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A GENEALOGY OF ABSENCE & EVIL:  
TRACING THE NATION'S BORDERS WITH *CAPTAIN AMERICA*

by

CHRISTIAN STEINMETZ

Under the direction of Dr. Mary Stuckey

ABSTRACT

Although research has previously connected comic books and national ideology, there has yet to be a study examining the role of villains in this relationship. By analyzing representations of evil and villainy in the long-running series Captain America and understanding them in light of the model of the circuit of culture, the transforming imaginary space of the American nation can be traced.

INDEX WORDS: Comic Books, National Ideology, Captain America, Nation, Limit Attitude, Circuit of Culture.

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TRACING THE NATION'S BORDERS WITH *CAPTAIN AMERICA*

By

CHRISTIAN STEINMETZ

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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2008

A GENEALOGY OF ABSENCE & EVIL:  
TRACING THE NATION'S BORDERS WITH *CAPTAIN AMERICA*

by

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August 2008

## DEDICATION

For Kelly Jean. Thanks for being my support, my conscience and my companion in villainy.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my committee. I am especially grateful to Mary Stuckey for never pressuring me to do something I did not want to.

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### Introduction: A Genealogy of Evil and Absence in *Captain America*

What would public reaction be if Captain America punched a pregnant soccer mom in the face? Or if he encountered a gay rights advocate on the street and crushed the man with his unbreakable red, white and blue shield? If a 2007 story featured this hero beating up a grossly stereotypical Asian villain—with yellow skin, a distended head, long fingernails, a sumo wrestling outfit and a long Fu Manchu style moustache—would Americans find that representation racist? Likely, public reaction to these three extreme examples would include shock and disgust, while the media might express concern about such violence in sexist, homophobic or racist depictions. Such victims—despite their other ideological complexities—are not usually represented as enemies of the modern American nation or subject to violent punishment in our mainstream fiction. Yet, in the 1940s issues of *Captain America*, this character fought multiple Asian enemies as described above. Today, such villains would not be acceptable. Instead of being symbols of evil, they represent racism and ignorance. Between 1940 and 2007 the meaning of "evil" has clearly transformed, and the borders to the American imagined community have shifted.

Some scholars have analyzed superhero comic books as texts that reproduce ideologies of nationalism and capitalism (Emad, 2006; McAllister, 1990; Wolf-Meyer, 2003), but none have examined the important recurring archetype within these narratives: the villain. Villains are rejected, excluded and disciplined (often violently) by heroic protagonists. Yet, regardless of the role they play in determining the borders of the acceptable, villains have largely been ignored by the literature connecting comics and national ideology. This literature focuses heavily on the representations within comics, overlooking the content's link to its production, consumption and regulation. All of these factors contribute to the nationalistic meanings derived from such texts,

but are disregarded in most interpretations of comics. Although some of the comics analyzed have decades of history, few longitudinal studies of their relationship to our nation's history exist. Clearly, the imaginary space of the nation has changed drastically over the years, but most research focuses on one particular moment rather than outline the shifts it has undergone since Americans started defining their identity in connection with the imagined idea of a nation.

Drawing on theories of the limits constructed within public discourse (Foucault, 1977), this study addresses that problem. How do depictions of evil and villainy in *Captain America* represent the changes to the nation over the last seventy years of American national history? Using Foucault's concept of the limit attitude, together with Paul Du Gay's (1997) circuit of culture methodology, I hope to trace the shifting borders of the imagined nation, performing a kind of fluid cartography.

For the purposes of this project, when I refer to the American "nation" I mean the interior of its imagined community maintained by cultural texts. This is the same as Benedict Anderson's "nation," but I understand it as a spatial metaphor, with an inside and an outside delineated by borders. This is not the same as the concrete, geographic space constituting the country of the United States. Nor is it accurate to lump this together synonymously with either "national identity" or "national ideology," as I believe those terms encompass something broader. Similar to the way that geometry allows us to find the area of a triangle, I am seeking to locate the area of the imagined nation, by first locating its contours within a cultural text and then noting what is on either side of these borders. Since this area is constantly shifting, both over time and over various texts, the only national space this study can document is the constituent one maintained by *Captain America*.

I have chosen *Captain America* as a cultural site of importance to begin this mapping, because of 1) the comic book medium's documented connections with ideology, 2) Captain America's iconic symbolism of American idealism and, 3) the longevity of that character's stories, together with the closure brought by his recent fictional assassination. A brief overview of the character's fictional history and his symbolic representation follows. Captain America originated as a U.S. soldier during World War II, experimented upon by military scientists with the "Super Soldier Serum," to produce an American hero to battle the Nazis. His costume is patterned on the American flag, with stars, stripes and tiny eagle wings on his cowl. He bears an unbreakable shield, again designed with red and white stripes with a large star in its blue center. Interestingly, this shield is used defensively, but is also thrown as an offensive weapon. For almost seventy years, the character has appeared in comic books, a man outside of history.

The analysis presented here will trace the borders of the American imagined nation, beginning in 1940 and ending in 2007. It would be impossible to list all of the things within these borders, but by detailing those things at the limits we can begin to understand how much this imagined community has changed. By using a comic book as our cultural text and specifically approaching its villains, some borders to the nation may be noticeable that were not from other textual angles. Also of significance is that this research covers sixty-seven years of rhetorical context, interacting with only this one particular text. This provides insight and understanding into what elements of nationalism are narrated through this comic book, reflecting America's hatred of some and its love of others. This study provides a map of the imagined community as its shape changes over time, showing who is inside its borders and who is left outside of them. Concurrently, I seek to answer what circuits of culture are worked through when a cultural text like *Captain America* establishes these kinds of limits for the nation. New meanings of "evil" are

discovered, maybe even ones revealing the maintenance of Americans' willingness to die and to kill for their community. By examining the limits of acceptability within comic book discourse, this study shows how Americans understand themselves and those they exclude as villainous others.

### Comic Books & Ideology

This study relates to an ongoing discussion about comic books and ideology within scholarly literature. By reviewing that body of work, alongside the texts that contribute to my methodology, I will provide a framework for the importance of tracing the American nation through its representation in *Captain America* comics. I begin by evaluating the results of other studies that have focused on comic books' ideological themes. Other writers have found gender portrayal, religious myth, capitalism and nationalism to all be connected to comic narratives. Within this literature on comics and ideology is a growing concentration on *Captain America* comics specifically. I separately review the articles and books that address that text, assessing their usefulness to my examination of this cultural artifact. Following the scholarship on comics and ideology, I move next to the literature that informs the methodology of my own study. This begins with Michel Foucault's (1977) theory of a "limit attitude," followed by Benedict Anderson's (1991) conception of the nation as an imagined construction. Together, Frederic Jameson (1981) and Roland Barthes (1972) compound both of these theories, bringing new insight to how mythic narratives like Captain America can appear ambiguous and apolitical while still representing the nation. Finally, since Paul Du Gay's (1997) "circuit of culture" is used as the primary organization for this study, I review its importance to studies of such cultural artifacts as comic books. Du Gay links five moments together in the process of creating meaning

for a cultural artifact: representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. None of the other research available on comics and ideology approaches a case study from all five of Du Gay's modes of culture. The following section looks at these other studies, situating them within the modes they do analyze.

### Comic Book Regulation, Representations and National Ideology

Given my concentration on the nation and comic books, it is important to focus on what nationalistic themes other researchers have already found. As my study will begin with the regulation of comics and its effect on what is acceptable within comic narratives, I will start with a review of research covering that mode of culture.

Kiste-Nyberg's (1998) book on the creation and implementation of the Comics Code Authority is an important guideline for defining what limitations were self-imposed on comic narratives by their publishers, in hope of avoiding actual governmental regulation. Her account reveals all of the moments when publishers updated the code to reflect contemporary standards, listing the subject matter they bowdlerized. She finds three moments where the code is altered, as well as an in-house code implemented by Timely Comics, *Captain America's* publisher in the 1940s. This resource helped my own research determine what moments in Captain America were dictated by the code, either by portraying characters as evil or by eliminating them from the story.

Kiste-Nyberg also helps my study to distinguish between what I term "borders of absence" and "borders of evil." If certain subject matter was missing entirely from the story (as sexuality was from the early sixties issues of Captain America) because of the code's restrictions, then I understand this to be a border of absence, where the unacceptable is invisible in

representation. There is, however, a difference between what the code defines as objectionable and what the producers of the comic define as evil. For instance, the code does not require communism to be depicted as evil, but during the 1950s when the code was created, many Captain America villains were communists because that dogma was an external fear of the nation's. So, when characters are depicted negatively without guidance from the code (as these communists were) then I understand these to be borders of evil, where the code doesn't regulate the representation, but the nation's anxieties are still symbolized in the text.

While discovery of these borders of evil is possible through my own interpretative research of *Captain America*, it was greatly aided by Kiste-Nyberg's revelations of what representations were regulated and changed by the code. Her revelations were also useful toward my interpretations of what is absent in these comics, though I will also look for moments where something absent (such as African-Americans until the late 1960s) suddenly become present and acceptable.

Three other researchers besides Kiste-Nyberg delve into the regulation of comic books (Beatty, 2005; McAllister, 1990, 2001; and Kluver, 2000). All investigate the impact of government regulation on ideological representation in comics, although McAllister tends to focus more on the publishing industry's production practices. From these resources, it is clear that the governments of the United States and China have both shown interest in comic book storylines and how they construct both ideology and nationalism. My research seeks to contribute to this other research by demonstrating through a particular case study how a comic book maintains the nation's space by adhering to the state's expressed concerns. All of these regulations manifest themselves in the representations within *Captain America*. It makes sense then to proceed next to the moment of representation in Du Gay's circuit of culture.



From their earliest instances in Europe, comics grew in popularity with the rise of the literate lower-middle class, used as an arena of argumentation within that class (Kunzle, 1990, p. 7-8). These comics adopted distinctive nationalist characteristics depending on the local conditions within which they were distributed (Kunzle, 1990, p. 5). Nationalism in comics does not begin with *Captain America*, or even in the United States. It is a characteristic of many comics, documented through the medium's history and across the world.

As discovered by the previously mentioned researchers engaging in the regulation of comic books, their narratives tend to represent the status quo of their respective nations. It is important to note that the tendency of comic books to promote nationalism isn't just symptomatic of an American condition; studies have determined that representations of national ideology are found in Japanese (Kinsella, 1999), Korean (Noh, 2005), Chinese (Kluver, 2000) and Indian (Rao, 1996) comics as well. These studies are usually textual analyses, indicating that comics can act as reflections of nationalism, regardless of the nation that they represent. Alone, each of these studies claims that a comic text represents the nationalism of its country of origin. Together they demonstrate that cultural texts can maintain the boundaries to their nation's space. My research seeks to identify specifically how *Captain America* performs this function, moving through the circuit of culture to do so.

Looking specifically at the narratives of American superheroes reveals that their ideology never allows the characters to solve the world's problems and establish a utopia, so that their fantastic fisticuffs can continue forever, protecting the status quo from change (Wolf-Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, comics represent how both gender and power relationships are understood in the United States (Emad, 2006). Wright (2001) even argues that comic books are a neglected set of texts that can be analyzed to test how deeply American consciousness retains political and

economic current events. His work emphasizes these representations within various comics' narratives, professing that comics can actually frame how we experience reality, and that this framework differs between generations of readers.

All of this research interprets specific American comics as representative of nationalism, supporting my claim that *Captain America* does the same. My project adds to their research by finding further areas where the imagined community is traceable, even locating moments where it shifts and changes what is acceptable within it.

So far, the research published on comic books and ideology has focused on their central superhero characters, mostly ignoring the constant stream of villainous antagonists on the receiving end of these status quo affirming thrashings. This is an area that is lacking in the literature, one to which my study can add to by expanding upon the interpretations of these artifacts. While I have much research to support my interpretations of a superhero comic book, I am exploring new territory with regard to evil and villainy.

### Comic Books: Identity, Consumption and Production

Alongside the lack of research on comic book villains is a deficiency in studies that engage in the moment of identity within Du Gay's circuit of culture. This moment should detail how an artifact is a part of our cultural universe, encoded with particular meanings that construct roles for itself, its consumers and sometimes even its producers (Du Gay, 1997, p. 4-5). Again, this creates an opportunity for my research to contribute to an incomplete area in the already established literature. However, examining the identities constructed through comic books would require interviews and direct interaction with consumers of comics. In a genealogical study like this, it would be impossible to locate consumers from seventy years ago, making this an elusive

moment in cultural history. Pustz's (1999) study of comic book culture and fandom might be able to fill in some of the gaps here, but it is the only available resource detailing how identity can be constituted through comics. The examination in Pustz (1999) is also very broad and does not have particular relevance to *Captain America*. Since my study is focused on the rhetorical symbolism within these comics, the representations I examine flow through the circuit, connecting with the identities that *Captain America* constructs. Still, it is important to note here the difficulty in revealing any further insights within the moment of identity.

Similarly, the moment of production in the circuit of culture was also difficult to approach firsthand, given the longevity of the comic I plan to analyze. Unlike the moment of identity however, I rely on several studies available to approach the comics industry and creators. McAllister's (1990, 2001) investigations focus on the history of the industry and distribution in America. His results find comic book content to be particularly susceptible to historical events, specifically their social/political environment. He concludes that comics are capable of both legitimating *and* resisting dominant American ideology. More commonly though, these narratives tend to adhere to the status quo of American culture, and the current trend of conglomeration within the comic book publishing industry has a propensity for keeping them there (McAllister, 1990).

More importantly, McAllister indicates a possibility for superhero comics producers to resist enforcing the status quo. Given this possibility, my study remains cognizant of potential moments of resistance, distinguishing them from the more common representations adhering to nationalism. McAllister's work points to a few moments in comic production where I looked for such resistances. Alongside his research, I turned to Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow* (2004) and his work with Will Jacobs (1997) for further information about factors in comic book production

that might have contributed to resistant content. Both of these Jones texts are written as narratives rather than critical examinations, but together they cover almost the entire period of comics production that I analyzed.

The other studies that focus specifically on the production of comics are historical examinations analyzing how comic book representations of ideology relate to the historical events surrounding their publications. Kinsella (1999) and Rao's (1996) studies are not about the American publishers I studied here, but they both connect the ways that capitalism, government and publishing impose ideology upon comic books narratives. Both of these articles were useful to consult when I needed to make similar connections in my work.

Like the moment of production, there is a lack of research in the ways comic books have been consumed by their audience. Again, Pustz's (1999) book on comic fans provides at least one source of information about the consumption practices of comic book readers. His work focuses heavily on the emergence of the comic fan in the sixties and may be less useful when I need to explain the consumption activities in other eras of *Captain America*.

The only other research available on comic consumption is a study analyzing the content of letters sent to superhero comic book publishers (Palmer-Mehta and Hay, 2005). Their procedure was to textually analyze the letters written to DC Comics after a *Green Lantern* narrative featured the violent beating of a gay supporting character. From looking at all thirty of these letters, the researchers developed a theory about the ideology of comics' fans concerning GLBT issues. I find it problematic that the researchers make inferences about the general consuming audience based on such a small and specific sample of letters. However, while I don't find the content analysis of letters to be the most effective method to research the culture of consumption, it was one of my only means to approach the consumption of *Captain America*.

Since my study doesn't make generalized claims about the entire comic book audience, I believe the letters pages of the issues I examined provide insights into how *some* readers were interpreting the same content. It is important to note however, that there is a distinct possibility that not all of the letters appearing in *Captain America* may really be from consumers of the book, while many others are edited out by the "gatekeepers" on the editorial staff.

### Conclusions From the General Literature on Comics and Ideology

Given this review of the literature on both comic books and ideology, there have been several key revelations that both impact my study of *Captain America* and indicate that it will contribute considerably to the above body of work. To summarize, there is a heavy focus for both these previous studies and my own research on the moments of regulation and representation in the history of American comics. Kiste-Nyberg's (1998) book on the comics code will serve as a useful guideline for determining what counts as a "border of absence" versus a "border of evil," allowing me to find significance in which absences are actually maintained to preserve the borders of the imagined community.

I can also contribute to the other research on regulation and representation in comics by performing a large case study on almost seventy years of American comics' history. The shifts I locate in *Captain America* can provide a chronological "map" for future researchers to watch for in other comic texts. My research also notes the formal properties of a comic that allow it to induce nationalism, particularly looking for the circuits of culture that most heavily influence that evocation. Certainly, since my study is the first to engage the villains of superhero comics as the primary representation of importance, it does provide some new insights about this connection.

The moments of identity, production and consumption in the circuit of culture were all difficult to research and therefore represent a much smaller section of my thesis. There is a lack of literature in all three of these areas, though two sources provide my research with some potential assistance. First, McAllister's (1990, 2001) indication that resistance to status quo ideology is possible in superhero comics, presents some historical moments to look for such resistance and alerts my study to watch for other such moments. Secondly, Palmer-Mehta and Hay's (2005) usage of comic book letter pages as an indication of the culture of consumption may be an inaccurate method for making generalizations of the audience, but it did prove useful when my study engaged in the specific culture of *Captain America* readers. Despite the lack of previous literature covering these three moments in culture, I believe that my study's emphasis on the rhetorical symbolism of Captain America makes these moments less critical to tracing those comics' relationship to the space of the nation.

Now that I have reviewed how my research can contribute to the general dialogue about comic books and ideology, I focus separately on the research that concentrates on *Captain America* specifically. I assess how this other work relates to Du Gay's circuit of culture, determining how that research contributes to my study, while how I vice versa contribute to this growing niche of Captain America specific research.

### *Captain America* in Scholarly Research

In the last few years, there have been four published pieces of academic research on *Captain America*. Like my own research, these all focus on the series' relationship with the nation, though their approaches are very different from my own. Another commonality between the four is that they all focus on the moment of representation in the circuit of culture, largely

ignoring the other moments in favor of critical interpretations of how the title character reflects national ideology.

Captain America has been interpreted as a zealous anti-democratic fantasy (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003), popular culture war propaganda (Scott, 2007) and a symbol for the idealized American, narrating our national identity through symbolic space (Dittmer, 2005). Dubose (2007) also argues that Captain America in the eighties demonstrated a reaction to Ronald Reagan's rhetorical reconstruction of the hero myth. Other than his look at the eighties, Dittmer focuses on some post-9/11 stories, while both Scott, Jewett and Lawrence make their arguments from a few Golden Age 1940s issues of *Captain America*. Since none of these studies look at the broad history of Captain America, I find some problems with their generalized claims about the character reflecting ideology.

For example, Jewett and Lawrence (2003) argue that Captain America is indicative of what they call the "American Monomyth," an anti-democratic fantasy where a super-powered everyman saves society by stepping outside of institutions to violently punish villains. However, their only evidence is a few scattered issues that they review, mostly from the 1940s and one or two from the 1990s. These two scholars believe this character to be so demonstrative of this myth that in some of their work they refer to it as the "Captain America Complex," (1984) suggesting that it permeates ideologically through the media, reflected not only in American entertainment, but also our political language (Jewett & Lawrence, 2002; Jewett, 1984).

I have trouble accepting these generalized claims because the authors look only at representations from two decades, with fifty years of national changes in between them. If the evidence was produced in the 1940s, a researcher cannot necessarily claim it reflects the ideology of the present. For example, while Asians in 1940s issues of *Captain America* were

depicted as sinister, rat-like enemies, the modern issues of the series do not represent them this way, even when Captain America has flashbacks to his adventures in the 1940s. The imagined community has changed and I would not claim that *Captain America* is still racist toward Asians. My own study addresses the changes to the nation by observing issues from the entire body of *Captain America*, tracing the borders of national space and noting when they shift dramatically.

Like the non-Captain America focused research on comic books and ideology, these four studies focus more on the superhero character rather than his villains. Only Dubose (2007) touches on the subject of the villain, briefly describing a few of them from the eighties *Captain America* issues as reflections of the Reagan era. Characters like Every Man, Flag-Smasher, Super Patriot and even an "evil" government oversight committee are all cited as evidence of this ideological shift. Despite his short descriptions of these characters, thorough examinations of the villains are less common than analyses of Captain America himself. Since my study proposes the opposite—by approaching the villains as symbolic expressions of American limits—I think it can contribute significantly to the understanding of how these comics work to maintain the nation's status quo. While these claims indicate that Captain America is symbolic of U.S. ideology, they do not trace the imagined boundaries that give meaning to it. Instead of focusing on what Captain America *is*, we can define the shifting borders of the American nation by instead revealing what Captain America *is not*.

Although these studies do not focus on villains and neglect to cover the whole gamut of *Captain America*, they are still useful to my own research. Each interprets a specific moment in the series' history and will be helpful to compare with my own findings. These studies also help provide my research with some key moments from which to gather data: the 1940s, the Reagan



years and just after September 11. Since these researchers found ideological importance there, I look to each moment for shifts in what is unacceptable to symbolic America.

To summarize, the research specifically about *Captain America* addresses ideology, but only through interpretations of representation. They are problematic because their claims are based on brief moments in the series' sixty-eight year history and because they largely ignore the potential value embedded in Captain America's villains. Finally, I to use these studies as indications of key moments in the series, where the nation might shift its borders. To conclude this literature review, I will address the theoretical texts that I use to form this study's methodology.

### Methods & Theory

Three theories are necessary for my proposed method of interpreting *Captain America* as an artifact that reflects the nation's borders. Each of these is important because they allow my research to approach the text from angles that the previous studies on comics and ideology have neglected. First, Benedict Anderson's (1991) conception of the nation as an imagined social construct allows my study to approach *Captain America* comics as cultural products that maintain the borders to the abstract space of America. Next, Michel Foucault's (1977) limit attitude theory provides a method for understanding the villain in a text as symbolic of Anderson's national borders. Together these two theories are only capable of interpreting the content in these comics, but Paul Du Gay's (1997) model of the circuit of culture demonstrates that just studying representations does not give a complete picture of this artifact's relationship with the American cultural universe. Du Gay guides my study into the moments of identity, regulation, production and consumption as well, bringing up potential challenges to my

interpretations and providing clues toward the performance of further ideological work. This study contributes to all three of these theories, by putting them to use on one case study over the course of seventy years of ideological development.

The research strategy incorporating these three theories begins by referring to the guidelines of the comics code, documented in Kiste-Nyberg's (1998) book on its evolution. Each era of the code will have its own "borders of absence" that the code regulates out of *Captain America*, which I compared with my readings of these issues. After noting whether an issue adheres to or resists the code, I textually analyzed a numbers of key moments in *Captain America* history, together with a random sampling of issues since its beginning in 1940. I looked specifically for "borders of evil," noting how the villain is represented, talked about, designed and punished within the stories. To add to the "borders of absence" discovered through comparison with the comics code, my textual analysis also looked for moments when something or someone that was previously absent or invisible in the text, suddenly is presented as if they had always already been there. I compared these findings with the literature on Captain America and national identity. Finally, I reviewed the letters pages, design and marketing of *Captain America*, comparing these with the secondary literature on identity, consumption and production in comics. Before delving further into the details of this strategy, I next review the three theories that inform it with more depth.

## Theory

Turning first to Benedict Anderson's (1991) theory of the imagined community, I will outline its importance and contribution to my work. Anderson reveals that the convergence of capitalism, print media and access to privileged vernaculars gave birth to our idea of the "nation"

(Anderson, 1991, p. 46). While the concrete space of geographical borders may outline a state, a nation's boundaries are intangible, more of an imagined community than a material one. This nation's limits can still be traced, but they are defined more by culture than by their actual physical location. Since the identity of this nation is not natural, Anderson believes that it must be continue to be narrated through cultural products.

Comic books are an ideal cultural site to observe this manufactured nationalism, since they narrate modern myths within capitalist print media. It seems that the factors Anderson requires for the imagined community of a nation to exist are inherently connected to the rise of the comic. Comics are traditionally mass-distributed in print, primarily through a capitalist system. From their earliest instances in Europe, comics appear to fulfill Anderson's final factor (access to formerly privileged written languages) by growing in popularity with the rise of the literate lower-middle class and being used as an arena of argumentation within that class (Kunzle, 1990, p. 7-8). These comics even adopted distinctive national characteristics depending on the local conditions within which they were distributed (Kunzle, 1990, p. 5).

Furthermore, Anderson believes that after World War II, both the "official nationalism" of the state/ruling class and "popular linguistic nationalism" work together through mass media to maintain this imagined space (Anderson, 1991, p. 101, p. 113-114). Comics exhibit this maintenance when official nationalism is regulated by state pressure to uphold a code, while popular nationalism is represented in the general content of superhero narratives. My study traces both of these moments in nationalism by interpreting these popular representations while also looking at the regulations imposed upon them.

Captain America in particular seems to demonstrate Anderson's nation, as he is a symbolic representation of imaginary American space (Dittmer, 2005). Both the nation and

Captain America are imaginary, although the interpretation of "nation" is more clearly defined for us in the printed stories about this character. His continuing adventures since the 1940s narrate the identity of the American nation as its beliefs shift. When a cultural product like *Captain America* maintains this imagined space, the nation is almost expressing love for itself, a kind of pride (Anderson, 1991, p. 141). Simultaneously, it also demonstrates a hatred for the unacceptable and external. Michel Foucault's (1977) premise that ideology, knowledge and power can be uncovered when one locates these later areas of offense informs the next part of my methodology.

I will approach the text of these comics with what Michel Foucault (1977) calls a "limit attitude," a commitment toward discovering the transgressions against what is accepted as both universal and obligatory (Foucault, 1977, p. 76-101). This is important because it allows my research to outline the boundaries of the imagined community Captain America's narrative maintains. Foucault does not make this distinction, but I look for two types of limits, those of absence (when regulation bowdlerizes the text of the unacceptable) and those of evil (when the unacceptable is symbolized as a villain that must be punished). I focus on these two categories because they best document the changing contours of the nation, allowing us to glimpse at what is allowed inside that privileged space. This is similar to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the *doxa*: that which is taken for granted within the public sphere and falls within the boundaries of the thinkable and speakable (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164-169). Again, by putting these theories to use on a cultural text with such a long history, much is revealed about the nation, such as how (and when) it has changed over the last seventy years, together with an account of who has been excluded from its community.

Myths (like *Captain America*) are empty of political meaning and appear to have ambiguous signification, making them seem natural and universal to us (Barthes, 1972, p. 128). I believe that this is especially true in comic book narratives, where real history is ambiguous at the same time that the comic is revising its own continuity. It is continually necessary for writers to adjust comic book continuity to compensate for the real world passage of time, otherwise characters would have to age and experience historical events as do their readers (Eco, 1979). Comic book myths are *repeatedly* in the process of transforming their own fictional history, making some characters seem to barely age when they are actually close to seventy years old. This trait is shared with other serialized fiction (such as *The Hardy Boys* or *Nancy Drew*) but comic books' relationship with the nation complicates this erasure, when they revise real political history together with their own fictional past.

Comics like *Captain America* are constantly in the process of de-politicizing themselves, replacing America's old unacceptable utopian longings with modern acceptable ones, while pretending that the old ones never existed in the first place. For example, while Asians were demonized in 1940s *Captain America* stories and the title character mostly stayed away from the ground war in Europe, the current issues feature flashbacks where Asians are no longer monsters and Captain America actually serves overseas in World War II. It is important that the texts of a comic myth like *Captain America* be placed within its publication's historical context because myth actually *disintegrates* history, emptying it of its original meaning and replacing it with a de-politicized narrative that seems to have always already been there (Jameson, 1981, p. 9-14, 19-20; Barthes, 1972, p. 109-158). Revealing *Captain America's* limits dispels that disintegration and I will decipher its ideological position, despite the mythic defense that makes it seem ambiguous.

To further augment the interpretations garnered from using both Anderson and Foucault on *Captain America*, Paul Du Gay's (1997) model of the circuit of culture completes the theoretical trifecta informing my methodology. There are multiple cultural processes that contribute to ideological meaning, not just representation (Du Gay, 1997, p. 3). Du Gay finds these others to be identity, production, consumption, and regulation. Each links to one another and overlaps in the cultural landscape. Identity in this model refers to the national identity associated with the artifact, together with the ways that design and marketing techniques create new meanings and roles for those that consume it as a product (Du Gay, 1997, p. 48, 66-74). The moment of production refers to the industrial and creative practices that develop meaning for the artifact, in this case Marvel Comics and the writers and artists that produce *Captain America*. When the reading audience of the comic then receives that produced meaning and decodes it into a multiplicity of interpretations, they entail the moment of consumption. Finally, the moment of regulation occurs when the various interpretations of this text collide, and the anxiety of this collision either prompts the government, the producers of the artifact or even its consumers to standardize their usage of it. In this case, I find the most important and traceable regulation to be the evolution of the comics code over the course of its existence.

Reviewing all of these moments in the circuit of culture may seem excessive, but I did not devote equal attention to each moment unless they produced insights that challenged my interpretations of the text. Maybe the consumption practices of the readers influenced the characterization of a particular villain. On the other hand, maybe the producers introduced one of Captain America's enemies in order to sell one of their other products. These moments sometimes contribute clues to my study, indicating periods where I might find common traits in

these limits to the nation. I suspect that the moment of regulation will contribute a great deal, which is why I use it as a guideline for the borders of absence in each comics code era.

### Conclusions on Theory

Together, these three theoretical bases provide a framework for the importance of my research. Without Anderson's connections between printed cultural products and nationalism, arguing that a comic series manifests the nation's limits would not be as reasonable. Foucault justifies my focus on the villains as he points to the unacceptable as demonstrative of ideology. I understand his "limits" to be the same thing as the borders to Anderson's imagined community, with Captain America as a kind of patrol officer maintaining them. Finally, Du Gay's model of the circuit of culture shows that to interpret only the content of these comics is not a sufficient method for fully comprehending how this text is connected to the national space it inhabits. Each of these theories sustains my research, while my findings illustrate their application to a cultural text with such a long and complicated history.

### Research Strategy

In an interpretative study such as this one, it was important for my role as a researcher, the research strategy, and the data collection process to be planned thoroughly before investigating the text. With a cultural text (or artifact, to use Du Gay's language) like *Captain America*, I have already established that the model of the circuit of culture can reveal more than just an interpretation of what is represented to us. Du Gay's model then, serves as the organizational method for both analyzing this text and for presenting my findings. According to this model, all of these moments are connected to one another, so "it does not much matter where

on the circuit you start, as you have to go the whole way round before your study is complete" (Du Gay, 1997, p. 4). While this research will focus heavily on interpreting the content from issues of *Captain America*, it also relates those interpretations to the other four moments in the circuit.

I begin this section by addressing my role as a researcher. I will explain what experience I have that brings better understanding to this topic. The reason I have chosen *Captain America* as a site for this specific study will also be provided. Next, I will explain how I will navigate through each of these five moments, beginning with regulation. Foucault's limit attitude especially informs that section, as well as the following analysis of representation. These are the largest two sections of this study, following one smaller section reviewing how identity, consumption and production practices may have influenced the content within the *Captain America* comics reviewed. As explained below, these sections rely mostly on secondary sources about the evolution of the comic book audience and industry, though evidence will also be gathered from the letters pages, advertising and design in the comics. I believe that by using the model of the circuit of culture, my interpretative role in this study will have a higher degree of validity, as the circuit attempts to incorporate a number of processes that could lead to varied outcomes in the content, not just a straight textual analysis.

The review of methodology will conclude with the framework for data collection, describing my plan to record and analyze the massive history of *Captain America*. With at least twelve issues a year, since 1940 (except for a brief gap in the fifties and early sixties), there are close to 800 issues to interrogate here. Here I will explain my sampling procedure, which combined random sampling with a focus on key moments in the continuity of Captain America.



After outlining the process for which I will approach this bulk of texts, I believe the interpretative nature of this study will be justified. These strategies, combined with Du Gay's circuit of culture, should avoid potential bias by triangulating my findings with the documented factors that contributed to the evolution of the culture of comics over the last seventy years.

### The Role of the Researcher

Explaining my role in this study as a researcher requires a brief step outside of the analytic tone used throughout this introduction. I come to this research as an avid comics reader for twenty-five years, starting with superhero comics as a kid and gradually developing interest in other genres as an adult. Currently, I am a published comics writer and developing several stories to pitch to publishers. Even though I value the medium as an excellent way to tell stories, I wasn't surprised when I discovered that little research has engaged in comics, despite their long history and their influence on contemporary culture. Partially, I believe this lack of research stems from a kind of "shame" associated with comics in America. Comics have had a stigma associated with them for years, one that I believe relegates them to a subcultural status. My analysis of *Captain America's* return from cancellation in the early sixties touches upon this stigma, as I suspect it was fortified in that period. Despite their own research on subculture and ideological theory, some of my own colleagues have even expressed skepticism that a comic like *Captain America* has significant value, especially in association with something like the maintenance of the imagined community. I hope that this study will both further the now growing research on comic books, while validating these artifacts as sites of cultural importance.

Despite my personal interest in comics, I have had little experience with *Captain America* before deciding upon this research. I had one issue as a kid, where Cap fights Batroc the Leaper

(a kind of French kickboxing villain) in order to get his shield back. Other than that, I had little interest in him. Frankly, he always struck me as a bit jingoistic and boring. There was something too pretty and perfect about him, especially compared to Marvel's other flawed characters. I read issues of *The Avengers* in which he appeared, but there too he struck me as uninteresting.

My attitude toward the character might have something to do with other parts of my background. I grew up overseas and never really connected to American nationalism, even after returning to the states. As an adult, I participated in the punk scene, performing in bands and organizing events there. This subculture features a lot of anti-nationalism, which I have written about elsewhere (Steinmetz, 2007). That influence, together with my later work in Massachusetts' politics as a campaign manager and communications advisor, likely informs the larger goal of this study, tracing the shifting borders to the nation.

*Captain America* was chosen as a site of study because of three factors making it an ideal location to trace those borders. First, as the above literature review indicates, comics (and superhero comics in particular) have a history of supporting the status quo and evoking nationalism. Few American comic books exist with such a broad chronology as *Captain America*. Those others that do (Superman and Batman comics come to mind), might also reflect American anxieties, but not in such a specifically nationalized manner as does Captain America. As a personified symbol of the American ideal, Captain America performs exactly the function Anderson says post-World War II cultural products do: he narrates a celebration of nationalism, while simultaneously establishing a hatred for those unacceptable to the imagined community.

This role Captain America plays was solidified for me when the character was recently assassinated in the March 2007 issue of the series. I was surprised by the news media coverage his fictional death generated, especially in light of the stigma towards comics that I mentioned

earlier. Journalists speculated in several articles what the death of Captain America signified for our national consciousness, especially in a post-9/11 America.<sup>1</sup> It struck me that this study could answer those questions more accurately than the wild assumptions that characterized those articles. Furthermore, the character's assassination marked a moment of closure for my study, even though the series continues today and the character has just recently returned in a different form.

Even though I come to this study with the values and interests listed above, I believe the subsequent methodology restrains my role so that personal bias did not affect my findings. I understand the text of *Captain America* to be reflective of its context and the circuit of culture should serve to locate what contextual factors contributed to its representation of the nation.

### The Moment of Regulation

As with other the moments in the circuit of culture besides representation, the regulation factors that contributed to *Captain America's* portrayal of the nation's borders was mostly revealed in my study with the assistance of secondary resources. The main source here was Amy Kiste-Nyberg's (1998) Seal of Approval: The History of The Comics Code. The comics code was created in 1954, but was altered in 1971 and again in 1989 to reflect contemporary standards. For my study, I wish to understand the periods in between these alterations as eras where the code may affect the text.

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<sup>1</sup> Two such examples are still available on two sites. Holmes, L., O'Beirne, J. & Perreira, G. (2007) Shocking Event For Captain America, *CNN*, Retrieved 1/28/2008 from <http://www.cnn.com/2007/SHOWBIZ/books/03/07/captain.america/index.html>; Robinson, B. (2007) What the Death of Captain America Really Means, *ABC News*, Retrieved 1/28/2008 from <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=2934283>. Even satirist Stephen Colbert commented on the events on his television show, receiving "Captain America's shield" from Marvel Editor Joe Quesada. Retrieved 1/28/2008 from <http://www.marvel.com/news/comicstories.891>.

Before the 1954 code was implemented, Timely Comics (the publishers of *Captain America*) had their own in-house code developed to monitor their publications (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 108). This version was only implemented from 1948 until 1949, but began there since it is a similar form of self-regulation to the code shared by comics publishers in the fifties. Following that brief era, I examine the code used from 1954 until 1971. Kiste-Nyberg (1998) lists the guidelines that these codes adhered to, along with an evaluation of how much companies actually heeded its restrictions. For the issues published of *Captain America* during this period, I looked for instances where the code was broken and evidence that it was being adhered to. Similarly, I also turned to the guidelines established for the era from 1971 to 1989 and then 1989 until present day.

