

Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics

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This article introduces comic books as a medium through which national identity and geopolitical scripts are narrated. This extension of the popular geopolitics literature uses the example of post-11 September 2001 ("9/11") *Captain America* comic books to integrate various strands of theory from political geography and the study of nationalism to break new ground in the study of popular culture, identity, and geopolitics. The article begins with an introduction to the character of Captain America and a discussion of the role he plays in the rescaling of American identity and the institutionalization of the nation's symbolic space. The article continues by showing how visual representations of American landscapes in *Captain America* were critical to constructing geopolitical "realities." A reading of post-9/11 issues of the *Captain America* comic book reveals a nuanced and ultimately ambiguous geopolitical script that interrogates America's post-9/11 territorialization. *Key Words:* popular culture, American identity, nationalism, post-9/11 politics, *Captain America*.

Scale, Hegemony, and the Culture Wars

Popular geopolitics, or the construction of scripts that mold common perceptions of political events (Ó Tuathail 1992; Dalby 1993; Sharp 1993), is key to a full understanding of both national identities and global orders. One of the fundamental assumptions of the primary global "geo-graph" (Ó Tuathail 1996), or inscription of the earth's surface, is the division of the world into discrete states, each one ostensibly independent, sovereign, equal, and occupied by a discrete culture or nation. Other scholars have questioned the ontological primacy of such states and nations (Anderson 1991; Agnew 1994) and have concentrated on how bounded territories and identities are constructed and policed (Paasi 1991, 1996).

The division of the international political system into sovereign states remains a largely unchallenged premise of popular discourse. Indeed, challenges to the assumptions of the international system are seen as challenges to a moral geography of extreme importance: "Bush [in a victory speech after the first Gulf War] did not justify why the notion of nationhood was so important, nor why its protection demanded the ultimate of sacrifices. He assumed that his audience would realize that a war, waged by nations against the nation, which had sought to abolish a nation, was necessary to affirm the sacred principle of nationhood" (Billig 1995, 2). As institutionalized regions, states are best understood as an ongoing process of creating and maintaining territorial practices and ideologies. Paasi describes the region-formation process in four parts, the second part of which is

the attachment of symbolic meanings to territory, or the creation of symbolic shape (Paasi 1991; quotation is from 2003, 113):

Boundaries penetrate the society in numerous practices and discourses through which the territory exists and achieves institutionalized meanings. Hence, it is political, economic, cultural, governmental and other practices, and the associated meanings, that make a territory and concomitantly territorialize everyday life. These elements become part of daily life through spatial socialization, the process by which people are socialized as members of territorial groups.

One way in which the symbolic meaning associated with these boundaries materializes is through the production and consumption of popular culture, which leads to the internalization of the mythic and symbolic aspects of national identities (Edwardson 2003). Popular culture, in other words, is one of the ways in which people come to understand their position both within a larger collective identity and within an even broader geopolitical narrative, or script. Marston and Smith (2001) have made the point that collective identity formation involves the negotiation of many different scales, including the full continuum from the individual/body to the global/universal. Thus, the horizontal identity issues that revolve around the Self/Other nexus and other boundary-formation processes (as explained later) are inextricably linked through geopolitical narratives to vertical issues of scale. This is a critical link that enables hundreds of millions of individuals freely to assume a common identity.

Captain America is an example of popular culture's role in this process. Significant to this role is *Captain America's* ability to connect the political projects of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy (all formulated at the national or global scale) with the scale of the individual, or the body. The character of Captain America connects these scales by literally embodying American identity, presenting for readers a hero both of, and for, the nation. Younger readers may even fantasize about being Captain America, connecting themselves to the nation in their imaginations. His characterization as an explicitly American superhero establishes him as both a representative of the idealized American nation and as a defender of the American status quo. This image coincides with the definition of a territorial symbol, that is, "abstract expressions of group solidarity embodying the actions of political, economic, and cultural institutions in the continual reproduction and legitimation of the system of practices that characterize the territorial unit concerned" (Paasi 1991, 245).

Captain America and other territorial symbols from popular culture contribute to structures of expectations (Tannen 1979), which can be understood as a summation of the social effects of regional institutionalization. These structures are distinct from structures of feeling (R. Williams 1977), which focus on practical, lived consciousness. Rather, structures of expectations influence how people from a region interpret new information or situations. Thus, geopolitical events are interpreted through the lens of structures of expectations, and so, common structures promote common geopolitical scripts. These scripts are attempts to create order out of the complexity of global events by constructing narratives through which the region's place in the world is understandable and legitimate. While scripts are derived from many sources, one source with significant input is certainly popular culture.

The role of popular culture in constructing geopolitical identities and scripts has increasingly become the subject of critical inquiry (Sharp 1993, 1998; Dodds 2003). At the heart of popular culture's importance to the construction of national and global geopolitical scripts is Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Hegemony, the basis of strong national government, is predicated on consensus, as contrasted with coercion, which Gramsci perceives as the last resort of weak governments (Adamson 1980). While Gramsci was writing in the context of a Marxist revolution, his ideas resonate strongly with capitalist formulations of nationhood as well. Sharp (2000, 31) however, uses Gramsci's idea of hegemony to insert a space for popular culture in the literature of nationalism and identity:

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

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is not static, but instead, "a process of continual creation that, given its massive scale, is bound to be uneven in the degree of legitimacy it commands and to leave some room for antagonistic cultural expressions to develop" (Adamson 1980, 174). Thus, hegemonic constructions and their antagonists are in need of continual buttressing by active agents, in this case, the producers of popular culture.

Comic books are often equated with children's entertainment, and, historically, they have been associated with negative influences such as juvenile delinquency, perhaps most famously in Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Nevertheless, the producers of comic books (and *Captain America*, specifically) view their products as more than just lowbrow entertainment; they view their works as opportunities to educate and socialize. In an interview on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* (2002), *Captain America* editor, Axel Alonso, touched on this view among the production staff: "[W]hat I'd say is our responsibility as writers, artists, editors and creators is to create narratives that have a point, that entertain and seek to do something more, perhaps educate on some level." In this sense, the production staff of *Captain America* fit Gramsci's definition of organic intellectuals: not distinguished as intellectuals by their profession, these men (traditionally, the industry has been dominated by males) nevertheless "work consciously for their own social class, convinced that it has a historical 'right' at a given moment" (Lawner 1973, 44). While Gramsci was clearly interested in economic classes, here social class can also refer to nationality, as both are categories of belonging that require active construction and support. Thus, through the medium of their comic book, these men help create structures of expectations that consequently influence the way readers view the world and locate their own place as Americans within it. While they are more empowered than ordinary citizens because of their closeness to the publishing media, they are still constrained by market principles, their parent company's editorial decisions, and other limiting factors. Still, the role of these

men in shaping public attitudes has become the subject of scrutiny.

