforts to regain control, these two characters comply largely with the common gender stereotypes: Sharon's slow regain of control takes place within her mind, whereas physical violence plays a crucial role especially in the case of Bucky in accordance with the myth of masculine violence as empowering (as discussed in Chapter 8.), testifying to the violence myth and its use of violence as natural and acceptable in order to regain an illusion of control (Whitmer, 1997, 14). This is very apparent in the way Bucky reacts after a man with a US 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. (2007, 52)

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 he wonders whether he is lost in the violence or whether violence is precisely where he belongs (2007, 54), indicating that he at least partially feels in control of his identity and actions through violence. This view of violence as “natural” to his identity is repeated again in Vol. 3., where Bucky realizes that “death and combat are this comfortable to [him]” (2008, 37). Also, in the hopelessness after Steve’s death, he realizes that the “one thing” he can do after Steve’s death is to kill Tony Stark (2007, 56). All these examples demonstrate the way Bucky regains control of his identity through acts of extreme violence.

With Sharon Carter, the battle for control is fought within her mind, which, while not as visually dynamic, could be argued as being the harder battle. In depicting this battle, the comic book relies on the unique vehicle of captions to indicate the struggle for control.⁶⁴ 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 his equally gray views on morality. Similarly, the entire comic book’s 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 can be read as indicating the change from the old black-and-white morals to a much more ambiguous and morally unclear palette where heroes are equally ambivalent. The coloring of the captions becomes a crucial clue within the comic: in Volume 2, Sharon’s captions become black, indicating her loss of self-control in Dr.

⁶⁴ Whereas *The Death of...* 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. 39 (Vol.1, 2007), 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.

Faustus' 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.
(2007-2008, 2)

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:

[Caption]: Hey...what are you doing? Sharon, stop. What are you--
Sharon: Shut up.
(2007-2008, 42)

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 Vol. 2 she manages to silence the voice in her head and presumably regain the control of the own identity, 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.⁶⁵

The Death of Captain America reconceptualizes the dichotomy of good vs. evil by removing the barrier that traditionally has separated them. More importantly, the collapse of the perceived binary has direct effects on the way the heroes and villains are represented, producing a shift that now consists of several shades of gray instead of a moral palette of black and white, questioning the very premises of heroism. The "evil" threatening the nation is no longer a clear outside entity, but the threat is very clearly internalized: the minds of the heroes are constantly under attack, as is the nation from within. Whether under mind control like Sharon Carter or haunted by past choices like Bucky Barnes, the evil the heroes fight is increasingly located within their minds, and consequently,

⁶⁵ Somewhat similarly, in 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. 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.

becomes much harder to defeat. Betrayal becomes the greatest evil, as Dr. Faustus explains to Bucky in Vol. 2: “To be brought back to life and turned against your own people. It’s a fate worse than death...you cannot deny it.” (2007-2008, 19). Evil is not an outside entity, but a constant battle within, and the betrayal of one’s “own people” is the worst crime of all. Battle for identity and control inside one’s mind is central, and this theme is present as a variation in the representation of the classic arch-nemesis of Captain America, The Red Skull, as well. After being assassinated in a previous storyline, *Winter Soldier* (2005-2006), it is revealed that he used the Cosmic Cube to transfer his consciousness to the mind of his partner, Aleksander Lukin, where the two continue to battle over the control of his body. As the evil within cannot be fought with physical weapons, other measures of self control must be applied.

As battle for control becomes the central trope of identity construction, the relevance of reconciliation becomes crucial. Similar to the way Bucky offers to help the 1950s’ Captain America, Bucky himself has had to come to terms with his past in order to become who he is today. While his past as the Soviet assassin by the code name The Winter Soldier still haunts him, he is still able to resolve the issue and take on the mantle of Captain America. If read through Steinmetz’s Jungian argument, the assimilation of the Cold War -era persona may be read as suggesting a similar process within the popular American geopolitical identity. There are other connections worth mentioning, too: as Matthew Costello suggests, the War on Terror increasingly resembles the Cold War, and American leadership and government are continually questioned. The “new political economy” of the Marvel universe mirrors that of the United States, where 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). This distrust towards authorities escalates towards the end of narrative, too, as even governmental officials are presented as corrupted and evil.