I understand the code guidelines from all of these eras to be a manifestation of Foucault's limits to ideology. To better explain why I use the code this way, I present two examples of absence in *Captain America*, demonstrating why a system of justification must be established to locate borders of absence. When an entire aspect of American life (such as sex or profanity) is ignored in comics, myth's disintegration of history seems to be at work, making the invisibility of an element at the limits of the American imagined community appear normal, as if it has always been this way. The problem with locating these "borders of absence" is that it is difficult to discern what absences are ideological and what absences are not. The comics code, while certainly an ideological form of regulation, doesn't cover everything that the nation may find objectionable. So then, how do we discern then what is a limit and what is not? For instance, if none of the issues of *Captain America* contained a single reference to ferrets, would it be reasonable to argue that ferrets were at the borders of the imagined community? The absence of ferrets does not necessarily make them offensive or evil, because it is possible that the creators

just never wrote a story incorporating ferrets. There is an infinity of things (such as ferrets) that are absent from these comics, but are not necessarily ideological erasures.

On the other hand, in the early sixties there are no references or depictions of African-Americans in *Captain America*. When these issues were being produced, America was experiencing race riots in New York City (where Marvel Comics are produced) and elsewhere, civil rights marches and sit-ins, struggles against racial integration in universities and Lyndon Baines Johnson's signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Yet, none of these key American events are represented in the comics of that time, even in the villains. This seems to be an ideological absence, where symbols of African-Americans were relegated to the edges of acceptability. Because of this absence, I understand African-Americans' role in *Captain America* to also be a border of absence, despite any regulated censoring of them in the comics code.

The invisibility of African-Americans continued in *Captain America* until 1967, when the comic introduced The Falcon, the first African-American superhero. Falcon assists Captain America for several issues and eventually becomes his partner, sharing title billing on the comic for several years. No longer were African-Americans a border of absence. Now in fact, they participated in the punishment of evil along with Captain America. This example demonstrates that some borders of absence won't be traceable through an examination of the comics code.

My research strategy then also needed to be mindful of these moments when something that was once relegated to absence (like African-Americans) is suddenly made present, as the shape of the nation changes to include this former absence within its borders. When I noticed these moments, I traced backwards from that point, including these revelations as borders of absence together with the regulated limits within the comics code. These were often significant moments of political and social change, traceable in other American histories. Although my

study often relies on other explanations of American history, it remains significant because it reveals other moments of change in the nation, that were specifically observable by interpreting *Captain America* comic books.

Tracing backwards from these sudden presences will acts as further guidelines for monitoring borders of absence. This works in tandem with the borders indicated through the various eras of the comics code. The code provides evidence for elements that are intentionally bowdlerized out of these stories, because they were unacceptable. It is the only record of intentional omission from these comics, and provides a warrant for counting those omissions as borders of absence reasonably connected to the shape of the nation.

I began the research of this thesis with this moment of regulation then, as it establishes what absences to look for when I next analyze the bulk of data from the representations that *are* present in the text and be categorized as "borders of evil."

### The Moment of Representation

To use Foucault's limit attitude to approach the text and locate the frontiers of America's national space, I intend to review issues of *Captain America* and note the traits and themes associated with the villains presented. These are enemies of the symbolized American ideal, and therefore transgress what is presented to us as universal and essential to the imagined community.

My procedure for recording data from these comics was as follows: I read each comic according to the data collection procedure outlined below, noting instances where a villain appears, speaks, acts or is even discussed in the dialogue of other non-villain characters. I also noted how Captain America treats each villain, how he or she is punished by him and what their

fate is at the end of the story. How these villains are portrayed is significant toward understanding what borders they symbolize for the imagined community.

Each issue number, month and year of publication was logged into a code sheet. Under these entries, note was tagged with a page number and panel number. Each entry also listed the creative team responsible for the text, including the writer, editor and illustrator, but not the inker, letterer or colorist. This information was finally sorted chronologically by decade of publication, beginning with the 1940s and ending with the 2000s.

After recording the data from these comics, I consulted four possible areas for their relevance. First, I looked to other studies on ideological development in America over the last seventy years. Primary among these was be Gary Gerstle's (2004) American Crucible, tracing of the civic and racial forces that shaped nationalism. Secondly, I looked to the other scholarly interpretations of *Captain America*, noting the specific periods they look at and comparing my own findings there to theirs. Then I consulted the borders of absence from the comics code guidelines in the previous section. Finally, I looked for moments of resistance to the status quo, as McAllister (1991, 2001) specifies in his political economy research on the superhero comics industry. After noting the overlapping areas of nationalism, regulation, resistance and other *Captain America* studies, I analyzed the remaining data, locating ideological origins for the villains presented.

This section took the longest to analyze and was the largest section of my thesis. Some villains were not found as "borders of evil," when their characteristics did not correspond with the national anxieties of the period they were published within. I explain these in Chapter 2 as corresponding to moments of crisis with the comics' creators or publisher. Reviewing the findings in light of other researchers' claims about ideology helped to distinguish these moments,

although because of Captain America's symbolism, almost all of these villains reflected national limits in some way.

### The Moments of Identity & Consumption

While researching the content to be interpreted in this moment of representation, I also recorded data contributing to the next section of this study, focusing on both the moments of identity and consumption. I did this by analyzing the letters, the advertising and the design styles from the issues at hand, while referring to Matthew Pustz's (1999) book on comic fans and their culture as a secondary resource.

Beginning with the letter analysis, my strategy was to look to the letter columns in the back of each issue that I review. This allowed me to 1) get an idea for the ways some readers incorporate Captain America narratives into their own lives or personal beliefs, and 2) to locate different reading practices that these same readers may have. I reviewed both the issues in question and the letters from 2-3 issues after that, the ones specifically addressing the reader reaction to content within the stories analyzed in section two. I was particularly interested in how the readers interpreted the portrayal of evil in these stories and if they felt the book accurately represented the American ideal. My notes regarding both sets of letters were recorded with the same entry for each issue reviewed.

It is important to note that these letters may not be complete versions of those sent into the publisher, or that they are even real. There are many gatekeepers at the publisher that may have edited the content, and certainly chose these letters over many others for a particular reason. For this reason, my interpretation of these letters was always be conscious of an editorial voice



within them, and that problem will haunt any assertions I make about their relationship to the circuit of consumption.

While an analysis of letters may not be the best way to form claims about the consumption practices of an audience, I believe that the other option of performing an ethnography of *Captain America* readers over the last seventy years would not only have been too unwieldy for a study of this size, but would likely be impossible. This thesis' main focus is on representation, while the other moments in the circuit of culture serve to inform it of other potential processes that contribute to its maintenance of the nation. Since my study will only be making claims about these representations and not about their effects on readers, I think this letter analysis strategy combined with Pustz's (1999) findings on comics' consumers will still be beneficial.

Du Gay (1997) lists three other factors that give meaning and identity to a cultural artifact that may also prove important to watch for: national identity, design and marketing. Design was also considered here and I analyzed its contribution to the borders of evil in my research. Marked changes in the illustration style of the comics was also noticeable over the course of seventy years and I considered how these changes might impact the depiction of the nation. How have villains costumes changed? Are they drawn differently? Why might that be?

Finally, while reading through each issue I was sure to watch for how *Captain America* was advertised and how the book advertises other products. The particular lifestyles that are marketed to comic readers speak to the ideological content found in the narratives of each era. These ads reveal more about the era than they do about Marvel Comics as a corporate institution, because it is unlikely that the publisher ever changed its content to accommodate for advertisers. By recording data regarding the advertising, the shifts in design choices and the reactions of

readers in the letter columns, I found a decent picture of both the moments of identity and consumption, without the vast task of ethnographically interviewing almost seventy years worth of readers.

### The Moment of Production

The final moment in the circuit of culture that my study visited was the production of *Captain America* comic books. Unfortunately, this was even more difficult to research as there are only a few secondary sources available that can provide insight into how these comics were actually produced. Again, I do not think that interviews with the remaining creators, editors or businessmen involved in *Captain America* would have been an efficient means of contributing to this moment, given this study's focus on representations and symbolism. I found that the broad histories presented in these secondary texts were sufficient to locate instances where the changes in the industry might have affected the presentations of these symbols of national anxiety.

The principal sources concerning this production are McAllister's 1990 and 2001 political economy analyses of the superhero comics industry and its support for a conservative ideology. Other texts that I consulted for this section included Jones' (2004) Men of Tomorrow, Jones & Jacobs' (1997) Comic Book Superheroes and Dan Raviv's (2002) The Comic Wars. Each reveals crucial shifts in the production practices of *Captain America*'s producers.

After tracing both the borders of absence and evil in the regulation and representation sections, followed by the later analyses in the identity/consumption section, I believe the shortcoming of having little secondary research to turn to here in the moment of production did not undermine the study. The sources described above assisted in deciphering how the creators and publishing company might have contributed to how villains symbolize national limits.

## Data Collection

The difficulty in studying a medium like comic books is in narrowing research to an appropriate text. Examining the entire body of American comics would be impossible, so this study focuses exclusively on *Captain America* because of its symbolism and the closure from the character's recent assassination. However, even this is a daunting research task. The character has been published in comic books since the 1940s, including five volumes of his own series, several mini-series, *The Avengers*, *Truth: Red, White & Black*, *The Ultimates*, *Captain America & The Falcon*, *All Winners* and *Young Allies* among many others. Luckily, at the time of this writing, *Captain America* publisher Marvel Comics has produced a digital DVD-ROM collection of every *Captain America* comic published since 1964. This DVD was an immensely useful resource for this study. The remaining 1940s and 1950s *Captain America* comics were reviewed through archive collections or downloaded as images from the internet.

The issues that were downloaded are the ones that are currently out of print and unavailable for purchase outside of the collector's market. Since there was no way I could remunerate Marvel Comics or the creators for these earlier issues, I do not believe the downloaded issues to be unethical. I have shown that I would purchase the issues if they were available since I ordered the DVD that contains the other forty years of material I am researching. If, while writing this thesis, the issues in question had become available in either digitally or in print, I would have purchased them to compensate the publisher and creators.

One way I decided to narrow the field of this study is to exclude comics like *The Avengers* and *the Ultimates*, where Captain America may be a lead character but takes part in a team of other superheroes. While there is a possibility that some of these team stories may also

reveal limits to the nation, it is more analytically useful to argue the symbolism of villains when they are solely Captain America's enemies. When characters like Thor or Ant-Man get thrown into the mix, it is much more difficult to claim that they too symbolize American anxiety, especially when one of them is a Norse god. For that reason, I focus exclusively on stories in Captain America's own series.

Still, the scope of *Captain America* comics encompasses close to 800 issues of material. Since reviewing all of these would be a vast undertaking—beyond the capacity of this study—I decided to use two methods to narrow the data down to a manageable size. First, I performed a random sampling of *Captain America* issues in order to cull representative examples of his villains. This method ensures that I covered the range of comics available, without bias for particular creator runs.

Along with this random sampling, I also focused on key moments in the fictional history of Captain America. These moments of change signify particular shifts in the nation's borders that should not be ignored by this study. Such key moments include: 1) the Captain America origin story in 1940, 2) his 1950 cancellation and failed revival in the mid-1950s, 3) his successful revival in 1964, 4) the 1940s origin and subsequent development of The Red Skull, Captain America's primary nemesis, 5) his initial 1970s partnership with The Falcon, one of the first African-American superheroes, 6) Captain America's abandonment of his superhero role, in lieu of Watergate like scandals in both the 1970s and 1980s, 7) his romance with villainess Diamondback in the 1980s, 8) his 1980s encounters with anti-nationalist super-villain Flag-Smasher and his gung-ho replacement The Super Patriot, 9) the back-story of the super-soldier program using African-American soldiers as guinea pigs in their World War II experiments (created by Kyle Baker and Robert Morales in 2003), 10) the 2005 return of Cap's 1940s partner

Bucky as the anti-hero The Winter Soldier, 11) his reaction to the real world events of September, 11 2001, 12) his 2006-2007 opposition to a registration act forcing superheroes to register with the U.S. government, and finally 13) his assassination in 2007.

I began with these key moments and then turned to the random sampling. There were roughly 50 issues in the above key moments and reviewed another 50 random issues, bringing my total review to 100 issues, or roughly 13% of the entire series. By using these two strategies to narrow the field of research, I believe the boundaries of this study both capture the necessary insights to answer my research questions and will keep the study at a manageable size for presentation here.

### Conclusions on Method

To summarize the methodology of this study, the research and its presentation will be organized by the model of the circuit of culture, with a section each for regulation and representation. Identity, production and consumption will be combined into one section. The borders of absence were identified by using the various eras of the comics code to look for both moments of adherence to regulation and resistance to it. The borders of evil were identified by a close textual analysis of a random sampling of *Captain America* issues, together with several key moments in the character's fictional history. Identity and consumption were investigated by looking to secondary resources, letters pages, design shifts and ways that Marvel Comics marketed Captain America and other products.<sup>2</sup> Finally, *Captain America* was chosen as a site of study because of comic books' documented connection to nationalism, Captain America's

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<sup>2</sup> The coding sheet I will use for each issue is included in the back of this proposal.

symbolism as the idealized American and the character's fictional ending with his assassination in 2007.

### Discussion: Implications, Strengths and Limitations

The outlined procedure made great progress toward revealing the ways that evil is constructed within an American situated comic book text. It also revealed connections between nationalism and its social meaning in cultural artifacts. Briefly, I would like to state the implications I believe this study has and list the strengths and limitations of this method of research.

There are four important implications for this research. First, as Foucault (1977) concludes, a combination of historical and interpretative analyses will yield a revelation of the limits to society, knowledge and human social meaning. This study specifically discovers how *Captain America* portrays the limits of the American imagined community. Connections between the real forces shaping the nation and this fictional text were also revealed. The primary goal of this study was to trace the shifts in the development of the American national space, through a cultural artifact that would not normally be suspected of carrying rhetorical or political importance.

Second, I believe that this study reveals the interaction between the text of comic books and the context within which they are produced. The artistic creation of villains in American fiction is not an arbitrary process and is linked to the fluid changes to what our imagined community deems unacceptable enough to relate to. Exposing that connection and demonstrating how comic book myths appear ambiguous and silly, when they actually manifest nationalistic rhetoric was another achieved goal for this research. As Anderson (1991) notes, the construction

of this imagined community provides social meaning for people that leads them to not only sacrifice their lives, but to also take the lives of others. Further uncovering the origins of such extreme behavior—especially in a space least suspected—will contribute toward our understanding the abstract's influence upon reality.

By applying Foucault's (1977) genealogical approach to analyzing discourse, this study also reveals the evolution of meaning for the term "evil." Such a loaded term has a multitude of interpretations, even within a temporally static analysis of its current usage. *Captain America* provides a longitudinal text to observe how those interpretations have developed within the American social context through several wars and national crises. Discovering how that word's meaning has changed over seventy years of progress also shows us some things about American consciousness and identity that has not been revealed before.

Finally, this study significantly contributes to the pre-existing body of academic literature on comic books and ideology. It confirms the claims that American comic books are deeply connected to both nationalism and capitalism (Wolf-Meyer, 2003; McAllister, 1990). The study also confirms claims that comic books construct gender in particular ways as well, legitimating men and marginalizing women (Emad, 2006; Noh, 2005). At the very least, an analysis like this should invite us to confront how America socially constructs its enemies and fears through printed fiction. In order to understand the motivations of others, we have to appreciate how they reason and behave. This kind of criticism, forces us outside of the comfort of how we normally think, hopefully providing insight into who it is that Americans have historically excluded and demonized. This has altered somewhat over the last seventy years, but it is also interesting to see how it has *not* changed. In those moments, the common sense beliefs some Americans take for granted are revealed.

Certain strengths and limitations are inherent to the project and a brief discussion follows to demonstrate how I addressed each. The primary strength of this study is its reliance on Foucault's limit attitude theory, an excellent qualitative method that reveals the entymemetic hidden meanings within the content of these narratives. His theory is also flexible enough that it can be used on a variety of texts, making it suitable to study both the comic books here as well as their interaction with the circuit of culture surrounding them. A content analysis might also be able to analyze the representation of evil within these texts, but would not be able to make claims about their relationship with nationalism and culture.

The study was limited in two distinct ways. As a qualitative and interpretative method, this limit attitude analysis is neither empirical nor objective. The potential bias and subjectivity of my role in this research was not an ethical issue for the research, because the methodology of the circuit of culture restricts my interpretations to the content's relationship with other cultural forces at play.

Secondly, this thesis ignores the relationship of comic books to other media consumptions in favor of performing an isolated reading on *Captain America*. Comic books have been directed to a marginal audience since the 1950s, not the general American population, so how does a subcultural product reflect the beliefs and practices of the entire American nation? I suspect that despite comics' subcultural status, the same symbols of limits prevail in their content that would in a cultural artifact directed toward a larger audience. The methodology used in this study may not be a precise barometer of what Americans think and do, but it is an indication of the shifts in what we can acceptably know, say and do. While I claim that this analysis will trace the borders to the imaginary, Andersonian concept of a nation, I would not argue that this



"cartography" presents a complete geography of them. Given the fluid nature of that imagined space, it may not be possible to ever fully complete such a map.

Regardless of these limitations, I believe that the discoveries of this study present a trajectory for how both the imagined community and its interpretation of the word "evil" have progressed over the years. The flexibility of this method still contributes to the literature, including my own recent findings regarding sporadic moments in this fictional history. By performing a full genealogy upon evil in this American comic series, further insights into the relationship of a nationalistic text, its context and meaning was revealed.

After reviewing the strategy laid out within this introduction, it should be clear how significant the results of this research are. Certainly this research approaches the claims about ideology and comics from a unique angle, that of the villain's role in comics and culture. Evaluating each moment in the circuit of culture exposes more than just the surface level borders to the nation, charting a more complete map of our nation. The villains in these comic books symbolize the limits to that imaginary America and we can utilize their significance to better understand the fluid changes to its borders. Since the meaning of "evil" ambiguously shifts over historical context and cultural moments, studying the lineage of its depiction over time will help trace the origins of what America finds unacceptable today.

### Border Disputes: Production, Consumption, Identity and the Captain America Nation

If other fan cultures are within arm's reach of the producers they admire, then comic book fans are sitting in these producers' laps, fixing their hair and adjusting their collars. Comics fandom scholar Matthew Pustz (1999, p. 109) asserts that the proximity of consumers to producers is unique to comics culture, that these fans actually surpass others at getting close to the producers of the artifacts they distinctly receive, interpret and from which they build alternative social communities. Paul du Gay's (1997) circuit of culture assumes that these parties link and overlap, but between Pustz's (1999) research and my own examination of Captain America texts, it appears that comics consumers sometimes interact with the comics' producers to an amazing degree, even affecting the way that these comics represent the nation. Sometimes, comic book fans seem to be incredibly aware of the interconnected nature of the circuit of culture, including their role within it. Pustz (1999, p. 22) agrees with this, claiming that comics readers share a culture and collectively negotiate where that culture is heading. Comic book consumers analyze the production, regulation, consumption and content of these products thoroughly, providing a rich resource to turn to when examining how each of these moments might have affected Captain America's ability to narrate the borders to the American imagined community.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight such moments, when the circuit of culture either supports or impedes upon the Captain America national narrative. This occurs in three separate but related ways that I will examine in each section here. First, when four factors shifted the comics medium from mainstream culture to subculture in the 1950s, Captain America was cancelled for ten years, leaving a large gap in this genealogy. The idea that comics was a children's culture, subsequently criticized for its bad taste and negative effects, contributed to this

cancellation, along with the migration of American soldiers and others away from comics toward television. When Captain America returned in 1964, however, his narrative ignored the conventional tropes of both the Silver Age and Marvel's unique superhero formula, allowing the book to continue depicting the imagined community of its context.

The circuit of culture affected this narrative in a second way, through the communication between producers and consumers, where they sometimes negotiated the meaning of American identity. At times, the advertising in these comics supported the narrative, promoting patriotic volunteering from the readers and later an ethos of education and training. Eventually, the letters forum of these comic books demonstrated a negotiation between consumers and producers that influenced the narrative's depiction of the nation. In the 1960s and early 1970s, these letters provided a space for discourses that kept Captain America out of Vietnam and encouraged creators to include racism and American apathy as enemies of the nation. This kind of negotiation occurs again in the 1980s, when fans criticized the depiction of African-Americans and the creators promptly responded. Neither of these moments would be possible if Marvel had not fostered an identity of an intellectual, inclusive community for its readers. That identity encouraged readers to express their disagreement with Marvel's representation of the nation and persuaded Marvel to sometimes modify the narrative in accordance.

Finally, when the publisher experienced production turmoil and financial crisis, the resulting comics were haphazardly composed, leaving out villains that represented American limits and disabling Captain America's narrative of the nation. There are a few of these moments in this genealogy when the villains of Captain America are not symbolic of any particular fear or anger but are just punching bags in spandex. Each of these moments corresponds with production troubles at Marvel Comics, leaving pockets in Captain America history where the

comic was not narrating the nation's experience. I account for each in the final section of this chapter.

In the following three sections, I do not deeply analyze textual examples because an interpretation of these comics follows in the next two chapters. Although the primary focus of this thesis is on these moments of representation, it is important to start here with an institutional examination of Captain America's history. Beginning here introduces this comic to a reader unfamiliar with the subculture of comics, while simultaneously covering the forces of production, consumption and identity surrounding this artifact. After this initiation, the second chapter of this thesis does address the text, performing a kind of rhetorical criticism upon it.

When the moment of production converges with consumption and identity, the agency of some of these creators becomes more apparent than it will in later chapters that concentrate upon the text of these comics. People like Mark Gruenwald and Jack Kirby had the ability to support or hinder the Captain America narrative's ability to represent the nation's development. Illuminating their influence reveals the tension between the moment of production and the other nodes in Du Gay's circuit of culture. This gives us a road map of Captain America's history as a product, providing a better understanding for interpreting the representations that appear in the comic narrative over the years.

All three of these moments affect the ability of Captain America to represent the progression of the nation's borders and they overlap and influence one another in various ways. Because of consumers' close proximity to comics' producers, the moments when these parties negotiate Captain America's narration of those borders appear to be the most successful at representing both the internal and external evils that Americans perceived as unacceptable, outside of the imagined community.

## The Transformation of Comics into Subculture

*Captain America Comics* began in 1941, published by Timely Comics (later to become Marvel Comics) and created by Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby. The book thrived during the 1940s, riding the superhero boom while simultaneously working as war propaganda (Scott, 2007). Even from its beginning, months before the United States entered World War II, the comic portrayed Nazis as utterly evil monsters that the hero had to vanquish to protect the citizens of the United States. During this time it went through several changes, with both its creative teams and its content, but it wasn't until the early 1950s that its success really waned.

Just before the death knell for the first Captain America series in 1954, the book's title was briefly changed to *Captain America...Commie Smasher!* Certainly, this reflected the era that the book was published in, with the United States' intervention in the Korean War ending just a year before and Joseph McCarthy ratcheting up his invectives against the hidden Red Menace. The comic book switched gears from its anti-Nazi origin, focusing instead on the fear of an inevitable communist incursion. This change demarcated the imagined nation's borders with bold, sweeping strokes. Despite this measure, sales still failed and after three issues of commie spies, Timely Comics' publisher Martin Goodman pulled the plug on the sentinel of liberty.

At the same time that America was in the thrall of a Red Scare, the landscape of the comics medium changed dramatically, shifting from mainstream popular culture into a subculture considered to be for children. It was not until ten years later—after this transformation was complete—that Captain America returned to comic book pages, leaving a significant gap in the genealogy of how this artifact narrated the nation.

I contend that four factors led to comics' transformation into subculture, ultimately marginalizing Captain America's audience to a point that the publisher could no longer justify

the series' existence. First, after the war, comics were generally a children's culture. This led to criticism and bad publicity in the late 1940s and early 1950s over these comics' content and their potential effects on juveniles, a second factor that further shifted the medium to subcultural status. Third, the few adult readers of comics in the 1940s were soldiers during World War II. After the war they stopped reading because comics seemed two-dimensional compared to their combat experiences (Wright, pg. 111-112). Finally, the popularity of television siphoned away much of comics' remaining audience throughout the 1950s, thoroughly marginalizing the medium (Parsons, 1991, p. 72). The following section expands upon how these factors developed and their collaborative impact on comic book culture. These four factors significantly affected the sales of superhero comics and many books were cancelled by failing publishers, including Timely's Captain America comics. The market could not bear superheroes and subsequently, a superhero could no longer narrate the nation's fears and limits, no matter how patriotic he was.

Captain America was reborn as part of a new subcultural landscape in 1964, found suspended in a block of ice by new superheroes The Avengers. Even though the real world assumption was that Captain America's primary audience was still mostly children, the advertising content and letters from new readers indicate otherwise, demonstrating a significant adult audience. These later comics were written for fans—now often adults—using a unique cultural language that the average consumer could not necessarily decode. Most importantly, the writing of *Captain America* rejected the conventions of both the Silver Age of comics and of Marvel's formulaic angst ridden heroes, instead maintaining the nation's borders as he had before, through violence and moral superiority. As a representative of the nation, Captain America could not experience self-doubt, at least not in the early 1960s. The Golden Age traits that he returned with may just have been a result of Jack Kirby's adherence to the kinds of stories

he told in the 1940s, or they may have been indicative of Captain America's iconic qualities, representing a nation still defining itself through war and supremacy. After reviewing the return of Captain America after this ten-year absence, I conclude that the comic was still able to narrate the imagined community despite the transformation into subculture.

By the early 1970s, this new *Captain America* series looked back on that unstable moment in the 1950s, deciding that the last-ditch jingoistic behavior the hero had exhibited as a "commie smasher" was now itself an unacceptable American activity. In twenty years, the borders of evil were inverted, with the 1950s Captain America now on the outside of the nation. Story continuity was manipulated so that there were now two Captain Americas, the first one slipping into his frozen suspended animation during World War II, at the height of his popularity and moral certainty, while the second was a xenophobic imposter, who operated during the cultural disorder of the 1950s. Despite the metamorphosis of comics into a subcultural product, Captain America still delineated America's imagined borders with each villain he fought, even including his own past behaviors and failures.

#### *The Ten-Year Gap: Four Factors That Silenced Captain America*

Subcultures are usually thought of as outside of the public, somehow beneath society, based on either deviancy or their position on a social ladder (Thorton, 1997). Comics for years have had this stigma applied to them, beginning with their association with children's culture. At least in part, this assumption was based on early consumer evidence. In 1943, market research showed that 95% of eight to eleven year olds, and 84% of twelve to seventeen year olds read comics. Only 35% of comic readers however, were between the ages of eighteen and thirty ("Escapist" as cited in Pustz, p. 26-27). Kids read comics, and most people thought of comics as

being designed for and read by kids. This became problematic when the content of some comics did not meet certain expectations of what children should be reading. Even as early as the thirties, librarians, teachers and conservative religious groups accused comics of being inappropriate reading for this juvenile demographic, not because of their effects on children, but because their literary quality was considered undesirable, spoiling children's taste for more high brow flavored literature (Kiste-Nyberg, p. 9-11). These early critics essentially thought of comics as a kind of visual junk food.

Then a study performed in 1949 concluded that children who read superhero comics in particular did so to deal with self-esteem issues, because they revered these hero figures that gave them a sense of security (Wolfe and Fiske, as cited in Pustz, p. 33). This wasn't necessarily interpreted as undesirable behavior, but it marked a shift, where comics were now understood as media that could affect children's psychology. Suddenly the justification for rejecting comics shifted, moving from elitist literary criticism to an assumption about the effects of the medium on kids. Comics made kids think and behave in undesirable ways. The disparate groups that protested comics now banded together, targeting retailers with boycott campaigns, because they believed the publishers were self-interested and therefore, were not amenable to reason (Kiste-Nyberg, p. 24-26). While comic book producers may not have initially cared about the rhetoric of these protest groups, at the very least they were aware that their customers were mostly children. To cater toward the large demographic of young readers, many superheroes had child sidekicks with whom the audience could identify<sup>3</sup> (Pustz, pg. 27).

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<sup>3</sup> Whether children were buying these comics firsthand, or their parents were buying the comics for them might be pertinent when we consider the publishers' moves to target a particular audience. Such information might also shed new light on the impact of parent directed criticism on comic book sales. Unfortunately, Patrick Parsons' (1991) article on comic consumer trends (my usual resource for such statistical evidence) contains no information about this.



Captain America was one of these heroes with a child inexplicably following him into gangster dens and Nazi spy camps. Cap's kid sidekick was named "Bucky," an army scamp who discovers the hero's secret identity and accompanies him through most of his adventures in the 1940s and early 1950s. Bucky appears to be around the age of that crucial demographic, somewhere between eight and eleven.<sup>4</sup> He was often captured or held hostage and Captain America would come running to the rescue (affirming Wolfe and Fiske's hypothesis above), freeing the boy first so they could engage in fraternal fisticuffs against their enemies. It is Bucky in fact, and not Captain America, who gets to deal the final blow to Adolph Hitler and Herman Göring in the second issue of *Captain America Comics*. The two real-life Nazi villains argue so long about who will get to take "the little guy" in the fight that Bucky is able to jump, fly through the air and dropkick them both to the ground (*Captain America Comics*, 2). *Captain America Comics*, like its contemporaries, gratified child readers with a character with whom they could identify, because kids were considered the primary audience at the dawn of superhero comics. Child readers were given a vicarious identity through Bucky, as a hero contributing to the war effort, despite their youth and inability to serve in the military. Even though the book promoted patriotic values, demonstrating acceptable American behavior by punishing criminals and Nazis, it still promoted hero worship, lumped together by critics as pernicious reading material.

In spite of (and partially *because* of) kid sidekicks like Bucky, the negative publicity generated by all those angry librarians and teachers began to hurt sales (Parsons, 1991, pg. 71-72). Some retailers caved under the pressure and several parents began to monitor their children's comic reading. To stave off the criticism, publishers adopted a 1948 code to regulate the content

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<sup>4</sup> This is retroactively changed in later years so that in 2008 comics that wistfully remember the 1940s era, Bucky's age is closer to sixteen. In a recent issue flashback Cap himself remarks that even sixteen is too young for a sidekick, but an army general reminds him that young men of that age and younger are faking their birthdates to take part in the war.

of their stories (Kiste-Nyberg, pg. 35). This code failed, partially because the publishers did not take it seriously, though *Captain America Comics* publisher Timely Comics incorporated its own in-house code for about a year shortly thereafter (Kiste-Nyberg, p. 106-108).

By now the media effects argument against comics was fully entrenched, providing fertile ground for a new indictment, this time coming from psychologist Frederick Wertham. Debates still rage between comics historians over whether or not Wertham posited a media effects claim in his 1954 book *The Seduction of the Innocent*,<sup>5</sup> but what is certain is that afterward, comics were associated with juvenile delinquency. The idea was that kids read about crime in their comics, were enamored with gun molls and gangsters, and subsequently used their comics as a kind of how-to manual, committing crimes of their very own. Wertham later pressed for legislation against comics because he believed they glamorized criminal lifestyles and harbored racist themes (Kiste-Nyberg, p. 33, 57-64).

His calls were answered when in 1953 the United States Senate formed a Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, beginning hearings in April of 1954 (Kiste-Nyberg, p. 51). The tale of those hearings is thoroughly covered in Amy Kiste-Nyberg's *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (1998), but what is more important for this study is that just a few months later Timely cancelled *Captain America...Commie Smasher!* The negative publicity generated by Wertham and others critics, combined with the other factors listed here, took a significant chunk of readers away from Captain America and other comics. The medium as a whole waned. The hearings never led to any legislation, but the publishers agreed to form the Comics Magazine Association of America and start a serious regulatory code (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 110). The

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Kiste-Nyberg (1998) in her book about the initiation of the comics code argues that Wertham's work was more complex than media effects theory. Others, like David Hajdu (2008) and Bart Beaty (2005), denounce Wertham's methodology.

code was meant to provide positive public relations for the comics industry, to counter the negative publicity Wertham and the other critics had levied against them (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 110-115). For many books, *Captain America* one of them, this defensive reaction came too late.

But the negative publicity associating comics with children and delinquents was not the only reason comics were driven into the realm of subculture. Two more factors contributed to the decline in readership. The first of these was that after World War II, many of the soldiers who had been reading comics as a disposable form of entertainment, now stopped. During the war, forty-four percent of soldiers in Army training camps read comics on a regular basis (Muhlin, as cited in Parsons, 1991, p. 69). Another estimate states that two-thirds of soldiers were reading comics (Benton, as cited in Parsons, 1991, p.30). This discrepancy probably stems from the fact that comics were actually distributed to troops on bases, along with other supplies, as a disposable way for them to relax (Sabin, as cited in Parsons, 1991, p. 31). It is likely that some soldiers just read comics because they were available, free and disposable, while a smaller percentage actively followed the books. Either way, comics were so common within the military that their training manuals were even designed in a comic format<sup>6</sup> (Parsons, 1991, p. 69). Captain America stories changed in the late 1940s to accommodate these wartime readers and Bucky disappeared for awhile, briefly replaced by a femme fatale partner to appeal to adult men (Parsons, 1991, p. 31). Despite all this popularity, after the war ended and the free comics weren't being handed out anymore, these soldiers quickly lost interest.

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<sup>6</sup> This may say something about the expectations that the military had for its troops' literacy levels. However, one could counter argue that comics are not necessarily easier reading than traditional prose, especially when some scholars (Groenstein, 2007; Pustz, 1999, p. 4) claim that comics literacy requires knowledge of a whole different systematic "language" than just English. Try reading translated Japanese manga to understand the complication. Regardless, if comics were considered trashy reading for children, there are implications that soldiers were regarded as undereducated and lower class when their superiors decided to use this medium.

Partially, this was because the comics were no longer gratis, courtesy of Uncle Sam. However, there was another reason soldiers didn't keep buying comics after they so readily consumed them during the war. After their combat experiences, and with the ambiguity of the Cold War looming, some of these men found the simplicity of superhero stories to be two-dimensional (Wright, pg. 111-112). The gung ho style of World War II comics, when applied to the Korean War, failed because they seemed naïve and juvenile compared to the grim realities of the conflict. Captain America, with his Manichean, fist-first approach to the nation's enemies, must have seemed positively troglodytic after these soldiers experienced the complexity of war first hand.

One of the veterans who felt this way was Captain America co-creator Jack Kirby. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs (1997, p. 49, pg. 58-59) claim that after his service, Kirby returned to comics with a more mature vision for superhero stories, one with a "real human dimension" where the villain was a more intricate character. He did not professionally draw Captain America for over a decade after his return from the war, turning instead to romance comics for income. This may have been because he felt Cap was not complex enough for the post-war world, but more likely it was because superhero comics were barely profitable anymore. The accusations against them as a children's culture, compounded with the departure of their few adult readers further pushed the medium toward subculture. Instead of attempting to recover those veterans who found the comics simplistic, Captain America comic books took on an even more hawkish tone in the 1950s. The book was shortly thereafter cancelled, confirming the theory that adult readers during the Cold War did not accept this kind of stark depiction of America's enemies.

The final nail in the coffin leading to Captain America's cancellation was the rise of television as an alternative medium, skyrocketing in popularity during the 1950s. In fact, Patrick

Parsons (1991, p. 72) suggests that television's siphoning off the audience from comic books was responsible for the decline in comic sales, not the other ideological factors I have already discussed. I would posit that rather than one factor being solely culpable, that these four variables worked in concert to reduce the comic book medium to subcultural status. Captain America comics were clearly affected by this combination. They simultaneously catered to child and adult audiences, but lost both when comics suffered negative publicity and veterans' taste for facile superheroes faded. Television brought a *coup-de-grâce* to the star-spangled avenger, draining what little audience he had left.

Ten years passed before Captain America saw publication again. In that time, the four factors I have described thoroughly reduced comics to a subculture and superheroes entered into an era that comics fans now call "The Silver Age." These new heroes demonstrated less violent solutions to their problems (to appease the comics code) and their villains were not representations of real-world anxieties, but were often ridiculous rivals like telepathic talking gorillas or magical imps from other dimensions (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, pg. 11-12). When Captain America returned in 1964 it was into this era, where he was now a subcultural product instead of a mainstream one. However, this shift did not affect the way *Captain America* symbolized the limits of national ideology. Partially, this is because the book did not adhere to the standards of other Silver Age books.

The Silver Age began in the 1950s, while Captain America was still in fictional suspended animation. By 1964 however, there were clear American anxieties the hero could fight again: the Viet Cong, political assassins, and the destructive power of the nuclear bomb. When he returns to comics, ready to confront these anxieties, Captain America does not demonstrate either of the traits that were necessary for the Silver Age consumer audience. Unlike

the Flash or Green Lantern (DC Comics' forerunners of the Silver Age), Captain America *always* used violence to solve his problems and beat his enemies. Furthermore, while these enemies were still campy and absurd, they were representative of real threats: criminals, assassins, communists and Nazis. Captain America's return defied the conventions of the Silver Age and the character still operated as a symbol capable of defining the nation's limits.