Captain America and the Culture Wars

If comic books such as *Captain America* seem too facetious and fantastic to be educational, that is understandable. Many factors lead to the social denigration of the comic book medium, including low production values (comic books are still printed on pulp paper) and unrealistic storylines (culminating in battles between two superpowered beings who have full conversations while in melee). Still, for the purpose of this article, the divide between low, middle, and highbrow culture is artificial; all three have political content and therefore are relevant to those who are seeking to sculpt American identity. Indeed, the seemingly innocent nature of the comic book medium contributes to its significance in the battle over American identity because it usually operates beneath the gaze of most cultural critics. This battle over the meaning of America has been termed the "Culture Wars" (originally by conservative commentator and occasional presidential candidate, Pat Buchanan), with partisans on both sides scanning popular culture for subversive messages (intentional or otherwise) that undermine or challenge their favored geopolitical script or American identity. John Ney Reiber, the author of the *Captain America* comics analyzed later in this article, had this to say about the ambiguous, yet adamant, reaction to his post-11 September 2001 (hereinafter "9/11") storyline (*Newsarama* 2002): "[T]he . . . Captain America story arc . . . has been called right-wing, left-wing, jingoist, communist, anti-American and flag-waving." To further illustrate the political importance of the symbol of Captain America, consider the title of an article (available online) in *The National Review* by radio show host and film critic Michael Medved (2003): "Captain America, Traitor? The comic-book hero goes anti-American." Medved concludes the article by writing,

We might expect such blame-America logic from Hollywood activists, academic apologists, or the angry protesters who regularly fill the streets of European capitals (and many major American cities). When such sentiments turn up, however, hidden within star-spangled, nostalgic packaging of comic books aimed at kids, we need to confront the deep cultural malaise afflicting the nation on the eve of war.

Clearly, the "culture warriors" that have dominated American politics since the early 1990s are paying attention to *Captain America*; they have attached political significance to its content, in part because Captain America is a character that is familiar to several gener-

ations of Americans. Furthermore, this political significance is magnified by the importance of comic books in American youth culture. According to the Simmons Market Research Bureau's *Study of Kids and Teens* (2002), the net youth audience (ages six to seventeen) of the two largest comic book publishers (Marvel and DC) is almost fourteen million. While it is impossible to measure the impact of comic books and similar media on the political attitudes of children and youths, they nonetheless do participate in a recursive relationship between elites advocating particular geopolitical narratives and the popular geo-graphs distributed by media to be consumed by the public. The impact of comic books on (geo)political attitudes is heightened because they reach their young audience at the developmental moment when sociospatial frameworks are being formulated (Dijkink 1996).

Science fiction, the genre in which superhero comic books such as *Captain America* can most broadly be located, has been the object of recent analysis by geographers. Science fiction tales have interested geographers because of their usefulness in "exploring alternative geographies of power and social relations" (Morehouse 2002, 84; see also Kitchin and Kneale 2001 and Warf 2002). Furthermore, geography has lately edged ever closer to the subject of comic books, even to the point of studying political cartoons. Klaus Dodds (1998), for example, has engaged in a critical analysis of political cartoonist Steve Bell's work by looking closely at the spatiality and iconography of the images Bell created in his critique of the mid-1990s Bosnian War. In doing so, he has situated his work within the larger body of literature in critical geopolitics. As Dodds (1998, 171) says, "[I]n contrast to the existing literature on iconography within cultural geography, critical geopolitics has not engaged in close and detailed readings of visual material. Images have either been employed to illustrate a general analysis or used occasionally to illuminate specific issues such as media war reporting." This is in contrast to other disciplines, since there have recently been many academic studies of comic books in the fields of sociology, history, and literature (e.g., Reynolds 1992; Nyberg 1998; Brooker 2001; Klock 2002). Historian Ryan Edwardson (2003) has even written about "Captain Canuck" and his role in Canadian nationalism. This work should be seen, in part, as an extension of these scholars' very fine work.

This article is divided into three parts, each united with the others through their use of *Captain America* texts and images to provide insight into the construction of American identity. The article begins with an introduction to the character of Captain America and a

discussion of the role he plays in the rescaling of American identity and the institutionalization of the nation's symbolic space and continues by engaging with theories of landscape, iconography, and nationalism before showing their connection to *Captain America* comic books. In the final section, a reading of post-9/11 issues of the *Captain America* comic book will reveal a nuanced and ultimately ambiguous geopolitical script that interrogates America's post-9/11 territorialization.

Deconstructing the Captain

It may seem obvious that Captain America is a symbol for America, yet it is this obviousness that makes him so useful for study:

The double neglect of banal nationalism involves academics forgetting what is routinely forgotten. People in established nations overlook the routine flagging of nationhood. The flags melt into the background, as "our" particular world is experienced as *the* world. The routine absent-mindedness, involved in not noticing unwaved flags or other symbols of nationhood, has its reflection in academic theory.

—(Billig 1995, 49–50)

Since Captain America is so clearly a symbol of America, he provides an opportunity to analyze the changing meaning and symbolic shape of America as the region is continually (re)constructed. If identity is a performance, then American identity has been performed monthly since 1964 in *Captain America* comic books. Captain America was created in 1940, prior to the entry of the United States into World War II, but after the war had been ongoing in Europe and East Asia for some time. Timely Comics (later Marvel Comics) created the character in an attempt to tap into the patriotic consciousness that was awakening in America (stealing the concept and plagiarizing parts of the uniform from a rival company's character named "The Shield"; see Ro 2004). From its beginning, *Captain America* helped construct an identity for America and a geopolitical script:

It is the spring of 1941. "The ruthless war-mongers of Europe" have cast their sights on "a peace-loving America," and "the youth of our country" heed "the call to arm for defense." As foreign agents carry out "a wave of sabotage and treason" against the United States, the president authorizes a top-secret plan. A patriotic young American named Steve Rogers, too sickly and weak to qualify for standard enlistment, volunteers for a dangerous scientific experiment conducted by the nation's top scientist, Pro-

fessor Reinstein. Injected with a strange, seething liquid, Rogers undergoes a startling transformation. Growing in height and mass, Rogers's muscles expand and tighten to the peak of human perfection. No longer a frail patriot, he now has a massive physique, a proud new name, and a bold mission. The nation's newest "super-soldier," Captain America, is born.

