

*Paper prepared for the
Third Euroacademia Global Forum of Critical Studies
Asking Big Questions Again*

Florence, 6 – 7 February 2015

*This paper is a draft
Please do not cite*

“Oh Captain! My Captain!”
Terrorism in Post 9/11 Captain America Comic Serials
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Abstract: In 2002, Marvel Comics published two ongoing Captain America series with narratives that responded directly to terrorism in America, *Marvel Knights: Captain America* and *The Ultimates*. Because many superheroes have a publishing history that spans decades, scholars suggest that continuity created from ongoing narratives in monthly publications respond to political discourse in American popular culture. Henry Jenkins asserts that forms of media with greater production times and costs, like films or television, use comics as a testing ground to decide which direction to take their discourse. This paper will respond to Jenkins' claims examining both a brief history of the character of Captain America and how the difference between the Captain Americas' separate narrative histories affect the discussion of terrorism with the same character. Using continuity (the adherence to a series of narratives established throughout the publication of a character), writers and artists can encourage readers to draw specific connections between the current political discourse and events within the serial's history, both in the comic continuity and actual world. Comparing the Captain America in the *Marvel Knights* series to the Captain America in *The Ultimates* reveals two commentaries on the relationship between patriotism and terrorism, and how U.S. policies may have motivated the attackers. These commentaries are influenced by the political and personal views of the writers, but also the audience that, through continuity gain a passive role in the story telling process.

Introduction

In post 9/11 America, many anxieties have surfaced that were not necessarily as prevalent before the terrorist attacks. Since 2001 American political discourse has continually drawn a comparison between the World Trade Center attacks and the previous attack on U.S. soil made during World War II and U.S. foreign policy's relationship to terrorism and fundamentalism. In post 9/11 America, it is arguably the function of literature to hold a mirror up to society and discuss the issues that most relevant to our culture. According to Haruo Shirane "literature provides us not only with the human story, by which we can see into the minds of others, but also with alternative paradigms and hypothetical models, the multitude of human possibilities, by which participants in culture seek to resolve conflict and bring about change" (513). There is no better source than comic book to provide not only complex characters with human stories but also hypotheticals that allow the reader to explore issues like those that surfaced after 9/11. Scholars like Henry Jenkins understand comics as a link in the chain of pop culture media. When faced with an event that requires America to step back and process what happened, Jenkins asserts that there is a series of reactions to that event that forms a kind of chain. The chain goes from news to comics, from comics to film (71). The news media is reactionary, simply presenting the facts of the events from a particular point of view at the time of the event. Film eventually takes the reporting of the media and offers cultural analysis and discussion of the events; however, the cost of production and time required to produce a film or television show limits the amount of experimentation. Comic books work to bridge this gap between the two. Comics are not as fast or reactive as the news media, but they are much faster and cheaper than films. This middle ground that comics occupy allows them to experiment with different ideas and responses to culturally significant events. As Jenkins points out, "because [comics] are a fringe media, they have more space for experimentation than most mainstream products; but because they are a feeder system for the rest of the entertainment world, those experiments are closely monitored and may have enormous influence" (71). Film looks to comics because it can test audience response to social commentary for little money and do it quickly, and because the readership of comics is low by comparison, so are the stakes involved with making criticisms. Building off Jenkins' premise and Haruo Shirane's view of literature's function, I would suggest that no other character is better suited to address the historical and political issues of terrorism in the U.S. than Captain America.

Captain America, or Cap as I will often refer to him, serves as a symbol of national identity and past cultural perspectives, both inside the context of his narrative and from the audience's perspective. Captain America embodies the perspectives of the generation of World War II (Jenkins, 79), but he is also a representation of the American dream. In this essay I will look at two different publications, *Marvel Knights: Captain America* (2002) and *The Ultimates* (2002), published six months after the World Trade Center attacks, which address U.S. policies leading up to and following 9/11 as well as national identity as it relates to WWII era America. Understanding the continuities, or the adherence to a series of narratives established throughout the publication of a character, of serial comic books illuminate a way to reading the text that encourages its audience to read by bringing past information and symbolism to the present as well as offering a new way to read and understand past texts within the continuity.