I have two possible explanation for this 1960s Captain America's difference from his contemporaries in the superhero genre. First, as a representative of the nation, Captain America in 1964 could not be filled with the same doubt and self-loathing as Spider-man and the Fantastic Four, because that would signify a nation that wasn't confident in its superiority. While it is true that in the 1970s, Captain America manifests the "Marvel formula" by exhibiting ennui after he doubts the American Dream, here in the early 1960s the nation didn't consider its own faults because it was still defining itself through war and opposition to the external other. This then is a second possibility for his adherence to Golden Age tropes of violence and "real world" enemies. As Gerstle (2004) has noted, during times of war the nation is able to sharply define its identity, by positioning itself against its wartime enemy, using xenophobic representations of an external other. The Viet Cong and other 1964 realities show up in Captain America then, because they are indicative of this kind of national identity maintenance.

Another example of Captain America's resistance to the norms of superheroics is found in a distribution arrangement made between Marvel Comics (Captain America's publisher) and National Comics (later DC Comics, the publishers of Superman, Batman et al.). In 1957, three years after *Captain America...Commie Smasher!* was cancelled, Marvel's distribution system failed, forcing them to turn to National for assistance. The deal they agreed on limited Marvel to only eight titles and kept them from trying to get back in on the superhero business, of which

National was practically the only successful publisher left. (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 19; Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 126). Marvel circumvented this by coming up with a unique formula for superheroes: characters filled with angst and doubt, together with an obligation to right moral wrongs. Characters like The Fantastic Four and Spider-man exhibited this ethos, with just the right mix of "realism," self-actualization and hip intelligence that National's stiff superheroes were all missing (Pustz, 1999, pg. 49-52). With the success of these characters, Marvel was no longer neutered and soon they were able to negotiate their way out of National's binding distribution contract and into a successful superhero empire.

Captain America however, returned to Marvel Comics without any of these hallmark Marvel traits. His theme as "the man out of time" was meant to fulfill the Marvel angst formula, but it was not until the early 1970s that he was filled with anxiety or self-doubt over his role as an American icon. Compared to the rest of Marvel's stable, the character is barely self-reflective. In fact, Captain America behaves more like National's Golden Age characters, with their one-dimensional personalities and black and white conceptions of evil and good. Not only was Captain America resistant to the tropes of the Silver Age, but he also resisted the formulaic conventions established by the Marvel/National distribution deal.

Despite the multiple factors that led to Captain America's cancellation in the 1950s, his ten years out of action and a return to a markedly different cultural landscape, the character was still able to reflect the borders of the imagined nation. For the purposes of my genealogy, it is important to note this moment of cultural metamorphosis because it leaves a sizeable gap on our roadmap to discovering America's developing limits. In later periods of production turbulence, the book is less successful at maintaining its national narrative, a development to be explored later in this chapter. This makes it significant that after all the calamity surrounding its

production and consumption in this period, *Captain America* continued to narrate the literal ins and outs of the nation's experiences. Partially this stemmed from a decisive change brought about by comics' transformation into a subculture; because now the producers and consumers were *communicating* with each other, negotiating what the meaning of American identity was through their interactions in this new comics community.

### Advertising, Identity Construction and Negotiation:

#### Communication between *Captain America's* Consumers and Producers

Alongside the gradual transformation of comics into a subculture came two different but parallel developments in the consumption and production of *Captain America*, leading to a crude form of communication between fans and creators. First, the progression of the comics' advertising over the years demonstrates a significant shift from patriotic rhetoric to an adult targeted consumer culture without a nationalistic premise. The themes within these ads match some of those advanced in the comic's actual narrative, supporting the comic book's ability to represent the borders of the imagined community. I begin this section with an examination of this advertising's development and when it parallels the narrative's depiction of the nation.

In contrast, starting in the 1960s, creators and editors started communicating with the *Captain America* audience in the book's letters pages, having extensive "conversations" about American values and problems. Following the examination of advertising in *Captain America*, I investigate how this letters forum communication sometimes developed into a negotiation between the two parties, influencing how *Captain America* represented the American nation. I argue that such negotiations contributed to Captain America's withdrawal from the Vietnam War and Marvel's depiction of racism and political apathy as malignant to the 1960s nation. I end this



section with another example of letters forum negotiation, occurring again in the mid 1980s when writer Mark Gruenwald heeded reader feedback about how he represented African Americans in the comic. This kind of discourse ended in the late 1980s, when an editorial mandate locked down any critical discussion. Such communication has been relatively absent since. Until that moment however, readers and editors addressed the significant issues of race, gender, nationalism, war and political apathy. All of these discourses negotiated the meaning of American values and Marvel sometimes accommodated their readers' interpretations of the imagined community.

*Patriotism, Pedagogues and Consumerism: Captain America's Advertising Supporting the National Narrative*

Even going back to Captain America's beginnings in the 1940s, the advertising of the comics often spoke to readers about what it meant to be American, though in a much more direct manner than letters pages eventually would. Recall that during this period, comics were sold mainly to children and that superheroes often allied with kid sidekicks to appeal to that audience (Pustz, 1999, p. 27). Captain America's partner Bucky not only gratified these children, but he also promoted another way for them to venerate their hero and feel secure, by participating in a fan club called "The Sentinels of Liberty."

The club was advertised as "Captain America's own mighty legion, all working side-by-side for American democracy!" and for a dime, readers could join the group, receiving a membership card and metal badge (*Captain America Comics*, 9). Membership allowed readers to imagine that they were participating in the war effort, especially when the club requested that they scan the skies for enemy planes, collect paper for war drives and buy bonds. At one point,

Cap and Bucky even asked members to relinquish their badges so the metal could be melted down, possibly for munitions (Pustz, 1999, p. 30; *Captain America Comics* 9, 37). The Sentinels of Liberty may have started as a mere fan club, but it evolved into another narrative for national identity, informing children how to be authentically American by contributing to the war effort.

The volunteer rhetoric of the Sentinels of Liberty ads generated a patriotic identity because 1) children were told they were ostensibly helping Captain America, the heroic symbol of the nation and 2) their actions were advertised as directly affecting the war. Captain America for example, compares paper collection to using a weapon against the Axis enemy. "Paper is a weapon of war! A mighty weapon!" he says, "Every gun, bullet, every piece of ammunition used to smash the unholy Japs and Nazis is shipped in paper containers!" (*Captain America Comics*, 37). Even in this advertisement, the character is delineating who is on the inside of the imagined community (those who contribute to the war) and who is outside of it (the Japanese and Germans).

The club even opened its membership to young girls, specifically stating that, "Girls as well as boys may do their share in keeping America free and democratic! Any boy or girl may become a Sentinel of Liberty! And any patriotic Sentinel of Liberty is a real American!" (*Captain America Comics*, 9). This contradicts the roles of women as represented in the Captain America stories. Other than the femme fatales designed to appeal to male soldiers, women were either journalists or kidnapping victims if they even appeared in the narrative. Girls were likely included in the Sentinels of Liberty rhetoric to increase comic book sales. Regardless, the back matter of the comics was actively communicating with the readers, promoting certain types of behavior as being genuinely American, including both genders when other American institutions did not. Even though the war allowed women to assume working roles like "Rosie the Riveter"

that were previously unavailable to them, they were still excluded from combat positions in the military (for more on this, see Colman, 1998). Fraternal fellowship during the war effort was still just that, a relationship between men, but the Sentinels of Liberty represented the changes to gender roles that America endured during the war. Women were now more visible within the imagined community.

After the war was over, the Sentinels of Liberty eventually evolved into a more commercial enterprise, encouraging children to become salesmen instead of war volunteers. Issues in the early 1950s (during the "commie smasher" period) advertised potential jobs for kids where they sold cards printed with patriotic and religious mottos (*Captain America...Commie Smasher*, 76). From here until the mid 1980s, promotions involving readers selling chachski for cash were prevalent in most Captain America stories. Instead of continuing to promote a patriotic volunteerism from the readers, the comics asked them to become door-to-door salesmen. Flanking these entrepreneurial themed ads were progressively more adult oriented pieces of marketing, persuading the reader to train their bodies and their minds, so that they could gain successful American lifestyles.

The Captain America comics in the early 1960s, for example, demonstrated an obsession with training and education, with the untrained always represented as villains who Captain America beat up while bragging about his manly self-defense skills. For instance, when Captain America beats the Viet Cong's general in 1964 it is because he is not as skilled as the hero (*Tales of Suspense*, 61). Similarly, in his first solo story that year, Captain America fights a group of criminals who break into the Avengers mansion. Again, he defeats these villains with skill, calling them "clumsy," "ill-trained," and "amateurs" (*Tales of Suspense*, 59).

Interestingly, these stories were accompanied by multiple advertisements for training books and audiotapes. Professional bodybuilding instruction ads were common, with slogans like, "I'll rush to you my professional secrets how to gain up to 50 pounds of mighty muscles!" (*Tales of Suspense*, 60, p. 1). Self-defense training was also advertised, primarily through Yubinaza, "The secret, amazingly easy art of self-defense that turns just one finger of your hands into a potent weapon of defense" (*Tales of Suspense*, 61). There were also ads for home training in auto repair, radio operation, electronics, guitar playing and even some for comic book art instruction (*Tales of Suspense*, 60-74). Education and training were represented here as characteristics of the ideal American, traits that could be purchased so that the reader could be more like Captain America, physically confident with impressive skills. Again, the ads paralleled the representation of the nation within the narrative. Those who were trained were inside the nation, while those outside of it were incompetent amateurs.

This theme of training and education is not one located by Gerstle (2004) or the other narratives of American history this thesis sometimes turns to for supporting evidence, making it a significant discovery for this study. It is not necessarily a theme that was particular to Captain America, as most Marvel Comics probably ran these same ads. However, the fact that they are so ubiquitous while the hero himself espouses similar values seems to indicate that this theme of bettering one's self was common at the time. The ads show us that this was a trait in the nation's identity, while the comic's content supports that identity by establishing the untrained as unacceptable. Here is a moment where identity and representation are linked in the circuit of culture.

The focus on self-education became even more prevalent in the late 1960s and into the 1970s when *Captain America's* advertising heavily promoted potential jobs for readers. These

varied wildly: from shoe salesmen positions to veterinary assistants, locksmiths to national park game wardens. Advertisements for extension schools were prevalent, as were "second chances" for high-school dropouts. If one were to just read the advertisements of *Captain America* to trace the development of the nation, you would find it to be singularly obsessed with edification and exercise, grasping at every opportunity to become a sort of enlightened renaissance man, both a physical Adonis and mentally marketable. This alternate "marketing narrative" actually supports the one within *Captain America*, where the hero enthusiastically praised training and education, admonishing those villains who lacked it.

Contrary to the inclusion of women during the 1940s as Sentinels of Liberty, these training and education ads in the 1960s hardly ever targeted women. The photographs and illustrations accompanying these ads showed men, often flexing or posing nonchalantly. Women maybe appeared when a Charles Atlas look-a-like was shown lifting bikini clad models over his shoulders. This gender specific marketing is indicative of the primarily male comic book audience.

The revenue generated by these ads likely had little or no impact on the producers of these comics, so I would dispute a political economy claim that the advertisers were able to influence the content of these stories. For instance, it is unlikely that the comics' producers in the 1960s included negative and villainous depictions of the untrained in an effort to promote their advertisers' products. It is however possible—given the copious amount of advertising dedicated to self-defense and bodybuilding—that this was indeed an anxiety of the time, represented by *both* the content of the story and the products advertised. If the untrained or undereducated were maligned within the imagined nation, it makes sense then that a small marketplace existed to sell products purporting to train comic readers in self-defense or technical skills. Such ads also point

to the implication (at least on the part of the advertisers) that comic readers were lower class and already in need of an education. This example of training advertising suggests that the products marketed to the readers of these comics are just as fruitful territory for discovering the nation's borders as Captain America's villains are.

What is particularly notable about these ads is that going into the 1960s, comics were subcultural products, still considered children's culture. Yet, children surely were not the targets for shoe salesmen ads or post high school diplomas. The military readers during World War II showed us that comics were capable of reaching an audience beyond children, and now the advertising in the 1960s demonstrates that adults were again considered a significant part of that audience. Like those military readers, there is an inference that comics were read by undereducated adults, probably because they were a subcultural product. There weren't ads for medical schools or rocket engineering, the extent of the education theme never went that far. The medium itself was considered trashy reading, but these ads specifically target untrained adults for lower class employment. The attention Marvel's marketing gave to adult readers is a development that would continue in *Captain America*, although the lower class implications would eventually disappear.

The fascination with training and instruction finally faded around the mid 1980s, giving way to junk food and video games. Comics culture itself gained more ad space as the industry moved toward the direct market in the late 1970s and ads for conventions, specialty shops and mail order businesses grew more prevalent. By 2007, all three of these (comics, junk food and video games) were still advertised in *Captain America*, but they competed with a growing market for movies, designer sneakers and big ticket items like cars and personal game rooms.

These shifts in advertising are again not specific to Captain America's narrative, but represent changes in the industry as a whole. They still should be observed however, because they provide a context for the circumstances that these comics were produced within. In the span of fifty years, the advertising in these comics displays a trajectory beginning with Bucky showing kids how to gather paper for the war, and ending with Dodge, Honda and Nissan pitching sports utility vehicles to comics fans. This reveals two shifts in the marketing rhetoric accompanying *Captain America's* narration of the American nation. First, the advertising has dramatically changed how it defines the consumer. Captain America began by encouraging readers to be patriotic volunteers, then emphasized the importance of training and education, and now totally embraces raw consumerism. This shift parallels similar developments of Captain America's narrative, showing us that the advertising can actually work through the circuit of culture to support the way this comic represents the nation.

Second, these comics began as a children's culture, consumed by millions. By 2007, after all those years relegated to the basement of subculture, the advertising shows a reorientation of these comics toward both adults and general popular culture. Despite the stigma that comics are a subcultural product for children, the development of their advertising shows that this narrative is directed at adult consumers, defining their national experience as much as anyone's. The implication is that Captain America narrates the development of the nation's borders for a consumer audience that includes male children and adults, but excludes women for the most part. This conclusion is important to consider when examining the roles of villains in this national narrative, as it is not as juvenile a product as one might assume and the definition of the imagined community is broadened by its inclusion of adult readers. The advertising supports a

male-centric characterization of the nation, so the roles of women, within both the narrative and the imagined community, should be considered in this light.

Despite the drastic changes in how Marvel markets products, the evolution of this comic's advertising only partially demonstrates the ways that communication between producers and consumers affected Captain America's representation of the nation. This is primarily because advertising as communication is mostly top-down and one-way, with the producers dictating what the ads are and their acceptance only determined by the success of these products, not through any kind of public interaction with the readers. The advertising only shows us the identity that Marvel projects through the circuit of culture, *upon* its readers. I found no evidence that this marketing identity affected the way *Captain America* narrated the borders to the imagined nation. What it does do however, is support the narrative's representation of America in certain moments. The advertising and the narrative do seem to be casually linked, through examples such as the prevalent theme of training/education present during the 1960s. This link shows the circuit of culture in full effect as the imagined representation of the nation makes its way through the moments of identity, consumption and production. However, to truly catch the relationship between these cultural moments interfering with the moment of representation—to see the negotiation of American identity at work—we must look to the only consistent forum between these parties over the last fifty years, the comic book letters page.

### *Negotiating Meaning in Captain America's Letters Forum: 1960s-1970s*

Comics scholarship often celebrates the moment in 1961 when DC/National editor Julie Schwartz began including the addresses of correspondents when their letters were printed in the back of comics (Pustz, 1999, p. 44; Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 64). To many, this small change



gave birth to comics fandom because consumers could now contact one another about their interests, meet in person and maybe even start a fanzine together. Marvel editor Stan Lee took this a step further by using eccentric rhetoric, projecting a particular Marvel identity that gave consumers a feeling of inclusion (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, pg. 64-66).

Captain America's 1964 return coincided with Lee's decision to mimic Schwartz and include letters and addresses in the back of each issue. "Yes, siree," he wrote in the back of the first solo Captain America story since the 1950s, "Marvelmania is sweeping the land, and—to celebrate the rising tide of enthusiasm, we at the ol' bullpen decided to go for broke and toss a letters page into every one of our super-duper-hero mags!" (*Tales of Suspense*, 59). In these frequent messages, Lee often praised the readers for their acumen and sophistication, all the while referring to his heroes by garish nicknames to let the readers feel welcome in the Marvel clubhouse. Captain America for example became "Cap," while his ally Iron Man was good ol' "Shell Head." Lee even rechristened the fans; now they were "True Believers," with the Marvel Universe as some sort of messianic experience. This habit of granting nicknames indicates a familiarity between Lee, the readers and the fictional characters, augmenting the identity of Marvel as an inclusive community.

All of this hyperbole gave fans the feeling that they had a direct line to Marvel editorial, that Stan Lee respected them and that he genuinely wanted to hear their opinions (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 67). Marvel purposefully used the letter columns to promote this sentiment, wanting readers to feel like they were not just passively reading comics, but were actively participating in them (Pustz, 1999, p. 167). Egalitarian comics-by-consensus may not have truly been their intention, but the letters pages for *Captain America* do show that this was a space where consumers and producers discussed the definitions of the American imagined community,

and that sometimes this led to negotiations over how the comic book represented that community's borders.

Analyzing letters pages as a source for identifying the consumers of comics is usually problematic, because the editors purposefully select the letters to represent their ideal audience, sometimes even faking them (Barker, 1989 as cited by Pustz, 1999, p. 166). However, the desire of Marvel's producers to represent their consumers in a particular way makes letter analysis still useful toward revealing how these negotiations affect the narrative. In Marvel's case, the publisher initially projected an identity of a participatory community, where *Captain America* readers could discuss American values and politics openly. Because of this manufactured consumer/producer identity, Marvel in the 1960s and 1970s often allowed criticism of their stories, but not necessarily of the company itself (Pustz, 1999, p. 168). The letters pages of *Captain America* may not reflect what its general readers' beliefs and behaviors were, but they do provide a space for the kind of dialogue indicative of Marvel's communal identity. Some of these may have been faux negotiations, but in several cases, I found that they actually reflect developments within the narrative and how it represented America's imagined borders.

The first instance of this kind of consumer/producer negotiation came during Lee's tenure as writer/editor of *Captain America*. Originally, Lee's *Captain America* stories had a Cold War era streak of anti-communism about them. Part of this was his attempt at political reality; his superheroes would sometimes go to Vietnam or battle the "red menace" in the United States (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 70). Some of it came from his collaboration with conservative artist Steve Ditko on Spider-Man. Jones & Jacobs (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 59) suggest that this partnership led to Lee adopting "much of Ditko's conservative individualism and pessimistic view of human institutions." When Captain America first returned from his arctic thaw, he often

battled villains who possessed advanced technology capable of massive destruction, a Cold War theme found in Lee's other work on Iron Man and The Fantastic Four. In one particular issue, Captain America goes to Vietnam and fights an entire camp of the Viet Cong, ending with a confrontation with the camp's sumo wrestling general (*Tales of Suspense*, 61). However, after this 1965 issue, he does not return to Vietnam or even reference the war occurring there.

It is possible that this was because of the identity Marvel was trying to mold and the often politically oriented letters they printed in the back of these issues. The fans that Lee pandered to, the ones he constantly referred to as smarter and hipper than everyone else, were not buying the anti-communist antics of Cap's villains, and suddenly those jingoistic stereotypes started to disappear (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 94). If Lee had not listened to reader feedback, the 1960s run of *Captain America* could very easily have failed just as the 1950s version did, because readers still did not buy the simplification of the Cold War. Despite Marvel's hip identity, it is possible that the company created simplified Captain America stories again because he was a familiar property of theirs that could be published in the new rising boom of superheroes. These initial anti-communist comics were produced by Lee and Kirby, probably because they were similar to the Captain America formula that was successful in the 1940s, using the character as a foil against wartime enemies. The "realism" of the book didn't lie in its angst (like other Marvel properties) but its confrontation of "real" villains. Some fans, however, could not identify with the war or the characterization of Captain America's villains, and a heated debate began over whether the hero should be fighting in Vietnam. Within other letters, fans debated issues of race and nationalism. Some argued about American values and how the superhero symbol for the imagined community should represent them. Others discussed the impact of apathy on the American public, focusing their attention less on an outsider enemy and more on the corruption

of the nation's heart. Lee (and other Marvel editors who followed him) often responded with "personal" interpretations of America and its limits. All of this communication constituted a negotiation, one that kept Captain America out of Vietnam and encouraged Marvel to leave the communist formula behind, so that by the early 1970s the character was confronting domestic political issues like government corruption and political ennui.

The first important theme that these 1960s-1970s letters demonstrate is the question of whether Captain America should enter the Vietnam War. Not all of the fans writing in were the swinging left, high school and college kids that Jones & Jacobs (1997) describe as Lee's impetus for keeping Cap out of the war. Reader Jeff Chown for instance, reasoned that Captain America had always fought for the betterment of humanity, not just American interests, and therefore he should fight the communism in Vietnam because it "is based upon world domination" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 122). This was a more internationally sophisticated interpretation of Captain America, not necessarily shared by all the readers. Another pro-war reader named J. Glenn Bevans suggested that the war was synonymous to World War II's significance as a threat to the American nation:

This then is where Captain America belongs—wherever and whenever the ideals of America are tested and the blood of her young men stain the land; that is where Captain America belongs. Allow your other superheroes to battle spacemen, robots etc. Captain America is needed to combat the real "supervillains" those who would seek to destroy the very ideals of freedom and liberty for which America stands. Captain America is not a superhero, he is a Super-American. He is the embodiment of the spirit of America; and while either lives, the other can never die. (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 115)

Bevans' and Chown's statements confirm that there were some readers who thought the Vietnamese were crucial villains for the book to represent, because they were a danger to the American imagined community. Bevans' comment about "spacemen" and "robots" also expresses a common feeling of the *Captain America* letters forum that such science fiction tropes were not appropriate for this superhero, because they did not represent an obvious threat to the American nation. These reader criticisms further show that Marvel opened up their forum to both sides of the Vietnam War argument. Like Stan Lee, Bevans and Chown's rhetoric is a little heavy handed and their claims did not go without criticism.

Objections to pro-war letters came from a faction that did not support an American superhero fighting a war they considered illegal and unjust. One reader disagreed with Bevans' assessment of who Captain America should be fighting: "Captain America should fight villains that enslave the world for themselves or threaten America... in Vietnam there is no man who wants to enslave the world. There are two countries fighting over something that has nothing to do with America" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 120). To this reader, the Vietnamese were not an enemy of America, because they did not directly threaten its borders. This also contradicts Chown's former argument that Captain America (and through him the nation) had a kind of multinational responsibility to the whole world.

On the other hand, the cosmopolitanism of the 1960s worked in reverse too. Another letter stated that Cap should only go to Vietnam as an observer of both sides, specifically because he was "more compassionate and understanding now" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 117). This reader seems to envision Captain America as outside of America, a non-interventionist capable of looking in and judging others national behavior on a global stage. It is an interesting

but unreasonable take on the character because there was not much narrative evidence to support his idea of a globalized, compassionate Captain America, especially when the hero was still busting heads every month with his star spangled shield.

Not all of the anti-war readers based their arguments on globalism. Some based their claims on the legality of the war, according to the nation's laws. "The Vietnam War doesn't pose a direct threat to America," wrote one reader, "Congress hasn't declared war on Vietnam. Many Americans, including hordes of young people, believe this makes the war illegal and well as immoral and unwise" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 124). The reader weirdly follows this legal argument up by suggesting that America should instead diplomatically manipulate China and the U.S.S.R. into fighting each other instead. His argument may fluctuate from the sublime to the ridiculous, but it shows the range of political proposals these letters brought to Marvel's inclusive identity.

Marvel's response to this (likely from Lee himself) was to counter with an interpretation of what America's moral responsibility was: "We're surprised that you can condone the propagation of any war between any countries. What you're saying is basically, 'Let's rid this country of hate and poverty—and let somebody else worry about it!' We shouldn't promote hate elsewhere" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 124). This was how Marvel editors would often counter the political claims of some of their readers in the letters forum, with vague references to what America should or should not do, but never with a concrete argument for or against the war itself. Their non-committal responses characterize the identity that the publisher promotes in these letters pages: quasi-intellectual, but neutral regarding the war. This is significant because it allows the "intellectual debate" to continue amongst the fans, without the publisher appearing to take any side on the issue. Yet, since Captain America did not battle in Vietnam the way he did

in World War II, it is clear that the editors chose not to support their pro-war readers. The reader letters chosen for print support this identity in that they were mostly balanced between the pro/anti war factions.

Even though Lee and Marvel ultimately kept Captain America out of Vietnam, they weren't necessarily against the war. These issues never represented the war, the government that prosecuted it and the military that performed it as a border of evil to the imagined community. I would argue instead that the Vietnam War was an example of a border of absence to the nation, where the narrative rendered the unacceptable invisible. The controversy over the war, exhibited within these letters, was the deciding factor in whether the superhero participated in it. Because there was no clear national opinion about the legitimacy of the war, Marvel was not sure whether it was "American" for their superhero to support it. Instead of acknowledging the complexity of this wartime identity (vastly different from how the nation defined itself in previous conflicts) the narrative ignored the war, pretending like it was not happening. The letters forum simultaneously allowed the fans to debate how the nation should define itself in relation to the war. Captain America did not actively support the war. Neither did he support the anti-war movement. Instead, the controversy of these two options left the war as almost a taboo topic, unable to be presented in the narrative for fear of offending one side or the other. This rendering and Captain America's seeming ignorance of the war's events may not have occurred without the communal identity perpetuated by Marvel and the discourses that followed.

This style of communication further narrated the borders of the nation by telling fans what was morally appropriate for Americans. In the above example, Marvel argues that any allowance of war is wrong, outside of American morality. This demonstrates their own fluctuation—and likely that of the nation's—when only five years previous Stan Lee eagerly sent

Captain America into honorable mêlée with the Viet Cong. Here then is one of the strongest examples of the relationship between producers and consumers, negotiating how the cultural moment of representation narrates their national experience. As the nation changed to an anti-war stance, *Captain America* began to ignore the war's existence. Because the readers (members of the imagined community) communicated their experience as Americans, they recognized that the book was not representing their borders accurately. This affects the way that *Captain America* maintains the imagined community, so that it is not just the producers at Marvel dictating the nation's borders, but a participatory cooperation with the consumers, with the product connecting with their actual understanding of the nation.

The letters pages in the 1960s and 1970s affected Marvel's depiction of other borders as well. Arguments about American values were prominent and readers proposed a variety of ideas: maybe Captain America was a symbol of Christianity; or possibly he represented the flexible nature of the government that the nation's framers "intended;" perhaps he should reject the "flower child's dream world of peace and love" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 118, 120; *Captain America & Falcon*, Vol. 1, 176). Most prevalent among these arguments was that apathy was ruining the American dream and *Captain America* should signify that decay.

One letter claimed that a "what have I got to lose attitude" is what leads Americans to "drugs, drinking and crime" and therefore the comic shouldn't "glorify an attitude which has such a negative effect on the people of our nation" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 127). This was a clear call for Captain America to face villains with such nihilism, as fans described this philosophy as the root of America's problems in the 1970s. Cap did face some nihilistic villains (The Viper most notable among them), but Marvel writer Steve Englehardt decided to instead symbolize America's apathy by letting it infect the hero himself. Captain America discovers corruption in



the government, leading him to unmask the President of the United States as the villain behind a conspiracy. This story came only months before the Watergate scandal broke and Richard Nixon resigned his office, suggesting that the nation was already suspicious of the office. Afterward, Steve Rogers was dejected and gave up the Captain America identity to become Nomad, a "man without a country" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 175-183). Many readers in the letters forum related to their hero's faithlessness:

Hate wars, and government corruption had destroyed Steve Roger's faith in America (as it has done to us). The same America he fought for, the same America he symbolized because of faith in her. I don't blame Steve for "resigning his office." Just think, everything he fought for blown away like smoke. – W. James Grayson (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 176)

These kind of readers felt Steve Rogers experience reflected their own, such that the evil he faced was now the hypocrisy of the American Dream. After several issues of his moral exile, the letters pages began to reject Roger's apathy as a pure reflection of America. "We are all like Steve Rogers, in a way," wrote one letter, "Disillusionment and frustration make us divorce ourselves from America, but after weighing the alternatives, they just don't stack up" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 183). Even though apathy was prevalent, it was considered a problem within the imagined community, not necessarily a symptom of it. Readers wanted their hero to act, purging America of this problem, demonstrating the positive characteristics of the American dream with his symbolism.

Eventually, Rogers resumed the Captain America mantle and the letters seemed pleased with his return. Captain America acknowledged the failures of the nation, but he spoke of how he would now face them as an internal enemy of the dream he symbolized. Afterward, Jeff Barden wrote to Marvel:

So much cynicism, so much lethargy lately in America. Where has the dream gone? Marvel has provided the answer: it never left. We became detached in thought and let the concrete application escape us. The questions laid down during Cap's monologue seemed nothing if not a challenge to the common man—a challenge to believe in yourself and your ideals. Perhaps Marvel will lead this country spiritually in this direction. — Jeff Barden (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 183).

Barden's letter demonstrates the shift in the imagined nation that the book symbolized, in part because of feedback from readers. When Captain America wasn't reflecting the apathy that American readers experienced, they responded and soon Marvel injected him with disillusion. Yet, these readers soon realized that a complete rejection of America did not reflect the nation's borders either. Through their communication about the meaning of American identity, the readers of *Captain America* were able to negotiate how the character could still narrate their imagined community. Like his absence from the Vietnam War, Captain America's confusion about his convictions in the 1970s was a border of the nation shaped through discourses between the comics' consumers and its producers.

Along with the Vietnam War and political apathy, issues of race and xenophobia were also coming to the forefront of these 1970s letters page communications. The letters printed there

entirely rejected racism, clearly placing it outside of the acceptable for the American nation. In response, Marvel editorial stated that they never purposefully tried to demonize people based on their race or nationality (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 118). This is an ironic statement, as it came in the middle of a storyline where Captain America fights The Exiles, an evil group of mercenaries each symbolizing other nations and ethnicities. The Exiles were Russians, Germans and Chinese, all nationalities that America had been in conflict with. Interestingly, this is also where the producers introduced The Falcon, the first African-American superhero, dissociating themselves from their stereotypes of Italians, Russians and the Chinese by providing one positive example of an internal minority. To further distance *Captain America* from potentially racist/xenophobic depictions of villains, Marvel firmly established racism and elitism as core "evil" characteristics of Cap's nemesis The Red Skull. Readers were satisfied, responding with enthusiasm to the demonization of racial intolerance:

The Red Skull, nastier than ever before, even in the old Marvel in the early fifties with Cap, is the best thing to come along since tutti-frutti... He's not misunderstood... he just radiates hate. I feel that if you associate hate and bigotry with this type of villain it might show your younger readers how senseless all of this is! This type of story can mean a lot to people who grow up hating other races and religions, and perhaps can change the minds of some. If one person will give up hatred of his fellow man because of a story like this, you can be a proud person Stan. – Marvin Wolfman (*Tales of Suspense*, 80)

The feedback from *Captain America's* readers once again affected the way the narrative depicted evil. As Marvin Wolfman (who would later go on to pen comics himself) expresses in this letter,

not only did some fans want *Captain America* to accurately reflect the nation's boundaries, but they also hoped it would work pedagogically to dispel such limits permanently. Again, like the critics of comics in the 1940s and 1950s, there was an assumption that comic books could teach readers, affecting their belief systems about what was right or wrong. If Wolfman's assumption were accurate, *Captain America* would cyclically narrate the nation's borders, reflecting the consumers' community experience and then disseminating those principles to younger readers, themselves normalized through the symbolism in this cultural artifact.

The success of this approach was clear and Marvel fully embraced American civic nationalism,<sup>7</sup> pretending that the villains they created were no longer symbolic of American xenophobia, when the evidence proved contrary. Lee advanced this belief further in the same issue that introduced The Falcon and demonized The Exiles, writing a long missive on Marvel's supposed liberal tolerance:

We have all but discontinued using any real foreign "enemies" in the pages of our superhero sagas... we try to make it clear at all times that even in our way-out war mags, we are not trying to condemn all citizens of any one nation or nations for a war that ended a quarter of a century ago... the world has become much too small a place for such a thing... and it is destined, obviously to grow smaller... He (Captain America) is the idealization, the realization of the hopes and dreams of all freedom-loving peoples everywhere—whether they be black, white, or any of the other million-and-one shades of a multi-hued humanity.

(*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 118)

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<sup>7</sup> According to Gerstle (2001, pg. 268-270), the civil rights movement shifted American from a racialized nation, where some races were superior to others, to a community of civic nationalism, where equal social rights are a unifying principle. Captain America in the 1960s reflects Gerstle's claim.

Despite the contradiction between Lee's stories (still stereotyping nationality and race) and his anti-racist rhetoric, there were some changes in how *Captain America* represented the nation's limits. Most of his villains in the early 1970s moved from clear representations of an enemy nation to culturally ambiguous symbols of nihilism, corruption, racism and greed. These included the nihilistic terrorist The Viper, the racist, jingoistic and evil 1950s imposter of Captain America and the ultimate corruption of the President of the United States, unveiled as the leader of a secret empire trying to control the world.

When Marvel slipped and a clearly xenophobic villain appeared, the readers responded with criticism. For example, in *Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 165, the hero faces "The Yellow Claw," an enemy harkening back to the 1940s era of demonized Asians with a yellow complexion, fangs and long claw like fingers. A reader's response to this issue admonishes the creators for pigeonholing Asians in an "ugly" and "unnecessary" manner (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 176). Marvel reacted to their readers' feedback and the Yellow Claw was never heard from in *Captain America* again. Like their feedback about the Vietnam War and political apathy, consumers interacted with the producers of *Captain America* to mediate how the comic depicted the nation's fears and enemies.

This kind of negotiation kept *Captain America*'s narration of the imagined community parallel with the experiences of its citizens. Despite Lee's urges to simplify villains by tacking an enemy nationality onto them, the readers disagreed and the Marvel identity that desired intellectual discourse forced Lee to acknowledge them. America was shifting away from its racialized past and toward a more civic nationalism (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 268-270). This transformation was by no means easy or complete, and the nation struggled with its racism at

home and in Vietnam (Gerstle, 2001, p. 312). Marvel's own struggle then—with *Captain America* fluctuating from a conservative, xenophobic super soldier to an egalitarian cosmopolitan besieged with aporia—reflected the changing geography of the nation's borders during this period. The readers, and the supposition that Marvel respected their feedback, allowed the comic to match the pace of that quasi-tectonic shift.

*Negotiating Meaning in Captain America's Letters Forum: Mark Gruenwald's 1980s*

The comics industry in the late 1970s however, experienced turmoil in both production and consumption. Distribution networks were in flux, production values went down and Marvel experienced a lot of editorial staff changes as the company lost \$2 million a year (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, pg. 269, 189-195). Simultaneously, fandom became less about creating a community and more about aesthetic appreciation (Pustz, 1999, p. 46). The letters forum of *Captain America* reflected this, as most of the discourse there was either critique or acclaim for the revolving door of artists. During this period, letters barely addressed the narrative, much less demanding that Marvel represent the nation appropriately. Political discussion was a rarity until editor Mark Gruenwald left his position in 1985 to write *Captain America* full-time.

Gruenwald—in true Stan Lee fashion—threw down his gauntlet, filling the entire letters page with a long, hyperbolic notification that Captain America would be returning as a mirror of American politics. Mostly this message affirmed civic nationalism, stating:

It's the belief that common folk from anywhere on Earth can come to a land of opportunity where they are free of forces that oppress them because of race, color or

creed. And in this land they have the freedom to better themselves, to realize their aspirations and to fullest potential, provided they are willing to work for it.

Gruenwald's statement, while supporting the more civic oriented conception of the nation, assumes that America's system of capitalism and democracy is neutral, an equal playing field that wasn't essentially racist, selfish or dominating. This announcement was similar to the Reagan-esque rhetoric of the era, supporting the civic ideal on the surface even though American policy rehabilitated a racist nation (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 348, 357-359, 365). Gruenwald continued by characterizing Captain America in full, asserting that, "He does not battle evil out of guilt, neurosis, hatred, sense of obligation, or sense of destiny—he battles evil for sheer love of freedom and justice!" Before any reader feedback had even come in, Gruenwald was determined to bring political allegory back into *Captain America*. From the missive it seems that this was Gruenwald's decision and not an edict of Marvel's editorial, but it's hard to tell where the line is drawn between the two.