In Vol. 3. of *The Death of...*, the comic book makes no attempt at hiding its agenda by portraying a populist presidential candidate who is no more than a puppet to The Red Skull, aiming at ruling the country and showing how “a police state is the only answer to the chaos of democracy” (2008, 6). However, instead of war, America is now attacked economically: by manipulating the Wall Street stock exchange and forcing a foreclosure of thousands of American homes, the resulting economic crisis is a crisis *within* the US, an evil that comes from the nation, not outside it, stressing the collapse between the traditional inside/outside dichotomy that has characterized the classic superhero narrative. In an economic crisis that springs from within the nation itself, the role of the superhero becomes increasingly unclear. By questioning the government and the virtue of power in general, superhero comics published in the 21st century not only question the moral actions of the government but “render problematic the very possibility of heroism in the modern world” (Costello, 2009, 200). This is indicative in the way the hero/villain binary is collapsing into itself in post-9/11 *Captain America Comics*, and instead of good and evil, there are more shades of gray than ever before, even in the visual outlook of the comic:

The books reflected a more ominous tone, a greater sense of insecurity and moral ambiguity in the wake of 9/11. -- [T]he books now took on a much darker background and less distinct contrasts. The stories also offered plots of a more insidious nature. (Costello, 2009, 213)

Similarly, the idealized myth of the American dream and national identity and its unsustainable nature is stressed in the revival of the 1950s Captain America, who represents the paranoid Cold War mentality of the past, yet is suggested into believing that he can “save” the nation – or at least the “people who deserve to be saved” (2008, 78). As Costello stresses, when depicted defending a nation whose moral core is found to be lacking, superheroes are often portrayed as morally problematic themselves and therefore unable to rescue America from itself, while simultaneously creating doubts about the “virtue of the American system” (2009, 219-221).

It is tempting to read the death of Steve Rogers as an allegory of the death of a mythicized “America,” as an end of an era in many ways. One of the basic premises of this study is, after all,

the idea that analyzing superheroes, and Captain America in particular, allows one to access the way popular American identity itself is envisioned. In this light, the death of Steve Rogers on the steps of the courthouse in New York becomes significant, as it proposes the reconstruction of the American nation as one without idealized, perfect and flawless superheroes, rejecting at least partially the American monomyth and its vision of American heroism. Instead, *The Death of...* proposes several alternatives that produce a variety of heroes and villains, often within the same character, producing a range of complex hero/villain characters who are neither black or white, but shift through various shades of morally gray zones. In *The Death of ...*, the true alliances of the heroes are constantly questioned, and no-one is to be trusted; Nick Fury remains unseen and unlocated throughout the storyline, Tony Stark is seen a traitor and responsible for the death of Steve Rogers by many of the heroes. Loyalties among the group of heroes are constantly doubted. Anyone can turn on his or her friends, and thanks to the very real possibility of brainwashing within the comic book's world, no-one is safe even within his or her own mind. The constant doubt and distrust that characterizes the comic book could, then, be read as a response to the larger American sentiments after the initial response to 9/11. Depicting a nation torn in half over the death of a national icon quite obviously has cultural and social resonance, and the resulting crisis of identity is both individual and national.

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, is dead, and his boots may well prove impossible to fill. The shades of grey that shadow the increasingly blurred hero/villain -dichotomy are most clear in the depiction of evil as internalized, 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. While Jason Dittmer saw Captain America's quest after the terrorists as representing a chance to reproduce American

identity through a stark binary of us/them immediately after 9/11 (2005, 637), this inside/outside dialectic did not carry the nationalistic response for long, and instead it soon collapsed, marking such storylines as *Enemy* (see previous chapter) a short-lived phenomenon. Instead of a national reterritorialization, the later post-9/11 superhero narratives, like *The Death of Captain America* are marked with increasing confusion of a postmodern, globalized and shifting sense of identity without a clear definition of heroes and villains.

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 superheroes like Captain America clearly imply that America is under threat, but both the enemy and the way to respond to it remain unclear and vague. 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 both the need to 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.