History and Background

Marvel comics reacted to the attacks of September 11th because of the emotional connection that the creative team felt with the city as well as a historical and artistic precedent established at the company's formation. When the attacks happened, the writers and the artists were undoubtedly impacted by their proximity to the World Trade Center. As Henry Jenkins points out, "this was deeply personal. Manhattan has historically been the base of operations for the mainstream

publishers” (74). The creative teams would have undoubtedly felt compelled to comment on the tragedy in their publications because they, in some cases, literally watched the events unfold out their office windows. Some employees might have had family or friends that lost their lives in the attack. Comic books are particularly well suited to allow the writers and artists to respond directly to significant cultural events. It is a precedent that was set early at Marvel Comics. Unlike the heroes of their rival publisher, DC comics, “Marvel comics focused ... upon the ways in which the mundane problems of the human existence interfered with their crimefighting abilities” (Genter, 954). Heroes like the Fantastic Four or Spiderman were more relatable with real problems, like bickering over television shows or getting a date for the weekend. These characters are people first and heroes second, and in the Marvel universe these heroes lived in our world. They might have powers that make them unbelievable and apart from reality, but they “are meant to exist within [our world], as indicated by the material landscapes they inhabit, the famous people they meet, and the sociopolitical systems they protect or threaten” (Dittmer, 143). Marvel’s stable of heroes lives in a world that should be very familiar to us, or a very close version of it, so when the 9/11 attacks happened, “Marvel felt especially implicated since its stories had always been set in New York City” (Jenkins, 74). Because the publishing company was physically close to the attacks and Marvel has a clear history of placing its characters in a world that is identical to reality in many ways, it was necessary for them to comment on 9/11, and what better character to lead the charge, as it were, than Captain America.

Captain America first appeared in *Captain America Comics* (1941). From its inception, the book and the character functioned as mild propaganda. The cover of the first issue shows Captain America hitting Hitler with a powerful right cross above the caption, “Smashing thru, Captain America came face to face with Hitler” (Simon and Kirby). The issue itself gives the origin story of Cap. Steve Rogers, as any American man was wanted to do at the time of World War II, attempts to enlist in military service but is turned away because of weak physical prowess. He is taken aside by Professor Reinstein, the lead scientist in the Super-Agent (later known as the Super-Soldier) program. After being injected by the super soldier serum, weakling Steve Rogers becomes Captain America. Immediately following the transformation, Reinstein is shot and drops the vial of serum, thus leaving Steve to be the only super soldier ever created (Simon and Kirby 5).

Captain America remains relevant because from the first issue the book the creators discussed anxieties over immigration during wartime and patriotism and the national identity. After the transformation is complete, Reinstein reveals Captain America to be the first in a “corps of super-agents whose mental and physical ability will make them a terror to spies and saboteurs” (Simon and Kirby 5). The book sees Captain America as a device to relieve a xenophobic anxiety that was clearly present at the time, evident from the internment of Japanese Americans shortly after U.S. involvement in the war. In the very next panel, the book all but refers to itself as propaganda, when immediately following the transformation Reinstein tells Rogers, “We shall call you Captain America...because like you -- America shall gain the strength and the will to safeguard our shores” (Simon and Kirby 5). Professor Reinstein is inviting the reader to see Captain America as a representation of American ideals. The visual concept from artist Jack Kirby works much the same way by draping Rogers in a costume version of the American flag and carrying a flag patterned shield. The shield serves as a powerful metaphor inviting the reader to see the American ideal the character represents as the ultimate protection from the evil that Germany offered at the time. The book’s creators set the stage immediately to have Captain America embody a purity of the American dream that could protect the country and defeat foes both seen and unseen.