His run sparked a revival of the Lee-era letters forum and many readers wrote in to express their approval or disapproval of his politically allegorical villains, such as the jingoistic, southern anti-hero the Super-Patriot or the anti-nationalist Flag Smasher. Unlike Marvel in the 1960s, in the 1980s the publisher was not in the habit of projecting an identity of inclusion to its readers. Editor in chief Jim Shooter had a tenuous relationship with fans, even referring to them as "little fucks" at one point in a memo later made public (Pustz, 1999, p. 60). His editorial mandate was that superhero comics should be about big fights and spandex, not political assertions (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, pg. 267-268). Somehow, Gruenwald managed to ignore this, sending Cap against a corrupt government, jingoistic troglodytes, censorship advocates, intrusive

corporations and flag burning anti-nationalists. This is one moment where the agency of an individual can support or hinder this cultural artifact's ability to narrate the nation's development. Along with Gruenwald's agency to defy Marvel editorial, the letters forum once again represented an identity of open political debate. The negotiation of the nation's borders was back.

These letters pages often remarked on how excited the book made them feel about the American nation. Letters stated that the comic stirred their blood, affected them emotionally and got them to cheer aloud. Oftentimes, these readers said that the book ignited their patriotism, filling them with pride. Their takes on Captain America called again for a civic nationalist who ignored "ethnic origins" and acted like a cosmopolitan superhero that "takes a leaf from the pages of Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* and becomes a sort of globe-trotting ambassador" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 237, 296). They agreed with Gruenwald's depictions of jingoistic arrogance and the "bureaucratic idea of death by red tape," but some were critical of this "pro-liberal, conservative bashing Captain America" and its stereotyping of Southerners as "conservative fools who voted for Reagan" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 338, 339). Slight changes accommodated these criticisms, and the conservative character in question, The Super-Patriot, went through a long dramatic arc where he confronted his hubris and slightly matured. The most significant change that the 1980s letters pages brought about however, was Gruenwald's depiction of Super-Patriot's partner, an illiterate African-American nationalist.

In the storyline, Captain America again resigns his position when a corrupt government commission demands he work directly for them. They replace Steve Rogers with The Super Patriot and his bigoted sidekick Lemar Hoskins, who becomes the new Bucky. Several readers wrote in to complain that the portrayal of an African-American character as ignorant was controversial and would have negative effects. "I was also bothered that the Buckies were shown



as illiterates," wrote one reader, "Just because a bigot has brawn doesn't mean he can't have brains" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 333, 339, 340). Others did not like that an African-American was reduced to the role of sidekick, especially after years of The Falcon acting as Captain America's equal partner. The final straw came when the character was named after Bucky. According to an editorial response in the letters page of *Captain America*, Vol. 1, 340, many angry letters came in alerting Marvel that "buck" was a racist term. Gruenwald claimed that he was just trying to be innovative and that he was unaware of this racist interpretation. He meant the story to be about the consequences of assuming another's identity, but fans were not accepting it as an appropriate representation of their nation.

Almost immediately, Gruenwald changed the character, having him learn literacy as part of his superhero training. A few issues later, this Bucky encountered an African-American man who relayed the racist meaning of his new codename. Thereafter, the character was called "Battlestar" and discarded his role as sidekick, eventually maturing further than the Super-Patriot character. As with the Marvel of the 1960s and 1970s, the letters page forum acted as a space for negotiation between the readers and the creators. Gruenwald's cooperation was specifically necessary for this forum, as Marvel editorial was not known at the time for collaborating with fans (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 225, 255). The readers provided input about American cultural reality that Gruenwald was claimed to be unaware of and he immediately rectified the discrepancy. Again, the negotiation between consumers and producers was able to shape the narrative so that it more accurately represented the imagined community. Soon after however, this kind of concession on the part of Marvel's creators became a rarity.

Gruenwald may have managed to circumnavigate Shooter's aversion to fandom and briefly create a community similar to Lee's Marvel of the 1960s and early 1970s, but at a point in

the 1980s the publisher no longer allowed any seriously critical letters, even in *Captain America* (Pustz, 1998, p. 168). There the era of negotiation between the producers and consumers of this comic seems to have ended. Throughout the 1990s this censorship policy continued, and there were very few intellectual criticisms of the book and its representation of the American nation. Likely, this stems from Marvel's then owner Ron Perelman deciding that the company should focus more on the licensing possibilities of the characters instead of their narrative development (Raviv, p. 36). During Perelman's term, Gruenwald's stories became less politically oriented and little feedback printed in the letters pages criticized this change. Gone was the Marvel identity of an open community for readers and creators to exchange ideas about these superhero icons. Most of the printed letters now consisted of gushing flattery or fan questions about continuity. Sometimes editorial printed no letters at all. In 1996, Mark Gruenwald died from a heart attack at the age of 43. According to Lia Pelosi, a former Marvel staffer, Gruenwald was unhappy with the state of the industry in the 1990s and, "Comics just broke his heart" (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, pg. 368-369).

After the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, *Captain America* restarted with its fifth volume. These were very overt political stories, beginning with Captain America fighting Arab terrorists in the American Midwest. The character was redesigned slightly, emphasizing the chain mail in his costume and changing his mask sometimes to a combat helmet. Artist John Cassaday redesigned the comic's covers to mimic war propaganda posters, exclaiming jingoistic epithets like "Fight Terror" and "Are You Doing Your Part?" *Captain America* even featured heavy advertising for *The Call of Duty*, a new Marvel series about firefighters, exploiting their popularity after the national disaster. No letters were published during this volume, leaving little room for readers to provide feedback, criticism or dissent of this new politicized representation.

In a way, this was a return to Captain America's origins in the 1940s, where there was a more top-down, creator interpretation of what America means and where its borders are. Partially this was because of the return to a wartime environment, although Marvel's financial troubles in the late 1990s and its new corporate direction under Isaac Perlmutter and Avi Arad might have contributed to the silencing of consumer voices. Just like Bucky and his Sentinels of Liberty, the post 9/11 issues of *Captain America* promoted certain kinds of behavior as being authentically American, with no published response from readers about how well that representation matched their actual experiences.

Even now, during the sixth volume of *Captain America*, there is nothing resembling the political debates of the 1960s, 1970s and Gruenwald's run in the 1980s. Current writer Ed Brubaker personally answers correspondence in the resurrected letters forum, but again these mostly consist of fawning praise or fan questions on obscure superhero minutia. For instance, one letter requests appearances from little known Marvel villain The Mandarin, while another references "the cardinal rule of comics," that "no one stays dead except Bucky and Uncle Ben" (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 12). It is possible that the internet has provided an alternative venue for political debates between the readers and the comic's creators, but such negotiation is entirely absent from the actual *Captain America* product. Marvel no longer appears interested in projecting an identity of inclusion in these physical pages.

Such an identity—even if it was sometimes insincere and manufactured—was what allowed this comic's producers appear to collaborate with its consumers, influencing the way it represented the imagined community and the constantly shifting terrain of its borders. From the 1960s until the 1970s, the letters forum featured debates about America's war in Vietnam, the apathy affecting its citizens' national faith, and issues of race and xenophobia. All of these

criticisms affected how Captain America's villains were presented, keeping him out of Vietnam, while fighting racists and his own national ennui. After an interval in the seventies, *Captain America* again featured this kind of letters forum discourse during Mark Gruenwald's run on the book in the 1980s. He fielded criticisms of his politically allegorical narrative and most significantly, made quick story alterations to alleviate concerns that his depiction of an African-American character was racist. After this moment however, the company went through multiple transitions that prevented such negotiations from occurring again in the pages of *Captain America* again. While these production shifts may have kept the consumers from having input into the ways this comic narrated America, the shifts themselves affected how its villains represented the nation's borders, often disabling their symbolism entirely.

#### The Destabilization of *Captain America's* National Narrative by Production Crises

As Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs (1997) tell it, the history of the comics industry is one of backstabbing, turmoil and disappointment. From their chronology of comics production culture, it seems that every few years a prominent creator will either fall out with their publisher or leave the industry behind in exhaustion. When these creators are disgruntled, they sometimes alter their villains to reflect their irritation with their bosses, giving them roles as business executives or even editors. Other times, when either a creator leaves early or the publisher experiences major transitions, the villains do not necessarily represent the nation's borders, a side effect of tight deadlines dealing with production chaos. Moments like that occur sporadically across this genealogy, where Captain America faces ambiguous enemies with no obvious interpretation as limits to American principles.

When researching this genealogy, I would occasionally encounter such moments, when I was unable to decipher the meaning of a villain. These were not the "robots" and "spacemen" that readers in the late 1960s complained about being unrealistic American enemies; those I actually found to be representations of Cold War fears. Yet, there were some points in Cap history where he simply fought supervillains for the sake of battle and flashy costumes, much as Jim Shooter wanted comics to be like in the 1980s. Oddly, more than one of these moments involved professional wrestling, though sometimes the enemies were as confusing as Antarctic dinosaur barbarians or a sinister floating mass of energy from the future. These characters were indistinct—save for their science fiction trappings—and clearly did not narrate the development of the nation. They may have had meanings, but I did not interpret them as national ones that reflected the era they were created in.

However, when I compared these instances with my timeline of the culture of production, I realized that almost all of these ambiguous villains corresponded with periods of transition and turmoil for the creators of *Captain America*. When the book had a clear direction and the company was stable, the villains did as expected and symbolized America's anxieties and hatreds. When a creator angrily quit however, or Marvel experienced crises like bankruptcy and financial ruin, the comics were haphazardly put together, using villains that did not make any sense in light of Captain America's role as a symbol of the American nation.

Like Mark Gruenwald's ability to support the national narrative through his resistance to the Marvel editorial mandate against such realism, this section details creator agency that counters corporate pressure and disrupts the narrative's connection to the imagined community. Individuals can affect this comic's ability to represent the nation's identity, though in all the examples below, their choices are confronted by moments in the circuit of culture. Production

challenges these agents when editorial sabotages their creative runs, while consumers are able to voice their disapproval of these agent's divergence from the nation's story.

In this final section, I will briefly define each of these moments in the genealogy where the nation's narrative is disabled, providing a corresponding moment of production turbulence as a cause. In all of these examples, the villains become vague and nonsensical, clearly not representing America's imagined community and its many borders.

### *Frustration, Bust and Boom: The National Narrative Disabled*

From the 1940s until the book's cancellation in 1954, *Captain America* had clear nationalistic enemies. When Marvel revived the character in 1964, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby were still inventing villains that reflected American limits and this tradition continued well into the 1970s with each of their successors. Kirby, however, grew frustrated with Marvel, partly because Lee was claiming ownership of ideas that Kirby thought were his. There was a period in the 1960s when Kirby was excited about his work and incorporated many philosophical ideas into his comics (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 106). This tendency waned as his frustration grew and by 1967 his comics became routine, much simpler than the work he had previously done (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 108). In March of 1970, Kirby did the unthinkable and left Marvel's bullpen for DC Comics, where editors allowed him to develop outrageous cosmic fantasy stories like his "Fourth World" epic *The New Gods* and *Kamandi: The Last Boy On Earth* (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 127). Again, Kirby became aggravated with his publishing superiors and he went back to Marvel in 1975 to begin again on *Captain America*, the character he co-created in 1941. The comic book business was skeptical that he would do anything productive or creative on this assignment (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 189-1995).

Upon his return, the comic took a wildly different direction. Previously, under Steve Englehardt, Captain America had struggled with issues of identity and aporia, becoming increasingly self-reflective. Kirby's Cap ignored all of this character development, becoming emotionally simple and more action oriented (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 198).

Fans were angry and the letters page reflected readers' confusion. Some complained that Kirby was turning the character into a juvenile science-fiction epic, without regard for the history of the book or its previous characterization. One of these letters referenced an interview with Kirby, where he stated, "My Cap has no identity crisis!" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 199). Kirby partisans of the time complained that Marvel staffers were purposefully sabotaging the letters page against Kirby (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 198). In one particular incident, Kirby scripted the African-American superhero The Falcon into saying, "Don't jibe me man!" and the fans went ballistic over the inaccuracy of jargon. This outcry came at the tail end of the period described above, when Marvel encouraged consumer feedback to portray an inclusive, communal identity. Like the moments when reader feedback affected Captain America's involvement in Vietnam or his struggle with political apathy, these letters demanded that the comic accurately reflect the borders of the nation. Kirby, however, unlike Lee and others, would not cooperate or relent.

This then is a moment in *Captain America* history when the narrative's ability to represent the imagined community was disabled, primarily because of production turbulence. Kirby was reportedly angry at the comics industry and staffers at Marvel were thought to be biased against him. The fans were unhappy with his depiction of Captain America, but Kirby stubbornly continued. One issue from this period that my data sampled showed that Kirby indeed used villains that did not seem to have anything to do with American fears or doxa.

Captain America battles Agron, a sentient mass of floating energy that animates corpses. Kirby's captions describe Agron as, "A dead human shell which is activated by something spawned in the heat of a distant inferno, and thrust by some mysterious means into mankind's domain" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 205). This kind of prose is indicative of Kirby's "cosmic" storylines, but Captain America had already matured beyond that style into political introspection, and this kind of fantasy story with a vague villain did not seem appropriate for the themes affecting 1970s America.

Even after Kirby left *Captain America*, the late 1970s and early 1980s were a difficult period for Marvel. The company's owners flooded the market with new books during a time when less new consumers were compelled to read comics, losing \$2 million a year in the process (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 195; Pustz, 1999, p. 59). Subsequently, Marvel's production values plummeted and editorial turnover increased (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, pg. 189-195). *Captain America* reflected this unrest, with a multitude of different creative teams. Sometimes, these creators would represent the nation's borders with Cap fighting Nazis, nationalistic militias and an atheist, academic svengali. Other times, the pressures of the industry again disabled the narrative's ability to represent the imagined community, and *Captain America* would feature wrestlers and giant purple monsters. It was not until Mark Gruenwald took over the book in 1985 that the narrative stabilized and the randomly ambiguous villains disappeared.

Gruenwald maintained ten years of the *Captain America* narrative, with most of his stories involving political allegory that reflected the changing landscape of the imagined community in the 1980s and early 1990s. Even Gruenwald's turn however was affected by the tumultuous comics industry, as the 1990s marked the beginning of a speculator boom that brought a seesaw of events to Marvel (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, pg. 328-330, Raviv, 2002, p. 39).



During this period, comics gained a lot of attention as products that could appreciate in value, and they were bought by in piles by collectors. Marvel pandered to this audience by again flooding the market, paying young artists to keep the covers flashy, and neglecting the actual story and interior artwork (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, pg. 349-358). There were more production crises as Marvel's stock went public and the company tried to monopolize the comic book distribution network, only to find their distribution now in the hands of Diamond Comic Distributors Inc (see Raviv, 2002, for the full story). The speculator bubble burst and owner Ron Perelman tried to sell the company when it went bankrupt, firing half of the employees in the process (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 364). Ultimately, after an extended legal battle, toy manufacturer Isaac Perlmutter and his business partner Avi Arad gained control of the company, barely resurrecting it from bankruptcy. During these years of production chaos, *Captain America* again experienced a fluctuation between villains that reflected the nation's changing landscape and those that seemed nonsensical for the symbol of the imagined community to fight.

One could probably mark these production crises by simply looking for wrestling villains, because they again show up in the 1990s<sup>8</sup>. This was a rare moment for Gruenwald, as most of his stories had clear political bases, but this wrestling story and some of his others in 1993 seem dispassionate compared to his other work, with the villains just serving as punching bags for Captain America rather than ideological foils. I would suggest that one cause was the disorder occurring at the Marvel offices as the company went from boom to bust in a matter of years. If Marvel was purposefully ignoring story quality because most of their consumers were not even opening the comics, then it is possible Gruenwald gave up on his political allegories in

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<sup>8</sup> This may be because of wrestling's popularity at the time. It may also have something to do with televised wrestling's own tendency to incorporate nationalized narratives into their wrestling matches.

favor of continuity-heavy fistfights. You might think that Gruenwald would have pushed his political allegories even further with this editorial distraction, but instead his passion for writing them seems to decline. As staffer Pelosi's earlier quote indicated, Gruenwald seems to have loved comics so much that their 1990s transformation into a mere speculator product deprived him of the joy they brought him as a creator in the 1980s.

After Gruenwald's death in 1996, his successors also struggled with the fast production deadlines of a failing company. Captain America sometimes faced the nation's borders in the form of terrorists, foreign weapons dealers, racists, and America's own paranoia and lethargy. Sometimes however the book descended into science fiction silliness again, with monsters of living sound, and dinosaur barbarians threatening the hero. Again, I would attribute this to the financial bedlam the company was dealing with, distracting the creators from depicting the nation's borders within this narrative.

Once Perlmutter and Arad gained control of the company, they decided that Marvel should push these characters to be adapted into movies and licensing by condensing each into a clear brand identity (Raviv, 2002, p. 105, 266). Not long after came the attacks of September 11, 2001 and Marvel had an impetus to reboot Captain America with more attention to story and a clear American villain in the form of terrorism. Since then, *Captain America* has rarely suffered a moment where production problems disabled the ability of this narrative to represent the imagined community. Only once, in 2004, when writer Robert Morales left an 18-issue commitment early, has this narrative faltered. Morales' run placed Captain America in real world political scenarios: battling Al Qaeda, meeting Fidel Castro and visiting settings like Guantánamo Bay. All of this clearly represented modern limits to the imagined community, but according to a letter written by Morales, Marvel executives Gui Karyo and Dan Buckley did not

approve of his direction, finding it biased and moving away from their brand management goals (Robert Morales, "Morales 'Caps' Off"). Robert Kirkman penned the issues filling in the rest of Morales' commitment. They are obviously last minute and slapdash as the story seems nonsensical, the dialogue out of character, and the villains have no clear objectives or symbolism. Again, when chaos affects production, the ability of the *Captain America* narrative to represent the nation and its borders can be disabled.

Besides the Morales incident, *Captain America's* narrative since 9/11 has been rife with allegorical villains. Marvel's desire to manage the character like a brand seems to keep most creators from deviating away from American symbolism and unlike the 1980s Shooter era, editorial mandate keeps Captain America's stories symbolic, rather than ambiguous brawls with colorful costumes. In fact, for most of the history of this character, he has faced villains who represent the limits of the imagined community. From the Nazis to communism, from Vietnam to America's own apathy, to the corruption in government and the umbrella of corporate control, this comic hero narrates our shared dread and odium. It is only when the culture of production surrounding this artifact is derailed by financial crisis or creator dissatisfaction that the narrative then descends into the vagaries of superhero infantilism, where his enemies are not representative of the problems that face the nation, but are simply empty signifiers for the hero to punch and kick.

### Conclusion

When we compare these three moments—1) the transformation of comics into subculture, 2) the communication between readers and producers through advertising and letters and 3) the production crises at Marvel over the years—all of them affect the way that Captain

America's narrative is able to represent the imagined community. In one case, this narrative was silenced for ten years, in others it was supported, improved and even momentarily disabled. This examination of the circuit of culture demonstrates that when a cultural artifact narrates the nation, it does so through the entire circuit, not just during representation.

Like the circuit of culture, the three moments examined here are interconnected, often overlapping one another. Their relationship indicates a significant insight for this genealogy to consider: Captain America and his villains symbolize the nation's borders best when their producers have open channels of communication with their consumers. If Timely Comics and Martin Goodman had access to reader feedback in the 1950s, they may have learned that Captain America's anti-communist jingoism was ill received by their veteran readers. They may also have concluded that the critiques leveled against comics by Frederic Wertham and others, were serious enough to heed before losing business. Later, the points when Marvel Comics did interact with readers, the narrative seemed at its strongest, locating limits in America's dream as well as its nightmares. The moments when Marvel ignored those readers, both in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, seem to correspond with the financial crises that hobbled the industry and disabled Captain America's villains from symbolizing the nation's fear and hatred. Even though Marvel still does not publish serious criticism in their letters pages, fans and creators today are in close proximity, negotiating the borders of the imagined community like never before, and maintaining a Captain America brand identity that Marvel hopes readers will continue to consume voraciously.

## Borders of Evil: Representations of the Nation's Fear, Hatred and Anxiety in *Captain America*

As evident by his myriad of changing identities over the years, Captain America's nemesis the Red Skull represents the varying national interpretations of evil over the last sixty-seven years. He blows around like a weathervane, always changing his ethos to accommodate for the American nation's transforming borders. Watch the way the Red Skull swings, and so seems to go the nation. Usually retaining the Nazi identity of his first appearance in 1941, the Red Skull's characteristics and motives have changed dramatically since then, always fluctuating between the internal and external borders that outline the imagined community. He has never purely been an external threat representative of some outsider enemy to America, because his Nazi origin is often paired with internal anxieties that contextually plague the nation.

This connection to America's internalized fears began in the 1940s when he first appeared as a corrupt businessman, even though he strangely transformed after the war into a supporter of communism. The Red Skull re-emerged after Captain America's ten-year hibernation as a Machiavellian manipulator, using advanced technology to steal his victims' independence.<sup>9</sup> Besides his plans for dictatorship, he was not accompanied by other Nazi ideological traits of racism or German national pride until the late 1960s. By the 1980s however, he changes into a symbol of corruption, of both the United States government and the American Dream. This adjusts again in the 1990s as the Red Skull oscillates between nihilism, racism and fascism. At present, the villain operates again as a hidden manipulator, working through international corporations to fund terrorist acts against the United States and its allies.

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<sup>9</sup> Dangerous advanced technology is a common Cold War era trope of comics, to be explored later in this chapter.

Former *Captain America* comic book artist Jim Steranko has said that villains like the Red Skull, "Taught readers who the enemy was and what they stood for" (Pustz, 1999, p. 29). I agree, and argue here that these villains represent borders to the imagined community, narrating the nation's fears, hatreds and anxieties, as symbols that must be punished. These villains allow us to decode the changing meanings of "evil," as it has developed over the course of this genealogy. Simultaneously, since Captain America narrates the nation, these comics provide us with a traceable trajectory, his enemies helping to define the nation by signifying what it is not. When these adversaries are external to the United States (Nazis, demonized Asians, Arab terrorists etc.), they are usually products of war, defining the nation by what is outside of it. Captain America also faces villains that represent the nation's internal anxieties, those that threaten its well-being or question its virtue.

Following Paul du Gay's (1997) model of the circuit of culture, this chapter primarily focuses on the moment of representation, providing interpretations of these symbols of evil. To account for that moment, I have outlined here a genealogy of themes characterized as evil and villainous within the Captain America narrative. Gary Gerstle (2001, p. 12) in his own mapping of the nation, states, "To write the history of the nation is to be alert to the ranges of possibility and identify with those most important." To identify these important moments, without completely binding their possibility to the calendar, I do not organize these chronologically. Rather, they are separated into two sections: 1) borders of evil that are external to the United States, representing xenophobia often associated with war; and 2) internal borders of evil, connected to the nation's own transforming beliefs and anxieties.

These later borders include big business and corporate power; the "fifth column" of hidden betrayal; prejudice against race, nation and gender; crime and the nation's relationship

with African-Americans in the 1970s; the dangerous advanced technologies indicative of Cold War apprehension; independence and its security; government corruption; and finally, the apathy and cynicism that results from recognizing the nation's own fallibility. After the 1960s, civic nationalism—the belief that the nation judges ideas and actions, rather than ethnicity, gender or nationality—permeates much of this internal conflict.

The chapter begins with the external representations of evil, finding American borders drawn against Nazism, communism, demonized caricatures of Asian peoples and other nationalities, and the American nation's dissociative reaction to Arab terrorism's conflict with civic nationalism. As this genealogy unfolds, watch for the Red Skull like a *Where's Waldo?* type figure, as he pops up repeatedly, swapping ideologies, ethnic origins and predatory means to menace the nation. As Captain America's archenemy, the Red Skull changes characteristics sinuously to keep up with the evolving nature of what the American nation considers evil, beginning as an external enemy of war.

### The External Borders of Evil

In the sixty-seven-year history of Captain America comic books, there have always been borders of evil that are external to the United States. Now this might get a little confusing, because when we're talking about the nation as a space that has borders, and everything at or beyond those borders as being either evil or absent within the text of *Captain America*, it seems obvious that all of those borders would be external. This is where the tricky difference between a nation and a country comes into play, since the nation is an imagined community with intangible borders, while the country/state of the United States of America has concrete geographical borders that we could go stand on and look out and see either water, Canada or Mexico. Both

kinds of borders are at work here. These external borders of evil are manifestations of peoples or institutions that are physically outside of the United States and symbolically outside of the nation's acceptance. Often, their representation is straightforward, only occasionally paired with other American anxieties. Nevertheless, these xenophobic symbols need to be accounted for to fully trace Captain America's narration of the borders to the nation.

The first external border of evil to plague Captain America and the nation came from the German National Socialist Party. Nazis however, weren't demonized at the time for their ideological beliefs of racial superiority or authoritarian government, but were simply evil because of their foreign identity. Since *Captain America Comics* worked as a kind of wartime propaganda, Nazis were a constant threat to the hero and remain so to this day, albeit with different characteristics than their 1940s counterparts. Nazism has later developed from a simple outsider identity of evil that sabotaged the United States' war effort, to a representation of racism that challenged the civic nationalism that grew during the 1960s. In between, there is a brief moment where foreign communists take the Nazis' place as outsiders of evil, but the two are symbolized as practically interchangeable, despite their drastically different ideologies. By the 1980s the Nazis became just another stereotypical nationalized villain for Captain America. Today writers mostly use them as foils within the hero's flashbacks, but they are devoid of any characteristics like racism that would mark them as Nazis ideologically. In this sense, symbols of Nazism have come full circle since the 1940s, since both eras treat them as evil simply for their existence as outsiders, rather than their ideological differences.

Other racialized and nationalized stereotypes of outsiders occur throughout Captain America's history as villains. The book demonized Asians during World War II, the Cold War and the Vietnam War, often representing them as monsters with fangs and claws. This continued



into the 1970s with the Chinese villain The Yellow Claw, though the nationalized stereotypes spread out to include Italians, Russians and ambiguous Latinos. By the late 1980s, after challenging this border of evil with a group of Russian superheroes looking to defect to the United States, such specifically nationalized stereotypes disappeared from the comic. The nation finally seemed able to define itself without vilifying external others, ignoring the Gulf War and conflicts in Somalia and the Balkans. Evil came from within during this period, rather than the xenophobia that typified its past.

The events of September 11, 2001, however, provided an impetus for external borders of evil to return to *Captain America*, this time in the form of Arab terrorism. This is an interesting moment for this genealogy, for while his villains were primarily Arab terrorists, Captain America simultaneously denounced any racialized hatred of Arab people. This is a border of evil that the comic clearly struggled with, as it attempted to react to the 9/11 attacks while still maintaining its rhetoric of civic nationalism. This moment implies that the nation does not yet have closure with its racialized past, experiencing a kind of schizophrenia when its ethnic assumptions collide with its supposed tolerance.

Times of war especially sharpen American identity against external enemies (Gerstle, 2001, p. 9). Captain America reflects this in his narration of the nation by consistently doing battle with villains not just outside of the American nation, but also foreign to its state. One could argue that Nazism was the incentive for Joe Simon and Jack Kirby creating Captain America in the first place, providing a clear symbol of the American nation to promote the war effort. In later years, this explanation has become canon to Captain America's origin story, with the fictional American government creating their super-soldier as a foil to Nazi propaganda.

Given their importance to the narrative's origin, the Nazis seem the ideal place to begin exploring its use of external fears to represent the nation's borders.

*Nazis: Devils, Racists & Nostalgia for a "Good War"*

As Richard Weaver has noted, "Nazi" is a devil term in America, one that automatically gives negative meaning, though often in a vague manner (Weaver, 1953). In Captain America's narrative, Nazism often works like a devil term, symbolic of nothing in particular save evil. Since they are so intimately connected with the hero's origin, Nazis are recurring villains in the comic, even outside of the constant menace of the Red Skull. They are always borders of evil in the narrative, instantly marking a character as both evil and outside of the nation, no matter what era in the genealogy. Often they are represented in flashbacks, but the characteristics that make them evil either are ignored by the narrative or change over the years.

Part of the reason why the Nazis sometimes appear as devils without further explanation stems from the idea originating in the 1940s that World War II was a "good war" against an enemy universally regarded as evil (Gerstle, 2001, p. 187). Because of this, it was not necessary to define their evil based on ideological reasons such as racism or fascism, especially when America itself was struggling with racialized nationalism at the time (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 192-193). Pearl Harbor for instance, symbolized for many an attack by an inferior race upon superior white America (Gerstle, 2001, p. 191). The segregation of African-American within the military further signified that the nation had yet to fully embrace civic nationalism (Gerstle, 2001, p. 203). Because of these internal issues, America's enemies could not yet be portrayed as evil because of their racism, as this was not necessarily a border of evil to the imagined community.

What made Nazis evil to the American nation was simply their identity as Germans, external and dangerous to the stability of the United States. The narrative proceeded from there, with Nazis either engaging Americans in war or attempting to hinder the war effort at home. A caption in the first issue of *Captain America* states that the Nazi threat "paralyzes the vital defense industries," demonstrating the fear of their potential attack from within (*Captain America Comics*, 1). Nazi villains in the comic constantly sabotaged factories and industry while assassinating military generals and war supportive businessmen. These depictions of Nazi spies and sympathizers, described them as a "dreaded fifth column," simultaneously an external menace and a threat of invasion from within. Even before the United States entered the war, the American nation experienced these concurrent internal/external fears, partially stemming from the 1939 release of Leon Turrour's *Nazi Spies In America*—a book detailing his work as an F.B.I. agent, using polygraph technology on Nazi spies (Turrour and Wittels, 1939). When *Captain America Comics* debuted in 1941, he dealt with these internal/external Nazis separately, uncovering spy organizations in one story, and traveling overseas to battle Hitler in another.

The Nazis in *Captain America Comics* are depicted as almost subhuman, with ghoulish facial features. They are violent and ruthless, often turning on one another in the interest of self-preservation. Hitler and Göring behave this way in the second issue, arguing over who will get to fight the juvenile Bucky instead of Captain America, showing both cowardice and a lack of scruples. The Red Skull similarly defends himself, though without the cowardice, when he sets a pack of his dogs after Captain America. He shows no care for his pets, threatening to starve them if they don't obey his commands. When Captain America captures one of these dogs and throws it at the Red Skull, the villain gorily snaps it half to save himself (*Captain America Comics*, 37). The story insinuates that Americans would not treat their pets this cruelly and the Nazi symbol is

injected with sadistic self-preservation as its primary trait. The American nation in contrast, is both courageous and ethical.

Despite this, Captain America isn't terribly ethical about murder, killing several Nazis without moral compunction. Many of his enemies at the time were either killed by accident or committed suicide before he could apprehend them, but the hero doesn't bother to make distinctions, often keeping their inadvertent deaths to himself. In later years, Captain America's morals about killing change and the hero spends multiple issues agonizing over his murder of a terrorist in self-defense. Here in the 1940s however, the Nazis are dehumanized devil terms, perfectly acceptable to violently destroy. In his origin story Captain America kills a Nazi spy who sabotages the experiment that created the super-soldier. "A fate he well deserved!" Cap cheers after he hurls the Nazi into scientific equipment, electrocuting him to death (*Captain America Comics*, 1). Because the Nazis only symbolized a violent and evil threat that were engaged in the context of a "good war," such brutality on the part of the hero was tolerable and well within the boundaries of the nation.

After the war ended, the hatred toward an external other shifted from Nazis to communists. As outlined below, this shift wasn't necessarily accepted as a legitimate border of evil, as soldiers returning from the war did not embrace the simplified depictions of villainy (Wright, pg. 111-112). Captain America shortly thereafter disappeared from comics for ten years following a cancellation of the comic. When he returned in 1964, Nazis returned with him, and the book often featured flashbacks to World War II, where the villains were easy to recognize based on their identity. However, these 1960s Nazis were not as ideologically blank as their 1940s counterparts, now symbolizing two anxieties with which the 1960s American nation struggled.

First, the Nazis now possessed advanced weapons that allowed them to bring mass destruction to their enemies. Giant robots and ray guns became a staple of these Nazi villains, although this was in fact a manifestation of Cold War era fears of dangerous technology. Second, Captain America's Nazi enemies now used racist language, such as referring to African-American characters as "beasts." Now demonstrating racism as an ideological component of Nazism, the villains were no longer evil simply for their German identity, but also for beliefs and actions implied by that identity. The nation by the 1960s had turned toward civic nationalism, and racism itself became one of its borders of evil. Both of these moments will be explored further in this chapter's later sections dealing with the Cold War fear of advanced technology and the 1960s shift toward civic nationalism.

In this era, Captain America sometimes even pondered the possibility that Nazis were not all cruel and evil. For example, when Nazis unleash a giant robot on a German village, the hero realizes that the village has been evacuated, speculating that one of the Nazi agents must have warned them before the assault (*Tales of Suspense*, 73). This may seem minor, but it demonstrates that the comic moved from representing Nazis as entirely evil and amoral to understanding them as fellow human beings with at least some ethics despite their violent actions. This change may stem from the nation's acceptance of civic nationalism, not necessarily believing that foreign symbols automatically represented evil. The discourses at the time between the published letters in the comic book and the editors' responses to them further indicate that villainy based on nationality or race was no longer acceptable. Some kind of ideological beliefs, that were also at the borders of the nation, had to be combined with these external figures for them to continue to work as villains.

Despite these changes, the use of "Nazi" as a devil term did not permanently go away in the 1960s. By the 1980s, Nazis were once again depicted as evil simply because of their national identity. The character of Baron Zemo<sup>10</sup> for instance, does not demonstrate racism or any other ideological traits of Nazism when he appears in the 1980s. He is simply identified as evil because he is a Nazi, verified by his ridiculous usage of German phrase like "mein gott" and "herr" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 359). Nazis again became nationalized stereotypes, demonstrating the nation's acceptance of them as borders of evil simply because they were on the other side of the "good war."

In contemporary *Captain America* stories, Nazis appear in multiple flashbacks, where the hero can battle them again without any moral quandary. Again, they are often defined as evil solely because of their Nazi identity, not by any racist or fascist beliefs. Occasionally, these flashbacks use the 1960s trope of dangerous advanced technology, when for instance Captain America encounters undead U.S. soldiers, turned into zombies by Nazi science (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 12). Likely, this trope recurs from modern anxieties regarding weapons of mass destruction. More often though, "Nazi" still operates as a devil term and these villains are represented as evil solely because of their identity.

Sixty-seven years later, this symbol is still decoded as instantly loathsome, with only vague bases for why. In World War II, this devil term was shaped as such because the nation struggled between its racialized past and its movement into a civic future. That symbols of Nazism are again depicted at face value as evil, suggests that the competition in America between civic and racial nationalism is not yet over. Since the Nazis are no longer represented as

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<sup>10</sup> A Nazi foe of Captain America's who created a kind of super-adhesive that accidentally glues his cowl to his head. Zemo blames Cap for this and wants revenge because he now has to take food intravenously. For some unexplained reason, Zemo never just cuts the cowl off.

evil because of their beliefs, they show that prejudice is less of an impenetrable border of evil today than it might have been in the 1960s.

Part of this may be attributable to the War on Terror, which once again places America in a situation that hones national identity against external threats. As Jason Dittmer (2005, p. 637) notes, there was a nostalgic return to the "good war" sensibility of World War II after the events of September 11, 2001, in part narrated by Captain America. Once again, the hero's external enemies can be defined as evil simply because of their foreign nature. The return of the devilish Nazi suggests a yearning for a simple enemy, one that Americans need not dwell on with their complex civic ideals. Later, when this chapter tackles stereotypes of Arabs, we will see that Captain America begins to question reactionary national hatred, discovering (as does the nation) that Arab peoples are vastly more complex than simple devil terms. The connections between our modern war, the Nazis of World War II and the xenophobia that infuse both demonstrate the cyclical process of war determining the borders to the nation.

### *The Commie Smashing Cold War*

After World War II was over, Captain America didn't have many excuses to pound on Nazi enemies anymore. The creators however, seem to have assumed the Nazi devil term status would be easily translatable into the new national threat of communism. The Red Skull, for instance, switched sides easily, supporting communist masters, despite the vast differences between these ideologies.<sup>11</sup> However, as discussed in chapter 2, the readers, many of them veterans, did not buy this simplification of national enemies any longer. The book, retitled *Captain America...Commie Smasher!* quickly failed and was cancelled. Despite some of the jingoistic rhetoric of the Cold

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<sup>11</sup> Convolutional comic book continuity eventually alters this, so that the Red Skull during the 1950s was actually an imposter.

War, this indicates that communism was not necessarily a complete border of evil to the American nation, because some members of that imagined community did not accept these external others as villains. If the Captain America narrative was partly disabled because of its anti-communist rhetoric's lack of appeal, this contradicts other historical understandings of the era, like Gary Gerstle's (2004) for instance. In Gerstle's interpretation, the fear of communism was so rampant that dissent was demonized (p. 238), the corporation was secure from criticism (p. 246) and labor was so marginalized that even the civil rights movement turned away from it and toward more religious affiliations (p. 264). The failure of the anti-communist Captain America to keep readers interested seems to imply that the hatred of communism was not so severe however.

