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Captain America: The Epitome of American Values and Identity

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Captain America: The Epitome of American Values and Identity

Written by William Peitz



<http://www.marveldirectory.com/individuals/c/captainamerica.htm>

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Introduction

The United States of America is falling apart. Washington D.C. has been decimated. The United States government is in turmoil. States have seceded from the union and have formed coalitions or alliances. This is the backstory behind *Ultimate Comics The Ultimates #16 United We Stand*. On the brink of destruction, America needed a symbol, a uniting factor. America needed a hero to rise to the challenge and lead the people to bring this great nation back to what it once was. Who was to heed the call of the American people none other than Captain America?

America is deep in crisis—we're divided, mistrustful, nervous, and scared. America has asked me to lead them. I ask America to look within themselves. My grandmother always said, ask not for challenges equal to our strengths, but for strength equal to our challenges...I look at America right now, broken, in pieces, and I remember—I once risked everything to answer a call. I realize now I can do more to serve my country. I know I can do more to live up to my potential. This crisis calls us all to do our best. To rebuild our fragile unity. To find strength equal to our challenges. I have decided to answer the call of the people. I accept. I, Steve Rogers—Captain America—Do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of the President of the United States. And will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.¹

Captain America has taken the greatest office an American can hold, the Office of the President of the United States. It will be his duty now to not just protect the American people, but lead them and guide them. He is the face of all that America stands for from his star spangled suit to his values and heroism. This paper is a study of how Captain America represents American values and epitomizes the American identity. He is a hero solely created to uphold the patriotic fervor that represents America for what it is.

¹ Humphries, Sam (w), Luke Ross (a). "United We Stand." *Ultimate Comics The Ultimates#16* (November 2012). Marvel Comics.

History of Comic Books

To understand the creation of Captain America, one needs to have background information of the comic book industry as a whole, and also have an understanding of how superhero comics in particular came to be. If there weren't any comics to begin with, then Captain America would never have existed. So it is important to gain an understanding of the history of comics. Browsing through bookstores, one sees texts after texts of sophisticated studies of cinema, television, books, and other popular media. However, there are hardly any comparable studies on comic books. Much of this can be attested to the readership of comics. Mostly children, young adults, and in non-industrialized nations, the poor and sub-literate, read comics which marginalizes this group even more so than the groups that partake in cinema, television, and popular media. The association of comics with children, young adults, and the not-so-literate is evident in the attacks on comics by the media. One of the most famous attacks on comics is Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, published in 1954. Wertham accused comics as depicting too much sex, violence and anarchy. Comics were considered sensational, yet trivial pieces of work that would lead to juvenile delinquency.²

Alongside Wertham's book and the crusade against comics, came a campaign that included parents' groups, religious groups, and school organizations. These attacks on comics went so far as to initiate a public forum in Congress. In 1954, senate hearings led by Senator Kefauver of Tennessee, attempted to link comics and juvenile delinquency. The senate hearings also became a part of a larger investigation into crime and adolescence that had lasted a decade. Despite all the desperate attempts to rid the country of comic books, the Senate Hearings did not result in the creation of any laws to ban comics. However, the pressure forced many publishers

²Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 2.

out of business. Even more so, the hearings set off a large comics scare that caused the self-censoring attempts of the comic book industry, which proved fatal to the medium's growth and development.

Despite the attitude towards comics and the way the industry was moving, a backlash against all those who opposed the medium arrived in the counterculture of the 1960s. These Underground comix, as they became known, deliberately "aimed to offend the sensibilities of bourgeois America."³ The Underground comix opposed all that was valued by middle class society. The artists designing these comics were bound by no "Code" derived from the mainstream comic publishers, thereby creating an outlet for unrestricted artistic freedom. However, much like the counterculture of the 1960s, Underground comix only lasted the decade, but left a legacy that became a crucial phase in the development of comic books as a narrative form and a means of artistic expression.⁴

By the 1970s, comics saw a bit of ease when it came to public scrutiny when their popularity extended as their characters transformed into branded merchandise ranging from action figures, posters, mugs, board games, university mascots, etc. But it wasn't until the 1980s, more so in the latter half of the decade, did theorists and experts on popular culture begin to re-examine traditional thought on the medium.

This involved an active reassessment of the basis for the derision of popular culture in order to reveal the relativity or arbitrariness of the standards on which earlier conclusions on media influence were grounded. More current studies re-evaluate the terms, categories, presuppositions and methodologies with which mass media have customarily been thought of and call attention to the cultural hierarchies that attend the social construction of subjectivity and of standards.⁵

³Bongco, Mila, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, 6.

⁴ Ibid. 6.

⁵ Ibid. 9-10.

Since the late 80's, comic book popularity has increased exponentially, and in today's market, the subject material of comics have been the basis of some of the most lucrative movie franchises in history. Children are wearing superhero costumes on Halloween or buying action figures to imagine a world of heroes and villains where the heroes always win. Today, in a post-9/11 world, comic books often take serious matters and place them in their narratives to help depict a picture of current America. Examples of this will be shown later in the examination of Captain America in a post-9/11 world.

Defining the Superhero: A History of Superhero Comics

An overall look at the history of comics has been laid out, but nowhere has the term 'superhero' been brought up. Superhero comics deserve it's own part in the history of comics especially since most comics nowadays are only about superheroes, and Captain America, the focus of this paper, is in fact a superhero. First of all, what is a superhero? Asking an everyday person, they might tell you a superhero is someone with extraordinary abilities and powers. Superheroes could be characterized as having super strength, the ability to fly, or magical capabilities that utilizes the elements. Most would probably say superheroes are usually white men, built, and attractive. Many also wear costumes or masks that hide their true identity while living a double life. All of these descriptions give a stereotypical depiction of what a superhero is. However, Richard Reynolds gives a different definition of what a superhero is in his *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*,

Superheroes are by and large not upholders of the letter of the law; they are not law enforcement agents employed by the state. The set of values they traditionally defend is summed up by the Superman tag of 'Truth, Justice and the American Way'. Sometimes the last term has been interpreted in a narrowly nationalistic sense...but far more often the third term has stood for the ideals enshrined in the US Constitution. Superheroes have

been better Americans – as the founding fathers would have understood the term – than most of America’s modern political leaders.⁶

Captain America surely fits the stereotypical descriptions of what a superhero is, but Reynolds’ portrayal really lays out what Captain America stands for: the “ideals enshrined in the US Constitution.”

Now that an understanding of what a superhero is has been established, the arrival of superheroes in the comic book narrative can be examined. The first ever publication to label itself as a comic book actually came out in 1917 from the Saalfield Publishing Company, which consisted of collected reprints from newspaper comic strips. It wasn’t until 1933 that the format in which we know comic books to be in today arrived. But the superhero genre all started in June 1938 with the first issue of *Action Comics* featuring Superman’s first ever appearance. The new arrival instantly became a huge hit that quickly led to the arrival of many other superheroes such as Batman, Wonder Woman and the Sub Mariner. The Golden Age of comic books had begun. Superhero comic books became a unique visual phenomenon. Children couldn’t resist the 64-page colorful covers that featured superheroic characters in action-packed sequences saving the world from evil enemies. The first superheroes can be described by those stereotypical descriptions mentioned earlier. “These were mostly muscular men in brightly coloured tights shown performing remarkable feats of strength and defeating strange villains one after another. The heroes also had all the traits a child could dream of: speed, strength, power, and knowledge.”⁷

The United States’ entry into World War II gave superheroes a whole new set of enemies, and initiated a big push for patriotic superheroes, and “supplied a complete working rationale

⁶ Reynolds, Richard, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1992), 74.

⁷Bongco, Mila, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, 86 – 95.

and world view for a super-patriotic superhero such as Captain America”⁸ who epitomized American values during World War II (Captain America first appeared in *Captain America #1* 1941). The World War II superheroes became great employers of American propaganda and slogans depicting great men defeating Nazis. The cover of *Captain America #1* shows a daring Captain America bursting into a room full of Nazis, and punching Adolf Hitler across the face.⁹ The war also brought a sense of realism into comics where historical events were being adapted to fit the narrative of comic storylines. Fantasy and science fiction still dominated the essence of the comic book though, with super humans fighting villains with their magical capabilities, or scientific gadgets that aided their endeavor. *Wonder Woman* broke the gender barrier in the summer of 1942, published by DC comics, while Marvel quickly followed with *Miss Fury*.¹⁰

After the war, superhero comics quickly died out due to the loss of servicemen readership, and Nazi/Japanese enemies. The so-called Golden Age of Comics had ended where the bulk of superheroes had faded out. Only Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman had no break in publication through the 1950s despite growing interest shifting away from superheroes and leaning more towards crime, western, and horror comics. This shift to different genres in comic books, more specifically the horror genre, had inadvertently been the catalyst to the censorious publication *Seduction of the Innocent* by Frederic Wertham and the 1954 Congressional hearings on juvenile delinquency in comics. As stated earlier, the hearings had no legal ramifications on comics, but the pressure forced many publications to close down. In response to the public scrutiny, both Detective Comics (DC) and Marvel Comics decided to expand their small list of superheroes. By 1960, the Justice League of America, comprised of

⁸ Reynolds, Richard, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, 8.

