Bibles, Guns, and… Comic Books?

Re-Conceptualizing (Non-)Violent Selves and Others in a Postcolonial Era

By

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"The broader philosophical implication of many comics, to one
extent or another, is: *there is another world, which is this world*"
(Wolk 2007, 134: *Emphasis* as in original).

Following what has been called the "aesthetic turn" in International Relations (IR)

(Bleiker, 2001) there has been an increase in theorizing the interconnections between pop culture

and global politics. Despite (limited, but existent) engagement in other disciplines, comics have

been essentially untouched by this 'turn' as its IR manifestations have tended to focus on other

media, such as film, television, poetics, literature, the internet, and news imaging.[1] This non-

engagement has roots in IR's disciplinary practices (Beier and Arnold 2005), but presumably

also reflects the widespread perception that comics are juvenile and lack the substantive content

required for serious scholarly analysis. However, if we accept the role of social performativity

as fundamental to the constitution of states, security, threats, and even the field itself (Butler

1990; Campbell 1998), such grounds for exclusion seem irrelevant. Comics not only reflect

popular conceptions about the socio-political world, but further serve to participate in an

intertextual construction of the world in ways no less substantial than films, for example, even if

they are *sometimes* less 'sophisticated.'

By examining cultural understandings of global politics through comics, I am not

claiming that scholars should cease studying traditional IR indicators (such as state actions). I

am, however, claiming that enquiries into traditionally studied political phenomena are limited

without some correlated inquiry into the social context and discursive parameters within which

such actions come to be comprehensible. As Jutta Weldes has noted, "the decisions and actions

of state elites cannot be understood without a corresponding grasp of the field of discourses

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[1] See, for example: Bleiker 2001; Neumann 2001; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Weber 2002; Weldes 1999; Weldes 2003. One possible exception still comes from a geographer, Jason Dittmer, who has explored narratives of geopolitics in Captain America comics, though the relevance of his cases necessitates ignoring the disciplinary origins – in my opinion (Dittmer 2005; and Dittmer 2007).

through which those officials apprehend the world of international politics and the place of their state in it" (Weldes 1999: 119). Moreover, I maintain that state actions (and other international events) become comprehensible and (re)presentable to the public through discourses which are conveyed more substantially through pop-cultural media than they are through the scholarly canon.[2] Following Neumann and Nexon (2006), I further uphold that popular culture in general, and comics specifically, are constitutive of and interactive with other representations of political life in social discourse (2006: 9-10, 14-7) in ways that demand problematizations lest we further participate in naturalizing them.

So why examine comics specifically? A partial and (only partially) smug answer to this query is simply, why not comics? As aforementioned, the relative absence of comics following the aesthetic turn in IR seems to reflect their perceived immaturity more than it does the (re)presentations therein. However, even if we buy the highly problematic claim that this medium (rather than simply elements within it) is immature in its conjunction of visual art and prose,[3] comics are written by adults who are themselves both informed by and informing culturally-specific intertextual notions. In their insightful and polemical text, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1971), Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart claim that:

> In juvenile literature, the adult, corroded by the trivia of daily life blindly defends his image of youth and innocence. Because of this, it is perhaps the best (and least expected) place to study the disguises and truths of contemporary man... Thus, *the*

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[2] This insight draws upon and extends Weldes' (1999) claim that, "Popular culture thus helps to construct the reality of international politics for officials and non-officials alike and, to the extent that it reproduces the content and structure of the dominant foreign policy discourse, it helps to produce consent for foreign policy and state action. Popular culture is thus implicated in the 'production of consent'" (119). Weldes is here citing Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology'," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, Michael Gurevitch *et al.* (Eds.), (London: Methuen, 1982), 56-90.

[3] Indeed, one can argue that comics are unique in their capacity to intersperse art and text in ways that make them both and neither simultaneously (McCloud 1993: 17). This is perhaps a worthwhile place to note the debate over McCloud's (1993) claim that comics can be defined as "sequential art" (20). While irrelevant to the study herein, insofar as none of my sources here are contentious for either side in this definitional debate, its specifics can be explored further in: Wolk 2007; and Horrocks 2001.

> *imagination of the child is conceived as the past and future utopia of the adult* (31; *emphasis* as cited from original).[4]

While I take issue with their claims to truth, that juvenile literature is 'perhaps *the best*' medium for such exploration, and that comics are even simply 'juvenile literature,' their general point is well taken. The intertextual discourses that inform our conceptions of the socio-political are not simply referent to popular culture ingested as adults, they are so from a young age and all intertextual media which inform our conceptions of global politics similarly inform its practices. Comics have, however, come to reach a broader audience with the primary demographic now being older than in the past and, while still predominantly male, have achieved increased female readership. These changes are due in part to the increased cinematic exposure to comic narratives, to an increase in female writers, and to the very sorts of 'growing up' that comics have done in the age of a decaying Comics Code. Regardless, I maintain that comics are as 'valid' a medium through which to read discourses of IR as any other popular culture medium, and my choice to read them in such a manner will hopefully expose our own complicities in the narratives that shape our world.

Through such analysis I argue herein that comics tend to mask an underlying colonial politics that delimits our capacities for other/Other ways of conceptualizing and practicing IR by naturalizing certain discourses and delegitimizing others/Others. In other words, notions of good and evil, mapped so neatly onto both the colonial terrain and the superhero comic genre, which subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) underpin comic moralities serve to (re)enforce understandings of the righteousness, the justice, and the necessity of (neo)colonial interventions as can be seen, for example, in the current war on/of terror. Moreover, and with reference to the

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[4] A similar case is often made and, relevant to the argument herein, has been made by C.L.R. James (2004 [1950]) who once claimed that within popular culture, including comics, "you find *the clearest* ideological expression of the sentiments and deepest feelings of the American people and a great window into the future of America and the modern world;" an insight apparently not found in high-cultural literature (142).

work of Mike Alsford (2006), it can be argued that the realm of the imaginative, within which

most comics reside, is most representative of an epitomized or idealized form of social identity

(8). I maintain that such idealized forms perpetuate their denigrated antitheses in the form of

Others in need of being saved. Additionally, while superhero comics arose amidst a "war-

weary" American "desire for protection, unassailable power and unambiguous moral

superiority," they continue to promote according nationalistic and militaristic ideals that justify

the coercive use of force against those perceived as outside of the moral righteousness of the

socially arbitrary 'inside' (*Ibid*.: 34, 67). To illustrate this, I will first explore my theoretical

framework and the Christian ethos underpinning the Western comic myth of good and evil,

before turning to various comics and exploring the ways they (knowingly or not) participate in

reinforcing the myths foundational to advanced colonialism.

Before moving in that direction, however, I wish to make a few initial remarks regarding

my choices and methodology. In this paper I will mainly be focusing on Neil Gaiman's *1602*

(2003), Doug Murray's *The 'Nam* (1986-7), and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986). One reason

for this varied choice is simply that they fall into different genres with the superhero comic being

merely a component herein, thus broadening my sample. Additionally, that these comics are all

American is crucial to my decisions insofar as it is from within this Western social

location/colonial context which the discourses I am examining are to be explored and where they

tend to be most naturalized and deployed. As the superhero comic (and its attendant Christian

morality) can be seen as distinctly American (Eisner 1996: 74), so too can the contextual,

discursive intertext of which they are a part.[5]

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[5] Clement Greenberg (2004 [1945]) has long since noted the need to consider the social context within which and
through which cultural products are produced; a claim now widely accepted as given (40).