CONCLUSION

”Yeah, I don't do shit like this. Interviews for theses? No way.”
-Ed Brubaker, (qtd. in Gaudio, 2010)

It has been the aim of this dissertation to demonstrate the significance of the often overlooked relationship between popular geopolitics and superhero comics, and the relevance of this relationship in defining (and redefining) popular American national identity from the late 20th century to the early 21st century. Whether deconstructing entire genre traditions (and national ideologies) like *Watchmen* or rewriting established characters like *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the superhero comic holds immense potential in revealing how popular American geopolitical identities and scripts are created, and a more careful examination of these scripts reveals some of the tensions and contradictions within those scripts. Popular geopolitics, after all, is not just about dividing the world into political hierarchy of places and nations within fiction; as Simon Dalby stresses, it is also “about the performance of political acts – [and] the construction of popular identities ” (2003, 63). These popular identities of imagined nationality are formed through “communities of media recipients” (Kukkonen, 2008, 265), who consume particular national identities in a socialization process that reproduces a national and cultural identity that is particularly American. Within the superhero comics analyzed in this dissertation, the American national and cultural identity discussed has been prominently that of the white, masculine and exceedingly heterosexual. Overall it can be stated that the superhero comics mainly reproduce the popular American identity of the American monomyth, and its inability to encompass anything outside the white masculine myth, such as powerful women of ethnic minorities, demonstrates its limited usability.

In this dissertation, I have taken the initial construction of the American monomyth as defined by Lawrence & Jewett (2002), and applied it to the particular phenomenon of superhero comics within the context of popular geopolitics. I have contributed to the original theory by

developing further such concepts as American utopianism and the state of exception within the construction of the monomyth in America, and especially tied this discussion to popular geopolitics and the creation of an idealized “America” that can be derived from superhero comics. I also discovered that the American monomyth is unable to contain the active female hero, restricting female heroism only to the domain of the domestic. By adding these aspects to my analysis, I have produced a new and current analysis of the superhero as crucial to the popular American geopolitical identity, while at the same time taken the concept of the American monomyth further. Within comics scholarship, this dissertation takes on both studied works as well as newer comics, such as *Superman: Red Son* and *The Death of Captain America*, which have so far not been subjected to serious academic study. By analyzing recent works, this dissertation also gains relevance as a study that aims at discovering some of the popular geopolitical motivations behind current events through the mythicized character of the superhero.

In part one, I outlined the contextual framework of the superhero as a manifestation of a larger mythological construction, the white American monomyth, with its roots in a myriad construction of cultural references. What marks the American monomyth as particularly American is the role of the hero as an outsider to the community he protects, which he is forced to do as the government fails in its mission. The costume, the secret identity and the mission aspect all contribute to the formation of the superhero comic as a distinct genre. Against this background, I then proceeded to demonstrate the ways *Watchmen* can be read as a hypertrophic deconstruction of the superhero mythology that questions the entire paradigm of superheroes by exposing the hidden contradictions that lie beneath the popular fiction’s, and by analogy the nation’s, surface. In the second part, I examined Captain America and the construction of popular geopolitical identities and imagined communities through the consumption of superhero comics and the national ideals represented in them. Identity construction was also approached through a rewriting of Superman in *Red Son*, where a relocation of the American monomyth to a communist setting exposed the

inherently fascist potential within the superhero. Part three focused on the traditional “others” of the superhero comic: women and the villains. The portrayal of female characters in superhero comics is a highly problematic issue, as the women are usually portrayed as secondary to male characters, and often becoming evil or killed in order to serve the plot structure. The phenomenon of Women in Refrigerators, as analyzed in *Identity Crisis*, signals the ongoing tension within the gender politics of superhero comics. The villain’s role was accessed through the character of The Joker in *The Killing Joke* and *Arkham Asylum*. The Joker’s fluid identity and grotesque portrayal of queer bodies acts as a threat to the hero’s stable identity, both textually in his denial of linear histories and sexually in his fluid sexuality and identity. The representation of women and (evil) queer characters comments on the gender politics of the superhero: the monomythical hero’s renouncement of sexuality over redemption, as Lawrence and Jewett remind us, leave him (and her) outside so-called “normal” sexual identities (2002, 320). This idea clashes with the hero’s costume, which visualizes the superhero as an extremely gendered being, often up to the point of absurdity. The paradoxes contained in the superhero are telltale signs of similar tensions within popular American geopolitics, and through them, a more integrated and multifaceted geopolitical narrative may in time be constructed.