⁹ Herron, Ed (w) and Jack Kirby (w, p), Liederman, Al (i). *Captain America Comics #1* (March 1941). Captain America Comics. Digital. <https://marvel.com/digitalcomics/view.htm?iid=1652>

¹⁰ Bongco, Mila, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, 97.

Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash (1956), Green Lantern (1959) and Supergirl (1959) marked the re-emergence of DC superheroes while under the leadership of Stan Lee, Marvel Comics re-entered the superhero market with *The Fantastic Four* (1961), *Spider-Man* (1963) and the X-Men (1964). *The Mighty Thor* introduced Norse Gods, and the horror genre was embedded to the superhero format in *The Incredible Hulk*. Golden Age superheroes such as Captain America and the Sub Mariner were also brought back out of retirement. This new wave of superheroes marked the beginning of the Silver Age of Comics.¹¹

Marvel Comics dominated the scene in the 1960s and 1970s, but DC remained the leading publisher of superhero comics in terms of sales, mostly accredited to the large fan following of the 1960s Batman television series. By the 1966 premier, America went “bat-crazy,” and Batman sales reached an impressive circulation of nine hundred thousand copies, the largest circulation of any superhero since the 1950s. Despite DC leading in comic book sales, both DC and Marvel rode the wave of new superhero popularity. However, by the 1980s, “the Marvel phenomenon had gone stale,”¹² while DC asserted itself as the leading comic book publisher by launching its new line of comics, DC Vertigo, a line meant for the adult readership. The Comics Code had become a spent force, allowing both publishers to begin to advertise many of their comics as “Suggested for Mature Readers” with comic books dealing with sexuality and violence. Comics such as *Hellblazer*, *Watchmen*, *Sandman*, *Moonshadow*, *Shadows Fall*, and many others became linked with fantasy and horror to create a new superhero genre. Despite the ups and downs of the comic book industry, Batman and Superman remain among the most popular superheroes to date with the longest running publications. “Although almost all of the

¹¹ Reynolds, Richard, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, 8-9.

¹² Reynolds, Richard, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, 9.

original superhero concepts were developed between 1938 and 1943, the superheroes have definitely grown up, and so have the genre and its readers.”¹³

It was important to understand the history of not just comic books, but also superhero comics as well before the focus shifted towards Captain America. Comics were not always a beloved medium, so it's very interesting to see their ups and downs in its history. Of all the superheroes that are out there today, of the ones that have survived the 1950s outcry against comics, only a few stand out among the rest. Captain America is one of them and it is of no surprise that many love him. He stands for freedom, justice, and the American way. He screams star spangled banner. He is the American identity. Through the eyes of Captain America, this paper will seek to portray him as the epitome of American values and identity from his incarnation to a post-911 world in which we live in today.

Popular Culture, Hegemony, and Captain America

Popular geopolitics is the key to understanding both national identities and global orders. The world is divided up into discrete states that are either independent, sovereign, equal, or occupied by another discrete culture or nation. This concept of the division of international political systems is largely unchallenged in popular discourse. In fact, any challenge to this idea is seen as a challenge to a moral geography of extreme importance. In a victory speech after the First Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush did not justify the reasons behind going to war against Iraq. Instead he just assumed that the American people would realize that a war against a nation, which had intended to abolish another nation, was necessary to cement and reaffirm the principle of nationhood. Within states there is always an ongoing process of creating and

¹³Bongco, Mila, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, 100.

maintaining territorial practices and ideologies. One of these practices is the production and consumption of popular culture. Through popular culture, people come to an understanding of their position both within a larger collective identity and within an even larger broader geopolitical narrative.¹⁴

Captain America is a prime example of popular culture's role in this process. Jason Dittmer, expert on geopolitics and popular culture says,

Captain America's ability to connect to the political projects of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy with the scale of the individual, or the body...[He] literally embod[ies] American identity, presenting for readers a hero both of, and for, the nation. Younger readers may even fantasize about being Captain America, connecting themselves to the nation in their imaginations. His characterization as an explicitly American superhero establishes him as both a representative of the idealized American nation and as the defender of the American status quo.¹⁵

Captain America among other territorial symbols from popular culture contributes to structures of expectations that influence how people from a particular region interpret new information or situation. Therefore, geopolitical events are seen through the lens of structures of expectations, and so, common structures promotes common geopolitical scripts that attempt to create order and understanding through the complexity of it all. Although scripts can be seen through many different sources, popular culture certainly has significant input.¹⁶

To further understand popular culture's importance to the construction of national and global geopolitical scripts, one needs to grasp Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. By hegemony, Gramsci meant the "permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations...[It] is an 'organizing principle' that is diffused by the process of socialization into

¹⁴ Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 626, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3693960>.

¹⁵Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire," 627.

¹⁶Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire," 627.

every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the population it becomes part of what is generally called 'common sense' so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling elite comes to appear as the natural order of things.”¹⁷

Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which is the basis of strong national government, is predicated on consensus, which Gramsci perceives to be the last resort of weak governments. Gramsci originally wrote his ideas during the time of Marxist revolution, but his ideas still resonate strongly with capitalist formulations of nationhood as well. Joanne Sharp, professor of geography at the University of Glasgow, uses Gramsci's concept of hegemony and inserts a space for popular culture in the literature of nationalism and identity:

Hegemony is constructed not only through political ideologies but also, more immediately, through detailed scripting of some of the most ordinary and mundane aspects of everyday life. Gramsci's concept of hegemony posits a significant place for popular culture in any attempt to understand the workings of society because of the everydayness and apparently nonconflictual nature of such productions. Any political analysis of the operation of dominance must take full account of the role of institutions of popular culture in the complex milieu that ensures the reproduction of cultural (and thus political) norms.¹⁸

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is not static, but instead, “a process of continuous creation, which given its massive scale, is bound to be uneven in the degree of legitimacy it commands and to leave some room for antagonistic cultural expressions to develop.”¹⁹ Therefore, hegemonic constructions are in continuous need of buttressing by active agents, which in this case, happens to be popular culture.

Traditionally, comic books are often equated with children's entertainment, as well as negative influences on children's development as seen famously in Wertham's *Seduction of the*

¹⁷Barry Burke, “Antonio Gramsci, schooling and education,” *the encyclopedia of informal education*, 1999, 2005, <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-gram.htm>.

¹⁸ Joanne Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 31.

¹⁹ Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 174, <http://www.ucpress.edu/op.php?isbn=9780520050570>.

Innocent. Despite the negative connotations that comic books bring about, their producers (specifically the producers of Captain America) view their products as more than just lowbrow entertainment. They see their work as examples of education and socialization. In an interview on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* in 2002, Captain America editor, Axel Alonso, discussed this view among his production staff, "What I'd say is our responsibility as writers, artists, editors and creators is to create narratives that have a point, that entertain and seek to do something more, perhaps educate on some level."²⁰ In this case, the production staff of Captain America fit Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals. These men (traditionally, the medium of comic books have been dominated by males) "work consciously for their own social class, convinced that it has a historical 'right' at a given moment."²¹ Gramsci was originally talking about economic classes, but social classes as seen here can also refer to nationality, as both are categories of belonging that require active construction and support. Thus, through the medium of comic books, these men "help create structures of expectations that consequently influence the way readers view the world and locate their own place as Americans within it."²²

Deconstructing Captain America

It may seem obvious that Captain America is a symbol for America, but it is this obviousness that makes him so appealing and useful for study. He provides an opportunity to analyze the changing discourse and symbolic shape of America as the region is continually (re)constructed. "If identity is a performance, then American identity has been performed

²⁰ National Public Radio, "Captain America and Tuskegee," Interview with Lynn Neary on *All Things Considered*, 19 November 2002. Axel Alonso discusses the release of a new miniseries telling the real story behind the creation of Captain America, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=848542>.

²¹ Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire," 627.

²² *Ibid.* 627.

monthly since 1964 in Captain America comic books.”²³ Captain America was first published in March 1941. Although the United States had not entered World War II just yet, they were just as affected by the war as much as everyone else. So in 1940, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon created Captain America for Timely Comics (later to become Marvel Comics) to tap into the patriotic consciousness of the American soldiers about to enter the war. He epitomized American values and helped construct an identity for America and helped establish a geopolitical script:

It is the spring of 1941. “The ruthless war-mongers of Europe” have cast their sights on “a peace-loving America,” and the “youth of our country” heed “the call to arm for defense.” As foreign agents carry out “a wave of sabotage and treason” against the United States, the president authorizes a top-secret defense plan. A patriotic young American named Steve Rogers, too sickly and weak to qualify for standard enlistment, volunteers for a dangerous scientific experiment conducted by the nation’s top scientist, Professor Reinstein. Injected with a strange, seething liquid, Rogers undergoes a startling transformation. Growing in height and mass, Roger’s muscles expand and tighten to the peak of human perfection. No longer a frail patriot, he now has a massive physique, a proud new name, and bold mission. The nation’s newest “super-soldier,” Captain America, is born.²⁴

Even in the first issue, Captain America is participating in the construction of a geopolitical script through its description of the United States’ role in the world. The reader is presented with an outline of global order with “war-mongering” Europe and “peace-loving” America.

Captain America clearly can be identified as a territorial symbol of America solely by his red, white, and blue star-spangled uniform. He is part of what is known as the ‘cult of the flag.’ Villains often mock Captain America for his uniform, which is in fact a “vaguely ridiculous display of stars and stripes completed by a pirate’s gloves and boots, and inexplicable, small wings on his head that resemble those on the ankles of the Roman god Mercury.”²⁵ An example of this is shown in the film, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, where the Red Skull is fighting Captain America aboard an aircraft destined to drop bombs on American cities. The Red Skull

²³Ibid. 629.

²⁴ Herron, Ed (w) and Jack Kirby (w, p), Liederman, Al (i). Captain America Comics #1 (March 1941).

²⁵Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire,” 629.

says, “You wear a flag on your chest and think you fight a battle of nations. I’ve seen the future Captain. There are no flags.”²⁶ Unfortunately for the Red Skull, those were one of his last words before the Captain defeated him. However, Captain America’s friends would never mock his outfit or think it’s odd because to them it represents what some would call ‘an unwaved flag.’ Stan Lee, comic book icon and former writer for Captain America, argues that “Captain America represents the best aspects of America: courage and honesty...A product of his times, however, Captain America’s image and origin mirror the American identity/dream of 1941. Blonde-haired, blue eyed Steve Rogers (with his almost obsessively Anglo-American name) overcomes his own physical weakness to become a proud soldier for his country.”²⁷

Although Captain America was created with the “super-soldier serum,” which is responsible for his physique and strength, he is unique among the world of superheroes. Whereas many superheroes fly and smash enemies with ease, Captain America’s real abilities lie with his athleticism and leadership skills. The drugs administered by the United States government may have given the Captain an advantaged start, but his success is certainly attributed to his continued hard work. In fact, a 1990s storyline featured Captain America losing his super-soldier serum because it was overloading his body. It was noted in the editor’s column that the creative team took an initiative to remove the super-soldier serum from Captain America because of the association of the American ideal being hooked on a performance-enhancing drugs.²⁸

Captain America also contributes to the American geopolitical narrative by being ultimately defensive in nature. There is a conceit in the American geopolitical narrative that America acts only in the name of defense and security rather than in the name of offense or empire. In *Captain America #109 The Origin of Captain America*, Steve Rogers is portrayed as a

²⁶*Captain America: The First Avenger*, film, directed by Joe Johnston (2011; Paramount Pictures, 2011.), DVD.

²⁷Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire,” personal correspondence between Jason Dittmer and Stan Lee, 629.

²⁸Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire,” 630.

reluctant warrior, not a reluctant patriot: “I hate war – and senseless bloodshed – but I can’t stay behind – while others do the fighting! There must be something I can do – someplace for me!”²⁹ It was after this plea that Rogers was granted access to the “super-soldier serum” which enhanced his physique and strength. However, instead of handing the Captain an offensive weapon like a sword or a hammer, he was given a shield, indicative of his association with the American geopolitical script. His shield is just as star-spangled as his outfit, and although at first glance may seem to be a weak weapon, Captain America has become quite good at throwing his shield as an offensive weapon, which always seems to come back to him after being thrown. He embodies defense rather than offense, which is important to the narrative of America.³⁰

The sense of being a part of something extraordinary such as the American nation is inherent in the storylines of Captain America. The Captain is always willing to die for his country, and this “reinforces the centrality of the nation in the readership of the comic book...Captain America’s willingness to die for his country illustrates the essential centrality of the nation to him and, by extension, to every American reading the comic book”³¹ This makes the symbol of Captain America much stronger than other traditional symbols of America, such as the bald eagle or the American flag because Captain America can both embody and narrate America in ways that the bald eagle, the American flag, or other American symbols cannot. Captain America adds a personal connection those other symbols cannot. “Captain America serves as a cultural product that vaguely and invisibly connects the reader through the body of the hero, to the scale of the nation.”³²

²⁹Kirby, Jack (p) and Syd Shores (i), *Captain America* #109 (January 1969), Marvel Comics Group, Digital, <https://marvel.com/digitalcomics/view.htm?iid=4236>.

³⁰Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire,” 630.

³¹Ibid. 630.

³²Ibid. 630.

The Patriotism Controversy

In 1969, a letter written by Albert Rodriguez appeared in an issue of *Captain America* that described the hero as a warmonger, and criticized the editors for giving the character speech consistent with a “defender of the Establishment.” Four issues later, three of the four published letters in *Captain America* #114 attacked Mr. Rodriguez for his letter. One of the submitters, Kenneth Burke, claimed that the letter made his blood boil while another submitter, Rick Ellrod, said it shook him to the core. Mr. Rodriguez’s letter had sparked a six-year argument that soon became the “patriotism controversy.” The “Let’s Rap With Cap” letters column contained more than sixty letters over the course of eighty issues including submissions by military personnel, politicians, social scientists, future writers and editors of Marvel Comics, as well as comic readers from all walks of life. The letters covered topics ranging from American military presence in Vietnam, McCarthyism, Watergate, and other controversial political issues. The controversy became “centered on how a character designed to represent America should react to the changing cultural climate of the 1960s and 1970s.”³³ Over the course of the controversy, the writers of *Captain America* comics battled over their own views of how Captain America should behave. “Each revealed personal views on what it meant to be an American during one of the more contentious periods of American history.”³⁴

During this period in American history, America was entangled in a very controversial military conflict in Vietnam among other political issues. The mood of the citizen’s views of the government and American icons were usually fragmented and diverse. The letters published in *Captain America* comics at this time posed strong arguments about the definition of American

³³ J. Richard Stevens, “‘Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 607.
<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

³⁴ Ibid. 607

patriotism. The comic book “provided a structure and forum to discuss their views of American identity and politics during a time when such forums were not readily available.”³⁵

Often during times of intense social discord, as it was during the Vietnam War, public opinion became overtly political, making it very difficult for the voice of the common citizen to be heard. “Let’s Rap With Cap” made it easy for the average Joe to discuss increasingly complex political and social issues through less serious cultural expressions that have linkages to their world-view. The *Captain America* comics of the late 1960s and early 1970s serve as a distinctive example of this phenomenon. In fact, the increasing debate published in the *Captain America* comics had dramatically changed the tone and story of the comic content itself. Because of this, Captain America became even more so representative of the American people.

Most superhero narratives maintain the status quo, using the realities of the world that we live in and applying them to the stories in which fans read. Captain America is of no exception. According to the canon, the United States government created Captain America to battle the Nazis and to preserve the pre-World War II way of life. He was specifically designed to oppose Adolf Hitler a year before America entered the war. During his first year of existence, Captain America defended America from Nazi spies and hidden plots, while the Nazis were officially still not the enemies of the United States. Captain America came to “epitomize not only the values and fighting spirit of the national war effort but also the fortunes that comic book publishers would reap for their enlistment into patriotic wartime culture.”³⁶ Even after the war, Cap was still fighting Nazis and Japanese agents. However, in the late 1940s, *Captain America* comics were cancelled. There was a brief relaunch in 1954 where the Captain was depicted as a “Commie Smasher,” but due to lack of sales, the comic only lasted three issues.

³⁵ Ibid. 607.

³⁶ Wright, Bradford W, *Comic Book Nation The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 36.

In the early 1960s, when Marvel Comics began to rise to prominence, Captain America was successfully revived. There were arguments made however, questioning how could a character from the 1940s' establishment offer a credible critique of the 1960s' American society. Andrew and Virginia MacDonald in *Sold American: The Metamorphosis of Captain America*, argued that the Captain America of the 1960s and 1970s evolved into a character that had "accurately caught the changing mood of the past thirty years."³⁷ Captain America had been forced to adapt every few years to changes that were happening in American society and culture. This "man out of time" element of Captain America's mythos "allows him to continue to represent conservative values while consistently offering a liberal critique of the culture through which he walks."³⁸

The stories of Captain America, particularly during the late 1960s and early 1970s, are often composed to demonstrate how competing American values create conflict among the American people. When Captain America was revived from his frozen tomb in 1963, his reaction to the culture of 1960s America had allowed him to comment on the paradoxes of his contemporary surroundings:

Perhaps it would have been better if I'd never been rescued from that glacier—where I was in suspended animation for two decades! The world seems so changed—so different—I feel like a relic—a holdover from some dim and dismal past! Everything has changed! The cities are more crowded—more tense—with people racing about in vehicles we never dreamed of in the forties! But is it really progress? [He looks at newspaper announcing plans to visit the moon] We may one day be meeting strangers—on far distant stars—But we still haven't learned to live with out neighbors—in peace and brotherhood!³⁹

³⁷ Andrew and Virginia MacDonald, "Sold American: The Metamorphosis of Captain America," *The Journal of Popular Culture* X (2004): 253.

³⁸ J. Richard Stevens, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," 609.

³⁹ Lee, Stan (w), Jim Steranko (p). *Captain America Special Edition Vol. 1 #2* (March 1984). Marvel Comics Group. Quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 609.
<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

Captain America speaks as if he were an alien in his own country. His reaction to the changing times allowed readers to have personal access to the confusion and questioning mood of his time. One reader praised, "...on a few pages of a comic book you've put down on paper the thoughts troubling each and every American in the last few years."⁴⁰

Captain America's audience was brought into contact with the shifting definitions of American culture. Many controversial topics and changing cultural values found their way into the Captain America narrative. As the subject matter became challenged in the adventures of Captain America, readers began to express their reactions to the narrative through mailed letters to the editors that became published in the letters column of the comics.

The 1969-1975 Patriotism Controversy, as it has been called, is broken up into two distinct waves. The first wave was in response to the Rodriguez letter, but that died down in 1971. The second wave surfaced when writers such as Steve Englehart began to write a more relevant narrative storyline that brought the debate into the content of the comic book itself. The two waves are connected, and certainly the content within Captain America would not have developed in the direction that it did without the contentious debate amongst the readers. Although the two waves are linked, they also have key differences. The first wave began with a politically conservative backlash against the Rodriguez letter, in which Rodriguez complained that Captain America was too conservative in nature and did not belong in the current time period. The initial responses were exceedingly against Rodriguez and defended Captain America's conservative representation. At first, the editors sided with the conservative readers, and then moved towards a more progressive, yet neutral stance. The second wave of letters came from a more liberal approach and praised Englehart's relevant content. The arguments presented

⁴⁰ J. Richard Stevens, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," 610.

were more about how the events that unfolded in the *Captain America* comics compared to actual reality. The focus will be primarily directed to the first wave of letters.⁴¹

By the end of 1965, Captain America comics moved towards a contemporary storyline, focusing less on realistic stories, and more heavily on the fantasy genre. The famous Rodriguez letter appeared in issue #101, Cap's second self-titled magazine:

...I've seen, as others have, 'Nuff of Capt. America's incessant conservative speech making during the heat of battle. From my point of view CA belongs to the past in more ways than one. Stan, the day of the hero worship is gone. CA is the type of man who lives to fight for his personal brand of liberty. He believes just as the warmongers of the post wars and of today do. His roots belong in the past, not now. Doesn't CA realize that today the so-called patriotic fighter is gone? You guys know that Cap is a defender of the Establishment. The Captain does not reason. In #101, page 17, panel 6, and I quote, "And those who would grind us underfoot can never hope to keep us from reaching our eventual destiny!" Sure, I agree with this ideal, in fact that tyrants are enemies to freedom, equality, and fraternity. But does he have to make it sound as if he and a few other glory mongers can decide what justice individuals may have or may not have? No! Today in America, there are many hawks who favor conservatism. Obviously, Cap is an upholder of this policy. In the above issue, page 18, panel 2, Cap says, "It's you who have outgrown the dream—You who are blind to the promise of tomorrow!" Ha! Look who's talking. He's just as blind. There are many promising people who are expounding the cause of peace and liberty. This magazine does not fit in with today's society. Cap ought to know that someday the world will be built on a pinnacle of peace and freedom. Cap believes the same way, but must he show it through violence and heroics? Of course, without this element there would be no Captain America. All I question is his reasoning, which is entirely out of date. This is a strong plea against war lovers and so-called patriots. One more thing. Get rid of that Living Legend of World War II deal. Who wants to be reminded of a shameful ideal? Aside from this, Cap is one of your best characters. It would fit the standards of today, though, if he were more liberal.⁴²

Rodriguez's letter was published in the February 1969 issue of Captain America, and was in response to a battle between the Captain and his arch nemesis, the Red Skull. The Bullpen (the

⁴¹ J. Richard Stevens, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," 612.

⁴² Rodriguez, Albert, "Letter," *Captain America* 1.110 (February 1969): 23, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 613.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

comic's editorial staff) did not publish any comments or response to the letter, but three fan letters appeared in *Captain America* #114 in response to Rodriguez:

...Then I flipped the page nonchalantly to the letters section. The letter by Albert Rodriguez made my blood boil! Mr. Rodriguez called Captain America a warmonger. I take it Mister Rodriguez has not been reading CAPTAIN AMERICA for long, for he would have found that the dear Captain is far from a war lover. Where does Mr. R get off knocking patriotism?! It's the apathists, not the patriots, who have caused our country's problems. Mr. Rodriguez is not consistent. I quote from his letter: "this magazine does not fit in with today's society. Cap ought to know that some day the world will be built on a pinnacle of Peace and Freedom." I suggest Mr. Rodriguez look out his window. What does he call Vietnam? A flower garden? Perhaps someday Mr. Rodriguez's prediction will come true. But Cap's mag does fit in with today's society with all its evils and wars. No one but a dreamer can think the world is safe and peaceful...⁴³

...Mr. Rodriguez tells us, "The day of hero worship is gone." "The so-called patriotic fighter is gone." "Who wants to be reminded of a shameful ideal!?" This shocks me to the core! If Mr. Rodriguez is one of the "modern" types, out for his own good and nothing else, contemptuous of all and any ideals—he doesn't have to read CAPTAIN AMERICA. I'm an idealist. I believe that hero worship is stronger today, in our lonely society, than in many other periods. I believe that if the "day of the patriotic fighter is gone," it should return. I do not believe in Mr. Rodriguez's reasoning (?) process, by means of which he manages to contradict everything he says, and uphold the things he is fighting.⁴⁴

...First, Al, Cap is conservative because he is from a time in which it was more commonly accepted to be pro-USA than against it. Actually, he is a very strange mixture of individualism and statism in that, when he lectures on freedom, he seems to be talking about the nation rather than the people who make it up. Unfortunately, you are right (if you are saying what I think you are): Cap is a war lover. He is dedicated totally to smashing his foes (read America's foes) and protecting his friends and allies (the Avengers, SHIELD, etc.)...And don't forget, Al, the "Establishment"—the LBJ's HHH's Galbraith's, Kennedy's, et al—is a liberal establishment. So I wonder where you stand. Not everyone in this nation is liberal...⁴⁵

⁴³ Burke, Kenneth, "Letter," *Captain America* 1.114 (June 1969): 23, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, "Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 613.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

⁴⁴ Ellrod, Rick, "Letter," *Captain America* 1.114 (June 1969): 23, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, "Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 613-614.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

⁴⁵ Higgins, Michael, "Letter," *Captain America* 1.114 (June 1969): 24, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, "Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 614.

Within this round of letter exchanges, the Bullpen sided with Mr. Rodriguez. It is not known whether this stance on the issue was a result of Marvel editorial policy or simply an effort not to lose readership and harm sales, or possibly even both. In the following issue, issue #115, two more letters were published and appeared to be in the same spirit as the previous three:

...I see nothing wrong with Captain America being a conservative or a lover of America. Every superhero since the word was coined has been for—if you'll pardon the cliché—liberty, justice, and Mom's apple pie. Captain America was conceived as a symbol of those ideals, and in upholding that conception...⁴⁶

...Today we are again in a war—one no less crucial than “the Big One.” This then is where Captain America belongs—whenever and wherever the ideals of America are tested and the blood of her young men stain the land; that is where Captain America belongs...⁴⁷

This exchange of letters truly set the tone and format that would take in the following issues. “Most readers tended to operate within a specific set of ideological frames, frames that were central components of the Captain America narrative.”⁴⁸

The Patriotism Controversy, so rightly named, touched several topics, and at the core of each letter was a statement about what it meant to be American in a contemporary society. These letters became representative of how the right and the left of the political spectrum viewed their country and culture that they live in. Mr. Rodriguez argued that freedom and peace could only be achieved without an establishment that uses violence to achieve its policies. Rodriguez, like

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

⁴⁶Bluhm, Warren, “Letter,” *Captain America* 1.115 (July 1969): 22, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 614.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

⁴⁷Bevans, J. Glenn, “Letter,” *Captain America* 1.115 (July 1969): 23, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 614.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

⁴⁸J. Richard Stevens, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” 614.

many leftists of the period, felt that the American government was “crushing the very ideals it was designed to promote.”⁴⁹ The Burke letter challenges the left’s view of peace and freedom and tells Rodriguez to “look out his window.” He assumes that the left is unaware of the fact that the world that we live in is a dangerous place, and in order to take practical action, ideals must give way. The Ellrod letter takes the opposite approach to Rodriguez, accusing “modern” leftists of being “contemptuous of all and any ideals.” He assumes that the American left of the period was too anchored in reality that they could not see the benefits of higher ideals. The third letter written by Higgins tends to be a bit more open to Rodriguez’s opinion, but then points out that the “Establishment” that Rodriguez talks about is largely comprised on Democrats, so is therefore a “liberal establishment.” Higgins assumes that liberals and Democrats are one in the same and doesn’t consider that a leftist might be willing to challenge or critique a Democrat.⁵⁰

Letters that were published in following issues provided interesting characteristics of various political ideals. Leftists views tended to frame around the idea that the right’s form of patriotism was either the cause of America’s problems or at least presented a barrier to America’s solutions. Rightly so, conservatives found that liberals were the cause of the country’s problems and more than likely that Communists were behind the liberal’s words and actions. Several letters complained that the social conflicts that were occurring at the time would never have occurred earlier in America’s history. There were several appeals to the American spirit and patriotism as remembered through the cultural history of World War II. The letters eventually led the writers to argue strongly for their views concerning how Captain America should behave. America’s presence in Vietnam became a particularly strong area of debate. In *Captain America*

⁴⁹ J. Richard Stevens, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” 615.

⁵⁰ J. Richard Stevens, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” 615.

#116, a letter was published by a conservative reader accusing the editors of abandoning their “policy” of anti-communism by not having Captain America take part in the Vietnam conflict:

...why isn't the supposed symbol of our liberty and justice over there fighting our enemies? Isn't the policy of our enemies one in which there is no individualism and everything is done for the good of the state. Aren't those the principles which Captain America fought against in World War II? Wasn't Captain America conceived for this purpose?⁵¹

The Bullpen responded by referring to previous fan requests to avoid realistic stories, and if the readers had changed their mind, then they were called to write in their opinions and inform the editors.

Chown's letter drew in supporters in the following issues, but it also drew in many who disapproved of Chown's plea. However, Captain America did have an adventure in Vietnam in the following issue where he fended off attacks by both the North and South Vietnamese forces, but ultimately ended up fighting the Mandarin, an anticommunist villain of Chinese descent. In this manner, Captain America was able to be present and do battle in Vietnam while avoiding taking sides of the conflict.⁵²

John Hall and Steve Gerber, a longtime associate of Marvel scripter Roy Thomas, wrote one of the most influential letters written to the editors. Both letters were in support of the Rodriguez letter that started it all; it breathed new life into the controversy:

...Cap's real defect is that he tends to identify his own enemies with the nation's, his own survival with the nation's, and his own values with the nation's. Unlike his colleague, Nick Fury, Cap has tended to become emotional and often hysterical when fighting battles. This fanaticism and the concurrent willingness to act as an arbiter of what is and is not American are the marks of a “super-patriot”, in the pejorative sense of the word. This, I think, is what Albert Rodriguez had in mind. We cannot afford to have as heroes

⁵¹Chown, Jeff, “Letter,” *Captain America* 1.116 (August 1969): 23, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, “Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 617.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

⁵²J. Richard Stevens, “Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” 618.

men who have fused self and country into a secular god.

Having said all this, I still would ask that you retain Cap in his present form. First, Cap is fighting this tendency. He is a basically decent and level-headed individual with the capacity to be more so. Secondly, his own dramatic background would very likely have produced just such tendencies as these. Ideologically born of World War II and the early Cold War, cut off from personal identity by his years frozen on ice, he might be expected to center his identity around the only sure thing in his life—his fight for human principles as he understands them.⁵³

Both Gerber's and Hall's letter were so influential that the Bullpen supported these letters by defending them when two conservative letters attacked them. This marked a change in tone of the Bullpen.

And we doubt if Steve Gerber, whom some of the Bullpenners have known personally for several years, meant to paint as black a picture of the Land of the Free as you seem to think, Doug—he was primarily arguing, as we see it, for a future state of affairs which can rise above the more petty side of nationalism in favor of humanity as a whole. Still, your points are basically well taken—except that we don't feel that it is good for us, as a nation, to be certain that we are in all respects the greatest country in the world. We'd rather concern ourselves with more tangible realities—and then, when these are resolved, see how the United States stacks up against other nations. We don't think the U.S. is perfect—not by a long shot—but what's important now is that we're trying to make it better!⁵⁴

It should be noted that the issue before Hall's and Gerber's letter was published, a significant change in tone and plot occurred in the Captain America comic. The Falcon, Marvel's first African American superhero, made his debut in issue #117. Captain America's views and values would take on a much more liberal approach to America in the coming months and years,

⁵³ Hall, John, "Letter," *Captain America* 1.118 (October 1969): 23, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 619-620.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

⁵⁴ Reply to letter of Douglas G. Scott, *Captain America* 1.122 (February 1970): 21, quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 620.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

because of the influence of his partnership with The Falcon.⁵⁵

Liberals continued to pursue the idea of the establishment; the American system of government was in need of a change. While conservatives argued that to be a true patriot one must refrain from criticizing the government and its institutions. However, strongly influenced by Hall and Gerber, Captain America had decidedly took a turn towards the left, “making arguments about whether patriots should quietly support or loudly critique the American system a central component of the comic text.”⁵⁶

In *Captain America #130*, Captain America encounters a university riot, a scene where students were matched up against police officers. Captain America surveyed the scene saying, “What can be happening up ahead? There’s nothing but a college! COLLEGE! Of COURSE! I should have guessed! Judging from the noise I hear—it must be a student riot! Here’s where I oughtta step in and make like a swingin’ hero! But how do I know whose side to take? What the heck—the cops don’t need any help—but these kids do!”⁵⁷ After diffusing the situation and rescuing the college dean, Captain America visits a local television station to make a public announcement concerning his views on the university riot:

I’ve been asked to speak to you today—to warn America about those who try to change our institutions—But, in a PIG’S EYE I’ll warn you! This nation was founded by dissidents—by people who wanted something better! There’s nothing sacred about the status quo—and there never will be! I don’t believe in using force—or violence—because they can be the weapons of those who would enslave us—But, nor do I believe in an establishment that remains so aloof—so distant—that the people are driven to desperate measures—as in the case of a college dean who isolates himself from his

⁵⁵ J. Richard Stevens, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” 621.

⁵⁶ J. Richard Stevens, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” 623.

⁵⁷ Lee, Stan (w), Gene Colan (p). *Captain America Vol. 1 #130* (October 1970). Marvel Comics Group. Quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 623.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

student body!⁵⁸

Captain America had finally completed his evolutionary journey. The early 1960's conservative patriot had now become a liberalized captain. In issue #134, Captain America and the Falcon became official partners, and this relationship forced Captain America to deal with issues of gender, race, and class struggles that were apparent in American culture of the 1970s. Captain America comics increased in attention and readership, and Marvel continued to explore Captain America's new outlook on society, and created relevant stories to the zeitgeist of America. Captain America would soon be delved in conspiracies with former Nazis, slanderous advertising campaigns produced by a conservative coalition, and a presidential scandal influenced by Watergate. Captain America at that point loses his faith in the American government, gives up his flag, and becomes Nomad, a man without a home, in search of the restoration of his faith in America.⁵⁹

Comic book letters may not represent a society as a whole, but they are great examples, both in the opinions brought to the table, as well as the ability to articulate complex ideas. Letters to the editor allowed non-elite citizens to express their viewpoints and share them with the world. "By focusing the discussion around the portrayal of a fictional character who supposedly represents American values, those values come more clearly into view than when Americans—who have an easier time expressing philosophy through literary conventions than through scientific approaches—discuss what the character should stand for, rather than for what the

⁵⁸Lee, Stan (w), Gene Colan (p). Captain America Vol. 1 #130 (October 1970). Marvel Comics Group. Quoted in Stevens, J. Richard, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (2011): 623.
<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60959842&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 2012).

⁵⁹J. Richard Stevens, "'Let's Rap With Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," 624-626.

country should stand.”⁶⁰ There are certain ideological myths with American society, and superhero narratives gives insight to them. The Patriotism Controversy is a great example of this. Even more impressive about the letters to the editor was their influence over the Bullpen eventually changing their stance and ultimately transforming Captain America.

Captain America the grandfatherly teacher eventually gave way to Captain America the naïve child of the Establishment. This transition reflected the changes occurring within the editorial staff of Cap’s comic...Readers not only found an outlet for their preexisting opinions and beliefs, but were also confronted by the alternative perspectives embedded within the comic text and the other reader responses. As readers and writers wrestled with each other, they unwittingly collaborated to create a social text that reflected the tensions and disagreements of their culture. The readers, writers, and even Captain America himself were dramatically transformed through this intense level of interaction, and all in a time when the other areas of the social fabric of American society seemed to fragment communities instead of drawing them together.⁶¹

Post-9/11 Geopolitical Scripts

“We’ve got to be stronger than we’ve ever been—as a people. As a nation. We have to be America. Or they’ve won. We’re going to make it through this—we, the people. United by a power that no enemy of freedom could begin to understand. We share—we are—the American Dream.”⁶² Captain America’s inner monologue echoes the voices of Americans all across the country post-9/11. He defines America for what it really is. September 11, 2001 was a horrific day for Americans where nearly 3,000 people were murdered. America was attacked and it was thrown into a long and unwanted war. At that moment, everything changed. The dominant script of 9/11 told us “the geography of war had apparently changed, too; the assumption that America

⁶⁰ J. Richard Stevens, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” 626.

⁶¹ J. Richard Stevens, “Let’s Rap With Cap’: Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters,” 627-628.

⁶²Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p). *Captain America Vol.4 #1* (June 2002). Marvel Comics.

itself was relatively immune to terrorism...was no longer valid.”⁶³ Over the years, Captain America changed as the times changed. So how would he change yet again as America entered a new stage of foreign affairs?

“Oh, God—How could this happen here?”⁶⁴ Steve Rogers, out of uniform, had been looking for survivors in the rubble of the World Trade Center. Captain America’s response to the attacks was that of mourning, anger, and self-discipline. While at Ground Zero, Captain America had a conversation with a rescue worker after finding a corpse within the rubble:

Rogers (Captain America): I saw a man and a woman—when I’d run here from the park. They Jumped. Holding hands.

Rescuer: I’ll get a stretcher.

Rogers: Have you seen the news?

Rescuer: Too much of it.

Rogers: Do they know yet?

Rescuer: Oh, they know. But they’re still calling him a suspect. They say there’s no evidence, yet. They say they have to be sure.

Rogers: We have to be sure. This is war.⁶⁵

The conversation establishes that war is not a choice; war has been imposed on America. Also the final line, “We have to be sure. This is war,” is given from the perspective of the corpse looking up at Captain America as Captain America and the rescuer cover the corpse. This image depicts which the side the reader should be on, and it shouldn’t be the terrorists’. In the immediate days following the attacks on 9/11, Captain America’s words and actions clearly represent the feelings of every American, especially to the families of those that were lost. He became their voice when they could not speak.

In the *Captain America Enemy* story arc written by John Rieber and John Cassaday, they tell the story of terrorists who attack the United States seven months after the events of

⁶³Simon Dalby, “Calling 911: Geopolitics, Security and America’s New War,” *Geopolitics* 8 (2003). http://ipac.kacst.edu.sa/edoc/2006/157721_1.pdf.

⁶⁴Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p). *Captain America Vol.4 #1* (June 2002). Marvel Comics.

⁶⁵Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p). *Captain America Vol.4 #1* (June 2002). Marvel Comics.

September 11, 2001. Within the story arc, the reader learns more about the meanings associated with America. A terrorist by the name of Faysal al-Tariq airdrops small landmines into the small town of Centerville. The image of Centerville is clearly evocative of the America heartland mythology with its name literally meaning “middle of America,” and its overwhelmingly white population. The very first image of Centerville is a view down the main street showing trees, buildings, and barns, an ideal Middle American small town. The view of the town is from the top of a church steeple with a Christian cross as the focus of one third of the frame. The cross is a clear contrast between the Christian Centerville and the Islamic jihadists, a “literary proxy for the war between America and the fundamentalist Islam.”⁶⁶ To further emphasize the contrast between the religious clash, the terrorists capture the town with one fell swoop by breaking through the stained glass church windows on Easter Sunday. The last words of the preacher before the attack are, “It’s good to see so many visitors here this morning. Neighbors—you know we’re always glad to see you. Strangers—we hope you’ll give us a chance to know you better, after the service.”⁶⁷

Captain America defines what America is and reminds the reader of his or her identity as an American, but Captain America also explains what that means in relation to the rest of the world. The post-9/11 geopolitical script within *Captain America* feels much more in common with the World War II and Red Scare versions of Captain America, but it also invokes another geopolitical script that is critical of American foreign policy on anticolonial grounds. Simon Dalby argues that the attacks on September 11 are most understandable in terms of empire:

Understanding war in the terms of state-to-state conflict, the Second World War model, or even in its updated version the Gulf War of 1991, severely limits the understanding of

⁶⁶Dittmer, Jason, “Captain America’s Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 639, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3693960>.

⁶⁷Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p). *Captain America Vol.4 #2* (July 2002). Marvel Comics.

warfare to a matter of pitched battles between large armies. There is another history of the use of American power, one of the conduct of small wars in the rise of US power, a pattern of violence that Max Boot, in his recent volume on the topic, suggests might best be called “imperial wars”—a term that, American sensitivities notwithstanding, seems apt to describe many US adventures abroad.⁶⁸

America is not normally referred to as an empire, at least not in its common definition. America has much economic and militaristic influence across the globe. So rather than conceive the attack on America as solely territorially, the events of 9/11 should be put into an imperial context. Captain America is forced to this blowback of empire in the al-Tariq storyline. The first clue leading to this is al-Tariq’s monologue to his hostages: “Some of you are asking your God why you will die today. Some of you know—those of you who work at the bomb manufacturing facility at the edge of this peaceful town. Today you will learn what it means to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.”⁶⁹ His monologue punches through the innocence of America, showing that a small American town such as Centerville is still part of the imperial project.

The effects of Centerville’s manufacturing of bombs are demonstrated in the scene where Captain America fights four children in stylized Arabic gear, armed with daggers and hatchets. All the children have metal prosthetic arms or legs. While battling the children, Captain America converses with al-Tariq to discover the connection between the bomb factory and the children he is fighting:

Tariq: These are my shepherds. My children, American—and yours.

CA: Call them off. This is America—we don’t make war on children.

Tariq: No? Tell our children the, American—who sowed death [landmines] in their fields—and left it for the innocent to harvest? Who took their hands? Their feet?⁷⁰

⁶⁸Simon Dalby, “Calling 911: Geopolitics, Security and America’s New War”

⁶⁹Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p). *Captain America Vol.4 #3* (August 2002). Marvel Comics.

⁷⁰Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p). *Captain America Vol.4 #3* (August 2002). Marvel Comics.

Captain America reflects on this revelation by asking, “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?”⁷¹

Soon Captain America fights the true leader behind the terrorist attack on Centerville. The villain is nameless and faceless. His ethnicity is unknown. Therefore, he is placeless. The villain offered to surrender to Captain America if he could guess his homeland:

There’s no planting in the hell I’m from. No seed, no harvest...not now. But there was. Guerillas gunned my father down while he was working in the fields—with American bullets. American weapons. Where am I from? My father didn’t know that the Cold War was at its height—remember? When the Soviets were your great enemy? The evil empire? My mother didn’t know that our nation was in the throes of an undeclared civil war between your allies and the allies of evil when she ran to find her husband. My mother was interrogated and shot. Our home was burned. That fire gave me my face. But fire didn’t make me a monster. You know your history, Captain America. Tell your monster where he’s from...You can’t answer me...You played that game in too many places...The sun never set on your political chessboard—your empire of blood.⁷²

The villain’s specific use of the word “empire” reflects the geopolitical structure put in place through American hegemony.

Through the content that was developed post-9/11, Captain America has defined what it means to be an American in a time of terror, but also reconstructs the meaning of America. “Captain America’s ambivalent reaction to America’s complicity in global affairs leads to an ambiguous reading of the comic book’s political content. Captain America acknowledges the sins of America’s empire, but views those sins as not sufficient for the legitimizing of ‘terrorist’ activities.”⁷³ He therefore defeats America’s enemies in battle. “Still, while ultimately entrenching the status quo of territorially based American power both morally in the dialogue and physically in the action, Captain America serves as a voice for a resistant, counterhegemonic

⁷¹Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p). *Captain America Vol.4 #3* (August 2002). Marvel Comics.

⁷²Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p). *Captain America Vol.4 #5* (October 2002). Marvel Comics.

⁷³Dittmer, Jason, “Captain America’s Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 641, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3693960>.

narrative that illustrates the connections between the American way of life and American military operations around the world.”⁷⁴

The Death of Captain America

In the Marvel world of comics, there was a civil war between the great heroes of our time. Captain America surrendered to end the conflict. On March 7, 2007, despite his noble sacrifice, Captain America was assassinated. As he was being led up the steps of the courthouse, a sniper shot him, but it was Sharon Carter, Cap’s lover, who delivered the final shots. She was brainwashed by Doctor Faustus who had posed as a S.H.I.E.L.D. psychiatrist. The final image in *Captain America* #25 showed Captain America laying on a hospital bed, faced toward the reader, hand draped over the edge, lifeless. The caption below boldly stated, “The Death of the Dream.”⁷⁵

Those final words could have said anything. It could have said, “The death of Captain America,” or “The soldier has been laid to rest,” or something similar, but still conveying the same message that Captain America had died. Instead, the words “The Death of the Dream” were used. More specifically, “The Dream” should be emphasized because Captain America was not just the average superhero. He stood for something more; he stood for the American dream, the American values, and the American way. Those specific words clearly exert nationalistic and patriotic empathy towards the death of Captain America, because his death truly marked “the death of the dream”.

Captain America’s death was so important and newsworthy, that mainstream media made it their priority to capture this story and share it with the world. "Captain America Killed Outside

⁷⁴Ibid. 641.

⁷⁵ Brubaker, Ed (w), Steve Epting (a). Captain America #25 Variant Edition (April 2007). Marvel Publishing, INC.

Courthouse" read the headline on CBSNews.com's Entertainment section.⁷⁶ "Captain America Killed!" screamed the headline on page 3 of the New York Daily News.⁷⁷ ABCNews tried to analyze what the death of Captain America really meant.⁷⁸ These articles are hardly substantive in any way, with mostly giving little to no context at all as to which the circumstances of Captain America's death, only reporting that he has died. However, the sheer fact that these articles even exist is remarkable considering the decades of ridicule and associations with juvenile delinquency that the medium had been branded with. Comic fans hadn't seen so much media attention since DC Comics killed Superman in 1992 in *Superman #75*.

The death of Captain America certainly generated a bit of controversy. At a turbulent moment in American history, with America fighting two wars, terrorism looming in the minds of the average American, and the nearing end of the Bush administration, the death of Captain America could have been seen as an allegory to the demise of the United States. Series writer Ed Brubaker wanted to explore what the hero meant to the country in these polarized times. "What I found is that all the really hard-core left-wing fans want Cap to be standing out on and giving speeches on the street corner against the Bush administration, and all the really right-wing [fans] all want him to be over in the streets of Baghdad, punching out Saddam."⁷⁹ Many fans were shocked and even angered over the Captain's death. "I'm definitely pissed off," said Ken Feliu, a 34-year-old commercial production director and lifelong comic book reader. "I mean, why did they have to kill him off? He's supposed to represent all our ideals, everything we're supposed to aspire to and they couldn't leave him intact? And the way he died -- with two bullets to the chest

⁷⁶David Morgan, "Captain America Killed Outside Courthouse," *CBSNews*, February 11, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/03/07/entertainment/main2542461.shtml>.

⁷⁷Ethan Sacks, "Captain America killed!" *NY Daily*, March 9, 2007, <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/captain-america-killed-article-1.217626>.

⁷⁸Bryan Robinson, "What the Death of Captain America Really Means," *ABCNews*, March 8, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=2934283&page=1#.UMeKe470mcF>.

⁷⁹Ethan Sacks, "Captain America killed!" *NY Daily*, March 9, 2007.

by a sniper? Come on!"⁸⁰

The death of Captain America had not just a vital impact on his readership, but also on the Marvel universe as well, and the narratives that follow the death of Captain America reflect how the country felt when he died. Jeph Loeb wrote a five-part story arc following the death of Captain America, titled *Fallen Son, The Death of Captain America*. Each of the five comics within the story arc follows the five stages of grief after the Captain's death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Loeb has described the Captain as

...a soldier...and a hero. He's actively trying to inspire others to believe what JFK said about not asking what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. Given where we are in the world today, that's a hard concept for most people, and Cap's death is all the more tragic in that we need him now more than ever to show us the way...He was created to be a living symbol. By wearing the flag, he separates himself from the others in that he has a name and purpose that is about country and heritage and loyalty. Most heroes are trying to do their job and if that job inspires, so be it. But Cap was saddled with that responsibility from his origin.

Within each of the five stories, the five stages of grief are associated with a particular superhero who was very close to Captain America. Wolverine, best known for his association with the X-Men, attempted to describe his pain to Spiderman over the death of Captain America. "Try this. It's like somebody shot a cannonball right through your stomach, leaving a great big hole. Eventually, it starts to close up from the outside in...'Course then you'll hear a song or somebody will laugh or the wind will blow the wrong way...and the hole will tear wide open again."⁸¹ Wolverine described a very human reaction to loss, a feeling that many can relate to.

On the day of Captain America's funeral, tens of thousands of Americans lined the streets of Washington D.C. in the rain to get a glimpse of the casket "drawn by a single white horse, riderless, a ceremony up until now held only for a president. But, then again, there are many who

⁸⁰Bryan Robinson, "What the Death of Captain America Really Means," *ABCNews*, March 8, 2007.

⁸¹Loeb, Jeph (w), David Finch (p), Danny Miki (i), Frank D'Armata (c). *Fallen Son The Death of Captain America: Chapter 4 Depression* (July 2007). Marvel Publishing, INC.

felt that he was even more important than any elected official.”⁸² In *Acceptance*, Captain America was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery at the foot of a newly installed Captain America Memorial, a monolith depicting the Captain in his star-spangled outfit, holding up high his American shield, and proudly grasping the American flag. As a reminder of the disturbing times in which we live, the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier hovered over the funeral. Although this happened in a comic book, it certainly speaks to the times in which we really live. Sam Wilson, also known as the Falcon and longtime friend of Captain America, spoke very highly and passionately about the Captain at his funeral.

Folks called him “Captain America.” “Cap.” “Winghead.” Once or twice, he was “nomad.” And, believe it or not, “Cap-Wolf.” But I got to call him “Partner.” I take great pride in that...The truth is, it didn’t matter what we called him—because it all began and ended with Steve Rogers. He did more than wear the flag. He believed in all the things it stood for. And he actively worked to inspire men, women and children to be the heroes he knew they could be...More than any super-soldier serum that had been pumped into his veins—Steve’s real power came from the lives he touched in the decades he was with us. People of all ages. In all different walks of life.⁸³

The Falcon then went on to ask those who fought with Captain America during World War II to stand up, those whom he saved from the horrors of war to stand up, and those whom he has inspired to be a hero and continue the legacy to stand up.

Now. Look around you. Kind of amazing, isn’t it? How we usually see the differences between us...separated by nationality, by color, by religion...and yet here we are all connected. Steve Rogers, that skinny blond-haired kid who grew up on the streets of New York...showed us that the ideals of the American dream—that great melting pot that can bring out the best in each of us and bind us all together—actually works! And he can keep teaching us that long after he’s gone. By telling stories about him...to our children...to our grandchildren...Steve Rogers, Captain America will never die. This doesn’t have to be a day of sadness. We can accept it as a gift of unity and hope. The kind of day Captain America lived for.⁸⁴

The Falcon was right. Captain America will never die. Someone else will try to take up

⁸² Loeb, Jeph (w), John Cassaday (a), Laura Martin (c). *Fallen Son The Death of Captain America: Chapter 5 Acceptance* (August 2007). Marvel Publishing, INC.

⁸³Ibid. *Acceptance*.

⁸⁴Ibid. *Acceptance*.

the mantle, as they have in the past. Within the same story arc, Tony Stark, also known as Iron Man, had asked Hawkeye, who had somehow returned from the dead, to carry the shield and wear the flag. At first, it seemed easy to just slip on the suit and act as a new Captain America. Hawkeye once believed that anyone could be Captain America if they wore the flag with “that waiter’s tray”⁸⁵ on his arm. It wasn’t long before Hawkeye came to his senses that it was not his right to wear the flag. The following conversation is between Hawkeye as Captain America as he ran into two other superheroes named Hawkeye, a woman, and her friend, Patriot.

Patriot: Who the @\$% are you supposed to be?

Hawkeye: Cap...?

Captain America: Who do you think I am?

Patriot: I don’t know. Pick a name. And it better not start with “Captain America”—‘cause that ain’t you.

Captain America: You mean, like someone calling herself “Hawkeye.”

Hawkeye: I...I don’t know why I should explain myself to you—particularly when you’re dressed like...that. I took his name because he died. Because I wanted to honor him. If Hawkeye were alive—I’d call myself something else. By the way, it was the real Cap who offered me the name. And the bow.

Captain America: He...did...?

Patriot: Look, we’re just trying to do the job. Learn the ob. Inspired by our heroes. Not pretending to be one of them.

Hawkeye: The second you put on that uniform, it’s a different argument. You might even look the part—but I never dressed up like Hawkeye. Even when he wore a headband and a skirt.

Captain America: years later and people still make fun of the skirt...

Hawkeye: That’s not his shield, right? I mean, that’s got to be a copy. Because if it’s not...that’s just...wrong...⁸⁶

Captain America’s assassination wasn’t the first time Captain America had died in the world of comics. Captain America had died in 1984, or what seemed to be the death of Captain America. The Captain faked his own death to disassociate himself with his real identity as Steve Rogers. Captain America was aware that everyone knew that Steve Rogers and Captain America were one in the same. By making everyone believe that Steve Rogers had died, but Captain

⁸⁵Loeb, Jeph (w), John Romita, Jr. (p), Klaus Janson (i), MorryHollowell (c).Fallen Son The Death of Captain America: Chapter 3 Bargaining (July 2007). Marvel Publishing, INC.

⁸⁶Ibid. Bargaining.

America had lived, gave Captain America a secret identity once more. This proves that Captain America will never die. He will live on.

A man can be destroyed! A team, or an army can be destroyed! But, how do you destroy an ideal—a dream? How do you destroy a living symbol—or his indomitable will—his unquenchable spirit? Perhaps these are the thoughts which thunder within the murderous minds of those who have chosen the way of Hydra—of those who face the fighting fury of freedom’s most fearless champion—the gallant, red-white-and-blue-garbed figure who has been a towering source of inspiration to liberty-lovers everywhere! How can the fearsome forces of evil ever hope to destroy the unconquerable Captain America?⁸⁷

In the world of comics, it’s rare to have a hero die, and never return. Superman returned just a year later after his supposed death, and Captain America did the very same. A few others tried to take up the mantle and serve the country as the proud red, white, and blue warrior, but Steve Rogers did return. He even became President of the United States. Captain America’s death in 2007 had a huge impact on the Marvel universe, but also within the context of the world in which we live. The hero that stands for the flag that we salute died in cold blood. The narratives surrounding the Captain’s death certainly reflected the zeitgeist of America. If a superhero can do that, than surely he means more than just pencil and ink. He does. Captain America is America epitomized in print.

Conclusion

For more than seventy years, Captain America was and still is one of Marvel Comics’ flagship superheroes representing truth, strength, liberty, and justice. Cap’s identity has always been around preserving and standing for what America believes in. He’s outfitted in the American flag. He carries a shield to defend against all those that threaten America and its values. He was created to uphold and enhance the patriotic fervor of the 1940s. He stood as a symbol, an icon that entered many homes throughout the country. However, Captain America is

⁸⁷ Lee, Stan (w), Jim Steranko (p). Captain America Special Edition Vol. 1 #2 (March 1984). Marvel Comics Group.

also an unstable character. His views and actions change as America changes. He often “thinks critically about the facts of history in his time, the legitimacy of commands from superiors, and how his actions are seen by others.”⁸⁸ Therefore, his behavior always reflects the politics and policies of the moment. As America changes, the ideals, values, and identities of the American people change as well, and Captain America is always there to support those changes.

From his incarnation pre-America’s entry into World War II to a post-9/11 world, Captain America has had many struggles, both internally and externally. He had only one goal in the beginning: to fight Nazis and help America win World War II. He did just that, and he raised the spirits of young Americans when he punched Hitler in the face. However, once the war was over, he had nothing else to fight for. So he went into retirement, only to come out again in the 1950s in an attempt to fight communists, but failed to retain readership. It wasn’t until the 1960s, a time of much turbulent change in American society, which Captain America would reawaken from a block of ice in the Arctic Ocean and enter a world very different from the one he was used to. He had to change with the times. Because readers were disinterested in the Captain’s fantastical adventures, and accused him of being too conservative and a man out of time, Captain America embraced a more liberal agenda, engaging in the conflict in Vietnam and fighting alongside his new companion, The Falcon, an African American superhero.

September 11, 2001 changed everything. America was changed, and drawn into two wars that have spanned over a decade. Captain America had to accept that America had changed once again, but also question the responsibility of America and its involvement with the rest of the world. There have even been times when Captain America had been called a traitor, but in the end, his duty had always been in the interests of America and its values. Captain America’s death

⁸⁸ Robert G. Weiner, edit., *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 1.

in 2007 was made into a fairly big deal. His death was even announced over media news. However, he would make his return much like any other superhero, but his death certainly had an impact on the Marvel community, as well as the American readership.

Captain America may not have always been given the same recognition as Batman, Superman, Hulk, or Spider-Man, but Captain America is certainly among the top ten most important superheroes ever created. Captain America has often been seen as an anachronism, a relic of a past era, but the truth is that Captain America epitomizes what America is and stands for. He changes as America changes. He represents the identity of America.

Captain America, the costumed hero, is the embodiment of all that's best and brightest in the *concept* of America: a concept that transcends the nation that birthed it. Steve Rogers, the man, represents everyone who seeks a better world for himself and his neighbors; who strives to live a decent, compassionate life. That makes him one of us—*all* of us, no matter our country or origin—and insures that that character will still be with us, in all his gaudy, vibrant glory, for decades to come.⁸⁹

Literature Review

When asked to think of a superhero that best reflects the United States of America for what it stands for, it's hard not to think of Captain America. Here is a man that wears a star-spangled outfit, carries a shield with the American flag branded on it, and who fights in the name of the United States Constitution. For a man who is so physically strong and immensely influential, one would expect volumes of research done on him. However this is not the case. Captain America is but one of thousands of superheroes that have been created over the past eighty years or so. In fact, there really hasn't been an extensive study on the medium at all. The last time comics were in the media spotlight was back in the 1950s when Congressional hearings were called upon to question whether or not comics were related to juvenile delinquency. In the year 2013, comic books are as popular as ever because of Hollywood and their film adaptations

⁸⁹ Weiner, *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, 243.

of everyone's favorite superheroes, including Captain America. Despite the lack of research done over the years on comics, doesn't mean that there hasn't been any research at all. Comics are mostly associated with America and its culture and how comics reflect that culture.

William W. Savage, Jr. was one of the first scholars to research comics. In his book, *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*, Savage undertook an effort to use comic books as primary sources and connect them to topics of concern in postwar America. Bradford W. Wright incorporated Savage's research into his own. In his book, *Comic Book Nation The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Wright claims that his research is a cultural history that seeks to deepen our understanding of the interaction between politics, social change, and popular culture. Much like Savage, Wright uses comic books as primary sources to connect hot topics in America's culture to comics.

Richard Reynolds's, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, focuses mainly on the superhero genre and explores the very many facets and myths within several superhero narratives. Reynolds tends to focus more on Superman and Batman for his research, and examines three case studies including X-Men issues 108 through 143, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Watchmen*. Mila Bongco's book, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, arrived several years after Reynolds's book. The author outlines developments in comic books since their inception in the 1930s until around the 1990s before the book was published in 2000. Bongco focuses on the five changes that affected the development of the medium over the past sixty years, and how they led up to the conditions of the 1990s. Bongco claims the changes were as follows: image and perception of comics; format and overall appearance of comicbooks; artists and publishers involved in the industry; readership; distribution and marketing of the products.

Danny Fingeroth explores even further into the myth of the superhero. He even actually calls it the “cult” of the superhero. Every society has myths and stories that get passed down from generation to generation. Traditionally these stories tend to have good conquering evil. Fingeroth takes this idea of “myth” and applies it to superhero comics. He explores the origins of the heroic myth, and how it came to become the superhero myth of American popular culture.

The literature offered on the topic of comics vary slightly, but tend to focus on the developments over the years on the comic book industry, and/or focus on the creation of the superhero narrative and how it has impacted American culture and society. However, this paper is about Captain America. Luckily there are a few scholars out there that focus primarily on Captain America and explore the significance of such a character. It should be noted that within my research, I came across three significant eras of Captain America that stand out: the creation of Captain America in 1940, the Patriotism Controversy on the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Captain America post-9/11. Within my research it seems that several decades are skipped. That is because in the 1950s, Captain America was retired as a superhero and reappeared in the 1960s. The 1980s and 1990s are also skipped only because within my research, nothing significant appeared to be noteworthy.

Robert Weiner has collected a group of critical essays that provide source material for studying American culture and history. Captain America comics reflect historical change in American history post-World War II. Weiner’s *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero* is a reaction to the assassination of Captain America where Weiner felt it was a cheap shot to kill off a man who strongly believes in one’s country, its history, and American idealism. Weiner also collected these essays in response to all those who made fun of his fascination with Captain America, seeing the soldier as a “tool” of the American government. Weiner would

argue otherwise, claiming that Captain America often disobeyed the U.S. government, and that he represents the best of what America has to offer. This collection of essays stands out particularly because of the authors of the contributed essays. Graduate students, historians, art and literary scholars, PhDs, librarians and archivists, and writers of Captain America have all contributed to this collection. Weiner's hope is that with the growing interest in comic book characters seen in movies, television, toys, and so on, his book can provide a spawning point of future research into the medium of comics.

J. Richard Stevens wrote a journal article in *The Journal of Popular Culture* titled, "*Let's Rap With Cap*": *Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters*. Stevens takes the Captain America comics of the mid-late 1960s and early 1970s and examines the "letters to the editor" column at the end of every comic. The incoming responses to the Captain America narrative sparked what became known as the "Patriotism Controversy" and in fact led to the political change of Captain America and the narrative in which he was placed. The 1960s and 1970s was a period in American history in which the citizenry's views of the government and American icons were fragmented and diverse. Stevens sees the letters as strong arguments about the definition of American patriotism. The Captain America comics provided a structure and forum to discuss the readers' views of American identity and politics. The debate that Stevens examines appeared to have dramatically changed the tone and direction of the comic content itself.

The go-to expert on Captain America and geopolitics, the name that constantly reappears in others' findings, is Jason Dittmer. Dittmer is currently the Reader in Human Geography in the department of Geography at University College London. His most recent work titled, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* describes not

just what nationalist superhero narratives say, but also what kind of work they do setting the political stage. Most of his book uses discourse analysis of comic books to examine how the territorial nation-state is produced as a dominant scale of identity and politics. He looks not just at the superhero genre, but rather the *nationalist superhero*, which according to Dittmer, are superhero narratives in which the hero, sometimes the heroine, explicitly identifies himself or herself as a representation of and defender of a specific nation-state, usually expressed by their name, outfit, and mission. For example, Captain America.

Dittmer has also written several papers on the topic. In his "*America is safe while its boys and girls believe in its creeds!*": *Captain America and American identity prior to World War 2*, he engages in the literature on nationalism and popular culture to discuss the role of Captain America comics in the production of American national identity and national interest prior to World War II. Dittmer examines how comic books as a medium can be used to express national identity and where geopolitical scripts are narrated in his *Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics*.

So there hasn't been hundreds of scholars researching the medium of comic books, but they are slowly becoming recognized as a legitimate literary medium, as well as a significant part of America's popular culture, and therefore important enough to begin researching. As more and more media pays attention to the characters that come out of comic books, then more attention will be drawn to their original comics. Within another ten years or so, it can be assumed that another study into the development of comics will be produced with at least twenty years or more ahead of the recent literature of that particular historical research. Recent American history will be found in the latest comics being published and scholars may want to take note on how

history is being presented in that medium in relation to other popular culture. The research will only ever grow, slowly, but surely it will surely continue.

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