Finally, while I have chosen to study the comics herein for various reasons, a key one relies admittedly on their pertinence to the subject matter insofar as they are not explicitly 'political,' but express an underlying (colonial) politics that is worth considering. To say they are not explicitly political is to say that they are basically mainstream comics published by the two large comic publishers, DC and Marvel, rather than the more consciously independent 'political' comics that are contemporarily becoming prevalent, such as Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001) or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003). Indeed, one might ask how texts contextually positioned around the Spanish Inquisition, the colonization of the Americas, the Vietnam War, and the nuclear shadow of the Cold War could not be seen as political. Indeed, they are extremely political, but they are typically presented as 'comical,' not in the humorous sense but rather as *simply* 'comic books' rather than profound political statements thereby masking their political implications and naturalizing their assumptions. While this statement does not hold for *Watchmen*, which is explicit about disrupting certain notions of politics, I maintain that it still participates in naturalizing certain problematic myths that are effectively depoliticized insofar as they are taken as given. In this sense, the politics of *Watchmen* that I will explore here are elements similarly presented as apolitical insofar as they stand outside of and serve as foundations to the political disruptions the text does offer.

What Roland Barthes (1973) would call "depoliticised speech" – in which myth masks and thereby naturalizes a political agenda – characterizes these comics and is indicative both of the subtle ways our conceptions of politics are informed by implicitly political pop-cultural messages and of how our own performativity in violent social relations functions (as the internalized rather than the instrumental) (See also: Murray 2000). As Foucault (2003) has argued that racism has transformed from its once instrumental and more scientific incarnation to

an internalized sort of nationalism perpetuated through discursive practices, so too I maintain

that colonialism has undergone a similar shift that can be read through these examples and

others. In so doing, however, I must note that I seek not to make claims about all comics, but

rather to comment on a general trend pervasive not simply in most comics or popular culture, but

in societal discourse and resultant socio-political practice itself.

Comic Book Morality and the Personification of Good and Evil

The relevance of my case here depends upon Roland Barthes' (1972) distinction between

first-order and second-order representations that has been brought into IR by Iver Neumann and

Daniel Nexon (2006). First-order representations are those which purportedly offer a direct

representation of political events, as through say news coverage or political speech, while

second-order representations illustrate social and political life through explicitly fictitious

narratives. As Neumann and Nexon argue, "International-relations theorists often neglect

second-order representations. They also view first-order representations as relatively

unproblematic expressions of the 'facts' of international politics" (Neumann and Nexon 2006:

7). However,

> [S]econd-order representations are often more significant sources of knowledge about
> politics and society. Popular entertainment not only commands a larger audience
> than the news or political events, but it frequently has a more powerful impact on the
> way audiences come to their basic assumptions about the world (*Ibid*.: 8)

Thus, as Chris Murray (2000) argues with respect to more dated *Superman* comics, second-order

representations play a vital role in naturalizing societal myths and in shaping cultural

conceptions of the world and its attendant socio-political relations. For Barthes (1972), this

naturalization is the very crucial effect of myth: "it transforms history into nature" (129). This is

the critical problem of the underpinning colonial myths that pervade much popular culture and

the Western discourses of which they are a part: that is, their distortion of history to naturalize

and, thereby, not only legitimize but necessitate violent impositions whether they be theoretical

and ideological or through the exercise of force.

Myth, for Barthes, "is a system of communication" (*Ibid*.: 109). That is, it is dependant

upon a discourse and functions as a part of a discourse, but to distort rather than obfuscate (*Ibid*.:

121, 129). The problem with comic representations of colonialism and its attendant violences is

similarly, not that these issues are ignored, but rather that they are thereby normalized. In

Barthes' words:

> Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply,
> it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal
> justification, it gives them a clarity of which is not that of an explanation but that of a
> statement of fact (143).

Comic analysts frequently note the roles of symbolism and metaphor in comics not only

as means of allegory, but as vital components necessary to disseminate ideas in the medium

(Wolk 2007: 20-1; McCloud 1993: 24-59). Noting the role of subjectivity, as is standard in

comics analysis, Douglas Wolk (2007) notes, much like the René Magritte painting, *Ceci, n'est*

pas une pipe,

> When you look at a comic book, you're not seeing either the world or a direct
> representation of the world; what you're seeing is an interpretation or transformation
> of the world, with aspects that are exaggerated, adapted, or invented. It's not just
> unreal, it's deliberately constructed by a specific person or people (20).

What is telling beyond the *deliberate* metaphors of comic artists and writers, however, are those

that may or may not be deliberate; that is, those myths indicative of, reliant upon, and

perpetuating internalized, contextual, cultural, and ultimately arbitrary foundational premises that

naturalize and delineate such binary myths as good from evil, right from wrong, masculine from

feminine, West from East, realism from idealism, civilization from barbarism, saviour from

victim and, ultimately, normal from abnormal. While these myths are discussed, they are not

treated as products of historical social relationships, but are rather viewed as immutable facts.

For Bleiker (2001), the aesthetic turn in IR seeks to politicize the space between representation

and represented in these underlying metaphorical myths by:

> [Contrasting] aesthetic with mimetic forms of representation. The latter, which have dominated ir scholarship, seek to represent politics as realistically and authentically as possible, aiming to capture world politics as-it-really-is. An aesthetic approach, by contrast, assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith. Rather than ignoring or seeking to narrow this gap, as mimetic approaches do, aesthetic insight recognizes that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics (510).

Herein, this space whereby the presumed given is naturalized and stands outside of the dominant

metaphor is the very site of a depoliticized view of colonial past and present, and the very site

that must be re-politicized as radical praxis.

A key unquestioned assumption underwriting most comic metaphors is that good and evil

exist independently of culturally-specific understandings and, moreover, that the apparently

desirable triumph of (an acculturated) good is paradoxically both achievable and impossible.

Certainly, most superhero comics rely extensively upon this conception of morality, yet even

those that problematize the nature of good and evil still presume their independent, pre-

discursive existence. Before examining this in more detail, however, it is worthwhile to consider

the ways personified metaphors of good and evil rely on culturally-specific myths, such as the

Christian myth of Satan. Martin Hall (2006) draws on the work of Elemér Hankiss to argue that

the mythical personification of evil (as a process necessitating colonialism and to construct

goodness as the identity of the Self) in the figure of Satan had a dual effect: it both made it

theoretically possible to defeat evil, while at the same time ensuring its perpetuation for without

it the identity of the Self collapses into disarray (183-4). That is, for goodness to triumph would

negate its meaning, destabilizing the identity of the Self and end the superheroic comic struggle,

while the personification and embodiment of evil in villains (and Others) implies the capacity to

kill, imprison, or 'save' them in ways that would apparently enable this impossible final victory. This culturally-specific conception of evilness not only follows for the villains of superhero comics, but further serves in the inverse to define the heroes; and in both comics and 'the real world' comic book morality serves to justify colonialism in the name of a deep-rooted Christian ethic that implicitly still informs many pop-cultural metaphors. While this idea is not a perfect fit for the comic medium, insofar as goodness and evilness are not ultimately characterized by singular individuals, I find it pertinent insofar as superheroes and supervillains are virtually always entirely good or entirely evil; not necessarily perfect as mistakes can occur, but embodying virtue or corruption completely in their idealized representations.