Maybe the publishers figured this out too late, as even within the pages of the final issue of *Captain America...Commie Smasher!* not all of the communists were depicted as simple figures of evil. Some of them actually espoused political beliefs, separating them from the ideologically blank Nazi enemies. One villain, a Chinese communist called "The Man With No Face" says to Captain America, "We communists are united in our purpose! We will lead the world out of chaos and into peace and plenty! After all, we are your friends... we are not the blood-thirsty killers you've been led to believe! There is deep love in our hearts for all mankind! Even if we have to kill them to prove it!" Captain America responds to this with, "Another example of the brutal, twisted thinking of the reds... when brother can be turned against brother!" (*Captain America...Commie Smasher!*, 77). Even though Captain America's response is obtusely illogical, the very fact that an enemy had an opportunity to explain his beliefs provides further evidence that at this time, the simple application of a foreign identity to a villain began to be questioned as an acceptable border of evil.



Communism then, although certainly depicted as an external threat in some issues, was more permeable a border than Nazism. Perhaps this was because communism did not have as specific a national origin as Nazism did. Within this narrative at least, "communist" was not as much a devil term for the nation as "Nazi" was (and still is). This seems to contradict Gerstle's (2001, pg. 238-264) understanding of this era, where the Red Scare affected American politics, criticisms of corporate business, the labor movement and the burgeoning civil rights movement. I expect this discrepancy stems from the turmoil that the comics industry experienced during the 1950s,<sup>12</sup> partially because some readers no longer accepted the simplicity of such symbolism. Because Captain America's history is cut short in this era, I think it is difficult to make any watertight claims about these representations of communism. Another possible explanation is that the Cold War was understood more in ideological terms, while a "hot war" like World War II allowed for the kind of devil term symbolism that was applied to Nazis (Robert Ivie, 1980). All we can note for certain here is that they were not represented in the same black and white terms as Nazism was. That Captain America does not wistfully remember his commie smashing days the same way he does World War II,<sup>13</sup> suggests that communism was only an anxiety of the moment, and not even necessarily a universal one. When he returned in 1964, Captain America only briefly tangled with communists in Vietnam and their demonization stemmed more from their ethnicity than their ideological beliefs. The evil presented through stereotypes of Asians then is the next border that this section will examine.

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<sup>12</sup> Accounted for in detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> Again, like the Red Skull above, the Captain America who fought communists in the 1950s was later changed in the stories of the 1970s to be an imposter. The "real" Cap treated this 1950s Captain America as a villain, because he returned as a racist and jingoistic psychopath who eventually ran a kind of Ku Klux Klan organization and even wore swastikas as "The Grand Director."

### *Beasts & Demons: The Representation of External Asians*

Asian peoples, regardless of their national origin, were demonized in Captain America stories for forty years, symbolized as evil in both World War II and the Cold War, extending through to the one moment this hero went to Vietnam. Again, war promotes an American nation defined by its external enemies. Though these depictions were occasionally connected to ideologies of fascism and communism, like the Nazis they mostly serve as devil terms that are defined as evil though their ethnic/national background.

World War II era *Captain America Comics* were rife with Asian demonization. Issues of the series in 1941 featured villains with names like "The Ageless Orientals Who Wouldn't Die," "Captain Okada, Oriental Master of Death," and "Fang, the Arch-Fiend of the Orient." (*Captain America Comics*, 2, 5, 6). An issue reviewed within this study's random sample featured villains named "The Sons of Satan," Japanese spies pretending to use black magic (*Captain America Comics*, 37). All of these characters were designed with pointed ears, fangs, bright yellow skin and claws. Often these villains were malformed, with atrophied limbs and gigantic heads. This suggests that the ideal American citizen (represented by Captain America) is white, muscular and proportional, with a head (and brain) that isn't too large or pensive.

Another similarity 1940s Asian villains had to the Nazis was that Captain America and Bucky sometimes killed them in combat, giving little thought to ethics. Again, the impact of war upon the nation allowed the narrative to be both brutal and simplistic when handling these enemies. Furthermore, real world combat against the Japanese brought a racial conflict into the war that the white European Nazis did not. Japanese military successes challenged the (Theodore) Rooseveltian idea that the American nation was both white and superior (Gerstle, 2001, p. 191). This led to a viciousness of combat between the United States and Japan, that

subsequently allowed for such stereotypes as we see here in *Captain America Comics*, making it easier for U.S. troops to resort to barbarism with their Asian enemies (Gerstle, 2001, p. 202).

Both war and race played into the 1940s representations of Asians as borders of evil. The nation's racial superiority complex allowed for brutal action against real Japanese soldiers and their fictional comic book counterparts.

By the 1950s, Chinese communism allowed the narrative to keep these Asian villains while the Nazis departed. Captain America battled communist Asians in both Indochina and the United States. Interestingly, during this era, the comic makes a distinction between Chinese-Americans and foreign Asians, depicting the later as murderers while the former maintain the righteousness of the American nation, despite their ethnicity (see *Captain America...Commie Smasher!* 76, 77). Similar to how the post-World War II nation began to question its assumptions about communism, so too did it begin question its prejudices based on race. The narrative here suggests that race was not necessarily a marker of evil, since Asian characters could now be proud, democratic Americans. Ideological characteristics began to be more important than ethnic ones, and the nation allowed races that it had previously demonized within its own borders.

The claws and fangs were left behind with the 1940s, but all Asians (Americanized or not) were still a vivid yellow, often bald with little moustaches. The same shifting of borders that loosened the stark depictions of communism seem to be present here as well, where there was a slight flexibility to how evil these racialized Asian borders actually were. Despite the movement away from ethnic assumptions, race was still an important visual characteristic for comic book villains. Even though Asians could now be accepted within the nation, this approval came with the caveat that they still be recognized as abnormal. The nation may have gained some tolerance since the 1940s, but it was still not ready to totally disregard its racialized past.

The flexibility of these ethnic assumptions was important when Captain America returned to comics in 1964. One of his first stories that year brought him to Vietnam, to literally grapple with the Viet Cong and their General, a massive sumo wrestler described as a "glory hungry power mad potentate" (*Tales of Suspense*, 61). By this era, the yellow coloring is replaced with a more accurate skin tone, though the moustaches are still prevalent. The Viet Cong are described as both merciless torturers and complete narcissists, luring Captain America with a prisoner of war as a means to prove that their General is the more powerful combatant. They do not demonstrate however, any ideological beliefs akin to communism. While this example still exhibits xenophobia, the porous nature of this border becomes more apparent here. First, here in 1964 the images of Asians are far less demonizing than they were in both World War II and the 1950s. The bestial characteristics those villains possessed are mostly gone, although their ethnicity is still enough to define them as evil. However, after this one bizarre sumo wrestling story, Captain America never returned to Vietnam. In Chapter 2, I argue that this was because of a negotiation that occurred between Captain America's readers and the creators at Marvel, keeping the hero out of Vietnam and challenging racialized symbols as villains. The trajectory of this border to the imagined community should have ended here, dissipating entirely as America moved toward civic nationalism.

However, despite this move, Captain America tussled one last time with a demonic Asian villain. The Yellow Claw appeared in 1973, a throwback to the bestial Asians of the 1940s, complete with the fangs, claws, moustache and pointed ears (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 165). His headquarters is even equipped with such stereotypical trappings as gongs, dragon artwork and steam baths. Like his antecedents in World War II and Vietnam, the Yellow Claw doesn't espouse a particular ideological viewpoint, only demonstrating his evil through plans for

world domination. In fact, he rejects the "gullibility" of what he calls "new China," presumably referring to the country's communist government. The letters published in the comic, again did not respond well to this racist confrontation of America's mounting civic nationalism. After this one last incident, the demonization of Asians disappeared from the pages of *Captain America*.

Like most of these examples, this last instance of xenophobic Asian enemies likely originated from war, as the Vietnam War continued to rage abroad even if Captain America's readers negotiated his withdrawal from it. The stereotypes in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s all originated through war, attempting to solidify the nation's shape by placing external enemies at its borders. In the 1940s, as World War II provoked America's racist assumptions, so too did these enemies become further racialized. As the nation moved away from Roosevelt's Euro-centric conceptions toward civic nationalism, this demonization gradually faded, until by the mid 1970s it was no longer accepted as a border of evil.

#### *Not us: Other Representations of Xenophobia*

Much like the demonization of Asians, several other ethnicities and nationalities served as villains in *Captain America*. These enemies were often mercenaries whose work brought them into conflict with the hero. Similar to the demonized Asians, war (or the potential for it) served as a catalyst for the creation of these nationalized villains, placing them at the borders to the imagined American community when their respective nations were considered a threat. Unlike the negative representation of Asians however, these villains often were often connected to other American anxieties, like the loss of control and a corrupted government. Most of these characters originate in the 1960s, around the same time that readers were arguing against such stereotypical representations. They fade somewhat because of those arguments, though some appear again in

the 1980s. By 1989 however, as the Cold War ended, the series started to challenge its own negative portrayals of nationalized villains, by introducing a group of Soviet super-villains who wished to defect to the United States.

In 1969, during the same storyline that Marvel claimed it had "all but discontinued using any real foreign 'enemies'" in *Captain America*, the hero is trapped on an island by The Red Skull, hunted by a group of mercenaries called The Exiles (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 117-119). This assembly of nationalized villains featured Baldini, an Italian who used scarves as weapons; Franz Cadavus,<sup>14</sup> an enemy in a flying wheelchair that shoot lasers; General Ching, a Chinese soldier; Eric Gruning, a German soldier with an electric whip; Jurgen Hauptmann, a Nazi stereotype with a hand made of iron; and Krushki, a shirtless Russian wrestler. This smorgasbord of nationalized symbols featured representations of both the devil term Nazis and the demonized Asians we covered above, as well as other enemies of war: Italy (World War II) and the USSR (Cold War). Almost all of these Exiles further signified war by either having military backgrounds, or wearing uniforms of their different country's military. Despite their national and military backgrounds, the only thing that marks these men as evil is their vicious attacks upon Captain America. War again, seems to be the impetus for demonizing foreign others, sharpening American national identity in the process.

Another nationalized mercenary group Captain America encounters is "Batroc's Brigade," named for their leader, Batroc the Leaper. Batroc originated in the 1960s, a French stereotype complete with pointed moustache, the self-proclaimed master of a style of kickboxing called savate. Always portrayed as an annoying and relentless talker, Batroc even frustrates the other villains, with comments like, "Even as I have mastered ze art of la savate, ze ancient form of

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<sup>14</sup> Cadavus' nationality isn't as easily recognizable as the other Exiles, but from his name it's likely he was conceived as Eastern European or German.

combat with ze feet, so too will I mastair those who oppose me. And those I cannot control I will strike like I strike zis bag and like zis bag zey will be destroyed!" Like many villains of this period, his dialogue indicates an obsession with controlling others. Captain America villains were often guilty of braggadocio, but Batroc took it to another level, representing the French as big talkers, whose vanity was always dispelled by the American hero's triumphs. The construction of Batroc's dialect with the Z phonemes, was the comic's attempt at overtly signifying Batroc as a foreign other, because his physical characteristics (besides his moustache) could not do so. The medium of comics, unable to audibly reproduce the difference of French accented English, resorts to this awkward dialogue to distinguish Batroc from other Caucasians native to the nation.

Batroc is joined in the 1980s by two other nationalized mercenaries, Machete (an ambiguously located Latino knife expert) and Zaran (a British weapon master). Besides Batroc's control issues, none of these villains espouse any particular ideologies that set them against the American nation. Mostly they are shown to be dim-witted compared to Captain America, who always prevails because of his training and determination. Machete briefly mentions that he will use his mercenary earnings to help a revolution in his home country, but these are very vaguely defined and he never says where he's actually from or what kind of struggle is happening there. Like the Exiles, it is their nationalities and their criminal work that seem to be the reasons for Captain America to fight them.

Unlike those previous mercenaries, however, Batroc's Brigade do not represent countries that the American nation demonized through war. While Central America may have been at the limits of the nation because of the Reagan administration's rhetoric against Nicaraguan Sandinistas, they weren't symbols of war like Nazis had previously been, so Machete does not

appear to be a devil term symbol based on war. Similarly, Batroc and Zaran, as representatives of France and Great Britain respectively, do not symbolize nations with which America had an actual conflict. I suspect that rather than refining its identity against an external nationality that America was at war with, the narrative uses French and British enemies because of their status as usual allies of the United States. A similar kind of sharpening of American identity occurs here, because rather than defining the nation by its wartime enemies, the Captain America narrative positions the hero as superior to these nationalized characters. Even though both Batroc and Zaran are built up as unsurpassed fighters, Captain America always defeats them, identifying America's icon as superior to all other nationalized symbols, even those of its frequent allies. That this occurs in the mid-1980s is likely a result of the decline of the Cold War and the lack of a wartime related villain the nation could use to define itself against. Unlike the previously demonized nationalities Captain America has narrated, these borders of evil were not forged in war, but simply symbolized the nation's boundaries as external and foreign, always losing to the symbol of America, thereby defining the comic's nation as superior.

When readers in the 1960s and 1970s letters forum requested less nationalized villains, Marvel professed an allegiance to civic nationalism in response and these kinds of representations faded for most of the 1970s. Occasionally, like the Yellow Claw incident described above, they would briefly remerge, but it is not until 1985 that nationalized villains fully return with Batroc and his motley crew. By 1989 however, Captain America begins to question his assumptions about foreign others.

While training a young group of American superheroes, Captain America encounters three "Soviet Super Soldiers:" Vanguard, Darkstar and Ursa Major (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 352). These three are still stereotypical, and use ridiculous expressions such as "By Lenin's



ghost you shall pay!" They are also highly symbolic, as Ursa Major has the power to turn into a giant bear (a Soviet symbol) and Vanguard wields a hammer and sickle, in opposition to Captain America's star spangled shield. Interpreting these as symbols of evil, his trainees attack the Soviets calling them "lousy Reds." Captain America however, is not so reactionary and realizes that despite their representation, these characters are not villains.

He learns that the Soviets want to defect to the United States, and sympathizes with them because their government has become corrupt. As will be discussed later in this chapter, government corruption appears as another border of evil in the 1980s and Captain America himself had just uncovered major corruption within the American federal government. These characters still embrace both communism and Soviet national pride, but challenge the corruption of government as evidenced by statements like, "We love our country, we did not want to leave"; and, "We are heroes of the Soviet people, Captain, not the Soviet Government. From time to time the government's and the people's interests were one and the same." Here the distinction between the state and the nation becomes a part of the narrative itself. Despite their opposing ideological beliefs, Captain America accepts the Soviet characters because they too oppose corruption within government. This corruption here is represented by more Soviet villains, further stereotypes like Red Guardian (a Soviet Captain America analogue) and the Crimson Dynamo (a communist version of Iron Man), posing as Captain America and his allies and pretending to attack the defectors because of American jingoism.

Because of this 1980s superceding border of government corruption, the Soviet Super Soldiers are shown then to be heroes rather than villains, allowed within the space of the imagined community. Now there were communist Russian villains *and* heroes, their roles interpreted by the American imagined community. These characters were however not within the

American imagined community, they were just accepted by it. Since the nation (as a result of war) had defined itself since the 1950s as not being like the USSR, it is significant here that Soviets are accepted. As the Cold War closed and the 1990s began, the American nation divested its external borders, looking ever increasingly inward for evil.

The dominant borders are obvious: government corruption was maintained as pernicious and evil, outside of acceptability, while the assumption that one is villainous because of their nationality, was no longer reasonable. The 1989 imagined community did not necessarily understand foreign others as evil, unless other characteristics outside of the nation's acceptability were applied to them. Although readers had argued against nationalized depictions of villainy in the 1960s and 1970s, they did not negotiate for Captain America to actually accept foreigners into his confidence. This point at the end of the 1980s, marks the erasure of that border, without any public negotiation with *Captain America's* consumers. Its removal lasts for only a little over a decade however, as the events of September 11, 2001 provided another reactionary war setting that generated external foreign enemies, this time in the form of Arab terrorists.

#### *Arab Terrorism and America's Schizophrenic Borders*

When planes crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and rural Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, the narrative of *Captain America* did not involve Arab terrorism, suggesting that before this event, it was not yet established symbolically as a border to the American nation. Afterward however, the series was cancelled by Marvel and Captain America returned in a new 2002 volume to face Arab terrorists as his primary villains. The covers to the comic were designed to emulate wartime propaganda posters, complete with slogans like "Fight Terror," "Are You Doing Your Part?" and "Never Give Up" (*Captain America*, Vol. 4, 1-6).

This was a stark shift, after a period in the 1990s when the comic sometimes didn't feature symbolic villains at all, focused more on grand superhero battles than representing the nation's fears.<sup>15</sup> While this transformation brought back racialized wartime stereotypes like those we saw between the 1940s and 1960s, it was more complicated than those simplistic depictions of evil because the narrative interlaced this racism with an anti-hatred argument of civic nationalism. Although Jason Dittmer (2005) argues that these 2002 issues returned Captain America to the symbolic space of "the good war" of the 1940s, I disagree, because the symbols of these ethnic enemies as evil are complicated by the hero's rhetoric against such hatred.

The new volume opens with Captain America helping emergency services clear rubble from Ground Zero in New York City. His interior monologue reflects his anger at the perpetrators: "Is this the face of your Great Satan? Is this your offering to God? Your worship? Your prayer? Tell the children this is a holy war. But we've seen what stands behind you. Heard them screaming open. The gates of hell" (*Captain America*, Vol. 4, 1). This statement sets the tone of the next few issues, with Captain America seething with anger toward aspects of Arab culture. Eventually the narrative leads him to a mission in the Midwest United States, where Arab terrorists have taken a small town hostage by setting trip wires within their church on Easter Sunday (*Captain America*, Vol. 4, 2, 3). Their goal is to lure Captain America, so they can make America "pay with his blood for the crimes of a nation of blood." These terrorists are depicted with robes and head scarves, wielding axes, sniper rifles, rocket launchers and explosives. At one point they even brainwash their children into attacking the hero, knowing he will struggle with his morals, becoming vulnerable. All of this—the post 9/11 mourning and the later depictions of this fictional Midwest attack—attempts to demonstrate malicious, immoral

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 2 for more.

violence as being characteristic of Arab enemies. The nation returned then to its racialized origins, constructing itself as peaceful, ethical and brave, while Arabs became its antithesis: craven, sadistic and corrupting to their own religious principles.

This partially stereotypes Arabs (cultural seepage from the war on terror), once again sharpening American national identity against a foreign threat. More so than the other racial/national stereotypes this book had encountered previously, these symbols are complicated by an anti-hate argument, asking Americans to refrain from knee-jerk racism, while explaining terrorist dogma as Captain America's primary reason for fighting them. The prominence of civic nationalism in America, building strength since the 1960s, collides with such ethnic assumptions about Arabs, leading to Captain America's attempts to rationalize his hatred of them.

As a representative of the nation, Captain America usually confronts external wartime threats with prejudice. The Nazis and the Japanese were both demonized not for their beliefs, but for their very identity. Here, Captain America's initial reaction is to treat Arab terrorists the same, thinking of them as monsters. Then, however, the prevalence of civic nationalism's anti-prejudice doctrine comes into play, pulling Captain America back from his initial hatred and positioning him against such behavior, displacing it upon the Arab enemy. Captain America then doesn't consider his actions to be prejudiced or revengeful, because as a representative of the nation he must reject such behavior. He displaces his xenophobic reaction, placing it upon his enemy, the Arab who are now defined as evil not just because of their terrorism, but because those actions are motivated by hatred.

Despite this complex twist, when the villain refutes Captain America's rationalization, the hero ignores their argument and continues to fight. The leader of the terrorists, Faysil Al-Tariq, states, "I am not a terrorist. I am a messenger, here to show you the truth of war. You are the

terrorists!" and argues that, "When Americans die—it's an atrocity. But when we die it's 'collateral damage.'" (*Captain America*, Vol. 4, 3). He further reveals that they chose this particular Midwestern town because its primary job provider is a munitions factory that provides the bombs used against his people. Regardless of Al-Tariq's reasoning, Captain America judges him on his terrorist actions rather than his words and kills the man with a single punch. This moment suggests that despite the nation's desire to judge the enemy's ideas rather than his race, it is unwilling to fully listen to those ideas, relying instead on ethnic assumptions to make its decisions. Though a brief enemy in the series, Al-Tariq's appearance here is significant in two ways.

First, although Captain America ignores his argument, Al-Tariq is not just a racialized symbol of Arabs, as he is able to announce his philosophical beliefs in the story. This is different from the ideologically blank Asians demonized previously in this series' history. While the villain's ethnicity is a part of his symbolism of evil, he is also defined by his adherence to violence as a solution. This allows Captain America (and through him the nation) to separate out the stereotypical ethnic representation of these villains, claiming instead that the only reason this character is evil is because of his actions and beliefs. Arab ethnicity, compounded by violence as a means, negates any of Al-Tariq's possible arguments about the American nation's own culpability.

Second, this is separation of ethnicity from belief is further complicated because Captain America since the 1960s has traditionally not killed his enemies unless he has to, even going through severe self-doubt after he killed a terrorist in the 1980s. While that situation was remarkably similar to this post-9/11 issue, here he experiences no doubt, and immediately after he kills Al-Tariq, he faces a television camera and pulls off his mask. The act of killing in this era,

no matter who the enemy, is unacceptable to the imagined community, so Captain America must present an explanation for this severe action.

Where I stand—I don't see war. I see hate. I see men and women and children dying because hate is blind. Blind enough to hold the actions of a nation accountable for the actions of a man. I can't be a part of that. After what I've seen here today. America didn't kill Faysil Al-Tariq. I did. (*Captain America*, Vol. 4, 3).

Like the Nazis and Asians of the 1940s, Captain America finds it morally acceptable to kill these terrorist enemies. Furthermore, his own rhetoric here argues against racial/national categorizations of evil, insinuating that the terrorists are the ones stereotyping, not Americans. Specifically, this statement suggests that Captain America's actions (and through him the nation's) are not motivated by hatred, while his enemies' (Arab terrorists like Al-Tariq) actions are. This again displaces xenophobia and revenge away from the American nation, attributing it instead to Arab terrorist enemies. By taking responsibility for his killing of Al-Tariq as Steve Rogers instead of as Captain America, the hero insinuates that other Arabs (racist and xenophobic, according to the narrative) might associate his act with the nation. Vice versa, he seems to assume that Americans in the wake of 9/11 are not guilty of the same kind of prejudice against an aggregate enemy. If Captain America is still narrating the imagined community here, and he's arguing against stereotyping race while hypocritically attacking and killing symbolic Arab terrorists, then this suggests that the American nation post-9/11 had contradictory borders of evil, against foreigner others and against hating foreign others.

Captain America further complicates this schizophrenic boundary by continually emphasizing his civic nationalism argument in the comic's prose, insisting that hatred is the enemy, not Arabs. At one point before heading to the Midwest, he stops a group of angry New Yorkers from killing an Arab-American man<sup>16</sup> walking home. Afterward his interior monologue states, "We've got to be stronger than we've ever been. Or they've won." Despite the accompanying words, in relation to the rest of the story, Arab ethnicity is still placed as a border of evil. For instance, Captain America stops the Caucasian Americans' hate based violence without killing them, but then later kills the Arab Al-Tariq with no hesitation. The kind of rhetoric Captain America utilizes de-emphasizes the fact that he later beats up and kills representations of Arabs, placing the focus on their ideology—1) use of violence against Americans, and 2) promotion of nationalized hatred—rather than their ethnicity. The contradiction between his actions and statements demonstrates a national confusion about the nation's symbolic borders.

It is possible that the incongruity between these borders of evil is also a result of 9/11. Naomi Klein (2007) has argued, for instance, that the shock of that event derailed the American nation from its own narrative, disorienting it from its previous conceptions of the past. By 2004, the simultaneous narratives of the nation and *Captain America* were still grappling with this disorientation, trying to distinguish between "reformed Islam" (the good guys in the narrative) and "militant Islam" (the villains). Like his challenged assumptions about Soviets in 1989, Captain America concludes that an Iranian-American suspect is not a traitor, even though circumstantial evidence links him to a terrorist group (*Captain America*, Vol. 4, 23). This

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<sup>16</sup> This character's ethnicity is only notable through dialogue telling us he's Arab-American. Otherwise he wears khakis and a button down shirt, not the robes and head scarves we see on the villains.

instance is the last moment in *Captain America* where the hero encounters Arab-specific terrorism. Unable to reconcile the schizophrenic reaction between civic nationalism and Arab villains, the series simply stops using either ethnicity or ideology to define the terrorists who continue to appear as villains. Instead, terrorism is hazily connected to a corporation that Captain America battles from 2005 onward. As will be explained in the next section, the corporation is a border of evil that is familiar to this narrative, beginning with its earliest publication.

### *Conclusion: External Borders of Evil*

As Gerstle (2001) has suggested, war seems to often be responsible for the depiction of foreigners as evil within this narrative. Beginning in the 1940s, the Nazis are treated as a devil term by Captain America, forever evil without any suggestion for redemption. When World War II ended, the publishers of this comic attempted to graft this instant hatred onto communists, but didn't quite succeed. The nation during the Cold War was not as ready to accept communism as unquestionably evil as it was Nazism. Along the way Asians were represented as demonic and bestial enemies, with no real ideological background to justify this treatment. Eventually, by the 1960s, these racist depictions of Asians were negotiated away by the readers and producers of *Captain America*. Villains who were symbolic of nations but not a particular ideology still appeared in the book, however, representing Russians, Italians, Central Americans and the French as borders to the imagined community. By 1989 the nation began to question its own reactionary stance toward these external others. However, after 2001, these questions faded and Captain America confronted a new stereotyped ethnicity in the form of Arab terrorism. This external other was complicated however, by an adherence to civic nationalism that denounced hatred, while the hero still beat up ethnic stereotypes. The schizophrenic contradiction of these



borders led the creators of the comic to ignore the ethnicity of these terrorist villains, replacing their motivations with those of the corporation, a familiar border of evil that Captain America has tangled with since his conception in the 1940s.

### The Internal Borders of Evil

While the narrative of *Captain America* has often placed foreigners at the borders to the imagined community, internal struggles within the American nation have also plagued the hero. This begins in the 1940s, with a distrust of business that persists today, symbolizing corporations as a façade for terrorism and government corruption. This fear of selfish commerce was often connected to "the fifth column" of Nazi or communist spies and sympathizers, working within the United States to destroy the nation. Sometimes, these fears of evil within came from crime, represented by gangsters, often associated with African-Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. When this crime was perpetrated by Caucasians however, it was often associated with advanced technology, potentially dangerous to the imagined community. Many of Captain America's villains from this era utilized technology that gave them the power to assault the nation. Connected to the Cold War nuclear scare, this technology often took away what the nation prized most, its ability to stay in control. Villains, forcing Captain America and his allies to do the unacceptable, often controlled them beyond their will. This loss of control theme was further magnified in the 1970s when Captain America revealed government corruption, extending through to the President of the United States himself. Discouraged by the government's betrayal, Captain America confronted his own political apathy, losing faith in the American Dream. When he recovered his confidence, Captain America headed into the 1980s with civic nationalism as

his defining creed, vowing to fight the racism and overzealous jingoism he encountered within the nation.

Throughout these sixty-seven years of narrating the nation's borders, Captain America has not just demonstrated America's fear of the external other, but also symbolized the nation's evolving understanding of its internal self. The definition of evil then has changed along with the nation, as the imagined community's borders shift to accept previous fears and reject others.

### *Big Business: Suicidal Capitalists & the Corporate Entity*

When Gary Gerstle (2001, p. 175-176) performed his own tracing of the nation's trajectory over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he found the comic books featuring Superman to be a significant site where a fear of capitalism was narrated. Like Captain America, Superman often narrated the nation's experiences, so it is not surprising that these comics have similar anxieties about business. Partially, this was because the state was developing quickly and in the interests of the nation, capitalism had to become more humane to reconcile these growing pains (Gerstle, 2001, p. 201). Another factor in the 1930s was a fear that the nation would lean toward communism as a reaction to callous capitalism. Subsequently, as Captain America villains represented the nation's borders, many of them became merciless and selfish businessmen.

In the 1940s, Captain America encountered a throng of costumed villains revealed to be either business owners or financiers of some kind. In most cases, their motives are unclear, but sometimes they're attempting fraud or murder to gain financial interest. In fact, originally the Red Skull himself was one of these villains, an airplane manufacturer that betrays the United States when Hitler offers him control over America after the Nazis win World War II (*Captain America Comics*, 1). Often, these villains would commit suicide rather than be taken by Captain

America. The Red Skull, for instance, initially rolls over on his own poison needle weapon to escape capture. These kinds of suicides were usually acceptable to Captain America and Bucky, who would make quips about not seeing anything. While Captain America was free to kill Nazis and Japanese enemies, it is implied that dealing with corrupt American businessmen in the same way would be unacceptable. To free the hero from this moral responsibility, these internal villains would punish themselves, excising this border of evil from the imagined community.

As the state and capitalism became more cooperative and the economy enjoyed post-war prosperity, big business faded as an anxiety. In the 1960s and 1970s, the hero was instead struggling with political apathy, corrupt government and super-villains wielding advanced technology, and the businessman-as-villain disappeared. In the 1980s however, this motif resurfaced as evil corporations, a common cliché for villains of the era (Jones and Jacobs, 1997, p. 256). In two issues reviewed from this study's random sample, the corporation appears as a border of evil. First, in 1984 a company called Roxxon Oil and its subsidiary the Brand Corporation decide to destroy all of Earth's superheroes so that it can "own America" and subsequently, the world (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 289). Their reasons are vague, but the company has its own private militia carry out attacks on various heroes while Captain America disarms a weapon that uses "psycho-rays" to force its victims to face their subconscious fears. Captain America defeats them by overwhelming the device when it attempts to disable him with dread, countering its fear effects with his extreme patriotism.

He later goes on to face The Power Broker, a secret criminal corporation that sells super-strength bestowing drugs to its professional wrestler customers (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 328). The drugs are highly addictive, however, and the wrestlers keep coming back for more, even though the process is unstable and sometimes kills them. In both these 1980s examples of

corporate symbols of evil, the business itself has the identity of villain, while its CEO is often vague, either hidden from the reader or just a part of the company's infrastructure. This is a development from the way business was portrayed as evil in the 1940s. Rather than the evil being associated with the individual(s) that runs the company, evil is now a faceless institutional entity that is pernicious to the nation.<sup>17</sup> This consolidation of aggregate corporate employees (workers, owners etc.) into one evil gestalt, allows the narrative to ignore the unacceptable activities of American citizens that may work for or own such a company, displacing their sins onto the personified corporation. This way, the business is evil, rather than the people who comprise it, diverting attention away from individual responsibility.

The corporation wasn't present as a villain again in *Captain America* until after the narrative struggled with Arab terrorism as an external threat. Unable to reconcile its symbolization of Arabs as terrorist villains with its rhetoric of civic nationalism, the narrative amputated the ethnic characteristics from terrorism, attaching it instead to the corporation. Today in the comic, the major villain is the Kronas Corporation, a front for terror, utilizing weapons of mass destruction, corrupting the government and housing dispossessed nationalism in the wake of globalization. After scandals involving companies like WorldCom, Enron and Halliburton, it is not surprising that the corporation is again represented as a border of evil to the nation.

Unlike its counterparts in the 1980s however, this evil corporation is not an anonymous entity, but is run cooperatively by the Red Skull and former Russian general Aleksander Lukin (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 14, 22-25). This indicates a movement away from identifying evil with the institution rather than the people operating it. The Red Skull is again Machiavellian, using the corporation's power to enable acts of terrorism and trade weapons of mass destruction

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<sup>17</sup> The 2003 documentary *The Corporation* addresses both the legal and psychological ways America has come to accept a corporation as an individual rather than an institution.

without accountability. Lukin connects this terrorism to a nationalistic agenda, nostalgic for his "Mother Russia." As Kronas is an international company, the motivations of these villains connect the corporation, globalization and foreign jingoism all together as anxieties for the American nation. Terrorists are no longer Arabs, but are instead are results of the corporation, with no ethnicity and only the ideology of the CEO to guide them.

This shift back to the individuals who run the "evil" corporation is first significant because these CEOs are not Americans, but foreign entrepreneurs with global influence. The fear of business has evolved, so that the corporation is now seemingly outside of America, another external other. The tensions caused by corporate globalization—the practices that motivate massive protests against transnational institutions like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund for instance—are connected to this portrayal of the fictional company. With foreign villains like Lukin and the Red Skull at the helm of such a corporation, the fear of business that has plagued the American nation for so long, evolves into a fear of international business. Furthermore, I suspect that this shift away from the gestalt corporate entity back toward a menacing individual in charge of the business, has something to do with the very public prosecution of corrupt businessmen like Kenneth Lay, who becomes a face to which we can identify the immoral, transnational corporation with.

Together with its symbolic connection to terrorism, *Captain America* further establishes the corporation as evil because of its influence on the United States government. Captain America himself states that he no longer trusts politicians, because they are corrupted by "corporate donors" who are "pulling their strings" (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 22). Furthermore, when he assaults the Kronas Corporation's offices, Captain America finds Lukin meeting with the Vice President's Chief of Staff and the Assistant to the Secretary General of the United

Nations, echoing both the UN's Oil For Food Scandal and the conviction of Scooter Libby in 2007 (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 9). As we will see later in this chapter, government corruption is another internal border of evil, one that Captain America has faced since the 1970s. Connecting that theme together with terrorism further serves to establish the corporation as an unacceptable border to the American nation.<sup>18</sup>

From the costumed businessmen in the 1940s to the current representation of the corporation as a cause of terrorism and government corruption, big business has been symbolized by the *Captain America* narrative as an enemy of the nation. In between these two points, the corporation became an entity unto itself, personifying evil to the institution rather than the individuals that comprise it. As recent issues of the comic focus on the executives of business as the true figures of evil, it seems that the nation is again shifting its borders, this time to divert blame away from the gestalt entity, placing it again on the people at the top of the corporation's hierarchy. As in the 1940s, the single businessman is portrayed as a potential figure of danger, giving into his own selfish urges at the expense of the corporation he controls and the nation his business serves.

The corporation then, is still conceived of as an individual, one that is blameless and innocent, only performing evil deeds because of the hubris of the men running it. This understanding of companies seems to still be connected to the 1940s idea that business is an integral part of the nation's structure, necessary for both its security and well-being. The selfish

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<sup>18</sup> It is of course interesting that a cultural product like *Captain America* which is produced by a corporation like Marvel is able to associate corporate business with evil so easily. How the comic is able to disassociate itself from its own corporate origin is unclear, but I suspect that the close proximity of consumers to producers in this cultural circuit (as discussed last chapter) has something to do with it. Comics fans might feel that there is a certain amount of transparency to Marvel that isn't at all a part of the average consumer's relationship with corporations like Enron or Halliburton.

machinations of evil businessmen then were considered harmful to the nation, as were the plans of those within it who wished to destroy big business as a means to injure America.

### *The Fifth Column: Spies and Sympathizers*

The very first issue of Captain America Comics in 1941 opened with several captions, stating: "As ruthless war-mongers of Europe focus their eyes on peace-loving America... the youth of our country heed the call to arm for defense... but great as the danger of foreign attack... is the threat of invasion from within... the dreaded fifth column..." This passage sets up the comic book for the external/internal dichotomy that this chapter has focused on, with the fifth column—a clandestine group of people, trying to undermine the nation from within—representing the internal fears of the 1941 nation. Throughout both World War II and the 1950s era of the Cold War, Captain America uncovered and fought many fifth column enemies, often Americans who sympathized with Hitler or communism, trying to subvert the war effort. The hidden-enemy-among-us is a common theme for villainy, still evident in much of popular culture today<sup>19</sup>. It is important however to note this moment in our genealogy, because by the 1960s, wartime fifth column enemies mostly disappeared from Captain America's narrative.

The common characteristics of Captain America's fifth column villains are that they are hidden, merciless, violent and often attack Americans who contribute to the war effort. Likewise, the hero handles them with violence. Mostly he just beats them up, although like the 1940s businessmen above, these villains had an uncanny tendency to kill themselves. Although Captain America and Bucky rarely spot these enemies at first, there are many visual cues to alert the

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<sup>19</sup> Look to television shows like *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost* for contemporary versions of this theme. In comics, Marvel is again playing with this idea in *Secret Invasion*, where superheroes are replaced by shape shifting aliens who want to conquer Earth.

reader that they are suspicious characters. This positions the readers to be more "aware" than their heroes are, providing further confidence to the 1940s children who this comic identified as part of the war effort. Nazi spies and sympathizers, like their external counterparts, are often bald men with beards, ghoulish faces and upper class attire. The communist insider is usually represented by purple clothes, just shy of being "red."