—(Wright 2001, 30, who, in turn, quotes Simon and Kirby 1941, 1–2)

Thus, even in its first issue, *Captain America* is participating in the construction of geopolitical "reality" through its description of the U.S. role in the world. The insider/outsider dialectic outlines a global order with a "war-mongering" Europe and a "peace-loving" America.

Clearly identified as a territorial symbol of America by his red, white, and blue star-spangled uniform, Captain America is part of what Renan (1990, 17) has called the "cult of the flag." Villains often mock Captain America for his uniform, which is in fact a vaguely ridiculous display of stars and stripes completed by a pirate's gloves and boots and, inexplicably, small wings on his head that resemble those on the ankles of the Roman god Mercury. Nevertheless, Captain America's friends never mock his outfit or think it odd because to them it is in the background—what Billig (1995, 40) would call an "unwaved flag." Only villains would dare to question his fashion sense. That Captain America is intended to represent the American ideal cannot be seen as simply recognition of ontological fact, but is instead a truth claim about American-ness. Stan Lee, comic book icon and former writer for *Captain America*, argues that Captain America represents the best aspects of America: courage and honesty (personal correspondence with author 2004). A product of his times, however, Captain America's image and origin mirror the American identity/dream of 1941. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed Steve Rogers (with his almost obsessively Anglo-American name) overcomes his own physical weakness to become a proud soldier for his country.

Although the "super-soldier serum" is responsible for his physique, the success of Captain America in crime fighting is clearly attributed in the stories to his hard work, an extension of the Horatio Alger story into the world of superheroes, where flying and smashing tanks come easily to dozens of costumed vigilantes (Macdonald and Macdonald 1976). Captain America's uniqueness comes from the fact that he has fewer super powers than almost any other costumed hero; his real skills lie in his athleticism and his leadership skills (Lee, personal communication with author, 5 February 2004). Indeed, *Captain America* comics are laced with images of

the Captain practicing his acrobatic maneuvers or lifting weights. While the drugs given to him by the U.S. government may have advantaged his start, his continued success is scripted as attributable to his continued hard work. In fact, a 1990s storyline had Captain America lose the super-soldier serum, ostensibly because it was overloading his body; in reality, it was explained in the editor's column that the creative team made the decision because of the unseemly image of the American ideal being hooked on a performance-enhancing drug.

Furthermore, Captain America contributes to the American geopolitical narrative by being ultimately defensive in nature. Indeed, a conceit of the American geopolitical narrative is that America only acts in the name of security, not empire. True to this form, young Steve Rogers in 1940 is a reluctant warrior, but not a reluctant patriot (Kirby 1969, 9): "I hate war—and senseless bloodshed—but I can't stay behind—while others do the fighting! There must be something I can do—some place for me!" After this plea gains him access to the "super-soldier serum" that gives him his strength and quickness, Captain America is provided with a weapon unique among comic book heroes: a shield. This event is indicative of his association with the American geopolitical script. Most superheroes who use props carry glamorous offensive weapons; Captain America has a rather unglamorous (yet patriotically colored) shield. While Captain America has become quite good at throwing his shield as an offensive weapon (and always managing to have it bounce right back to him), it is important for the narrative of America that he embodies defense rather than offense.

While the definition of one particular American identity and geopolitical narrative is an impossible task due to the crosscutting currents of political thought and human experience that influence opinion, there are definite themes running through the discourse. Beasley (2001) alludes to liberty, equality, and self-government as the tenets of American exceptionalism. These qualities take meaning only when contrasted against other nations (Poole 1999), and so the American symbolic shape requires a dominant geopolitical script to define the American sense of place and purpose in a complex world. American exceptionalism thus also becomes the theme of the dominant geopolitical script, with Jewett and Lawrence (2003, 34–35) providing an excellent explanation of this linkage between superheroes, geopolitics, and American exceptionalism:

[T]he elaborate effort at restraint in the use of force—suppressing his own aggressive instinct—places Captain America in the heroic tradition of the American cowboy

killer, the man of purely innocent intention who draws second in the gun battle but shoots more quickly and accurately than the dastardly foe . . . In these and countless other examples, superheroes and -heroines exercise the powers otherwise reserved only for God in dealing with evil. They are the individuated embodiments of a civil religion that seeks to redeem the world for democracy, but by means that transcend democratic limits on the exercise of power.

Indeed, the sense of being part of something extraordinary, the American nation, is inherent to the storylines of *Captain America*. The Captain's willingness to die for his country (witnessed in virtually every issue) reinforces the centrality of the nation in the readership of the comic book. As Anderson (1991, 144) says, "Dying for one's country, which usually one does not choose, assumes a moral grandeur which dying for the Labour Party, the American Medical Association, or perhaps even Amnesty International can not rival, for these are all bodies one can join or leave at easy will." Captain America's willingness to die for his country illustrates the essential centrality of the nation to him and, by extension, to every American reading the comic book. Support for the geopolitical objectives of American exceptionalism becomes an understood, tacit extension of citizenship.

As just illustrated, the impact of Captain America on readers is different than other symbols of America, such as the bald eagle or the flag, because of his ability both to *embody* and to *narrate* America in ways that the bald eagle, flag, and other symbols cannot. Such static, non-human symbols represent and construct the nation but do not allow for a personal connection to it in the same way that Captain America does. Paasi (2004, 542) has written about this interconnection between place/boundaries and scale: "Scales are not fixed, separate levels of the social world but, like regions/places, are structured and institutionalized in complex ways in de/reterritorializing practices and discourses that may be partly concrete, powerful and bounded, but also partly unbounded, vague or invisible."

Captain America serves as a cultural product that vaguely and invisibly connects the reader (usually young and male, aspiring to heroism), through the body of the hero, to the scale of the nation. This bridging of scale, from the individual body to the body politic, is necessary for the construction of a territorially bounded state occupied by a cohesive nation. Paasi (2004, 542) reiterates this point: "The institutionalization/deinstitutionalization of region, place and scale are in fact inseparable elements in the perpetual process of regional transformation." Thus, it is not enough to foster territoriality

and national identity; individuals, despite the abstract origins of collective identity and territory as a political project, must internalize the scale of the nation. We now turn to the construction of that identity and territory.

Captain America and the Other

Captain America serves as a territorial symbol that participates in the construction of difference between one region (the United States) and other regions (the rest of the world). Derek Gregory (2004, 17) illustrates the role of fiction in shaping this Foucauldian order imposed on our worldviews through his discussion of imaginative geographies (a term originally coined by Edward Said):

“Their” space is often seen as the inverse of “our” space: a sort of negative, in the photographic sense that “they” might “develop” into something like “us,” but also the site of an absence, because “they” are seen somehow to lack the positive tonalities that supposedly distinguish “us.” We might think of imaginative geographies as fabrications, a word that usefully combines “something fictionalized” and “something made real,” because they are imaginations given substance.