Regardless of the content that myth presents goodness and evilness to 'naturally' de/connote, however, the personification of their supposed epitomes maintains roots in the Christian duality it exemplifies and serves to perpetuate as (re)constituted myth in social discourse. However, what is further relevant here beyond these cultural and crusade-esque religious origins of personified good and evil is the way that colonial myths are mapped onto these traits, such that Christian goodness equates with 'us' while heathen evil defines 'them' and accordingly mandates 'their' redemption – a redemption that this notion of evil makes impossible yet apparently achievable and desirable, thus perpetuating cycles of subjection. As Robert Warshow (2004) has shown, comic book criminals are irredeemably evil insofar as criminality equates with ultimate criminality beyond hope (73). Similarly, colonialism relies upon a paradoxical conception of our Others as irredeemably inferior while justifying its continuation on the naturalized mythical premise that it will last until 'we' bring 'them' to the enlightened progression of history.

Within traditional superhero comics of the 'Golden Age' and other comic genres from the same era, these messages are more overt than they are later. Superman's personification of evil's antithesis has frequently been noted to reinforce the status quo he protects (Eco 1972; Kawa 2000; Waid 2005). As in most superhero comics, evil appears to be simply that which violates culturally-specific notions of private property rooted in Western capitalism, while goodness seems reducible to a liberal conception of charity (Eco 1972: 22). Such representations go beyond the superhero comic. For instance, Dorfman and Mattelart (1971) have shown how Disney comics in general, and *Donald Duck* in particular, reinforce a rigid status quo lacking social mobility in which goodness comes from accepting one's place in a hierarchical imperial structure, while that very lacking social mobility assures the omnipresence of the personified extremes. Other examples abound. For example, in Hergé's *Tintin in the Congo* (2002 [1930]), not only are stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples the norm, but goodness is clearly mapped onto the European 'saviour' whose supposed superiority is embraced as the apparently intellectually-inferior colonized willingly subject themselves to the servitude of colonialism. In one case, following Tintin's nobly-presented protection of a foolish and misguided Native who erroneously enacts a simple-minded plot against Tintin that winds up inadvertently endangering his own life, the stereotypically-drawn tribesman – internalizing the colonial mentality – exclaims in pigeon-English, "… so, me want to make you dead. Me put on Aniota costume and wait to strangle you. When boa put coils round, me dead if you not saving me. Now me your slave, o noble white man" (57).[6]

What brings me to the comics I have chosen to explore more thoroughly, however, is that the myths are buried deeper in more contemporary comics but still remain foundational to the

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[6] On the role of pigeon-English as a component of internalized feelings of inferiority on the part of the colonized, see: Fanon 1967.

morality presented. As aforementioned, Foucault has discussed a discursive shift in which

racism has become less instrumental and more implicit in social behaviour. Similarly, while

some of the more explicit racialized violences of comics past have faded from acceptability,

there are still deep-rooted cultural myths that pervade most contemporary comics (as they

pervade Western discourse) that reinforce ongoing colonialism. Furthermore, the source

decisions reflect, for the most part, a consideration of the ways in which comic morality has

supposedly been upended by a postmodern turn following on the heels of two hugely influential

1986 series': Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*.

Despite this, I maintain that even the inversions or disruptions of good and evil that have

occurred still tend towards implying a different moral code worthy of imposition rather than truly

embracing difference.

Marvel's *1602* (2003), as written by Neil Gaiman, ponders a scenario in which

superheroes appear out of temporal sync arriving in the world of 1602 CE. Though this follows

the supposed subversion of comic book morality and though it is clearly influenced by styles

made popular by *Watchmen*, this eight-issue series still neatly demarcates the goodness of its

many temporally-displaced superheroes in contrast to its irredeemably evil villains: Magneto (as

the Grand Inquisitor) and Dr. (Count) Doom. The story essentially revolves around the

cataclysmic potential of a disruption in historical continuity with these super-powered

individuals (referred to in the speech of the day as "witchbreeds") arriving earlier than they

'should have.' Though the heroes find themselves relying on Magneto's assistance to restore a

balance by sending the cause of the rift – a temporally-displaced Captain America – back to the

present day, the comic book morality remains intact insofar as simply self-interest forges this

temporary alliance while the absolute natures of goodness and evilness linger in their embodying subjects.

More insightful, however, is the relationship between Rojhaz and Virginia Dare (the actual historical first born colonist in the 'New World'). When the reader first meets the two, Rojhaz is Virginia's protector and the reader is unaware that Rojhaz is actually Captain America or that it is his presence in the past that caused the potentially cataclysmic time rift. Virginia comes to represent the hope for a new America as she has done historically, however the temporal rift has caused her to be a shape-changing 'witchbreed,' though her allegiance remains on the side of good. One is immediately struck by Rojhaz's appearance, however: he resembles a stereotypical Native American in attire replete with feathered head-dress, certain facial characteristics, speaks in broken pigeon-English, and stands – as per the common representation – with a constantly stern gaze and with always crossed muscle-bound arms at his chest (as if one can expect him to say 'How' as a greeting). One exception belies his not-quite Indigenous ancestry – his blond hair. However, this anomaly seems minimal beside his character; he is abusive, savage, and unrestrained in his treatment of a messenger, and his devotion to Virginia Dare seems to indicate consensual subjection as if protection of the white colonists (and their colony) were of paramount importance to those previously dwelling on supposed *terra nullius*, or those who have adopted their lifeways.

Upon the superheroes discovering that Rojhaz/Captain America is the time-shifted being that has caused the rift, he suddenly changes: he becomes capable of speaking full sentences and explains his drive to protect Virginia, recognizing her importance to colonialism. His appearance remains the same, though he no longer stands so menacingly with arms crossed and even takes up smiling! At this moment, he seems to cease being Rojhaz, the 'almost Indigenous'

servant-protector of Virginia and becomes simply 'White' Captain America. He then explains to the other superheroes his past before the beginning of the series. He was sent back in time from a future America that had descended into totalitarianism (where he became an enemy of the state leading to his exile) and, being alone in the New World, he joined a local Indigenous tribe for an unspecified amount of time – though it was obviously long enough for him to have picked up their apparently rough mannerisms (which are conveniently shed the moment his 'Whiteness' is realized by the other superheroes). His story continues: upon meeting Virginia and her fellow colonists during an encounter between the Roanoke colonists and its previous inhabitants, he decided to remain with her as her protector for, as he explains, "I knew what she was. What she represented. What she *meant*. My America…" (Gaiman 2003, 8: 3; *emphasis* as cited in original).

In the climax of the eight-issue story – thereby heightening the impact of this purported 'need' and its message – Captain America resists returning to the totalitarian future and is sent there without consent by his fellow well-meaning super-friends. The message of his resistance, striking a chord in the hearts of patriots everywhere, is that he must stay to protect "[His] people" and nurture them towards "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," as well as democratic governance "worth fighting for" (*Ibid*.: 1, 25).