Although this chapter has already described the symbols of Nazis and communists as external enemies of the nation, these villains here were different in that they were inside the nation, pretending to maintain its borders, so they could destroy them from within. Like their external equivalents, these representations were brought on by war, defining the nation's identity through their betrayal of it. In one issue, Nazis spies disguise themselves as homeless people and proceed to attack labor and business leaders who are supporting the war effort (*Captain America Comics*, 4). By playing on the nation's sympathies toward the destitute,<sup>20</sup> the Nazis are able to hinder America's strength. Originally, the Red Skull too, as both a representation of corrupt business and Nazi sympathy, acted as an internal enemy that disrupted the armed forces by assassinating military officials (*Captain America Comics*, 1). Similarly, in 1954 a newspaper editor and photographer are revealed to be communist sympathizers, leaking information to communist armies (*Captain America...Commie Smasher!* 76). These enemies were acceptable to punish because they were unseen, sabotaging America's military and therefore, its confidence.

However, if these fifth column enemies were manifestations of the nation during wartime, like the external xenophobic villains Captain America fought, their connection to war's ability to sharply define the nation ends in the 1950s. During later wars, when the narrative demonizes Asians, Russians and Central Americans, there are no corresponding internal spies or

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<sup>20</sup> Recall Gerstle (2004, p. 201) says that as the state grew larger the nation expected capitalism to become humane.



sympathizers there. Even after September 11, 2001, no American Muslims take up terrorism against Captain America and the nation. The theme of internal spies and sympathizers during wartime seems to no longer be accepted here.

I will suggest one possible explanation for this border's erasure. After the Red Scare suspected labor movements, Jews and the Protestant elite of harboring communism, the nation shifted to civic nationalism with the rise of the civil rights movement (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 238-264, 268-270). As a part of this shift, and with the backlash against Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunts in the 1950s, it seems likely that the nation no longer accepted the "enemy within" as easily. Captain America's own trajectory reflects this, as he increasingly engages racist and jingoistic villains from the early 1970s until the mid 2000s. Recall that even though he engages ethnic stereotypes of Arab terrorism after 9/11, this is complicated by his own sense of civic justice. While the United States still fought wars and Captain America continued to engage symbols of the nation's external enemies, internally the imagined community could not justify looking back at itself with further suspicion and scrutiny.

### *Prejudiced Villains: The Borders To Civic Nationalism*

In the late 1960s, after Marvel Comics readers influenced Stan Lee to abandon his usual anti-communist narratives in *Captain America*, one of the changes the writer/editor made was to incorporate racism as a characteristic of many of the hero's villains.<sup>21</sup> While this shift came partially from a negotiation with the readers, the nation itself was moving away from racism, toward a more civic version of nationalism (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 268-270). Simultaneously, a combination of the anti-war movement and Black Nationalism opened the door for anti-

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 2 for a more in-depth analysis of this moment.

nationalistic thought among Americans (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 327-328). As the borders of evil shifted for the nation, so to did Captain America's enemies. America itself may still have had racist tendencies, but overt depictions of racism were now unacceptable. The previous ideologically blank Nazis became overtly racist, while Captain America himself confronted his own xenophobic past in the form of a 1950s doppelganger. This theme of prejudiced villains continued into the 1980s, with Captain America fighting misguided citizens' action groups and another reflection of his own jingoistic potential. By the 1990s, this theme evolved into a misandric villainess, while the Red Skull's intense racism was confirmed in a flashback profiling his origins. Civic nationalism was so prevalent within the nation that by 2002, when Captain America began to confront Arab terrorists in reaction to 9/11, he was torn between his racialized anger and his doctrine against hatred. Yet in recent years, racist and jingoistic villains are absent in the narrative, suggesting a suppression of this border of evil. Nazis are not even depicted as racist anymore and are again accepted as evil simply because of their apparent identity. Like Arab terrorism before it, this border is repressed into absence, as the nation yearns for a simple external enemy to define itself against.

Back in the 1960s however, The Red Skull, Baron Zemo and other Nazi characters made racist comments in their dialogue and Captain America often allied himself with The Black Panther (an African superhero) and The Falcon (the first African-American superhero) against them. As racists, the Nazis threatened the growing popularity of civic nationalism. These were preferable villains to the Vietnamese, because they threatened this internal border of the nation while keeping Captain America away from the more ideologically complicated battle in South East Asia. Baron Zemo (described as "the mysterious, masked, nazi naster-fiend!" and "the hate obsessed hitlerphile!") demonstrates his racism when he captures Captain America and the Black

Panther, referring to the later as more beast than human (*Tales of Suspense*, 99; *Captain America*, Vol. 1, 112). Black Panther responds, "Better to die as men, than to live as slaves!" and the heroes defeat the villain. These examples show that racial hatred was unacceptable to the imagined community at this time, while identities that were both proud and black could punish this border of evil.

Nazis are mostly replaced by internal fears of racism in the 1970s and 1980s, but this study's random sample encountered an interesting moment in 1999 that inspects the Red Skull's character, revealing what makes him evil (*Captain America*, Vol. 3, 14). Racial superiority is especially highlighted here, as the origin story reveals that the Red Skull thinks of himself as a "pureblood" and murders his teenage girlfriend when he discovers her ethnic background is not the same. As he makes the discovery and kills her and her family, his interior monologue states, "Foreigners. Mongrels. Barbarians. Whatever their race or color, it makes no difference. All of them chase their pathetic notion of racial harmony. All of them preach some grand scheme of global diversity. But underneath... they are all the same. They must be destroyed" (*Captain America*, Vol. 3, 14). Before this, the Red Skull saw the entire world in black and white, with only his own red face in color. Afterward however, he does not even distinguish other people's facial features. Everyone around him is faceless, save Captain America, upon whom the Skull projects his rage. The dramatic symbolism of blind racism here indicates that such hatred was still a firm border to the nation, completely unacceptable when defined so thoroughly here as evil.

Within the gap between this moment and the 1960s, the narrative stopped attributing racism to foreign others and began looking inward. Captain America himself had demonstrated racist and jingoistic behavior in the past (recall his treatment of external others above) and

somehow needed to reconcile that history with his present adherence to civic nationalism. Writer Steve Englehardt navigated around this by introducing a character known in comic fandom as the "1950s Captain America." The narrative explains that after Steve Rogers was lost in the arctic sea during World War II, a second man took on the Captain America identity during the 1950s, accompanied by a faux Bucky. This move disintegrates history, claiming that these imposters were the "commie smashing" era heroes, placed in suspended animation until they reawaken in the 1970s to battle the "real" Captain America. These characters are depicted as racists, misogynists, jingoists and uncontrollably violent.

After he encounters this version of himself, Steve Rogers thinks, "I've never fought the evil side of my own nature. That's what he is after all, a man who began with the same dreams I did and ended as an insane, bigoted superpatriot!" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 156). Civic nationalism seems to have become so dominant here in the 1970s, that the nation (through Captain America) is looking backward and now realizing its racialized and misogynistic past. This is the first time Captain America has experienced this kind of introspection and as with other moments in this genealogy, when he realizes the nation's past actions are now understood as abhorrent, he splits his identity to accommodate, disintegrating history in the process.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, while the nation now recognizes its past faults, it does not take responsibility for them, instead foisting them upon a dissociative identity. That new, "other" national identity has such boldly drawn borders against race, gender and the foreign, that it is regarded as "insane," a psychological manifestation that must be purged. This is further demonstrated when during another Cap vs. Cap battle, the narrating captions read: "... eyes that once held the cool glow of

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<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising that a superhero comic narrative deals with such identity issues through such a splitting. Alter egos and dissociative personalities have been a common trope in superhero fiction since its inception.

patriotic fervor and later flamed with the bright fire of madness, now blaze with the roaring inferno of absolute hate!" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 156). The 1970s nation understands that patriotism can lead to a hateful prejudice that is not acceptable under the beliefs of civic nationalism.

The evil Bucky is especially vulgar in his hatred, having a fight with Captain America's girlfriend and his African-American partner The Falcon. Below is an exchange between the three, during their fight:

Bucky: "This is going to be fun. I get to pound on both a colored creep and a tomato at the same time! And they said super heroing didn't pay"

Falcon: "You stupid bigot! You're no superhero."

Bucky: "Not bad for a darkie boy."

Bucky: "Just like a dame, getting emotional when she should keep her head. And it's gonna cost ya frail!"

Sharon: "You bet I'm a woman Bucky, and I do act like one, but that doesn't mean I act like a lady! Women have changed a lot since the 1950s in case you haven't figured it out yet, just like everyone else, right Falcon?"

Falcon: "You know it mama!"

Sharon: "We've got teamwork sonny and you've only got hate!"

This exchange (while perhaps anachronistically hilarious) especially highlights the shifting national borders of evil over two decades. While the Captain America narrative in the 1940s and 1950s could depict Asians as bestial, referring to them as "dirty Japs," the later changes to the

imagined community place this same kind of racist behavior on the margins, as insidious to the nation as the Nazis. Instead of defining itself through the external enemies of war, the narrative began confronting the nation's own imperfections when forging its identity, realizing that the process of nationalism actually oppressed some of its own citizens.

By the 1980s, this rejection of racism developed to include overzealous nationalism. Captain America again confronted a mirror version of himself in the young superhero named "Super-Patriot." This character has a similar costume and powers, but is shown to be ignorant, selfish and sadistic, while manipulating the American people to favor him with clever rhetoric (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 323, 327). He is however, not overtly racist, as one of his partners is an African-American version of Bucky named Lemar Hoskins. Hoskins in fact is the most xenophobic character, beating up Middle Eastern students on a college campus and saying:

You traitorous foreign lowlife-I'm wise to you. You pose as students, but yet actually here to spy for Khaddafy! Libyan, Algerian, Iranian, you're all the same. All out to do America dirt—an' this is one proud American who ain't gonna stand for it! Roughin' up a bunch of un-American slimeballs sure does my patriotic heart good. (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 327).

The emphasis here is on fanatical nationalism rather than racism as an internal corruption to the nation. Super-Patriot and his allies hate others for their nationality, not necessarily their ethnicity. Hoskins for instance is African-American and Super-Patriot and his other jingoist allies never question his race. Instead, they return to the xenophobia of wartime, despising foreign others.

These characters still threaten civic nationalism with their prejudice, just in a nationalistic, rather than racist manner.

Captain America, in response, says that they are, "Trying to give patriotism a black eye" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 327). He's reluctant to fight the Super-Patriot, but the two battle anyway, physically and ideologically. During the fight, Super-Patriot yells at the hero, "You dare to insinuate that I'm less committed to the ideals of America than you? Your concept of America and her ideals are as dated and obsolete as you are! You're out of step with America—you don't know what makes this country and the people tick anymore!" The hero's response is that, "America's ideals are timeless, Super. Liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness never go out of style!" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 327). The Super-Patriot's argument is that the nation's borders have shifted, to *include* xenophobic hatred. Captain America, however, idealistically claims that such intolerance has and will always be unacceptable to the nation. Like his erasure of his 1950s racist "commie smashing" persona, here Captain America severs prejudice from the nation. Such disintegration of history indicates that racial and national discrimination was a firmly established border to the 1980s imagined community, so unacceptable that this cultural artifact had to pretend this border had always been there.

The Super-Patriot eventually learns to embrace this border, when he replaces Captain America after a corrupt federal government fires the hero. In this same era, the narrative depicted citizens groups like The National Force and The Watchdogs, which advocated their superiority based on race and moral standards (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 233-235, 385). Captain America treats these groups as villains, punishing them in combat.

By the 1990s however, the narrative's loyalty to civic nationalism found a new hate group to make villains out of: female misandrists. A female villain named Superia appears in 1991,

wanting to rid the world of men with her group of female super-villains The Femizons (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 389, 412). Like these other superiority groups, Captain America defeats The Femizons, demonstrating that civic nationalism was so prevalent that the nation would not accept any prejudice, even from a group traditionally oppressed within it.

The narrative further devalues women when Captain America goes on a date with the sometime morally gray mercenary Diamondback (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 371). Diamondback is a strong-willed and voluptuous femme fatale member of the Serpent Society, a criminal group of snake themed villains. Because she has proven to Captain America that she is not a killer, he accepts her as a sometime partner on his adventures. When she asks him out on a date, however, he's taken aback. "No offense," he says to her, "But I'm just not the kind of guy who would look right going out with a girl with magenta hair!" Diamondback vows to change her appearance for him and when he shows up at her apartment, he's overjoyed to see how "normal" she looks. After the date, Diamondback decides to quit her mercenary job to become a sales clerk so that Captain America will fully accept her.

This disciplining of a previously independent and strong female character represents women as still subservient to men within the American nation, without challenging civic nationalism. Because of his adherence to that creed, Captain America doesn't fight and hate Diamondback when she's a mercenary, because her femininity doesn't threaten any of the borders of the nation. He will not however accept Diamondback until she normalizes her hair, clothing, personality and employment. This kind of rejection of women is acceptable within the narrative and does not challenge the civic dogma so firmly established there since the 1960s. In this way, the imagined community can still discipline sub-groups within it, without crossing its own border against prejudice by establishing what is "normal."



When civic nationalism encounters the nation's other fears of particular groups of people, it experiences this same kind of contradiction. As revealed above, Captain America's confrontations with Arab terrorism experience a similar kind of schizophrenia, attempting to reconcile the nation's external fear of Arab ethnicity with its denunciation of racially based preconceptions. Similar to the disciplining of Diamondback, the Arab-American that Captain America saves from a post 9/11 riot is ethnically vague, wearing a white button down and black slacks, not the stereotypical robes and head scarves reserved for the hero's Arab enemies. Foreign others and women seem to be acceptable within the nation, so long as they assume the roles expected of them as Americans. If the nation is to maintain its civic nationalism, then the way it seems to distinguish its lingering xenophobia, racism and sexism from mere prejudice, is through this kind of disciplining of the other. When addressing the fear of African-American crime in the 1970s, the Captain America narrative performs a similar process, again disciplining a symbolic other, while creating yet another split identity to satisfy the nation's urge to punish those that resist discipline.

#### *Omnipresent Crime and Disciplined African-Americans*

Crime has always been a border of evil in *Captain America*, beginning in the 1940s when he broke up counterfeiting operations and beat up colorfully dressed gangsters (*Captain America Comics*, 4). Over the years, many of his villains have been criminals, usually exhibiting another anxiety about advanced technology, with dangerous gadgets and weapons. Crime as a border to the nation seems somewhat obvious, since the imagined community is threatened whenever someone transgresses the law of the state. However, when crime is connected to ethnicity, this border comes into conflict again with the narrative's civic nationalism.

It was rare for Captain America (and all superhero comics) in the 1960s and 1970s to combat simple, everyday criminals. More often, his villains were world dominating tyrants like the Red Skull, Baron Zemo or MODOK, all wielding weapons of advanced technology that threatened the nation. So, when gangsters returned to Captain America's narrative in the 1970s, it was noticeable, particularly because these gangsters were black. As has been stated previously, around this time Captain America took on the first African-American superhero, The Falcon, as his partner. At first it was solely The Falcon who dealt with this crime, choking informants, questioning "stoolies," and generally protecting his urban neighborhood from corruption. In the random issues sampled for this genealogy, Captain America did not fight these same black gangsters, often separating from Falcon to go investigate another case. Although they were partners, Captain America was still the symbol representing the nation, and his reluctance to confront African-American crime again demonstrates his difficulty with civic nationalism. As the nation struggled with civil rights, its symbol (a white man in a flag costume) could not punish symbolic African-Americans, even if they were represented as criminals. The Falcon then, served a dual function, first incorporating African-Americans into the nation as a visible symbol of heroism, and second, combating this anxiety of African-American crime, so that Captain America was free to maintain his civic nationalism.

Like Diamondback and Arab-Americans post 9/11, Falcon is disciplined, so that he can symbolize African-Americans within the nation, rather than as a threat to it. Gerstle (2001, pg. 358-359) argues that during the Reagan administration, racist discourse was unacceptable, but rhetoric that constructed African-Americans as internal others still worked. From this example of The Falcon and his criminal enemies in the 1970s, it seems that such symbolizations manifested even before that presidency. Falcon often speaks using the slang popularized by blaxploitation

films of the era, but is otherwise disciplined by his quest to be a hero like Captain America. Even The Falcon's girlfriend Leila refers to his new identity as, "Heroic Uncle Tomming" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 149). She seems to recognize the divestiture of cultural identity necessary for Falcon to be a hero, and dismisses it. Similarly, Boss Morgan (the head of the fictional Harlem mob) notices Falcon's shift, and continually offers the young hero the opportunity to join his gang. Both Leila and Morgan tempt Falcon to abandon his disciplinary process, but he resists, so Captain America and the nation will fully accept him.

However, a significant part of this disciplining should not go unnoticed. While Captain America was unable to combat African-American crime, The Falcon was unhindered and could fight white villains freely. Given the turmoil of the civil rights movement, this is a noteworthy moment, where African-Americans were accepted enough culturally that this comic book narrative could portray them defending the nation. This is huge leap for the nation, indicating the growing strength of civic nationalism. Previously, in the 1940s, African-Americans couldn't even serve combat duty as soldiers and they were excluded from films, because movie companies feared overtly strong roles would anger the nation (Gerstle, 2001, p. 208-216). Now, with an integrated military in Vietnam, including some black commanding officers, African-Americans could be symbolized as heroes, punishing the nation's enemies, even if they were white.

Captain America, on the other hand, the symbol representing the imagined community, could not transgress civic nationalism. It was not until 1975 that the character physically punished black villains the same way he had beat on the nation's other enemies. This however, required another dissociative identity shift. It was explained that political apathy caused Steve Rogers to abandon his Captain America identity to become Nomad, "the man without a country" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 183). Again, this comic book narrative deals with identity

contradictions by splitting the character into alter egos. As Nomad, no longer narrating the nation's borders, the hero goes to Falcon's neighborhood and confronts Morgan, the local African-American mob boss, and his gang. In the same issue, he fights an African-American super-villain named Gamecock, a man in a ridiculous rooster costume equipped with claws. This issue reveals the confusion manifested from the conflict between African-American crime and racial prejudice both being borders to the nation. In order for Captain America to confront one without the other, he literally has to dissociate himself from his identity, as the nation could not express its fear of African-American crime without violating its recent adherence to racial equality.

*MODOC = Machinery's Odium and Danger Outside the Community*

Marvel Comics in the 1960s often featured advanced technology as a theme, connected to the Cold War, and fears of nuclear escalation. Iron Man for instance reflects American communist paranoia with a host of Russian and Asian villains, mostly using advanced technologies that compete with Iron Man's powerful suit of armor (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 70). The Fantastic Four's origin is rooted in strange technology, especially rockets and the space race. Spider-man, was also created through science, but for him it was dark, something that branded him an outcast (Jones and Jacobs, 1997, p. 60). The Hulk, on the other hand, represented a nuclear-created super weapon, one that America and the Soviets fought for control over (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 68). Not only was this a subject connected to the Cold War, but science fiction trappings became the norm for superheroes during the Silver Age, with many characters (such as DC's Green Lantern and The Flash) having their origins updated to reflect this. Interestingly, despite the many examples of this kind of national paranoia, Gerstle's (2004) history of America

neglects to mention its importance on the community's psyche. When Captain America returned to comics in 1964, his villains immediately reflected this anxiety, even reaching back in history to insert this Cold War trope into his World War II flashback adventures.

As previously addressed, Captain America eschewed involvement in Vietnam, instead reminiscing his "good war" adventures against Nazis, who now openly expressed racism to meet the needs of that border of evil. Additionally, these Nazis now had access to advanced technologies like laser guns and giant robots, even though the actual 1940s *Captain America Comics* rarely featured such devices. Even though his adventures took place in a fictional World War II, these 1960s stories were published in a Cold War context, reflecting the concerns the nation had about dangerous technology (Wright, 2001, Ch. 7).

When these later *Captain America* comics did take place in the same era they were published within, his villains there wielded similarly destructive gadgets. Often these were untrained criminal hoods, who somehow gained access to ray guns and powerful exo-skeletons (*Tales of Suspense*, 59). Because of his superior training, Captain America was always able to defeat these symbols that combined crime and advanced technology fears. This benefited Marvel Comics' constructed identity of a smart & well-trained readership, though the advertising often seemed directed at the undereducated lower class. Because of this overlap of advertising, narrative and company identity maintenance, I argue that a lack of training and education was also a border to the nation, represented here by inept criminals wielding technology requiring skill and intellect.

One principal group of Captain America enemies symbolized this repeatedly, the science-terrorists called Advanced Idea Mechanics (AIM). AIM members were often intelligent enough to design and produce amazing feats of technology, but always lost control of their creations.

One of these failures was MODOK (Mental Organism Designed Only for Killing); a super-intelligent creature in the form of giant head, with stubby little arms and legs. Keeping up with the theme of the foolishly untrained, MODOK proves smarter than his creators and takes over the AIM organization and battling Captain America on numerous occasions.

Another AIM creation that went wildly out of their control was the Cosmic Cube, a deus ex machina device that altered reality to its user's wishes. The Cube ends up in possession of the Red Skull, who uses it and other advanced technologies to torment Captain America repeatedly. This tradition extends to the present series, where the Red Skull uses the cosmic cube together with weapons of mass destruction, signifying a return of the advanced technology anxiety as a result of the United States' war on terror.

The Red Skull—appropriately as Captain America's main nemesis—brings together multiple borders of evil to the nation. He represents the external Nazi other, while challenging civic nationalism with his racism. Simultaneously he often has access to the advanced technology symbolizing Cold War and terrorism fears, often using it to take control away from Americans. This tactic is so frequent, with the Red Skull and other villains, that it drew my attention to another internal border of evil to the nation, the loss of independence.

### *Stolen Independence: Defamation, Domination and the Psychoanalyst's Couch*

Villains in the Captain America narrative of the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated a primary motivating desire to control others, dominate them and rule as their dictator. The Red Skull, often through technological means, is able to control Captain America and others, usually ruining their reputation in the process. This kind of defamation is one of three ways the loss of independence manifests as a border of evil within the narrative. Another manifestation of this

fear comes in the form of psychoanalysis, which gained notoriety throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Curtis, 2002). Finally, the loss of independence is connected to slavery, with allusions to racism and elitism as motivating factors. Again, here is a moment in America's development that Gerstle (2004) and others don't seem to notice. It could be argued that this theme of stolen independence is particular to the Captain America narrative, but the converging issues of psychology, equality and liberty that the nation was facing in the 1960s suggest that its manifestation here is not arbitrary.

As a symbol of the American nation, Captain America's reputation seems to be very important to him in the 1960s, as it is constantly under threat. The Red Skull says that he tries to tarnish Captain America's name, because he wants the hero to "lose faith" and have his "spirit crushed" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 117). The villain used the Cosmic Cube for instance, to swap bodies with the hero and convince Americans that Captain America was uncouth and disrespectful (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 117). Another example has the Red Skull threaten to destroy New York City with a destructive weapon, unless Captain America aids him and betrays the nation (*Tales of Suspense*, Vol. 1, 91). Technology is almost always behind this denigration, such as when AIM and Red Skull use a "hypno-helmet" on the hero to make him hallucinate and act strangely in public (*Tales of Suspense*, Vol. 1, 79). This recurring theme seems to demonstrate a great concern for the nation about its reputation, and how well it was meeting up to its own ethical standards. By losing independence, the nation fears it will hypocritically fail, perhaps even violating its own borders in the process.

At least in part, this fear of not being able to control one's own actions stems from the rise of psychoanalytic theory in American popular culture. As documented by Adam Curtis' film *The Century of the Self* (2002), advertising, public relations and politicians all made use of Freudian

psychoanalytic techniques to influence the American nation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The nation's awareness of such manipulation remains unclear, but at least culturally, a fear of this kind of control manifests within the *Captain America* narrative, in the form of the villain Dr. Faustus. Faustus is an Austrian psychologist, physically similar to Freud with his business suit, spectacles and beard. Through psychoanalysis and mind-controlling drugs, Faustus often controls his victims, turning them into villains. In the 1970s, Faustus manipulated Americans into forming The National Force, a racist organization symbolic of the Ku Klux Klan (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 233-235). This includes Captain America's longtime love interest Sharon Carter, who becomes a fascist street soldier whom the hero must stop. Later, in the most recent issues of *Captain America*, Faustus has returned to manipulate Sharon into murdering the title hero (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 25). In this comic, psychoanalysis, while accepted by many, seems to repeatedly occur as a source for the loss of independence that the narrative constructs as a border of evil.

Finally, domination and the loss of control within the narrative are often connected to slavery, both racist and elitist in origin. The Red Skull and Baron Zemo, with their racist Nazi personas are often behind acts of domination in the comic, both represented as patrician elitists who wish to enslave others beneath their status. The Skull, for instance, is often seen in a fancy smoking jacket, enjoying cigarettes from a long holder, a cravat at his neck. This outfit symbolized the upper class and the villain would rant hyperbolically about his superiority to others. A classic Stan Lee penned Red Skull outburst follows:

So long as evil lives to muster the forces of bigotry, greed and oppression, the fight goes on! So long as men take liberty for granted, so long as they laugh at brotherhood, sneer at



honesty, and turn away from faith, so long will the forces of the Red Skull creep ever close to the final victory! ... It is the dream of every conqueror since the beginning of time! The ability to have every command, every slightest wish, instantly, infallibly, obeyed! From this moment on, the universe itself must bend to the supreme will of the Red Skull! (*Tales of Suspense*, 80)

Domination, together with his innate racism, are the principal characteristics of the Red Skull since the rise of civic nationalism in the 1960s. Sometimes he successfully forces Americans to obey his whims, though Captain America eventually frees them. Given the importance of liberty and equality under the civic nationalism dogma, it is not surprising that this theme of domination and control appeared in the 1960s. It symbolized a new border to the nation in the wake of the changes that the civil rights movement wrought.

The loss of independence then manifests throughout the narrative in these three ways: defamation of the nation's reputation, psychoanalytic control and a racist/elitist form of domination alluding to slavery. Interestingly, the villains aren't the only ones responsible for stealing Captain America's liberty. At the same time that this loss of independence theme began manifesting in the narrative, the hero was also manipulated by SHIELD, a fictional international counterterrorism agency. Nick Fury, the head of SHIELD, uses a device called the "slumber seat" to force Captain America to perform government operations the hero is opposed to (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 120). With moments like this, domination is also connected to the government, representing the beginnings of an internal border of evil prevalent within the narrative even today. The next section addresses this moment, again making a distinction between the state and the nation, as the later began to thoroughly distrust the former.

*Government Corruption: "Those men are not my country"*

As the anti-war movement and racial motivated protests rocked the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, anti-nationalist thought itself became more prevalent (Gerstle, 2001, 327-328). This manifested itself within *Captain America* when the government became a symbol of corruption, its members evoking the same kind of dictatorial characteristics of The Red Skull and other enemies that wanted to suppress liberty. The problem, as represented in the comic, was not the nation, its beliefs or system, but the bureaucracy and the malignancy within it. In this respect, the comic comes just short of questioning nationalism itself, blaming many of the imagined community's faults on its institutions instead. This has been a consistent theme in the narrative since then, manifesting in three ways: 1) cruelty, war crimes, ineptitude and racism in the military, 2) corruption and megalomania within the federal government, and 3) the suppression of civil liberties for national security.

Beginning with the problems in the military, it may seem unlikely that Captain America would question the armed forces, given his origin as a soldier and wartime propaganda tool (Scott, 2007). However, as the nation shifted its borders away from external enemies and toward its own internal blemishes, Captain America separated himself from the government and the military, symbolizing the nation as a free agent. This was a tricky change to navigate, as the 1971 Comics Code forbid superheroes from questioning authority (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998). For instance, in 1979 Captain America gets angry with an army major when he slows down the hero's investigation of a racist riot (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 233). Throwing his shield to disarm the soldier, Captain America states that he doesn't "want to question authority" but he can't waste his time on military protocol. This kind of behavior supports John Shelton Lawrence and Robert

Jewett's (1977, 2002, 2003) theory that Captain America embodies what they call "The American Monomyth" of an anti-democratic fantasy where a super-powered Everyman saves society by stepping outside of institutions and violently beating villains. Captain America's distrust of the military as an institution sustains that myth, presenting it as bureaucratic and foolish, while only the lone hero has the foresight and ingenuity to defeat society's problems. This obsession with a sole autonomous savior is threatened then by the interference of misguided government institutions. The previously discussed border of stolen independence also hinders this heroic image, since individual liberty is necessary for the hero to prevail.

Such depictions of the military continue even until 2004, when Captain America is disgusted by Guantanamo Bay soldiers feeding tracking devices to Arab prisoners (*Captain America*, Vol. 4, 23). That same year, the comic began to look back at the American nation's real history, to confront its historical violations of modern day borders of evil. First, in the mini-series *Truth: Red, White and Black* (2004, 1-7), it is revealed that before the army created Captain America, they tested their super-soldier serum on African-American soldiers in the early 1940s, most of whom either died or were disfigured as a result. The only survivor, Isaiah Bradley, stole Captain America's costume, engaged the Nazis in Germany and was court-martialed and imprisoned as a result. This story exposes the general racism within the American nation of the era, especially army enlistment and the duties presented to African-American soldiers (Gerstle, 2001, p. 208-216).

The invisibility of this racism had previously been a border of absence within the comic, evil that was not represented through villains, but was instead hidden for its unacceptability. As the white Steve Rogers/Captain America learns of this program, he discovers that Isaiah is a venerated celebrity within the African-American community, though he himself had never heard

of the man (*Truth; Red, White and Black*, 7). The hero's discovery then, narrates the nation's own acceptance of its past violations of its current borders, realizing that white cultural history has a selective amnesia about its own part in America's racialized history. While the narrative had previously disintegrated history by replacing it with a myth that buried the nation's racism in this moment, it now served to uncover the history it had previously de-politicized. Interestingly however, Captain America himself was not a part of these racist actions, nor was he aware of them. So the narrative still dehistoricizes the past by "forgetting" Captain America's own 1940s racism, as well as the segregation within the army that he would have been well aware of.

Another narrative moment where Captain America confronted the now unacceptable past actions of the American military came with the 2005 reintroduction of his partner Bucky, now called The Winter Soldier (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 12, 14). Although Captain America had believed that Bucky died in World War II, it turns out that Russian scientists captured the young man and brainwashed him into being their "Winter Soldier," a covert assassin who is thawed out of stasis only to murder foreign political leaders (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 11). The Winter Soldier comes into conflict with Captain America in the present day when his new master (a Russian CEO) orders him to kidnap Cap's girlfriend, kill his other former sidekick and set off a Weapon of Mass Destruction in Philadelphia. This new Bucky is designed with a bionic arm, machine guns and body armor, making him look much more the "super soldier" than Captain America does. In their final battle, Captain America dispels Winter Soldier's brainwashing and accepts him as Bucky again, despite the deaths he's caused.

The term "Winter Soldier" comes from a 1971 the Winter Soldier Investigation event held by the group Vietnam Veterans Against the War. During this three-day gathering, the group intended to publicize war crimes committed by the United States armed forces during the

Vietnam War. The evolution of Bucky into the Winter Soldier then, is symbolic of America's growing awareness of the war crimes committed during the Cold War period, in the name of defeating communism and protecting national security. Captain America's acceptance of the Winter Soldier indicates recognition of these war crimes by the American nation, a fault of the military and of war, but not of the imagined community itself.

Vilification of institutions within the nation, rather than the community itself, came in the 1970s and 1980s when the federal government became Captain America's enemy, presciently preceding the Nixon Watergate scandal and following Reagan's Iran-Contra scandal. First, in 1974 Captain America discovers that the unnamed fictional President of the United States is actually the leader of The Secret Empire, an organization trying to dominate America (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 175). This president reveals that his motivation is precisely the same as Captain America's monomyth, "High political office didn't satisfy me! My power was still too constrained by legalities! I gambled on a coup to gain me the power that I craved, and it appears that my gamble has finally failed!" This villain demonstrates that the violation of laws and institutions, just for one's own personal gain, is not as acceptable as when Captain America does the same thing for the community's benefit. In order to avoid regulatory penalty from the Comics Code for "questioning authority," the president is not defeated by Captain America, but instead kills himself in the Oval Office. This incident leads to a political ennui that causes Captain America to abandon his identity to become Nomad, the man without a country.

Similarly, in the 1980s Captain America is confronted by a federal organization called The Commission, comprised of Washington politicians and heads of the CIA, Pentagon and FBI (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 332). The Commission informs the hero that he is technically under contract to work for the government and is legally bound to do so as Captain America. Given his

past experiences with government corruption, the hero is reluctant. The Commission responds as a single entity to his lack of enthusiasm:

What reason could you possibly have to disobey a presidential mandate? Have you not pledged yourself to the service of your country? We are America, Rogers. We are your commanding officers. It had not ever crossed our minds that you would have any difficulty obeying our directive. (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 332)

Once again, Captain America resigns his identity as a result of his mistrust of the government. As he walks away he thinks to himself:

Those men are not my country. They are only paid bureaucrats of the country's current administration. They represent the country's political system. While I represent those intangibles upon which our nation was founded.... Liberty, justice, dignity, the pursuit of happiness... (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 332)

To Captain America, the government is predisposed to political bias, "compromising" his "effectiveness as a symbol." Here he again makes a distinction between the government and the nation, denying that one represents the other. Mike Dubose (2007) notes that this moment in *Captain America* was a reaction to the Reagan administration's usage of the Jewett and Lawrence's hero myth, with the hero transcending the law. The nation rejects the institutions within in it, especially when their system interferes with the imagined communities borders, as outlined by Captain America above.

To reconcile Steve Rogers' abandonment of the Captain America role, his assumption proves correct and The Commission turns out to have corrupt members working for the Red Skull, who now manipulates American politics through bribery (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 350). His involvement as a Machiavellian force behind the corruption of American government is a long running theme in *Captain America*, even extending to the present storyline where as the head of an international corporation, The Red Skull is cozy with politicians while secretly funding terrorism (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 14, 22-25). If the absolute nemesis of Captain America—representing Nazism, racism, destructive technology, corporate power and domination—is affiliated with the federal government, the corruption of that institution is firmly demarcated as a border of evil.

Finally, while the government and military have been depicted as inept, corrupt and racist since the early 1970s, their violation of the borders of the imagined community come to a head in 2006. Marvel's fictional government establishes a Superhuman Registration Act, requiring superheroes to reveal their identities to the authorities and begin working as government agents (*Civil War*, 1-7; *Captain America*, Vol. 5, 23-25). Captain America, in American Monomyth fashion, resists the act as a violation of civil liberties, arguing that the government is intruding in the lives of its citizens. Ultimately, he is arrested by his (now registered) former allies, and subsequently assassinated while being brought to trial (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 25). Again, this storyline affirms the narrative's representation of the nation distrusting institutions, for being both corrupt and immoral. Captain America himself compares the pro-registration side of this argument to Stalin's Russia and states, "While I love my country, I don't trust many politicians. Not when they're having their strings pulled by corporate donors. And not when they're willing to trade freedom for security" (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 22). Like its connection to the multiple

borders of evil symbolized by the Red Skull, here the government is akin to the former external enemy of communism and the current internal fear of corporate control. The nation accepts none of these, so these associations suggest that government, while integral to the country of the United States, is in fact ineffectual and loathed by the imagined community.

Like his schizophrenic reaction to previous conflicting borders, Captain America usually has a dissociative reaction to his disappointment in the American government. Since the government is both a part of the nation and an adversary of it, it is difficult for the symbol of the nation to reconcile both at once. Initially, this manifested itself in the 1970s as the final border to national thought, that of political apathy.

#### *Apathy & Nihilism: Chaos for the Sake of Chaos*

As anti-nationalism became more popular from the anti-war and civil rights movement, the *Captain America* narrative further manifested such thoughts in the form of cynicism and apathy. The hero's encounters with government corruption and his confrontation with a racist and jingoistic version of himself eventually led the character into a brief depression where he doubted the validity of the "American Dream." This ennui was not uncommon for the nation at the time. According to Gary Gerstle's investigation of the nation's development in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:

The 1970s and early 1980s, in particular, were a time of drift, anxiety, and uncertainty, and of proliferating pronouncements from a variety of quarters that America's greatness—economic, cultural, and political—was finished. Many were unsure about



whether the American nation could ever regain its former glory or whether it should even try. (Gerstle, 2001, p. 347)

Reflecting this growth of cynicism in the nation, Captain America took on many of these traits. At first, he battled against such beliefs, fighting villains who espoused nihilism. Eventually, a lack of clear external enemies combined with mounting tensions within the nation led the hero into apathy, giving up his role as a national symbol because he no longer believed the myths that defined it. Captain America was finally able to take on the Marvel ethos of angst and self-doubt (Pustz, 1999, pg. 49-52). Previously, as a symbol of the nation, he could not question himself without insinuating a failure within America. Now that the nation questioned its own virtue, he could assume the insecurity common to his superhero peers. Corroborating Gerstle's trajectory above, this anxiety stayed within the narrative until the 1980s, though the hero resumed his symbolic role and instead of doubting the nation, he recognized its failures and worked to correct them. By the 1990s, he still lectures the American people for their occasional doubt, treating these reservations as borders to the nation that he works to stabilize. Once again, the nation is thought of as infallible and any internal actions that contradict this are malignancies to be excised. This section will examine the development of national apathy and doubt within the *Captain America* narrative, beginning with the nihilistic villains that provoked it in the 1970s.