The effects of imaginative geographies are not insignificant, in part because they are performative; they outline a frame through which the world can be viewed, which then enables the reader (or viewer or consumer) to adopt that frame and act based on it.

To understand the symbolic and dichotomous relationship between Captain America/U.S./Self and the Supervillain/Georival/Other, attention must be paid to the history of the Captain America icon itself. Captain America represents a different type of American identity than Superman, who, as an alien come to earth, embodies the ultimate American immigrant—the Other—who is, nevertheless, willing to fight for “truth, justice, and the American way.” Superman’s story of origin is the ideal American immigrant narrative, with an outsider (or Other) who adopts a new homeland and fully assimilates, happily abandoning any previous culture (Gordon 1998); instead, Captain America’s narrative of origin is a 1941 nativist fantasy of individualist patriotism, with Captain America’s (and thus, America’s) values contrasted against his un-American Others.

The Captain, as a product of the American military-industrial complex, begins as a tool of the establishment and a proxy for American foreign policy. In his first issue, when a Nazi saboteur assassinates the creator of the “super-soldier serum” (Dr. Reinstein, an obvious allusion to Albert Einstein), Captain America captures

the murderer and treats the reader to an image of the Captain bursting into a room in Germany and decking Hitler (featured on the cover; see Figure 1) nine months before Pearl Harbor and the American entry into WWII. In 1949, after catching saboteurs and spies on the home front and fighting alongside American troops in Europe and the Pacific (see Figure 2) until WWII was completely finished, *Captain America Comics* folded. The title was revived in the 1950s and billed as “Captain America . . . Commie Smasher!” in an effort to feed symbiotically on the geopolitical narrative of the new Cold War (see Figure 3). This run of the series was brief, perhaps because it did not effectively engage in that narrative. “The series offered no further discussion of Cold War issues beyond the message that Communists were evil, overweight, and poor dressers” (Wright 2001, 123).

The third, and still ongoing, incarnation of Captain America began in 1964 with Captain America’s revival after being found frozen in a North Atlantic iceberg since World War II. Interestingly, this effectively disavowed



Figure 1. The first visual reference to Captain America—the cover of *Captain America Comics* #1: The Captain acts out the American geopolitical fantasy nine months prior to Pearl Harbor. Several early covers would feature Captain America decking Hitler.



Figure 2. The cover of *Captain America Comics* #13. Like much of American propaganda in WWII, *Captain America* portrayed the Japanese as subhuman.

the “Commie Smasher” era of Captain America, which never happened since he was frozen in an iceberg. “Commie Smasher” Captain America was, years later, revealed to be an imposter. This disavowal reflected the changing political climate of post-McCarthy America, in which McCarthyite Americanism was deemed to be false patriotism. Indeed, Stan Lee, the writer who brought back Captain America in the 1960s, has said, regarding the production process, that “everything that is happening at the time a story is written has an effect on that story, whether an obvious effect or a subliminal one. We [creative staff] are all influenced and affected by the events of the world around us at any given time” (personal correspondence 2004). The 1960s were a difficult time to write *Captain America*. As America became embroiled in the Vietnam War, Captain America’s role as the embodiment of American values put him squarely in the middle of the politics of the time. With the American people torn between competing geopolitical scripts, there was pressure both for and against Captain America’s intervention in the war in Vietnam. As the war



Figure 3. The cover of *Captain America* #76. During the 1950s, Captain America battled Fifth Columnists and Communist saboteurs under the title “Captain America . . . Commie Smasher!”

ground on, it became clear that the majority of the readership wanted Captain America to remain in the United States, and, for the most part, he did (Wright 2001).

In the 1970s, *Captain America* continued to follow the issues of the times in which it was written, battling against poverty, racism, and pollution. The splintering of the myth of American homogeneity is documented throughout the issues of the 1970s, as Captain America partnered with an African American social worker (The Falcon) and dated a feminist. Captain America described this fragmentation of American identity in the pages of the comic book (Englehart and Buscema 1974, 17): “Americans have many goals, some of them quite contrary to others. In the land of the free, each of us is able to do what he wants to do, think what he wants to think. That’s as it should be, but it makes for a great many different versions of what America is.” In the 1980s, Captain America continued his path of political

awakening that began in the 1960s. Pressured by the American government to submit to its orders, as he had submitted in the 1940s, Steve Rogers gave up the uniform and fought crime as an independent vigilante (his new name, "Nomad," reflected his placelessness) before later coming back to the uniform and title after a government apology. This episode affirmed what had been implicit since the Captain's return in 1964: he was, despite his government origins, a rugged individualist. Even when he pursued American foreign policy goals, he was not directly affiliated with the American government.

The preceding discussion has briefly outlined the character and history of Captain America with a purpose of connecting this fictional person to the larger construct of American identity. It should be clear that *Captain America* is more than just an artifact of entertainment for children and young adults. Instead, it is a truth claim regarding the characteristics that define America against a backdrop of otherness. Captain America (and thus, the American ideal) is patriotic without being a government stooge; he is a self-made, rugged individualist who still cares about his community and nation; he is willing to stand up for what he believes but is ultimately defensive of the status quo. Furthermore, although he is white and male, he is increasingly aware that America is much more diverse. While remaining somewhat one-dimensional during the 1940s and 1950s, Captain America has become a dynamic character over the last four decades, changing in time to the shifting politics of the question, what does "America" mean?

Popular Culture, Landscapes, and National Identity

Territorial Differentiation and Bonding

Herb (2004) argues that the continuous construction of national identity can be divided into two processes: territorial differentiation and territorial bonding. The first process is the one outlined in the introduction to this article, whereby a bounded geographic entity is created through a process of exclusion vis-à-vis other geographic units and the people associated with them. Herb argues that this process is not sufficient for an explanation of how nationalism becomes wedded to territory: "While scholars of critical geopolitics have shown convincingly how boundaries are crucial in constructing a national identity, I feel their treatment is imbalanced because it does not give sufficient attention to the process of attachment that is exemplified in the notion of the nation as a local metaphor" (Herb 2004,

144). Herb advocates a second component to nationalist territoriality, that of territorial bonding.