Yet, the unasked question that is virtually impermissible in the context is 'Whose America?' This point is well recognized, and has been answered negatively by Chris Murray (2000): "By and large they [the American visions of Superheroes] weren't an America for women, or for African-Americans, or indeed for any minority or disempowered group" (143). That Virginia serves as the symbol of 'his America' shows whose America the 'hero' is not fighting for: that of the original inhabitants of the continent, his adoptive peoples. The fight

'worth fighting' – and in superhero comics it is always literally a fight, sooner or later – is to be waged not against the apparently inevitable (historical) future of revolutionary America but against those whose lifeways are presumed to stand in the way of Captain America's mythical idea of an egalitarian, colour-blind, and democratic America. The raced, classed, and gendered contradictions of this ideal are thereby naturalized in this mythical America as the historical legacy of colonialism and genocide is masked by an unwavering faith in progress. His drive to disrupt the supposed future-historical inevitability of America's descent into totalitarianism is not one driven by concern for those of his adoptive tribe – for their apparent backwardness seems to naturalize their genocide as their lifeways come to be seen as increasingly anachronistic to a modernizing colonial world – but, rather, is driven by concern stated explicitly for '*his* people,' those *admittedly* represented by Virginia Dare, the firstborn colonizer in/of America. And throughout this representation, *Captain America remains the embodiment of goodness*.

Though explicitly this comic draws parallels between the treatment of Indigenous peoples brought before England's Queen Elizabeth who danced to their deaths and those denounced as 'heathens' before being unjustly killed by the Inquisition, and further glorifies the 'noble savage,' it implicitly participates in discursive myths that naturalize the purported 'progress' of history towards a colonial, democratic America as the symbolized epitome of virtue, with the reminder that 'their' 'savage' ways were antithetical to the march of colonial history. The critical unanswerable question, however, revolves around the degree to which this is a choice of Gaiman's or whether he felt constrained by the conventions of Captain America's persona. Considering the ways various superheroes have been reconceived both in tune with changing times (not to call them 'postmodern' times) and how Gaiman's comic itself was subversive of the traditional Marvel narrative, this lacking reconceptualization of Captain America is telling.

Without disregarding the sophistication of much of Gaiman's work, I maintain that he, as all of us, is a (post)colonial subject complicit in and subjected to the very social myths of colonialism that underpin this characterization. Accordingly, subjecting these performative myths to social critique is crucial to any radical politics.

To briefly escape from the comic book morality of the superhero genre, I will now turn to Doug Murray's *The 'Nam* (1986). Murray, a Vietnam veteran, pitched this series to readers with claims to avoid moral debates on the war while offering simply "the real thing… based on fact" in a "promise" to "show… what the War was really like for those who fought in it" (1: 23). However, insofar as it can be said that, "After *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the 'reality' of trench warfare in the public mind was a 'reality' constructed in Hollywood," the same can be said of Vietnam following its deluge of filmic representation and through other pop-cultural media as well, of which this comic was a part (Chambers II 2006: 204). Indeed, following Jean Baudrillard's ideas in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995), it scarcely seems like a stretch to say the Vietnam War most of us envision is not the war itself but representations of it that are fundamentally and subjectively different from events that actually occurred – though the media coverage of the day was perhaps less sanitized than that during the Gulf War of which Baudrillard was writing. However, for the readership of *The 'Nam*, comprised to a large degree of children (as evidenced by my own childhood experience, by the comic's stated adherence to the kid-friendly Comics Code for wider audience reach, and by the inside advertisements for such things as Laser Tag, Saturday morning cartoons, and colouring books), it seems fair to presume that most readers (at the time of publication and beyond) acquired an understanding of Vietnam from second-order representations. Regardless of the accuracy of its (re)presentations

(as if they can be anything other than subjective anyway), *The 'Nam* is undoubtedly re-presentation, though with a far more 'realistic' feel than the fantasies of the superhero genre.

The comic itself functions in what is roughly-termed 'real-time;' that is, each monthly issue covers up to a month of the war beginning in early 1966 before the next issue picks up a month later. Moreover, the timeline follows actual events and operations as they occurred. At times moral repugnance at American actions comes to the fore, though I would argue that even these instances serve to reinforce the idea of the need to get beyond Vietnam Syndrome and for a more militarized masculinity.[7] Issue 12, for instance, focuses on the annihilation of the village of Ben Suc, which was literally bulldozed away after its supposed Vietcong inhabitants were "educated" (one of the soldierly euphemisms used in the comic to justify killing). At times, PFC Ed Marks (the first 'protagonist' of the series whose tenure in *The 'Nam* lasted from issues 1 through 13) seems repulsed by the behaviour. The issue alternates between images coloured with dialogue actually occurring during the scene and those panels narrated by the letter Ed Marks is writing to his parents after the day has ended while he awaits his chopper-lift back to the base. Marks is visibly appalled at the torture of a Vietcong prisoner, shown in this Code-approved comic by a punch in one panel and a bloodied cheek aside a wavering knife in another (Murray 1987, 12: 16). The reader is left to fill in the graphic imagery in the "gutter" through what McCloud (1993) calls "closure" in which comic readers must mentally fill in the space between panels (which plays anew on Barthes' death of the author thesis) (62-6).[8] PFC Marks' letter home provides another sort of closure, but one that noticeably contrasts with his appalled expression in the second torture panel, where his disgusted face is seen looking on. In the panel displaying the face-cutting torture, contrasting with his horrified gaze, Marks writes, "Our

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[7] For more on this, see: Boose 1993.
[8] On the death of the author, see: Barthes 1977.

intelligence officers are pretty efficient…" (Murray 1986, 12: 16). When the intelligence-gathering torture proves fruitless and the prisoner is summarily executed by a point-blank bullet to the head, Marks concludes his ellipsis with the following: "But in this case… I don't think they got any information at all" (*Ibid*.). While the closure of the comic reader is left to ponder the connection between the images of torture, the closure of this letter home serves to foreclose the possibility of querying morality as it conforms to a 'what-happens-abroad-stays-abroad' sort of mentality that writes off atrocity as justifiable, even if appalling, in a time of 'justified' war.

Later in the same issue, PFC Marks watches from his helicopter lift as the "educated" village is bombed to smithereens on the pretext that "We couldn't let the VC have all those explosives back, could we?" (*Ibid*.: 21-2). What is interesting here is that Marks' expression displays horror at the massive explosions wiping out the remains of an emptied village, yet he seems to feel little to no remorse whenever he (or his platoon-mates) kill Vietcong combatants, so long as they were killed honourably; that is, when not already captive. Homes and farms, not bodies, here become the source of PFC Marks' horror. While this may reflect a psychological separation from ones own actions, it is telling that the first protagonist of the narrative is the one feeling this way rather than some other, more secondary or less empathized-with, character insofar as his viewpoint is naturalized for the empathetic reader. Perhaps the reason for this disparity in Marks' responses will be clarified by deeper analysis of the myths representative of American 'Selves' and their Vietnamese 'Others,' and the ethical (re)presentations of the War within the comics (even though this is supposedly, explicitly absent).