In part four, the superhero’s inherent inadequacy for democracy was further analyzed through *Miracleman* and *Watchmen*, and the realities of monomythic superhero politics (and by analogy, American politics) were exposed. The superhero, though an avid avenger for democracy, ultimately undermines the very democratic principles he swears to protect through his own use of undemocratic and often slightly fascist and violent means. The superhero represents an Agambean *state of exception* where legislative and executive powers are separated, as the latter lacks the sanction of the former. The superhero takes on the executive force of the law, removing the power of the punishment from the state. Relating to the superhero’s inability for democracy, the problematic relationship of vigilante violence and vigilante justice was analyzed and dealt with in

detail through *Batman: Dark Knight Returns*, which effectively used organic metaphors and naturalized violence to justify the violent behavior of Batman. The final part focused on the post-9/11 superhero comic and the relevance of the superhero after such a collective trauma. *The Death of Captain America* was identified as a culmination point, and suggested that a time without superheroes may be what popular American geopolitics is facing. The hero/villain dichotomy that dissolves in the post 9/11 superhero comics has its origins already in the revisionist comics of the 1980s. As Coogan writes, this is apparent in the way the “mission convention” of the heroes began to falter, as their selflessness became increasingly problematic (2002, 420). Works like *Watchmen* or *The Dark Knight Returns* portrayed these superheroes whose heroism was no longer unequivocally “good,” but instead presented the inherent ambiguities within the characters. However, the final push into the morally gray zone, in many ways, came with 9/11 and its aftermath, as the superheroes’ relevance to the world was put to doubt, and the good/evil binary began to erode in the Marvel Universe of *The Death of Captain America*. However, to claim America as a nation without heroes does come with a price: as Iain Thomson reminds us, in a society without heroes but only enemies, we begin to define ourselves negatively, and so become “more empty, hostile, and closed-in” upon ourselves (2005, 118). Despite Thomson’s rather grim view, as well as my own prophecy of the annihilation of the national icon of America, there may still be hope that heroes live on. After all, Steve Rogers has returned from the dead, although he has yet to take on the shield and title of Captain America.

It must be noted that despite the fact that half of the key texts were written by non-American authors (Alan Moore and Mark Millar, to be precise), the impact and relevance these texts hold in defining (and more importantly, critiquing) popular American geopolitical identities is not diminished. After all, all of the key texts discussed were published by American publishers primarily for American audiences. As Alan Moore, for example, has on several occasions testified, 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” instead of his peers (Pappu, 2000). An outsider with an intrinsic knowledge of the nation’s popular mythology, Moore and Millar (who is of Scottish descent) are able to approach American mythology and identity with a more critical stance, and also open up their own work for criticism.⁶⁶ (In a similar vein, it can be argued that studying a national identity and culture can sometimes gain from the relative position of an outsider, as is the case with this dissertation.) This becomes increasingly relevant when contrasting these authors to their American counterparts. Representing the American author, Captain America writer Ed Brubaker stated a complete refusal to engage in any critical dialogue regarding his work. Stating his limited time for “shit like this” (aka academic dissertations), his aggressive denial of any critical analysis of his work may actually function to reveal a deeper tension within American culture itself – a reluctance to be held accountable. After all, the vigilante politics of America are based on a premise of unaccountability, of being outside and above the law, not answering to anyone. This became apparent as Brubaker refused any comment on the defense/offense problematic of Captain America’s gun (as discussed in chapter 9). An email conversation with Alex Ross and Ed Brubaker collaborator, comics writer and illustrator Stefano Gaudiano, revealed that the authors 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 subsequently denied any ideological or political agendas. While the relevance of authorial intention within any form of literature must be assessed with caution (if it is to be assessed at all), this still reveals a deep lack of awareness, as claiming any aesthetic choice as void of ideological meaning is both ignorant and naïve. The superhero may be used to question America, but the superhero himself often eludes this questioning, which is precisely what this thesis has aimed at questioning.