Territorial bonding is a tactic by which nationalism is fostered through the elites' evocation of emotional linkages to regional landscapes. Herb argues that such bonding occurs at the local scale alongside the process of boundary making; in the case of Germany, territorial bonding takes the form of *Heimat*. "Heimat reinterprets the individual experience of place into a collective feeling of belonging to a group and its values—the German nation. . . . When children learn about place names, historical events, folklore, and other 'facts' of their local area . . . they are taught to recognize (and love) its 'German' essence" (Herb 2004, 153). Through their common linkage to the local landscape, citizens come to think in the collective "we."

What makes the concept of *Heimat* so powerful is its flexibility. Herb argues that any place or region in Germany could be referred to as *Heimat*, and thus every place in Germany can be described as German, with each region uniquely so. Anderson (1991) alludes to the importance of the *Heimat* phenomenon for abstract community formation when he describes visual culture from sacred communities, such as Christendom, that predate the nation. These stained glass windows, paintings, etc. all portrayed historic, religious figures dressed in the style of the people who made the image. "The shepherds who have followed the star to the manger where Christ is born bear the features of Burgundian peasants. The Virgin Mary is figured as a Tuscan merchant's daughter. . . . This juxtaposition of the cosmic-universal and the mundane-particular meant that however vast Christendom might be, and was sensed to be, it manifested itself *variously* to particular Swabian or Andalusian communities as replications of themselves" (Anderson 1991, 22–23). Similarly, the visual cues in *Captain America* landscapes allow for that same juxtaposition of the national-universal and the mundane-particular. It is through this juxtaposition that some landscapes become particularly symbolic for, and critical to, the nation.

Symbolic Landscapes and the Nation

Symbolic landscapes serve "the purpose of reproducing cultural norms and establishing the values of dominant groups across all of a society" (Cosgrove 1989, 125). Indeed, it has been argued that they are part of establishing the very idea of a dominant group: "Nationhood . . . involves a distinctive imagining of a particular sort of community rooted in a particular sort of place" (Billig 1995, 74). Representations of landscapes are not necessarily *physical*, but instead can be an

attempt to police the *social* boundaries of “Americanness.” Campbell (1992) provides examples of such policing that include America’s opposition to Communism and illicit drugs. Paasi (1991, 250) illustrates how these boundaries simultaneously exclude outsiders and create a union of the insiders: “The collective, institutionally mediated roles expressed in the structures of expectations are essential for the transformation of regions into places, centres of a feeling of belonging to time-space-specific, more or less abstract reference groups and communities.” Paasi’s and Campbell’s boundaries of inclusion and exclusion designate certain landscapes as more “of the nation” than others. For example, much as Herb’s German textbooks focused on portraits of regional geography as a tactic to foster emotive connections to a stereotypical landscape of the nation, *Captain America* used imagery of an iconic America to foster a feeling of territorial violation in its post-9/11 storyline. The visual medium inherent in comic books allows the authors to represent visually cultural values that are only visible in the background and must be brought out through a “close, detailed reading of the text” (Cosgrove 1989, 126). The American landscapes portrayed in the post-9/11 *Captain America* comics are all highly symbolic and likely chosen to heighten the dramatic tension of the attack by terrorists. Their status as places worth defending by Captain America privileges them over other places in the scripted geography of insiders and outsiders. Edensor (2002, 39–40) describes privileged landscapes of this sort:

Argentina is inevitably linked with images of the pampas: gauchos riding across the grasslands. Morocco is associated with palm trees, oases and shapely dunes, and the Netherlands with a flat patchwork of polders and drainage ditches. Of course, the deserts, swamps and mountains of Argentina tend to be overlooked, as do the highlands of Morocco and Holland.

Because the World Trade Center and Pentagon are so iconic for the American imagination, in comparison to, say, the Aleutian Islands or a landfill, the attack had special significance for Americans seeking to interpret it through a geopolitical script. Edensor (2002) specifically mentions the attack on the World Trade Center as a blow against the symbols of national modernity and progress; he does not specifically reference the Pentagon attacks, but, clearly, these fall into his category of sites that represent the authority of the government within its national territory. This American connection to these sites is an example of what Herb referred to as territorial bonding—a linkage in the popular consciousness to a locality as particularly iconic for the nation. While the

attacks of 9/11 clearly violated Americans’ sense of territorial differentiation, they were particularly potent because they disrupted the process of American territorial bonding by attacking those specific sites.

Similarly, the use of the loci in *Captain America* both illustrates their status as sites of insiderness and uses that status to heighten the emotional content of the story. The opening scene in the story is of Ground Zero (see Figure 4). Ground Zero has often been identified in the media as “sacred space” (e.g., Iken 2002). The next scene is in the streets of New York City, with American flags flying from all the light poles. Certainly, after 9/11, New York City was seen as uniquely American for, as many said, “We’re all New Yorkers now” (e.g., Allis 2001). The action shifts to Centerville, which is a metaphor for Middle America or the American Heartland (this metaphor will be discussed in more depth later). Following the defeat of terrorists, Captain America goes to an American military base; its insiderness is clearly denoted by its function. Upon his departure from the base, Captain America rides his motorcycle past an Independence Day celebration, complete with fireworks exploding and flags waving; he daydreams about what his life could have been if he were not Captain America (Rieber and Cassaday 2002d, 15–16):

You could have had a home. You could be there now. In a little white house. On a quiet sunny street. Nobody firing missiles at you. Knowing who your friends are—listening to the neighbor’s kids squeal, running through the sprinkler one more time. While she works on her tan. The one you love. The one who loves you. You’d look back at her and she’d look back at you and smile. And you’d know she was wondering too. How beautiful they’d have to be—the children you’d have someday.

The images of this alternate life flash on the page, providing a slideshow of idealized, heteronormative, small-town Americana, which looks remarkably like Centerville (see Figure 5). These invocations of “all-American” quotidian landscapes (urban center, small town, Fourth of July celebration) serve to construct an American form of Heimat through which individuals come to understand their common connection to the nation.

Herb’s tactics of territorial differentiation and bonding help us to understand how the symbolic shape of the United States is rescaled as the landscape imagery of *Captain America*, where it affects the individual on an emotional level. As the example of *Captain America* shows, geographic iconography in political texts, whether comic books or Herb’s textbooks, contributes to the (re)construction of national identity through the reification of the state.



Figure 4. Extensive imagery of Ground Zero heightens the emotional impact of the story-line.