Comics and Their Continuity

Serial comic books tell a narrative that continues, often times, over several decades without interruption to the characters’ development. All of the characters published under the Marvel Comics banner exist within a persistent universe. In other words, the events in one title happen in the narrative context of every other book published by Marvel unless explicitly stated otherwise. This adherence to the interdependent narrative created in each book is known as the continuity. The continuity of a character begins with his or her first appearance, which can take place in any of the books published by Marvel. The events within a character’s narrative remain part of the character’s history and characterization until specifically contradicted. The titles that Marvel publishes will carry on for decades and be produced by countless different creative teams over a span of decades. A title will be created and run for an undetermined number of issues and within that run are groupings of issues that separately become chapters with a single story arc. Each volume of a title then becomes a collection of story arcs. This structure of the publications and the interconnected narratives produced a complex and multifaceted continuity. A straightforward way to understand the continuity is as both synchronic and diachronic. Synchronic continuity tracks events from issue to issue within a story arc and diachronic continuity tracks events over the publication history of the character. Beyond that are, what I call, meta-continuities, which are events that happen outside the text that the character appears in, but are referenced within the narrative. These events can happen in the real world, like 9/11, that become “real” within the fictional world, or they can be events that happen in other publications that impact the character’s narrative. Continuity is a complex network of events that create an often times deep characterization and rich narrative history.

The complex network of continuity provides the reader with a unique relationship to the characters that form an emotional connection and involve the reader in the storytelling process. The cultural connection between the reader and super heroes is not to be underestimated. Henry Jenkins points out that “for regular readers, these characters have greater

depth and resonance than almost any other figure in American popular culture” (78). This resonance comes from interacting with the development of a character on a regular basis over a large span of time, often decades. Continuity also creates a relationship between the creative team and the audience that makes the reader a passive part of the storytelling process. The writer and artist cannot simply change the character or the world that the character operates in without considering the audience reaction. As Dittmer says, “events in continuity, or attempts to escape continuity, must be exacting, detailed by fans with significant cultural capital” (144). Continuity gives the audience some control over the text that is unique to the serial comic book. Other texts might have the audience reaction in mind, but it is the fans’ relationship to the characters through the continuity that forces the creative team to adhere to certain conventions for any given title. If the team wishes to change something within the continuity, it requires a certain level of finesse done from inside the narrative world. It is not simply enough to proclaim in a press statement that a character has a new home city or different ethnicity. The writer and artist must create a narrative explanation for the change. Both the relationship between the audience and the character and the audience and the creative team are dependent on one another. It is because of the strong emotional ties to the characters that require the creative team to adhere to the conventions of continuity and this adherence that strengthens the audience’s emotional connection.

Continuity not only develops a world of complex characters that audiences form bonds with, but also a shortcut for understanding historical and culture similarities and progression in the real and comic book worlds alike. Continuity allows creative teams to make sociopolitical statements using the audience’s knowledge of the character’s history. Henry Jenkins points out that because of “continuous publication...protagonists have become both vivid personalities with complex histories and powerful symbols with heavily encrusted meanings” (79). The bond the readers form and the meanings in comics are what allow creators to infuse the texts with sociopolitical discussions. The character’s connection to the readers allows the audience to form opinions and explore the issues. Over years of publication “...the comic book provided a structure and forum to discuss [the readers’] views of American identity and politics...” (Stevens, 607). Because super heroes are tackling complex sociopolitical issues, audiences are able to understand and engage with social and political discourse. By looking at the discourse over the entire span of the character’s publication we begin to see that “super hero narratives, particularly those that have been running for more than six decades, are a valuable source for understanding cultural transition...” (Stevens, 609). Because of the interdependence of the creative team and the audience, coupled with the sociopolitical conversation happening between the book and the readers, a pattern in cultural development can be observed as it progresses over decades.