While for Lynda Boose (1993), (re)presentations of the Vietnam War have served to enforce a myth that the War was bad only because 'the good guys' lost and were emasculated in the process, the same notions are (re)presented by PFC Marks' letter back to his former Sergeant

following his return home. "[T]he whole country seems to be going crazy," Marks laments,

implying a correlation between anti-war 'hysteria' and rationality's feminized opposite

exemplified by those against the war (*Ibid*., 15: 15). Marks' letter further considers the case of a

driven, but incompetent trainee who was discharged from the service rather than sent to the

'Nam. Marks wonders what America is coming to, exclaiming that "He wanted to fight! He

believed in what we were doing in the 'Nam! The whole country is burning their draft cards, and

this misfit kid wants to fight! Maybe there was some hope yet" (*Ibid*.: 17-8). That hope,

following Boose's formulation, is a hope for a rejuvenated militarized masculinity, a discourse

which the popular culture (re)presentations of Vietnam of the era played into, and one which

served to naturalize winnable interventions and wars abroad, such as the forthcoming Persian

Gulf War which would (re)enforce notions of justice and right in the exercise of force. What

appears to make this war unpopular is not the mythically-acculturated bases for intervention, but

rather that full body-bags are returning home. As is typical concerning Vietnam:

> [D]iscussion of U.S. involvement was isolated to issues concerned only with winning
> and losing… In this [pop culture] scenario, if Vietnam was a bad war, it was bad
> because we lost; and what we should not have gotten into was a war that was doomed
> to failure by the refusal of the American people to support their troops (Boose 1993:
> 70).

In this sense, *The 'Nam* can be read as playing into the construction of a militarized masculinity

vital to the resolve requisite for successful future interventions.

Akin to superhero comic book morality, American intervention is portrayed as morally

justifiable, even if there are errors in its application that demonstrate imperfections in applying

their noble ideals, while the Vietnamese are always caricatured as backwards, foolish, and naive

unless they assimilate to the American line and, akin to the melting-pot home-front, effectively

progress to the 'enlightened' outlook of their presumed moral superiors. Admittedly, this

viewpoint is tempered by (re)presentations that show American ideals as not always so neatly

mapped onto the 'realities' of American life. For instance, the reader is encouraged to

sympathize with the plight of African-Americans who are less able to avoid being drafted insofar

as they are disproportionately poorer and have fewer avenues to the draft-disqualifying college

path (Murray 1987, 10). However, this failure never seems to correspond to a critique of values

or social practice and the reader is left to presume, akin to the discursive myth, that any failures

of implementation do not imply hierarchized values since those values are always shown as

morally superior. The Vietnamese are perpetually shown as either warmongers or greedy

troublemakers. During a single visit to Saigon, PFC Marks and his mates suffer from repetitive

robbery attempts, numerous bombing attacks, and multiple sexual solicitations without any

consideration of the social conditions enabling such need whether in gendered, classed, or

racialized terms (*Ibid*., 3).

　　　When race or nationality are considered they are virtually always denigrated. At one

point, Marks' platoon stumbles upon a reversely 'educated' village, where the Vietcong

apparently inflicted their own atrocious slaughter akin to the My Lai massacre. Marks'

expressions of shock are similar to those presented when he regrets the killing of a captive by his

own side, but rather than being written off as an error in application instead of values, he asks,

"How could anybody *human* do this?" as if the perpetrators fall outside the civilizational

parameters delineating human from animal (*Ibid*., 5: 7; *emphasis* as cited in original). Similar

denouncements of 'their' inhumanity follow a suicide bomb attack ("What kind of country is

this?! How can they do that kind of thing to their own kids?!") (*Ibid*., 11: 12) and an attack

during Christmas ("They'll do the same thing on *their* holidays!") (*Ibid*.: 16). Moreover, when

the reader is encouraged to sympathize with the Vietnamese, it is for their own extreme policies

rather than those of the Americans: "Don't be too mad at [the uncooperative villager], Sir. The

VC would kill him and his family if he gave us any help" (*Ibid*., 16: 13). Their apparently

'extreme' capital punishment for treason is somehow deemed less civilized than the identical

American sentence for a similar 'crime'! Furthermore, a show by "roundeye girls" is considered

superior to the usual entertainment fare simply for the fact that it stars "roundeye girls" as if they

are *obviously* preferred to the apparently lower-quality Vietnamese (*Ibid*., 11: 4-5).

Perhaps most crucially, however, for the moral myth narrative crucial for intervention

here and elsewhere, *The 'Nam* offers an explicit statement that sides in the conflict despite

claiming the contrary. The entirety of Issue 7 is devoted to the story of a "reformed VC"

character, Duong, who serves the American military as a scout; a story that Doug Murray's

introduction tells us is "completely true" though pieced together from several such stories

supposedly told to the writer during his service in Vietnam (*Ibid*., 7: 2). According to this

narrative, Vietnam's problems "began" not with French colonialism, but with the Japanese

invasion during the Second World War to which Duong laments the lack of French help to

restore the normalcy of French rule (*Ibid*.: 2-3). A critique of French colonialism only then

follows, as if their rule took on a different tone once our narrator perceived the force behind it

(*Ibid*., 5). His regret here seems to be that the French killed those desiring independence rather

than a concern for independence for its own sake. It is this anti-nationalist violence that

apparently prompts Duong's entry into the nationalist movement. He denounces Ngo Dinh Diem

as an imposed imperialist ruler perpetuating colonialism and laments the division of the country,

yet never draws any connection to the fact that Diem was supported by the American

government or that the United States sought the division as if this colonialism was not only

unconnected to Cold War foreign policy and its attendant displaced hostilities, but further as if it

occurred in a vacuum as no colonial power is ever named or queried in connection (*Ibid*.: 13-4).

It is only later that Duong notes, "Then the Americans came," as if simply troop presence constitutes colonialism and the Americans were previously uninvolved (*Ibid*.: 16). Finally, after regretting that it was "[his] own comrades [who] were oppressing the people," Duong comes to the realization that, American intervention "was not the same. You Americans wanted to help," thereby also emphasizing not only that the Vietnamese require(d) 'help,' but that American paternalism would nurture a better future (*Ibid*.: 15, 19). The imagery in this panel shows an American servicewoman giving bottles of what is presumably either shampoo or head lice medication to Vietnamese children while a fellow serviceman rubs something into the hair of a young Vietnamese child. Elsewhere, American goodness is similarly presented in terms reducible to charity as we see the terms of superhero morality (re)inscribed here even without the *individually* personified epitomes of good and evil.[9] Reflecting back on his prior views, as an apparently deceived nationalist, Duong bemoans, "my people… I do not know what my people were trying to do!" as the accompanying imagery shows a Vietnamese child killing an American soldier and himself in a suicide-grenade attack (*Ibid*.: 19). Not only is the notion of essentialized difference supposedly inherent in the natures of 'my people' and 'your people' perpetuated by this narrative, but lest the point be missed, the supposed Vietnamese point of view here (from at least those 'sensible enough' to assimilate to American myth) results in Duong, and any 'rational' fellow Vietnamese, coming over to "the right side" (*Ibid*.: 20).