Post-9/11 Geopolitical Scripts

While Herb declines to translate “Heimat” directly, Confino and Skaria (2002) offer “homeland” as the English cognate (although this clearly limits the scale to

which it could be applied; Heimat itself seems to be a scaleless concept). Still, this definition offers an interesting bridge to the post-9/11 geopolitical narrative in the United States, in which efforts to establish greater state power often turned to linguistics. The creation of



Figure 5. The juxtaposition of Independence Day fireworks and Captain America's domestic fantasy construct an image of Americana.

the Department of Homeland Security in the United States raised many political hackles, but few linguistic ones; yet it was a rare example of the United States rhetorically institutionalizing an explicitly territorial form of nationalism. American nationalism has generally been predicated on common Enlightenment values (e.g.,

freedom, liberty, individualism) rather than common territorial affinity.

Neither Roosevelt nor Truman referred to the U.S. as a homeland, but only used the term to refer to other countries under the threat of invasion (Holland, Russia, and

Japan). Perhaps *homeland* was evocative of the German fatherland and the sinister identification of *Heimat* with fascist ideologies of racial purity, and the German home guard and homeland defense (*Heimwehr, Heimatschutz*).

—(Kaplan 2003, 85)

Peggy Noonan (2002) alluded to this objection when she raised a rare voice of public dissent: “The name Homeland Security grates on a lot of people, understandably. *Homeland* isn't really an American word, it's not something we used to say or say now. It has a vaguely Teutonic ring.” Perhaps this territorialization marks a new era in American history; as Kaplan (2003, 90) points out, this, too, serves a political purpose: “Although homeland security may strive to cordon off the nation as a domestic space from external threats, it is actually about breaking down the boundaries between inside and outside, about seeing the homeland in a state of constant emergency from threats within and without.” Still, this “grounding” of American identity in the national territory was clearly a reaction to the violation of the inside/outside dialectic of territorial differentiation by the assaults on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Simon Dalby (2004) argues persuasively that government and media elites of the United States have hewed to a geopolitical script since 9/11 that has led to a reterritorialization of American identity.

The world had changed, said the TV pundits and the newspaper columnists, but quite how remained a mystery as the geopolitical specification of the terrain of conflict was decidedly obscure beyond the initial invocation of external threat from terrorism. . . . The presidential discourse drew lines between those that were on America's side or those that were on the side of the terrorists, the polarization dynamic of conflict was set in motion hastily; them and us, freedom versus terror reprised the themes of other American wars, both hot and cold.

—(Dalby 2004, 66)

While Dalby probably did not intend for his comments to apply to such media as comic books, the script he details is also inscribed within the pages of *Captain America*.

The events of 9/11 provided an opportunity for *Captain America* to return to its origins, with a clear geopolitical script, free of the ambiguity and complexity introduced since the 1960s. Indeed, it is apparent that much of the American public embraced this post-9/11 script, in part for those same reasons, as a nostalgic return to “The Good War” (Terkel 2004), World War II, with its clear categories of good and evil, freedom, and fascism. The following will demonstrate how *Captain America*

participated in the reterritorialization of American identity by clearly inscribing the inside/outside dialectic on the immediate post-9/11 environment. Then, it will proceed to demonstrate *Captain America's* awareness of competing geopolitical scripts and how they were also incorporated into the text to produce a depoliticized narrative.

Captain America at Ground Zero

The events of 9/11 coincided with the preparation of a new *Captain America* series, and storylines were hurriedly written to incorporate the new geopolitical script. The first twenty-four pages of *Captain America #1* specifically reference the events of 9/11. In fact, the first page of *Captain America #1* shows a hand with a box-cutter in the aisle of a jetliner, surrounded by startled passengers. The second and third pages show images of men in robes with long dark beards and assault rifles gathered outside a cave. The text that accompanies these pages reads, “It doesn't matter where you thought you were going today. You're part of the bomb now. [Scene shifts to men outside cave] And somewhere in the world—a handful of men with famished eyes sit around a radio—or a telephone. Waiting. Twenty minutes—Four thousand murders later—They praise God for the blood that stains their hands” (Rieber and Cassaday 2002a, 1–3). These pages set up a clear dichotomy of insiders and outsiders, of innocent and unsuspecting domestic airline travelers, and of distant, foreign intruders. This portrayal is consistent with the idea of American exceptionalism, whereby American innocence is protected by its isolation from the rest of the world. Dalby (2004, 67) notes that the dominant script of 9/11 told us that the “the geography [of war] had apparently changed, too; the assumption that America itself was relatively immune to terrorism, despite the earlier 1993 bomb in the basement of the World Trade Center, and the Oklahoma bombing of 1995, was no longer valid.” This concern over the new locus of combat is found in the text as well: the next pages show Steve Rogers (out of uniform) looking for survivors in the rubble of Ground Zero. His first thoughts are “Oh, God—How could this happen here?” (Rieber and Cassaday 2002a, 4).

Captain America's response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon is one of mourning, righteous anger, and self-discipline. While at Ground Zero, Steve Rogers has a conversation with a rescue worker after finding a corpse in the rubble (Rieber and Cassaday 2002a, 8–9):



Figure 6. The use of perspective puts the reader in the position of a World Trade Center victim.

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

Rescuer: I'll get a stretcher.

Rogers: Have you seen the news?

Rescuer: Too much of it.

Rogers: Do they know, yet?

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

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

There are two things interesting about this exchange. First, it establishes that war is not a choice; it is a state that America has found imposed upon it. The dominant script of war, as Dalby (2004, 65) points out, forecloses other possibilities: "The point here is that geopolitical scripts might have been otherwise; the events could have been specified as a disaster, an act of madness or perhaps most obviously a crime, an act that required careful police work internationally and in the United States." The second interesting thing about this exchange is that while the dialogue is taking place, the action, viewed from the third person perspective, is of the rescuer and Rogers covering the corpse. The final lines, "We have to be sure. This is war," are given while the view is from the perspective of the corpse, looking up at Rogers (see Figure 6). In a war between America and the terrorists, there is no illusion of which side the reader

is on. The reader is subjectively put in the place of the victims at the World Trade Center; this perspective can be viewed as a conceit of Billig's "unwaved flag" phenomenon.

A scene where Captain America saves an Arab American from the angry father of a World Trade Center victim furthers the dominant geopolitical script of American innocence and fairness. While Captain America's intervention demonstrates America's commitment to multiculturalism and justice, his inner monologue serves not only as a proscription for American behavior and a statement of American military power, but also simultaneously constructs both the meaning of America and the terrorists' identity as parts of a freedom-loving/freedom-hating dichotomy that forecloses other possibilities (Rieber and Cassaday 2002a, 20–24):

We've got to be stronger than we've ever been. Or they've won. We can hunt them down. We can scour every bloodstained trace of their terror from the Earth. We can turn every stone they've ever touched to dust, and every blade of grass to ash. And it won't matter. We've got to be stronger than we've ever been—as a people. As a nation. We have to be America. Or they've won. We're going to make it through this—we, the people. United by a power that no enemy of freedom could begin to understand. We share—we are—the American Dream.