The superhero, especially Captain America, still holds a central role in popular American geopolitics. As Edwardson writes, comic book superheroes like Captain America or his Canadian

⁶⁶ Alan Moore, for example, engaged in over two hours’ of delighted discussion on his work at a conference focused on his work at the University of Northampton, UK in May, 2010.

counterpart, Captain Canuck, still present “popular cultural characteristics, myths, symbols, and stereotypes” that function to legitimize and reinforce the conception of a national identity (2003, 184). The superhero’s currency today has not diminished despite the questioning of the superhero tradition after 9/11. As the Captain America “Tea Party Incident” in February, 2010 made clear, superhero comics are still very closely tied to the national politics and identity issue. The “Tea Party Incident,” of course, refers to #602 of *Captain America Comics*, which depicted what was clearly identifiable as a Tea Party rally (the sign “Tea Bag The Libs Before They Tea Bag YOU!” underlined it, 2010, 19) in a negative light. The protesters were portrayed as racist and violent political extremists, and Marvel was promptly accused of “making patriotic Americans into [their] newest super villains.”⁶⁷ While not taking a stand on the Tea Party politics themselves, it is fascinating to notice the amount of uproar that this single page managed to create, as the issue was picked up by everyone from the New York Times to bloggers and columnists nationwide. Superheroes have been able to question America’s role and its politics since their inception, and the uproar created by their political standpoints tells of their high geopolitical relevance.

What has become obviously clear during this research is that the superhero narrative, as well as popular American geopolitical identity, is one of deep division: the democratic principles applauded within the national rhetoric are undermined with a clearly undemocratic hero tradition, which is embraced by the popular geopolitical scripts. The geopolitical narratives and scripts are produced and consumed through popular culture; they create a generalized mass identity, a mythicized construction of the American self where American monomyth is reproduced repeatedly. As Karin Kukkonen has argued, this kind of reconstruction, this interaction between text and context offers a stabilization of the narrative and the characters, but also allows for a critical

⁶⁷ Warner Todd Huston. “Marvel Comics: Captain America Says Tea Parties Are Dangerous and Racist”. Publiusforum.com, 8.2.2010.

reflection and problematization (2008, 266). As often is the case, a reproduction that challenges the genre expectations or conventions often results in strengthening these conventions instead of producing a permanent change within the genre. Still, it is vital to question, problematize and challenge the established modes and conventions of popular fiction, as they have the potential to subvert tradition and reveal the implicit ideologies hidden beneath, as is the case especially with superheroes and their problematic relationship with the democratic principles they claim to uphold, yet simultaneously deny.

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Appendix:



Figure 1. The controlled panel division of *Watchmen* is carefully constructed to create symmetrical spreads and powerful splash pages. (V; 14-15). © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.



THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH

Figure 2. The juxtaposition of text and images from separate storylines creates multilayered narrative in *Watchmen*. (III; 1). © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.