At least one critic has praised this issue for what is called "a nice change of pace from the American point of view," without realizing the unquestionably naturalized myth of moral right and its correspondingly mandated obligations reminiscent of the 'White Man's Burden' (Shayer). The myth of moral righteousness necessitates such interventions and the ultimate failure of the

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[9] See, for example: Murray 1993, 14: 19. In this instance, one serviceman chooses to return for a second tour of duty in Vietnam partially to help orphaned Vietnamese children.

Vietnam War (from an American perspective) seems to have simply reinforced the militarized

masculinity of this myth to necessitate recuperative crusades elsewhere. In Issue 11 of *The*

'Nam, while Ed Marks and his fellow soldiers walk the streets of Saigon, we are explicitly

reminded of the myth in ways that leave it front and centre, if still naturalized as fact, by the

words of a Priest's sermon as he proclaims "And so we must realize that this is a war *for*

'civilization'… and that anything less than victory is… inconceivable!" (*Ibid*., 11: 3). Certainly,

there is an amount of irony here in that the reader knows that this war was 'less than victorious'

and that it neglected to result in the domino effect predicted. However, the intertwining of the

myth of a failed masculinity in need of repair with that of the justice of a civilizing mission seem

to not only have been strengthened by this non-victory, but have further become deeper

enshrined in discourse through pop-cultural (re)presentations that take moral right as a given and

which ascribe the binary terms of good and evil to entire nations rather than to remarkable

individuals.

Beyond Good and Evil? The Postmodern Superhero Comic

"The disgust with dirt can be so great that it keeps us from cleaning
ourselves – from 'justifying' ourselves" (Nietzsche 1966: 119).

Alan Moore's award-winning *Watchmen* has rightfully been praised as a landmark in the

comic genre and had been conceived as an attempt to make the genre mature. Moore takes most

of what is presumed about superheroes and disrupts it. As Wolk (2007) notes, traditional

superhero morality has become

> [T]he condescending, cynical political spin on international relations that the
> American government pumps out on a regular basis, and superhero-comics writers
> have made their analysis of 'good' and 'evil' much more interesting. The trend
> didn't really start until the mid-90s, after *Watchmen*'s intimation that maybe the mass
> murdering villain could be in the right and the earnest heroes in the wrong had had a

> chance to sink in… a lot of the best and most significant [post-*Watchmen* superhero comics] address the question of means and ends and where they intersect with violence and history and the notion of what constitutes moral action (99-100).

Insofar as the moral high-ground is not simply pervasive in comics (such as those explored) but serves to justify, necessitate, and naturalize colonial interventions, a crucial disruption of this standard (as *Watchmen* proffers) seems a vital site of exploration.

Watchmen takes place in an alternate 1985, in a timeline roughly parallel to, but split off from our own in the late 1930s. As Mike DuBose notes, "*Watchmen* is set in a world marked by fragmentation of authority and disconnected forces – a postmodern world" (DuBose 2007: 924). In this alternate world, following the appearance of superhero comics, costumed vigilantes (with no super-powers) arose from the woodworks to fight crime inspired by the textual superheroes of the so-called Golden Age. Unlike traditional representations of superheroes, however, these 'masked adventurers' (as they are referred to at times) almost immediately strike the reader as profoundly human, flawed, and often psychologically disturbed, with one 'masked adventurer' (ironically named 'the Comedian') even having gone so far as to have raped another. Rorschach, so named for the way his mask is composed of shifting inkblot shapes, seems to be the most psychologically-damaged and is also firmly committed to the far right-wing stance of *The New Frontiersman*, a news magazine. Rorschach epitomizes the vigilante "in that he is violent beyond necessity, attacks police when cornered, and blatantly refuses regulation" (*Ibid*.). Other characters encompass varying degrees of neuroses and represent other political perspectives ranging from relativism, to what could be called the 'left liberalism' of Ozymandias – the purported world's smartest man. Ozymandias, otherwise known as Adrian Veidt, had quit his 'masked adventurism' in 1975 and pursued a business life from scratch – having given away his inherited fortune to prove his capacity for success – and, over the next decade, had become the most successful capitalist on the planet.

The plot of *Watchmen* is remarkably complex and not worth repeating in detail here for two reasons. First, I couldn't possibly do justice to a story that relies so heavily on its own symbolic modes of representation for its entire internal coherence and, second, because my argument herein relies simply on one major component of the graphic novel. To provide simply the requisite synopsis: the world of *Watchmen* is mired in the Cold War and hovers on the brink of nuclear annihilation. Indeed, the Doomsday Clock is a recurrent motif in the story, with an image of a symbolic clock beginning at eleven minutes before midnight ending each issue with a one-minute advancement before striking twelve in a pool of blood at the conclusion of the twelve-issue series. A tense anxiety and feeling of impending doom grips the reader as it does the world where people carry signs proclaiming "The end is nigh" and pessimistic graffiti covers the backgrounds of many scenes. In this Cold War world, however, the United States has achieved technological and military superiority over the USSR as a result of a 1959 nuclear accident that transformed Jon Osterman into the only super-powered superhero of the story: Dr. Manhattan. When it becomes clear that Dr. Manhattan could simply stop any nuclear assault launched by the Soviets in mid-air, nuclear parity breaks down and the (il)logic of Mutually-Assured Destruction (MAD) no longer holds. This strategic advantage ensured an American victory in Vietnam and, presumably, resulted in a more aggressive foreign policy since this world has spiralled towards nuclear war, in ways the reader must assume were prevented by MAD's (il)logics in our world. This strategic advantage has thus far contained the Soviet Union, but when Dr. Manhattan comes to feel too alienated from humankind and teleports himself to Mars that advantage collapses and the Soviets invade Afghanistan, prompting an American response.

In the meantime, Ozymandias – purportedly the world's smartest man and the most politically 'left' of our superheroes – has been enacting a plot to save the world from what he deems to be otherwise inevitable nuclear destruction. His plot depends upon secrecy and he has been killing those who get in his way or have previously needed to know of his plans to assist him. Thus, the mysterious killings spark the vigilante investigation that leads to the inevitable confrontation. When finally confronted by Rorschach and his politically-diverse allies, Ozymandias confesses his plot which has already taken effect unbeknownst to his confronters: he has used the advanced technology made possible by Dr. Manhattan's capabilities to construct a realistic-seeming alien carcass whose teleported appearance in New York resulted in a "psychic shockwave killing half the city" (Moore 1986, XI: 26). His rationale maintains that the appearance of an external alien threat would force the United States and the Soviet Union to forego their hostilities, uniting in alliance against a common enemy thereby saving the rest of the world from assured destruction. The heroes, though appalled by the mass-murder, agree to keep the ruse silent accepting the logic for ensuring a lasting peace, yet Rorschach – ever the absolutist – refuses to censor himself or his convictions and accepts a fate of death instead, but not before having secretly left his journal with the editor's of the right-wing magazine, *The New Frontiersman*. While the ending is somewhat ambiguous, there are hints that pending publication of Rorschach's journal allows the secret to slip thereby ending Ozymandias' utopia prematurely.