Captain America and Terrorism

The remainder of *Captain America* #1, and issues 2–6, tell the story of terrorists who attack the United States seven months after the events of September 2001. In this story arc, we learn more about the meanings associated with America: a terrorist by the name of Faysal al-Tariq airdrops small landmines into the small town of Centerville. Centerville, with its literally “middle America” name and overwhelmingly white population (only one African American is visible in the entire al-Tariq episode), is clearly evocative of the American Heartland mythology and resonates as what Edens (2002, 50–51) refers to as a “quotidian landscape.”

The battle between Captain America and the terrorists is a literary proxy for the war between America and the fundamentalist Islam that became the “Other” described in the post-9/11 geopolitical script (Dalby 2004). The contrast between the Christian Centerville and the Islamic jihadists is made from the very first image of Centerville (see Figure 7); it is a view down the main street of Centerville, showing trees, low buildings, and barns. What is notable about the image is that the view is from the top of a church steeple, allowing the Christian cross to occupy the leftmost third of the frame. In case that symbolism escapes the reader, the conflict is further cast as a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1993) through the narrative: the terrorists capture the town in one fell swoop by bursting through the stained glass church window on Easter Sunday and trapping most of the population of 600 in their pews with trip-wired landmines. To further clarify the difference between Christianity and Islam, the last words of the preacher before the terrorists attack are (Rieber and Cassaday 2002b, 3), “It’s good to see so many visitors here this morning. Neighbors—you know we’re always glad to see you. Strangers—we hope you’ll give us a

chance to know you better, after the service.” The openness and tolerance of Christianity is further exemplified by the image of the outside of the church, which is dominated by a sign that says “EASTER SERVICE: ALL ARE WELCOME” (Rieber and Cassaday 2002b, 3). Further, references to jihadist rhetoric permeate the storyline. One terrorist refers to a woman as a “whore with a painted mouth” (Rieber and Cassaday 2002b, 8); another terrorist, willing to die to kill Captain America, announces “Death is peace for me” (Rieber and Cassaday 2002b, 13).

While Islam is never explicitly mentioned, the references in the text are quite clear in their intended connotation for the reader. The obvious interpretation of this text draws on Huntington’s (1993) “clash of civilizations” thesis. In this geopolitical narrative, culture and religion serve as the fundamental schism in world politics, and the current geopolitical situation derives from secular modernity reaping the whirlwind of religious revival. Thus, while American actions in the past may have caused friction, the conflict itself is an inevitable result of incompatible cultures. Islam, in particular, is given as an example of a civilization innately tied to religious violence. Gregory (2004, 58) discusses how this narrative has become mainstream:

In the wake of September 11, this imaginative geography helped to define and mobilize a series of publics within which popular assent to—indeed, a demand for—war assumed immense power. For many commentators, the attack on America was indeed a “clash of civilizations”... Although he [Huntington] now connected the rise of Islamicism to the repressions of domestic governments and the repercussions of US foreign policy in the Middle East, other commentators used Huntington’s repeated characterizations of Muslims and “Muslim wars” to degrade the very idea of Islam as a civilization.

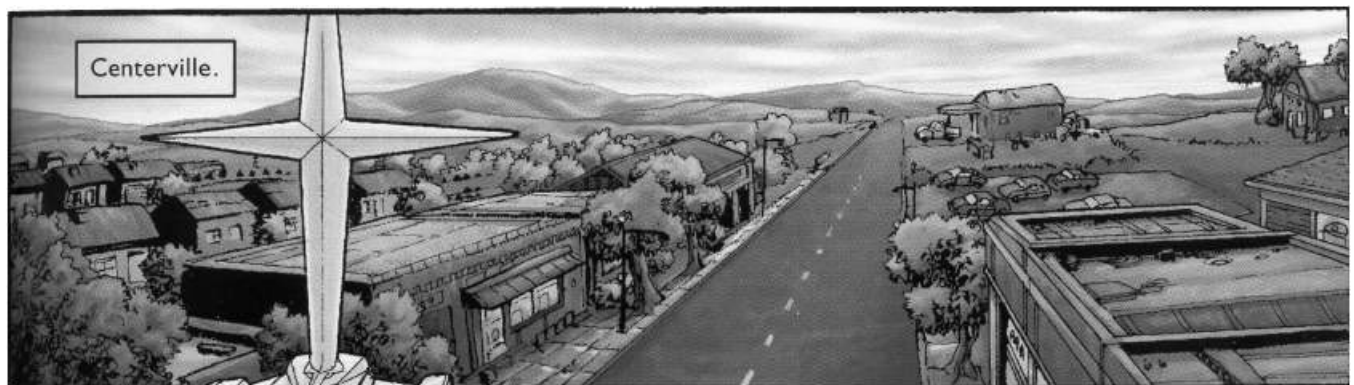


Figure 7. The first image of Centerville. Note the prominence of the Christian cross in the foreground.

Captain America and Empire

While much of the above indicates a relatively unnuanced geopolitical script that has more in common with the WWII and Red Scare versions of Captain America than with the current incarnation of Captain America, the post-9/11 issues of *Captain America* also invoke another geopolitical script that is critical of American foreign policy on anticolonial grounds. Indeed, Dalby argues that the events of September 2001 are not explainable via the dominant geopolitical narrative; rather, they are most understandable in terms of empire:

Understanding war in the terms of state-to-state conflict, the Second World War model, or even in its updated version the Gulf war of 1991, severely limits the understanding of warfare to a matter of pitched battles between large armies. There is another history of the use of American power, one of the conduct of small wars in the rise of US power, a pattern of violence that Max Boot, in his recent volume on the topic, suggests might best be called “imperial wars”—a term that, American sensitivities notwithstanding, seems apt to describe many US adventures abroad.
—(Dalby 2004, 80)

But American sensitivities are a critical part of the equation; this is part of the difficulty in discussing American foreign policy. Opinions differ about what is appropriately referred to as empire. “Different and sometimes rival conceptions of empire can even become internalized in the same space” (Harvey 2003, 5). Harvey notes that the U.S. empire has been conceptualized in various ways, including George W. Bush’s empire of “hard power,” Clinton’s empire of “soft power,” and the Cold War-era client state system. Still, in all cases, “the actually existing American empire was acquired . . . not in a fit of absent-mindedness (as the British liked to claim), but in a state of denial: imperial actions on the part of the U.S. were not to be talked of as such, nor were they allowed to have any ramifications for the domestic situation” (Harvey 2003, 6).