Captain America and His Enemies

The use of Captain America as an icon are present in both the *Marvel Knights* story and *The Ultimates*; however, *The Ultimates* is an allegory examining the growing military industrial complex while *Marvel Knights* is aware of the symbolism inherent in the book and uses that symbolism to examine American identity and how terrorism and patriotism are related. *The Ultimates* creates a more realistic and with it a darker look at the superhero than previously by Marvel. The world is still full of the fantastic, but *The Ultimates* is character significantly more driven in the scenes between all the costumed fighting. For example, Wasp and Giant-man have an abusive marriage, Ironman is dying from a brain tumor and fights because he has nothing left to lose, while Thor is a super-powered schizophrenic that believes he’s a Norse god incarnate (Millar and Hitch). The “Ultimate” continuity seeks to expand the Marvel tradition to explore the darker side of the human condition. The *Marvel Knights* book sticks to the more traditional depiction of Captain America. What the reader gets is a less fleshed out, or less realistic, depiction of Cap that speaks more about ideals’ effects on his identity and how institutions relate to our concepts of terrorism and patriotism, rather than the day to day realities of post 9/11 America. When looking at the two books in tandem, we get a didactic read from the *Marvel Knights* book and in *The Ultimates*, a much richer and complex book that requires the reader to look past aliens and monster to make an argument in much more sophisticated way.

Marvel Knights: Captain America

In *Marvel Knights: Captain America*, the villain of the story arc is a terrorist leader that sends vaguely Middle Eastern militants to attack a small town in America; forcing Cap to confront his identity as an iconic representation of America and thus the concept of the American dream. In this story the terrorists are not subversive, but rather resemble a more tradition military unit. This is a departure from the tribute comics immediately following 9/11, like the ones that Henry Jenkins refers to. “[Super heroes] are more likely to be standing tall against racial violence than punching out terrorists” (Jenkins, 79). Jenkins is referring to the single shot, 9/11 tribute issues that were in direct response to 9/11; however, immediately following these tribute issues Captain America started combating radical Islam in Middle America. Captain America finds the balance between the two, as much of the first story arc in the *Marvel Knights* series portrays Rogers’ efforts to reclaim his neighborhood from racially motivated gang violence. Literally fighting terrorists by day and street thugs by night, Captain America is very aware of the tension between external forces threatening our way of life and internal struggles with xenophobia that undermines our safety. This tension becomes a running theme throughout the story arc, highlighting the difference between terror and our traditional concept of war. *Marvel Knights* unpacks the complications of a “War on Terror” by presenting the reader with a concrete militaristic enemy while drawing attention to the insidious agenda of terrorism to undermine the national cohesion of the population.

Cap struggles throughout the story arc with his identity as a soldier. The parallel between the attack of Pearl Harbor and the attacks on the World Trade Center are drawn by explicitly comparing the modern combat to his experiences in the forties, but also the threat from within that has been explored from the creation of Captain America. As Stevens reminds us, “for the first year of existence, Cap defended domestic America from Nazi spies and hidden plots, while the Nazis in the real world were officially still not America’s enemies” (Stevens, 608). Rather than seeking out spies that threaten to weaken us militarily, the reader, through continuity, is reminded that espionage and terrorism are very different. In a scene from issue 1, Captain America confronts the internal threat caused by terrorism.

Captain America: Maybe you shouldn’t be out by yourself.

Samir: I know what time it is. And I know where I am. I live here. My name’s Samir, not Osama. My father was born on this street (Rieber and Cassaday 26).

In this scene, Captain America disrupts a potential hate crime from happening as a result of the World Trade Center attacks. After the altercation, the gentlemen shake hands after the Arab American fellow tells his would be attacker that his father was born on this block, reminding readers that we are not under threat of invasion from a foreign sovereignty, but rather victims of our own fear and bigotry.

The more overt threat in the book, the militarized terrorist cell operating inside the U.S., is used to examine the foreign policies of previous administrations that might have played a role in motivating the enemy that attacked us. After several altercations with military units, Captain America comes face to face with the terrorist leader. He is a man with a horribly scarred face that completely hides his ethnicity from Cap. As they fight the terrorist begs Cap to guess his identity based on those countries that would have caused to hate America. The terrorist leader, taunting Cap says, “Guerrillas gunned my father down while he was at work in the fields – with American bullets. American weapons. Where am I from?” (Rieber and Cassaday 33). From this scene he sees that the end result is the revelation that US foreign policies have given countless groups from several countries reason to attack America. The moral ambiguity presented here invites the audience to look at the narration that opens the story arc from the first issue. The synchronic continuity works both ways, offering a new way to read past narration that says, “Is this the face of your Great Satan? Is this your offering to God... Tell your children this is a holy war” (Rieber and Cassaday 17). While the narration is not attributed to a speaker, the language used suggests it is spoken by an Islamic radical but visually looks like the narration offered by Captain America throughout the rest of the book. In the same way that the terrorist leader asks Cap to think into the country’s history and evaluate the ethics of foreign policy against militants, so does the book ask readers to evaluate the presentation of America’s rhetoric immediately following the World Trade Center attacks.