Moore himself denies presenting a moral judgment in this tale. As he noted in an interview:

> [A] different way of seeing the universe… is part of what *Watchmen* is about. We tried to set up four or five radically opposing ways of seeing the world and let the readers figure it out for themselves; let them make a moral decision for once in their miserable lives (Coulthart 2006)!

For the most part, he did a praiseworthy job: the good/evil binary is subverted, comic book morality is deconstructed, and the medium has been altered to a degree it never has before – or since. Yet while Matthew Wolf-Meyer has argued that Ozymandias is "in the true sense of the word… a Nietzschean übermensch, a man who has succeeded in becoming something more than the proscriptions of humanity normally allow, has overcome his nausea, and is still bound to his genetic precursors, willing to uplift them," there are ways even this comic participates in naturalizing certain social myths (Wolf-Meyer 2003: 507). To begin with, Ozymandias' rise to capitalist success reinforces a crucial myth of liberal capitalism: that any man starting with literally nothing (as he had given away every penny to prove his worth), and driven by a hard work-ethic and the use of his intellect, could become a successful businessman. This masks the structural barriers to success and presents poverty as evidence of personal failure, while anyone can apparently succeed at going from rags-to-riches. The fact that Veidt is 'White,' male, educated, and connected is obvious, but naturalized as irrelevant in the absence of any consideration of the role of social location in his success. In this sense, while Veidt's drive to stand above the herd of humanity whose moralities have caused the descent towards nuclear annihilation can be read in terms of a Nietzschean frame, he more easily and consistently upholds the ideals of particular raced, classed, and gendered interests that naturalize capitalism.

Moreover, despite Moore's claims to not simply disrupting Western comic book morality, but denying one at all, the reader is ultimately encouraged to side with either Rorschach – the insane, absolutist, right-wing, violent, vigilante fanatic – or Ozymandias and his reluctant allies (all of the other 'heroes') who represent 'the other' option for the global future. Though these last-minute allies of Ozymandias are representative of numerous (domestic?) political ideologies matters not for the global political choice ending the story insofar as they all

reluctantly accept the binary presented and side with Ozymandias rather than Rorschach. What exactly is this choice between? On the one hand is the apparent inevitability of not only major power conflict, but nuclear war as security dilemmas, power-struggles, and conflict-generating (bi)polarity are naturalized. On the other is the need for a common, greater-powered enemy threat that must be balanced against to minimize the damages of inevitable war. In other words, it's a choice between realisms. That global politics is the timeless pursuit of power and the careful balancing against any power that would disrupt a roughly stable order (with inevitable warfare) is taken as a given natural fact of global politics. Its morality is beyond consideration even in this remarkable disruption.

Furthermore, that Moore is bothered by widespread reader identification with Rorschach rather than Veidt or Dr. Manhattan (*Ibid.*) hints at an implied moral siding in this supposedly non-moralizing narrative. Such desired empathy with Ozymandias or Dr. Manhattan ultimately, despite political differences between the two, implies that Moore finds their common decision – to sacrifice millions for the sake of an alliance against an external enemy – of greater moral worth. While claiming not to side in politics, Moore not only participates in a domestic/international split,[10] implicitly siding internationally with realism, but further sides here (by seeking reader empathy with Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan) with a notion of utilitarian liberalism in which minorities can be sacrificed to majority concerns. As Marshall Beier (2005) has argued that realism, liberalism, and even much critical theory within IR is founded upon a culturally-specific Western cosmological tradition that naturalizes itself through discourse and serves as a basis for imposition, so too does Moore's text (re)inscribe this culturally-specific narrative thereby naturalizing such approaches to global politics. While balance of power theory within the realist tradition has been argued to be inherently anti-colonial (Hall 2006), realism can

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[10] For more on this, see: Walker 1992.

be seen as imperialistic in being cultural yet purportedly universal thereby justifying its

naturalization and imposition through myth and force. To consider realism anti-colonial depends

upon a definition of colonialism that links it strictly to power-seeking instrumental colonialism,

rather than one which considers cultural complicities in structures of social relations that enforce

hierarchizations and privileges rooted in a more biopolitical notion of power.

   Admittedly, this discourse is less neatly mapped onto *Watchmen* than onto the other

comics discussed as there are clearly unanswered moral quandaries intentionally left in the text.

Indeed, the 'threat' constructed by Ozymandias to bring about a balance of power is just that: a

constructed one – aliens are not actually posing a real, existential threat to humanity. This plays

into a key postmodern and thematic question that underwrites the story and that is asked

explicitly by Dr. Manhattan: "Who makes the world?" (Moore 1986, IV: 27). Yet, unlike the

typical postmodern answer that the world is socially constructed through discourse and

performativity, an answer here seems to indicate that societal elites have a disproportionate

capacity to easily sway publics to their interests and, more problematically, those interests are

naturalized as beyond reproach. While Aeon Skoble (2005) maintains that Moore's masterpiece

leads readers to question their own complicity in constructing a certain world and then discarding

obligation to it, thereby leaving those such as Ozymandias to make constitutive decisions for us

(39), it seems to me that even this reading implies that we are capable of escape from the

constitutive functions of our actions by delegating them elsewhere as if our complicities are not

always present.

   While social myths in *Watchmen* are less overt or perhaps less aggressively imperialistic

than in the other comics discussed, this does not mean that they are necessarily less

(re)productive of certain discourses that naturalize a certain colonial mode of viewing the world.

Yet by apparently asking the reader to decide whether Ozymandias is bad or good (*Ibid*.: 36-7),

Moore perpetuates the idea that good and evil are universal, pre-discursive values that stand

outside of culturally-specific social myth. When speaking specifically about *Watchmen* and

other comics like it, Jeff Brenzel (2005) notes that:

> [E]ven when writers have adopted what literary critics might call oppositional or
> subversive postures with regard to superheroes, those same writers are still testifying
> strongly to, and relying heavily upon, the notion that comic-book superheroes are
> *supposed* to be good" (149; *emphasis* as cited in original).

Additionally, Moore remains wedded to the ideas that good exists independently of the social

discourses that create the world, that it stands outside of cultural myth, and that capitalist

progress and realist international politics are the definitive (and good) modes of social

organization, and this thereby, at least implicitly, perpetuates a naturalizing myth of supposedly

superior cultural ideologies that *Watchmen* participates in normalizing; the very similar sorts of

myths used to justify impositions of these values onto those who are accordingly viewed as

retrogressively behind 'our' standards and in need of 'our' imposed help.

Conclusions, Comics, Colonialism, and International Politics

Pop-cultural (re)presentations both reflect and inform social myths. According to Bleiker

(2001):

> Representation is always an act of power. This power is at its peak if a form of
> representation is able to disguise its subjective origins and values. Realism has been
> unusually successful in this endeavour; it has turned one of many credible
> interpretations into a form of representation that is not only widely accepted as
> 'realistic', but also appears and functions as essence (515).