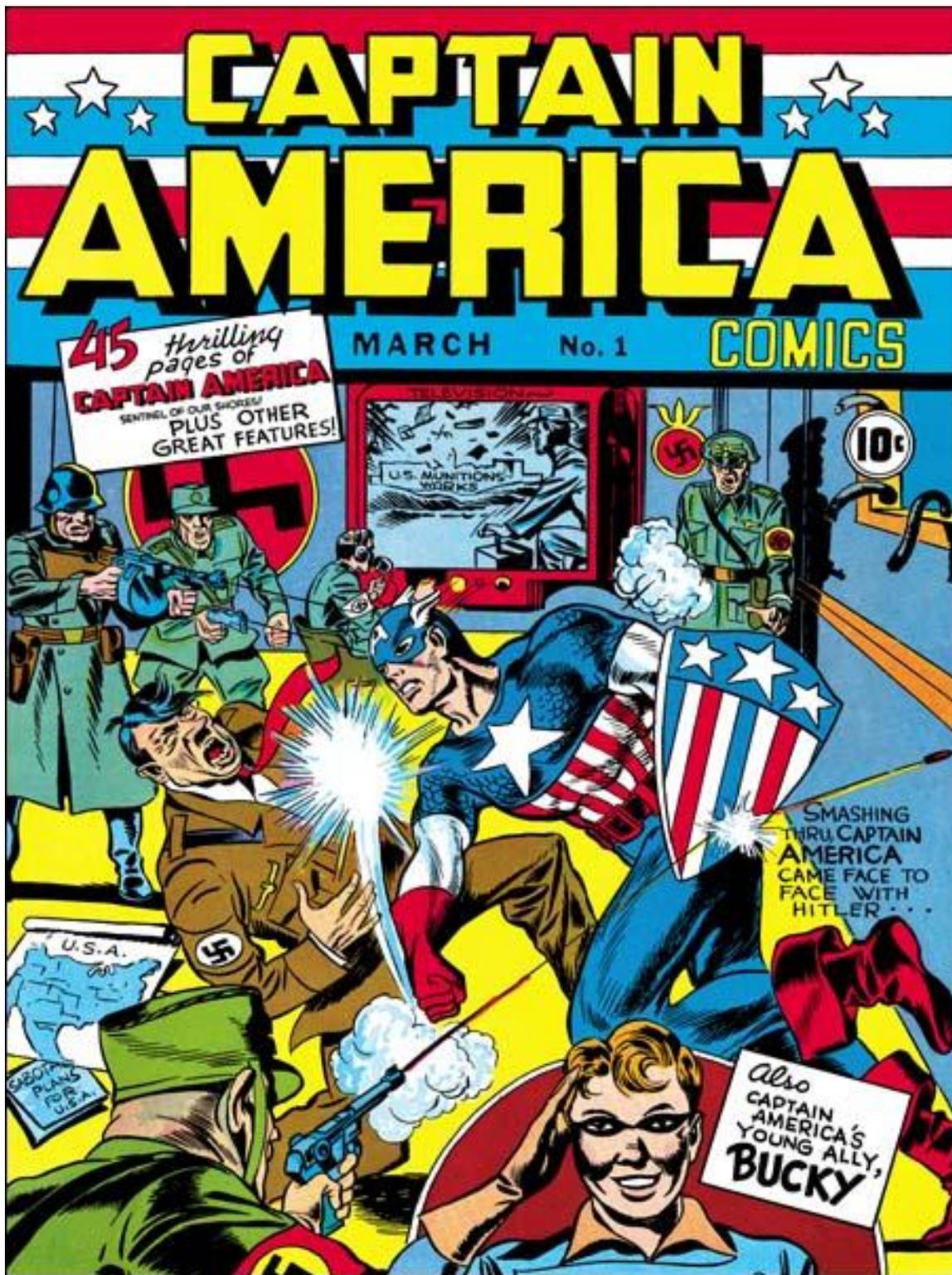


Figure 3. The cover of *Captain America Comics* #1 (1941). © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved

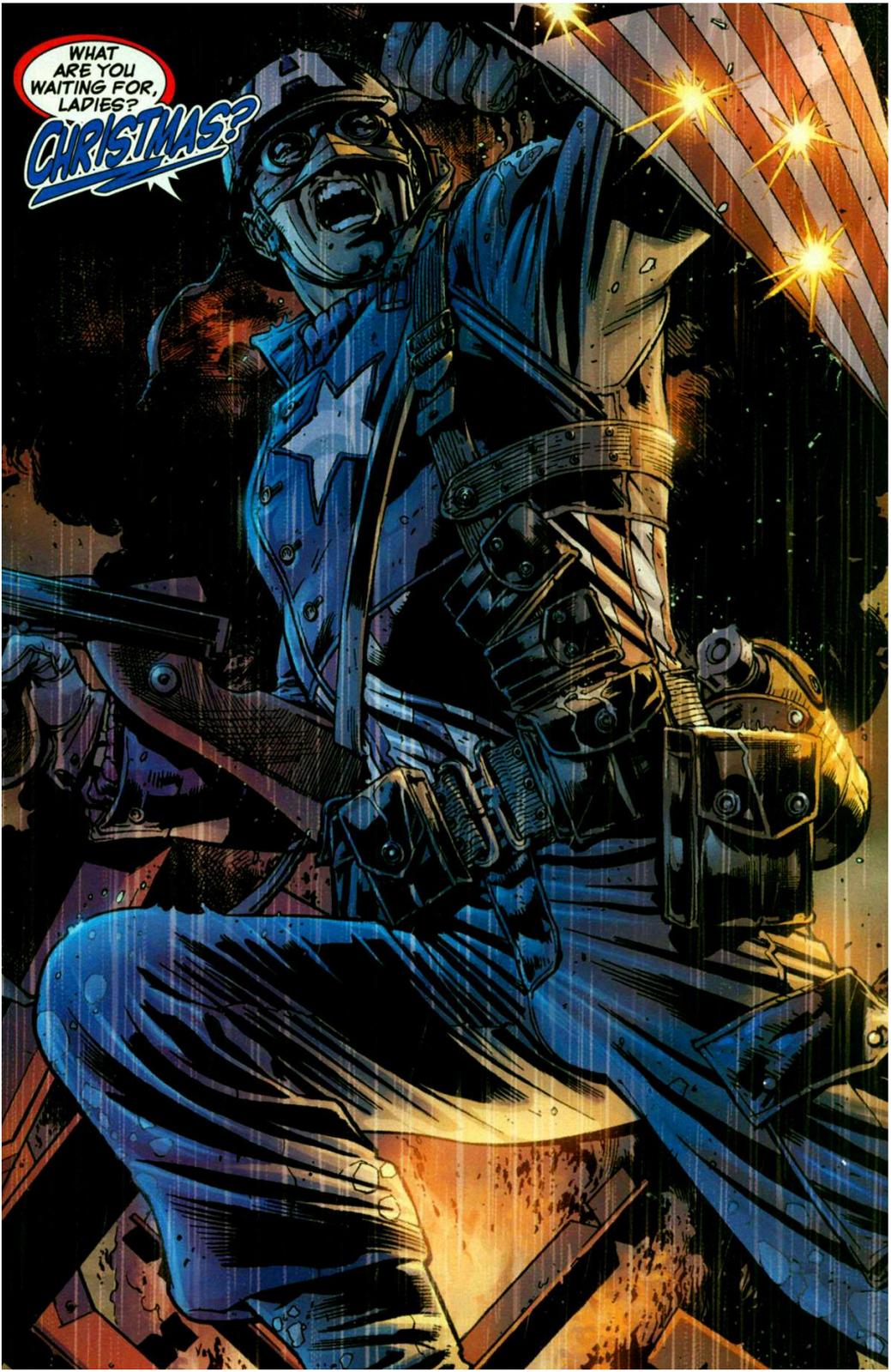


Figure 4. *The Ultimates* reproduction of Captain America as an aggressive war hero. (2002, 15). © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.



Figure 5. The iconic vision of Superman re-envisioned as a communist idealist in *Superman: Red Son* (2003, 55). © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.



Figure 8. The Nietzschean allusion in *Miracleman* forces the reader to stare into the abyss of the superman (1985, 11).