The stress of the anti-war and civil rights movements began to manifest in *Captain America* when the hero broke up a group of student protesters who were smashing up their university with no discernible cause (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 120). The story makes a distinction between these anarchistic protesters and those who want to work with the establishment to make things better. This fractures the nation's understanding of civil

disobedience, setting apart those activists who won't cooperate with institutions. These kinds of protesters are demonized as nihilists who only want to destroy, even going so far as to depict them as mind-controlled subservients to the villains in AIM. When Captain America himself veers toward nihilism as Nomad, he fights such protesters again, because they're unwilling to talk and only want to fight (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 183). This establishes protesters unwilling to work with the system as anathema to it, acceptable to punish as a border to the nation.

This kind of violent nihilism is best symbolized by the villainess The Viper (sometimes known as Madame Hydra), a femme fatale in a green catsuit that often raged against the "corrupt and decadent society" of America (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 419). To demonstrate her nihilism, Viper would yell things like, "Very little means anything to me fool! I've seen too much of life to have any illusion regarding its importance... we are but the pawns of the greater forces in society. I fight for nihilism and shall continue to do so until I, in turn, am cut down!" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 180). Captain America battled Viper often in the 1970s, establishing this "belief in nothing" as erroneous, even though he was struggling with similar ideas himself. What Viper provided, however, was a distinction, between nihilism without and the kind of internal nihilism that Steve Rogers would soon deal with.

Viper at this time evoked echoes of the Women's Movement, demonstrating her feminism by punishing sexists (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 180). Such connections seem to suggest that feminism and women's protests were somehow nihilistic in nature, unwilling to work within the nation's parameters. The design of Viper further relegates roles of women, as she is hyper-sexualized and one of Captain America's only female enemies in the 1970s. Since her flirtations with feminism are brief, and other women in *Captain America* have strong positive

roles, I wouldn't describe the Women's Movement as a border of evil. Rather, this moment suggests that the nation was still struggling with what roles women could play within it.

Viper's nihilistic attacks on society continue well into the 1990s, when even the Red Skull is swayed by her rhetoric. Briefly, he eschews his past role as a racist enemy, instead stating, "You should know that I no longer espouse the old ways, I have transcended Nazism, Der Fuhrer's little dream. I have my own agenda of nihilism" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 389). This dramatic shift in the narrative's primary symbol of evil suggests that the nation possibly placed nihilism ahead of fascism and racism, as an unacceptable border. This fluctuation doesn't last, however, as by 1993 the Red Skull is back to his challenging civic nationalism as a fascist, distinguishing himself from Viper: "I believe in fomenting chaos in order to bring about a new order, while you believe in fomenting chaos for the sake of chaos!" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 419). Nihilism, then, is established as being so excessive a dogma that even the evil nemesis of the nation won't accept it. This contrast between Viper and the Red Skull shows us that nihilism is so extremely forbidden to the nation because it completely undermines the imagined community. To be a part of that imagined construct, *belief* itself is crucial. If one claims to believe in nothing then, they chip away at the imagined community's substance. A Nazi like the Red Skull, however, while still unacceptable to the American nation, at least believes in *something*. The Red Skull's ideal world would still require an imagined community, but it would be one that's values would contradict America's. While still evil, Nazism does not challenge the very foundations of a nation, since it too is based on belief and cultural maintenance. A stark border is drawn then here, between a belief in nothing and the necessary belief in the nation.

That border wasn't always so impermeable however, as there was a period where Captain America himself wondered if the nation was just a futile imaginary construction. After

uncovering the 1970s corruption in the White House that led to the President of the United States killing himself, Steve Rogers questions his identity, what he represents and who he serves, becoming disillusioned with the American dream:

The American dream had abused both it and us! There was no way I could keep calling myself Captain America because the others who acted in America's name were every bit as bad as the Red Skull... and yet, I didn't want to know about those people! The Skull was okay to oppose and still is, but number one (the president) wasn't because he was supposed to be on our side! (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 183)

Here the hero begins to dabble with the idea that symbols of the American nation were not automatically righteous, even comparing them to a Nazi like the Red Skull. He does this again with the statement, "I've seen America rocked with scandal, seen it manipulated by demagogues with sweet, empty words, seen all the things I hated when I saw those newsreels" (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 176). The newsreels he refers to are those of the Nazis taking over Europe in the 1940s, the same footage that led to him volunteering to become Captain America. Even his symbolization of the nation is questioned as he says, "I wasn't perfect. I did things I'm not proud of, but I always tried to serve my country well..." (*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 176). Realizing that "Captain America" is a symbol for a broken nation, Steve Rogers discards the identity to become Nomad, the man without a country.

All of this doubt opens the door for a border never before seen in this narrative, one so inverted that it threatens the existence of the imagined community itself with explosion. The symbols that narrated America's experience were exposed, the curtain pulled back on the national

wizard, revealing deeds as unacceptable as those of the external enemies that had previously defined it. This internal pressure was too much for the nation to take, and if it continued to expand the nation's borders would shatter, leaving a community in ambiguity and insecurity.

The *Captain America* narrative resolves this crisis in the same way the nation did, by turning such apathy into a border itself, one that could be defeated by eliminating the corruption and contradictions that gave rise to it. Steve Rogers returns to the Captain America identity, vowing to change his focus:

The country didn't let me down, I let her down, by not being all that I could be! If I paid more attention to the way American reality differed from the American dream, if I hadn't gone around thinking the things I believe in were thirty years out of date, then I might have uncovered number one (the president) and stopped him before it was too late!

(*Captain America and Falcon*, Vol. 1, 183)

Blind ignorance of the nation's imperfection then is set up as a future challenge for Captain America, who was now responsible for narrating such flaws to the imagined community so they could resolve them. Resolution itself, even in this symbolic comic book, is crucial, because the alternative is for the nation to crumble under its own disappointment, failing to evoke security and camaraderie for the community of humans that imagine it.

By the 1980s, such an apathetic response to the nation's problems was fully rejected by the character, when he again ran into the corruption of the United States government. The Red Skull, always stepping in to represent the borders the nation fears most, began to embrace the

flaws in the American nation. As the manipulator behind the fictional Reagan era government's corruption, the Red Skull now celebrated the nation:

If political power were my only goal, how easy it would be to steal it while the posturing politicians were engaged in their petty bureaucracy. But I have farther reaching ambitions. For I have become an American dreamer. I now embrace the American dream for what it is — the realization of one's personal ambitions by whatever means necessary! My American dream is no less than the denial of everyone else theirs (dreams)! To achieve it, I will have to enslave every American citizen and destroy America itself!  
(*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 350)

All of the failures of the nation that disappointed Captain America in the 1970s were now represented by his nemesis in the 1980s. These internal borders then were not critiqued for being a result of the nation, but as something cancerous and "foreign" within it. As America embraced civic nationalism, its own racist tendencies were treated similarly, as unnatural to the body of the nation. The Red Skull represents this as well, cloned to look like Steve Rogers and no longer wearing a mask because, "Here the face of a handsome Aryan is a much more versatile mask!" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 350). Because he is a figure of evil, the Red Skull's statements about the nation are treated as lies, while his manipulation of its flaws is not a fault of the gestalt imagined community, but the unacceptable parts within it.

This understanding of the nation as a pure body, with tumor-like blights to be surgically removed by Captain America was still represented in the late 1990s when the hero fights Nightmare, a demonic entity feeding off of the doubts of Americans (*Captain America*, Vol. 3,

12). He defeats the fiend by embodying the American dream on a hallucinatory plane of reality, showing the cynical citizens that the idea of the nation itself is infallible, only their actions within it can be flawed. This lives up to his speech a few issues previous, where he states:

Years ago, in a simpler time, this suit and this shield were created as a symbol to help make America the land it's supposed to be... to help it realize its destiny... There's a difference between fighting against evil and fighting for the common good. I'm not always able to choose my battles... but effective immediately, I'm going to make an effort to choose the battle that matter. Battles against injustice, against cynicism, against intolerance. (*Captain America*, Vol. 3, 7).

Again, the concept of America is narrated here as perfect, not responsible for the oppression within it. The flaws that haunt it are defined here as injustice (the border of government corruption), intolerance (the border to civic nationalism) and cynicism (the border of apathy, examined here), all of which have been defined here as internalized borders to the nation. The narrative understands all these internal borders of evil as malignancies within the country of the United States, but outside of the American nation. Like the external enemies prompted by war that this chapter began with, this positioning of internal limits allows *Captain America* to still define the nation's identity sharply, by symbolizing what it is not.

### Conclusion

To close this genealogy of evil, I will briefly summarize these internal and external representations of evil, providing a dynamic map that chronologically traces the fluid shifts these

borders make. The narrative began in the 1940s, prompted by the threats of World War II: Nazis, demonized Asians and the hidden "fifth column" of potential traitors and spies. Concurrently, big business within the United States was vilified, because the nation expected humane behavior from capitalism during this wartime crisis. A concern about criminal behavior overlapped this expectation, continuing well into the 1960s.

When the war ended, communists replaced Nazis as external others and hidden usurpers, but failed to be interpreted in the same devil terms. Asians, now associated with communism instead of fascism, continued to be demonized. The Captain America narrative is cut short in 1954 when multiple factors contribute to the comic book's cancellation. When it returns ten years later, Asians are still initially represented as evil, though their previous bestial depictions are abandoned. Because of the nation's growing movement toward civic nationalism and a negotiation between the readers and producers of this comic, such racialized depictions begin to fade, at first replaced with national oriented villains with no identifiable ideological beliefs. Nazis return as well, though they now utilize the destructive advanced technologies indicative of Cold War anxieties, and compliment civic nationalism with their racist diatribes. Often, these villains use such technology to steal independence from Captain America and other Americans.

Crime, while still a prevalent fear in the 1970s, was complicated by civic nationalism when the nation associates criminal activity with African-Americans. Trying to avoid racism, Captain America takes The Falcon, a disciplined symbol of African-Americans, as a partner. Together they battle racist, jingoistic and nihilistic enemies, but have to separate for The Falcon to address racialized crime. The nation continues to fear violations of liberty and independence, sometimes in the form of an inept military and a corrupt government. Captain America responds



to these transgressions of the American dream with apathy, though he eventually rises from his ennui, promising to excise internal national problems like cancerous tumors.

The 1980s challenge him with further corporate and government corruption, prompted by the Red Skull's cynical manipulation of the American dream. Other Nazis again become devil termed stereotypes, accompanied by vilified representations of France and Central America. Such nationalized symbols aren't accepted by the end of the decade, as civic nationalism begins to severely malign jingoism.

This denigration of prejudice continues through the 1990s, even criticizing misandry, while disciplining women's roles in the nation. Nihilism and apathy continue to haunt the nation, but as before Captain America treats these as foreign objects not indicative of any flaws of the nation itself. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, his adherence to civic nationalism is put to the test, trying to reconcile the reactionary ethnic stereotypes of Arabs within it. Even though these post-9/11 symbols are given ideological reasons for their actions, the narrative can't cope with its schizophrenic reaction and thrusts terrorist traits upon corporations while ignoring Arab threats entirely. Contemporary Nazis are again instantly symbolic of evil, with no ideological evidence of racism or fascism, as the nation desires a simple enemy again. Finally, in 2005, government again poses an internal threat, challenging civil liberties that Captain America protects before his friends arrest him his mind controlled lover assassinates him.

For the purposes of this genealogy, the narrative ends here, even though the *Captain America* comic book continues to narrate the nation with a new character filling the role. Now, we have a trajectory for how the meaning of "evil" changes as the imagined community negotiated the shape of the borders that define it as a nation. This is but one interpretation of those dynamic borders, as decoded through a cultural artifact that narrates their changing

cartography. Perhaps, by watching recurring factors such as war, civic nationalism and the denial of its own accountability, we might identify trends in anticipation of the nation's fickle nature. For now however, it is enough to recognize that evil varies, and is never constant.

### Borders of Absence: Regulation, the Implicit and Failed Auditions

Both the 1954 and 1971 versions of the Comics Magazine Association of America's Comics Code state that, "In every instance good shall triumph over evil..." (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998). The stark disparity then, between Captain America's "good" and the bevy of "evils" that menaced him over the years, was not just a representation of the nation evolving, but also a mandated requirement for this comic book narrative to bear the seal of the comics code. Without that seal, Captain America was open to the same criticisms that plagued comics in the 1950s, some of which led to his cancellation in that era. This left no potential for Captain America to explore the grey areas of the nation's morality or actions; only bold, sweeping lines in the sand that marked one side as good, and everyone on the other as evil.

This is but one manner in which the code regulates what is considered evil to the nation, by concealing the unacceptable. The villains Captain America punishes can represent evil in the narrative, but sometimes when something (or someone) is left out of the comic, it is because they too are outside of the imagined community. This chapter then, examines these "borders of absence," when the intolerable is made invisible. The comics code is often responsible for such moments, regulating the standards of comics, so that they do not teach readers immoral behavior. However, there are some moments when the code is out of step with the nation's tolerance level. Occasionally, in reaction to this inconsistency, comic book producers and the gatekeepers of the comics code collaborate to violate its written regulations, producing a more accurate narration of the nation's borders.

Some people, though, have been so rejected by the nation that they are even invisible to the comics code. Their absence then is not a regulated, because it is an assumption that is so universally taken for granted that it wasn't recorded in the code's text. Often these implicit

absences are brought out of concealment so long as they split their identity, leaving the undesirable half behind, while the other is disciplined into normality. Occasionally, some groups that are implicitly absent from the text appear briefly, sort of an audition for acceptability, only to disappear again. Other implicit absences are the results of war, colliding with the nation's anxiety about racial prejudice. In these moments, wartime enemies vanish, because they challenge the nation's ability to ignore race as a characteristic of evil.

This brings us to the final leg of this genealogy's tour around the circuit of culture, concluding at the moment of regulation. It begins with the comics code and its regulation of absence, first looking at how Captain America comics adhere to the code, even when they consider with breaking it. Next, I find three moments when Captain America actually did violate the code's precepts. Usually this was a result of the code's gatekeepers and the comic's producers negotiating the accuracy of the code in relation to the nation's development. After the adherence and violation of these regulated absences is examined, I will move on to the unrecorded absences where the narrative assumes a group of people should be invisible. African-Americans, multi-faceted women, Native-Americans, homosexuals, the Viet Cong and Arab terrorists have all been subject to this kind of banishment, intermittently becoming visible when disciplined into acceptable roles. On some occasions, these people only occur briefly, failing their audition for a present role in this national narrative. Before drawing the curtain back on the nation's history and revealing these hidden subjects, I will briefly introduce the establishment of the comics code and its advancement through three revised iterations.

## Regulated Absences: Adherence to and Violations of the Comics Code Authority

As described in the second chapter of this thesis, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was created in 1954 by a collection of comic book publishers seeking to avoid both negative publicity and government legislation (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 110).<sup>23</sup> A hired "czar" and his team, mostly comprised of women, managed the code and its approval of submitted comics while running public relations campaigns to pacify critics (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, pg. 110-115, 134). Sometimes there were struggles between the publishers and the CCA, but these usually led to a revision of the code. Eventually, as comics publishers (like *Captain America's* Marvel) moved away from newsstand distribution and toward a direct market, they gradually abandoned the code in favor of their own ratings systems. Throughout this history of the code, however, *Captain America* comics were always submitted to the CCA for approval.

Depictions of crime were a major concern for the 1950s comic book critics, so these were the primary focus of the original code. Crime and drug use were not to be presented positively, "extreme violence" was prohibited and authority was to be respected. Similarly, horror and the gore that traditionally accompanied it were forbidden. Profane language and slang were also censored. Marriage and religion were to be treated with respect and sex was not even allowed through innuendo. Finally, sexually provocative representations of women were also prohibited.

After the creation of the first code, superhero comics slumped in the 1950s but were revitalized by the early 1960s with the Silver Age of science fiction themed superheroes and Marvel's successful angst ridden formula. By the late 1960s, these superhero comics attempted to depict social relevance in their narratives, often about drug abuse. This push, together with the changing morals of the nation, led to a revision of the comics code in 1971. Some "classic"

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<sup>23</sup> For a precise listing of the code's various standards, please consult Amy Kiste-Nyberg's (1998) thorough tracing of its evolution in *Seal of approval: The history of the comics code*

depictions of horror were allowed again in this revised code and drug use could be hinted at so long as it was depicted negatively. (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 140). By 1989 there was another revision, following a struggle between the CCA and an "editorial task force" representing the various comics publishers (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, pg. 147-151). The resulting revision required positive depictions of recognizable groups and institutions; appropriate usage of language; sensitive depictions of race, gender, religion etc.; and costumes that "fall within the scope of contemporary style." This 1989 version of the code maintained previous policies regarding violence, crime and substance abuse. For Captain America and Marvel Comics at least, this no longer mattered as of 2001, when the company abandoned the code and began applying its own rating system, similar to that of the Motion Picture Association of America (Dean, 2001).

Like Captain America's narrative, when we trace the development of this code it shows a partial trajectory of the nation and its borders. For instance, when looking at the 1989 code, several paragraphs are devoted to sensitive portrayals of individuals, rejecting prejudice and embracing the civic nationalism whose prevalence we witnessed in this era during the last chapter. Likewise, the revision of the code in 1971 was prompted by a push for social realism in comics, led by a Stan Lee penned Spider-Man story that addressed drug abuse. Under the guidelines of the 1954 code, the CCA rejected the story and did not allow their seal of approval to appear on that Spider-Man issue's cover (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 139). Despite this penalty, Marvel still published the comic, primarily because the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare requested them to (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 139). Once again, the government's insertion into the comic book production process contributed to the industry's decision of what was acceptable. Marvel ignored the code, first because the government's green light signified that they wouldn't rile any legislative critics, and second because they believed

drug abuse was no longer so deplorable in society that it had to be relegated into censored absence.

This "realism" struck at the same time Marvel promoted an identity of hip intellect for its readers, while *Captain America* tackled a loss of faith in the American Dream. Spider-Man's violation of the code suggests that drug abuse should no longer be invisible, but should instead appear as a border of evil, challenging the nation much the same way as Captain America's apathy did. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the validity of these absences are determined, as the violation of the drug use standard came from a collaboration between government officials, the publishing industry and the cultural gatekeepers of the code. Such moments seem to accompany the shifts in the nation's borders, paralleling their development.

When these violations of the code occur, I note them as indicators of such shifts, where the nation's borders of absence are redefined. When content is missing from the comic, however, because of adherence to the code's regulation, the unacceptable is made invisible, maintaining those borders of absence. There is however, an infinity of things that are absent from Captain America's narrative, and not all of them are necessarily borders to the nation. The code then serves as a guideline for locating some of these borders of absence. Each era of the code regulates these borders, with each revision detailing this genealogy's mapping of the shifting fluid nation. It is the only record of the intentional omissions of such limits, capturing myth's disintegration of history at work when an entire aspect of American life is bowdlerized and ignored.

I will begin by briefly explaining some moments where the Captain America narrative adheres to the code. These are regulated absences, beginning in 1948 with Marvel's own in-house decency code, and ending with their dismissal of the CCA in 2001. Next, I track moments

where the narrative violates the code, crossing the regulated borders of absence and suggesting a tectonic shift within the nation. Each of these—adherences and violations—assist in capturing as close to a full trajectory of the nation's changing nature as this genealogy may get.

### *Adherence to the Code: Regulated Borders*

The adherence to the code by the publishers of the various Captain America series suggests the possible concern that violating these standards was antithetical to a character who symbolized the nation. When Captain America complies with the code then, it signifies his maintenance of the nation's borders, albeit in a different manner from his usual battles with borders of evil. This border protection instead keeps the unacceptable out of the narrative. Therefore, positive images of crime, drug use, extreme violence, profanity, slang and any disrespect for social institutions like religion and marriage are absent when the code calls for such absence. To briefly provide evidence for this border maintenance, I will detail just three instances where the narrative flirts with violating the code, but ultimately adheres to it. This begins with the required depiction of crime as evil, the vilification of drug use and the fictionalized representation of real social groups and organizations.

Crime, the biggest concern of comic book critics in the 1950s, has almost always been depicted negatively in the Captain America narrative. This is unsurprising, given the amount of attention the code gives to crime, its representation and its methods. The 1954 code was so stringent in fact that the word "crime" could not even appear on a comic's cover. This may be one reason why crime has consistently been a border of evil for superheroes like Captain America. Not only does it threaten the well being of the imagined community by breaking laws,



but it also provokes the fear that media entertainment will somehow affect consumers negatively by glorifying criminal behavior.

The best example of Captain America's rejection of crime comes decades after the code first enforced it, with his romantic flirtation with the super-villain Diamondback. As discussed last chapter, these characters go on a date in 1990, but only after Diamondback accepts Captain America's disciplining of her deviancy, both as an independent woman and as a criminal (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 371). For Captain America to accept Diamondback as an occasional adventuring partner was already controversial with the reader letters published in the comic. For him to romantically accept her, however, required that she denounce her criminal past, subjecting herself to his judgment. If Diamondback had stayed a criminal while dating the symbol of the nation, *Captain America* would have challenged the code's demand that crime be presented negatively. Instead, Diamondback repents, accepts her discipline and resolves to abandon crime to become a sales clerk to continue their relationship. The narrative, though testing it slightly, did not cross this border of crime. Instead, it reinforces crime's unacceptability by showing that a criminal would be willing to forsake this lifestyle for the love and approval of the nation, as represented by Captain America. This suggests that crime as a border of evil has not shifted over the years, one of the few borders to remain so static.<sup>24</sup>

By 1971, the code was revised so that the "realism" of drug abuse and other social issues could be addressed in comics, provided they were depicted negatively. Captain America again swayed along the edge of the nation's borders in 1987, when the hero goes after The Power Broker, a corporation selling super-power bestowing narcotics to wrestlers (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 328). After he's almost forced by the company's scientists to take the drugs, Captain

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<sup>24</sup> However, what gets defined as crime might change over these eras, reflected in the changing patterns of existing laws.

America ponders the benefits of the increased strength they would give him, almost deciding to take them. He eventually decides not to, stating that he rejects them because he "enjoys the challenge of beating the odds" too much (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 328). As the issue closes, he stands alone in the shadows, wondering if he has made a "bad decision." The other characters who take the drug are not all depicted negatively, though eventually it is revealed that the narcotic can potentially kill its users. Although he again tested the permeability of a regulated border of absence, by not taking the drugs and eventually realizing they're dangers Captain America obeys the code and maintains the nation.

Finally, in 1989 the code paid particular attention to characterizations of race, gender, religion and nationality, rejecting any demeaning depictions of them. Furthermore, recognizable organizations and institutions had to be fictitious so that their activities could not be "clearly identifiable with the routine activities of any real group" (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998). *Captain America* followed suit and although he challenged racist, misandrist and jingoistic groups, they were always fictional. For instance, rather than confront The National Organization for Women about feminist misandry, Captain America fights The Femizons, super-villain feminists (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 389). Similarly, instead of challenging Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Center, he engaged with The Watchdogs, a fictional group of terrorist censorship advocates (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 385). This way the narrative followed the code's guidelines, not targeting any particular group by name. In addition, as described last chapter, in the 1990s Captain America demonstrated the growing recognition of civic nationalism, fighting these fictional groups that challenged this dogma of the nation. That the code was constructed in 1989 with such attention to issues of prejudice, provides further evidence that bigotry was no longer acceptable to the nation and was now a firmly delineated border.

These three examples of Captain America rejecting crime, drug use and prejudice show us his adherence to the comics code and the regulation of borders to the nation. If in any of these moments the hero were to accept these borders, it would disrupt his symbolism, derailing his narration of the imagined community. Adherence to the code, although it happens much more often and in less traceable ways, is another way that this comic book preserves the nation's borders, keeping the unacceptable invisible or marginalized as immoral.

### *Crossing Borders: Violations of the Comics Code*

When the Captain America narrative violates the code's restrictions it suggests one of two things. Either, Captain America is failing to protect the nation's borders, or these violations are a result of those borders shifting and slowly being redefined. If it were the former, the code's administrators likely would not have allowed the comic to bear the seal of the CCA's approval. It is possible that the comic would stop reflecting those borders in other ways as well, such as when production crises at the publisher manifested as a directionless narrative.<sup>25</sup> More likely however, the comic and its creators were testing the borders of absence as outlined by the code, finding those restrictions to be out of step with their experiences within the nation. If these borders proved porous, then the comic ignored them, redrawing the outline of the community as imagined through this narrative. I found three such moments within this genealogy, beginning in the 1970s as the book showed disrespect for authority and institutions, one of the primary factors of Jewett and Lawrence's "Captain America Complex" theory (1984, 2002, 2003). In the 1980s, *Captain America* further challenged the code by using increasingly hyper-sexualized images of women, a common element of the superhero genre at the time. Finally, in 2001 Marvel Comics

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 2 for such moments.

completely separated itself from the code's judgment, leaving the CCA and creating their own in-house ratings system. Not much of the content changed immediately, but after the events of September 11, 2001 the comic suddenly stopped substituting real people and groups with fictional labels. Now Arab terrorism appeared in detail, alongside figures like Fidel Castro and locations like Guantanamo Bay. The regulated borders of absence are still maintained, but more through a ratings system developed to separate juvenile and adult readers, a system that still conceals the unacceptable from this narrative.

*No Respect: Government Corruption and Anti-Nationalism.* The first time I noticed the narrative intentionally violating the code's regulation of absence came in the 1970s, when Captain America began to lose faith in the American government and its authority. General Standards Part A, Section 3 of the 1971 code states:

Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall not be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority. If any of these is depicted committing an illegal act, it must be declared as an exceptional case and that the culprit pay the legal price. (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998)

As previously covered in Chapter 3, a major border of evil for Captain America in the 1970s and 1980s was government corruption, first appearing in the form of an evil President of the United States committing suicide in the Oval Office after the hero unmasked him as the head of a secret empire (*Captain America and Falcon*, 175). This continued with the hero disrespecting military figures and uncovering further federal corruption in *The Commission*

(*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 233, 332-334, 337, 350). One issue even subtly referenced the real-life Reagan administration's problems, stating that it didn't need any more bad publicity than it already had (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 333). None of these examples features these officials paying "the legal price" as required by the code. The evil president commits suicide and one member of The Commission is killed by The Red Skull, but none are brought before the law. Because these villains aren't prosecuted in court, the narrative continues to disrespect authority, suggesting that the government is such a weak and ineffectual institution that it can't judge and punish its own corruption correctly.

This then is a moment where the comic violates the code, and yet still receives a seal of approval, because the regulation no longer works as a border to the nation. Originally, such dissent against authority was likely regulated because the nation desired social conformity in the Red Scare 1950s (Gerstle, 2001, p. 238). After the anti-war and civil rights movements of the late 1960s, however, anti-nationalist thought was more acceptable (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 327-328). Even though the code still forbade it, disrespect for institutional authority was no longer an opaque border of the nation and now could be challenged by Captain America. The nation began to distrust the government and the military so much that its previous anxieties about dissent were dispelled. That this border was tested in the 1970s and Captain America continued to disrespect authority into the 1980s suggests that the producers found a shift in the nation's borders and represented it within the narrative, regardless of the code's standards. Because these issues still bore the seal of the CCA's approval, it suggests that the gatekeepers of the code who judged these comics, also found corruption within government to be a tolerable manifestation of evil. A collaboration between the producers and the regulators of *Captain America* then, was able to

more accurately narrate the nation's understanding of evil, despite their violation of the code's recorded border of absence.

*Undue Emphasis: The Hyper-Sexualization of Comics.* Another specific regulation of the code was violated as comics moved away from newsstands and into the direct market of the 1980s. The 1971 revision of the code specifically states that "Females shall be drawn realistically without undue emphasis on any physical quality" and that "Suggestive and salacious illustration is unacceptable" (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998). Despite this, superhero comics increasingly featured hyper-sexualized images of women in the 1980s and *Captain America* was no exception (Bukatman, 1994). Diamondback, the series' primary female character in the late 1980s, was increasingly drawn as a figure of sexual desire, her "physical qualities" receiving exactly the "undue emphasis" that the code forbade. This progressed in fact to a point where her pink spandex outfit was continually being ripped, exposing her skin suggestively. For instance, in one issue she assists Captain America by boarding a yacht and distracting its owner with her body, her suit shredded from a previous battle. All of these moments of hyper-sexualization represent another shift in the nation's borders, no longer restricted by the code.

Partially, this change came from the comic industry's move to a direct market distribution system, now able to cater to its increasingly adolescent (and adult) male readers with sexy illustrations of women. Another possible factor may have been the nation's own shift toward a more hyper-sexualized culture. This kind of representation increased in acceptability, culminating in 1989 with a vague rewording of the code's restriction. "Costumes in a comic book will be considered to be acceptable if they fall within the scope of contemporary styles and fashions," the new code said (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998). Whatever the cause, the comic had tested the

flexibility of these restrictions until they changed, redefining the limits of the code. With every issue, the creators of comics were able to experiment with what they could get past the code's gatekeepers, drawing progressively larger breasts and tighter costumes. The gatekeepers in turn continued to interpret these hyper-sexualized images as acceptable, neither suggestive nor salacious. As with the comic's disrespect for authority, collaboration between the moments of production and regulation helped to determine what was acceptable within the nation's borders.

*In-House Regulation.* Rather than continue to peck away at each standard one at a time, in 2001 Marvel Comics decided that the CCA's regulations were no longer necessary. Comics no longer had the negative publicity of the 1950s hanging over their head and the government had lost interest in them completely. As a result, the code's regulated borders of absence were replaced with Marvel's own rating system, which mimicked that of the Motion Picture Association of America (Dean, 2001). Make no mistake; absences are still regulated, just not by an external agency and now for different categories of consumers: adults, teens, children, etc. The borders of absence are now maintained by the moment of production in the circuit of culture, rather than the moment of regulation. When Marvel decides that these borders have shifted, they no longer need to collaborate with the appointed regulatory gatekeepers at the CCA, but can now alter what is or is not acceptable on their own terms.

One of the interesting shifts that accompanied this replacement comes into direct opposition of the last revision of the CCA's code. One section of it mandates that if organizations are to be portrayed negatively, they must be fictionalized. This is the same standard that Captain America adhered to above, criticizing feminism and censorship with faux versions of real organizations. Yet, after September 11, 2001, the book did not always feel the necessity to

confront the nation's borders with fictional symbols. As previously discussed, Arab terrorism was a major anxiety for the nation after that event. It was thoroughly represented within the Captain America narrative, not by faux terrorism, but by ethnically identifiable Arabs. Al Qaeda and other real organizations still do not show up, but the similarities between the terrorists that the hero battles and the real life one threatening the nation were unmistakable. The comic even had the hero travel to Guantanamo Bay in 2004, where he met Fidel Castro as he chased escaped terrorist across Cuba (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 23). While this moment was no longer strictly monitored by regulation, it does provide support for my earlier assertion that this was a moment when the nation experienced a kind of schizophrenia about its civic nationalism. I would argue that the 1989 CCA code's insistence on tolerance and fairness to all peoples was a direct result of the nation's increasing adherence to civic nationalism. Yet, when confronted with the shock of 9/11, the imagined community struggled with that dogma, depicting both racism and ethnic representations as evil. Here, the sudden decision to include identifiable ethnicity and figures further demonstrates the nation's psychological struggle, because Arab terrorism had become such a border of evil that it *had* to manifest itself symbolically, regardless of previous resistance against such ethnic depictions.

These three moments of violation show us then that the narrative did test the permeability of some of its regulated borders of absence. In some cases, if it found them to be porous, the narrative continued to violate the code in order to redefine what was acceptable to the American nation. The nation is constantly shifting these borders, but neither the producers of this comic or the gatekeepers of the code are necessarily attuned to when these shifts occur. Each one tests and restricts the other, resulting in a collaboration that attempts to narrate the nation's development as precisely as possible. The *Captain America* version of the nation then, isn't always meticulous in



its representation of the nation and its context, but through such violations as these it attempts to keep up with the imagined community's fluid nature.

### Implicit Absences: Sudden Revelations of the Invisible

Although examining when this narrative adhered to or violated the comics code allows us to trace certain shifts within the nation, it does not account for some unregulated borders of absence. Some people—such as African-Americans, women, Native Americans, homosexuals and certain enemies of war—were so marginalized that their repression was not even evident within regulation. These groups were completely invisible, so much so that even the code couldn't record their presence. As the nation evolved, however, these groups were accepted within the imagined community and suddenly became visible in this comic's representation of it. In order to account for these absences, with no recorded guideline available to us, we have to trace them backwards, starting with their sudden revelation as members of the nation. By performing this kind of reverse tracking, I have found several moments when the invisible suddenly become visible to Captain America.

The first of these examples comes when African-Americans were completely hidden by this comic until the late 1960s when The Falcon and The Black Panther made their debut as Marvel's first black heroes. Their absence is not however recognized and it is only decades later that Captain America actually reflexively looks back at the nation's racialized past in the mini-series *Truth: Red, White and Black*.

On occasion, those that become visible within the narrative are quickly relegated back into absence. These moments act like failed auditions, when the narrative tests the acceptability of these groups, only to determine that they are not yet ready to be brought out into visibility

within this nationalized story. These failed auditions are another revelation that analysis of the Captain America narrative brings us that are not paralleled by Gerstle's (2004) similar tracing of the nation's progress. In all the cases that such failed auditions occur, the comic book was written by J.M. DeMatteis. Whether he intentionally exposed these previously absent groups, or just expressed the nation's own testing of them, after DeMatteis' run all three disappeared again.

The first of these failed auditions was from multi-faceted women. Female characters have always been visible in Captain America comics, but their roles were marginalized either to that of the girlfriend or the desirable femme fatale. In the 1980s they are allowed more complex identities when the hero begins dating Bernie Rosenthal, a Jewish law student. Unfortunately, this complexity was reduced in the 1990s and women were again left to choose between two simple identities.

The other failed auditions involved two groups—Native Americans and homosexual men—who become visible in the early 1980s and then, as quickly as they are included, they suddenly become invisible again. Neither returns to this narrative in any long-term role and their disappearance suggests that the nation still isn't quite sure on which side of its borders they belong.

Finally, I will examine when this comic forces groups of people into absence comes during periods of war. When the nation celebrates civic nationalism, these periods become difficult for the narrative to represent and ethnic enemies of war such as the Viet Cong and Arab terrorists are made invisible.

Often when these absences become visible, they do so as disciplined figures that need to split their identity, with one side representing their intermediate culture, while the other behaves the way the nation (and Captain America) expects them to. Being a comic book narrative, these

splits usually manifest themselves as secret superhero identities. Whether the superhero portrays the disciplined American or the internal other depends on the situation. Beginning then with African-Americans we will see this psychological division occur with that group's first superhero representation, The Falcon.

### *Authenticity vs. Invisibility: African-Americans in Captain America*

Beginning with Superman in the 1930s, ethnic identity was often hidden by superheroes (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 175-176). In Superman's case, his hidden identity was simultaneously his fictional origin as a Kryptonian alien, and his real origin was the symbolic impulse of his two Jewish creators to talk and act like "authentic" Americans (Gerstle, 2001, p. 176). This was a symptom of the nation at the time, enacting Theodore Roosevelt's racialized tradition (Gerstle, 2001). For African-Americans at the time, this resulted in segregation, even from blood banks and within the military. Fearing that either strong or submissive representations of African-Americans would anger the public, movie regulations excluded all of their roles completely, making them invisible in that medium (Gerstle, 2001, p. 208). It is unclear whether comics' producers at the time had a similar policy of eliminating African-American roles, but the Captain America comics from this era are still devoid of them.

The only moment in the 1940s when this study's random sample even found mention of African-Americans, was when Captain America fought a villain named the Black Talon in 1941. The Black Talon was a Caucasian painter, who after an automobile accident had his hand replaced with that of an African-American death row inmate (*Captain America Comics*, 9). This transplant made him malicious and he murdered his victims by choking them with this "demonic" hand, later capturing their corpse poses in still life renderings. It's clear from this

example—that didn't even show the inmate this hand was taken from—that African-Americans hovered at the periphery of the nation's awareness, only briefly becoming noticeable when they were interpreted as a source of corruption and bestial impulse.

Amy Kiste-Nyberg (1998, p. 30) claims that the 1954 comics code didn't help encourage any further discourse about social roles and racism in comics. The censorship of the code impacted the social stances comics could take, because it banned race even from discussion within the books. Once again, the code regulated a border of absence, one that kept race invisible well into the 1960s. Contributing to this invisibility, was a fear on the part of comics publishers that the stores they sold to in Southern states would return comics if they portrayed African-Americans positively (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 71). African-Americans were hidden within this medium, because the nation still found them unacceptable.