The events of 9/11, a “revolt in the provinces” in Dalby’s (2004, 80) formulation, were “about political theatre, dramatic gestures, and . . . the willingness to resist in the face of ridiculous odds.” Thus, the War on Terror is not a new type of war, but instead, simply “counter-insurgency warfare at the fringes of imperial control.” Dalby is arguing for a reconsideration of the geographic underpinnings of current events in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere where U.S. troops are committed. Rather than the territorialized conception of a violated America, the events of 9/11 should be put into

an imperial context—one masked by America’s tendency not to territorialize the empire itself. “The resulting ‘Empire of Disorder’ allows American national identity to maintain its anti-imperial rationalizations while committing troops to garrison duties and counter-insurgency operations in many places” (Dalby 2004, 82).

Captain America is forced to confront the blowback of empire in the al-Tariq storyline, thereby questioning America’s role in the wild zones of disorder around the globe. The first clue that the events in Centerville are more complicated than previously illustrated comes from al-Tariq’s monologue to the hostages in the church (Rieber and Cassaday 2002c, 1): “Some of you are asking your God why you will die today. Some of you know—those of you who work at the bomb manufacturing facility at the edge of this peaceful town. Today you learn what it means to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.” The geopolitical reordering implicit in that statement is significant; it punctures the innocence of America, showing that even a town like Centerville is part of the imperial project. The distant effects of the bombs made in Centerville are demonstrated in the next scene, when Captain America battles four children in stylized Arab costumes, armed with daggers and hatchets. Midway through the battle, Captain America notices that these children each have a metal prosthetic arm or leg. While battling them, the Captain converses with al-Tariq and uncovers the connection between the bomb factory in Centerville and the melee he is engaged in (Rieber and Cassaday 2002c, 2–4):

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

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

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

Reflecting on this revelation, Captain America considers the validity of the dominant geopolitical narrative (Rieber and Cassaday 2002c, 15): “Are we hated because we’re free—free and prosperous and good? Or does the light we see cast shadows that we don’t—where monsters like this al-Tariq can plant the seeds of hate?” Later, the villain who had sent al-Tariq transforms the “blowback” of Centerville into an overarching critique of American foreign policy. While Captain America is grappling with the villain (who is nameless, and of unknown ethnicity because of burns over his face—and therefore placeless), the villain offers to surrender if Captain America can guess his homeland (Rieber and Cassaday 2002e, 16–18):

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

The villain has directly invoked the term “empire” to discuss the geopolitical structure put in place through American hegemony. The geographic consequences of *Captain America's* “empire of blood” are paralleled in Dalby's (2004, 82–83) description of an “empire of disorder”:

Consumers are not safely here in their cities divorced from the consequences of the political economy that provides their commodities and their identities. . . . [T]he interconnections between what the United States or US-based corporations do in remote places is no longer a matter that does not connect, in however unlikely ways, with everyday life in America. Security requires understanding political connections to distant events; politics is also about obligations to distant strangers.

The preceding sections have illustrated how artifacts of popular culture like *Captain America* and other entertainment for the youth of America serve to (re)construct the meaning of America. The perpetuation of the “imagined political community” requires constant efforts to discipline the meaning of America (Anderson 1991, 5). Furthermore, the myth of American exceptionalism and its consequent power to structure the earth's surface geopolitically requires a script of equal and mutually exclusive states; this script needs to be, literally, narrated through media such as comic books. While the example of *Captain America* shows how that reading is possible from the text, it also shows the importance of dissident geopolitical narratives in what originated as a comic book proxy for American foreign policy. *Captain America's* ambivalent reaction to America's complicity in global affairs leads to an ambiguous reading of the comic book's political content. Captain America acknowledges the sins of American empire, but views those sins as not sufficient for the legitimizing of “terrorist” activities.

Consequently, he defeats the enemies of America in battle (Rieber and Cassaday 2002c). This storyline from *Captain America* reinscribes the dominance of state-based power over nonstate actors by delegitimizing those who are voiceless in the territorially based state system. Similarly, Leitner, Pavlik, and Sheppard (2002) have shown that transnational networks conflict with and transcend territorial boundaries, yet do not eliminate their importance and utility. Still, while ultimately re-entrenching the status quo of territorially based American power both morally in the dialogue and physically in the action, *Captain America* serves as a voice for a resistant, counterhegemonic narrative that illustrates the connections between the American way of life and American military operations around the world.

Conclusions

Edward Said (1993, 7) wrote, “Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.” This article has attempted to illustrate the relationship between Said's two facets of geographic struggle: physical claims to space and cultural claims to geopolitical truth. This article has illustrated the political relevance of *Captain America* and has used the post-9/11 texts of that series to describe part of the process by which *Captain America* informs: (1) the meaning of America and how that idea is re-scaled to the individual reader through territorial symbols, (2) the process by which landscape images can contribute to territorial bonding among citizens, and (3) the construction of a dominant American geopolitical narrative. Thus, *Captain America* not only defines what America is, but it also firmly ensconces the reader within its geo-graph. The reader, tacitly assumed to be American, is reminded of his or her individual identity as an American and is told what that means in relation to the rest of the world. As Linda R. Williams (1991) says, regarding horror movies, to dismiss comic books as juvenile entertainment is to miss their utility for cultural understanding. “The astonishing acceptance of [this] iconography as an important part of our societal character raises questions regarding not only the content of myth but also its power” (Aitken 2002, 105).

Captain America has also been shown to be a text that expresses a great deal of ambiguity and nuance regarding the identity and geopolitical narratives of America. There is a disconnection between what Captain America

is meant to represent (the idealized American) and the source of the geopolitical narratives in which he has to operate (the American elites of media and government). A fundamental source of conflict in *Captain America* since the 1960s has been this divergence between American ideals and American practice. The acknowledgement of this divergence is inherently debilitating for the construction of hegemonic geopolitical scripts, as seen in the references to American empire in *Captain America*. This counterhegemonic position is unusual in a literary genre that is almost universally about the conservation of the status quo; superheroes are about the protection of life and property and almost never seek to fundamentally revolutionize the system. Any character that seeks to achieve political or economic praxis is, by comic book convention, characterized as a villain (Wolf-Meyer 2003). Thus, *Captain America* occupies a particular niche within the world of superheroes. The storylines have the hero acting in the usual conservative manner, preserving the status quo; however, the authors of the text incorporate dissident representations of the geopolitical order into *Captain America's* plotlines and dialogues. In this way, they are able to affect the discourse by both reinforcing an ideal American identity and contrasting that ideal with the effects of American geopolitical activities.

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