The revelation of America’s role in creating terrorist cells comes after the juxtaposition of 1940s Cap with modern day Cap. In this image the reader can see the similarities between the two eras for Captain America¹.



The similarities in the images are not as significant as the differences. The image from the 1940s is in black and white. This lack of color is a metaphoric reminder that the enemy then was a much less complicated one. Captain America of the 40s is also carrying a firearm and a shield. Reading Cap as the symbol of foreign policy reminds readers that the effort of WWII was to fight for the protection of our ideals and way of life. Now, carrying only the shield, the reader is reminded that US foreign policy has evolved to something more defensive from the lessons we learned about aggressive spreading democracy. Drawing on these images during the conversation with the terrorist leader, we can see the reality of Stevens' assertion that "Cap's mythos allows him to continue to represent conservative values while consistently offering a liberal critique of the culture through which he walks" (Stevens, 609). Captain America embodies the conservative desire to wage war on an enemy, while having to navigate the reality of the progressive world that our "enemy" is one created by the combination of botched foreign policies and conflicting cultural ideals.

The Ultimates

As I stated above, *The Ultimates* is a rich and complicated allegory and as such every character is representative of some institution that is present in post 9/11 America. For the sake of time, I'm limited my reading of *The Ultimates* to Captain America and his foil in the story arc, the Hulk. Like the Captain America from the main continuity, "Ultimate" Captain America is the sole survivor of the lost Super Soldier program. He is reawakened in a post 9/11 world, skipping straight from World War II into the present day. During his absence, the US government, in an attempt to recover the magic of the lost icon, reopens the Super Soldier program under the lead of a scientist named Bruce Banner. In an effort to recreate the experiment that created Captain America, Banner injects himself with his own version of the serum that creates the Hulk rather than a true super soldier. The Hulk is a violent monster that rampages through the city, driven by his base urges. The story sets the Hulk as the Hyde to Captain America's Jekyll.

Because the symbolism is working in a more subtle and sophisticated way in *The Ultimates*, we need to establish the implications of bringing Captain America straight from the 1940s to the present day. Throughout the story arc, Cap is frequently reminding other characters, that for him 1940 was only a few weeks ago. As Jason Dittmer points out, "[*Marvel Knights*] Captain America has been used to draw a narrative line from the New Deal of the 1940s through the liberalism and multiculturalism of recent decades, 'Ultimate' Captain America constructs and alternate narrative – from the wartime grit of the 1940s directly to the 'moral clarity' of the post-9/11 moment" (Dittmer, 152). Where the *Marvel Knights* Captain America has acclimated to the new era, "Ultimate" Cap is still a man out of time. Cap's moral clarity is drawn into question repeatedly through the narrative. He refers to women as "dames" frequently, assaults a helpless Bruce Banner after he unwittingly rampages as the Hulk and shows an unquestioning allegiance to a government that he is sixty years removed from. In much the same way that *Marvel Knights* wants to compare World War II era and post 9/11 America, so does *The Ultimates* wish to question the moral high ground that the "Great Generation" is supposed to hold.