The rise of civic nationalism, due in no small part to the civil rights movement, resulted in a shift in the racist nation that kept African-Americans invisible to comics. To demonstrate Captain America's awareness of this shift, in 1967 and 1968 he began to team up with the Black Panther and the Falcon, two black superheroes, against racist enemies like the Red Skull and Baron Zemo (*Tales of Suspense*, 99; *Captain America*, Vol. 1, 117-120). Suddenly, black men were visible, revealed to be champions fighting for the nation's security just like Captain America and as his partners and equals. Around the same time that black heroes began to appear in *Captain America*, African-American criminals also started appearing. The black superhero seems to have made black villains a possibility as well, with the former necessary to punish the later, since the white Captain America couldn't battle African-Americans during the rise of civic nationalism. But this visibility came with a price, one that required the black heroes to be

disciplined out of their ethnic roles and into a split "authentic" American identity, much like Superman was in the 1930s.

As explained in the last chapter, this discipline came for Falcon when he had to choose between his ethnic background and his superhero identity. As Sam "Snap" Wilson, the character fluctuated between being a hoodlum and a social worker. As the Falcon, however, he was able to combat African-American crime, while civic nationalism kept Captain America away from it. In the 1970s then, African-Americans were allowable in this comic if they developed an alter ego to punish unacceptable internal others. Other black characters were usually criminals, or like Falcon's girlfriend Leila, wary of the dominant culture. The only trace of Falcon's Harlem identity when he's in costume is his usage of blaxploitation style dialogue, referring for instance to Captain America as "white man" and Sharon Carter as "mama." He was not a fully developed African-American character, but a disciplined other, allowed into visibility as long as he repressed his ethnicity behind the costume of a superhero. As Captain America (symbol of the nation) is the one whose acceptance Falcon desires, the comic suggests that the nation would only accept African-Americans as long as they behaved like "authentic" Americans, assimilating by leaving their racial identity and culture behind.

When the Captain America narrative reached the 1980s however, the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and other directors of American identity might have refrained from racist language but it continued to construct African-Americans as an internal other (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 358-359). Reflecting this construction of national identity, Falcon disappears from the comic around this time, only occasionally showing up. A Caucasian replaces him, the rehabilitated faux Bucky from the 1950s, no longer racist and now calling himself Nomad. The book continued to struggle with African-American roles, as a third Bucky appeared, this time an illiterate black man.

Readers found this depiction racist and the book struggled to make this new character more three-dimensional. It wasn't until 2003, however, that a Captain America comic truly created complex roles for African-Americans.

Kyle Baker and Robert Morales' mini-series *Truth: Red, White and Black* (2004) had several African-American protagonists, all subjects of the same 1940s Super Soldier program that created Captain America. One of these men even becomes the "black Captain America" celebrated by African-American culture as an underground icon for decades. These characters have fully developed roles that examine the very way African-Americans were disciplined into acceptance within that era of the nation. More importantly, while Falcon was the first African-American superhero, these characters are the first to acknowledge the racism of the nation in the 1930s and 1940s. *Truth* doesn't just make African-Americans visible, but it also reveals the Captain America narrative's own dehistoricization of the military's segregation and brutal treatment of black soldiers. Captain America himself acknowledges this, but still does not recognize his own racist behavior at that time. For now, it appears, this is as close to guilt as Captain America's narration of the nation appears to get. It concedes that the military and government at the time were racialized institutions, but still maintains the illusion that the nation itself (as symbolized by Captain America) was never prejudiced.

This transition began with African-Americans' invisibility in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, to the sudden revelation that they were a part of the nation in 1968. Even though they were visible, they had to perform as disciplined alter egos, keeping the nation's anxiety about their ethnicity under control by punishing African-American crime. In the Reagan 1980s, even this concession disappears, though the readers once again challenge the producers to maintain an African-American character that isn't stereotypical. By 2004, after civic nationalism had fully set into the

imagined community, this comic was finally able to confront, albeit in a limited way, the nation's racialized past, still blind however to the racial conflicts of its present.

### *The Invisible Multi-Faceted Woman*

While women were never invisible in comics the way that African-Americans were, their roles were extremely limited. They were either allowed to be Captain America's girlfriend, or a femme fatale that tantalized him and the readers. Partly, this second role stemmed from the early national assumption that women should not operate in the public sphere and are dangerous when they do (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 175-176). This representation wasn't exclusive in Captain America; Superman, for instance, represented this with his girlfriend Lois Lane, a combination of those two roles, always getting into trouble because she insisted on being a journalist rather than a homemaker. Even when superhero comics were in decline in the 1950s, and romance comics took the lead, most women were established as needing men, while independent women were lusty and dangerous, individuals that men should avoid (Wright, 2001). Comics in general seem to have established that one role or the other could be portrayed, but anything in between was absent. While roles for women may have broadened in other comics, even some superhero ones, the multi-faceted woman eluded Captain America for years, invisible within this narrative.

This limitation of female roles was not just because comics were mostly constructed by and for men. The preservation of the comics code had a part to play as well, as most of its reviewers were women (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 115). Since women maintained the borders of absence, the code indicates a feminization of comics, likely connected to their previous relegation to the domestic world within the private sphere. In this sense, the code played a "mother role" with comics like *Captain America* (Kiste-Nyberg, 1998, p. 115). This matronly

editing limited women's roles to ingénue girlfriends that the comic consumer "sons" should desire, while the femme fatale represented the woman those boys should never bring home. This was by no means the only factor, however, as the dominance of male consumers and creators certainly contributed to the tight costumes, suggestive postures and exaggerated body parts of the femme fatale. As the average age of readers grew steadily closer toward adulthood, and comics left newsstands for the direct market, these depictions increased significantly. If anything, the motherly code reeled these hyper-sexualized images in, so that ingénues had balanced representation to the lusty succubae that haunted these heroes.

Two major examples of this limitation of female roles occur in the *Captain America* narrative, accompanied by a slew of hyper-sexualized villainesses. First, Captain America's love interest in the 1960s, 1970s, 1990s and in the current storyline is Sharon Carter, an American espionage agent. Sharon first appeared in *Captain America* in the 1960s, as the women's movement was ratcheting up in intensity and she often reminded the reader that women's roles had evolved. "Women have changed a lot since the 1950s in case you haven't figured it out yet," she yells at the sexist version of Bucky in 1972 (*Captain America and Falcon*, 156). This wasn't quite true, however, because rather than have a multi-faceted female character, the narrative merged the two roles to which women had been relegated. Sharon, like the Falcon, struggled between two roles, first as Captain America's girlfriend and then as her alter ego, the sexy and assertive Agent 13. As Agent 13, Sharon wasn't exactly a femme fatale because she didn't always use her sexuality to defeat her enemies, but she still had that familiar combination of independence, danger and sex appeal. For years, she showed mixed feelings when her missions paralleled Captain America's, putting either of them in danger. In 1970, this came to a head when Captain America demanded that Sharon be relegated to a "desk job," so that her dangerous career



didn't distract him anymore (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 124). Sharon tells him she'll do "what you want, my dearest," resolving to "leave the danger to you now my dear." This attempt to reduce Sharon to solely the girlfriend role did not work, however, for when she discovers Captain America has walked into a trap she comes to his defense as Agent 13. When he is saved, the American hero is angry because she broke her word and had again assumed a role that was independent of him. While the 1940s and 1950s women were reduced to one role or the other, the late 1960s and 1970s woman had to assume both, an awkward attempt at gender equality.

As Sharon tried to incorporate her independence into her role, Captain America disciplined her, trying to keep her as his girlfriend, not as the risky, autonomous super-agent. Like the split between Sam Wilson and The Falcon, Sharon has to split her identity with Agent 13, struggling to reconcile these roles. She disappears in the late 1970s, presumed dead as a victim of Dr. Faustus, but returns in 1995. The later storyline states that Sharon was assigned a covert mission requiring her to sever ties with Captain America, resulting in this fifteen year absence. "Cut loose behind enemy lines," she returns to him as a suicidal, nihilistic, anti-nationalist (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 446). The depiction is clear; having chosen her autonomy over being just a girlfriend, Sharon was no longer an acceptable symbol of femininity, now representing ideas that were antithetical to the hero and the nation he embodied.

Even as she continues in the comic today, Sharon is only acceptable as long as she struggles with these two roles. If she chooses one identity over the other, she becomes problematic, veering too far in one direction. For instance, when she leans too far toward her girlfriend role, ignoring her orders to protect Captain America, the villains exploit this and hypnotize her into assassinating him (*Captain America*, Vol. 5, 22-25). Even in 2007, the

narrative's idea of a multi-faceted woman only actually navigates between two possible identities: girlfriend and independent agent.

There is a similar split female persona when Captain America disciplines Diamondback in the late 1980s. As explained previously, Diamondback was forced to choose between her independent criminal lifestyle and a submissive role as Captain America's girlfriend. This discipline restricts Diamondback's femininity as much as it punishes her criminality. Again, the female character fluctuates between alter egos, either Diamondback the sexy bad girl, or Rachel Leighton the submissive girlfriend. As with other moments in this genealogy, when this national narrative is confronted with contradictory identities, they manifest as the super hero trope of an alter ego. Like Sharon, Diamondback struggles to compromise these roles, eventually choosing to remain a femme fatale. When she does this, she can no longer be Captain America's girlfriend and literally becomes a "bad girl" when she starts her own mercenary unit called "Bad Girls, Inc." Unable to reconcile the only two roles available to women in this narrative, Diamondback (like Sharon) was then written out of it.

The femme fatale role was further perpetuated by a bevy of Captain America villainesses. Two instances of these villainesses, both claiming to be feminists, especially demonstrate how limited women were within this narrative. First, Captain America fought the female villain Viper in the 1970s and the 1990s, a symbol of nihilism unacceptable to the nation. Viper is also represented as a feminist, punishing male villains when they express chauvinism (*Captain America and Falcon*, 180). However, her feminism ends there, never expressed in any philosophy and ironically paired with the typical hyper-sexualized body of a femme fatale. Feminism is further distorted when Captain America faces the misandrist villain Superia (implying superiority just in name alone), attempting to create a feminist community of super-

villains aboard a giant cruise ship called Superbia (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 389). Although they speak about feminism, only misandry is represented, and there isn't much philosophy about women's roles beyond their superiority to men. Furthermore, all of the women lounge around the ship in bikinis, portraying feminists as lusty and dangerous, the same old tropes of the femme fatale identity from the 1950s. These women were villains to Captain America because their misandry challenged civic nationalism, and their female identities within the nation couldn't be multi-faceted, reduced to simple symbols of desire and risk.

In all the issues that this study sampled randomly, only one female was characterized beyond the restriction of these two disparate identities. This is where multi-faceted women are given an audition in the narrative. In the early 1980s, after Sharon Carter disappears, Captain America meets and dates Bernie Rosenthal, a Jewish law student. Bernie's ethnicity is frequently discussed, yet she never has to split her identity or be disciplined by the hero. While she plays a girlfriend role, Bernie is not subservient to Captain America and has a multi-faceted personality. In one issue she watches television wrestling, surprising Captain America with her un-ladylike devout fandom. In another, she confronts her community's homeless problem while Captain America is off fighting evil. Even though some letters called for Bernie to become a superheroine, she never did so and the creators even mocked such a forced conversion with a spoof issue that turned her into "Bernie America," upsetting Captain America because of her superior heroism (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 289). Unlike Sharon Carter and Diamondback, Bernie was able to represent a dynamic woman, primarily because she was not forced to choose between being either submissive or tantalizing. Bernie was slowly written out of the story, however, having moved Midwest to further her education, eventually replaced by Diamondback.

Apparently, she failed her audition. The Captain America narrated nation perhaps did not want a multi-faceted woman as much as it wanted a sexy criminal to be disciplined into obedience.

What is absent in these comics then is not women, but their representation as multi-faceted, complex people. Besides this one example in the 1980s, women are represented within the nation as either of these two roles, or an unstable combination of both. Partially this is a result of comics being a male-centric medium, but I believe the mother role that the comics code played also contributed to these limitations. Bernie Rosenthal, the one example of a well-rounded female character, was present for only a few years in the 1980s and then this split female persona returned with Diamondback's introduction. Brief moments of visibility are common to *Captain America's* attempts at inclusion, and like Bernie, usually occur in the early 1980s. The next section will examine two of these moments, when Native Americans and homosexuals were suddenly present in the narrative, only to quickly disappear back into absence again.

### *There and Gone Again: Native Americans and Homosexuality*

While some invisible groups like African-Americans became present and were no longer absent from this narration of the nation, others were only momentarily visible, returning to obscurity when the nation wasn't sure about their acceptability. So far, I have referred to these moments as failed auditions, our first example being the brief appearance of a multi-faceted female character. This happened again, to both Native Americans and homosexuals in the 1980s, briefly present and then never seen again. Unlike African-Americans and women, neither of these were disciplined by Captain America, because they weren't visible for long enough to be assimilated into American "authenticity." Native-Americans were however symbolized by a

similar split identity syndrome to these other groups, manifesting as the Noble/Savage division common to their representation (Deloria, 1998). *Captain America* does not seem to be sure whether these two groups are acceptable yet to nation, so it returns them to absence, rather than falsely narrate the nation's experience.

Native Americans first appear in *Captain America* in 1984, when the hero is attacked by the Black Crow, a wheelchair-bound Navajo man who gains superpowers when "great spirits" possess him (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 292).<sup>26</sup> These spirits of "old America" show him visions of "the white man" destroying the nation with guns and alcohol, asking him to replace Captain America as its symbol. When empowered by these spirits, Black Crow wears furs, feathers and body paint, becoming both a superhero and an image of what Philip Deloria calls the noble/savage performance (Deloria, 1998). This performed Indian identity has a history of narrating American identity, as a fractured desire for both civil order and unhindered freedom (Deloria, 1998). Black Crow performs nobility as a recognizable superhero symbol, while demonstrating savagery with his animalistic costume and a violent attack on Captain America during the holy holiday of Christmas. The noble/savage split is further evidenced by the Black Crow's reasoning for his attack:

On this night so sacred to your people, this night when the spirit of your America is at its peak, retribution shall be mine! When you die, Captain, the sins of your fathers die with you! The scales will have found balance, the restless spirits of my people will have found harmony once more! And in that harmony, the past and the present can merge... become

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<sup>26</sup> The secret identity of a Native-American superhero as an debilitated man may also suggest that these peoples were considered incapacitated in their current state.

transformed... and this land we love so, can birth a future worthy of both our peoples!

(*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 292)

The Black Crow is "noble" in his attempts to fix the nation, and to bring it harmony. His means however, requiring retribution, especially on a Christian holiday, threaten the nation with savagery.

Unlike the Falcon's split identity, Black Crow's noble/savagery does not grant him acceptance within the nation. As Deloria (1998) states, the noble/savage performance is necessary to displace Indians from American consciousness, so that their presence does not remind of us of their true circumstances. Captain America fulfills this displacement by losing his fight against Black Crow, bowing before him and then hugging him. In response, Black Crow laughs hysterically and then leaves, stating, "The Earth Spirit is now pleased." As quickly as Native Americans became present to this narrative, they disappear into absence again, displaced by the noble/savage depiction of their existence. The nation, seemingly desiring some kind of closure with its hidden members, doesn't seem to want Native American present within its borders, as after the noble/savage is reconciled, the Black Crow vanishes, taking the nation's guilt with him. Rather than assume civic nationalism has embraced their existence like African Americans, the narrative briefly acknowledges Native Americans and then shunts them off into invisibility again.

Similarly, homosexuality was banished from the nation, unacceptable within its borders and never seen in this narrative until the early 1980s. This is unsurprising, given the various negative associations with homosexuality prior to that. In the 1940s, homosexuality was the only unforgivable boundary within the fraternity of the military that brought together ethnicities that

had never been connected before (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 223-224). This denunciation continued into the 1950s, as homosexuality was associated with communism (Gerstle, 2001, p. 254). Its absence afterward—even if it had not already been rejected by American society—was required by the CCA, forbidding sexual "abnormalities" and "perversion." These were probably code words for homosexuality, so thoroughly unacceptable in American discourse that even here in regulation it could only be suggested.

When a homosexual first appeared then in *Captain America*, it was through indirect allusion and innuendo, much like their "presence" in the code. Captain America reconnects with Arnie Roth, an old friend of his from the 1940s. Arnie never "admits" to being a homosexual, but hints around it a lot, saying things like, "For the past ten years, I've been... rooming with a guy, my—best friend. With him along for the ride, I've been able to handle the hard times without going nuts" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 270). Arnie's "roommate"/partner Michael is subsequently killed in an encounter with Baron Zemo, where the villain manipulates them into fighting Captain America, referring to Arnie as a "fop" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 277-278). The Red Skull later forces Arnie to debase himself, performing in make-up onstage. During the performance, Arnie refers to himself as a "sorry excuse for a man," a "menace to society," a "pariah" and a "disease" (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 296). With these hints to his sexuality, Captain America seems to understand Arnie's identity, accepting him fully and stating, "They can't corrupt your love for Michael with their lies any more than they can corrupt my love for Bernie! ... They're the pariahs! They're the disease!" This seems to signify the nation's acceptance of homosexuality, despite the code regulating it into an absence never addressed directly. Unlike African-American and women, Captain America doesn't seem to want to discipline Arnie into another identity either. In fact, the Red Skull and Zemo are the ones

punishing Arnie, signifying that such discipline is antithetic to civic nationalism, as both these villains had been previously established as Nazi threats of prejudice.

Yet, despite the narrative's brief acceptance of homosexuality, it disappears, never represented here again. Michael is killed and Arnie just fades away out of the story, despite being a major ensemble character during J.M. DeMatteis' 1980s run. Like multi-faceted women and Native Americans, it seems homosexuals failed their audition for the national narrative. This suggests that despite the writer's desire to portray homosexuality as acceptable, this group of people were still at the limits of the nation. Homosexuals weren't necessarily outside of the nation, as they weren't depicted in any issues here as borders of evil. However, their absence implies that neither were they tolerable enough to remain visible, missing from any inside/outside dialectic and kept invisible to the narrative.

Both Native Americans and homosexuals then show that this narrative has the ability to briefly include symbols of oppressed peoples as parts of the nation, even though the imagined community was uncertain of their acceptability. Unlike the previous revelations of African-Americans and multi-faceted women, Captain America didn't discipline these depictions and only one of them used an alter ego to represent their identity. Rather than continue to represent these as acceptable symbols within the nation, the narrative under different creators decided to return these groups to the borders of absence.

### *Wartime Schizophrenia*

The last moment of implicit absences within this narrative comes from a collision of civic nationalism with the common wartime symptom of demonizing external others. As stated previously, often when the state goes to war, the nation responds with xenophobia, narrowing



and sharpening its identity (Gerstle, 2001, p. 9). However, as the dogma of civic nationalism became progressively more prevalent after the 1960s, this kind of racist depiction of foreign enemies was no longer acceptable. Twice during this narrative, Captain America participates in an American war by fighting such xenophobic representations, only to be reeled in by the civic nationalism of the era. This then results in a weird amnesia, where the hero forgets his previous fights with racialized others, while the narrative pretends they do not exist, despite the very real presence of an ongoing war. First, this occurs in 1964 during the Vietnam War, with Captain America briefly confronting the Viet Cong and then suddenly forgetting there was a war, ignoring its effects on the nation. Second, Arab terrorism was demonized in 2002 after 9/11 occurred and the War on Terror began. Yet, only three years later, despite an ongoing American anxiety about Arab terrorism, such depictions disappeared as Captain America struggled to reconcile his reactionary hatred with his principles of tolerance. I have covered both of these moments previously in this genealogy, when addressing their significance as borders of evil, so I will only briefly describe them here in relation to their transformation into borders of absence.

The Viet Cong were one of the first enemies Captain America fought after returning to comics in 1964. Though less racially demonized than previous depictions of wartime Asian villains, they were still stereotyped (*Tales of Suspense*, 61). After this single issue, however, they remain absent from the comic for the duration of the war,<sup>27</sup> replaced by World War II flashbacks and racist villains. A combination of reader feedback, Marvel's desire to appear contemporary and the rise of civic nationalism all contributed to this absence. As the nation struggled with its racialized past to become a more inclusionary imagined construction that did not judge others by their race or nationality, it was unable to continue to define itself in opposition to xenophobic

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<sup>27</sup> At least from the issues reviewed here from a random sample.

enemies. The Viet Cong shifted from a border of evil to a border of absence as the nation transformed.

Similarly, the shock of 9/11 and the consequent War on Terror resulted in an influx of Arab terrorist villains in the 2002 issues of *Captain America*. Unlike the circumstances during Vietnam, civic nationalism was already a well-established dogma of the American nation in this era. When Captain America continuously confronted Arab villains then, he simultaneously had to reiterate his adherence to that anti-prejudice principle, justifying his battles as ideologically rather than racially motivated. Finally, the narrative could no longer take this schizophrenic reaction and Arab terrorists disappeared from the book entirely in 2005. Now, when terrorism appears, the ethnicity of the attackers is vague, often hidden behind masks. Arab terrorism is now relegated to absence, hidden from the narrative because of the complexity of reconciling both ethnicity and prejudice as borders of evil.

Similar to his erasure of the Viet Cong, Captain America immediately began experiencing flashbacks to World War II. In both of these instances, this was a manifestation of the nation's desire to fight a "good war," where the enemy was universally regarded as evil and the imagined community was confident in their righteousness. Because of their racial differences (not being Caucasian), neither the Viet Cong nor Arab terrorists could function the same way as an utterly evil devil term, as Nazis could and still do. Civic nationalism then should be understood as a dominant dogma for the nation in these circumstances, rejecting the instinctual reaction to demonize enemies of war for their ethnic differences. When this kind of collision occurs, such xenophobic symbols briefly seep out, though shortly thereafter, they are relegated to borders of absence, unacceptable for this narrative to even consider, for fear that the nation might violate its adherence to civic nationalism.

## Conclusion

While the nation's borders are certainly represented by the villains in *Captain America*, they are also apparent when we observe what is purposefully absent from the comic. These absences can be regulated, as they were with the comics code, or they can be implicit assumptions, depending on the era the comic was published in. When either of these sources seems out of step with the nation's experiences, it is possible for the absence to be violated, bringing the omitted out into the open. How these absences become present is often through collaboration, between the production and regulation facets of the circuit of culture.

There have been some subjects—positive examples of criminals and drug use, together with the depiction of real organizations—which the Captain America narrative seemed to want to show, but instead adhered to the code and kept hidden. It did however violate the code on three occasions, demonstrating a forbidden disrespect for authority in the 1970s and 1980s, increasingly hyper-sexualizing women since the 1980s and discarding the code completely in 2002. Other borders of absence that weren't dictated by the code, have also become present over the years. This presence comes with a price, however, as it often requires the subjects to be disciplined into an authentic and "normal" identity. African-Americans experienced this in the late 1960s with the introduction of The Falcon. Women have either been portrayed as submissive girlfriends, dangerous femme fatales or a tense combination of the two. Native-Americans and homosexuals both had failed auditions in the early 1980s, only to be relegated again to the borders of absence when the comic changed creative teams. Finally, during wartime, both the Viet Cong and Arab terrorists were originally demonized as borders of evil, but these

representations collided with the nation's desire to reject prejudice and vanished from the narrative to resolve this tension.

The narrative intentionally denies certain subjects entry to the nation, allowing us to trace further borders by locating those left on the outside looking in. The comics code provides a record to follow some of these intentional exclusions, but some are so imperceptible that even the intention of proscription was hidden, never written down as criterion. These absences only become obvious to us when they suddenly appear, even in a restricted, wraithlike state. Gaining acceptance into the imagined community appears to be a tricky path to navigate if one is exiled from visibility like this. It requires unusual collaborations, violations of principles and subjection to the nation's almost matronly discipline. Even then, the presence these refugees gain is almost ethereal, often without fully developed roles within the narrative. It seems that the nation does not give these subjects full presence because it is not yet sure that they are welcome within it. Sometimes then, the reward of presence is unsolicited by the imagined community, its devotion to civic nationalism keeping it from fully excluding these cultural migrants, leaving them trapped in an in-between stasis. The nation then as narrated by Captain America, only fully integrates these subjects when it openly acknowledges its own suppression of them, finally admitting them past the borders of absence.

### Conclusion: Necessary Villains

A 1985 Captain America super-villain named Flag Smasher provides an excellent example to conclude this genealogy. The son of an ambassador killed in a peace demonstration gone awry, Flag Smasher decides to honor his father's dream of world harmony by demolishing symbols of nationalism. He destroys the flags lining the United Nations New York headquarters, followed by arson at a flag-manufacturing factory (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 312). Afterward, he builds up enough confidence to attack Captain America, the ultimate symbol of nationalism in his mind, embodying the imagined idea of the American nation. During the confrontation, Flag Smasher hopes to convince others to follow his cause with rhetoric, stating:

I am not against America in particular! I am against all countries... I am against the very concept of countries! I believe all men are brothers, sprung from the same primal parent. Tribalism, ethnicism, nationalism —these are all latter day concepts that in our nuclear powered world have become outmoded and dangerous! They make people think they are different... special... better than other people. This is wrong! All men are equal. No better or different than anyone else! When you say, 'I'm an American,' what you're saying is that you are separate from anyone who cannot make a similar statement. Every nation fosters the idea that it is better than all the others! This is what has brought us to warfare with our fellow beings—what has brought us to the brink of nuclear destruction! If we were to erase national boundaries and accept the essential unity of all mankind, the world would be a better place! Earth should not be divided into nations! We are the world — not a bunch of different species! (*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 312)

This rant of Flag Smasher's confronts Captain America with a threat that he and the nation never encountered before and have not since. Flag Smasher essentially presents Benedict Anderson's (1991) concept of the imagined community to the hero: that the nation is only a social construction, one that may itself be dangerous and threatening to the human beings who conceive of it. He proposes a unified globalization, something that may dispel the very idea of borders of evil. Such a world might not demonize others through inside/outside dialectics of nationality or race or gender. It sounds like a place founded on the principles of civic nationalism that occasionally echo throughout this genealogy, judging humans for their ideas and actions, rather than their identities. Unfortunately, like Anderson's nation, and Captain America himself, this utopia is just an imaginary idea.

Predictably, Captain America can't conceive of a world without national boundaries or symbols. Without these, he could not exist. Even if he became Captain Earth or Captain Humanity, he would have a difficult time knowing who to defend the imagined community from without identifiable borders. As we've seen, modern ideological conflicts between the nation's reactionary xenophobia and its adherence to civic nationalism have already stricken Captain America with an irresolvable schizophrenia. His response to Flag Smasher exhibits this same contradiction:

I believe my opponent was wrong. There is nothing harmful about having a sense of national identity or ethnic heritage. America is made up of a multitude of different groups, each of which has had its own part to contribute to American culture. Be proud of your heritage, but never let that pride make you forget that beneath it all we are all human

beings who have the same wants and needs and deserve the same respect and dignity.

(*Captain America*, Vol. 1, 312)

Essentially, Captain America and Flag Smasher are calling for the same thing: an inalienable equality of all human beings. Yet, unlike his enemy, Captain America can't let go of the security that the borders of the imagined nation bring. He invokes the idea of multiculturalism that was one popular response to the American nation's identity crisis of the 1970s, proposing that if the nation celebrated the diversity of all cultures, it could maintain its civic ideals (Gerstle, 2001, pg. 347-356). Captain America's argument for multiculturalism is however paradoxical. It is impossible to honor all the cultures and races of humanity, while continuing to maintain the nation, a concept that inherently separates people. As with many cultural artifacts of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Captain America's narrative may want to be committed to civic nationalism, but it is still sometimes inscribed with separatist rhetoric (Gerstle, 2001, p. 5). Flag Smasher, much like this genealogy, seeks to expose that contradiction, forcing us out of the safety the nation provides, a comfort Americans take for granted as being universal.

To summarize the findings of this traced trajectory of the nation's development over the last sixty-seven years requires a review of who was inside or outside its borders over that period. The shifting borders of both evil and absence, demonstrate how an artifact creates such meaning by flowing through the circuit of culture, while providing a kaleidoscopic set of contours for cartographers of the nation to follow. These then are the various interpretations the nation had for the meaning of "evil."

When *Captain America Comics* promoted wartime propaganda in the 1940s, both Nazis and Asians were demonized, without any ideological characteristics. The nation also feared the

threat of corruption from within, sometimes connected to Nazism as the "dreaded fifth column," but it often also manifested in anxieties about big business and crime. These internal borders of evil continued after the war ended, with communism replacing the Nazis, though not as universally despised. African-Americans, Native Americans, homosexuals and multi-faceted women were completely absent from the text, invisible in American culture. Borders of absence became regulated after the controversy that led to the creation of the comics code, and the medium veered toward subculture, with Captain America as one of the first casualties.

When the superhero returned to a reinvigorated superhero scene in 1964, crime was still a concern and Asians (now the Viet Cong, rather than the Japanese or Chinese or Koreans) were still vilified as enemies of war. However, the growing spread of civic nationalism in America, combined with a negotiation between the consumers and producers of this comic, negated this border of evil and the Vietnam War was banished into absence. Their presence was often replaced by returning Nazis, now expressing racism that threatened civic nationalism, using advanced technology that recalled the Cold War, stealing American's independence away from them.

By 1968, the letters forum and Marvel's constructed identity of an intelligent hipster reader led to more racist enemies, compounded by the nation's own apathy about the American Dream. African-Americans finally became visible that year with the Falcon, but had to be disciplined into fighting their own crime, so that Captain America was freed from contradicting his anti-prejudice rhetoric. Together, they defended the borders of the nation from racism, jingoism and nihilism. All these banes of civic nationalism came to a head when *Captain America* first violated the comics code, disrespecting authority in the form of a corrupt



government and an inept military. Captain America himself struggled with ennui, but eventually rose up as a symbol to excise the nation's internal malignancies.

In the mid 1970s, however, Jack Kirby returned to Captain America, frustrated with the comics industry. During his run, the borders of the nation were not clearly represented and readers and other comics professionals criticized him for it. The rest of the 1970s was a shaky time for Marvel, undergoing editorial crises and distribution upheaval. By the 1980s, this seems to have resolved and Captain America was able to steadily narrate the nation again. Big business reappeared as the malevolent corporation and the government was once again filled with corruption. Briefly (during J.M. DeMatteis' run in the early 1980s) multi-faceted women, Native Americans and homosexuals rose out of their absence, only to be relegated there again when he left. Women in fact, became more hyper-sexualized than ever before, despite the comics code's standards. At the same time, African-American identity within this narrative was criticized for being stereotypical and subservient. Further negotiations between the readers and writer Mark Gruenwald led to the African-American character Battlestar maturing past that kind of a role. Although nationalized depictions of villainy were common during the 1980s, civic nationalism challenged American jingoism and when the Cold War ended, America re-evaluated foreign enemies association with evil.

The 1990s was another period of upheaval for Marvel Comics, as they went from boom to bust within the decade. This affected *Captain America's* ability to narrate the nation when the allegory would occasionally disappear in favor of nonsensical superhero fistfights and eroticized women. When the nation's borders were apparent, they were commonly the anxieties of the now dominant civic nationalism. Nihilism and its effect on the American Dream further challenged

the hero. However, most of Captain America's doubts about the nation interior were dispelled following the events of 9/11.

Immediately after that tragedy, *Captain America* changed in tone and design. Arab terrorists became his primary adversaries, but as with the Viet Cong in the 1960s, his adherence to civic nationalism caused a schizophrenic reaction, shifting these racial enemies into absence. Nazis filled the gap, again a devil term with no ideological qualities, allowing the nation to revel in its righteous nostalgia of the "good war." Reconciling the comic's reactionary racism into absence made room for the 2004 mini-series *Truth: Red, White and Black*, that not only represented African-Americans in fully developed roles, but also exposed the racist history of the United States military in the 1940s. When the book returned for a fifth volume in 2005, corporate sponsored terrorism and the government's corruption were Captain America's worst enemies as he further came to terms with the war crimes of the nation's past. When the character was assassinated in 2007, the nation's borders were mostly represented as these internal anxieties, echoing many of the same problems of his creation in the 1940s.

This longitudinal tracing of one cultural artifact in relation to the nation's history provides us with important insights into the constantly changing area of the imagined community. Symbols of Nazism, for instance, seem to work universally, either as simple devil terms when the nation needs the comfort of a "good war," or as racist challengers of civic nationalism. Nazis are necessary to fill the gaps left when the narrative banishes wartime enemies into absence, because their demonization contradicts anti-prejudice dogma. That principle further evolved the nation's borders when it rejected the use of xenophobic villains at the end of the Cold War. Ironically, the Captain America narrative doesn't seem similarly bothered by its frequent depiction of women and African-Americans as roles that need to be disciplined. Even before the

comics code existed, this narrative has been relegating various identities and subjects into absence. The code provided a written record though of what was unacceptable to the nation, right at the same time that the comics medium itself was relegated to the "inferior" status of subculture.

Some of this history of the nation's development echoes Gary Gerstle's (2004) similar tracing. However, using the cultural artifact of *Captain America* as an origin point to trace from provides us with several insights that are not available from Gerstle's work. First, the depiction of communists was not as devilish as that of the Nazis for instance, suggesting that the narrative didn't interpret them as being so universally despised as those earlier enemies. Gerstle finds America's paranoia of communism to be ubiquitous and Captain America certainly demonstrates some of that, though not as fervently as the nation's hatred of Nazis. Growing out of that same Cold War paranoia, the nation's fear of dangerous technology was also rampant throughout the comic, though it was not documented by Gerstle. The villains of Captain America, often used such technology to steal American's independence from them, suggesting a concern about liberty that was yet another border of evil that Gerstle seems unaware of. Also, the persistent theme from the early sixties until the 1980s of training and education, was something Gerstle did not find, with the untrained as a deplorable internal border to the nation's acceptance. Finally, while Gerstle describes the implicit absence of African-Americans and their subsequent discipline as a visible part of the nation, the kind of failed auditions that multi-faceted women, Native Americans and homosexuals went through are not a part of his history of the nation.

With regard to the other literature on comics, Captain America and ideology, the findings of this study confirm some of those theorists, while resisting others. Much like Jewett & Lawrence propose (2002, 2003), Captain America does seem to have a "complex" about

institutions, often ignoring them to protect the nation's borders single-handedly. Furthermore, the character's convoluted history provides further evidence for a connection between comics, nationalism and capitalism (Kunzle, 1990; Rao, 1996; Kinsella, 1999; Kluver, 2000; Noh, 2005; Wolf-Meyer, 2005; Emad, 2006). Like Emad's investigation of Wonder Woman's history (2006), I found that this narrative constructed gender and the nation in ways that often marginalized women, predictably awarding power to white, American men. McAllister (1990, 2001) might argue that this is typical of comics emulating the social/political environment they are published within. Nevertheless, McAllister also allows for a possibility of resistance against dominant ideology that I did not find in *Captain America*. While the comic may have violated the regulations of the comics code a few times, my sense is that these were moments of collaboration between consumers, producers and regulators, allowing the book to represent the nation's borders more accurately. It is unsurprising that Captain America doesn't challenge the status quo, given that this superhero's ethos requires him to symbolize, narrate and protect the nation.

What this genealogy didn't do unfortunately, was provide an answer to why Americans are willing to die for these imagined borders, sometimes even killing for them. That connection, between the psyche of an individual's American identity and the construction of a national community, remains elusive. This map of the nation's last sixty-seven years, does however, provide evidence of what they were willing to perform those extreme acts for: often foreign threats devoid of ideology, compounded by an identity crisis of civic nationalism. If my research can predict anything, it is that as long as the American nation celebrates civic nationalism without acknowledging its own past (and present) violations of that dogma, it will continue to respond to external challenges with this weird combination of hatred and amnesia. The nation seems to be ashamed about its racialized past, but usually disguises its guilty conscience by

shunting evidence of it into an implicit invisibility, while raging against prejudiced villains that aren't too far removed from Captain America's own past self. These moments usually require a split in his multiple personality, giving us a racist Captain, a jingoistic Captain, a civic ideal Captain and now even a black Captain. Each of these skins is shed, allowing Captain America to continue to maintain the nation's borders as they exist for the era that he is narrating them in.

H.L. Mencken is often quoted for stating, "The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary." This axiom at first seems to echo the results of this genealogy, where the nation's fears are as much defined by a cultural artifact like this comic, as those fears in turn symbiotically inform the narrative within *Captain America*. However, I would take point with Mencken's insinuation that some elite political body engineers these anxieties. That kind of Machiavellian treachery is as fictional as the Red Skull. No smoky backlit cabal creates the villains representing the nation's borders. They are negotiated, between the various moments of the circuit of culture, where the imagined community is constructed. Captain America was unable to imagine a functional community that was not a nation, because otherwise his symbolism would be unnecessary. He is just as imaginary as the nation he represents, and without enemies to define what they are not, both suffer vague and arbitrary identities. We need the hobgoblins. We need the Red Skull. Without them, at least for now, we are just millions of human beings without a communal identity.

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