While the comics considered herein do not necessarily all naturalize realism, they do all rely on

and naturalize what I call a colonial mode of comprehending the world; according to which the

culturally-specific comes to be universalized and trans-historicized (much like realism in

Bleiker's assessment) in the name of right and for the right of imposition. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's famous argument of *Imagined Communities* (1983), Ryan Edwardson (2003) has claimed that "Comic books, as a visual medium, engage this act of imagination, in turn facilitating the mental construction of the nation and national identity… [such that] National identity… is also consumed into existence" (185). Similarly, these comics tend to engage the imaginative acts of a colonial legacy that naturalizes and depoliticizes an imperial past and present under an (il)logic of moralism masked as fact. Likewise, this colonial framework for the international is not simply produced or performed, but 'consumed into existence.'

Insofar as the comic medium relies on simply the illusion of change alongside actual repetition to provide for continuity in narrative and understanding (Wolk 2007: 103), so too do the rationales behind colonialism. Colonialism's (re)presentation in popular culture has certainly evolved from the explicit racial violences inherent in, for example, Hergé's *Tintin* and the colonial practices of its time, but the overarching narrative of justice couched in the necessity of universalizing 'our' values pervades even newer incarnations of colonial practices. As can be evidenced in Iraq or Afghanistan, the apparently necessary imposition of culturally-specific values and practices (such as liberal democracy) serves to justify violence that is itself regenerative of the notion of right. In the words of Jeffrey Lang and Joey Skidmore:

> Marvel superheroes generally still resolved a situation in the quaint, old 'individualistic' method of beating the living crap out of the bad guys. This much is held over from the American monomyth elements found in Superman. Richard Slotkin calls it the myth of regeneration through violence. It originated in Puritan colonists' tales of Indian wars. Through killing the pagan Indians, the colonists made the frontier safer for virtuous white Christians… Regeneration through violence suggests a worldview in which the most powerful or most clever members of the community are also the most moral (166).

Conversely, the notion that morality transcends cultural context serves to justify the notion that the most moral entertain a right to exert their power to impose it. That instrumental power, and

the moral righteousness to use it coercively, map so neatly onto absolute value systems informs a more sociological international political understanding of underlying social structures and the role of imaginative ideas in global politics.[11]

As a brief additional example, one can consider the recent hugely popular *Civil War* (2007) crossover series from Marvel. In this narrative, following growing widespread hostility towards free-acting superheroes, the American government initiates a registration plan that splits the superhero community between those accepting government sanction, and its attendant limitations, and those – led by Captain America – resisting this incursion on what are deemed civil liberties. *Civil War*'s writer, Mark Millar, has admitted to "a certain amount of political allegory in a story where a guy wrapped in the American flag is in chains as the people swap freedom for security" (Newsarama.com). However, insofar as Captain America is the story's main protagonist and he ultimately decides the pro-registration forces are morally right, security effectively trumps freedom not simply as statement, but as judgment since his viewpoint comes to epitomize goodness. Just before his turn to the pro-government side, however, the two sides clash in inevitable conflict even when it is no longer either strategically necessary, useful, or viable, thereby implying not only that war leads to final resolves, but further that war is natural and inevitable. Additionally, this unnecessary battle (that leads to Captain America's conversion) fulfills the anticipation for a fight between the 'good guys' that is similarly both rooted in and (re)productive of militarized-masculine desire.

Again indicative of the limits of epitomized 'goodness' in superhero morality, Captain America ends the story feeling relieved that the heroes are now able to tackle "everything from the environment to global poverty" (Millar 2007, 7: 24), as if: 1) these social ills were ever the focus of superheroic action that virtually always reinforces the status quo; 2) the American

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[11] See also: Alsford 2006: 3.

government sanction prioritizes such issues as global poverty when we are explicitly told to sacrifice values like freedom for security; and 3) epitomized goodness can be mapped neatly onto charity-like transformations within a specific capitalist, masculinist, racist, colonial context without challenging the enabling conditions under such systems themselves that effectively ensure global poverty (and its relief only by bandage-solutions). This analysis fits neatly with Jason Dittmer's (2005), according to which Captain America represents an America that acts defensively, "a conceit of the American geopolitical narrative… that America only acts in the name of security, not empire" (630). This social myth is perpetuated by comic texts, like *Civil War* that emphasize security *from* an 'Other' (even the superheroic 'Other') who neglects to conform to the universalized values premised upon moral right, while obfuscating relationships between, for instance, modes of production and resulting forms of insecurity.

This conception of hero as Other is a central theme for Mike Alsford (2006). However, while heroes may represent Others to the degree that they are often separated from 'normal humanity' (as epitomized by Superman's alien origins), the degree to which they implicitly or explicitly embrace nationalistic driving goals, such as Superman's aim to serve 'truth, justice, and the American way,' without problematizing the limitations and implications of such moralism reinforces status quo politics. While Alsford ultimately characterizes heroism as the deployment of oneself in the service of the Other (as the average human is to the hero) (132), I maintain that this deployment is only read as heroic, according to the socially discursive myths that underpin Western conceptions of politics, insofar as their charge is not-too-Other – unless the 'hero' seeks to bring the un-Enlightened into (colonial) history. Alsford notes that the idea of progress similarly maps onto imagined heroes (3), but neglects to consider the ways this progress is itself enshrined in colonial violences.

This paper is not meant to offer a new *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), in which Frederic Wertham (in)famously argued that comics contributed to youth delinquency in an influential text that led to the Comics Code Authority. It would seem that typical conceptions of delinquency are hardly what are engendered by culturally-discursive products that tend to perpetuate the (colonial) status quo. Certain comics, such as Brian K. Vaughan's *Pride of Baghdad* (2006), which explores the personified lives of a pride of politically-diverse lions accidentally released from the Baghdad zoo following U.S. bombing in 2003, more fundamentally reject the sorts of colonial myths prevalent in many comics, even many of those supposedly beyond good and evil, though I would argue it still relies on and perpetuates certain social myths, such as the natural inevitability of the state. Rather what is crucial to the argument herein is that all cultural products, as all social discourse, are always rooted in some form(s) of cultural myth in order to be comprehensible. The nature of comic myths – like the nature of colonial myths – has changed over time, partially as a result of interventions that have exposed the inadequacy of certain (re)presentations in ways that have brought politics back to that which myth has depoliticized. Comics are not simply productive of these social myths but function as a part of an intertext through which these myths are re-transmitted. This intervention seeks not to reject the comic medium, but rather to prod social critique of the ways we all participate in social violences; which I am sure this paper does as well. What I hope to do is not transcend myth, which plays a vital role in cultural understanding but rather to subject those very colonial myths to critique and to prod them to change in ways more respective of difference in hopes of a less violent international politics – a task beyond simply the scope of this paper.

Admittedly, stereotype is crucial to the comic medium, as there is little time or space for such things as character development outside of caricature (Eisner 1996: 17-9). When discursive

social stereotypes rely on colonial myth, these trends will similarly pervade its cultural products. I am emphatically not suggesting the comic medium cannot portray outside of colonial myth, but that such approaches tend to be minimal as they are in a society where intervention on the grounds of moral virtue is a commonly believed right. Exceptions to this are many, but thus far tend to remain those outside of its superheroic mainstream. Furthermore, I am speaking here intentionally not to a comic audience, but to an IR one in hopes that the colonial myths that pervade both our theoretical frameworks and our culturally-constituted reference points to the political can come to be problematized lest we inadvertently further advance the violent politics of colonialism by accepting myth as given and leaving its (re)product(ion)s unproblematized.

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