Understanding the moral question posed by Captain America's narrative is essential in understanding his relationship to his foil in the first volume, the Hulk. The specialness of Captain America is highlighted by the hubris of Banner that created the Hulk. Under pressure from the government, Banner creates the Hulk, a clear representation of the military industrial complex run amuck. Captain America, as in the original continuity, is created by a government experiment. He is viewed as little more than government property or something to be used for U.S. benefit. In the 1940s a young soldier accuses Cap of being a piece of propaganda used by the government to boost enlistment. "Dressing some clown in a circus costume and calling him a super-soldier might be a hit with the recruitment people, but what age do you think we are, Barnes?" (Millar and Hitch 4). Before being awakened in the modern day, his body is objectified by the government when Bruce Banner makes it clear that to unlock the secret they need "...Super-Soldier serum in [Captain America's] veins..." (Millar and Hitch 5). While government agents and scientists might be interested in the curiosity of a frozen man that didn't age, it is clear that they driving force is the military application of the blood in his veins. This same desire to expand America's military dominance is what created the Hulk in Banner.

The fight between Captain America and the Hulk is symbolic battle between the military of 1940s and the modern day. The creative team suggests that the military of World War II had a moral high ground and righteousness of its crusade against fascism while the military industrial complex of today is a hulking aggressive beast that is difficult to control. Ultimately, Captain America is unable to defeat the Hulk himself. In an indicting act, the fight is actually won when the "third assault plan" is executed. This plan is not an assault at all, but rather a non-violent activation of the part of Banner's brain that controls the Hulk.

General Fury: ...This some kinda lobotomy you're cooking up or what?

Wasp: No, just a little wasp sting to the portion of his brain that makes him big, bad and angry, General (Millar and Hitch 27).

Wasp has the ability all along to subdue the Hulk peacefully, with no harm to anyone, but the plan is considered a last resort by Captain America. The creative team seems to suggest America's overeagerness to solve problems with violence, instead of pragmatic though risky nonaggressive ones. The end result is the leveling of Manhattan that is reminiscent of the World Trade Center collapse¹¹.



Using a fight between Hulk and Captain America the creative team implies that a growing military industrial complex coupled with an outdated moral obligation to spread democracy may have fuel the fire of radical and suggests that the US policy to meet violence with violence will just end in unwanted destruction, and ultimately prove futile.

Conclusions

Understanding the way that continuity works in serial comic books helps us understand how to read the complicated sociopolitical discourse happening in the Captain America titles and how using the same character in different continuities can impact the discussion happening in each book. Because of the diachronic continuity, we understand how to read the connections that the creative team makes between World War II and 9/11 and are meant to make the comparison between Captain America “Nazi spy hunter” and the Captain America that must hunt down terrorist attacks and prevent the xenophobic reaction that terrorism provokes. This comparison between World War II and the “War on Terror” that was made in the public discourse is inescapably made in both versions of Captain America. Because the same character exists in *The Ultimates* but with a different continuity, readers are able to look at theme in different ways. Alternate continuities, like *The Ultimates*, “offer reinforcement of primary themes found throughout these heroes’ continuities and also opportunities to narrate political alternatives that may or may not be more politically progressive” (Dittmer, 143). The meta-continuity presents the opportunity to compare the theme in both texts. Because the reader is familiar with the character of Captain America, certain key events in his history are assumed to be the same unless otherwise contradicted. For example, we know that Captain America was a wimpy kid that wanted to join the military but couldn’t and was given a chance to participate in the Super Soldier project. The details are never expressly given, but in their absence, the reader fills in the gaps allowing the creative team to draw these connections implicitly. Two different responses to the WWII and 9/11 comparison that happens in both titles emerge because of the common theme. In the *Marvel Knights*, we see the desire for a simpler enemy, like the Nazis in the past and in *The Ultimates* we find the impotence of an older way of thinking to simply hit the enemy in the face.

Although in very different ways, both titles suggest that the source of the threat that manifested as the attack on 9/11 is a symptom of US policies, both foreign and domestic. The anxiety that emerges from both texts is the threat of the military industrial complex and its effects on our interactions with the rest of the world. In *Marvel Knights*, the criticism is explicit, culmination in a windy back and forth between Captain America and his faceless foe. In *The Ultimates* the criticism is subtle, telling the reader through allegory that our enemies cannot be beaten into submission and the attempt to do so only fuels the violent beast within our government.

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ⁱCassaday, John 34

ⁱⁱMillar and Hitch 30