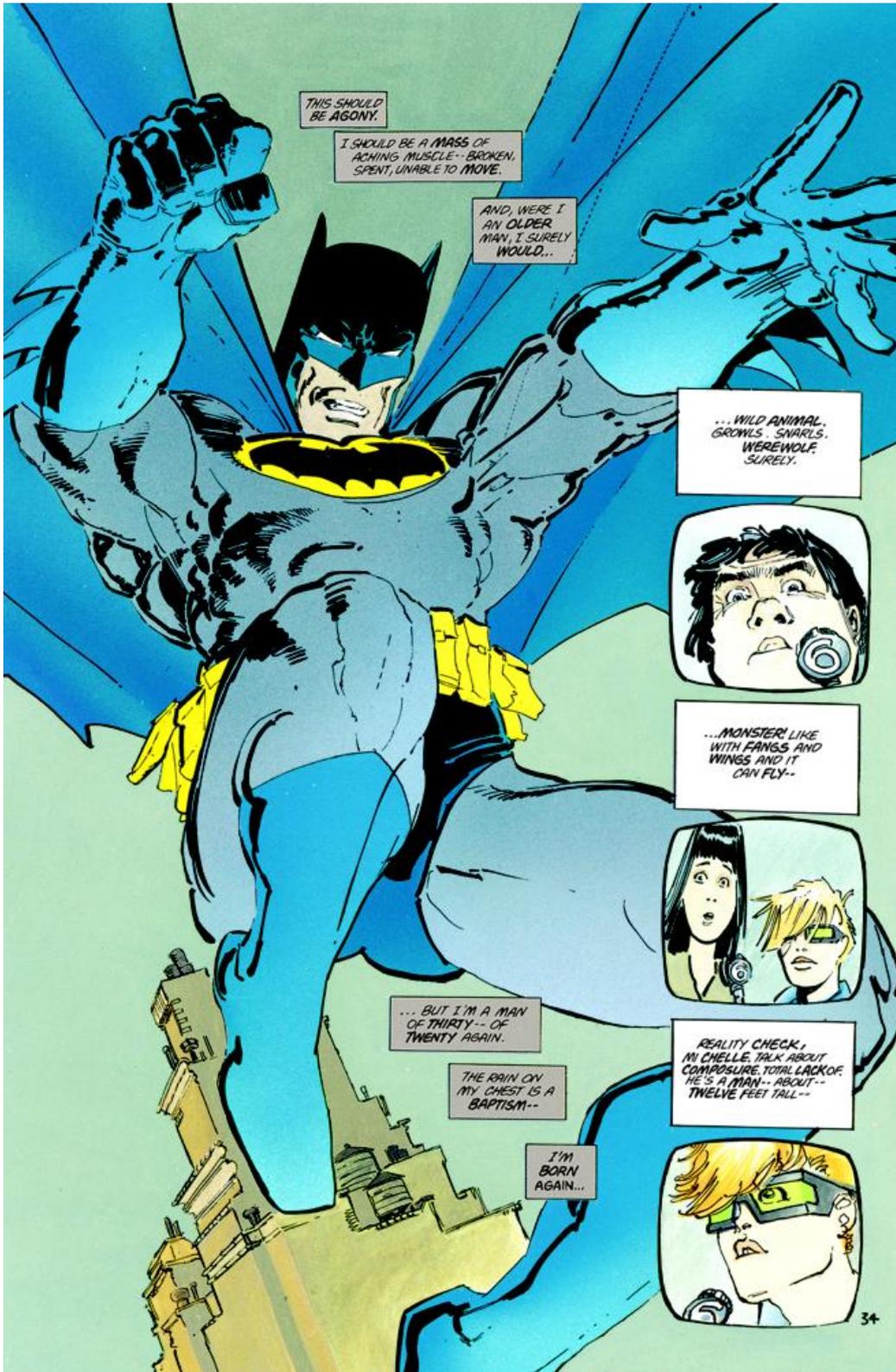


Figure 9. Frank Miller's Batman re-envisioning him as a beast-like, muscular and aggressive (1986, 34). © DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.



Figure 10. Spider-Man at the ruins of the Twin Towers. (*The Amazing Spider-Man Vol 2. #36*, 2001). © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved

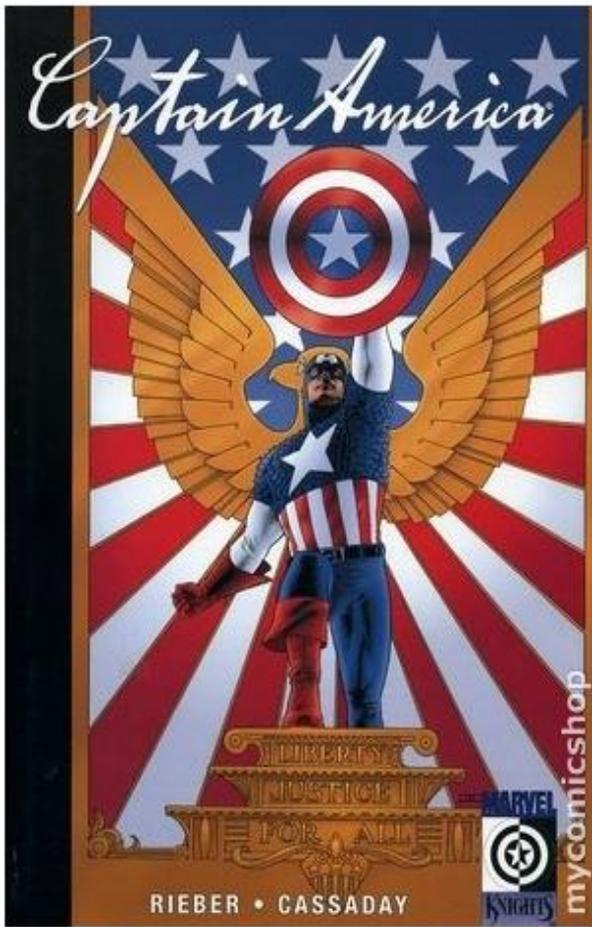


Figure 11. The shift from defense to offense is clear in the addition of a gun to Bucky Barnes' costume as the new Captain America (right). © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved