TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND AMERICAN MYTH:
THE MANIFESTATION OF AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY IN THE
SUPERHERO NARRATIVE

by

Richard Thomas Cruz

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. David Lavery, Chair

Dr. Jimmie Cain

This thesis is dedicated to my father and my mother, the first superheroes I ever met.

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ABSTRACT

Over the last fifteen years, nearly no story has dominated American popular

culture like the superhero narrative has. It has come to captivate and entertain

billions of people around the world. However, this narrative actually has its roots

planted firmly in the past. The ever-changing superhero narrative has drawn on

classic American mythology such as the frontier myth as conceptualized by

Fredrick Jackson Turner. Tracing the idea of the American superhero from its

inception in late 1930s America to post-Vietnam America reveals why the mythic

American superhero has outlasted similar stories and myths of the past; the

creators and contributors of the superhero narrative have adapted it after every

major American conflict. In the 1930s, superheroes battled social injustice and

inequality. In the 1940s, they battled the international threats of World War II.

After that, they battled the Red Scare of the Cold War, before turning back to

social injustice during and after the Vietnam War. The heroes that still reach into

the minds of American and international audiences alike do so because they have

endured a crucible of cultural change that has produced a new variation on

traditional American myths.

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CHAPTER 1:

THE AMERICAN FRONTIER AND THE SUPERHERO NARRATIVE

"Jerry Siegel always told Superman's origin as a simple story

of inspiration and belief. And the world was always eager to

believe it."

—Gerard Jones

No one ever taught me to fear the dark, but I still did. When I was young and

my parents would put me to bed, I would dread the few seconds between my

mother's turning off the light and my nightlight coming on. I knew in those few

seconds of darkness that whatever was hiding in the unseen parts of my room had

all the time it needed to slither through the darkness and get me. As a child, I

looked into an empty, dark room and saw shadows bend and twist into monsters

and demons dead set on stealing me away from my way of life. In order to keep

these fears from devouring me, I created heroes and totems of security that would

keep whatever ghouls my mind conjured away from me. These champions often

took the forms of my childhood heroes of television and film. Whenever the lights

went out and the darkness would come to life, I knew a giant Leonardo of

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles fame would keep the threats of the unknown from

attacking me.

The battles my childhood psyche acted out always had the same outcome and

little effect on the real world. They were simply the fantasies that kept the

nightmares away from a six-year-old boy. In fact, creating these small fantasies is

something we have all done before. We create stories in our minds that play out in

the landscape of our dreams. These stories shape our consciousness and influence our beliefs. We share these stories more and more until an individual's consciousness and collective consciousness begin to resemble one another. These individual stories and fantasies slowly become myths that infiltrate different aspects of our lives to form cultural and societal beliefs. It's our natural reaction to try and make sense of the senseless and unknown. That's why a six-year-old boy looks into the emptiness of darkness and sees monsters. That is why settlers of the American West looked out to the frontier and created stories of the inhabitants of the wilderness that lurked in the shadows of the unknown. We create myths to make tangible the ghosts and ghouls of our consciousness. We create myths because it is in our nature. We create myths because we always have.

Joseph Campbell, Richard Slotkin, and Myth-Making

Several scholars have written on humanity's myth-making tendencies, but Joseph Campbell's work is widely regarded as the foundation upon which any study begins. He identified this innate and subconscious desire of people to create myths in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell traces the history of a universal monomyth, a myth perpetuated and retold in several different religions, cultures, and societies that span several thousand years. Campbell's analysis of this monomyth merges psychological, historical, and cultural theories to find a common thread uniting all people, the foundation of the shared desire of man to create myth.

Carl Jung influenced much of Campbell's analysis. This can be seen in Campbell's fascination with the subconscious and the role it plays in the construction of archetypes. Campbell writes, "The unconscious sends all sorts of vapors, odd beings, terrors, and deluding images up into the mind—whether in dream, broad day light, or insanity; for the human kingdom, beneath the floor of the comparatively neat little dwelling that we call our consciousness, goes down into unsuspected Aladdin caves" (8) When left unchecked, the unconscious allows our unspoken and undefined fears to bubble up to the surface from our unconscious mind. In effect, bad dreams do not stay hidden in those Aladdin caves forever. They escape and begin to shape our waking world. To Campbell, myth and dream are intertwined and influence one another. He writes, "Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche" (19). Those symbols will feature heavily in my analysis going forward.

In addition to his interests in Jungian psychology, Campbell also viewed myth through historical and cultural lenses. Whether we discuss Hercules and his many labors, the feats of Beowulf, or the adventures of Alice in Wonderland, myths and heroes take a snapshot of the world in which they were first told or created. Though the reflection is rarely exact, myths capture something of the culture that nurtures them. After all, few little girls fell through rabbit holes into bizarre and nonsensical worlds, but many probably felt they had as the rules and restrictions of Late Victorian Era England constricted their behavior, sexuality, and station in life. In this sense, myth becomes a time capsule, capturing an immense moment in

history and preserving it for future generations. Campbell identifies this function

of myth, stating, "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to

supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those

other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back" (11). The reflection we see

in the looking glass of mythology may not be exact or perfect, but it still captures

a glimpse of truth. Myth thus links our past to our present.

Campbell incorporates these different ideas and notions in his monomyth—a

shared myth among all people. He finds that we all share a subconscious desire to

create myths, even if it is just subconsciously. He also finds that the hero myth is

universal among cultures. Some of the mechanics or specifics of the myth are

different, but the arc remains the same. He explains:

> Full circle, from the tomb of the womb to the womb of the tomb,
>
> we come: an ambiguous, enigmatical incursion into a world of
>
> solid matter that is soon to melt from us like the substance of a
>
> dream. And, looking back at what we had promised to be our own
>
> unique, unpredictable, and dangerous adventure, all we find in the
>
> end is such a series of standard metamorphoses as men and women
>
> have undergone in every quarter of the world, in all recorded
>
> centuries and under every odd disguise of civilization. (12-3)

These metamorphoses take many forms in Campbell's monomyth, but the results

are almost always the same. As Campbell diagrams in *The Hero with a Thousand*

Faces, a hero is born under some peculiar circumstance and is summoned to

adventure. With some form of aid, the hero passes through a threshold of

adventure, such as a brother battle, crucifixion, or some type of journey. The hero, passing through the threshold and passing the tests found along the way, then takes his treasure, be it spiritual enlightenment or some new found understanding of the world, and escapes to bring this knowledge back to the rest of us not brave enough to accept the call to adventure. The hero's journey, as diagramed by Campbell, can be (and has been) applied to religious figures such as Jesus, mythological figures like Perseus, and to modern pop culture icons like Luke Skywalker.

Campbell identifies a universal myth. He taps into a shared consciousness that stretches across thousands of years and circles the globe; however, the myth I am examining is more localized and contained. I am searching for the myth of the American superhero—a myth that has been perpetuated and retold throughout the history of this country. This hero was born in violence on the frontier of the early American colonies and reborn again when our country declared independence. This hero again changes throughout every major conflict from the Civil War up to the current conflicts in the Middle East. Perhaps the best analysis of these myths is to be found in the works of Richard Slotkin, specifically *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.

In this book, Slotkin both describes the myth of the American frontier and also shows how that myth has changed over time. He identifies the American myth of the frontier as an essential defining element. Slotkin explains:

> The Myth of the Frontier is our oldest and most characteristic
>
> myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual,

historiography, and polemics produced over a period of three

centuries. . . . The original ideological task of the myth was to

explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies; but

as the colonies expanded and developed, the myth was called on to

account for our rapid economic growth, our emergence as a

powerful nation state, and our distinctively American approach to

the socially and culturally disruptive process of modernization.

(10)

In a sense, the American myth grew with the nation, but it also helped to shape

the nation's future.

　　In the introduction to his book, Slotkin shows how President John F.

Kennedy's use of the word during his 1960 presidential campaign reflected a

growing trend to treat the frontier as both a physical and abstract construction. He

writes:

The exchange of an old, domestic, agrarian frontier for a new

frontier of world power and industrial development had been a

central trope in American political and historiographical debates

since the 1890's… The 'Frontier' was for them a complexly

resonant symbol, a vivid and memorable set of hero-tales—each a

model of successful and morally justifying action on the stage of

historical conflict. (3)

In a sense, Slotkin's use of the frontier myth resembles Campbell's conception of

the threshold of adventure, but the threshold is not for any one particular hero as

much as it is the threshold through which the collective American consciousness must pass.

Regardless of ideological purpose, one aspect of the frontier myth is continuous; it creates some kind of border between what is uniquely (and often righteously) American and that which is not, typically depicted as savage. As Slotkin explains, this frontier has changed and moved over time, encountering "others" as it progresses. The earliest border was the western border of the original American colonies and states (11). Here the border separated the civilized and Christian world of the American colonies from the savage wilderness of the unknown, unmapped, and un-white.

The wilderness comes to represent the unknown and un-American. As Slotkin explains, the earlier conflicts between American settlers and Native Americans "defined one boundary of American identity: though we were a people of 'the wilderness' we were not savages" (11). In effect, the American myth often takes the form of a boundary-building myth. The frontier becomes the membrane keeping out the dangerous, unknown elements and the known, unapproved elements. This frontier separated western settlers from Native Americans, but it also allowed whoever was constructing the myth to move the borders and decide what was and was not American. During the early years of the country, the frontier was easy to identify as the physical and cultural boundary it created were one and the same. During other periods of United States history, however, the physical frontier and the cultural frontier did not exactly line up. In the book *The*

Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling, Milton J. Bates focuses on those unknown aspects of the wilderness.

According to Bates, the wilderness is a dangerous place where the moral standards of society are cast aside by perverse and wicked men (13). Bates goes on to write, "For better or worse, frontier mythology has remained what Michael Herr calls the 'containing perimeter' of our collective experience" (47). However, what happens when that collective experience becomes splintered, fragmented, and divisive? As Bates hypothesizes, such ruptures of the central frontier myth create several smaller frontiers separating the status quo from the counter culture. He explores the Vietnam War and how that very real and tangible conflict in a far away Asian country created frontiers separating races, classes, and sexes, but these kinds of frontiers appeared much earlier in American history.

This wilderness that Bates and Slotkin discuss was less a philosophical separation of competing social norms and more a physical border that marked the tangible end of American civilization; however, once America became industrialized and more isolated from the rest of the world, the wilderness became displaced. Much like examples Bates maps out for us in later American history, during the early 1900s, the frontier no longer marked the boarders of American civilization. The frontier marked the battlegrounds upon which social and economic classes fought a losing battle. Perhaps this is most notable during the 1930s and the Great Depression.

The Great Depression, World War II, and the Shifting Frontier

When the stock market crashed in October 1929, any outward facing eyes turned inward to an America that found itself with a conflict that had not previously defined the idea of the American frontier—the conflict between the haves and the have-nots. Those with power, the wealthy, began pushing wages down as far as they could to protect their bottom line. As T.H. Watkins explains in his book *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s*:

> The blame for at least some of the widening gap between wages and productivity during the twenties could be laid out by the decline of unionism, because without organized labor to exercise some pressure, most employers were not inclined to pay wages any higher than they felt they could afford—and that was nowhere near parity with increased profits. The triumph of industrial Republicanism after the end of the war had nearly killed the labor movement which had been pictured by the business world and much of the national press as violent, radical, dominated by foreigners and Bolsheviks, antagonistic to the capitalist ideal, inherently un-American, and, not least, expensive. (45)

This new frontier separated the wealthy from the working so as to maintain the status quo. What resulted had not yet been seen in this new industrialized America. The American myth of excellence, which has historically been a top-down narrative perpetuated by those with power, started to be rejected by those intended to receive it. Watkins explains, "For many, particularly among those

who had invested the most faith in the system to begin with, the frustration and disappointment were almost too much to bear, anger seizing their personalities like an invasive spirit" (80). People were losing faith in the myth of the American dream.

Just as the frontier myth helped separate what was American from that which was not, so too did this time period attempt to define what would and would not be accepted as American. As Watkins explained earlier, the notion of unionizing was deemed un-American by those at the top. To disrupt the natural progression of capitalism would be to upset the very foundation of America. Despite the dissemination of this narrative, more and more Americans began turning to socialist and communist political organizations. In fact, the Communist Party/USA claimed to have had as many as 60,000 members during the early years of the Great Depression (Watkins 82). When the reality of America got in the way of the myth, people flocked toward the counterculture of socialism. If the American frontier is truly the threshold in which competing ideologies of American consciousness do battle, the old myth was losing. In order to restore the faith of the American people, a new kind of hero had to emerge.

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal did much to both heal the wounded psyche of the American worker, but more importantly, it gave the American worker something to believe in. Prior to FDR and the New Deal, the American middle class felt abandoned and alone. That is why so many flocked to the socialist and communist organizations. They were clearly fighting for regular people. With FDR and the image he cultivated for himself, he became the symbol of American

heroism to a downtrodden generation of workers. Even if he was fighting for political office, people believed he was fighting for them. He became something of a freedom fighter to the American people, a defender of the little man and protector of the downtrodden. As a symbol, FDR would reestablish some of the faith of the American people in the authority of the American political structure. This budding reacceptance of a system that had once failed so many would prove to be pivotal in the new frontier that would soon follow the Great Depression and the New Deal.

With FDR's New Deal in place, the United States began the slow process of healing itself but became increasingly isolated from the rest of the world. During the late 1930s, many Americans, particularly the Jewish-American population, were aware of the trouble brewing in Europe but felt little obligation to actually go out and do anything about it. After all, the United States still suffered from the self-imposed wounds of the Great Depression. Our frontier was less an expanding threshold and now more of an afterthought. All of that would change with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. If FDR's New Deal began to turn that inward-looking eye outward again, then Pearl Harbor intensified its gaze.

Prior to World War II, the frontier became somewhat misplaced. It no longer represented some form of physical barrier that separated nations or westward expansion; it became a barrier that separated ideas and social statuses. After the United States entered World War II, the frontier became very clearly and rigidly defined. On one side of the threshold were America and its allies. On the other side were Hitler and the Axis powers. The world had its first real super villain

which allowed everyone to view the world in absolutes and in black and white. Even if the American people understood little behind the ideology motivating their enemies, one thing was decided upon almost universally. We could not allow them to win.

I have spent much of my time discussing these two time periods for several reasons. First, the Great Depression and World War II illustrate perfectly how the American myth is transient by nature. Where we place the frontier is where we fight our conflicts, and these conflicts change from one moment to the next. Since the Great Depression, the frontier has seemingly moved from place to place more rapidly than almost any other time in United States History. The America of the 1930s barely resembles the America of the 1940s. By the 1950s, the Great Depression could be felt, but barely seen. The Great Depression marked a period of constant unrest and uncertainty for the American people. Many would argue that that uncertainty has continued well into the new millennium.

In his book *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, Paul Fussell briefly discusses how the uncertainty of war lead many soldiers to rely on narrative building in the form of rumors. Fussell writes, "In the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty for all and mortal danger for some, rumor sustains hopes and suggests magical outcomes. Like any kind of narrative, it compensates for the insignificance of actuality" (36). Campbell, Slotkin, and Bates all address this need for narrative construction. Applying their scholarship to the narratives of the late 1930s and early 1940s reveals how American culture began to create a new mythological hero that harkens back to the gods of Olympus. This is the period in which the modern American superhero is recreated in the form of a blue

and red spandex-clad sun god from the planet Krypton. This period marks the creation of Superman.

The Dawn of the Superhero Myth

Superheroes and their brightly colored costumes might seem a strange vehicle through which to project American myth-making, but the birth of the modern American hero truly begins within the pages of *Action Comics* #1. In those pages, the first adventures of a new kind of hero begin. This hero draws on the culture of the time and the myths of old to create an image and ideal of American existence that adapt with the changes of each era of its existence.

Since the early days of the comic book industry when the books consisted of little more than collected reprints of comic strips found in local newspapers, readers have been fascinated with the stories of heroes of the funny pages. Before Clark Kent donned the cape and tights, Tarzan swung from tree to tree, Flash Gordon battled the confounding frontier of space, and Popeye completed feats of immense spinach-fueled strength, but none of them felt like they lived in a world we could share. The birth of Superman, Batman, and subsequent other heroes allowed everyday people to embrace a hero who shared many of their own traits, qualities, strengths, and weaknesses. Tarzan lived in the jungle, and Flash Gordon spent his time in space. Superman and Batman, however, lived in Metropolis and Gotham—cities that suffered from the same kind of corruption and conflict as our own metropolises.

A common misconception of superheroes both old and new is that they are childish, even though at certain points in history they were. These heroes,

especially the early ones, were born through the hardships of their creators and the struggles those creators experienced. Obviously, children would be attracted to the bright colors and action, but would they be drawn in by the social commentary on the Great Depression? Yes, Superman, Batman, and many others have been written in ways that appeal to children. In fact, that appeal is what resulted in an intense period of censorship and oversight for the entire comic book medium. These same characters have been written in ways that heavily criticize political decisions and social practices of the United States. These same American myths welcome debates of race, sex, politics, drug use, war, and other controversial topics without becoming something unrecognizable. Even their origins and inspirations draw on so many different sources that their appeal is unlimited. In his book *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*, Gerard Jones explains Superman's origins:

> Superman was an evolving hero, as he would continue to be forever. As simple as he looked from the outside, he contained a great, contradictory jumble of inspirations, from Philip Wylie to Douglas Fairbanks, from Edgar Rice Burroughs to Bernarr MacFadden. . . . Jerry and Joe had created a character who transcended and redefined genre: Superman was both a primary-colored cipher of the purest fantasies and a cartoon that could comment on nearly every strain of mass entertainment. (115-6)

These superheroes are uniquely American because they appeal to the psyche and imaginations of the young and old while simultaneously reflecting the American culture that cultivated them. They entertain and illuminate.

Their appeal to generations separated by decades only begins to explain their value to American myth-making. In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin explores America's fascination with heroes. He examines early Daniel Boone stories, Revolutionary War stories, as well as John Wayne and Clint Eastwood films. He explores how these different heroes reflect the times in which they were popularized and the commentary they offer on American heroism. These heroes are not just from different generations; they're from different centuries. They are important to Slotkin's analysis because, as he explains, "Myths are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness— with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain" (Slotkin 5). Daniel Boone stories and John Wayne movies reflect different moments in American history. In that same vein, the superhero narrative of the Great Depression and the superhero narrative of World War II also differ. Further still do the narratives of the Cold War, Vietnam War, Desert Storm, and 9/11 differ.

Ever since Superman first graced the pages of *Action Comics*, he has connected past to present. As has already been established, the Great Depression was a tumultuous period of flux and change for America which lead directly into the even more tumultuous and changing period of World War II. This is the world

in which Superman and his contemporaries grew up. They not only survived the shifting political climate of the fifties and McCarthyism, they helped define it. The threat of a nuclear armageddon couldn't keep Superman from the public's consciousness. These heroes have outlasted 8-Track tapes, VHS, and parachute pants.

Many critics also view the superhero narrative as little more than violent power fantasies for young children; the early myths of the American frontier performed this role. As explained earlier, the frontier separated what was acceptable American behavior from the perceived cultural threat of the un-American. Those early myths created a villain in the Native Americans that populated the frontier. Who the Native Americans truly were, which was typically a people more diverse than those early myths ever acknowledged, did not matter. They came to personify all the fears and insecurities of American consciousness, so heroes were created who could conquer those fears. In that same vein, the comics of the 1940s often depicted the heinous Nazi machine and fearsome Japanese military as all that was truly fearful to the American people, so Captain America brandished the shield of justice and crossed seas to deliver right hooks to Hitler on a monthly basis. Two decades later, with the country under constant threat of nuclear death, science became a source of severe anxiety for Americans. During this period, Marvel Comics ushered in an entire line of heroes who drew strength from radioactivity, mutation, and strange explosions of energy. Whether our superhero myths literally depicted American victory over American enemies or simply took those fears and turned them into sources of great strength, they

have offered the same comfort and united mindset the early myths of the frontier offered to settlers. They provided a guardian to protect us from new and old enemies.

Beneath those capes and cowls exist perfectly preserved time capsules. In the same way scholars comb through line after line of Beowulf to try and find some clues to what life was like for ancient Anglo-Saxons, we have a chance to comb through panel after panel of these funny pages to get a glimpse into the lives, values, and interests of our more recent ancestors in a way only literature and art can allow. For the purpose of my analysis, I will be looking closely at the changes these heroes underwent. What caused the changes? Were the changes in some way a criticism of political and historical influences? How did audiences respond to these changes? Did popularity increase or recede? With these questions, I hope to uncover some understanding of the myth of American heroism, how it's presented, and the way it's received.

I will examine Superman and Batman as the primary depictions of this mythical American hero. These two characters share very similar early years. They are both created in the twilight between the end of the Great Depression and World War II. As brother myths and pop culture icons, they find themselves under similar criticism throughout most of their publication, but they also differ wildly in how each character responds to those criticisms. This is reflected in their relationships with one another as well. The two characters go from super friends in the 1940s-1960s, to nearly killing each other in the late 1970s-1990s. Now they are most commonly depicted as begrudging friends, figurative brothers united by

a common cause. Additionally, I will examine why each character seems to go through great periods of relevancy and irrelevancy. Why is the Superman "S" one of the most identifiable, non religious symbols of the Twentieth Century, but all of the most recent films about Batman drastically outperform all those about Superman? These two characters have battled each other for footing in the landscape of American consciousness for seventy-five years. Why have they remained relevant when so many other American icons have shuffled off into obscurity? Other American myths and heroes will make appearances in my analysis but only as points of comparison.

The worlds these two heroes occupy, both real and imagined, will feature heavily in my analysis. I will be working from the Great Depression of the 1930s up through post-Vietnam America. Along the way, I will make stops at other major conflicts of the United States' Twentieth Century, such as World War II and the Cold War. I focus on these conflicts because America always undergoes some kind of cultural shift at the start and end of each major conflict. Those cultural shifts shuffle the collective consciousness of a society. The political climate of the 1930s bled into the pages of *Action Comics* and *Detective Comics* every bit as much as the political climate of the 1940s did during World War II. With that in mind, I will spend much of my time looking at the political shift of the late 1950s-1970s. During this period of paranoia and othering, America's consumption of myths and heroes greatly changed. If the conflicts and turmoil of the 1930s and 1940s served as the birth and adolescence of the superhero narrative, then the 1950s, 60s, and 70s are the rebellious teenager years where our

childhood narrative grows up to rebel against the status quo of the culture that birthed it. This era of the Cold War becomes something of a fulcrum upon which the superhero narrative tilts.

The last piece of the superhero myth puzzle is the creators, writers, illustrators, and parent companies of these superheroes. Currently, it's hard to think of the superhero narrative as little more than a product line for companies like Warner Brothers and Disney. These superheroes are viewed as money-making machines for corporate giants less so than deposits of the cultural currency of the last seventy-five years. This view completely disregards the creators who have left their stamp on these American myths. When discussing these early superhero writers in his book *Men of Tomorrow*, Jones explains:

> Their relationships with masculinity, sexuality, power, individuality, violence, authority, and the modern fluidity of the self were so tangled and so heartfelt that their work spoke to the anxieties of modern life more sympathetically, more completely more acutely than they could have foreseen in the most inflated summer daydreams. With the passage of time, their creations become only more relevant. (xv)

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster did not create Superman in a vacuum. They created Superman as two under-represented Jews struggling for a living during the Great Depression. Their Superman reflects the concerns, fears, and anxieties they experienced toiling away in poverty. During a time when a superhero summer blockbuster makes over a billion dollars every other year, it is hard to imagine a

world in which these stories danced along a razor's edge of relevancy, but that was the world Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams entered when they took over Batman titles to create a version of the Caped Crusader that was both a reflection of a post-Vietnam America and their own political ideologies. These creators are every bit the products of their cultural environment as any other author or artist is.

As stated at the beginning of this introduction, myth-making is a fundamental human quality. It connects our past to our present and preserves our present for the future. Our desire to create and consume myths defines us as individuals, connects us within societies, and links societies together. As Campbell explains of myth, "Where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with the world" (25). In many ways, American myths and heroes are universal myths and heroes. It is my hope to find that strain within these stories that make them wholly and uniquely American.

This is where we begin. A strange ship from a fictional planet crashing to earth at the tail end of the Great Depression and the first adventures of the modern American hero—the fulfillment of American mythology.

CHAPTER 2:

THE BIRTH OF THE AMERICAN SUPERHERO

Giambattista Vico, an Eighteenth Century philosopher and rhetorician,

once explained in his most well-known work *New Science: Principles of the New

Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations* that people created language

to give form to their ideas (145). Cultures create myths and narratives in much the

same way. Once an idea spreads throughout a people and begins to take form, it

ceases to be an idea and becomes an integral part of society. It becomes a self-

sustaining idea that begins to shape a people rather than be shaped. However, no

matter how large or integral an idea might be to a society, it still has a point of

origin. In *The New Science,* Vico theorizes that the idea of gods began when man

first looked up to the night sky and lightning danced across it. Not understanding

how such a display could be possible, man conceived the idea of gods. The origin

of our myth, our American superhero, can be found in less dazzling skies.

Superman, the product of a displaced and reimagined frontier myth and a

character that would eventually grow into one of the most recognizable symbols

of modern pop culture, began in the minds of two Jewish teenagers from

Cleveland.

The Jewish, Capitalist, and Industrial Influences of Superman

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster grew up in strikingly similar childhoods. Both

of them were part of a booming Jewish community in Cleveland during the early

1920s. This Jewish culture shaped much of the young boys' lives. As Gerard

Jones explains, heritage would be nearly inescapable for them. He writes:

> From the 1890s-1920s, it grew from a quarter million people to
>
> nearly a million. . . . It was a mecca for immigrants: 40 percent of
>
> its population was foreign born or of foreign parentage. . . .
>
> Cleveland's 70,000 Jews were far fewer than New York's million
>
> or Chicago's third of a million, but they were enough to sustain a
>
> rich culture, complete with a Yiddish press and theater, a few
>
> nationally influential synagogues, and dozens of small shuls and
>
> community organizations. (24-5)

This Jewish community would influence much of the boys' youth as their fathers

and siblings toiled away to try and make money to provide for their families. As

the grip of the Great Depression tightened around the throats of more and more of

the middle class, families would begin to realize the grim realities of the time.

However, the financial hardships were accompanied by an even more pervasive

struggle of American Jews leading up to and during the Great Depression—ethnic

prejudice.

In the introduction, I wrote concerning the social, political, and cultural

climate of the 1930s because examining the modern American superhero requires

and understanding of these factors. This new hero was forged in the fires of a

disenfranchised generation, but to truly understand the world in which this

American myth was produced requires an understanding of one of the more

disenfranchised subcultures of the Great Depression. Being an American Jew

during the 1920s and 1930s meant being subjected not only to the hardships of the Great Depression but also to widespread systematic underrepresentation. Siegel and Shuster grew up in this culture. They fulfilled American mythology in this culture.

For many, American Jews were synonymous with greed and corruption during the 1920s and 1930s. Politicians and public figures regularly and publicly blamed the incompetence of government action on the corruption of Jewish wealth and greed. One of the more infamous instances of public anti-Semitism came prior to the big collapse of the Great Depression when Henry Ford of the Ford Motor Company publicly accused Congress of being influenced by the "International Jewry" of Wall Street (Watkins 150). Nevertheless, national anti-Semitism limited Jewish immigration into the United States. In 1924, the McCarran Act greatly restricted the immigration of Jews and other "insufficiently Anglo-Saxon or Nordic-Protestant types" (Watkins 33). In the years leading up to the Great Depression, the message was clear; minorities and other ethnicities, including Jews, threatened American stability. The great myth of American idealism had no room for these un-American peoples.

Domestically, anti-Semitism was both overt and unspoken. As Watkins explains, "If American Jews were fearful about what was happening in Germany, they could find plenty of worry in their own country. Thanks to numerous anti-Semitic organizations" (317). These organizations grew in number but not necessarily size. Nearly 800,000 of these groups sprouted up as the conflicts in Europe escalated while several political leaders also openly expressed their anti-

Semitic views without worry of backlash. American Jews also experienced less outspoken forms of discrimination during this time. Many were denied access to local groups such as country clubs and generally ostracized from communities (Watkins 320-1). During the late 1930s, the average American could find anti-Semitic sentiments in every form of consumable media, ranging from radio programs like the Radio League of Little Flower and the newspaper *Social Justice* (Watkins 322). During this time, however, anti-Semitism would be taken to greater extremes.

As the mass arrests, beatings, and murders began in Germany and its newly conquered territories, America remained expressively outraged but unmotivated in action. Watkins explains, "Most of the world was numb with horror, and said so out loud. . . . But expressions of shock were all that Roosevelt or any other nation leader seemed able—or at least willing—to offer" (320). Because the United States placed limits on the number of Jewish immigrants allowed each year, only a lucky 27,370 were able to make it into the United States, and Roosevelt, mostly due to the anti-Semitic leanings of Congress at the time, could not increase that quota despite the atrocities occurring in Europe. As horrible as the truth was, America maintained neutrality. The country still limped along bearing the scabbing wounds of the Great Depression. Nothing could unanimously convince the American people to intervene in a war that seemed so far away to most but probably hit too close to home for some. As Watkins explains, "So while the Jews of Germany and Austria died and tens of thousands were imprisoned in concentration camps every passing week, America's doors

remained closed" (320). The message was clear. The conflicts in Europe were a Jewish problem, not an American one.

Despite the struggles Shuster and Siegel experienced both directly and indirectly during their youth, their shared upbringing also instilled a valuable sense of social justice in the two boys. American Jewish culture of the early 1920s had very close ties to the ideas of socialism and social justice. In tracing the histories of Shuster and Siegel, Jones explores this relationship by diving into the boys' Russian Jewish heritage. He writes:

> Socialism was a growing movement among Russian Jews, for it promised not only to free workers from exploitation but also to free the world from a set of delusions that usually worked against Jewish welfare. Under socialism the Jewish sense of justice and mutual protection would survive, but the nonsense of religion could be eliminated. This was the same hunger for a better future that fed messianism among the Orthodox and assimilation among the children of immigrants in America. (12)

Shuster and Siegel admittedly had little interest in the religion of Judaism. Neither recalls ever entering a synagogue as an adult, but they were raised within this socialist-minded community that valued helping those in need more than individual success. From a very early age, Siegel and Shuster were both aware of their station in life and the injustices thrust upon the working class. Much like the lightning that Vico theorized gave rise to man's notion of gods, so too would this social influence lead Shuster and Siegel to create their own god. However, before

leaving these two lower middle class Jews from Cleveland, there is one last aspect of their childhood that needs to be examined.

Siegel and Shuster did not grow up in their parents' America. They grew up in an America in the midst of huge economic and cultural upheaval--the post-industrial roaring 1920s. Unlike their parents, they were exposed to advertisements for everything from cars to toys to cigarettes. Immediately following World War I, the United States attempted to reinvent itself through rampant consumerism. This reinvention through consumerism would also result in Siegel and Shuster reinventing the myth of the frontier in small, illustrated panels.

This consumer culture is essential to understanding the foundational forces pushing this American myth. Up until that point in history, cultural identity was drawn along very stark boundaries. Identity could be viewed in economic, class, ethnic, geographical, and political terms, but this growing consumer culture allowed people unhappy with their imposed cultural identity to create a new one. Jones explains:

> Americans no longer wanted to be identified by class, ethnicity, or region. But to be a Cadillac driver or a Valentino worshipper or a science fiction reader gave a sense of self and community, especially to young people trying to draw black ink borders around themselves in a world of runaway change. (36)

For two unpopular Jewish kids, this consumer age of the early 1920s allowed them to define themselves by what they bought, and what they bought would eventually allow them to redefine American mythology through those same

consumerist. Yes, they were influenced by Jewish heritage, but they were also influenced by *Flash Gordon*, *Popeye*, *John Carter from Mars*, and the short-lived comic *Gladiator.*

Technological advances were one reason consumerism and alternative culture became so ingrained in the 1920s. Newspapers and magazines could now publish strips and photographs in color. Due to the war, factories now had the infrastructure to mass produce products with relative ease. Most importantly, however, was the increasing popularity of the film industry. Shuster and Siegel grew up in an age in which their biggest concern was not hoping their father would return from war, but rather if they could afford to go see a film. After first seeing *The Mark of Zorro***,** Siegel couldn't get enough of the medium. For the most part, their parents were fine with encouraging this love of film because they knew how much Jewish culture influenced Hollywood:

> Nowhere was Jewish influence greater than in American popular culture. Jews ran the movie studios and wrote the songs. . . . There were Jewish movie stars. . . . Jewish dads made sure their gangster-crazy kids knew who Edward G. Robinson and John Garfield were behind their goyish screen names. . . . Those dads had grown up viewing American culture through the eyes of outsiders, but the kids knew it was their culture, theirs to take and theirs to remake. (Jones 128)

Again, Siegel and Shuster found themselves under the influence of their Jewish heritage even if they did not recognize it at the time.

In an age of rapid technological growth, it is no surprise that Shuster and Siegel sought to define themselves by the stories that explored these new sciences. They were hooked on science fiction stories from the beginning. When finding each other in high school, they energized each other to become even more absorbed in this new nerdy subculture. Their passion went so far as to push Siegel to develop one of the earliest fanzines dedicated to science fiction stories. Today, thanks to the advent of Tumblr, Twitter, and other forms of social media, the idea of a fanzine might not seem all that radical, but in these early days, Siegel and Shuster were breaking new ground. It would not be the last time they would think outside the box.

Shuster and Siegel also benefited from the 1920s in an unexpected way. During the 1930s, the Great Depression hit both of their families hard, but in the years leading up to the Great Depression; both boys enjoyed the fruits of a booming economy. They're childhoods were extended and their adult years delayed. They enjoyed a life that permitted their fantastical trips into these dazzling realms of science and adventure. As Jones explains:

> They were raised in an atmosphere of daily revolution and constant
> novelty, led to believe that their own futures must coincide with
> the great future of mankind. They were the first generation raised
> in the age of popular psychology, their childhoods examined and
> designed for the furtherance of their happiness. They were
> sheltered from hard work and adult knowledge like no generation

> before, allowed to play past an age when their parents would have
>
> already slipped on the yokes of realism. (127-8)

Had either boy been born a decade sooner or later, had either boy grown up in a different city, had either boy not found science fiction pulps, the narrative of modern American mythology would never have been reinvigorated by a spandex-clad alien messiah.

These shaping influences the lives of Siegel and Shuster ultimately lead them to seek out a new narrative that would encapsulate these competing cultures in which they grew. Their shared past rooted in Jewish underrepresentation, their shared socialist upbringing, and their shared love of comic book subculture all pushed them to create a brand new genre of myth. This might be why their response to the Great Depression was to create a champion to inspire and protect in the face of injustice. They had a youthful optimism that the negative forces of their time could not extinguish. As Jones writes:

> For all the stories of growing up in hard times, the voices that tell
>
> those stories crackle with a humor and optimism that somehow
>
> never buckled. . . . Those kids who spent their childhoods in times
>
> of wild promise and entered the workforce just after it all fell
>
> apart—attacked the hustle and shuffle of the Thirties with an
>
> astonishing lack of self-pity and despair (127).

Instead of wallowing in self-pity or despair, Siegel and Shuster elected to attack the shuffle of the 1930s with a new hero who would redefine what it meant to be American.

Superman's First Appearances

How would Siegel and Shuster revolutionize the very idea of American myth? They played with one of the most common and unoriginal ideas possible—the superhuman. The idea of a superman preceded Superman by centuries. In the most simplistic ways, Superman is a god made flesh here to save the denizens of the world from themselves just as Christ does. He is a demigod of heavenly descent here to complete his labors just as Hercules does. He is our personification of values, hopes, and concerns wrapped in an American flag just as the frontiersmen of legend are. The great lie of Superman's genesis is that he had never been seen before, that his story had never been told. Not only had it been told, but it had been told in all different manners. Jones explains:

> "The 'superman' was scarcely a new idea and was in fact a
> common motif of both high and low culture by the early Thirties,
> the inevitable product of those doctrines of perfectibility promoted
> by everyone from Bernarr MacFadden to Leon Trotsky. The world
> had descended from Nietzsche's *Ubermensch* through Bernard
> Shaw's *Man and Superman*, but it was easily wedded to ideas
> neither Nietzschean or Shavian" (81).

Even Hitler would get in on the action, claiming he could create a race of genetically superior supermen and used this claim to help fuel his genetic cleansing.

Why, then, did superman become Superman? He did so because he lived in a world that reflected our own. Hercules needs to be displaced through time and space, but Superman lives, works, loves, and fights in the United States. To put it simply, they didn't create a world around a superman; they created a superman within our world. He wasn't the product of eugenics or philosophical enlightenment; he was the product of a world Siegel and Shuster saw as filled with injustice. They asked themselves a simple question echoed by Jones, "What can and should a superman do in a world of real violence and pain?" (85).

As is well documented in several biographies about Superman, Siegel and Shuster would spend years of revision, rewriting, and rejection attempting to answer that question. Famously, early drafts of Superman depicted him as a bald telepathic super villain who wanted to remake the world in his own image. Ultimately, the two decided to remake Superman into the socialist hero he would remain for several years; however, the first draft of the story that would appear in Action Comics #1 would still retrain some of the more aggressive and rude elements of their original Superman.

The first unpublished draft of that Superman story still centers on Superman defending those who cannot defend themselves, but his methods might be more violent than many expect. The best case for this is how Superman convinces a woman guilty of murder to sign her confession. Jones explains:

> Superman bursts in on the real murderess, a bottle-blond chanteuse, in her dressing room. She shoots him. The bullet bounces off. He grabs the gun, crushes it, and then grabs her arm.

"Are you ready to sign a confession? Or shall I give you a taste of

how that gun felt when I applied the pressure?" She writes a

confession, knowing it will mean her death. He binds and gags her

and carries her to the governor's mansion. (122)

This Superman reads more like a bully or a thug than a defender of truth, justice,

and the American way. It's probably for this reason that this early draft was

rejected. Instead, Siegel and Shuster began this new American myth with a feat of

strength.

Imagine a child seeing *Action Comics* #1 on the newsstand for the first

time. An oddly dressed man lifts a car over his head clearly intending to smash it

to pieces. Around him, men in suits run and cower before his dazzling display of

strength. The dynamic action pops in the foreground as the bright yellow and red

background catches the child's eye. In his book, Grant Morrison asks what effect

this cover has on the imagination of readers for the first time. Is this powerful

character a friend or foe? Who are these men running from him? Is he a monster?

An alien? (6). These reactions would mark the moment when Superman first

gripped the American consciousness with strength enough to "raise tremendous

weights" (Siegel and Shuster 1).

In 2006, Morrison paid homage to the first issue of *Action Comics* by

opening his miniseries *All-star Superman* with a single-page explanation of who

Superman is. The opening page simply reads, "Doomed planet. Desperate

scientist. Last hope. Kindly couple"(1). Similarly, *Action Comics* #1 begins with a

brief one-page explanation of who he was at the time. There we get all the

essential information we need to know about Superman. Along with the quick backstory, we get quick glimpses into Superman's powers with panels depicting his leaping tall buildings, lifting steel support beams, and outrunning a speeding train, but it's one of the final panels on the first page that shows the reader what this new American hero is all about. Beneath an image of Superman reads the caption, "Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn his life to helping those in need" (Siegel and Shuster 1).

Immediately, Superman is cast as a socialist hero of those in need. That one tiny panel holds the entirety of influences of Siegel and Shuster: their rich upbringing in the Jewish American tradition of socialism, their experience with the harsh and oppressive conditions of Depression Era economics, and their love of the impossible that became possible within the pages of their beloved science fiction pulps. That one panel would come to redefine the myth of the American hero.

The readers, unaware of Siegel and Shuster's upbringing, might not have been as tuned into the themes the two young men were exploring after that first page, but what immediately followed made those themes perfectly clear. The next two pages show Superman racing against the clock to prevent an innocent woman from being executed. He does so by breaking into the Governor's mansion while brandishing a signed confession from the real killer. After a brief introduction to Superman's alter ego Clark Kent, Superman gets a report of domestic violence. Superman rushes to the scene, defeats the thuggish husband, and changes back to Clark Kent in time to make sure no one knows Superman was there to save the

day. Next he rescues a kidnapped Lois from a group of brutish mobsters, and now the audience sees the scene from the cover as Superman smashes the mobsters' car. All of the anxieties about this character start to melt away as it becomes clear who this Superman is. He is a guy who defends the weak and makes sure the crooks and criminals preying on the innocent get their comeuppance.

While these first conflicts show the social justice strain of Superman existed from the beginning, his final adventure in *Action Comics* #1 shows that he not only defends people from physical danger, but he also defends us all from corrupted authority figures. Clark Kent, arrives in Washington DC to see Senator Barrows speaking with "the slickest lobbyist in Washington" (11). Superman knows this kind of corruption can't stand. He leaps into action, grabbing the lobbyist and attempting to force an admittance of guilt from him. With the man in hand, Superman leaps high into the air and threatens to drop the sleazy lobbyist. He seems to revel in this task. Not only does Superman protect the everyman of America, but he also enjoys doing it. The strip ends with a declaration and prediction neither Siegel nor Shuster could have believed would come true. "And so begins the startling adventures of the most sensational comic strip character of all time: Superman!" begins the bold font. "A physical marvel, a mental wonder, Superman is destined to reshape the destiny of a world!" (13).

Superman's grip on the American consciousness would continue to tighten after this beginning. National Comics, which would become DC Comics years later, had a hit from the beginning. Glen Weldon, in his biography of Superman, reports that *Action Comics* #1 sold nearly 200,000 copies in its first weeks (25).

Superman was indeed an overnight sensation, a flame burning brighter than all the other pulps and strips at the time. In those first thirteen pages, he leapt over tall buildings and into the American consciousness. His success would continue to skyrocket. Within a year, Superman got his own comic, daily newspaper strip, and continued to appear in *Action Comics*. Before America entered World War II, Superman got his own radio show and cartoon shorts (Weldon 26). Superman went up, up, and away faster than a Kryptonian rocket, but why? What about Superman separated him from his peers? What about him helped redefine American notions of heroism and myth? The answer is three fold.

First, Superman is an alien. He, just like Siegel's family, Shuster's family, and countless other American families, was not born in the United States, but he was adopted by it. Superman immediately redefined what it means to be American by not being American himself. However, *Action Comics* #1 was not the first time this type of story had been told. In fact, Slotkin would argue that this type of hero, one that is both a part of the world he protects and not at the same time, has been around since the early days of American western expansion. Early American tales of the 1800s perpetuated the myth of the American frontiersman, a character archetype who takes his cues from the historical Daniel Boone, who himself was mythologized. This American frontiersman myth helped produce characters like James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo/Hawkeye who would come to personify the frontier itself. As Slotkin explains of Cooper's Bumppo and all myths of this type, "[A] white man who knows Indians so well that he can almost pass for one. . . . Hawkeye became the model for future versions of the

frontier hero in the writings of antebellum historians, journalists, and politicians interested in the important questions of Indian policy, emigration, and westward expansion" (16). Just as the frontiersman myth came to personify the conflicts of the time in which it was mythologized, so to does Superman come to personify the conflicts of his time. Bumppo fights on the battlefield of the frontier; Superman fights on the battlefield of social injustice and economic oppression. However, Superman carves out his own territory to become the frontiersman myth reimagined while also adapting to the cultural climate of the 1930s and 1940s.

One distinction between Superman and the mythic frontiersmen would be in the minutiae. In those frontier stories, the hero isn't working within the confines of the country, but instead working within the confines of the frontier. Daniel Boone came to personify American values of the time, but he also came to personify the frontier, the place where the values of one culture collide with the values of another. Daniel Boone came to resemble the archetypical noble savage every bit as much as the ideal American. In order to defeat threats from one culture, our myth had to become theirs. Characters like the mythical Boone and Cooper's Bumppo only survived on the frontier because they embraced certain elements that would not be acceptable back in the safe confines of civilization. These frontiersmen had to become more like the savages they fought against in order to defeat them.

Superman on the other hand is alien in a more literal sense. Boone walks from the safe, American side of the frontier into enemy territory to protect American culture. Superman enters from outside our borders and saw our struggle

as being internal rather than external. The most immediate threats were not foreign; they were domestic. Rather than battling the frontier, Superman became the frontier and stood between those that sought to redefine what it meant to be American and the working class. In Cooper's stories, Bumppo becomes the enemy to defeat the enemy; In *Action Comics,* Superman becomes American to defeat the enemy.

Clark Kent also helped move Superman closer to the center of American consciousness. In that very first issue of *Action Comics*, the reader marvels at Superman's ability to rip a steel door off its hinges. Knives and bullets break and bend against his body. He lifts cars and soars over buildings, but for some reason Clark Kent can't convince Lois Lane to go on a second date with him. Superman can do anything, but Clark Kent needs glasses. Superman tosses mobsters and bullies around with ease, but Clark Kent cowers from danger. In a very real way, the awkward and nerdy Siegel and Shuster wrote themselves into their story, but more than that, they wrote everyone into the story.

With Clark Kent, Siegel and Shuster truly separated Superman from similar stories of the time. Dick Tracy was always Dick Tracy. Flash Gordon could not stop being Flash Gordon. Tarzan was not only Tarzan, but he was also living in a jungle with which few readers could relate. To go beyond the competing heroes of his time, Siegel and Shuster separated Superman from the myths Slotkin examined. As Morrison explains:

> Hercules was always Hercules. Agamemnon and Perseus were
> heroes from the moment they leapt out of bed in the morning until

the end of a long battle-crazed day, but Superman was secretly

someone else. . . . In Clark, Siegel had created the ultimate reader

identification figure: misunderstood, put-upon, denied respect in

spite of his obvious talents as a newspaperman at Metropolis's

Daily Planet. (9)

Superman captured the imaginations of so many so quickly because there

was a piece of Superman carved out especially for each reader. The truth is, no

one can ever become Superman, but nearly everyone has felt like Clark Kent at

some point in his or her life. Weldon explains that "by so perfectly embodying the

element of wish fulfillment at the heart of character, that Clark/Superman duality

neatly provided us small grasping humans with the 'in' we needed--a stake in his

larger-than-life adventures" (14). Superman was a promise that the injustice that

people experienced on a regular basis would not be allowed to persist; Clark Kent

was a promise to every bullied child gripping the pages of *Action Comics* that

some day maybe they would be strong enough to make things better. Many

readers want to be Superman, but many readers are Clark Kent.

Myth and American Anxieties

The final piece to the Superman puzzle initially resembles the Campbell

and Slotkin depictions of popular myth; Superman did battle with the chief

anxieties of his time. We've already discussed how he attacked manifestations of

social and political injustice, but he also challenged another anxiety of the late

1930s: industrialism. The period following World War I was one of the first

extended periods of relative peace since the industrial revolution. America was no longer engaged in any major foreign conflicts and was not funneling money towards rebuilding other countries or the confederate states. With the noise of conflict quieting, the country was able to hear the engine of industrialism running throughout the country.

The men who returned from World War I were the first to see how the horrors of a highly industrialized military can damage the human body. These same men found their jobs and trades becoming less necessary as more and more products were being made by factories which relied on machines every bit as much as people to function. In the face of this moving industrial mindset, what chance did a person stand?

On the very first page, the audience sees Superman conquering the manifestations of industrialism. Skyscrapers seemed like they touched the heavens, and Superman could easily leap over them. Our railway system was impressive, but no train could hope to out run Superman. What about the massive steel beams used to construct our buildings and monuments? Superman could juggle them. What danger did a gun pose to a man with bulletproof skin? Superman took the anxieties of that era and tossed them aside as easily as he would a car. Morrison explains what this meant to an American consciousness:

> Superman made his position plain: He was a hero of the people.
> The original Superman was a bold humanist response to
> Depression era fears of runaway scientific advance and soulless
> industrialism. We would see this early incarnation wrestling giant

trains to a standstill, overturning tanks, or bench-pressing cranes.

Superman rewrote folk hero John Henry's brave, futile battle with

the steam hammer to have a happy ending. He made explicit the

fantasies of power and agency that kept the little fellow trudging

along toward another sunset fade-out… If the dystopian nightmare

visions of the age foresaw a dehumanized, mechanized world,

Superman offered another possibility: an image of a fiercely

human tomorrow that delivered the spectacle of triumphant

individualism exercising its sovereignty over the implacable forces

of industrial oppression. Its no surprise that he was a big hit with

the oppressed. He was a resolutely lowbrow, as pro-poor as any

savior born in a pigsty. (6-7)

Just as Bumppo and other legends like him battle with the personifications of their

time, so too does Superman battle and conquer the very real anxieties of his.

Unlike Bumppo, however, Superman also takes advantage of these fears and

insecurities because Superman, perhaps more than any character preceding him, is

more than a myth. Superman is a commodity.

Superman's rise had two perfect ingredients in its favor. The first,

Superman was born into a world of emerging technology, especially in the realms

of media, and National Comics needed to make money. Luckily, the good folks at

National paid Siegel and Shuster the going rate for new characters. They made

130$ selling all the rights to Superman to National Comics (Weldon 17). In

buying the rights to Superman, National had the green light to produce Superman

in whatever way they wanted. As noted earlier, National published Superman in

Action Comics, Superman, and an ongoing newspaper strip within the year, but

they also saw the advantages presented to them in other media. Soon Superman

would appear in is very own radio show and cartoon shorts. Jones notes that

Siegel and Shuster grew up in the first fully developed consumer culture, but in a

very real way, so did Superman.

In appearing in these other mediums, Superman came into contact with

millions and millions of people throughout the country. The radio show touched

the imaginations of listeners every bit as much as the first issue of *Action* did.

Superman bombarded the American consciousness relentlessly through every

available avenue. Even for those that didn't read the comics, the radio show and

animated shorts were nearly inescapable. These new mediums also added depth

that Superman's first appearances lacked. The radio serial would add layers to

Superman's myth that persist to this day. Superman's home planet Krypton got its

name in these radio shows. Lois Lane was reinvented to become a well-respected

journalist. Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen makes his first appearance, and

Superman's greatest weakness, Kryptonite, torments him for the first time

(Weldon 26). However, the additions to Superman's mythos were more than some

names, characters, and locations. These new forms of media would also reinforce

what Superman meant to America's collective psyche. They helped to maintain

that someone was looking out for the little guy. "Superman!" the narrator to the

Fleischer Studio's animated shorts bellows, "defender of law and order, champion

of equal rights, valiant courageous fighter against the forces of hate and prejudice."

Superman had become the first widespread, mass-produced, culturally and economically valuable American myth. He scratched an itch that the American people never knew they had. Just like every good myth, those who told his story kept adding and adding to his narrative. Superman was born out of the minds of two young men, but the moment *Action Comics* hit the newsstands, he was reborn again and again, not only in the minds of those who clamored to read his stories and held their breath every time he fought off injustice in the radio serial, but also in each proclamation made by Bud Collyer, the voice of Superman in the radio show. He was reborn every time he battled gigantic lizard monsters in the Fleischer cartoons. He was reborn in every single appearance, and with each rebirth, he recreated the myth of American exceptionalism. He fought urban decay, he battled corrupt politicians, he wrestled with inequality, and he did so with a smile on his face.

Superman challenged the traditional notions of the frontier myth and created something wholly unique. The idealized American hero no longer wore fur skin hats or battled savages on the western frontier. He wore a cape with a giant "S" on his chest and battled fictionalized personifications of the harsh realities of American life. He not only recreated myth, but he created a whole new genre that the American consumer devoured with haste. Within months of his appearance, National Comics editors were demanding new stories of costumed heroes, and, in a flash, Superman found himself accompanied by the Dark

Knight—Batman. Batman was soon followed by Robin, who was followed by Wonder Woman. The Flash, Green Lantern, Atom, Hawkman, Aquaman, and others would not be far behind. Superman's influence ran so deep that other publishers began creating their own superheroes. Timely Comics, the predecessor of Marvel Comics, produced Namor the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, and, of course, Captain America. All of this happened within a three-year span. The rocket sent from Krypton crashed into the American consciousness and left a crater that was soon filled with a brand new type of American hero.

Superman challenged many expectations of the traditional frontier myth. The character came to look inward less than outward. The threats he battled came from within not without. In those early years, Superman fought for the American people against American corruption, but, as is the case with all myths, he would not remain in his original form for long. Across an ocean a real life super villain was waging a war that ceased feeling so far away. Superman would have to leave his infancy and turn that inward gaze outward. This Superman, champion of the oppressed, would not be long for this world. His death was sealed on December 7, 1941. Morrison eulogized this version of Superman, stating, "And so it came to pass that our socialist, utopian, humanist hero was slowly transformed into a marketing tool, a patriotic stooge" (16).

CHAPTER 3:

SUPERMAN FIGHTS THE FRONTIER

In the book *The Myth of the American Superhero* John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett argue American heroes follow a very simplistic formula. Utopian societies are threatened by an external evil, forcing the outsider hero to emerge and battle the invading force to restore perfection to the threatened utopia (6). In the previous chapter, I outlined why their formula does not initially fit Superman and his fellow costumed compatriots. Rather than protecting society from an external force, the Superman of the late 1930s fought personifications of internal threats. He had never existed in a paradisiacal world; he had only ever existed in our reality, as warped as it may be. Those early Superman stories never suggested for a moment that the United States were an idyllic place; however, Lawrence and Jewett's formula becomes more applicable as the United States ceased its internal struggle and turned its gaze outward to a true external evil.

Prior to Pearl Harbor, The United States refused to enter the war that was viewed almost exclusively as a European problem. As far as Americans were concerned, our domestic problems prohibited our joining a war that seemed so far away. Additionally, many felt World War I caused many of the economic and institutional problems that lead to the Great Depression. As T.H. Watkins explains, "The overwhelming majority of Americans were dead against the idea of the United States becoming entangled in anymore foreign wars; one had been enough and more than enough, thank you. Nor was the isolationist wing in Congress ready to give up the illusion that there was safety in distance" (319).

This desire to remain isolated kept Superman limited to American airspace. That is why the the sun god from Krypton stayed on American soil and fought American problems by sticking up for the little guy and delivering right hooks to the jaws of criminals, slimy businessmen, and corrupt politicians. That is where the American consciousness focused. Once America entered the war, however, that consciousness shifted and ceased looking inwardly. Superman, Batman, and all the other heroes represented the ability of the average person to overcome an oppressive and sprawling industrialized machine, but after the first bombs fell at Pearl Harbor, they would come to represent the ability of both the American people and government to overcome the sprawling Axis war machine. Overnight, Superman got his paradise that needed his protection.

World War II would not only redirect the focus of this new American myth outward, but it would also redirect the eye of the American people toward the myth. As comic book superheroes traveled overseas like the soldiers who would come to read them, the America these soldiers once inhabited changed and morphed with the war. The previous chapter illustrated how Superman's Depression era beginning turned him into a champion of the oppressed; this chapter will illustrate how World War II turned Superman into an embodiment of American exceptionalism and eventually sanitized both Superman and the frontier myth that made him possible. Many icons and myths have come and gone, but it is the ability of the American superhero myth to morph and adapt that has kept it relevant when other similar icons and myths have faded into obscurity.

As previously explained, the collective American consciousness attempted to turn a blind eye to the ever-encroaching war in Europe. A potential war meant large-scale sacrifices from families that were only just beginning to recover from the devastation of the Great Depression. A war, especially one on the scale of World War II, also meant even harsher and more costly sacrifices. In his book *Wartime: Understanding Behavior in the Second World War*, Paul Fussell, himself a WWII veteran, explains that World War II had "receded into soft focus and no one wanted to face the terrible fact that military successes are achieved only at the cost of insensate violence and fear and agony, with no bargains allowed" (4). As the looming cloud of war darkened over America's soils, the American people turned to their new mythic heroes for comfort.

As depressing and frightful as wartime was for the American people, it was equally as lucrative for the comic book industry. In the first few years of the war, roughly 70 million Americans were reading comics (*Superheroes: A Never Ending Battle, PBS).* As the war progressed, their popularity only grew and grew to staggering numbers. Soon comics would find themselves in an increasingly larger number of soldiers' hands. According to Gerard Jones, "Those fat, quick, colorful reads were perfect for the GI trying to kill time at the base or on ship. By the end of 1942, over 30 percent of the printed matter mailed to military bases was comic books. Sales that had been breath taking went higher. Superman sold more than a million copies every issue" (213). Something about these superheroes resonated so profoundly with the American people that both citizen and soldier buried their noses into the adventures of Superman, but the stories that comics

sold, the fights that Superman fought, the right crosses that Captain America landed on Hitler's jaw told a different tale than the one American soldiers lived.

The American Soldier, the Japanese Enemy, and the Frontier Myth

Most people know the atrocities of the Vietnam War. Because of the advances in technology and journalism, few could escape the harsh truth of American soldiers maiming Vietcong soldiers and carrying body parts around as trophies. World War II, however, was a different beast entirely. World War II was not as well covered in newspapers and magazines, and what was covered arrived on radio broadcasts and in newsreels in a safe sanitized form. The bellowing roars of patriotism and simplistic moral dichotomies overtook the whispering of complexities and individualities of both person and nation. As Fussell explains:

> If war is a political, social, and psychological disaster, it is also a perceptual and rhetorical scandal from which total recovery is unlikely. Looking out upon the wartime world, soldiers and civilians alike reduce it to a simplified sketch featuring a limited series of classifications into which people in the process are dehumanized and deprived of individuality or eccentricity, are fitted. (115)

These limited classifications affected two groups more than any other--the American soldier and the Japanese enemy. These two groups of people came to have all individuality stripped from them and replaced with two narrative

archetypes that would both simultaneously harken back to Slotkin's model of the frontier myth and pave the road for superhero narrative to travel.

To put it simply, the story of the American soldier during World War II was embedded in John Wayne. The American soldier was a good man of noble intent and righteous strength. He was both a hero and an everyman to the public. He stood out on the edge of the frontier and battled back the invading enemy. This hero not only existed on the field of battle but also on reels of celluloid and in Hollywood war films.

The story of the American soldier during World War II owes more to the myth of the frontier and America's early fascination with the frontiersman hero as produced by Hollywood. As Richard Slotkin explains, the war films of the 1940s and the myths of the American frontier both rely on "centering the action in a small, isolated, ethnically diverse band, which often contains natives and which fights in guerrilla or commando style; building the story around a last stand scenario in which heroic representatives of American civilization sacrifice themselves to delay the advance of a savage enemy" (317-8). The narrative of the American soldier was simple. American soldiers were noble representatives of American civilization; they were strong men who courageously fought the savage and treacherous Axis powers.

Truthfully, fewer soldiers fulfilled this noble archetype than most would hope to admit. More and more soldiers knew the truth of their battle would never reach the shores of American soil. The message sent home was that of honorable "Boy Scoutism" and not the real images of "troops in the forests of Europe

crouching in freezing holes roofed with logs or railway ties and mounds of dirt to

protect against artillery tree-bursts" (Fussell 6). The horrors of the war and what

these soldiers faced daily were replaced with hunting and camping stories. Fussell

explains that soldiers "knew that in its representation to the laity what was

happening to them was systematically sanitized and Norman Rockwellized, not to

mention Disneyfied"(268). Arguably, this sanitized version was for the best as the

truth of the American soldier's life has less to do with Disney heroics and more to

do with the brutalities of war. To the men hopping from island to island in the

Pacific, the war was less than noble. Many soldiers could not see the benefits of

fighting the good fight of World War II. Too many knew they would return to

poverty and disillusionment rather than an ideal America (Fussell 130). It wasn't

a righteous battle for freedom. It was a job they had no choice but to complete

(Fussell 136). This mindset, that they simply had to complete their job, was not an

accident.

One of the great contradictions in the American hero narrative is its value

in individual heroes when many World War II soldiers had their individuality

ripped from them and replaced with a cold and efficient group mindset. After

World War I, the US learned the art of mass production on a scale not thought

possible before. Mass production practices seeped into the military and the

training of soldiers. Fussell explores how World War II forced American soldiers,

and the American people, to think of themselves as cogs in righteous machine. To

illustrate this point, Fussell examines Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* in

which a soldier by the name of Cedric Lane wanders away from his company and

revels in his newfound individualistic identity before being gunned down by enemy fire. Fussell goes on to explain, "The war's intolerance of such individualistic performance is the theme of a whole wartime and postwar literature"(73-4). He later explains that this prevailing and dehumanizing mindset would come to greatly damage the average American soldier, and many would turn to both alcohol and violence to seek relief from this psychological punishment. Of course, the intense violence American soldiers would inflict on the Japanese was more easily digested by the American people thanks to the narratives the United States constructed around the Japanese.

In Germany, Hitler and his Reich justified the atrocities committed against the Jews by dehumanizing and blaming them for contaminating a pure nation. In order to justify the violence of the war and motivate the American people to contribute to it, the United States did the same. Nearly any and all depictions of Japanese, both citizens and soldiers, showed them to be bestial and animalistic. They had to be beasts to assault American people the way they did in the attack on Pearl Harbor (Fussell 116). One of the more telling examples of this is a magazine cover that depicts Emperor Hirohito as a mechanical and menacing flying ape threateningly holding a bomb over an American landscape (Fussell 118). The Japanese soldier was a tiny pest, more insect than man. Fussell explains that their animalistic nature also granted them inhuman benefits such as the ability to "see in the dark" and "survive on a diet of roots and grubs"(119). At least, that was how they were portrayed. The military and American media also perpetuated a sneaky underhandedness as innate to the Japanese soldier. How could brave, strong, and righteous American soldiers ever hope fall to these small-statured

beasts? They clearly employed subterfuge and espionage to undermine American war efforts (Fussell 40). This particular bent to the depiction of the Japanese was particularly effective. It became a way to justify any lost battles or failed missions as the work of treacherous espionage against the heroic American soldier. Between the damage done to the American soldier psyche and the bestial depiction of the Japanese, it should be no surprise that many conflicts resulted in brutal bloodshed both on and off the battlefield. Slotkin recalls a sign located in a South Pacific military headquarters that simply read, "KILL JAPS, KILL JAPS, KILL MORE JAPS!" (325).

Both sides were guilty of violent and unnecessary crimes committed against each other. Fussell notes that American soldiers would collect gold teeth by knocking them out of still living Japanese soldiers' mouths while others collected the skulls of fallen enemies (120). Japanese soldiers were not blameless in this war of torturous extremes, as they were known to mistreat and kill their prisoners (Slotkin 321). The true horror and violence of the war, however, came not just in the physical torments these soldiers inflicted on each other and the enemy, but the systematic besmirching those same soldiers and the nations they represented experienced. In the same way the frontier myth killed the truth of Native Americans to replace it with the narrative of the savage, so too were the intricacies of Japanese culture killed to make room for an American narrative of racial and social superiority over the Japanese. Sadly, this world of cultural reductions and violent narratives is the crucible in which the American superhero was forged.

The Propaganda Pages

World War II would thrust superheroes into the forefront of American consciousness because these stories offered the American people, both at home and overseas, something they wanted desperately: escape. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster intentionally wrote Superman this way during the war. Superman stories became more and more comical and outlandish. The sharp social criticism with which Siegel and Shuster once filled the pages of *Action Comics* and *Superman* faded in exchange for escape from the very real conflict that permeated throughout the entirety of American life (Jones 219). Even the typically darker Batman stayed out of the war effort with stories geared towards dealing with more domestic and light-hearted threats, such as a fanciful trip back in time to 13th century England to help save Robin Hood (Kane 175). More than anything else, these superheroes helped Americans reduce the lingering threat of war, invasion, and death into small manageable panels. Superman might not have been able to protect the American people, but he could make them feel safe. Unfortunately, he and his fellow superheroes did this by perpetuating the same narratives that reduced the soldiers and citizens of both sides of the war into simplistic stereotypes.

For the most part, Superman stayed out of the war. Neither Shuster nor Siegel wanted to write stories of Superman flying into Berlin and ending the war in a single issue of *Action Comics* because they knew it would cheapen the war and insult those fighting overseas. Under editorial pressure, Siegel and Shuster decided to involve Superman in the war the only way they felt would work. Jones

explains, "They did finally bring Superman into the war, although, by agreement with the editors, not as a combatant. . . . The Man of Tomorrow decided that the war should be won by 'the greatest of all heroes, the American fighting man'" (218). During wartime, Superman became a springboard upon which American notions of righteousness and patriotism bounced into the minds of the young readers picking up the issues. Superman's first narrative foray into the war established him as a domestic protector. Even though he defended Americans and stood for American values, he knew this war could only be won with the combined efforts of the American people. While they fought the war, he would protect and shield them from the zanier and more outlandish enemies found in comics; however, Superman would contribute to the war effort in very real ways.

Despite the low public prestige comics held during the war and years following it, the government knew Superman had a major pull with the American people, primarily children. Comic books were mostly viewed as a juvenile bastardization of the well-respected comic strip. This vitriol toward the medium was such that famed comic creator Stan Lee refused to use his real name on any comic book work he published during the 1940s and 1950s because he did not want to taint his reputation (*Superheroes: A Never Ending Battle*, PBS). Regardless, the comics cornered the market on children, and many adults, in a way few other mediums had at the time. The government was knocking on DC Comics' door to draft Superman to the war effort. They knew Superman would be invaluable in recruiting kids to bond drives and patriotic campaigns (Jones 220). His stories might not contain much of the battles happening

overseas, but the covers of both *Action Comics* and *Superman* would let American children and adults know everything they needed to know about the wartime narratives being perpetuated.

During the 1940s, neither Hollywood nor journalists could compete with Superman and superheroes when it came to propaganda.. Even Batman contributed with propagandist covers depicting the Caped Crusader and the Boy Wonder feeding bullets into a machine gun while smiling. Beneath them the caption reads, "Keep those bullets flying! Keep on buying warbonds and stamps!" (*Batman* 15). Superman, however, committed to wartime propaganda much more enthusiastically. The cover of *Superman* #17 depicts the Man of Steel standing tall with Adolph Hitler and a generic Japanese soldier in each hand. They look both astonished and frightened as their much smaller frames struggle with their feet dangling high off the ground (Siegel and Shuster 9). The Japanese soldier on the cover with his contorted and bespectacled face resembles the bestial descriptions of the Japanese at the time. Superman and his fellow superheroes were every bit as guilty of perpetuating racial caricatures of the Japanese. In fact, the comics may have been even guiltier of this than other popular forms of mass media during the war. Even the cartoon shorts produced by Max Fleischer supported the popular perception of the Japanese. In one short entitled "Japoteurs," a small Japanese spy, complete with a thick accent and buckteeth, attempts to steal a prototype plane. Even the animated Japanese enemy had to rely on trickery to gain the upper hand on America's protector.

While the animated shorts preyed upon stereotypical imagery, the stories told in comics, sadly, were no better. In the pages of *Action Comics*, *Detective Comics*, *Captain America,* and others, it would not be surprising to see Japanese soldiers depicted in disturbingly racist images with yellow skin, absurdly rendered slanted eyes, fanged teeth and frothing mouths. On one of the more infamous covers, Superman can been seen operating a printing press which produces a newspaper that shows a caricature of a Japanese soldier being hit across the face. Above the image in large letters the caption reads, "Superman says: You can slap a Jap." Underneath the image, in slightly smaller font, the message reads, "With warbonds and stamps" (Burnley). One of the more shocking facts of these propaganda covers is that very few of the actual stories within the pages of *Action Comics* ever address the war.

On the rare occasions that the war would spill into the pages of comics, the stories would do much to encourage and reinforce the wartime narrative. One *Action Comics* story entitled "Conquest of a City," directly exploits the anxieties of wartime culture. The title page instantly preys upon the collective fears of the American people as the caption explains, "Metropolis! A typical American city representative of the rest of the nation, once peaceful--serene-- in the false security that the vast world struggle raging between democracy and tyranny is a conflict distant and remote" (Siegel and Shuster 62). Immediately, this story reminds the reader how immediate and present the threat of invasion from Nazi forces truly is. This opening splash page, while reminding the reader of the immediate threat of the war, also reminds the reader of the symbolic might of the

American people. The title page shows several gigantic Nazis towering over the buildings of Metropolis pointing their guns downward, but Superman, flying upward and snapping the bayonet of a Nazi soldier, is there to defend the people of Metropolis and the United States.

As the story progresses, Superman goes from fighting Nazi might on the title page to battling the only real threat the Axis powers could use at the time in popular media--espionage. A Nazi spy convinces Metropolis to hold a simulated invasion to help better prepare the American people how to respond should such an invasion ever take place. Of course, the invasion is not simulated at all. The Nazis of the story know they would fail to invade America directly; they have to try underhanded tactics to claim such a victory. Luckily, Superman uncovers the plot and battles against the very real threat of Nazi invasion. The Nazis are no match for Superman's speed, strength, and dedication to the American people. When Nazi planes and bombs crash into the Man of Steel, he falls buried beneath the rubble. The radio announcer watching the battle take place asks if this is the end of Superman. The next panel depicts Superman emerging from the rubble and loudly proclaiming, "Definitely not! It wouldn't be cricket for me to perish until my crusade is concluded" (70). Superman, the defender of America, expresses what the mindset of the United States in a single tiny panel.

Superman and his contemporaries, however, came to take on a more important role to the psyche of the American people than simply reinforcing the collective American narratives at the time. They became true modern and commercialized embodiments of the frontier myth. These superheroes became

more than faces seen in propaganda art; they battled back the lurking fears of

World War II and the anxieties of living in a postwar America in which men had

the power to level cities with a single bomb.

Several future creators and contributors to the superhero mythos came to

see their heroes as protectors, inspirations, and, perhaps in a more profound way,

connections to friends and family members drafted into the war. To Ramona

Fradon, one of the earliest female comic artists, the arrival of Superman meant the

Nazi forces couldn't hurt her. She says, "[E]veryone was in despair . . . and

Superman came out. I remember thinking as a kid that maybe he was going to

save us" (*Superheroes: A Never Ending Battle*, PBS). For others, these

superheroes were more than security blankets and safety nets. To people like Jim

Steranko, a revolutionary comic artist credited with bringing a postmodern bent to

comic book artwork, these superheroes were more than escapist stories of hope;

they were connections to friends and family members battling a threat overseas.

According to Steranko, these mythic heroes made people feel closer to those

scared soldiers doubled over in foxholes.

Legendary comic scribe Grant Morrison once explained in an interview

that he was connected to the horrors of the war perhaps more than most kids his

age. Morrison's father fought with the Allied forces and saw the evils that even

they were willing to commit. Following the war his childhood home in Scotland

stood mere miles from an American nuclear submarine. He grew up with a

constant reminder of the devastation and horror of World War II a short bike ride

away. For him, and countless other like him, America represented not victory and

honor but the destruction that could only be accomplished by dropping two

nuclear bombs on Japanese cities. Morrison, however, also came into contact with

the personification of the new American myth--Superman. To Morrison, the

United States at some point stopped being that nuclear submarine and became the

spandex-clad protector of truth, justice, and the American way. Just as the early

Siegel and Shuster Superman fought the embodiments of the formless and

threatening societal forces of the 1930s, Morrison's first experience with

Superman created this monolithic figure that could battle back the apocalypse. In

Morrison's own words, "Superman could defeat the bomb" ("Grant Morrison: Bat

Bard"). The myth of the American superhero had grown strong enough to even

conquer the perception of the United States and the looming nuclear threat of the

Cold War.

Postwar America and Censorship

By time the war ended, the American superhero had reached something

of an impasse. With the war ending and soldiers returning home, American

people's fascination with superheroes changed. Those soldiers who had

uniformity and comradery battered into them by the war, their training, and the

army brought a new outlook on life back with them. Suddenly, stories of

costumed vigilantes stopped appealing to the general American public. Superhero

comics started to wane in popularity. The early heroes, Superman, Batman,

Wonder Woman, and Captain America, were still profitable, but after the war,

almost no new costumed creations would thrive. In their place, Americans

became preoccupied with more specialized and niche comics such as those that focused on teens, romance, horror, and war (Jones 224).

Despite the failing numbers and the increasing number of lost and forgotten superheroes, the myth would survive and thrive in ways that extended beyond the funny books. Superman's presence and predominance in both radio and cartoons would soon be joined with the television show *The Adventures of Superman* in 1951. With the arrival of television, the American superhero myth found yet another route through which it could travel into the American consciousness. With physical copies of comic books failing, this cross-market success became vital in keeping the superhero narrative alive in the minds of the American people. These heroes were no longer just new and exciting reinventions of the frontier myth; they became American staples right along with baseball and apple pie. Even though the comics themselves failed, people still thirsted for more stories of Superman and his fellow tenured superheroes. In fact, business executive Ed Cato claims that the merchandising of superheroes through the realms of radio, movies, television, apparel, collectibles, and so on was "an essential part of the building of their whole mythologies" (*Superheroes: A Never Ending Battle*, PBS). Of course, remaining such a major focal point of American culture draws criticism with the praise. Soon, these American superheroes would be threatened by the very fears and anxieties they had battled against for fifteen years.

Immediately following the war, comics found themselves trapped in a perfect storm of criticism. Emerging from a long war such as World War II has

strange effects on the psyche of a nation. For four years the United States, both citizens and soldiers, fought a war that shook the basic foundations of society. As Jones explains, ""The story Americans had told each other through the war was that G.I. Joe, through sheer humble, dogged effort, would triumph over evil and then go home to his old job while his bride returned to her kitchen and they'd raise a family and carve the nation up into picket-fenced utopia" (234). Instead, those men returned to face women who were not as willing to give up the changes they had grown accustomed to. Shockingly, women were reluctant to give up their new found economic agency while African Americans who had fought, worked, and died like white American soldiers and workers were unwilling to return to a life of second class citizenship. Those returning soldiers too had to find a way to readjust to a position in a world outside the military machine. There were other anxieties too as Jones explains:

> The long draining realities of combat, self-denial, and labor ended in the huge relief of victory, but they ended also in horror. The bombs that ended the war with such breath-taking suddenness brought a new nausea. People began to think about what the next war would bring, and they knew America wouldn't be able to hold the secret of the bomb for long. And there was an enemy already. There would be no fifteen years of apparent peace after this war as there'd been after the last one. (234)

In order to alleviate these anxieties and pressures, a new narrative had to be created. Luckily, World War II put into place the cultural infrastructure needed to construct that new narrative.

To perpetuate the narratives during World War II, the American government employed a morale culture initiative. This initiative led the government to seek the aid of Superman and other superheroes to bring children into the domestic war effort; however, the government went to much greater lengths to ensure this collective mindset. Most Americans relied on two primary sources for their information of the War--radio and print journalism. The United States government began influencing and dictating the kinds of stories that would reach air and print. They made sure only stories that could motivate and inspire the American people would be told. During that time, morale culture had become so prevalent that, "The National Association of Broadcasters developed a code governing the conduct of its members, and one of its clauses prohibited programs 'which might unduly affect the listener's peace of mind'" (Fussell 181). The government would also pay Hollywood to produce wartime films that promoted the notion of American exceptionalism. All of this is simply to shed light on the ability of both the media and government to enforce a narrative on the American people. As Fussell explains, "The postwar power of 'the media' to determine what shall be embraced as reality is in large part due to the success of the morale culture of wartime" (164).

With World War II success giving way to Cold War fears, the United States would get to flex the propaganda muscles it built during World War II. In

order to drum up fear of the new Soviet enemy, government organizations funded

different films, magazines, concerts, and art exhibits that both depicted the evils

and horrors of the Soviet Union and also depicted the positive features of

American life (Green). During World War II, the American people feared a

potential attack or invasion on domestic soil. During the Cold War, the American

people feared that the enemy might already be among them and viewed all that

was un-American as Soviet. Movies like the 1951 *The Thing* horrified audiences

as an alien threat hid among the heroic Americans while murdering them one by

one. At the end of the film, one of the surviving members urges the audience to

"watch the skies everywhere, keep looking, and keep watching the skies". In

order survive in this political climate, superheroes had to armor themselves in red,

white, and blue to remain as positively American as possible.

With various government agencies pushing pro-American rhetoric in

every possible form of media, comics soon began adopting the same

tone. Additionally, a desire to believe in authority permeated through the

American consciousness following the war. According to prolific comic book

author Dennis O'Neil, "People wanted to believe in authority" (Smith). In a world

where an entire city could be wiped away in a second, the American people

wanted to feel safe with the people in power. This is the period of time in which

Superman adopted the moniker of "Truth, Justice, and the American Way"

(Weldon 95). Superman's becoming more representative of American authority

was not surprising, but the changes made to Batman postwar were much more

noticeable. Batman, who had always been more of an outsider and vigilante figure

than Superman, soon became Gotham's most upstanding citizen. In postwar America, Batman could only exist as part of the establishment and, thus, became a deputized member of the police department (Smith). Many of these changes were made out of fear of censorship and investigation. With the witch-hunt for communists heating up after Joseph McCarthy famously asserted that communists had infiltrated nearly every aspect of American government, no one in the comic industry wanted to have to endure a McCarthy trial. Sadly, these attempts to get in line with the prevailing American mindset failed, and comics still found themselves under heavy criticism from another source.

In the 1950s, Dr. Fredric Wertham released his book *Seduction of the Innocent* which claimed that comics were detrimental not only to the youth of America but also mass culture in general (Beaty 136). Around the same time, superheroes and comics also came under fire in the form of an investigation held by the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (Beaty 155). Wertham was brought in to testify and even condemned the very function the US government valued in comics during the war. According to Bart Beaty in his book *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, "[Wertham] suggested that a number of factors including comic books, conspired to seduce and betray America's youth and indoctrinate them with corrosive values. To this end, Wertham suggested that the propagandist value of comic books was so strong that 'Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry'" (157). With Wertham's damning testimony and very weak defenses from comic creators, the industry quickly threw together a self-regulating body that was, perhaps, even harsher than any

ruling the subcommittee would have handed down (Beaty160). The new Comics

Code of Authority would censor comics to such a degree that many comic

companies would go out of business by the end of the 1950s. For nearly two

decades, Superman and Batman stood between the American people and the

anxieties that plagued their collective consciousness. Not mad scientists, maniacal

clowns, nor scheming Axis enemies could defeat the superhero myth. Ironically, it

took the comic creators themselves to deliver the first real defeat to their own

creations. The CCA also affected the Man of Steel and the Caped Crusader in

such a way that they would again have to be reinvented and reintroduced to the

American people. This reinvention led to a radically new superhero narrative.

Wartime posed the first major challenge to the superhero myth. As they

were created in the late 1930s, they represented a very specific Great Depression

mindset. They were birthed into a world few myths had been prior--one of

technological and industrial might never before seen. As the years passed, they

entered a new conflict and became a new type of myth. Unlike the stories that

housed the cultural heroes before them, the superhero was uniquely adaptable in

content, production, and medium. When Cooper released his stories chronicling

the adventures of frontiersman Natty Bumppo, he did so in a world that could not

produce a new Bumppo novel every month. Nor did Cooper have the ability to

recreate Bumppo in radio, film, and television. Bumppo came to represent the

frontier through the lens of Cooper's time. Superman, however, could be

recreated every month and in different mediums. Batman was not limited to the

pages of *Detective Comics* and *Batman*. This inherent adaptive ability of the

superhero myth to shift along with the cultural and political landscape while also taking advantage of the technological advances in media production is the central defining element to remain both captivating and relevant across decades. This adaptive ability would also pull the superhero narrative out of the prison of censorship to catch up to a world engulfed in a new and more culturally challenging war.

CHAPTER 4:

THE SUPERHERO MYTH OF THE VIETNAM WAR

In 1959, a young artist named Neal Adams walked into the National

Comics publishing office with a portfolio of his work. He had to beg and plead to

get the chance to meet with the editor, Julie Schwartz. When Adams finally got to

show his work to him, the editor was admittedly impressed. Schwartz, however,

didn't offer Adams a job. As far as Schwartz was concerned, he was doing Adams

a favor. Adams recalls Schwartz telling him, "We'll be out of business within a

year" ("Neal Adams: Ad-Man Returns").

After Dr. Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent*, his

subsequent testimony before congress, and the implementation of the Comics

Code of Authority, the medium that birthed the superhero narrative was in free

fall. The restrictions placed on comic books crippled many publishers and forced

several others out of business. The Comics Code of Authority prohibited crime to

be presented in any fashion. Authority figures could only be portrayed as

upstanding and honest without a hint of corruption. Any kind of drug use was

fiercely censored. Writers could not use any kind of slang or improper English as

it set a bad example for the youth ("Denny O'Neil Pt. 2: The Professor from

Gotham University"). Of course, all of these restrictions were subject to the

opinions of the board serving on the Comics Code of Authority. Comic author and

editor Dennis O'Neil once wrote a story in which a giant monster rampaged

through New York in an issue of *Iron Man*. The Comics Code of Authority sent it

back to him for revision because a scene in which the monster stepped on and

crushed a police car was deemed disrespectful towards authority ("Denny O'Neil

Pt. 2: The Professor from Gotham University"). While these broad interpretations

of the Comics Code of Authority were damning and restrictive, many creators

were grateful to have to deal with the Code rather than the federal government.

Despite the self-regulating body of the CCA, comics themselves were still

ostracized by most of the American public. During the late 1950s and early 1960s,

many comic creators changed their names due to how disreputable the medium

had become (*Superheroes: A Never Ending Battle*, PBS). This diseased image

thrust upon comic books did little to inspire young readership as the product that

now filled newsstands had lost all that once made it captivating. Superheroes were

not the only ones hurting either. Other genres of comic books were also crushed

under the heavy hammer of the CCA. The Code succeeded in domesticating

comics, but it did so to the point that sales plummeted. With the medium fading

into obscurity, superheroes risked becoming nothing more than a footnote in

American history; however, this myth, just as it had done during the receding

decade, found a way to survive and remain relevant to the American consumer.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the American superhero myth survived thanks

almost exclusively to television; however, it survived as a commodity. It only

functioned as a product that could be bought and sold. In 1952, *The Adventures of

Superman*, starring George Reeves, was broadcasted into millions of American

homes. This Superman was every bit a representative of the authority as his

wartime comic book counterpart. Each and every episode let the world know

Superman was not only American but also trustworthy. He would have to be if he

was a protector of "truth, justice, and the American way," as every broadcast boasted (*The Adventures of Superman*, ABC). George Reeves' Superman even had a superpower that the two-dimensional version did not; he was immune to corruption. While the comics were being dragged through the mud and sales plummeted, *The Adventures of Superman* was one of the most popular shows on television throughout the 1950s. The television version of Superman was so popular and, more importantly, safe that the US government solicited George Reeves and *The Adventures of Superman* to serve as spokesman for the United States Treasury Department (*Superheroes: A Never Ending Battle*, PBS). As comic sales continued their downward spiral well into the sixties, *Batman* became one of the most popular television shows of the decade. Inspired by the pop art movement championed by Andy Warhol, this colorful representation of Batman was goofy and safe, not to mention a fully deputized member of the police force (*Batman* 2.27, ABC). The television Batman was embedded into the minds of the American people with a multicolored "BANG!"

The waning popularity of the physical commodity of the comic book conversely resulted in the commodification of the superhero myth. Were it not for the other mediums and merchandising, the American superhero myth would have died out well before the 1970s. For some reason, the Cold War climate did little to fan the dying embers of the superhero myth. A character like Batman by his nature was anti-authority and anti-establishment. He represented a time when people felt distrust of their authority figures. These heroes operated outside the limits of the law. The country during the late 1950s and early 1960s was very

much pro-establishment. This was the height of the Red Scare, and the American

people wanted to believe their government would protect them from the Soviet

menace ("The Cold War in Asia: Crash Course U.S. History #38"). Superman

survived the transition into this postwar culture because he so easily adopted the

uniform of the establishment, but some of Superman's other heroic allies, most

notably Batman, lost many of their most essential mythic qualities coming into

the light as agents of the government. It would take a drastic change, great

tragedy, and horrific atrocity in the collective mindset of the American people for

the superhero to recover what was lost.

Vietnam, Atrocity, and the Loss of Innocence

With Cold War tensions running high, America began to approach the

Soviet and communist threats with a containment strategy which was the

underpinning of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Domino Theory. Essentially, the

United States would offer aid, funding, political support, and, in extreme cases,

military assistance to the countries neighboring the Soviet Union in an effort to

prevent communism from spreading to other countries. This strategy pulled the

United States into the Korean War and conflicts in the Middle East. Despite the

amount of funding, manpower, and soldiers the United States pumped into these

conflicts, the general perception of the government remained positive.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the American people lived in constant fear

of a possible nuclear catastrophe as both the United States and Soviet Union

continually flirted with full-scale nuclear war. The American people wanted to

believe those in the US government with their fingers on the button could be trusted, especially since the American people were almost unanimously united in their fear of the Soviet Union. This trust in the United States Government would slowly start to dissolve as the conflicts in Southeast Asia culminated in the Vietnam War.

Several authors have written about the anti-war movement that emerged during the Vietnam War in staggering detail. Rather than simply repeating the familiar observations with which most are familiar, I will dispel a few misconceptions regarding the movement. First among these is that it grew out of very small and disorganized protests by such groups as mothers, clergy, and eventually, students. Even during the first few years of the Vietnam War, the American people were generally supportive of it as a means to halt the spread of communism ("The Cold War in Asia: Crash Course U.S. History #38"). When the anti-war movement began to take hold in American culture, the demonstrations and protests were sporadic and isolated.

As the war dragged on, however, the anti-war movement ceased being isolated and began permeating American society. A strong underground press and journalism movement helped push the mainstream news outlets to cover the war with more depth and objectivity than traditional news outlets (Franklin 91). Television's prevalence led to never before seen coverage of the war. In his highly critical book *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, H. Bruce Franklin explains:

> Vietnam was the first war to be broadcast into the homes of the
>
> American people with such immediacy. . . . American citizens
>
> could, for the first time see on-screen killings, as well as live action
>
> footage of the bulldozing of human carcasses into mass graves, the
>
> napalming of children, and the ravaging of villages by American
>
> soldiers. (13)

One of the reasons the public so adamantly supported World War II was that so few saw the atrocities being committed on both side of the conflict; the coverage of the Vietnam War afforded no such luxury. How could the American people trust a command structure that willingly allowed the atrocities at My Lai to occur? As Franklin explains, at My Lai " American soldiers did not just slaughter as many as five hundred unarmed people. They also sodomized young girls, raped women in front of their children, bayoneted children in front of their mothers, and used babies for target practice" (39).

Despite the extended coverage of the War, the growing anti-war sentiment, and the violence escalating in the southeast Asia, the anti-war movement did not truly take off until the blunders and real atrocities of the war reached the American people. The Tonkin Gulf Incident and the subsequent misinformation presented to the American people might have motivated the American people to support the war, but the missteps that followed would not. Later, the Tet Offensive in 1968 all but sealed the doom of general American support for the war as many US officials had promised the enemy's lack of coordination and support would result in the end of the war within months. The

highly coordinated assault on several key locations throughout Vietnam proved that was not the case.

As the war in Vietnam dragged on, the government's approval rating continued to plummet, and the ability of government institutions to perpetuate a positive view of the war faded (Franklin 43). The United States ceased resembling the idyllic image officials attempted to cram down the public's throat. It was difficult to view any form of American foreign expansion as positive. When Kennedy was president, he romanticized the idea of the frontier. To hear him speak of this mythic frontier was to hear of a myth filled with hope and possibilities (Hellmann 36). By the end of the war, it became little more than a metaphorical representation of America's policy regarding Vietnam and communism. The frontier receded into a containing perimeter that did less to protect those on the inside as it did to harm those on the outside (Hellmann 47). In *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*, Milton J. Bates draws comparisons to the state of the frontier and a military perimeter. He writes, "A military perimeter is established not to 'contain' but to defend against invasion. On a perimeter one's attention is usually directed outward rather than inward. During the Vietnam era, however, a series of traumatic external events turned our thoughts inward and backward" (12). Just as the Great Depression led some to conceive of a frontier separating the poor and rich, so too did the Vietnam War reveal cultural boundaries separating races, sexes, and classes as well. Bates explains, "It would not be far-fetched to say that for those who opposed the war as well as for those responsible for fighting it, Vietnam was not a foreign war at all.

It was a domestic cultural conflict of long standing, an American western displaced onto alien soil" (33). The conflict abroad unveiled a conflict at home as well.

The ongoing war helped to erode America's faith in the guiding narrative. Slotkin speaks of this phenomenon as the construction of the anti-myth. He writes:

> Historical events (like the defeat in Vietnam) always call into question the validity of 'the guiding myth'. In a healthy society the political and cultural leaders are able to repair and renew that myth by articulating new ideas, initiating strong action in response to crisis, or merely projecting an image of heroic action. . . . American elites (academics, policy intellectuals, journalists) have made the emergence of such leaders difficult by devoting their energies almost exclusively to criticizing, exposing, scandalizing, debunking, and demystifying the symbols, cannons, and understandings that inform public belief. . . . In the process they have created a public anti-myth. (626-7)

Our guiding myth of the frontier told Americans we were all in the good fight together, but the realities of the war and the political culture it fostered exposed where the cracks in this mythical frontier were. With the national myth failing, new cult myths began to surge. During the Great Depression, people defined themselves through capitalism. During World War II, people defined themselves by their national identity. During Vietnam, the established mythmakers tried to

define people as either free Americans or communist Soviets, but more and more

citizens resisted this simplistic narrative. Instead, people became defined by what

they were not.

The political and cultural effects of Vietnam bolstered new cult myths of

race, sexuality, and class. Much of Bates' *The War We Took with Us to Vietnam*

deals with these different mythic cults by showing how the fighting in Southeast

Asia reverberated within the borders of American culture. African American

culture, Bates argues, "had defined itself primarily in relation to mainstream white

culture, the culture of the slaveholders. . . . Yet even as African Americans have

assimilated features of white culture and have judged themselves according to its

standards, they have simultaneously separated themselves from that culture in

virtually every sphere" (51). Rather than be defined and assimilated by

mainstream white culture, African Americans defined themselves against it,

cultivating a strong counterculture. For women, the sexual revolution fostered a

stronger sense of independence that would eventually blossom into a powerful cry

for more equal footing with men. Bates explains, "The war taught them that they

were not merely a disadvantaged race or class but a politically and economically

oppressed segment of the world's population" (137).

In regards to class, both the Selective Service System and college

deferment options meant most of the poorer and lower class young men of the

United States were drastically more susceptible to being drafted than their more

affluent counterparts. In fact, Bates argues that class played a more prominent role

in a young man's being drafted than almost any other factor (91). These groups

rejected the defining narrative the government tried to enforce. Rather than deciding between the roles of patriotic American or Soviet commie, social groups like African Americans and women selected a different option. The cultural leaders Slotkin speaks of in *Gunfighter Nation*, the politicians and policy makers, tried to perpetuate the frontier as the external myth it had been during the Second World War, but in the Vietnam era its more noticeable placement was between those perpetuating the guiding myth and those who expressly defined themselves against it.

As the traditional frontier myth lost its grip on the collective American consciousness and a new myth of the cult began to take hold, the frontier myth's most popular medium and genre of entertainment, the Hollywood Western, lost its luster and was soon replaced by a mixture of vigilante films enunciating Vietnam era guilt. The white savage of Richard Slotkin's Western frontier myth ceased to look like John Wayne and soon came to look like Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver* or Charles Bronson's Paul Kersey of *Death Wish*. These vigilante characters possessed two very distinct characteristics. The vigilante is both damaged and exists outside of the established authority. Of the vigilante archetype, Slotkin writes, "What makes the urban vigilante genre different from the Westerns is its 'post-frontier' setting. . . . Its heroes draw energy from the same rage that drives the paranoids, psychopaths, mass murderers, and terrorists of the mean streets, and their victories are almost never socially redemptive in the Western mode" (634). In the traditional frontier myth, the object of that rage and aggression is an invading force, but the vigilante redirects the flow of aggression

inwardly and against the protected inward center of the containing perimeter. The vigilante does not seek to restore or redeem any kind of establishment or system. He protects the cult, not the state.

The Damaged Soldier and the Dark Knight Detective

As the damaged veteran representations of the time would continue to show up in films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Rambo*, both the political climate that birthed them and the character elements that defined them began to seep into both comic books and the superhero narrative. Superman, Batman, and their fellow Justice League members continued to fall in sales and soon found themselves threatened by a new surging enemy. Formerly Timely Comics, Marvel Comics had rebranded itself and began selling characters that had more in common with the disenfranchised cults proliferating American culture than the heroes of a by-gone era. Characters like the moody and guilt-ridden Spider-man, the arrogant arms-dealing Iron Man, and the ostracized X-men sought to connect with an audience that felt equally ostracized. For Superman, a character who had so long carried the banner of the establishment, these younger heroes offered something the Man of Steel struggled to offer--compatibility. As Glen Weldon explains in his biography of Superman, "the public regarded authority figures with a new breed of cynicism, if not outright contempt. With his close-cropped hair, clean-shaven face, and literally muscular defense of the status quo, Superman had now come to represent the capital-E Establishment" (145-6). Try as much as he might, even the Man of Steel could not break the bonds in which

that image restricted him. Marvel Comics began filling more and more of the newsstands while DC Comics struggled to reinvent itself. The company's answer would not come from a sun god from Krypton but rather a pair of young liberal creators not entirely unlike Superman's parents.

By time the numbers of American troops in Vietnam started to dwindle, comic books had nearly become invisible. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs explain, "Now that the mass-media eye had moved on, it was again a safely invisible subculture, an escapist haven" (142). This new anonymity and the desperation of DC Comics allowed them to take greater chances with their characters and stories. One of the more prolific of these was the consolidation of two separate titles, *Green Lantern* and *Green Arrow* into a single series lead by Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams. O'Neil, the writer of the series, was a self proclaimed super liberal and actively expressed his disagreements with the current governing establishment and the actions it had taken in Vietnam. As he stated, "I protested the war. We had to stop that damn war" ("Denny O'Neil Pt. 2: The Professor from Gotham University"). He also admitted that the comic scripts he wrote were a reflection of that mindset and time period.

Green Lantern Green Arrow did something even Marvel had yet to do; it directly addressed the new cult myth that had taken over the American mindset. Its premise was very simple. O'Neil and Adams took the character of Hal Jordan, the intergalactic space cop known as Green Lantern, and paired him with the neo-liberal defender of the little guy, Green Arrow. They would introduce a conflict, and the two characters would argue and debate the different sides of the conflict

while still filling the pages with enough action to keep even the least intellectually engaged readers entertained.

The first issue shows Green Lantern defending a man from a violent and rowdy crowd only for Green Arrow to reveal the man Green Lantern saved to be a slum landlord who was on the verge of evicting all the tenets of his building. As Green Arrow keeps peeling back layer after layer of the harsh living conditions the people have been subjected to, Green Lantern keeps arguing the same point again and again: "Can't you see? They're breaking the law" (11). Green Lantern begins to see Green Arrow's side of things, however, when one of the tenants confronts him directly. The man says to Green Lantern, "I've been readin' about you . . . how you work for the blue skins . . . and how on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins . . . and you've done considerable for the purple skins! Only there's skins you've never bothered with--the black skins!" (13). The scene, while melodramatic, was still shocking for its time. Not since *Star Trek* could audiences witness fictional characters addressing real social issues like Green Lantern and Green Arrow did. During the early 1970s, these kinds of arguments could be found in debates on college campuses and mentioned in passing by public addresses from the President, but never showed up in the lily-white world of the superhero myth. Even Marvel skirted around this type of direct sociopolitical commentary. As Jones and Jacobs explain, "Although O'Neil probably did not consciously intend it, his opening sequence was less about heroes reacting to the real world than about DC reacting to a changing cultural scene" (147). The superhero myth ceased to live on the frontier; now it lived in

the myth of the cult and the vigilante. Realizing their critical success with the *Green Lantern Green Arrow* approach, DC soon sought to revitalize their brand by embracing a new type of story telling. No hero benefited more from Vietnam wartime culture than the Caped Crusader, Batman. His journey to the 1970s was very different than that of Superman's. Whereas Superman stood front and center waving an American flag and battling the enemies of America, Batman spent his time in the shadows, the place where he was born.

In his first appearances in the late 1930s, Batman reflected less the superhero myth of Superman and resembled more the myth of the vigilante. The first Batman story, "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," has the dark and mysterious character investigating the murder of a local factory owner. His investigation sees him battle other corrupt businessmen who hoped to swindle others out of money. Fights ensue, and multiple people die by the end of the story (12-3). For the most part, his first story closely resembles the tone of Superman's first appearance in action comics, except one main characteristic was highly emphasized in Batman's first appearances.

Early Batman stories frequently placed him at odds with the police. At the beginning of "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," Commissioner Gordon sits with his old pal Bruce Wayne. While the two chat, Wayne asks Gordon if anything interesting has happened for the police lately. Gordon informs Wayne that he is currently investigating "this fellow they call the Bat-Man" (8). In the following issue, Batman captures two petty thieves atop a Gotham City roof. When the police arrive, they assume Batman is the thief and open fire as Batman

leaps from the building to safety (16). Much like the classic gunslingers of the Western, Batman is a vigilante operating outside the confines of the law. He somehow came to be both Robin Hood and Billy the Kid in grey and black spandex. He had the dangerous outlaw quality of John Dillinger while he battled common street thugs who looked like John Dillinger.

The following years would see Batman's popularity wane as he struggled to keep up with the shifting political landscape. Superman naturally leant himself to a wartime culture, but Batman did not. As explained in the previous chapter, Batman could only offer fanciful escapist stories rather than directly involve himself with the war as Superman had. Following World War II, Batman found his dangerous Dillinger-esque quality neutered by a world that valued authority over vigilantism. No longer would Batman ruffle the feathers of the police. Instead, he would work side by side as a member of the police force. He even had his own badge. When the 1960s arrived, Batman had little left with which he could grab the attention of the American people. Stripped of his vigilante quality and dark tone, Batman had one choice left, and that was to become a parody of himself. Thus was born Adam West's portrayal of the Batman and the Batusi.

In the 1970s, the television Batman had infiltrated the pages of DC comics in a feeble attempt by DC Comics editorial staff to make the Batman of the comics resemble Adam West as much as possible (Smith). As the show burned out, so too did this version of Batman, and sales of *Batman* and *Detective Comics* fell just as quickly as they had risen at the height of television show's success. With the comics floundering, DC turned to the writer who revolutionized the likes

of Green Lantern and Green Arrow. Soon, Dennis O'Neil turned his attention to Batman and saw a character that, perhaps more than any other, could tap into the current cultural climate.

With occasional help from his frequent collaborator Neal Adams, O'Neil removed the camp influences of the TV show and thrust Batman back into the shadows. O'Neil's Batman was darker, moodier, and more obsessive. He was still a hero, but he no longer acted like the heroes of World War II America. O'Neil's Batman more closely resembled the Batman of the late 1930s. The Vietnam era Batman started to resemble the damaged heroes returning from war, those scarred with memories of atrocity and violence. O'Neil thus tapped into the vigilante myth well before Hollywood began producing the likes of *Taxi Driver* or *Death Wish.*

Under O'Neil's pen, Batman's villains would follow suit. No longer harmless caricatures like those Adam West wrestled with during the 1960s, these villains became dark reflections of the anxieties lurking in the American consciousness. Jones and Jacobs explain, "Batman's enemies were the same costumed weirdoes as ever, but now they were played as truly murderous psychotics. The Joker became a twisted genius, a Moriarty to Batman's Holmes, Two-face, physically hideous and diagnosed psychotic with a horrific backstory, returned after decades of absences, as shadows fell over sunny DC" (162). Green Lantern and Green Arrow traveled America and tackled the relevant issues of the day, Superman leapt into space as America became more and more preoccupied with the space race, but Batman lurked in the shadows of the subconscious and battled twisted reflections of the very real threats people feared on a daily basis.

The Vietnam War did more than displace the frontier myth; it showed people that the real threats were lurking in our own minds.

Under O'Neill's editorial hand, the effects of the Vietnam War would resonate throughout Batman stories for more than two decades; no where is this clearer than in Frank Miller's seminal work, *The Dark Knight Returns*. In this four issue mini series, Frank Miller recreates Batman to more resemble the traumatized American soldiers attempting to cope with an American life filled with vice, corruption, and crime. Miller's Batman is more the urban vigilante that captivated the American people than Charles Bronson could ever hope to be.

Miller's story follows an aged and retired Batman struggling to adapt to civilian life. Throughout the first issue, Batman is haunted by memories of his youth, the death of his parents, and his own isolation from the rest of the world. He grows increasingly violent throughout the first three issues. He has flashes of glory in defeating new and old enemies, but it is his conflict with Superman during the story's climactic final chapter that truly defines the post-Vietnam mindset of the superhero myth.

In the story, the government has outlawed all superheroes except for Superman, who serves as the United States' nuclear deterrent. Batman's reappearance forces Superman, the representation of the established authority, to put an end to Batman before his vigilante heroics cause more harm. Reluctantly, Superman attempts to bring Batman in to answer for his crimes of defiance in the face of authority. As their battle ensues in the streets of Gotham, Batman reminds Superman what this conflict is really about. Batman says to him:

You've always known just what to say. 'Yes'—you always say

yes—to anyone with a badge—or a flag. . . . You sold us out,

Clark. You gave them the power that should have been ours. Just

like your parents taught you to. My parents taught me a different

lesson . . . lying on the street—shaking in deep shock dying for no

reason at all—they showed me that the world only makes sense

when you force it to. (190-2)

Miller personified the basic qualities of the social and political conflicts raging

during and after the Vietnam War in this battle. The fight between Superman and

Batman at the end of *The Dark Knight Returns* was not simply a battle between

two superheroes. Their conflict was a representation of the competing mindsets of

the American people and the ruptures in American culture. Just as the superhero

myth had done since 1938, it simply shrunk the battle down to small and

manageable panels.

This Looks Like a Job for Superman

The Vietnam and post-Vietnam era of superheroes became something of a

mixed bag. Between Marvel's more grounded approach to comics and O'Neil and

Adams' shaking things up at DC, comics slowly started embracing a more up-to-

the-minute relevancy, and, in exchange, different crowds began flocking to these

costumed superheroes. More and more college students and professors embraced

comics to the point that Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams were invited to speak at

some college campuses ("Denny O'Neil Pt. 2: The Professor from Gotham

University"). Comics, which were once so disreputable that DC Comics Editor

Carmine Infantino changed his name out of fear of being recognized, now began

cultivating enough gravitas that he would be asked to speak to *The New York

Times*. Journalist Saul Braun wrote an extensive piece on this comic renaissance

writing, "Combining 'new journalism' with greater illustrative realism, comics

are a reflection of real society and personal fantasy" (32). Even conservative

politicians embraced this once demonized myth of superhero vigilantes. The

Republican Mayor of New York, Thomas Delavall, publicly praised Dennis

O'Neil and Neal Adams for their work in dealing with socially relevant issues like

discrimination and drug use ("Denny O'Neil Pt. 2: The Professor from Gotham

University"). Despite this rising level of prestige, the comic book industry still

suffered financially, and just over a year later *Green Lantern Green Arrow* was

canceled due to poor sales (Jones and Jacobs 151). Relevance and realism could

not save the medium. Luckily, DC Comics knew something could. In 1975, as the

Vietnam War came to a screeching halt, DC began talks with Warner Brothers

Studios that would change the way people consumed the American superhero

myth.

    The 30 years after World War II had been a strange time for the Man of

Steel. He almost endlessly struggled to stay relevant to audiences. No one creator

or writer could ever quite pin down what made Superman such a captivating

figure. He continued to out sell many of his fellow superheroes, but those

numbers paled in comparison to sales during World War II. The George Reeves

television show helped him remain a key figure in the minds of the American

people, but what was he really viewed as? The superhero myth had merged with the Slotkin vigilante myth, and Superman still carried too much of the established authority with him to become the vigilante his street level counterparts did. Superman had always been both a myth and a commodity, but during the early seventies, the material value of the Man of Steel became a wholly separate entity from his cultural value, with its own appeal to millions who didn't read the comics (Weldon 152-3). In those thirty years following World War II, the United States reinvented itself time and time again; Superman never had that same luxury. At least he did not until he helped a nation reeling from the atrocity and deception of the Vietnam War believe a man could fly.

On December 15th, 1978, Superman marveled the American public once again, but this time he did so on the big screen. The *Superman* film reinvigorated the Man of Steel and reintroduced him to people who had long since forgotten him. Just as it had done since the its inception in *Action Comics* #1, the superhero myth, and Superman in particular, adapted itself to the changing times by taking advantage of new technology and different, growing forms of media. Christopher Reeve and Richard Donner's Superman was still the wholesome do-gooder he had been for decades, but he was also something else entirely different, something nostalgic. As Jones explains, "The Superman on screen was a synthesis of many versions, but it was truer to Jerry and Joe's flamboyant, sanguine, self-satisfied hero of the early Forties than to any other. And he was refreshing to audiences of the weary late Seventies as he'd been to the readers of the frazzled end of the Depression" (325).

Jones' observation makes sense, as the America of the late 1970s more resembled the America of the late 1930s than wartime America of World War II. The people of the United States had become disillusioned with the established order just as they had during the tail end of the Great Depression. They distrusted authority figures and lived in a world populated with all the fears and anxieties that come along after a violent conflict like Vietnam. In a world of complex sociopolitical conflicts, the threat of nuclear winter around the corner, and doubt in the American way of life, Superman gripped all the terrors that lurked under the American people's bed firmly in his fist and took off into the sky with them. No, he never truly defeated our real enemies, but he helped a worn down society believe they could defeat their own enemies by being better than they had been. After all, myths are both an extension of self and society. When Superman foiled the scheming Lex Luthor's plans and saved Lois Lane's life, he made audiences feel like they could accomplish much more than they thought. He helped them believe that even they could fly.

In a very real way, the impact of Vietnam on the superhero myth can still be seen in the stories and characters that resonate with audiences today. The 1970s saw characters like Vietnam veteran Frank Castle don a skull jumpsuit and clean up the mean streets as the Punisher while a foul-mouthed mutant runt from Canada named Wolverine began to take over the X-men franchise. Frank Miller even reworked Batman's long-standing ally Commissioner Gordon into a former Green Beret (Miller and Mazzucchelli). Batman's popularity continued to soar while *Superman* got three sequels of declining critical value but continual

commercial success. Television and animation offered a more dazzling display of super heroics as the merchandising value of superheroes continued to grow. Vietnam sparked an interest in these characters even if it failed to spark an interest in comic book sales. In a world in which fewer and fewer people could believe in their elected officials, people found they could turn to stories of brightly colored frontiersmen merged with outlaw vigilantes that represented them. In a world in which a singular guiding myth alienated people, superheroes leapt from subculture to subculture ready to adapt to any and all that staked a claim to the characters. No matter who the audience was, the superhero myth invited them to see themselves in the heroes of the comics, television shows, and movies that helped to foster American identity post-Vietnam. The superhero narrative nearly died several times during the years following World War II, but these heroes now carved out their own unmovable real estate on the landscape of American consciousness. To quote Bruce Wayne at the end of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, "This will be a good life" (199).

CHAPTER 5:

THE FUTURE OF THE SUPERHERO NARRATIVE

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, DC Comics toiled away in sale purgatory. Superman was no longer the million-issue behemoth he once was; his stories barely broke 400,000 copies sold (Hoknes). By time the 1990s began, Superman simply did not fit in amongst the darker and broodier superheroes that now populated and dominated the American consciousness. The damaged and dangerous heroes of the late 1970s and 1980s survived and embraced more and more the anti-authority image that invigorated popular mainstays such as Batman and Wolverine. Even Captain America now fought alongside the Nomad, the longhaired, leather-clad, sunglass-wearing man without a country. The cover of the first issue of the 1990 limited series *Nomad* reads, "He found his own way to fight for the American dream… And he brought the Hardware to do it!" (Nicieza, Fry, McKenna). The Nomad stands atop a roof brandishing a shotgun. Clearly, the irrelevancy Superman first experienced in the aftermath of the Vietnam War had not improved. With Superman inching ever closer towards obscurity, the creative teams and editors in charge of Superman made a decision that shocked the nation. They elected to kill Superman in *Superman #75*.

The financial effects of Superman's in-story death could be felt almost immediately. In the years prior to *Superman #75*, Jim Lee's *X-Men* series outsold the competition and regularly trounced *Superman*, but *Superman #75* dominated the market in a manner that had not been seen by the Man of Steel or any DC Comics title. Official sales numbers during the early 1990s are difficult to pin

down exactly, but *Superman* #75 reportedly sold over 6,000,000 copies (Weldon 276). Obviously, more groups wanted a copy of the issue than the traditional comic book buyer. Comic book stores found themselves filled with people from very diverse social and economic groups. Lawyers and janitors, grandmothers and children, everyone flocked to stores for the special black-bagged comic that featured nothing more than a red, bleeding Superman shield (Price). Those lucky enough to snag the first printing were greeted with a comic cover designed to resemble a tombstone bearing the description, "Here Lies Earth's Greatest Hero."

Despite the soaring sales, the story would prove to be unworthy of the Man of Steel. The issue introduces a hulking monster aptly named Doomsday. The mindless behemoth rampages through the United States and easily shrugs off the attacks of the Justice League. One by one, Superman's allies fall until he realizes that he alone is capable of downing the beast wrecking his city, hurting his friends, and endangering the good and innocent people of America. Superman and the beast engage in a multipage slugfest that ultimately results in both combatants falling. Doomsday, the brutish plot device, fulfills his purpose, and Superman dies in Lois Lane's arms (Jurgens).

When the dust settled, the death of Superman was little more than a publicity stunt as Superman would return and continue his never-ending battle. His ongoing life would prove to be much more boring than his death. Superman had been dying slowly ever since the credits rolled at the end of his 1978 movie. Superman stories floundered when compared to those of his younger and darker competitors. His movies continued to trend downward in both critical and

commercial appeal. In the end, Superman survived primarily as a merchandising and licensing juggernaut. Superman could and can still be found on everything from bottle openers to underwear to sneakers to umbrellas.

Despite Superman's decreased cultural currency, his death still reverberated throughout the country because, despite his comics and movies selling less and less, Superman had engrained himself into the American consciousness. His rise to power very much mimics America's. Born of hardship during the Great Depression only to rise to power at the same time the United States did during World War II, Superman triumphed and failed as did the country when the jubilation of America's victory in World War II gave way to national depression with the unsavory end of the Vietnam War. He rose to power when capitalism, marketing, and mass production became defining American qualities; thus, he symbolizes America's early fate. In the 1950s, he adopted "the American way" as one of his innate qualities, but sometime before his death in 1993, America adopted Superman as an innate aspect of American culture. This is why his death reached newspapers and late night talk shows. A comic book character didn't die; part of the American dream did. Even though Superman's relevancy never again soared like it did immediately following *Superman #75*, his death proved Superman still mattered, if only in his absence.

Grant Morrison was once asked to explain why superheroes have stuck around so long. Why do they matter? He responds by talking about Jesus Christ. Morrison says:

> Basically, the thing that about Christ is that he is God made flesh. . . . They took God and they nailed him to wood. They took the most beautiful thing you can imagine and they nailed him to wood. . . . You're not God until you know what it's like to be a mouse caught in a trap with his neck broken. You're not God until you know what it's like to die in a concentration camp . . . but Christ, the great symbol, says that no matter how hard you're hurting, no matter how bad the flesh is crushing and destroying you, no matter what the disease is, no matter how old you are, no matter how much you're losing it, I am here suffering with you. ("Grant Morrison: Bat Christ")

This, Morrison explains is at the center of the Christ myth. Whether Christ is fictional or historical does not matter. The promise of the Christ myth is what resonates so profoundly with the human psyche, but superheroes resonate in a different way. Morrison goes on to explain superheroes look into the void and the chaos of a world in which cities can be obliterated by bombs. They look into a world in which people die senseless deaths everyday. They stare out into the chaotic unknown and uncertainty that plagues us all and shout back, "I will create order out of this chaos. I will make meaning out of this." That declaration speaks to a part of the human consciousness. Superheroes take the troubles and ills of the world and reduce them down to small, manageable comic book panels. Our unspeakable and abstract fears and insecurities are crammed into menacing costumes and given henchmen, and then our heroes sweep in and beat back those fears and insecurities. That is why these heroes have endured.

Super Adaptation and the Frontier

Because of the serial nature of early comics, these superheroes were able to quickly adapt to a shifting political and cultural landscape that characterized the United States through the decades. When the comic book ceased being a popular art form, these heroes expanded into other media, ultimately infiltrating the world of television and film. These media have become the torchbearers keeping lit the flame of the superhero narrative and the American myth of the frontier. Superheroes in film and television faced mixed success for many years. No superhero story captivated the minds of audiences like the first Superman film, but all that would change after 2001.

After September 11, the American people found themselves shaken like they had not been since Pearl Harbor. The destruction and death of that day shredded all notions of security and peace for the American People. How could people feel safe when a real life super villain had just attacked in America's greatest city? When the world gets too chaotic and too scary, people often retreat into narratives and myth to find security, and this time would prove to be no different. People filled theaters to see Spider-man swing between New York City skyscrapers and punch the Green Goblin in the face. He would be quickly followed by the likes of Batman and Iron Man in their own respective films. After September 11, people wanted to believe there was someone out there keeping all of us safe. Superhero films offered the American people that comfort. Meanwhile, comics took on a more critical tone in addressing the political climate following September 11. After the passing of the Patriot Act, Marvel Comics began the

event *Civil War* that pitted hero against hero on opposite sides of the debate concerning liberty and security. Years later, with America becoming ever more involved in an increasingly volatile Middle East, Batman would challenge Superman and Wonder Woman to consider exactly how much they, as American symbols, should get involved in the affairs of foreign nations (Johns and Reis).

As the years progress, America's hunger for these mythic vessels only continues to rise. Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* was the first superhero movie to gross one billion dollars world wide, but would not be the last. In 2012, Earth's mightiest heroes, the Avengers, battled back an attack on New York by an army of faceless aliens under the leadership of one megalomaniac to the tune of 1.5 billion dollars. *The Avengers* essentially took the fear and pain of 2001 and applied a healing balm to the most hurt places of our subconscious. *The Avengers* proved the American people still thirsted for dazzling displays from these heroes, so much so that Marvel continues to expand its cinematic universe while DC Comics creates its own. Now, three of the ten top grossing films of all time feature superheroes front and center. Going forward, the superhero narrative will not only survive on the big screen, but the small one as well. In the wake of the Occupy Movement, the neoliberal Green Arrow found himself leading the charge in a slew of superhero and comic book inspired television shows. This fall season viewers can catch Marvel's Agent's of Shield and Howling Commandos appearing in two separate primetime network television shows while DC Comics trots out the occult conman Constantine and a Batman-inspired show to primetime network television as well, not to mention both *The Flash, Arrow,* and countless

animated television shows populating DVRs. The last fifteen years have shown that although the comic book has lost its cultural value, the superhero has not.

The modern American superhero has brought America's mythic qualities back to the forefront of American popular culture. Frontier settlers once looked out into the darkness of the unknown and constructed their mythic heroes to battle back against whatever evils their minds had conjured in that darkness. Those settlers gave form to their uneasiness and insecurities. As time progressed, the frontier took on different forms and separated different groups. It kept the uncivilized savages of the western frontier from penetrating into the civilized American colonies and states. The frontier separated the haves from the have-nots during the Great Depression. After that, the frontier came to separate the monstrous Axis regime from the honorable and patriotic Allied forces. Then the Cold War required us to redefine our enemies in the wake of potential nuclear armageddon. After the Vietnam War, the frontier became more transient and began separating classes, races, and sexes but also separated those with authority from those without it. Now, the American concept of the frontier has been displaced to international conflicts throughout the world. Regardless of where the frontier falls next, we will always want our cultural heroes standing out on the edge of the frontier, ready to protect us when the dangers lurking beyond the known become too much for us to handle. When we become too weak to bear the burdens of our own subconscious, it's comforting to know we have a helping hand making the load more bearable, especially when that hand is stronger than a locomotive.

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